

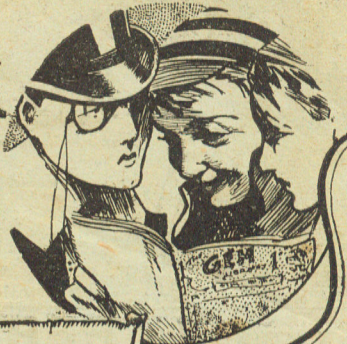
TOM MERRY'S TRUST.

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VOL. 3.
NO. 82.

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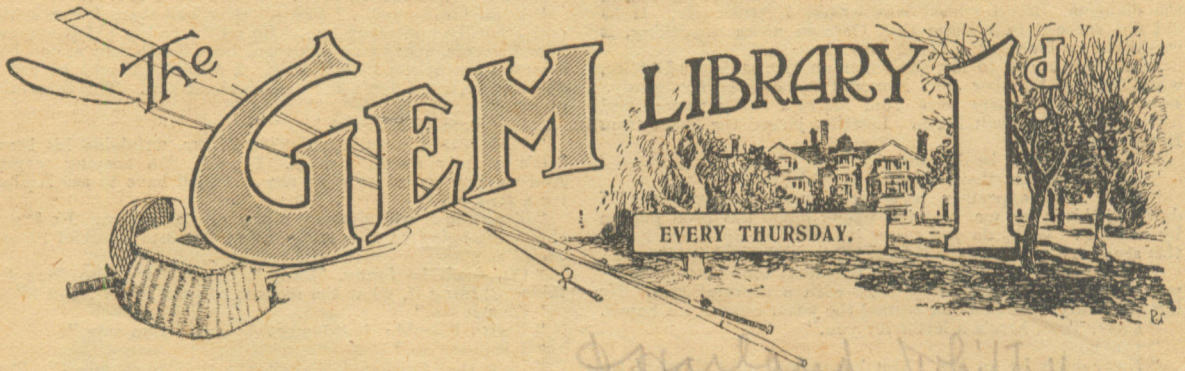
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BY

MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER I.

A Surprise for Tom Merry.

"MASTER MERRY!"

Tom Merry did not reply. He was sitting at the table, in his study in the School House at St. Jim's, with his chin in his right hand, and his elbow resting on the table, and his brows contracted in a portentous frown.

A page of German prose was before him, and Tom Merry was apparently trying to make out what it might possibly mean, and to judge by his expression, without much success.

"Master Merry!"

Binks, the School House page, put his head in at the door. Binks had a letter in his hand, and an obliging smile upon his face. He was not bound to bring up letters to junior studies; but he would have done that, or anything else, for Tom Merry. For the frank, genial hero of the Shell was just as much a favourite below stairs in the School House as he was with his own Form-fellows. There were few people who could see Tom Merry without liking him.

"Master Merry!"

"Br-r-r!" said Tom Merry, without looking up. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

"Yes, but, Master Merry——"

"Can you translate German, Binks?"

"Lor' bless you, no!" gasped Binks.

"Then get out!"

"Eh?"

"Get out! I'm busy! I'm going to extract some meaning from this blessed German, if I burst a boiler. There must be some meaning in it, because Goethe wrote it. I can't see any at present, but I'm going to stick to it. Run along and play."

"But——"

"If the Head wants me, tell him I'm busy. If it's Mr. Railton, say I can't come. If it's Kildare, give him a thick ear, with my kind regards. Bunk!"

"But——"

"Buzz off!"

"But it's a letter, Master Merry."

"I've got enough letters here, and each one like a spider's leg," growled Tom Merry. "Can't you buzz off?"

"It's a letter for you——"

"You can leave it. Be off!"

A DOUBLE-LENGTH TALE OF TOM MERRY NEXT THURSDAY.

Binks grinned. Tom Merry had not even looked up during the dialogue. His forehead was wrinkled ferociously. If he did not succeed in making that German mean something, it would not be for want of concentrated effort.

Binks was about to lay the letter on the table, and retire, when Monty Lowther and Manners came into the study. Lowther and Manners were Tom Merry's study mates, and his chums in the Shell Form. Lowther jerked the letter from Binks's hand.

"This for me?" he demanded.

"No, Master Lowther; it's for Master Tom."

"Rot! I'm expecting a letter," growled Lowther. "I dare say this is for me, and the wrong name has been put on by mistake. What do you mean by bringing up a letter into this study without a silver salver, Binks. Take that!"

Lowther said "take that" in a truculent tone—but "that" was a sixpence, which Binks took with a cheerful grin. He left the study, and Lowther turned the letter over in his hands.

"I say, Tom, here's a letter for you."

"I'm busy."

"Now, don't be an ass. You know how jolly short of tin we are, and it's tea-time. This may have something in it."

"I'm busy."

"But, look here, you ass, here's a letter which may contain—"

"Well, open it, then, and don't bother me!"

"Oh, all right."

Funds were held in common in Tom Merry's study, and the chums had no secrets from one another. Lowther slit the envelope and took the letter out.

He gave an expressive grunt as he unfolded it.

"Huh! No postal order!"

"Don't talk while I'm doing German."

"Shall I read the letter out to you?"

"No!" roared Tom Merry. "Read it to yourself."

"There may be something—"

"Bosh!"

"But—"

"Shut up!"

"Oh, all right. You don't want me to read it to you?"

"NO!"

"Then I'll read it to Manners," grinned Monty Lowther.

"Manners, dear, come listen here. My dear Cousin Tom!"

"Hallo, I didn't know Tom had any dear cousins."

"Oh, he's only rotting," growled Tom Merry. "My cousin's in South Africa. Why don't you ring off, Monty?"

"Honest Injun! My dear Cousin,—I am in England quite unexpectedly, and I want to see you upon important business."

"Don't be an ass!"

"I tell you that's what's written here. 'I—'" Lowther broke off. "I say, Tom, you'd better read this yourself."

"I won't!" roared Tom Merry.

"But—"

"Go on and get it over."

"Very well. I'm in England quite unexpectedly, and I want to see you upon important business. I do not wish to come to the school, so I have put up in Rylcombe for the present, and I should like you to come out and meet me. I will be at the stile in the lane at eight o'clock this evening. Come if you possibly can, as it is of more importance to both of us than I can explain in a letter. Keep it a secret until you have seen me—even from your most intimate chums."

"Phew!" said Manners.

"Your affectionate cousin, Herbert Dorrian."

"Rats!" said Tom Merry.

"Look here, Tom—"

"If you've done rotting, let me get on with my German. I've simply got to get through this thing, if it costs me a leg."

"But this letter—"

"Blow that letter!"

"Look here!" Monty Lowther shoved the letter fairly under Tom Merry's nose. "Read it yourself, you ass!"

A glance at the letter was sufficient to show that Monty Lowther had not, as he had imagined, been making it up as he went along.

"My hat!" ejaculated Tom Merry.

"You see it's there," said Lowther. "I'm sorry I read it now. But you really made me. If I'd had the least notion that there was anything private in the letter—"

"You couldn't—it's all right. I don't know that I should keep a secret from you two, anyway. Of course, you'll keep it dark."

"Yes, rather!"

"Blessed if I can understand it, though," said Tom Merry, looking utterly puzzled. "What can Dorrian be doing in England all of a sudden, and why should he keep it a secret? Why can't he come up to the school?"

"There's something curious about it."

"By Jove, there is!"

"He might be in trouble of some sort," hazarded Manners.

"What sort of a chap is this cousin of yours?"

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NEXT

THURSDAY:

"THE SCHOOL-HOUSE SECRET."

An Extra-long Complete Tale of Tom Merry & Co.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"I can hardly say. I haven't seen him since I was a kid, and I hardly remember him. He writes to my old governess, Miss Fawcett, every now and then, from South Africa, and he's sometimes sent me little things. I always thought he was a decent sort, but I don't know much about him. This is awfully queer!"

"I suppose you'll meet him?"

"I suppose I must," said Tom Merry, wrinkling his brow. "It's awfully queer, though. I don't like keeping secrets. And we lock up before eight now. I shall have to ask Kildare for a pass out."

"The skipper will give you a pass all right, Tom. He knows chaps belonging to this study never get into mischief of any sort."

"Oh, don't be funny, Monty." Tom Merry rose from the table. "Hang it, what the dickens can the letter mean?"

"Give it up."

"I wish I could; but I must do as Dorrian says."

"I suppose so."

"Blow that German! I shall give that up, anyway." Tom Merry looked over the letter. "What can it possibly mean?"

"Ask us another."

"Why can't he come up to the school?"

"Blessed if I know."

"And why should I keep it dark?"

"It's a giddy mystery."

"Blow!" said Tom Merry. "If there's anything I hate it's a mystery. I can't stand a chap with a secret, and I hate keeping one. I really don't know why my cousin has come all the way from Africa to interrupt my study of German."

"Ha, ha, ha! Better meet him, though. Blood is thicker than bacca-juice."

"Oh, I shall meet him. Hang it, though; I don't like keeping secrets!"

And Tom Merry crushed the letter into his pockets, and went off to ask Kildare of the Sixth for a pass out of gates.

CHAPTER 2.

Jack Blake Has His Suspicions.

"BAI Jove! Here he is!"

He was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's, who uttered the ejaculation. He was standing at the door of Study No. 6, in the Fourth Form passage, and he turned his eyeglass upon Tom Merry as the hero of the Shell came along.

"Pway stop a minute, Tom Mewwy."

"Can't."

"Bai Jove! He's in a bad tempah."

"Rats!"

"If you say wats to me, Tom Mewwy—"

"More rats!"

"Bai Jove, I—"

"Hold on, Merry!" shouted Jack Blake from the study. "I want to speak to you. Don't be a pig."

Thus adjured, Tom Merry came to a halt. He looked into Study No. 6, where Blake, Herries, Digby and D'Arcy, the chums of the Fourth, dwelt together in more or less of harmony. Harmony seemed to be reigning there at the present moment; the chums of No. 6 had been deep in a discussion when the Shell fellow came by.

"What's the trouble?" asked Tom Merry. "Buck up—I'm in a hurry."

"Why, what's on?"

"Oh, nothing. What do you want?"

Blake looked at him.

"There's nothing on, and yet you're in a hurry," he remarked.

"Tommy, my son, you are trying to deceive your uncle."

"Oh, don't be an ass," said Tom Merry. "Tell me what you want, or I'm off."

"To come to business—"

"Buck up!"

"It is practically impos for my friend Blake to buck up, Tom Mewwy, if you keep on intewwuptin' him."

"Oh, ring off, Gussy!" said Blake ungratefully. "Now, Merry—"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Now, Merry, we've been thinking in this study that the New House chaps have been getting too cocky lately, and we think it's about time they were taken down a peg or two. We were thinking of a Triple Alliance—us at the head, you three Shell-fish, and Noble and his gang from the end study, to put Figgins & Co. through a regular course of surprises. What do you think of the idea?"

"Oh, it's all right!"

"You don't seem so jolly enthusiastic about it."

"Bai Jove, no!"

"We're thinking of beginning this evening, with a raid on



In the stillness of the dormitory a voice made itself audible. "Tom Merry! Will you give me details of the crime?" But the only answer was a snore!

the New House," said Digby. "What do you say? A general rendezvous at eight o'clock?"

Tom Merry started.

"Eight o'clock?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Sorry—can't be did."

"Why not?"

"I—I've got an engagement this evening," stammered Tom Merry.

"I—I'm going out."

"You're going out?"

"Yes. Sorry. So-long!"

"Here, stop a tick—"

"Must be off. Sorry."

And Tom Merry disappeared down the passage. The chums of the Fourth Form looked at one another.

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, polishing his eyeglass in a thoughtful manner.

"It wathah looks to me as if Tom Mewwy had somethin' on his mind."

"What-ho!" said Herries.

Jack Blake grinned.

"I should rather say so," he remarked. "He turned quite red. Of course, it's perfectly simple."

"Bai Jove! I don't see it."

"There's a jape on, ass—"

"I wefuse to be called an ass—"

"Duffer, then—it's immaterial. There's a jape on, and it's up against us. That's why Tom Merry turned red, my sons!" said Blake sagely. "What is he going out for? What's his giddy engagement?"

"It's vewy pwob, bai Jove!"

"He declines the alliance," said Blake. "Well, let him rip. He's got something on—and so have we. We can let Figgins & Co. and the New House rest for a bit. We are on in this scene, my sons!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Tom Merry has an engagement at eight o'clock, has he?" grinned Blake. "I think we have an engagement about the same time, in the same place."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We'll keep our optics on this giddy youth. He mustn't be encouraged to jape a chap older than himself."

"Oldah, deah boy!"

"Well, I've been at St. Jim's longer," said Blake. "Practically older. We're on in this act. We shall have an engagement in the same spot, and if we don't frustrate their knavish tricks, you can use my napper for a cushion."

"Wight-ho, deah boy!"

Digby jumped up.

"Let's see what he's up to now," he exclaimed. "He rushed off in a deuce of a hurry."

"Yaas, watah, he certainly was in a dooce of a huwwy! Let's buzz aftah him, deah boys—he went downstairs!"

"Come on, then!"

The Fourth-Formers raced out of the study. When they were not disputing with Figgins & Co. of the New House, Blake and his friends were generally at war with the Terrible Three. The mere thought that Tom Merry was planning a "jape" against Study No. 6 was sufficient to rouse them to battle-heat. Even Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, who was generally leisurely in his movements, was excited as the four rushed out into the passage.

They dashed along to the stairs.

Arthur Augustus, who was in the lead, ran right into Reilly as the latter came out of his study. Reilly stood like a rock, and Arthur Augustus broke on him like a wave.

"Faith, and is it tired ye are?" asked Reilly, as D'Arcy sat down.

Before Arthur Augustus could reply, his three chums came tumbling over him.

"Ow!" gasped D'Arcy. "Bai Jove!"

"You ass!" roared Blake. "What do you mean by sitting down in the passage?"

"Ow! Weally, Blake—"

Blake picked himself up and ran on. So did Herries and Dig. Arthur Augustus sat where he was, gasping for breath.

The juniors reached the stairs and Blake slid down the banisters. Sliding down the banisters was strictly forbidden, but Blake did not stop to think of it just then. He reached the lower passage, and caught sight of Tom Merry just entering Kildare's study.

"Oho! He's going to see Kildare, eh?"

Blake waited. Tom Merry came out of the school captain's study a couple of minutes later, and he had a paper in his hand. Blake, Herries, and Digby affected to be busily talking cricket as he passed them, and Tom Merry was too much occupied with his own thoughts to observe them.

He had easily obtained the pass from Kildare, to remain out of gates until nine o'clock. Kildare knew the boys whom he could trust, and Tom Merry was one of them.

Blake chuckled as Tom went up to his study.

"Did you see that?" he asked.

"It was a pass."

"Yes, rather. Tommy's going out of bounds."

"It's a jape—but I can't see exactly—"

"We shall see at eight o'clock," grinned Blake. "We're on the giddy track. Hallo, here's Gussy! Gussy—"

"Blake! I have been knocked ovah and twodden on!"

Blake looked at him. He certainly looked dishevelled. His clothes were dusty, his collar torn out, his necktie hanging loose.

"Dear me!" said Blake. "Have you really? Why do you do these things?"

"Blake—"

"Is it a new form of exercise instead of Indian clubs—?"

"You uttah ass—"

"It must come rather rough on your clothes, old fellow."

"Look here—"

"Let's see you do it again."

Arthur Augustus jammed his eyeglass into his eye, and gave his chums a withering stare.

"I wufuse to be tweated in this spiwit of wibaldwy!" he exclaimed. "As a mattah of fact, my clothes are wuined. My governah is gettin' vevy close with the fivahs now, too. He says he can't send me so much since the new Budget. I wegard you as a set of asses! I—"

"Never mind, old chap, do ring off!" said Blake. "You see—"

"I wufuse to wing off! I—"

"Oh, let's run for it!" said Blake. "Gussy's fairly started, and he won't ring off for a good hour yet!"

"Weally, Blake—stop, you asses, I—you uttah wottahs!"

And D'Arcy sniffed—not to say snorted—as Blake, Herries, and Digby broke into a run, and disappeared round the nearest corner.

CHAPTER 3.

Shadowed by Three.

FIGGINS & CO. came out of the New House in the dusk. They were in running clothes, which showed off Figgins's long slim legs to great advantage: and which seemed to be nearly bursting upon the plump figure of Fatty Wynn.

Figgins and his chums were going to sprint round the quadrangle for exercise, as they often did in the evening. They trotted away from the New House in the dusk, and kept up a level pace on the grass, their running shoes pattering along with hardly a sound.

But suddenly Figgins stopped.

"Mum!" he whispered.

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NEXT THURSDAY: "THE SCHOOL-HOUSE SECRET."

He caught Kerr and Wynn, who were on either side of him by the arms, and stopped them at the same moment.

The whisper came just in time to prevent an exclamation from Fatty Wynn. As for Kerr, he was a canny Scotsman, and never spoke in a hurry.

"Listen!" muttered Figgins.

In the deep dusk, under the shadows of the old elms, they listened. The sound of a voice came to their ears from the direction of the wall.

"I am keepin' quiet, Blake."

"Then shut up!"

"I wufuse to shut up. It is uttally imposs for me to wemain as dumb as a beastly oystah all the time we're hangin' about here. I wegard it as unweasonable on your part to wequest such a thing."

"Now, look here, Gussy, if you give the alarm to Tom Merry, we'll simply squash you!"

"I should uttally decline to be squashed, but I have no intension of givin' the alarm to Tom Mewwy. He will not pass near us here."

"Hark!"

"What's the mattah?"

"I heard something."

"You are weally gettin' nervous, Blake."

"Oh, ring off!"

"I decline to ring off."

In spite of that last remark, however, D'Arcy apparently did ring off, for his voice was not heard again. Silence fell in the dusk.

Figgins & Co. peered at one another through the gloom.

"What do you think of that?" whispered Figgins.

"Something's on."

"What-ho!"

"And we're on, too," said Kerr.

"That's the weeze!" grinned Figgins.

They listened intently. They had followed the sound of the voices keenly, and they knew that the speakers were on the top of the school wall, looking down into the road near the gate, under the shadow of the overhanging trees.

What were the School House chums of the Fourth doing there? Their own words gave them away. They were watching for Tom Merry.

Something was certainly on.

Figgins & Co. chuckled silently. They were "up against" both the rival parties in the School House, and they were equally satisfied to score off the Terrible Three or off Blake & Co. They weren't particular, so long as they scored off the School House.

And it did not take them long to decide that they would "take a hand" in this little game, whatever it was, and whatever it meant.

They drew cautiously back out of ear-shot of the School House chums. All thought of the intended sprint round the quad was given up for the present.

"They're watching for Merry," Figgins muttered.

"That's pretty clear."

"He's going out by the gate, that's clear, too; so I suppose he'll have a prefect's pass. Let's watch for him there."

Figgins & Co. did not have long to wait at the gate. Tom Merry came down from the direction of the School House, and went out. Taggles was standing at the gate, and the New House juniors saw Tom Merry show him a paper. It was evidently a pass out of bounds.

Tom Merry disappeared.

"Come on!" whispered Figgins.

He led the way quickly back to the slanting oak by the wall, where they had heard the voices of the School House chums.

A low but stubborn voice was still audible.

"I wufuse to jump down!"

In the dimness Figgins could make out a single figure on top

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of the wall. It was that of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. Herries, Digby, and Blake were already down in the road.

"Jump, you ass!" came Blake's voice over the wall.

"It is too fah to jump."

"Then hold on with your hands and drop down!"

"I shall soil my clothes against the wall."

Blake snorted.

"You must do one or the other, ass, unless you're going to remain on top of the wall all night."

"I wufese to be called an ass!"

"Here, come on, kids; Tom Merry will be gone while we're talking to that champion ass!" growled Blake.

"Pway don't hurwuy away, deah boys. On secong thoughts I will dwop."

"Buck up, then."

"Pway catch my hat."

"You shrieking ass, to come out on a job like that in a silk hat!"

"I decline to be chawactewised as a shwiekin' ass, Blake, and I uttally fail to see why a chap shouldn't dwess respectably even on an expedish. at night. Pway catch my hat. I'm afwaid I might dwop it!"

"Oh, chuck it down!"

The hat was dropped, and Blake made a catch at it, and missed. It fluttered to the ground, but it was too dark for D'Arcy to observe it.

The swell of St. Jim's swung himself down by his hands.

Then he dropped, and struck the earth with his feet with a sudden jar, and sat down in the roadway.

There was an ominous crunch.

"Bai Jove! I've fallen on somethin'!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Blake——"

"Was that an opera-hat you brought out with you, Gussy?"

"Certainly not."

"Well, it is now."

"What!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

D'Arcy sprang up like a jack-in-the-box. He picked up the hat he had fallen on, and on which he had been sitting.

It was more like a concertina than a silk topper now. Arthur Augustus gazed at it speechlessly.

"Come on," said Blake.

"My hat's wuined! I thwew it to you to catch!"

"I missed it. It's all right!"

"It is not all wight. My hat's wuined!"

"Blow your hat!"

"I cannot possibly go out in a wuined hat!"

"Look here——"

"How can I appear in public with a smashed hat?"

"You'll jolly well appear in public with a smashed nose if you don't shut up," said Blake. "Tom Merry will be gone. Come on."

"Bai Jove, I nevah thought of that!"

"Get a move on, then."

The chums of Study No. 6 hurried away, D'Arcy pushing his hat into shape as well as he could as he hastened after them. Figgins & Co. climbed the wall and chuckled.

"Good old Gussy!" murmured Figgins. "We came out for a run, kids. We shall have to take it outside the walls, instead of inside. Come on."

"Good!" said Kerr.

The three Fourth-Formers dropped into the road. With cautious footsteps they hurried on the track of the School House juniors.

CHAPTER 4.

A Strange Meeting.

TOM MERRY strode on through the dusky lane, quite unconscious of the fact that he was shadowed by four, who in their turn were shadowed by three. The hero of the Shell was thinking of anything but House rows or Form japes. The nearer the time came for meeting his cousin, the more worried Tom felt about it.

Dorrian's letter had been strange and alarming; and in spite of the caution impressed upon him in that letter, Tom had not been able to keep the secret from his two chums in the Shell.

Lowther and Manners, of course, could be trusted to any extent; but, at the same time, it was awkward not to have carried out his cousin's directions.

But why were those directions given?

What was Herbert Dorrian doing in England so suddenly and so secretly; and why had he arranged this mysterious meeting in the lane, instead of coming up to the school to see his relative, as he had every right to do?

It was a puzzle.

Tom could not help thinking it over, in great perplexity, as he went down the lane. The village clock was chiming out as he came in sight of the stile, the chimes ringing over the deep, dark woods from Rylecombe. Tom Merry looked at the stile and round it, but there was no one in sight.

His cousin was late, then.

The boy stopped at the stile, and drew himself upon the top bar to sit down and rest while he waited for Dorrian to come.

There was a rustle in the thickets on the inner side of the stile, and Tom Merry started and looked round.

A dark form detached itself from the bushes and came towards him.

Tom Merry could only see a man muffled in an overcoat, with a loose cap pulled down over his face; but he guessed whom it was.

"Herbert!"

The man peered at him in the gloom.

"Tom! Is it you?"

"Yes. You are my cousin Dorrian?"

"Yes."

Tom Merry held out his hand, and grasped that of his cousin. He caught a glimpse of Dorrian's face in the rays of the stars, which were now coming out, and he started. It was white and full of an undefined emotion. The hand Tom Merry grasped was trembling like a leaf.

The junior looked anxious.

"What's the matter, Bertie?"

The young man did not reply. He glanced up the lane and down it, and back along the footpath through the wood, and then pulled his cap lower over his eyes.

"Herbert!"

"Come into the trees, Tom."

"But——"

"Come."

Tom Merry swung himself over the stile, and followed his cousin into the trees. He was more and more puzzled and alarmed.

Little as he remembered of his cousin, there was a tone of Dorrian's voice that struck a chord of his memory, and the feeling of kinship was strong in Tom Merry. If his cousin was in trouble, Tom Merry was ready to help him.

They entered the deep, sombre shadows of the trees.

Then Dorrian stopped, still with a furtive glance round him, as if in dread of shadows.

"Tom!"

"Well?"

"You had my note—you obeyed my directions?"

"You see I am here."

"I mean about keeping the secret?"

Tom Merry looked troubled.

"My chums, Manners and Lowther, know——"

Dorrian uttered a sharp exclamation.

"What!"

"You see, I let Monty Lowther read the letter out to me before I knew what was in it. But it's all right; they're true as steel."

Dorrian shivered.

"But what is it?" asked Tom Merry. "What's the matter? What are you afraid of?"

"Tom!" Dorrian laid his hand upon the boy's shoulder.

"Tom, will you help me?"

"Of course I will."

"I am in danger, Tom."

"What kind of danger?"

"There are enemies on my track. I left South Africa secretly to elude them; but I believe they have tracked me to England."

"Who are they?"

His cousin did not reply to the question.

"Listen, Tom. I cannot remain many minutes—I have been lurking in the wood ever since I sent you that letter, hours ago. Tom, I want to trust you—I am sure you will fulfil the trust."

"You can rely on me; but——"

"I wish to leave something in your hands."

Tom Merry stared at him.

"Something valuable?" he asked.

"Yes; of great value."

"To take care of for you?"

"Yes."

"But why? The strong-room of a bank would surely be safer, especially if you have enemies seeking you to take it away."

Dorrian gave a strange laugh.

"A bank would not serve my turn, Tom. I cannot explain. When I landed in England, with—with this, I did not know which way to turn. I did not know where to look for help. I remembered suddenly that Miss Fawcett had written to me that my little cousin was at school in Sussex. I hurried here. Schoolboy as you are, Tom, you are the safest person for me to trust. For who would suspect that a packet of enormous value was placed in the hands of a junior in a public school?"

Tom Merry nodded.

"That's true enough."

"You will take it, Tom?"

"Certainly—if you think it will be safe with me."

"It will be safer with you than with me," said Dorrian, with

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a hollow laugh. "If they find me, and search me, that will not matter, when the packet is no longer in my hands."

"Good. But if they harm you—"
"I am not afraid of that. I am only afraid of losing the packet. I am not a coward, Tom, though you see me so shaken up."

Tom Merry was silent. Dorrian did not impress him at that moment as a brave man, at all events.

"Besides, I am armed. I would shoot him like a dog if he crossed my path openly, the hound!"

"He—whom?"
"The Portuguese."

"Who is he?"
"He is the man who is hunting me—he is the worst of them, I am not afraid of him, if the packet is safe."

"Do you think he has followed you here?"

"It is possible."

"Then he may see me—"

"It is not likely. We are meeting in a lonely place in the dark; he cannot know I have a relation at the school. Yet, in case, remember, Tom, to be on your guard if you should see a Portuguese near St. Jim's—a little, lithe, dark-skinned fellow, with the eyes of a tiger."

"I will remember."

"Take this now."

Dorrian fumbled in his coat, and drew out an oblong packet. He passed it into Tom Merry's hands. Tom saw it very dimly in the dark, but as far as he could see it was an ordinary wooden box with a sliding lid, such as dominoes are commonly kept in. The lid was not even fastened.

"Have you a safe place where you can keep it, Tom?"

"Yes; my desk."

"Does anyone but yourself go to the desk?"

"Manners and Lowther."

"Ah! You must put it somewhere else."

"Well, I could shove it in my trunk in the dorm.," said Tom Merry.

"That is better. You will not open it?"

Tom flushed in the dark.

"I hope I'm not likely to open it," he said.

"Forgive me, Tom; I did not mean to say that. I hardly know what I am saying." Dorrian was glancing right and left as he spoke, into the sombre shadows of the trees, and Tom could easily believe that he spoke the truth. "Take care of it, that is all."

"You say it contains something valuable?"

"Yes, of immense value."

"But the box is not fastened."

"No; that cannot be helped."

"Hang it!" said Tom Merry, "I'd rather it were fastened. Anything might happen, you know, to an unfastened box."

"You can put some fastening on it yourself, then. I had no time. I fled in an instant, with that hound close behind me. I have been hunted ever since. Besides, that box looks suspicious."

"Yes, that's true."

"Take it now, Tom; keep it carefully till I reclaim it. Good-bye."

"But when will you claim it?"

"As soon as I can with safety."

"But—"

"I must go now; we must not be seen together."

"One word more!" exclaimed Tom Merry, grasping his cousin by the arm, as Dorrian would have disappeared into the trees.

The young man turned back with an impatient exclamation.

"What is it?"

"Perhaps I ought not to ask the question, but—"

"Ask it, ask it! Be brief."

"You came by this—whatever it is—honestly?"

Dorrian started.

"Is that a proper question to put to me, Tom?"

"Perhaps not; but the circumstances are so strange. I don't ask you the reason for all this secrecy. But I want your word that the thing is all right. Does this box belong to you?"

"Yes."

"And what it contains?"

"Yes."

"Honestly?"

"As Heaven is my witness."

"That's enough. Good-bye."

His cousin grasped his hand, and plunged into the shadows and disappeared. Tom Merry thrust the box into his inside pocket. For some moments he stood silent, where he was, thinking over the strange affair. The rustle of his cousin's passage through the thickets had died away; but just as Tom Merry was turning to get back to the stile, the rustle was renewed.

Had Dorrian forgotten something, and was he returning? Tom Merry looked towards the rustling thicket, and made a step forward as a dark form emerged.

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"Is that you, Herbert?"

A pair of black eyes glittered in the gloom. It was not Dorrian!

Tom Merry drew hastily back, but a soft, silky voice spoke in the morning.

"Pare!" Then the Portuguese word was immediately repeated in English, as if the speaker remembered where he was—"Stop!"

CHAPTER 5. A Little Mistake.

"PWAY halt, deah boys!"

"Rats!"

"I heard somethin'—"

"More rats!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Look here, ass—"

"I wefuse to be called an ass."

"Do you think we're going to waste all the evening?" demanded Blake. "We're off the track of Tom Merry already."

"That is not my fault," said Arthur Augustus. "I was willin' to bring a bicycle lantern and follow his tracks."

Blake snorted.

"Yes, you'd have seen a lot of his tracks!"

"It was really my fault," remarked Herries. "I ought to have thought of bringing my bulldog—I mean, I ought to have brought him, whether you duffers liked it or not. Towser can track down anything."

"Especially kippers," growled Blake. "Blow Towser! It's a jolly good thing that Towser's still chained up at St. Jim's, and I wish Gussy were chained up there with him."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Will you shut up, and come on?"

"I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort. I wepeat that I heard somethin'."

"I can hear something now," murmured Digby.

"Bai Jove! What is it, Dig?"

"A silly ass jawing!"

"Weally, Digby—"

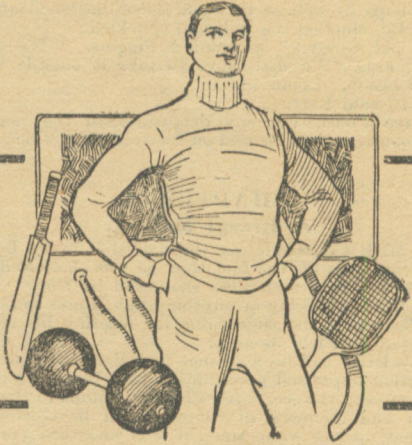
"What do you think you heard, Gussy?" asked Blake, in a tone of patient resignation which would have suited the celebrated Griselda.

"A footpint, deah boy—I mean a footstep."

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"Well, as there are eight feet in the party, counting Herries as only one pair—or ten, counting his as two each, that's not surprising."

"Look here," began Herries wrathfully, "you let my feet alone. I—"

"Pway don't waste time talkin', Hewwies, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus. "We are wathah in a huwwy, and I weally twust that you will not keep us here wastin' time in useless talk."

"Well, of all the cheek!" exclaimed Herries. "What are you doing?"

"I'm twyin' to make you asses listen to weason. I am certain I heard a footstep. There is somebody in the wood neah us."

Jack Blake looked round him.

After all, Arthur Augustus might have heard some sound that had escaped the others, though the chances were that he was mistaken.

The chums of the Fourth had missed Tom Merry in the lane, and their shadowing was proceeding more by chance than anything else.

As a matter of fact, they had very little prospect of getting on his track again, but they would not give in.

They had left the lane, and were following a footpath through the wood, somebody having fancied that he had seen a moving form dart through the hedge—the said moving form probably being the shadow of an elm branch.

The four juniors listened intently. The woods were very silent.

Rustle! Jack Blake started. Arthur Augustus had not been mistaken, then.

It was not a footfall, but it was a rustle in the thickets, as if someone were brushing cautiously through them.

Blake's eyes gleamed.

"My only hat!" he murmured, "Gussy's right!"

"As a mattah of fact, Blake, I usually am wight."

"Shut up! he'll hear you."

"I have no objection to shuttin' up, undah the circs., but you might word the wequest a little more politely."

"There's somebody coming towards us," whispered Digby.

"That's wight."

"He's making for the village," muttered Blake. "I don't know exactly where we are, in this beastly darkness, but we must be past the stile footpath, and nearer Rylcombe."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"It's Tom Merry, taking a short cut."

"It might be a poacher."

"Rats! There's no poachers in these woods now."

"It's Tom Mewwy wight enough, deah boys. I have a feelin' that it is Tom Mewwy. You can wely on me. My ideah is to suddenly spwing on the boundah, and bwing him to the earth."

Blake chuckled.

"Good! We'll pretend to be poachers ourselves, and press a fountain-pen to his head, and make him confess what he's here for."

"Bai Jove, that's a wippin' wheeze!"

"Good egg!"

The juniors had been whispering faintly. They were silent now, for the rustling in the thickets was getting very close.

The unseen person was evidently making for the lane, and he would pass very close to them if he kept straight on.

The juniors waited, with tense faces and bated breath. A dark form loomed up.

"Collar him!"

In a twinkling they had hurled themselves upon the shadowy form. There was a wild cry of alarm.

"Got him!" roared Blake.

The stranger went to the earth with a crash. The four juniors sprawled over him, holding his hands and grasping his hair. He was utterly overpowered before he had time to struggle.

"Hounds! thieves!" gasped a broken voice. "You have found me, but you will never find the diamonds!"

"Phew!" gasped Blake. "It's not Tom Merry!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Who are you?" demanded Blake, peering down at the fallen form beneath him in wonder.

The man gasped for breath.

"Let me go, you hounds!"

"Here, draw it mild!"

"You cannot rob me!"

"Bai Jove! Who wants to wob you, deah boy? We are not wobbahs," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, with a great deal of dignity.

"Who are you?" said the man, in a changed voice.

"Us," said Blake, who did not intend to give away the fact that he was a junior of St. Jim's breaking bounds. "We're us, and have been for some time. But we're sorry we bumped you; we were looking for somebody else."

"Pway welease him, deah boys!"

The juniors released the stranger. He stood blinking at them uncertainly in the gloom for a moment or two, and then he spoke in a low voice.

"You boys belong to St. Jim's?"

"Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy, before Blake could speak.

"We—ow! Blake, you howwid wottah! What are you stampin' on my beastly foot for?"

"Shut up, you owl!"

"I wefuse to shut up, and I utterly decline to be chawactewised as an owl! I—"

"Are you friends of Tom Merry's?" asked the stranger.

"Yaas, wathah! We were lookin' for the wottah to bump him, you know. We were goin' to give him a feahful waggin, you know, in a fiendly spiwit."

The stranger laughed slightly.

"I took you for somebody else," he said. "I am sorry I called you names. Good-night."

"Good-night, sir!"

The man plunged into the thickets. The juniors stared after him.

"Wonder who that was?" said Digby.

"Stranger in these parts," said Blake. "Must have shaken him up a little when we bumped him. He called us some pretty names. Well, we haven't found Tom Merry."

"Pewwaps you wish now we had bwrought that lantern for me to follow his twacks."

"Br-r-r-r! Let's get on and look for him."

"If you fellows would stwike a succession of vestahs, I would examine the gwound for twacks now. With my skill as a scout—"

"Br-r-r-r-r!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Come on!"

And they went on, though with but little hope of finding the one they sought. But suddenly through the darkness of the woods came a faint cry.

"Help!"

The juniors fairly jumped. It was Tom Merry's voice.

"Bai Jove! That's Mewwy!"

"Come on!" gasped Blake; and he tore away recklessly through bush and briar in the direction of the sound.

CHAPTER 6. Robbed!

"STOP!"

The foreign word, which he guessed to be Portuguese, had warned Tom Merry that this was the man his cousin had spoken of, the man from South Africa. He hesitated as the word was repeated in English.

The man came rapidly towards him. He was a little fellow, not much taller than Tom Merry himself, though evidently a full-grown man.

Tom Merry could only catch a glimmer of his face in the deep gloom of the wood, but he made out a pair of keen black eyes.

"Stop, senor!"

Tom Merry stood where he was, on his guard, and faced the man. He was not afraid of the Portuguese.

"What do you want?" he said.

"Only a word with you, little senor."

"Then say it where you are," said Tom Merry sharply.

"Don't come any nearer."

The foreigner laughed softly.

"And why not?"

"Because I don't like your looks, that's all."

The Portuguese laughed again.

"Be it so," he said, and he stopped four or five paces from the hero of the Shell, his black eyes scintillating like a cat's.

"But do not run or I shall have to stop you."

"I shall not run," said Tom Merry, scornfully; "but you will not stop me when I choose to go."

"Never mind that now. Who are you?"

"That is no concern of yours!"

"It might be, senor."

"My name is Tom Merry."

"Ah!"

"I belong to the school up the road—St. Jim's," said Tom. "Is there anything more you want to know?"

"Si, senor."

"Oh, go ahead!"

"Have you just met somebody in the wood?"

"That is my business!"

"Have you seen a man in this part of the wood?"

"Perhaps!"

"Will you answer me?"

"No!"

"Then I take it that you have seen a man."

Tom Merry was silent. If his life had been in peril, he would not have lied to save it; but his silence was as good as an answer in the affirmative to the Portuguese.

"I take it that you have met him," said the foreigner.

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Tom Merry did not speak. "I wondered," went on the silky voice, "I wondered why he came here, to this quiet place, this lonely wood."

"What business was it of yours?"

"I shall not explain that to a boy. Come, you have met the man I am looking for—the Englishman, Dorrian."

Tom did not speak.

"Is he a friend of yours, little senior?"

"Suppose he might be, what then?"

"A relative, perhaps?"

"Possibly!"

"What has he told you?"

"Nothing that I shall repeat to you!"

"Do you know where he is now?"

"No!"

"Did he tell you where he was going?"

"He did not."

The Portuguese chuckled.

"You have admitted, then, that you met Dorrian."

Tom Merry gave him a disdainful look.

"I am not afraid to admit it."

"Did he place anything in your charge?"

The boy's heart beat faster. He had expected that question, and the weight of the wooden box in his breast pocket seemed heavy upon his heart for a moment. He was alone in the wood, a man against a boy. What chance had he in a fight for the mysterious box? Yet he never flinched.

"I shall answer none of your questions," he said. "I have wasted too much time on you already."

"You will answer every question I choose to put, little senior, or it will fare the worse with you."

Tom Merry's eyes flashed.

"You will see how much I care for your threats," he said.

"I will not answer another question, not a word."

The Portuguese came closer.

"Then I shall make you speak!"

"You cannot!"

"I shall show you! Listen, little senior. I am a desperate man; I have come from a land where desperate deeds are done for less than the fortune Dorrian has robbed me of."

"It is a lie! My cousin never robbed you or anyone!"

"Your cousin!" exclaimed the Portuguese. "Good! I know now why he came here. Your cousin!"

Tom Merry bit his lip.

"He gave you something to take care of, then," went on the Portuguese. "He knew he could not keep it long from Da Silva. He was afraid. This was his device, to hide it in the hands of a schoolboy. Good! I should never have thought of it, if I had not been so close upon his track. But I am in time."

He came closer to the boy. Tom Merry backed away, his fists clenching.

"Keep your distance!"

"Bah! Give me the box!"

"I will not!"

"It is mine!"

"I do not believe you!"

"Mine or not, I will have it!" cried the Portuguese.

And with the quick, silent spring of a tiger, he was upon the boy. But Tom Merry was ready.

The champion athlete of the Lower Forms at St. Jim's was not an easy customer to tackle. His right-hand fist came up, and flashed out straight from the shoulder. The blow caught the foreigner fairly on the mouth.

He reeled for a second, muttering maledictions, but came on. The blow had been a terrible one, but it had only made him reel. The boy, with beating heart, drove his left out, and up, and it crashed under the dusky chin; but the grasp of his enemy was upon him.

Little as the Portuguese was in stature, his strength was great. Tom Merry struggled fiercely, but he was borne to the ground in a moment.

The Portuguese was growling fierce curses. The heavy blows Tom Merry had dealt had hurt him severely. Yet he hardly seemed to think of that. He crushed the boy to the ground in a savage grasp, and pinned him there with a knee on his chest.

"Where is the box?"

Tom Merry did not speak. He was struggling fiercely, but with a sinking heart. He was at the mercy of his assailant now.

The thin, wiry hands of the Portuguese searched through his pockets. Tom Merry struck at him, and struck again, but his blows did not tell. The foreigner gave a yell of delight as he felt the wooden box through Tom Merry's jacket.

"I have found it!"

The next moment his grasp was on the box. Tom Merry made a tremendous effort, and for a moment he almost threw off his foe. Then the thin savage hands fastened on his throat.

"Help!" shrieked Tom Merry.

Then a cruel grasp shut off his voice. The black savage

eyes were glittering down upon him. Did the man mean murder?

The scoundrel had thrust the box into his own pocket. He grasped Tom Merry's throat with his left hand, with his right he was fumbling, as if for a weapon. Tom Merry tore at the clutching hand, and released his throat.

"Help!" he cried hoarsely.

There was a crash in the thickets. The next moment a running form bumped right into the Portuguese, and the rascal released Tom Merry as he rolled on the ground.

"Bai Jove!" gasped a voice. "Here they are!"

CHAPTER 7.

Figgins & Co. Take a Hand.

TOM MERRY gasped and choked, he could not speak for the moment. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy stumbled over him and fell. Three other shadowy forms came looming up. The Portuguese muttered an oath, and darted away.

There was a crash in the thickets, and then he was in the footpath, and running for the lane.

Tom Merry sat up, gasping painfully.

"Blake! Is it you?"

"Yes, rather. Safe, old man?"

"Yes."

"Who was it? What was it? Here, lend a hand to get him up!"

"No; that's all right! Listen! I've been robbed! The fellow's got off—the man who ran. After him! He's got a box of mine. For heaven's sake get after him!"

"Bai Jove!"

Jack Blake stopped to ask no questions. The running footsteps of the thief were still audible. He had just cleared the stile into the lane.

Blake dashed in pursuit, and after him went Herries and Digby at top speed. Arthur Augustus helped Tom Merry to his feet.

"Are you hurt, dear boy?" he asked.

"No; it's all right!" panted Tom. "He was choking me—I couldn't get my voice for a minute, that's all. Let's get after them."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Tom Merry staggered as he tried to run for the lane. But he quickly recovered his strength. He vaulted over the stile, and ran after Blake and his chum, followed by the swell of the Fourth.

Jack Blake was running as if for a big prize on the cinder-path. He kept on the grassy belt beside the lane, and the Portuguese, looking back, did not hear him or see him in the shadow of the trees. The fugitive slackened a little to get his breath, and as he slackened Blake was upon him.

With a bound the junior hurled himself upon the Portuguese, and brought him to the ground.

Bump!

"Help!" roared Blake, sprawling over the foreigner, and clinging to him. "I've got the thief. Help!"

The Portuguese gritted his teeth savagely.

He made a great effort, and threw Blake off, and leaped up. And as he did so Herries and Dig arrived on the spot, and rushed straight at him.

There was no time for the rascal to run. He had to fight—or give in. He gave a wild glance round, and then sprang clear across the wide ditch beside the road, and clambered desperately over the palings that bordered the wood on the inner side of the ditch.

For a moment the juniors were nonplussed.

"He'll never get over!" gasped Digby.

But the lithe, active rascal was clambering over already. Blake did not hesitate. He made a spring to pass the ditch, and fell with a loud splash up to his knees in water.

"Ow!" he gasped.

Then he was after the foreigner. He made a clutch at the disappearing ankles, but they whisked away, and he heard the Portuguese roll down on the inner side of the fence.

Blake made a desperate spring, and caught the top of the fence in his hands. Then he went clambering over.

After him went Herries and Dig. But they weren't quite up to the jump. Tom Merry came plunging through the ditch, careless of his clothes.

He was thinking of the box that had been entrusted to him by his cousin, and of which he had been already robbed.

"Give me a bunk up, Dig."

"Right-ho!"

Up went Tom Merry, and over the fence, and he rolled down recklessly on the inside. There was a shout from a shadowy form in the gloom.

"This way!"

Tom Merry ran after Blake.

"Can you see him?"

"I can hear him."

The crashing in the underwood was a sufficient guide to the

ear. The wood was very thick in this spot, and could not be trodden in silence. At every step the branches and twigs crackled and rang.

Tom Merry dashed off, with Blake at his side, while the other juniors more slowly clambered over the fence and followed.

Crackle, crackle, crackle!

"Stop thief!" roared Tom Merry.

And Blake echoed the shout till the woods rang with it.

"Stop thief!"

It was quite possible that there might be a keeper abroad in the woods, and the running scoundrel might be caught yet.

"Stop thief!"

The Portuguese heard the shouts, and it warned him that there might be foes in the wood beside those behind him. He gritted his teeth as he ran, his black eyes flashing to right and left apprehensively.

The wood was growing clearer now, and he came out into a wide glade where he could run more freely without the dragging branches impeding his course. And now he could run silently, his footsteps unheard on the grass.

Was he safe, then?

"Stop thief!"

The shout rang more faintly in the rear from the juniors still struggling in the thickets.

The Portuguese stopped for a moment to take a panting breath.

"I have baffled them."

The next moment he uttered a yell of dismay.

Three figures were running down the glade, and their footsteps were as inaudible on the grass as his own. Three pairs of hands grasped him even as he uttered his exultant words aloud, and he went to the ground in a heap.

A heavy knee was planted on his chest, and each of his wrists was grasped by a strong pair of hands.

"I don't know whom you are," said a cheerful voice; "but you're jolly well going to stop here till you explain yourself! That was Blake's voice—what he calls a voice—yelling just now, wasn't it, Kerr?"

"Yes, rather, and Tom Merry's."

"Let me go," gasped the Portuguese vainly struggling. "let me go! I will give you money—five—twenty—fifty pounds!"

"Whose money?" said his captor caustically.

"A hundred pounds—quick!"

"My hat!" said a voice, in the gloom. "What a stunning feat we could stand for that, Figgy."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"A hundred pounds—"

"Oh, shut up, you thief! Do you think we want any of your stolen money?"

Tom Merry came panting up.

"We've got him, Merry, my son. You can safely trust a job of this sort to a New House chap, you know."

Tom Merry uttered an exclamation of amazement.

"Figgins & Co.!"

Figgins chuckled.

"Yes, in the right place and the right time, as usual."

CHAPTER 8.

Missing!

TOM MERRY looked down at the Portuguese writhing under the weight of Figgins & Co., and drew a deep breath of relief.

How the New House juniors came to be there just then he did not stop to inquire. That did not matter. They had appeared on the scene in the nick of time, and that was enough.

The Portuguese had not been able to escape with the box.

"You scoundrel!" said Tom Merry, as he looked down into the scintillating eyes of Da Silva. "Where is the box?"

"Find it!"

"That's soon done."

"What has he stolen from you?" asked Figgins.

"A little wooden box. It contains valuables."

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, coming up considerably tattered and torn. "It was wathah weckless of you to cawwy a box of valuables about in the woods at this time in the evenin', Tom Mewwy."

"It had only just been placed in my charge."

"Oho!" said Blake. "So that was why you came out—ch?"

"What do you know about it?"

"Well, you ass, why couldn't you tell us it wasn't a jape?" demanded Blake, rather indignantly. "Of course, we thought you were up to some little game, or we shouldn't have shadowed you."

"Shadowed me!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Well, you bounders—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Figgins. "They shadowed you, and we shadowed them, and we all missed one another in the dark."

"Bai Jove!"

"You don't mean to say you saw or heard—" began Tom Merry, somewhat perturbed.

"Nothing," said Jack Blake. "We were only shadowing you for a lark. You don't think we should poke our noses into your affairs, do you?"

"Weally, Blake, that is not exactly a pwopah wemark to make. It would be quite imposs for Tom Merry, as a gentleman, to suppose anythin' of the sort."

"Right-ho!" said Tom Merry. "Under the circumstances, as you've come in so useful, I won't lick you Fourth-Form kids."

As there were seven Fourth-Form "kids" this generous forgiveness from the hero of the Shell was not received with boundless gratitude.

"Good!" said Blake. "And we won't bump you for a cheeky Shell-fish, so we're even. As for these New House bounders—"

"I weward that expression as injudicious undah the cires, Blake. Figgins & Co. have played up vevy well, considewin'. I could not have stopped this wotiah bettah myself."

"What-ho!" said Figgins, in hearty agreement.

"Let me go!"

The Portuguese gasped out the words. The juniors laughed. They were masters of the situation now, and dangerous ruffian as Da Silva evidently was, they were not afraid of him. As Blake put it, there were enough of them to eat him.

"Better yank him along to the village, and shove him in the lock-up," said Blake. "He's not the sort of chap to be allowed to run loose."

"Senors—"

"You shut up," said Figgins, "you're dead in this act. Shall we yank him along to the lock-up, Tom Merry? It would sound well at St. Jim's. Desperate criminal arrested! Startling recovery of stolen property by New House Juniors—"

"Well, the police-station's the proper place for him, I suppose," said Tom Merry, hesitating. "Let me take my box away from him."

"Hold on," said Kerr, "that box will be wanted in evidence. You ought to leave it on him till he's searched at the police-station."

"Oh, no, no! It's a secret—I—I mean, I don't want a lot of fuss about it!" exclaimed Tom Merry hastily.

"Why not?" demanded Blake. "The man's a thief, and he ought to be locked up. You will have to appear in the witness-box."

"Yaas, wathah! It is the duty ewevy decent chap owes to his country to be vevy heavy on the thieves, you know, deah boys. It is quite imposs to weward a thief as havin' any claim to considewation whalevah."

"Yes, but—I want that box."

"Well, if you're particular about that, we'll soon have it," said Figgins, "You strike some vestas, Kerr, and give us a light to search the cad."

Kerr struck a succession of wax vestas. The flickering light glimmered on the savage, swarthy face, the gleaming black eyes of the foreigner.

But there was a mocking smile on the lips of Da Silva that puzzled the juniors.

"Now, keep quiet, or you'll get hurt, you animal," said Figgins, "I'm going through your pockets."

The Portuguese gritted his teeth.

"I shall remember you, senor."

"Thank you," said Figgins, politely. "I wasn't asking for a tip. Now, then, roll the black beast over."

And Figgins by the light of the vestas, went through the pockets of the foreigner in a really scientific way.

He turned out a clasp-knife, which Blake promptly kicked up and tossed far away into the depths of the shadowy wood.

Other articles were turned out, among them plenty of money, but there was no sign of the wooden box.

Tom Merry's face grew dark and anxious.

Figgins rose to his feet at last.

The foreigner's property lay in a little heap in the grass, but the wooden box was not there, and Figgins had finished his search.

"You haven't found it, Figgins."

"It isn't there."

"But it must be. He took it from me."

"How big was it?"

"About six or seven inches long, and two wide, I think."

"Then he can't have swallowed it."

"No, said Tom, laughing. "It must be about him somewhere."

"Well, have a look yourself old chap."

The mocking smile was still on the swarthy face of the Portuguese. Tom Merry knelt beside him and searched through his clothes.

He dragged off the jacket and waistcoat and coat, and turned them inside out. He groped in every possible recess where the box could be hidden—he even examined the hat and boots of the captured thief.

But the box was not to be found. It was missing. Tom Merry's face grew pale as he realised it. The box was gone after all. "You can't find it?" asked Blake. "No." "He must have chucked it somewhere when he was running." "I—I suppose so." "Then it's lying about here somewhere," said Figgins, with a glance round into the endless shadows of the wood. "Bai Jove! We shall never find it now!" "Impossible—to-night." "We'll all come and have a jolly good look in the daylight" said Digby, "It's bound to turn up if we all hunt for it." "Yaas, wathah!" "And this rotter had better be safe under lock and key, or he'll be joining in the hunt," said Figgins. "Bring him along." "Hold, seniors," "Shut up, you alien toad." "One word—"

"Rats! Yank him along." The dishevelled foreigner was dragged to his feet. He struggled the grasp of the juniors. "Hold!" he cried, savagely. "One word with Merry before you take me to the lock-up, one word with him." "Go on," said Tom Merry. "I must speak to you—alone." "Yes—and dodge off," said Blake, scornfully. "We're not mugs. Don't let go the cad." "Wathah not." "It is about your cousin, little senior." Tom Merry's face contracted. "Let him speak, you chaps," he said. "Fasten up his wrists and ankles with your handkerchiefs, and then he'll be safe." "Just as you like." The foreigner's hands and feet were tied. Then the juniors retired beyond hearing, leaving Tom Merry alone with the Portuguese. "Now, then," said Tom, sharply. "What is it?"

CHAPTER 9. A Bid for Liberty.

DA SILVA stood leaning against a tree; he could not stand upright with the bonds upon his limbs. The Portuguese was pale now under his tanned skin. He knew that he was in a tight corner. "Listen to me, little senior—"

"I am listening."

"Do you know what that box contained?"

"It is not my business to know."

"Diamonds," said Da Silva, fixing his eyes upon Tom Merry's face in the gloom, and trying to read its expression. "Diamonds worth twenty thousand pounds."

Tom Merry started. "Well, that makes no difference," he said, "I do not care to know it, even if it is true. And I sha'n't take your word for anything."

"You don't know where the stones came from?" went on the Portuguese.

"From South Africa, I suppose."

Da Silva laughed. "Have you ever heard of I.D.B.?"

"I.D.B.," said Tom Merry, puzzled. "I think I have—I do not remember. What do the letters stand for?"

"Illicit Diamond Buying."

"Yes, I have heard of that."

"Now can you guess where the stones came from?" said the Portuguese, mockingly. "Your cousin, Dorrian, and I bought them—from Kafirs working in the Kimberley mines. We are both liable to imprisonment for that. The stones can be taken back by the law, and sent to their original owners. Now do you understand?"

Tom Merry's face was white. "I do not believe it."

"It is true. That is why Dorrian fled from South Africa—he took the whole of the loot. If you had looked at the box he carried the diamonds in, you would have found my name written upon it."

Tom was silent.

"You understand, senior? The diamonds are as much mine as Dorrian's."

"It is not true—it cannot be true."

"Take me to prison," said the Portuguese, unheeding, "take me to prison, and I have only to tell the truth—and the officers will be on your cousin's track. You will send your kinsman to penal servitude. Take care, little senior."

"You lie," said Tom Merry, fiercely. "This is a tale to make me let you go. You would make me believe my cousin is a thief."

"He is a thief."

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Tom Merry's eyes blazed. "Very well. You say so—you shall have a chance to prove it. Here, you fellows—"

"Silence, you young fool! I tell you—"

"You fellows—come here."

The juniors ran up. "Lend me a hand to get this brute to the village," said Tom Merry, hoarsely. "I shall smash him, I think, if he says any more to me. Get him along."

"Yaas, wathah!"

The Portuguese ground his teeth with rage. "Ah, you shall repent this," he cried. "I will risk that."

Blake released the foreigner's legs. The ruffian was hustled along among the juniors, his wrists still tied. They reached the footpath leading to the village, and the man was forced along it towards the lane.

The ruffian's wrists were fastened with only a handkerchief knotted round them. As he moved along, he was wriggling his hands loose. He succeeded, just as the juniors came in sight of a solitary lamp blinking in the lane where the footpath joined it from the wood.

Da Silva drew a deep breath. Now was his chance!

Figgins and Blake were holding his arms, and the others were all round him. All depended upon a desperate bid for liberty. The Portuguese suddenly dragged his arms free, and struck out desperately on either side. Figgins reeled against a tree, taken by surprise. Blake staggered, and trod upon D'Arcy's foot, and there was a yell from the swell of St. Jim's.

Da Silva made a spring for the thickets. Half a dozen hands clutched at him, and missed, and he plunged into the shadows and was gone in a moment.

"After him," roared Blake.

"Ow! You have ewashed my foot."

"Blow your foot."

Blake dashed away in pursuit. The juniors followed him hotly; but in a few minutes it was clear that the pursuit was hopeless.

The rascally Portuguese had vanished into the darkness of the wood.

The juniors angry and disappointed, met in the footpath again, and found Arthur Augustus there, sitting on a root and nursing his foot.

"The cad's cleared off," growled Blake.

"Bai Jove!"

"What's the matter? It can't be helped now."

"I wasn't thinkin' of that chap, Blake. That is quite a minah mattah. I was thinkin' of my boot. The shape is uttably wuined."

"Do you want the shape of your features to be utterly ruined, to match?" asked Blake, grimly.

"Certainly not, deah boy. I wegard the question as widiculous."

"Then you had better ring off."

"Well, he's gone," said Tom Merry. "We had better get back to the school. I shall come out here first thing in the morning, before breakfast, and have a hunt for the box."

"We'll come and help you, old son."

"Yaas, wathah. I shall be vewy pleased to place my ability as a twackah at the service of Tom Mewwy. I have given a considerable amount of studay to the subject of amateur detective work, and I have no doubt that I shall soon twack down the missin' box."

"Rubbish!" said Herries, "it's all right—I'll put Towser on the scent. I suppose you don't happen to have the lid of the box, or anything, Merry, so that I could show it to Towser and put him on the scent."

"No," said Tom Merry, smiling.

"H'm, that's unlucky. Still, I'm pretty certain Towser will track it down. You remember the time he tracked down the burglars?"

"I don't think," murmured Blake.

And the juniors returned to St. Jim's. Tom Merry, armed with his pass from the captain of the school, marched up to the gates, but the rest of the juniors had to clamber in over the wall, and descend by way of the slanting oak. They were just in time to dodge into their houses before they were closed up for the night.

CHAPTER 10. An Open Secret.

TOM MERRY wore a thoughtful look as he went up to his dormitory with the rest of the Shell—or rather, the School House fellows in that Form. Manners and Lowther looked at him rather curiously. They had not heard a word yet; there had been no time to speak to them. But from Tom Merry's look they knew that something of unusual interest had happened.

Tom was thinking of the loss of the wooden box.

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Tom Merry & Co.



Tom Merry took the wooden box up into his study, and gazed at it thoughtfully. As he was to discover, the adventures of the mysterious wooden box were not yet over.

He had done his best—he had not been to blame—but how had he fulfilled his trust? Within so short a time after the box had been trusted into his care, he had lost it.

True, it was not in the hands of his cousin's enemy.

But now that the Portuguese had escaped, he had no doubt at all that the rascal would be in the wood with the first glimpse of dawn, searching for the box. And he would know more accurately where he had thrown it than Tom Merry knew. He had the more chance in finding it.

Where had he thrown it?

When he plunged over the ditch, and clambered over the fence, he had still been full of the hope of escape; and he had certainly not parted with the box then.

He must have retained it till he met Figgins & Co. in the glade, and then, finding himself captured, he had hurled the box into the trees, hoping to find it afterwards, but in any case determined to keep it as long as possible from being recovered by Tom Merry.

Or had he dropped it by accident during the chase—anywhere between the spot where Tom Merry had struggled with him, and the place where he had been captured by the New House juniors?

In that case, search would be practically hopeless.

But Tom Merry remembered the mocking smile on the face of the Portuguese when they had begun to search him; a smile he had not understood until he found that the box was missing.

No; the box had not been dropped by accident; the thief had retained it till the last possible moment, and it was still lying somewhere in the darkness of the woods, within a throw of the spot where he had been captured.

Tom Merry meant to be first in the field at daylight, at all events. He frequently went out very early for a bathe, and it would not be difficult for him to get out a little earlier.

He was in a deep reverie on the subject, turning over the various possibilities in his mind, when he received a slap on the shoulder. "Twopence for your thoughts," said Monty Lowther, "the usual offer is a penny, but you look as if you had a twopenny assortment this time."

Tom Merry laughed, as he kicked off his boots.

"It's all right, Monty. Are you game to come out before dawn to-morrow?"

Monty Lowther whistled.

"What's in the wind? A raid on the New House?"

"Oh, no."

"A row with the Grammar School?"
 "A row with nobody, my son. I want to look for something—something I've lost in the wood."
 "Any reward for finding it?" asked Gore, over Tom Merry's shoulder.

Tom looked vexed and annoyed.
 He had not known Gore was so near; and now that Gore knew there was something on, it would not be long before the whole Shell knew it.

"No," he said, shortly.
 "What is it—grub?"
 "Oh, no. Nothing of the sort."
 "A watch or anything?"
 "No, no."
 "Well, what is it?" demanded Gore. "Any giddy secret about it?"

"Well, you see—"
 "I might take a hand, and help you look for it."
 "Oh, I wouldn't bother you."
 Gore looked keenly at Tom Merry. He saw that there was something in this that the hero of the Shell did not choose to explain.

Gore was "up against" the Terrible Three whenever he had anything like an opportunity, and he thought he scented an opportunity now.

"My word! Here's a giddy mystery!" he exclaimed, in a loud voice, "I say, you chaps, who's game for a hunt in the woods at daybreak?"

"Why, what's on?" asked Harry Noble, the Australian.
 "Blessed if I know—Tom Merry's got something on, but it's a giddy mystery."

"Dear me," said Skimpole, turning his spectacles upon Tom Merry. "Did you say a mystery, Merry?"

"No, I didn't!" growled Tom Merry, "Gore did."
 "Ah! I shall be very pleased to look into it for you. As you know I have wonderful gifts as an amateur detective," said the genius of the Shell, fumbling in the jacket he had just taken off, for a notebook, "perhaps you will let me have a few details."

"Perhaps I won't."
 "Really, Merry."
 "Good," exclaimed Gore. "Go it, Skimmy. Why can't you let Skimmy take up the case, Merry? You know what a jolly good private detective he is."

"Yes, as good as Gussy in that line," Clifton Dane remarked, laughing.

Tom Merry looked worried.
 "Look here, you chaps, let this drop," he exclaimed. "It's a private affair, and only concerns me, only Gore had to poke his nose into it."

"What-ho," exclaimed Noble, promptly. "If that's the how of it, my son, we won't say a word."
 "Oh, I didn't mean you. I'd like you to lend me a hand, and Dane, and Glyn, if you feel inclined to get up early."

"I'll be up with the lark, then."
 "So will I," said Gore, with a malicious grin, "I like doing good-natured things. I'll come and help, Tom Merry."
 "No, you won't, you cad."

"Well, I call that ungrateful," grinned Gore, "I wonder what he has been losing? A banknote, perhaps, that belongs to somebody else?"

Some of the fellows laughed, and Tom Merry strode up to the cad of the Shell with a blaze in his eyes.

"Another joke like that, Gore, and I'll wipe up the floor with you," he said. "Now, keep that in mind."
 "Oh, keep your wool on," said Gore, uneasily, "I was only joking."

"Keep your jokes to yourself, then."
 "Ah, here is my pencil," said Skimpole, blinking through his spectacles, "I will now take some notes, Merry."

"Rats!"
 "But I want to take up the case."
 "Rubbish."

"Really, Merry, that is hardly polite. I want to do you a service. I have studied the business of a detective from the amateur point of view, and I am convinced that I can solve mysteries that would baffle the combined intellects of Sherlock Holmes and Sexton Blake. I am quite willing to find the villain who has committed this crime."

"Ass! It's only something lost in the wood."
 "Has there been any bloodshed?" asked Skimpole, whose deas of detective work were mainly gathered from cheap American fiction. "Did anyone hear the report of the pistol?"

"What pistol?"
 "Ah! it was a knife, then?"
 "What was it?"
 "The weapon that was used."
 "Ass!"

"Really, Merry."
 "Chump!"
 "I must remark that I consider that almost rude, Tom Merry."

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You have not answered my question as to whether there was any bloodshed."

"Fathead!"
 "That is no answer. That is simply a rude epithet. Have you any ulterior motives for concealing the name of the assassin?"

"The which?"
 "The assassin," said the amateur detective, firmly, "I am convinced from your attempts at subterfuge that there has been a serious crime."

"Oh, hold me, somebody," said Tom Merry.
 "I trust," said Skimpole, severely, "I trust that it will not be necessary for me to accuse you of participation in the crime, Merry. Is it your knife that you have lost in the wood?"

"My—my knife."
 "Were there any tell-tale stains upon it?"
 "T-t-t-tell-tale stains," gasped Tom Merry.

"Yes. I demand a reply. Place the details in my hands, and I'll take up the case, and clear you if possible."
 "Clear me!"
 "Certainly. I—"

The door opened, and Kildare looked in.
 "Are you going to keep me waiting all night?" he asked, pleasantly.

The Shell fellows tumbled into bed.
 Kildare turned out the light, bade them good-night, and closed the door. Tom Merry, who was fatigued with his exertions that evening, turned his head on the pillow to go to sleep.

In the stillness of the dormitory a voice made itself audible.
 "Tom Merry."
 "Ye-es."

"Will you give me the details of the crime?"
 "Rats!"
 "I am willing to take up the case in your interests."
 "Rubbish! Bosh! and more rats."

"Then I shall take up the case independently, in the interests of the truth only. As a sincere Socialist, I am bound to establish the truth."
 "B-r-r-r-r."
 "I am still willing to take down the details."
 Sn-noo-o-re!

"Merry!"
 Snore!
 "Really, Merry!"
 Snore!

And Skimpole gave it up.

CHAPTER 11.

Early Risers.

TOM MERRY could generally depend upon himself to awake, and he awoke on the following morning when the first fugitive ray of the sun was stealing in at the high windows of the Shell dormitory in the School House.

He sat up in bed, and rubbed his eyes.
 It was shadowy, and it was chilly, in the long dormitory, and he was far from inclined to get up.

But it was not a matter of inclination just then.
 He slipped out of bed, and groped for his clothes. He had a hasty wash; there was no time for the usual tub that morning, and Tom Merry promised himself a tub in the bath-room when he got back to the school.

He shook Monty Lowther by the shoulder, and Lowther opened his eyes.
 "Going to get up, Monty?"
 "G-r-r-r-r."
 "I'm off, you know."
 "You must be—fairly off—to get up at this time in the morning."

"I've got to go to the wood."
 "Good-bye."
 "You're not coming?"
 "Rats!" grunted Lowther. "Blow you! blow your lost property! blow your cousin! Blow everybody! I'm coming."

And Lowther tumbled out of bed. He shook Manners in his turn, but did not give him the option of remaining in bed. Manners was yanked out head first, and did not know that he was awake till he bumped on the hard floor.

"What on earth are you up to?" roared Manners.
 "Waking you up."
 "You utter ass!"

"I've saved you all the agony of mind I've been through myself," said Lowther. "You haven't got to decide whether to get up, and to make a big sacrifice for the sake of friendship. You're up already. You ought to be grateful."
 "I've a jolly good mind to—"
 "Don't thank me; it's all right."

Manners snorted.
 "I wasn't going to thank you. I—"
 "Then don't. Get a move on—also some clothes."
 "I'll jolly well—"

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"Don't wake the whole dormitory," suggested Tom Merry.

"Who's waking the whole dormitory?"

"You are," chuckled Harry Noble from his bed. "I'm awake."

"Are you the whole dormitory?" asked Manners, whose temper was considerably ruffled by his sudden exit from a warm bed to a cold floor.

"Not quite; the principal inhabitant, that's all," grinned the Cornstalk. "I say, Merry, old man, shall I come? I don't want to get in the way."

"I'd like you to; you ought to be up to some bush dodges that will help in a case like this."

"Then I'm on."

And the Cornstalk jumped up actively enough.

The rest of the dormitory appeared to be sleeping, and the four Shell fellows let them sleep. They finished dressing and left the dormitory, and as they did so Skimpole sat up in bed.

"Dear me!" murmured the genius of the Shell. "I heard a noise. I am convinced that I heard a noise."

"Go hon!" said Gore's voice from the pillows.

"Are you awake, Gore?"

"No," said Gore sarcastically. "I'm fast asleep."

"Dear me! You are speaking very connectedly for a fellow talking in his sleep," said Skimpole, who never could see anything approaching a joke.

"Ha, ha! You ass!"

"Really, Gore—"

"Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther and Kangaroo have just gone out," said Gore. "Ain't you going to investigate the case?"

"Dear me! Yes, certainly."

Skimpole crawled out of bed. He groped for his glasses and put them on, and blinked at Gore.

"Are you coming, Gore?"

"Well, I was coming," said Gore. "But—but I think I'll have another snooze, on second thoughts. Buzz off!"

"I should be glad of your assistance in working out the case, and in helping me to make any arrests that might be necessary."

"Ass!"

"Really, Gore—"

Gore snored.

Skimpole dressed himself, and left the dormitory. He blinked round in search of Tom Merry & Co. The passage and stairs were very dusky, and no one—not even the early housemaid—seemed to be stirring.

But a group of juniors were standing outside the door of the Fourth Form dormitory. Tom Merry had met Blake and his chums just coming out. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was wearing a cap. It would be necessary to leave the school in the same way as before, and D'Arcy did not mean to risk another topper.

"I hardly expected to see you chaps up," Tom Merry remarked.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, you must wemembah that we said we would be up."

"You might have overslept yourself."

"Not when it was a question of keepin' an appointment," said Arthur Augustus. "I weward your wemark as callin' for an apology, Tom Mewwy."

"Well, apologise, then."

"I mean an apology from you to me."

"Rats! Come on."

"Undah the circs—"

"Don't make a row and wake the house, you know."

"I wufuse—"

"Come on," said Jack Blake, linking arms with his elegant chum. "Not so much talkee, you know. This way."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Take his other arm, Dig."

"Right you are!"

"I'm going round to get my bulldog," Herries remarked. "Better have Towser on the scent, I think."

"Oh, yes, rather," said Monty Lowther. "If he tracks down wooden boxes as he tracks kippers, it will be all serene."

"Look here, Monty Lowther—"

"Dear me, are you ready?" asked Skimpole, coming up. "I am glad to see that you are all in this affair. It gives me some hope that Tom Merry is guiltless."

"Off his rocker, of course," said Jack Blake, who knew Skimpole too well to inquire into what he might possibly mean.

"Let's get on."

They descended the stairs. To save noise they left the house by the hall window. Herries cut round to the kennels to get his bulldog, in whose powers as a tracker he had a touching faith.

The others crossed to the school wall. The gates were not open, and would not be for more than an hour yet. The daylight was still hardly clear; night's shadows lurked under the old elms.

There was a sudden "coo-ooo" from the dusky quad, and

Figgins & Co. came running up. Figgins grinned at the School House juniors.

"The whole family's up, I see," he remarked.

"Yaas, wathah! These chaps are comin' with me to find Tom Mewwy's box. Skimpole is comin' to find the murdowah."

"Aha!" said Skimpole. "I knew there was a murder in the case. I can generally trust my detective instinct."

Br-r-r!

"Ow! Keep that bwute away from my twousahs, Herries."

"Keep your trousers away from Towser," growled Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies—"

"Are you taking that beast with you?" asked Kerr. Herries glared.

"I'm taking Towser," he said. "We're not taking any beasts, excepting three fellows from the New House."

"How are you going to get him over the wall?"

"One of you fellows can hand him up to me."

"Yes—you bet!" said Blake with emphasis. "I can see myself handing up that dangerous beast. I'll chain him up, if you like—or chop him up."

"Look here, Blake—"

"Or smash him up—but I jolly well won't hand him up. It's not good enough!"

"Wathah not!"

"He's going over the wall, anyway."

"Perhaps he could squeeze through the bars of the gate," suggested Fatty Wynn.

"Good egg!"

Towser did squeeze through, with some difficulty—difficulty which did not improve his temper, and made it rather unsafe for anybody but his master to go near him—and the juniors clambered over the wall and followed. Then in the strengthening light of the rising sun, Tom Merry & Co. went swiftly down the lane.

CHAPTER 12.

A Search at Dawn.

G-R-R R R R!

"Pway keep that beast quiet, Hewwies."

"Bosh! It does a dog good to growl sometimes. It's good exercise for his vocal cords."

"It's a jolly row," said Blake.

"Blessed if you're not always grumbling at something. I never met such a cantankerous set of rotters. You'd grumble at a dove if I kept one in the study, I believe."

Blake chuckled. Towser the bulldog was not very dove-like in his disposition. But to Herries, Towser was like the king in the British constitutional system—he could do no wrong.

"Here we are!" said Figgins, halting at the place where the Portuguese had made that desperate plunge across the ditch and the fence the previous night.

In the glimmer of the rising sun, the man's tracks could still be seen in the mud. The juniors managed to cross the ditch with less damage than they had received the previous night, and they climbed the fence and dropped down inside. Under the trees the shadows of night still lurked thickly.

Tom Merry looked about him alertly.

He was pretty certain that the Portuguese would be on the scene at the first glimpse of dawn, and every shadow might conceal the lurking form of the ruffian from South Africa.

"Bai Jove, it's dark here," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "It is awfully wet, too. It did not occur to me that it would be vewy dewy, deah boys. I shall get my boots wet."

"Take 'em off," said Kangaroo.

"My dear fellow, then I should get my socks wet."

"Take 'em off, too."

"Weally, Kangaroo, I should get my feet wet."

"Take 'em off!"

"Weally, you know—"

"Or couldn't you walk on your hands?" suggested Kangaroo thoughtfully. "Like they do in the circeses, you know. That would keep your feet dry."

"I wufuse to entah into a widiculous discush."

"Good!" said Blake. "It's about time you shut up, as that Portuguese chap may be hanging round."

"Weally, Blake—"

"A Portuguese," said Skimpole, jerking out his note-book. "Good! Is he the criminal?"

"Duffer!"

"How do you spell Portuguese?" asked Skimpole, wetting his pencil point. "Do you spell it with one or two z's, Tom Merry?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ahem! I should prefer to spell it correctly. Perhaps I had better put the two z's," said the amateur detective of the Shell, jutting it down thus—"Portugueeze." "Good! Did he commit the murder?"

"Ass!"

"What is his name?"

"Idiot!"

"That is not a Portuguese name."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I shall search for the lost box," said Skimpole, putting up his note-book. "I hope that the documents it contains will clear up the mystery."

"You utter ass!" said Tom Merry. "There aren't any documents in the case."

"You are prevaricating, Merry. You referred to a box. Now you say there are no documents in the case. Is it a case or a box that is lost?"

Tom Merry did not reply. He was plunging through the wet thickets in search of the lost box. Skimpole jotted down another note in his book. "Lost article, either a case or a box; the suspected party refuses to state which; looks very black."

Then Skimpole joined in the search.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy uttered a sudden exclamation, that drew the general attention to him at once.

"Bai Jove!"

"What is it?" exclaimed Tom Merry, hurrying towards him. "Have you found it?"

"Found what, deah boy?"

"The box, of course."

"Oh, no! I was just thinking that if I woll my twousahs up vevy high, I shall avoid gettin' them damp."

"You utter ass!" growled Tom Merry, in disgust.

"I wefuse to be called an ass! I——"

But Tom Merry was gone.

"Coo-oo-y!"

It was a call from Noble, who had plunged ahead in the thickets, careless of the damp dew on leaves and twigs.

Tom Merry hurried towards him.

"Have you found anything, Kangaroo?"

"Yes," called back Kangaroo. "Come here!"

"The box?"

"No—a trail?"

Tom Merry joined him in the glade. In the thick damp grass Kangaroo had turned up a candle-end and several burnt matches.

"Look at them!"

Tom Merry looked disappointed.

"What about them, Kangaroo?"

"That candle-end was turned out of a lantern, you see. It was burnt right down to the socket, and the chap put a new candle in."

"Ah!"

"Which shows that someone was searching here with a lantern last night, and kept it up a jolly long time, too, for his candle to burn right out."

Tom Merry changed colour.

He had not thought of that before.

He had arrived on the ground at the dawn—but the Portuguese had been before him. For there was no doubt as to whom the previous searcher had been. Da Silva had spent the night searching the woods with a lantern.

Had he found the box?

CHAPTER 13.

Towser Distinguishes Himself.

TOM MERRY'S face was full of dismay.

He had not been prepared for that; but even if he had thought of it, it would not have been possible for him to leave the school for the whole night, and search through the shadowy woods.

Had the Portuguese found the box?

The juniors gathered round the spot, and from the clues Kangaroo had discovered, they came to the same conclusion, of course, as the Cornstalk.

"He's been here!" said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"But we don't know that he found the box," said Kerr.

"It wouldn't be easy—much harder by lantern light than by daylight; and you can see that it's not easy now."

"That's true enough."

"I here's one thing, too," went on the keen-witted Scottish lad, "if he found it he won't come back. If he didn't, he'll be back here looking for it at daylight. If we see anything of him, we shall know that he hasn't found the box."

Tom Merry's face brightened.

"Good for you, Kerr! That's right enough."

And the juniors resumed the search.

They hunted high and low through the thickets, and there were several sarcastic requests to Herries to ask Towser to put them on the right track; requests to which Herries replied only with lofty sniffs.

But a sudden growl from Towser proved, soon, that he had found something. The bulldog made a dart into a thicket, and there was a hasty exclamation and a rustle of the twigs, and a lithe form leaped out and fled.

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Tom Merry gave a shout.

"The Portugee!"

"After him!" yelled Blake.

Towser was already tearing after the fugitive. Herries shouted encouragement to his dog.

"Seize him! Towser! Go it, doggy! Seize him!"

And Towser looked as if he meant business.

The Portuguese, with gasps of terror, disappeared into the wood, the dog still tearing after him with jaws ready to grip.

Tom Merry could not help laughing at the sudden flight of the foreigner. Towser had proved useful after all.

And Tom remembered Kerr's deduction on the subject, that if the Portuguese reappeared, it would be a proof that he had not found the box.

The wooden box was still lost in the shadows of the wood.

Tom Merry felt his heart lighter at the thought.

The juniors had a good hour before them before they need return to St. Jim's; and surely the box must be found in that time, with so many seeking it.

The whole party set to work again with renewed hope.

Although only Tom Merry understood the importance of finding the box, they were all equally keen on the quest.

But the time passed on, and nothing was discovered.

The difficulty of the task became more and more apparent as they proceeded.

The ground here was densely covered with undergrowth, with thick ferns and grass and weeds, and a minute search of the whole space was required to unearth the small object that had fallen there from the hand of the Portuguese.

A minute search of so wide a space, under such conditions, might take days, or even weeks, with the space mapped out and gone over methodically.

There was naturally little method so far in the search.

The juniors spread out through the wood, searching wherever they could, and a cursory examination of the space was made, that was all.

The sun rose higher, and warm beams poured down into the wood, lighting up the recesses in which the shadows of night had lingered.

"Dear me!"

It was a sudden exclamation from Skimpole.

Tom Merry looked towards the amateur Socialist of St. Jim's. Skimpole was standing in the glade, examining something he had picked up, and blinking at it through his spectacles.

Tom Merry ran quickly towards him.

"What is it, Skimmy?"

Skimpole blinked at him.

"The knife."

"Eh, the knife?"

"Yes."

Skimpole held it out to view. Tom Merry gave a grunt of disgust. It was the clasp-knife they had taken away from the Portuguese and hurled into the trees the night before.

"Oh, that's nothing!"

"You are quite mistaken," said Skimpole, blinking at him.

"It is a most important piece of evidence. I will see if there are any bloodstains upon it."

"You ass!"

Skimpole opened the knife, and seemed quite disappointed to find the blade quite clean and bright.

"Ah, this has been cleaned since the crime!"

"Chuck it away, you ass!"

"It is important evidence."

"Dummy!"

"What do you know about this knife, Merry?"

"I know it's in the hands of a silly ass."

"Really, Merry——"

"Look here, you can't keep that knife—it's another man's property. You can't rob even a thief. It ought to be taken to the police-station."

"I shall not call in the police till the last moment, when the case is complete. That is Sherlock Holmes's method. He then allows the police to take the credit of the case."

Tom Merry laughed, and turned away. Nothing would convince Skimpole that there was a great gulf fixed between real life and a detective novel.

Skimpole made exhaustive notes in his book on the subject of the knife. As Skimmy's writing was so bad that he frequently could not read it himself afterwards, his notes were not likely to be of much value to him.

The juniors kept up the search keenly enough, but there was no other discovery made. The clasp-knife was the only thing found.

The sun was getting high in the sky, and it warned the juniors that it was time to return to the school.

"Better go, I suppose," said Tom Merry. "No good getting gated, and being stopped from coming again."

"Wathah not."

"We'll come again immediately after morning lessons," said Kangaroo. "After all, if we can't find the thing between



Gasping with rage, the Portuguese lay on his back, his black eyes rolling in impotent fury. Tom Merry knelt beside him, his face red with exertion, and very stern. "Where is the box?" he said.

us, it's pretty certain that that foreign chap won't be able to find it on his lonesome."

"Yaas, wathah!"

And the juniors slowly took their way out of the wood. There was a great deal in what the Cornstalk said; but Tom Merry was despondent. The morning was before the Portuguese now; and the box might be in his hands before morning lessons were over at St. Jim's.

Tom Merry considered whether he should inform the police in Rylcombe of the matter. It was a difficult matter to decide.

How could he make them credit so strange a story?

And if they believed it, were they not certain to jump to the conclusion that Herbert Dorrian's mysterious conduct meant that the box had fallen into his hands by means that would not bear the light.

That the country police would be able to arrest the wily, elusive Portuguese Tom Merry did not believe for a moment. Neither was it likely that they would be able to find the box. But if they found it, would they hand it over to Tom unopened? It was not likely.

In fact, if they heard of its existence, they might make Tom hand it over to them if he found it, pending an inquiry into the matter.

These considerations, added to Dorrian's earnest impression upon him not to let the secret escape, made Tom resolve to keep the matter away from the police.

He was compelled to resign himself to the thought that for the next few hours the foreigner would have the ground to himself.

That could not be helped.

As the juniors left the wood, Herries looked anxiously round for his dog. Towser had not yet returned, and Herries's long and piercing whistles had been unanswered. Herries had full confidence in Towser; yet he had a lurking fear, now, that the dark-skinned ruffian from South Africa might have done him some injury. Even a bulldog was not proof against knife or bullet, and the Portuguese might have resorted to either.

Herries uttered an exclamation of relief as Towser suddenly burst from a thicket, very dewy and perspiring and muddy, and panting for breath. There was a fragment of cloth in the jaws of the bulldog, which he proceeded to lay at his master's feet.

Herries patted his head proudly.

"Good doggy! Good old Towser!"

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, turning his

eyeglass upon the fragment. "That was the pattern of the wascal's twousahs!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"Towser must have given him a run for his money," grinned Lowther. "Good old Towser! Herries is quite right about Towser. He can track anybody down—if he can see him."

And Towser came in for a great deal of petting as the juniors walked back to the school. At the gates, which were now open, they met a cheery-looking fag of the Third Form, with untidy hair and inky stains on his fingers. It was Wally, the younger brother of the swell of the Fourth.

"Hallo, cocky," said D'Arcy minor cheerily, giving his major a dig in the ribs that made him gasp, "what's the little game now?"

"Weally, Wally——"
"What have you been out for so early?"
"I do not intend to confide that to a Third Form fag," said Arthur Augustus, with dignity. "How long have you been wearin' that collah, Wally?"

"About twenty minutes."
"I was not weferin' to the time you put it on this mornin'. I mean, how many days have you had it in use?"

"Forget," said Wally cheerfully. "Less than three months, I'm certain."

"It is vewy soiled."
"Jolly sight cleaner than yours," said Wally, with a critical glance at his usually elegant major. "You're wet and muddy all over."

"I have been in the wood."
"What's the game?"
"Weally, Wally——"

Gr-r-r-r-r!
Bow-wow-wow!

"Here, call your little beast off, young D'Arcy!" exclaimed Herries. "Towser will kill him if you don't."

"Here! Pongo! Pongo! Pong!"
Pongo reluctantly left his enemy, and Herries marched Towser away to the kennels. Wally stood with his hands in his pockets, and a perplexed expression upon his face, looking after the juniors.

"Blessed if I can make this out," he muttered. "There's something on, anyway. What have they been up to in the wood? Some jape, I suppose; and a Third Form chap's not good enough to be taken into the wheeze." Wally grinned. "I shall have to educate them about that, I think."

And Wally turned it over in his mind, with a result that was destined to be of very unexpected consequence to Tom Merry & Co.

CHAPTER 14.
Gore Has Bad Luck.

MR. LINTON, the master of the Shell, looked curiously at Tom Merry in class that morning several times. Tom was usually an attentive pupil, and gave the Form-master little trouble. This morning he was so absent-minded that Mr. Linton could not help noticing it.

The Shell master was very patient. But when Tom Merry's answers grew very random, he remonstrated. It was too much to be told that one of the principal exports of the United States was wooden boxes, and that Christopher Columbus was a Portuguese. Portuguese and wooden boxes were running in Tom Merry's mind; but Mr. Linton could not be expected to understand.

"Merry!" he rapped out presently.
"Yes, sir."

"Are you ill?"
"N-n-no, sir."

"Then what is the matter with you?"
"N-n-nothing, sir."

"Then why are you making random replies to me?" demanded the master of the Shell. "Why are you answering me in the most ridiculous manner, sir?"

Tom Merry reddened.
"W-w-was I, sir?"
"You were."

"I—I am sorry."
"You have told me that Christopher Columbus was a Portuguese, Merry, and that the United States export a great number of wooden boxes every year."

Tom Merry's face became scarlet.
"I—I——"

"You are not thinking about your work, Merry."
"N-n-no, sir."

"You will stay in half an hour after morning lessons, Merry, and write out a hundred times that Christopher Columbus was a Genoese."
"Oh, sir!"

The dismay in Tom Merry's face struck the Form-master at once.
"Well, Merry?"
"Am I—er—detained, sir?"

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"I have said so."
"I—I—I am sorry——"
"Sorry you are detained?"
"Ye-es, sir."

"I dare say that is the case, Merry. I did not expect you to be pleased," said the master of the Shell grimly.

Tom Merry sat silent, and Mr. Linton looked at him. "Come, Merry," he said more kindly. "You are not yourself this morning. If there is anything the matter with you, say so."

"I—I am rather worried, sir, about—about something I have lost," blurted out Tom Merry.

"Ah, that alters the case! You are one of my best pupils, Merry, and I have no desire to be hard upon you," said Mr. Linton kindly. "What have you lost—something of great value?"

"I—I don't know, sir. It was given to me to take care of by somebody else."

"Ah, that is a serious matter! You have lost it about the school?"
"No, sir, in the wood."

Mr. Linton wrinkled his brows for a moment.
"You think it was of value?"
"Yes, sir."

"You may go and look for it if you like," said Mr. Linton after a moment's thought. "You are excused the rest of the morning's lessons."

Tom Merry's face brightened up at once.
"Oh, thank you, sir! You are very kind."
"Not at all. You may go."

And Tom Merry went, very gladly. The thought of the Portuguese, hunting in the wood for the missing box, was weighing upon his mind so much that he could not possibly bring his attention to his work.

Gore looked after him evilly as he quitted the class-room. Gore was not a good-natured boy, and he was fond of attributing any kindness Tom Merry received from the masters to favouritism.

The fact that Tom Merry was a diligent and attentive pupil, and that he never tried to make the master's task harder than it inevitably was, did not appeal to Gore at all. He was lazy and troublesome himself, and received little but lines and raggings from the Form-master.

He grumbled his discontent into the ear of Skimpole, who sat next to him.

"Rotten favouritism!" he grumbled.
Skimpole blinked at him.

"Really, Gore, I was thinking that it was very kind and considerate of Mr. Linton, as Merry is worried about the box he lost."

"Bosh! That's only an excuse for getting off lessons."
"I do not think Merry would tell a lie. As a sincere Socialist it is impossible for me to suspect people of bad motives without absolute proof."

"Rats!"
"Really, Gore——"
"Shut up, you ass! Linton's looking."

Mr. Linton was glancing towards them. He had caught the murmur of voices.

"Were you speaking, Skimpole?"
"Yes, sir. I cannot tell a lie."
"Very good. You will take a hundred lines."
"Oh!"

"Good old Georgie Washington," murmured Monty Lowther. "Skimpy is a silly ass at the little hatchet business."

Gore was thinking. He began to assume an absent-minded look, and made a very random answer to Mr. Linton. The master of the Shell pounced upon him at once.

"Gore!"
Gore did not reply. He was looking at the ceiling.
"Gore!"

Gore started, as if brought suddenly to himself, and looked at the Form-master.

"Yes, sir. Did you speak, sir?"
"I did, Gore. I spoke twice."
"I am sorry, sir."

"Why did you not answer me the first time, Gore?"
"I—I was thinking, sir. I—I was feeling worried."

Mr. Linton fixed his grey eyes on Gore's face. The class looked on and listened with interest. They guessed Gore's game at once, and if Gore had been as sharp as he thought he was, he would have seen from the expression of Mr. Linton's face that that gentleman guessed it too.

"Ah! You were feeling worried, Gore?"
"Yes, sir."

"About your lessons?"

ANSWERS

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"Oh, no, sir!"

"Kindly acquaint me with the cause of your worry, Gore."

"I—I've lost something, sir."

"Indeed! What have you lost?"

"A—penknife, sir."

"Your own penknife?"

"N-no, sir. It was lent to me," said Gore fatuously. The calm tone and look of the Form-master made him believe that Mr. Linton was taken in, and he was already looking forward to a free morning spent outside the class-room. "It was a very valuable-looking one, sir—silver mounted and pearl handled, sir."

"And you have lost it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where?"

"Somewhere along the river, sir."

"And you would like to miss your morning's lessons and go and look for it?"

"Oh, yes, sir! Thank you, sir," said Gore, leaving his place.

"You need not move, Gore."

"Eh? Yes, sir."

"I have not yet granted you permission to leave the class-room."

"Oh!"

"I wish to be further satisfied on the subject of this knife. You say that it was lent to you?"

"Ye-e-es, sir."

Gore was beginning to feel uneasy now. Why on earth Mr. Linton should make all these inquiries in his case, when he hadn't made any in the case of Tom Merry, Gore couldn't understand.

He did not reflect that Tom Merry was known to be the soul of honour, and that he himself was equally well known to be the most untruthful boy in the Form. A single word from Tom Merry weighed more than the most detailed and circumstantial statements from Gore.

The Shell looked on with great keenness.

They knew that Mr. Linton was on the track, and they wondered whether Gore would be able to get out of it.

Mr. Linton was smiling grimly.

"Who lent you the knife, Gore?"

"A—a—a friend, sir."

"In your own Form?"

"Yes, sir. I—I mean, no, sir," said Gore, remembering that the Shell were all there to be questioned.

"Indeed! Yes and no! Your answers are a little contradictory, Gore," said Mr. Linton, as gently as a cooing dove. He was most dangerous when he was most quiet, as the Shell well knew. "Which do you mean, Gore? Yes or no?"

"No, sir."

"It was not a boy in the Shell?"

"N-n-no, sir."

"What boy was it, then?"

"A—a—a chap I met out of doors, sir," said Gore desperately, seeing that the matter was now to be sifted to the bottom.

"Ah! What was his name?"

"I—I don't know, sir."

"Do you know him well?"

"N-n-no, sir."

"I suppose not, as you do not know his name. You do not know him at all well?"

"Oh, no, sir."

"Yet he lent you a valuable knife—a knife silver-mounted and pearl-handled—this boy whom you hardly know, and whose name you do not know at all?"

Gore was silent. He had involved himself in a maze of falsehoods, and how to extricate himself he had not the faintest idea. He could only blink uneasily at the Form-master.

Monty Lowther chuckled softly.

"Linton ought to be a giddy detective," he murmured.

"Well, Gore? Have you anything to say?"

"I—I—I—"

"That is not very explicit. I am driven to the conclusion, Gore, that you have made an untrue statement."

Gore did not speak. It was not of much use denying it.

"You have sought to escape morning lessons, because Merry was excused to look for something he had lost. You do not give much credit to my penetration, Gore. I am afraid, Gore, that you are the most obtuse, as well as the most untruthful, boy in the class. You will stay in after lessons, Gore, and remain till dinner-time, and you will occupy the time by writing out the sentence 'It is foolish and disgraceful to be a liar.'"

"Ye-e-es, sir."

"We will now resume," said Mr. Linton.

And they resumed; while Gore sat with a face like a demon. And when the Shell were dismissed, Gore still sat there, his pen travelling slowly over the paper, writing out again and again that very accurate statement, that it is foolish and disgraceful to depart from the truth.

CHAPTER 15.

Tom Merry Defends Himself!

TOM MERRY lost no time after quitting the Shell Form-room. He caught up his cap, and hurried out of school, and in a few moments was down at the gate. Taggles, the porter, was standing there, and he regarded the hero of the Shell with a glance of extreme disfavour.

"Which what are you doin' out of school, Master Merry?" he demanded.

"Walking."

"Which it's my dooty to stop you."

"What-bo!" said Tom Merry cheerfully. "You always do your duty, don't you, Taggy? It's your duty to keep strictly sober and attend to business, and you never do anything else."

"Which I says—"

"Sorry I haven't time to listen now, Taggy. Keep your remarks till this afternoon, and I'll have them after dinner. I've got leave, Taggy—special leave."

"Which I don't—"

"Ta-ta!"

And Tom Merry dodged the porter and ran out into the road. Taggles shook his head solemnly. He was half-inclined to think that Tom was playing truant. But Tom Merry did not stay to argue it out.

He went cheerily down the lane towards Rylcombe. He swung his stick as he went. He had caught the stick up in coming out. It belonged to Reilly of the Fourth, and it was a stout blackthorn, which Reilly boasted had broken many a head in County Down and Antrim before it came into his possession.

It was more than likely that Tom Merry would meet the Portuguese in the wood, and in that case he required a weapon.

The junior was soon on the scene of the morning's search. The cursory glance of the morning had failed to reveal the missing box, and it was only by a minute hunt over the recesses of the wood that he could hope to find it.

The task was long and difficult; but there was consolation in the fact that it would be still more difficult for the Portuguese, who had no one to help him in the search. As soon as morning lessons were over, Tom Merry would be joined by a dozen juniors, all keen to aid him in the quest.

In the thick grass the footsteps of the searchers were still visible. The spot was a lonely one, and had not been visited since the morning's search, unless by the man from South Africa.

Where could the missing box be? Tom Merry looked round him, and wondered. Among the thickets, hidden in the grass, down among the ferns and weeds? Perhaps stuck in some crevice of one of the huge trees? For the hasty throw of the Portuguese might have sent it upward through the overhanging branches.

The wood was very lonely. Tom Merry could hear the chimes from the village church, but the thick woods round him seemed to shut him off from all human companionship. He kept a wary eye about him as he began to search for the missing box.

He was more likely, as he knew, to find Da Silva than to find the missing box; and so it proved.

"Senor!"

It was a soft, silky, but threatening voice. The Portuguese stepped from the trees before him.

Tom Merry reeled a pace, his hand closing more tightly upon his stick. His eyes met the threatening glance of the Portuguese calmly.

"So you are here again, little senor?"

"Yes, as you see."

"You have not found the box, it appears?"

"No."

"Neither have I," said Da Silva. "I hurled it far—in what direction I know not. It will not be easy to find."

"I shall find it."

"I think not, little senor. You will not even look for it."

"Who will prevent me?"

"I, Manuel Da Silva."

Tom Merry swung up the stick as the Portuguese took a quick, tigerish step towards him, looking strangely like a wild animal about to spring.

"Stand back!"

"Ah! Do you think I am afraid of your stick?"

The man from South Africa leaped savagely forward. Perhaps he thought that the boy was scared, and would not dare to strike. If so, he did not know Tom Merry.

The hero of the Shell stood as firm as a rock. The stick came crashing down, and it fell upon the shoulder of the Portuguese, who dodged in time to save his head.

Da Silva gave a yell of pain; but he did not recede. With a livid face, and eyes that seemed to burn, he hurled himself upon the junior.

"Ah, I have you now!"

But he was mistaken. The stick swung round again, and caught him a terrific blow on the side of the head.

With a gasp, the Portuguese dropped into the grass.

Tom Merry drew a quick, sharp breath. He waited for his enemy to rise again, holding the stick in readiness; but Da Silva did not move for some moments.

A terrible fear smote the boy for a moment as he looked at him. He had struck hard; what if—

The thought was hardly shaped in his mind, when the Portuguese stirred and groaned. He sat up in the grass, his hand to his head, glaring in a bewildered way at the junior of St. Jim's.

"What—what was it? Ah!—you!"

Tom Merry drew a breath of relief.

"I struck you in self-defence," he said quietly. "Let me alone, and I shall not interfere with you." He turned away. The Portuguese was looking dazed and sick, and there was evidently nothing more to be feared from him at present.

He staggered to his feet, his head singing, his brain in a whirl. With his hand to his head, he moved away from the glade. He was not inclined to push matters further with Tom Merry at that moment.

Tom Merry resumed his search in the thickets. But it was in vain.

He searched on, till a rush of footsteps in the wood made him look up, and he was surrounded by his chums.

"Hallo!" said Blake cheerily. "We came as soon as we could. Any luck?"

"No," said Tom.

"Hard cheese!" Never mind, we'll find it for you."

"Yaas, wathah!"

And the juniors did their best. But they had no more luck than Tom Merry. It was time soon to get back to the school for dinner, and they had to go with the missing box still undiscovered.

Tom Merry's face was clouded as he walked back towards St. Jim's.

He began to think that his search would be in vain, and that the box would remain lost in some recess of the Rylcombe thickets.

"Pongo! Pongo!"

Bow-wow-b-b-br-r-r!

Wally and Pongo were coming down the lane. The junior stopped, and looked inquiringly at Tom Merry & Co.

"Up to your little games again?" he asked.

"Weally, Wally—"

"Now, don't you begin, Gus," said Wally, shaking his forefinger at the swell of St. Jim's in an extremely exasperating way.

"You cheeky young wascal—"

"Here! Pongo! Pong!"

"Pway keep that beast away from me, Wally! He is almost as wotten a brute as Hewwies' wotten bulldog."

"You let my bulldog alone!" growled Herries.

"I wouldn't touch him with a barge-pole, deah boy."

Wally whistled to his dog and went on towards the wood.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy called after his minor.

"Wally! you will be late for dinnah!"

"Never mind; you can have mine."

"Pway don't be widiculous, Wally. Come in at once."

"No fear."

"I wegard that as a vulgah expression. I wefuse to allow you to be late for dinnah. Come in at once, Wally!"

"Rats!"

And Wally scuttled into the wood with Pongo. Arthur Augustus looked after him wrathfully; but he knew of old how useless it would be to pursue the elusive Wally.

"This is the modern spivit," he said, looking at his friends.

"When I was Wally's age, I always tweated my eldah bwothah Conway with the greatest poss. respect. Wally nevah tweats me with pwopah respect!"

"Then the best thing you can do," said Blake solemnly. "is to give him a fearful thrashing. I particularly recommend a fearful thrashing."

"Yaas, wathah! I shall have to uphold my natural authority as eldah bwothah," said D'Arcy. "Weally, Lowther, I fail to see anythin' to gwain at in that wemark."

But apparently Lowther saw something, for he grinned.

CHAPTER 16.

Wally Makes a Discovery!

WALLY whistled cheerily as he entered the wood. That the juniors of St. Jim's were up to some "jape" the fag was certain.

What else could have caused the Fourth to fraternise with the Shell, and caused this sudden and astonishing friendliness between the School House boys and their rivals of the New House?

And the hero of the Third meant to find out what was toward. THE GEM LIBRARY.—82.

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"THE SCHOOL-HOUSE SECRET."

An Extra-long Complete Tale of Tom Merry & Co.

The Third Form weren't to be left out of anything that was going on, if Wally knew it.

What the juniors could possibly be plotting he did not know. But he expected to find some clue to their doings in the wood.

"Perhaps that Red Indian camping out dodge again," reflected Wally, "or something fresh in the School Territorial idea. I'll jolly soon know. Pongo!"

There was no answering bark from Pongo.

Wally looked round angrily. The dog had disappeared.

It was a little way Pongo had. He was as good as gold while he was on the chain. When his good behaviour had caused his master to give him a free run, Pongo took advantage of it in the most barefaced manner, scuttling off at the first opportunity.

"The beast!" murmured Wally. "He's gone! Yah! Pongo! Come back, you brute! I'll tan you! I'll jump on you! Where are you? Pongo! Pong!"

There was a distant bark. Pongo had no objection to the mild excitement of a chase. Sometimes he would give Wally a long and troublesome run, and when Wally had given him up as lost, Pongo would come sneaking back with an agreeable expression on his face, as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. Then, of course, all the dire threats Wally had been uttering would be forgotten, and Pongo would be forgiven on the spot.

Wally was taking upon himself to miss dinner at the school, but even he would not venture to miss afternoon lessons, and so it was very necessary to recover Pongo, and get him on the chain again.

Leaving aside for the present the idea of discovering what it was that brought Tom Merry & Co. to the wood, Wally set out in search of Pongo. Somewhat to his surprise, the barking of the dog did not cease; it kept up in a continual sound, intermingled with whining.

Wally was anxious as he plunged through the thickets in search of the dog. The whining, and the fact that the sound did not move from place to place, seemed to indicate that Pongo was fixed somewhere, and probably hurt. Wally had mental visions of Pongo fastened in the cruel teeth of a trap.

"Pongo! Pongo!"

The whining continued. It guided Wally to the spot. He came out into a glade overhung with thick branches, where the grass showed the traces of many footprints. He stared round him, perplexed.

The whining was very close, and yet he could see no sign of Pongo.

"Pongo! Pong! Pong!"

The dog whined again. Wally plunged into a thicket, and stopped at the trunk of a huge old oak. At a short distance up the trunk was a gap in the wood, which indicated that the trunk was hollow. The whining came from the hollow within.

Wally grinned. He could guess now what had happened. Pongo had scented a rabbit and chased it, and bunny had scuttled into the hollow for safety. Pongo had pursued him there, and had been unable to climb out again. Wally tried to peer into the hollow.

"Pongo!"

"Bow—wow—wow!"

"Lucky for you I'm here," growled Wally. "Where would you be if I weren't here, you duffer? You might have starved to death in that tree."

Pongo whined.

"Come out, you dummy!"

Pongo whined again. He could not come out. Wally could not see him—the opening in the tree was too narrow to get his head in, and how deep it extended in the trunk he did not know.

He thrust his arm into the opening up to the shoulder, and groped downwards for the dog. His hand struck something hard and square, and he uttered an ejaculation of surprise, and drew it out.

It was an oblong wooden box. Wally stared at it in amazement.

The box was a common one enough, but its condition showed that it had not been long in the tree. How could it possibly have got there.

He looked it over. On the lid was written a name—Manuel da Silva.

"A Portugee," muttered Wally, in amazement. "It's a Portuguese name, anyway. How on earth did it get into the tree?"

Pongo whined pitifully.

Wally, reminded of his favourite, groped in the hollow again, and caught Pongo's collar, and with some difficulty dragged the shaggy animal out.

Pongo frisked round him delightedly. Wally fastened the chain on to his collar at once, he did not mean to run any more risks with Master Pongo.

Then he examined the box. That it had been lost seemed clear, though how it could have been dropped into the hollow tree was a puzzle.

To open it and find out if it contained any clue which would



"There's some jape on," said Figgins. "Come on!" And the three Fourth Formers dropped into the road, and with cautious footsteps hurried on the track of the School House juniors.

enable him to restore it to the owner was naturally Wally's first thought.

He slid back the lid. Inside was a mass of tissue-paper, and he could see nothing else. But as he moved the paper he gave a shout of astonishment.

For from the box there suddenly burst upon him a blaze of brilliance that was almost dazzling. The box was crammed with diamonds.

Wally held it in his hands, staring at it blankly, hardly able to believe his eyes.

Diamonds! Little as he knew about the stones, he knew that the contents of the box in his hands must be worth many thousands of pounds.

"Good heavens!" murmured the dazed junior.

It was some minutes before he could even think what he should do.

Suddenly he started. There was a rustle in the thicket, and a dark face looked out at him. Wally snapped the lid of the box shut, and looked the stranger in the face. It was Da Silva.

He glanced at Wally, and then at the box, and then his eyes blazed. The expression upon his face made Wally start

back a little. He slipped the box into his pocket, and called to Pongo. His hands unconsciously closed for defence.

The Portuguese observed it, and his manner changed at once. Pongo had ranged up beside his master, his teeth showing, and growling ominously. Pongo had plenty of faults, but it was not safe for anybody to attack D'Arcy minor in his presence.

Da Silva's head was still aching and singing from the blow Tom Merry had given him, and he was not inclined for a struggle if he could avoid it; though Wally would not have been allowed to take the box away without one, in spite of Pongo's ready teeth.

"Good-day, senor," said the Portuguese. "You have found my box."

"Your box?" said Wally suspiciously.

"Yes. I was attacked by thieves last night, and threw it from me to save it," the Portuguese explained, eyeing Wally covertly. He could guess from the boy's clothes that he came from the school, but there was no reason to suppose that Tom Merry had acquainted his schoolfellows with the story of the box. In fact, it was clear that Wally did not know about it.

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or he would have shown by his manner that he regarded the Portuguese as an enemy.

"Oh!" said Wally.

"It must have gone into the hollow tree," said the Portuguese.

"I have been seeking it all day in vain. You have found it."
"I suppose you can prove it's yours," said Wally. "I was going to take it to the police-station in Rylcombe."

"I can prove it's mine."

"You'll jolly well have to before I give it to you!" said Wally bluntly.

The Portuguese smiled agreeably.

"That is easy, little senior. My name is written on it."

"Your name?"

"Yes—Manuel Da Silva."

Wally nodded. That was pretty clear. It proved that the Portuguese knew the box, at all events.

"Do you know what it contains?" asked Wally.

"Yes—diamonds."

"How many?"

"A hundred and fifty-six—of various sizes."

"H'm! I suppose you are Manuel Da Silva?"

The Portuguese laughed.

"Look, senior, here are letters addressed to me, some in my own language—some in English—look!"

Wally looked, and was convinced.

"Well, excuse me," he said, "I thought I ought to make sure under the circumstances. Here's your box."

And he handed it over to the Portuguese. Da Silva's fingers closed upon it like the talons of a hawk.

He did not stop to speak again, even a word of thanks. He plunged into the wood, and vanished from the boy's sight.

CHAPTER 17.

The Last Chance.

TOM MERRY, Manners, and Lowther, left the dining-room in the School House at the earliest possible moment. The Terrible Three meant to cut down to the wood and have another look for the box before afternoon lessons. Arthur Augustus and Blake came out at the same time and joined them, and the five juniors hurried to the old scene, though with little hope of finding what they sought. But, as Blake remarked, if they stuck it out long enough they were bound to succeed. It was only a question of time.

Bow-wow-wow!

"Bai Jove, I know that wow," said Arthur Augustus, as they came through the wood. "It's Wally's mongwei, Pongo."

"What's Wally doing here?"

"I expect he's heard something about the box," Manners remarked. "Gore and Skimpole have been chattering it all over the place."

Wally was looking round the glade as the juniors came up. He had been greatly interested by the thick footprints there, which indicated that this was the spot which interested Tom Merry & Co.

"Hallo, cocky!" said Wally cheerfully. "Back again! I thought I'd run you down. What's the little game here, eh?"

"Have you been looking for the box, you young wascal?"

Wally jumped.

"What box?"

"The box Tom Mewwy lost."

"Blessed if I knew he had lost a box. He never told me."

"Weally, Wally, you can hardly expect to be taken into the confidence of Uppah Form fellows, you know."

"Rats!"

"That reminds me—I am goin' to give you a feahful thwashin' to instnuct you on the subject of tweatin' your majah with pwopah respect."

"More rats!"

"Pway hold my hat, Tom Mewwy."

"Can't you see I'm busy."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Look here, what's that about a box?" demanded Wally, beginning to feel uneasy. "Have you really lost a box, Merry?"

"Yes; we're here to look for it."

"What kind of a box?"

"A wooden one, with a sliding lid," said Tom. "Have you seen one like it?"

"Another chap's name written on the lid?"

"Yes; a foreign name—Da Silva."

Wally changed colour.

"Is anybody else looking for it?" he faltered.

"Yes, a foreign chap, same name as that written on the box," said Tom Merry, looking at him in wonder. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing. Only I've found it."

"Found it!"

"Yes."

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"Good egg! Where is it, then?"

"I gave it to that chap."

"To Da Silva?"

"Yes."

"What!"

"He saw me with it in my hand," said Wally. "He described it, told me the name that was written on it, proved that it was his name, so I—"

Tom Merry almost staggered.

"You gave it to him?"

"What else could I do?"

"Bai Jove! You are a young ass, Wally."

"It's all right," said Tom Merry. "He couldn't know. It can't be helped. But—but we must get the box back."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I say, I'm awfully sorry," said Wally. "I didn't know, of course. I never guessed you fellows were coming here to look for a box. How could I?"

"Well, it's no good talking now," said Jack Blake. "The thing is, to get on the rotter's track and take it back."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Tom Merry nodded quickly. After the first moment of surprise and utter dismay, he was himself again, and ready to do anything to recover the box. Not a chance should be left untried, at all events.

"How long ago did you see the Portuguese, Wally?" he asked.

"About ten minutes."

"Which way did he go?"

Wally reflected before replying.

"He wouldn't go to Rylcombe," said Monty Lowther. "He doesn't know but what we've informed the police there about him. He surely wouldn't risk going to the railway station there, when the police might be watching for him."

"Bai Jove, that's wight enough!"

"He didn't go towards the village," said Wally, shaking his head. "He cut off towards Wayland, but whether he kept on that way or not I don't know."

"That's more likely," said Manners quickly. "The big expresses sometimes stop at Wayland, and that's just the point he would make for."

"Yes, rather!"

"But he's had ten minutes start," said Wally. "He looked as if he could get over the ground, too, if he wanted to."

"Ten minutes! Hang!"

"What price the short cut?" said Blake quickly. "The Portugee chap can't know anything about that. He'll be taking the ordinary footpath to Wayland. We could take the short cut through the woods, and get there a quarter of an hour quicker. That gives us five minutes to get ahead of him in."

Tom Merry's eyes flashed.

"Good. We shall come out on the Castle Hill, at the end of the footpath, and we can lay for him there. If we're ahead of him we shall have him, sure."

"We ought to be ahead of him, if Wally's sure about the ten minutes."

"It wasn't more than that," said Wally. "Probably less."

"Good; then let's cut off."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Tom Merry was already running. The others followed him fast. The short cut through the heart of the dense wood was known only to the local inhabitants. Of course, it was well known to the juniors, who frequently spent half holidays in exploring the woods. It was a difficult path to follow, often every trace of it being hidden by the thick grass, and a stranger could never have followed it. But Tom Merry & Co. kept on without a single halt.

It was a hot, breathless run.

But they kept up the pace, and, hot and perspiring, but keen as ever, they came out into the footpath where it joined the track over the Castle Hill.

Had the Portuguese passed?

Tom Merry looked at his watch. The run had only occupied eight minutes. Anyone following the footpath usually took quite half an hour to reach the same spot, even walking sharply.

The juniors should have been a good ten minutes, at least, ahead of the Portuguese, if he had taken that path. If he had even run all the way, he could not have passed this point yet.

Had he taken that path?

It seemed almost certain, yet there was a doubt. The juniors kept under cover of the bushes, watching the path like hawks. Tom Merry's state of mind may be easier imagined than described. If the Portuguese was on that footpath, there was every prospect of recovering the box. If he had gone another way, it only remained to communicate with the police.

Blake suddenly grasped him by the arm.

"Hark!"

It was a rapid footstep on the path.

CHAPTER 18.

At Last!

TOM MERRY drew a quick, deep breath. Was it the Portuguese?

The juniors waited with beating hearts.

As yet the thickets hid them from the sight of the new-comer; they would not see him and he would not see them till he was abreast of them.

Then—

They were ready to spring. If it was the Portuguese, he was in their hands at last. It might be a common wayfarer, but—

The footsteps were hasty. They heard a sound of quick, panting breath. The man was running, whoever he was—running and walking by turns, like a tired man making all the haste he could.

Wally put his hand tightly over Pongo's muzzle. But it was not needed, the dog knew too much to make a sound.

A running figure loomed up past the bushes, in full sight. A glance was enough. The dark, swarthy face, the glittering black eyes—it was the Portuguese.

Like an arrow from a bow Tom Merry leaped at him.

The attack took the ruffian utterly by surprise.

He had been glancing back in uneasiness as he ran, but from ahead he had no fear of danger.

Tom Merry tackled him low, carrying him fairly off his feet like a three-quarter making a rush on a Rugger field.

The Portuguese went to the ground with a heavy bump.

He gave a gasp of rage and terror.

"Come on!" panted Tom Merry.

In a moment his comrades were backing him up.

The Portuguese had rolled helplessly on the grass, but now he was fighting like a tiger. He was fighting for the fortune he carried in the wooden box.

He tried to get his hand under his jacket, but Tom Merry knew what that meant. He grasped the ruffian's wrist and held it fast.

"Get his knife, Blake!"

"What-ho!"

Blake dragged away the knife the foreigner had tried to draw, and flung it far. Then the juniors piled upon the scoundrel.

In spite of his furious resistance he was soon pinioned.

He lay at last, gasping, in the grasp of the juniors, his black eyes rolling with rage.

Tom Merry knelt beside him, his face red with exertion, and very stern.

"Where is the box?" he said.

The Portuguese muttered a curse.

He had had no opportunity of throwing the box away this time; nor would it have been of any use in the daylight to do so.

Tom Merry ran his hands through the rascal's pockets and drew out the box.

The Portuguese ground his teeth.

"Malediction! I will have it yet!" he panted.

Tom Merry laughed contemptuously.

"I will risk that," he said. "I have recovered my cousin's property, and now you can go. Let the brute alone, chaps."

"Pwaw wait a moment, Tom Mewwy. I do not wish to be hard upon the wottah, or any wottah, but undah the cires I weally think this wotten wascal would be bettah in pwison."

"Yes, but—"

"You see, it's a decent chap's duty to put down stealin', and as decent chaps we owe a duty to society, you know."

"Gussy's talking like a book," said Blake emphatically. "I don't want to be hard on anybody, but this chap ought to go to prison."

Tom Merry hesitated.

"I know that," he said. "Only we don't want to get mixed up in a case in the police-courts; and, besides, my cousin asked

me to keep the whole matter dark. Besides, the brute hasn't succeeded in stealing anything."

"Well, I don't half like letting him go; but have your own way."

And Da Silva was allowed to rise.

He looked at the juniors with a savage scowl, evidently feeling very little in the way of gratitude for his release.

"You have beaten me now," he said. "My turn will come."

"Bai Jove! I told you he ought to be in pwison, Tom Mewwy. It is not too late to take him there now!"

Tom Merry laughed.

"You had better cut off, my man," he said. "If we change our minds—"

The Portuguese stepped back quickly.

"You will see me again!" he hissed. And he plunged into the wood.

Blake shook his head seriously.

"That chap would be safer behind stone walls," he said. "But I dare say that's only gas. He can't bother us much now. Blessed if I know why he should want that old wooden box so much. I suppose there's something jolly valuable in it."

Tom Merry nodded. Arthur Augustus looked at his watch, and uttered an exclamation.

"Bai Jove! We're late for school!"

"Let's get back, then."

"Yaas, wathah! Wun like anythin'!"

And the juniors hurried back to St. Jim's. Wally was looking a little troubled. He spoke in a low voice to Tom Merry in the lane.

"I say, Merry, old man."

Tom looked at him.

"What's the matter, Wally?"

"I looked into that box when I found it. Of course, I hadn't the faintest idea that it belonged to you."

"That's all right."

"Only I know what's in it—it's crammed with diamonds," said Wally. "They must be worth thousands of pounds."

Tom Merry nodded, with a troubled look.

"I suppose it's all right, Merry?"

"What's all right?"

"It's no business of mine. But it's a curious thing for that to be in the hands of a chap in a junior Form at school," said Wally blantly.

"My cousin gave it to me to take care of."

"That's jolly curious, too."

"I know it is."

"I thought I'd tell you I knew, that's all," said Wally.

"And if you want a tip from the Third Form, you'll find your cousin as soon as you can and give him his box back. I wouldn't undertake to mind a thing like that. That's all."

And Wally walked on whistling.

Tom Merry could not help thinking that Wally's advice was good. But when was he likely to see his cousin again, or hear from him? Dorrian had not said a word on that subject.

The juniors reached the school, and received impositions for being late with exemplary meekness.

Tom Merry's chums were all glad to hear that he had recovered the missing box. Skimpole was a little disappointed at not having been the discoverer. He had been thinking out some clues, which he stated would have inevitably led to the recovery of the box that evening, if he had been given time—a statement the accuracy of which Tom Merry & Co. took the liberty to doubt.

Tom Merry locked the box up in his study, and waited to hear from his cousin on the matter. In a few days he had almost forgotten it. But, as he was to discover, the adventures of the wooden box were not yet over.

THE END.

NEXT THURSDAY:

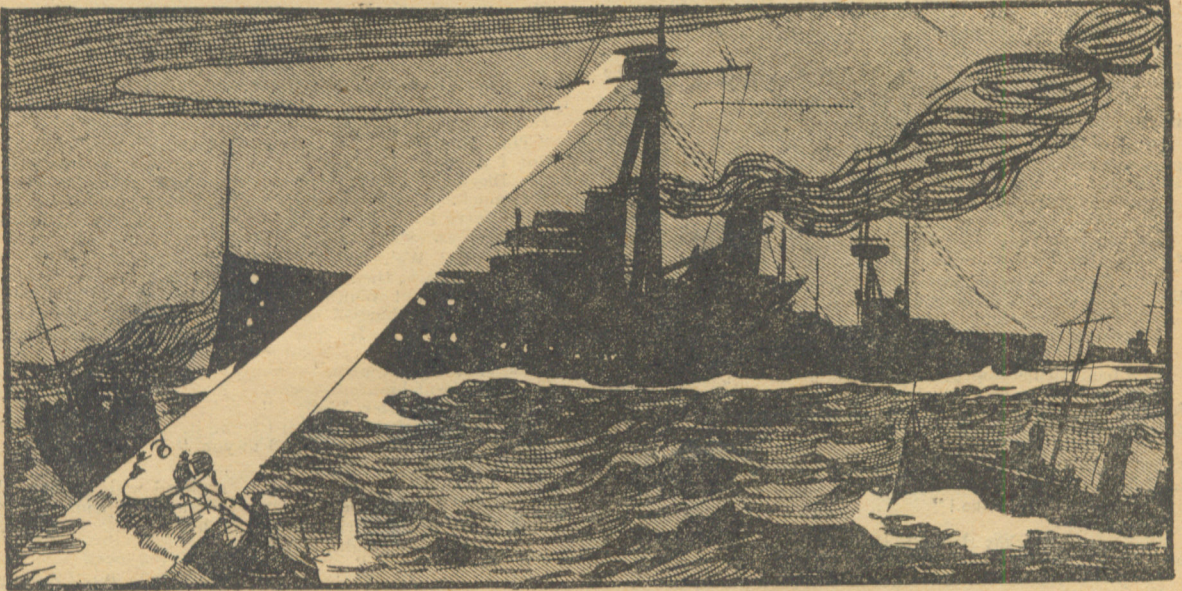
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THE FIRST CHAPTERS.

Sam and Stephen Villiers, two cadets of Greyfriars School, by a combination of luck and pluck render valuable service to the British Army during the great German invasion. They are appointed special scouts to the Army, which is forced back on London by Von Krantz, the German commander. At the time when this instalment opens, Sam and Stephen are with a Lieutenant Cavendish, who is in command of a captured German war-ship named the Furst Moltke. The Furst Moltke is being chased home into the Thames by a German submarine, which, having fired one torpedo and missed, is preparing another with all speed. Cavendish is making a desperate effort to reach dock before the second torpedo from the submarine can reach the Furst Moltke.

(Now go on with the Story.)

How Cavendish Trapped His Foes.

Ahead, some two hundred yards, the entrance of the new naval dock gaped wide. If the Furst Moltke gained that shelter in time she might yet save herself.

The diving-barge had been cast adrift to take its chance—its value was nothing to that of the big cruiser and her crew. The guns which had been newly mounted that afternoon were drumming away furiously, their muzzles pointed downwards to pierce the surface with their shells just astern of the ship, and great clouds of spray and fountains of water were thrown up by the impact.

"Can they reach the submarine through the water?" exclaimed Stephen, shouting to make himself heard.

"Can't say. He means to confuse her if she's followin', an' that ought to do it!" replied Sam, gripping the rail in his excitement. "Great Scott, what a race it is! Will she get us?"

Never had the boys felt such a nerve-thrilling experience as that headlong flight from the invisible foe. The soles of their feet seemed to tickle with expectation of the fearful

shock that would blow the cruiser's side in. It taught them bitterly the power of this new terror of the under-seas, when the huge cruiser, with all her guns and men, had no choice but to run from it.

"The time must be up!" muttered Stephen.

"We're nearly there! By gum, he'll smash ship and dock all to pieces, anyhow!" said Sam, aghast at the pace with which the great ship was charging the narrow space.

But Cavendish never used his seamanship to better purpose. While yet outside, the engines were reversed with all their power, and, amid a tremendous churning and foaming astern, the Furst Moltke ran in and slackened speed. Her signallers had sent the orders ahead, and the dock-men were ready. The great gates swung to behind her as swiftly as power could make them, and the men's hearts stood still as the guns ceased, and all wondered if the deadly enemy had been shut out, or had entered with her prey.

There was a severe shock as the cruiser, despite her furiously reversing engines, bumped fairly heavily into the farthest quay of the dock, and at the same time there was a great swirl outside the closing gates, which told Cavendish's trained eye that his dash for life was successful—the submarine was just too late.

"The inner gates—quick!" he shouted. "We've done her! She's shut out!"

Boom! came a shock that made the whole dock quiver, and a great pillar of water leaped up against the gates, which heeled and began to collapse. A torpedo had struck them fairly from the outside.

"They'll get us yet!" cried Stephen anxiously.

"Not they!" said Cavendish. "The second gates are torpedo-proof, and she can't smash both. Quick-firers there, slam away fifty yards clear of the entrance. Mr. Elcombe, signal the fort to have the booms at the harbour's mouth closed instantly!"

The guns rattled away furiously, and Cavendish watched with eager eyes.

"She's in shallow water, an' we may hit her if we're lucky," he said, "unless she draws out in time. The ship's saved, thank Heaven! An' now I've got to settle up with that beggar. If he'd only show the tip of his conning-tower!"

"There's no sign of the craft," said Stephen, after some little time; "maybe the guns have hit her."

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The flash of a periscope breaking the water some distance out was seen making for the open water, and was gone before a gun could be trained on it.

"Phew!" said Sam, leaning against the rail. "That was the hottest quarter of an hour I ever passed in my life. To think we're out of it with a whole ship!"

"I've never been through a sharper bit of work," said Cavendish, drawing a long breath. "There she shows again!" he added eagerly. "Now we've got her, if they've been quick enough with the booms!"

"What booms?" said Stephen.

"The moving barriers to close the river's mouth against torpedo attacks. One's across by Sheerness, an' the other just outside it."

"But will they stop a submarine?"

"Yes; they're made to, with chains and calthroops. They're across, too!" added Cavendish eagerly, scanning the river's mouth through his glasses. "We've trapped her fairly. She can't get out!"

"Hurrah!" yelled Stephen.

"I ought to be yard-armed for not havin' 'em closed before!" muttered Cavendish. "But this port-admiral job, in addition to fittin' out a captured cruiser, is new to me. We've got to move up level with the dock-gates."

The Furst Moltke slowly shifted her position till she lay alongside the river side of the nearer quay.

"Now," said Cavendish, "from here our guns command the whole river, from the entrance to Colemouth Creek, and we've got to watch for that beggar. Mr. Elcombe, see that every gun-crew is ready, and let the quick-firer men watch for a submarine's conning-tower and give it her instantly. It may be some time."

They watched earnestly for fully five minutes, scanning every inch of the estuary's surface. Nothing was to be seen.

"I say," said Sam, "what on earth happened after I was hauled out? They were frightfully slow; it seemed to me, getting my helmet off, an' the moment I could speak I told 'em to pull you up like blazes. Why didn't you come when I did?"

"I can hardly tell you," said Cavendish, his marine-glasses to his eyes as he spoke; "but it's rather lucky I didn't."

And, as briefly as possible, he related what had happened.

"My only aunt!" said Sam, staring. "That beats anything I've struck since I went to sea! You mean to say you dropped on to the thing?"

"What! On top of a live torpedo?" gasped Stephen.

"That's what made it miss. It was only a light Schwartzkopf—big enough to have blown our bilges out, though. The whole thing was largely luck. As it happened, it gave us time to clear into dock," said Cavendish. "Is the beggar never goin' to show up?"

"You're a cool hand. I've told you that before," said Sam. "I never thought of stopping down there to spar with the beastly thing. It nearly got me, as it was."

"I'd as soon have died in my divin' boots, if my prize had been sunk like that," said Cavendish; "an' I'd never even thought of submarines—like an ass! She did her best to do for us an' the ship, an' now I mean to return the compliment."

"I say, won't she get out by Queenboro' Swale," asked Stephen suddenly—"the way we got in with the torpedo-boat, at the back of Sheppey Island?"

"I wish she'd try it," said Sam. "The tide's out, an' she'd ram herself high an' dry on the mud before she was past King's Ferry. Then she'd be dished. What's the peri-what-d-you-call-it like, Bob? I didn't spot it."

"The periscope? A sort of small cased mirror, cuttin' along just above the surface."

"Isn't that what the submarine tells how to steer by?" queried Stephen. "It shows her what's ahead, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"Then how is it she don't show it all the time?"

"Her class of boat doesn't need to. In a river like this, with a strong sun shinin', she can see her way without it, especially when she's followin' a ship closely," said Cavendish, turning his glasses towards the centre of the estuary. "But when she gets out in the middle, in open water, she'll need to show it."

"There it is, then!" cried Stephen, whose keen eyes caught a glimpse of a small bright square out towards Port Victoria.

The gunners saw it almost at the same time, and with a crash three of their quick-firers hurled their shells at it. The water was dashed up in great spurts, and the periscope was seen no more.

"Got it, I think!" said Cavendish, as the whole ship's company watched eagerly. "Good shootin'. But she may simply have dived."

"If you did hit her, does that sink the submarine?" said Stephen.

"Oh, no! It's a long way above her, carried on a sort of mast. But without it she'll be less able to dodge about, an' sooner or later she must come up and show her conning-tower. If we hit that it's all up with her; she can't dive again."

"It may be soft, but I almost hope we capture the poor brutes, rather than sink 'em, to die like rats, shut up in that thing," said Sam, "now that we're out of their reach."

"I'm with you there," said Cavendish, "although they tried to dish us. All the same, it's my duty to ensure that craft does no further mischief, an' I shall take my first chance at her, whether or no."

"Steamer, flying British colours, approaching from the Nore, sir," reported Elcombe.

Cavendish turned and looked eagerly seaward.

"That's the ship bringin' our guns from Woolwich," he said. "She can't get in, because of the booms, an' if she did that beast under the water'd blow her into scrap-iron before you could count twenty. I'm goin' to wipe out that submarine within thirty minutes, an' blow the expense! And her crew'll go with her! Mr. Elcombe."

"Yes, sir."

"Detail six men to board the old Respite, cast off her moorings, and let her drift up the river with the tide. The men can leave her as soon as she's loose."

"Very good, sir."

"I am going out in the pinnace with a crew of blue-jackets. The gunners here will have to shoot over us when they fire at the submarine. Let them watch for her within a radius of the Respite."

"Yes, sir."

"Are you going with me?" said Cavendish to Sam and Stephen.

"You bet!" said the brothers. "But if there's time to explain, what's that old warship to be set adrift for?"

"The submarine's pretty sure to take it for one of our ships under way, and torpedo it. She can't pick an' choose much without her periscope. The Respite is only a steel hulk, an' no good to anybody. The German'll sink her."

"What good'll that do, though?"

"It'll keep the submarine busy just where we want her, and she's bound to come up to the surface pretty soon an' show herself. She's most likely to do it shortly after the explosion. Then our guns'll get their chance."

"Good! The Respite's a bait, then, to draw the submarine. You're a great man, Bob, my boy! Won't it be awkward, though, sinkin' that hulk in the channel?"

"I've got to get rid of the submarine without delay, and at any cost," said Cavendish desperately. "While the beastly thing's in the river we're dished. A pretty fool I should look if the admiral's orders came to put to sea at once, and I was boxed up in dock because I'd let that submarine hold me up. Come on!"

A steam-pinnace lying just outside the dock was taken—for the gates, of course, could not be opened—and Cavendish tumbled into her with a crew of eight picked bluejackets with their rifles. Stephen also brought his own, and Sam his revolver, though none of them understood what use they were likely to be put to.

"I hope you aren't goin' to coax 'em to torpedo us as well," said Stephen.

"Oh, no!" replied Cavendish laughingly. "Not so bad as that. We keep in the background an' watch for our chance. What chance? You'll see pretty soon."

"An' feel, too, I shouldn't wonder," said Sam.

"If the German happens to spot us, you will. But I think the Respite'll keep him busy an' draw his attention."

Out in the estuary's deep-water fairway, a boat had already boarded the old Respite, an out-of-date, abandoned ironclad, even more antique than the departed Challenge. She was stripped of everything that could be utilised some time before. The men from the Furst Moltke cast loose her mooring-chains, and then left her as she began to drive majestically up the river with the incoming tide.

"Look there!" said Cavendish, pointing to the booms at the harbour's mouth.

Just inside them a big swirl came just as he spoke, and the tip of a conning-tower broke the surface for a fraction of a second and disappeared again.

"She's found she can't get out," said Stephen gleefully.

"Yes. Now she'll hunt about below to try an' find a way through. But she can't even torpedo a passage for herself through those chains. Then she'll come up the river to try Queenboro' Swale, an' she'll spot the Respite on the way."

"By gum, it's lucky there are no sound warships in the harbour except ours?" said Sam. "What havoc she'd be able to make before she was caught if there were! Looks to me as if she'd passed the Respite an' gone on to Queenboro'."

"If so, she's bound to come back."

A dull, muffled shock telegraphed itself through the river, and the old hulk of the *Respite* suddenly heeled violently as a great column of water leaped up beside her. The old ship began to settle down.

"Got her!" cried Cavendish. "He's taken the bait. Now, watch!"

The pinnace was gliding to and fro under the east shore, her crew watching intently. The old *Respite*, in her death-agonies, slowly sank lower, and at last plunged down. Still no other sign was to be seen.

Suddenly a tremendous shock was felt under the pinnace. Her back broke like a carrot as she was fairly lifted out of the water by a great steel body, studded with rivets. As a whale rises beneath a whale-boat and smashes it the submarine dashed the pinnace to destruction, and Cavendish and her crew were sent flying out of her.

Sam, sitting amidships, felt the shock more severely than any, and it almost shook loose the teeth in his head. There was a crashing bump, and he felt himself flying through the air like a stone from a catapult, only to souse head-first into the water just clear of the iron monster's body.

He came up shaking his head and gasping, and was aware of several of the pinnace's crew floundering in the water around him. Nobody needed to guess what had happened; it was plain enough on the instant. The German submarine had stolen a march on them, and wrecked the pinnace by darting upwards just beneath it.

"Sam," gurgled Stephen's voice somewhere close by, "where are you? Look out for the submarine!"

"Swim away from her! Strike out for your lives!" gasped Cavendish, who, ten yards away, was setting the example as fast as he could. The bluejackets in the water were doing the same.

What there was to fear hardly occurred to Sam at that moment. The shattered pinnace had gone down like a log, and it was hardly likely the submarine would hunt the struggling swimmers down one by one. In fact, as he threw a glance at her over his shoulder, Sam saw she was preparing to dive again, with a swinging roll, towards the bottom.

But even as he looked the danger spoke for itself. The loud boom of a gun came from the distant *Furst Moltke*; a shell roared over the water and dashed up a column of spray a bare yard astern the German craft.

"Great Scott, they'll blow us into sausage-meat!" gasped Sam, swimming with all his might and main to increase his distance from the vessel.

To be hurling shells at her in the midst of that struggling crew of swimmers seemed a merciless proceeding. But hard on the heels of the first came a second shot that ripped right along the submarine's rounded deck and opened the steel plating just as she was disappearing.

"Got her!" cried Cavendish, with a half-choked yell. "Got her again!"

The submarine came swirling up again in a tremendous hurry, only just in time to save herself, for had she sunk with a gaping rent in her she would have stayed down for good and all.

Crash! came a third shell, knocking her short, upright conning-tower into fragments. Sam thought he heard the sound of muffled German oaths from inside the steel shell, and away went the submarine at full speed, like a scared shark, straight for the shore at *Swale Ness*.

"She's done for!" cried Cavendish. "They've got to beach her. Well done, *Elcombe*! Are any of you fellows hurt?"

"Here's *Barnes*, with an arm broke, sir. An' the engineer's got a knock on the head, an' he's stunned. Nobody's killed," said the coxswain of the pinnace.

"Hold 'em up. Keep 'em afloat till they pick us up!" said Cavendish, striking out towards the injured men. "There's the picket-boat, running up already. I'll give you a hand."

"Nay; I'm all right, sir," said *Barnes*, pluckily treading water. "Bone snapped in my arm, that's all. There's a couple o' cork fenders floatin' yonder, mates. Get 'em, and buoy up the engineer."

Two large, white, cork fend-offs, that had been in the pinnace were at once secured, and they were enough to keep up the injured men. All the rest were strong swimmers, and helped take care of the former. And, as soon as they could spare a glance westwards they saw the German craft—"submarine" no longer, for she dared not submerge herself—dashing straight at the mud-bank, beyond the little pile lighthouse, by *Queenborough*. The cruiser's gun had ceased firing, and with a bump and a heave, the German grounded on the mud, hoisting herself nearly out of the water, and stuck fast there.

"Beached!" said Cavendish. "She must be leakin' all

round. We've pipped her at last—or, rather, *Elcombe* has. That was a rattling fine shot! I'll bet it was *Gunner Davison's*!"

"My word! I thought we were all going to be made hay of when those shells came slashing in right amongst us!" exclaimed *Stephen*, treading water. "*Elcombe* couldn't have seen you were alongside, I s'pose?"

"Rot! He saw what had happened well enough," said Cavendish. "He knew what my orders would be, an' he wouldn't stop for that. It'd have been all one if he'd wiped up the lot of us, as long as he made sure of the submarine. Couldn't let her stay monkeying round the harbour under water."

"No; he was right, of course," said *Sam*, who now had to swim hard to keep himself afloat, for his sodden clothes were heavy. "We've got off lightly, too."

"Nothin' except bad shootin' could have hurt us," said Cavendish; "unless the submarine blew up. It was precious ticklish work, though, I own, an' we aren't likely to have a much closer shave. You aren't hurt, are you?"

"No, but I thought my backbone was rammed up through my hat when the thing hit us from below. There's the picket-boat nearly up to us, an' none too soon."

"*Elcombe*'s scored all along the line," said Cavendish. "It's his win. I never thought the German would come round an' get us like that. They must be pretty capable chaps aboard her, an' if we haven't killed most of 'em off, I'd like to tell 'em so. They may fight it out, though, if they're shirty about gettin' beached. Slow up, there!" he cried to the picket-boat, which came dashing to the rescue.

"Pass a couple of slings, an' get the damaged chaps aboard first!"

The powerful little vessel, which had dashed out from the smaller dock to the rescue of the pinnace's party, almost as soon as they were seen to be in trouble, now slowed right alongside them, and the engineer was passed aboard first. He had had his head driven against the pinnace's funnel, when she was wrecked, and was unconscious.

Barnes, with his broken arm, was hoisted in next, and after that the rest of the pinnace's crew were soon aboard. A petty officer was in charge, and the first thing Cavendish did, dripping and weary as he was, was to jump aft, and take command.

"Back to the cruiser, sir?" inquired the petty officer.

"Not on your life!" said Cavendish, drawing his Navy six-shooter, and wiping the wet out of it. "Right on ahead, an' take that submarine and her crew. Are any of you armed aboard here?"

"There's two rifles, sir, an' I've got my revolver," said the petty officer. "We tumbled in, without waiting to arm, when we saw the pinnace smashed."

"I've got my rifle, sir," said one of the pinnace's blue-jackets.

"So 'ave I, sir," added another. "I stuck to it while we was in the water."

"That's your sort!" said Cavendish. "Four rifles and a revolver. We three have got our six-shooters, too. Enough to tackle any German. Coxswain, jam her up alongside that submarine as fast as you like!"

Away raced the picket-boat, straight for the long, whale-like vessel on *Swale Ness*. She looked a strange sight, lying stranded on the mud, with the shallow water lapping round the after part of her. There was no saying whether her crew might not still elect to fight, nor what surprise she might have in store for them. So Cavendish took his riflemen into the bows of the picket-boat, and made ready.

So far no sign of life had been seen on the stranded vessel, but now a man, grim-looking and unkempt, came up through the wrecked conning-tower. Instantly four rifles were levelled at him.

"Surrender yourself and your vessel!" cried Cavendish sharply. "No harm will be done to prisoners!"

The man disappeared again into the submarine quicker than winking. A few minutes later a pole was poked up through the opening, with a white flag tied to it, in token of surrender.

Up from below came a tall, erect German lieutenant, evidently the commander of the submarine. He was pallid in the face, and showed the strain of navigating such a vessel, and handling her in a fight. With him came a junior officer, hardly more than a boy, and behind were six men, engineers and crew.

"Are you in command here?" said the German lieutenant coolly to Cavendish, in his own tongue.

"I am," said Cavendish.

"Then I have the honour to surrender my vessel and crew to you, sir, as we are hors de combat."

The words were hardly out of his mouth, when there was a rending explosion in the interior of the submarine—a violent shock, and the whole vessel quivered, as a large portion of her side was blown out with terrific force.

Cavendish and his men in the picket-boat were fairly taken aback as they heard the crash and saw the torn pieces of steel-plating go hurtling away over the mud. The explosion had not endangered the pinnace at all, but it was quite certain now that the German vessel, with a huge breach in her side, was ruined beyond repair.

The shock made the crew of the submarine stagger upon her sloping decks, but most of them kept their feet. The German lieutenant recovered himself first, and addressed the pinnace with perfect coolness—and this time in tolerable English.

"Are we to come into your boat, Herr Commander?" he said to Cavendish. "I presume," he added calmly, "we are under arrest as prisoners?"

"I say," said Cavendish, who, for the first time in his life, met somebody as cool as himself, "that isn't cricket, you know! After surrendering, you've blown up that submarine!"

"I fear she will not be of very much use to anybody now," returned the German officer. "They are very liable to sudden explosions, these sort of vessels. It sounded to me as though her engines were blown out, as well as her sides."

"I should think so!" said Cavendish sharply. Swinging himself on to the submarine, and looking down through her wrecked conning-tower, he saw a dismal wreckage of machinery and ironwork through the cloud of thinning smoke. "And it seems to me, on the other hand, you set a fuse to a case of gun-cotton before you came out to blow her up. Do you think I'm ass enough to think it was an accident?"

"I would not insult your intelligence to that extent," said the German, "but I naturally saw to it that my vessel should not fall usefully into your hands. Therefore I made sure of her. But you have my person and can do with me what you please."

"Don't concern yourself about that," said Cavendish. "I'm not going to take it out of you—for what you did was fair enough, after all. I'd have done it in your place. As for the vessel, I don't suppose she would have been much use to us, and she's certainly not in my line. And now I must trouble you to come aboard my picket-boat—your crew can leave their arms on deck here. It's been a tough fight, lieutenant, hasn't it?"

"A very interesting encounter indeed!" said the German, stepping aboard the pinnace with his junior, and saluting Sam and Stephen as he did so. "There is an end to my craft, though!" he added, with a regretful look back at the wrecked submarine.

"You fought uncommonly well!" said Cavendish. "Nasty, stuffy things those submarines, aren't they? Back to the cruiser, coxswain, as sharp as you can!"

Bearing the two crews and the prisoners as well, the picket-boat was loaded down nearly to the water's edge as she sped back. Sam and Stephen were dying to know how the submarine had got there, and how she managed to steal a march on the pinnace, but there was no time for any questions. The dock-gates had been opened again. The picket-boat went straight in, and came alongside the Furst Moltke's gangway. Elcombe was waiting to receive them.

"Mr. Elcombe, I congratulate you!" said Cavendish, as he gained the deck. "You managed that affair with uncommon smartness and decision!"

"I'm very relieved I didn't hit any of you, sir!" said Elcombe. "It was a big responsibility to take, for we could see you all the water round her. But I knew you wanted the submarine scotched at any price, and our gunners can be trusted."

"Quite right," replied Cavendish. "Never hesitate in a case like that—pot the Admiral himself, if it can't be helped. Single out the gunner who made those two hits for special mention."

He turned to the captured Germans, and invited the two officers on board.

"I shall be glad to give you parole, gentlemen, if you will take it," he said.

"Willingly," returned the German. "The cruise is at an end as far as we are concerned. The honours are about even, I think!" he added, with a smile.

Cavendish thought the balance was decidedly in his own favour, but he said nothing.

"You have taken my submarine, but I have merely changed her for that battleship of yours yonder!" said the German, with a smile, pointing to the steel masts of the sunken ironclad in the fairway.

"Oh, that!" said Cavendish, laughing. "I'm afraid you haven't done very much good, then—except that she'll be a nuisance in the channel of the river! That's an old hulk I sent adrift on the chance you might torpedo her and show yourself!"

The German looked rather blank. "We were in too great a hurry, I fear," he said. "Yes, Commander, I was wrong! The honours lie with you!"

"Oh, it isn't worth while splitting straws!" said Cavendish sympathetically. "You handled that vessel of yours admirably! I suppose you came in here on a special mission?" he added.

"Yes, there is no harm in telling you that now. I was sent to make an attempt to deprive you of this ship of yours, which you captured from our fleet," said the lieutenant, smiling. "But the fortune of war went against me. It was the most extraordinary encounter I ever heard of, for I thought we had the Furst Moltke at our mercy! What became of those two remarkable divers whom I had to do with when I attacked? Were they killed?"

"Not exactly!" laughed Cavendish. "I'm one, and here's the other," he added, introducing Sam.

"Blitzen!" exclaimed the German, opening his eyes wide as saucers. "It was you! You had a miraculous escape?"

"It was a pretty narrow shave, certainly!"

"And was it you who dropped across the torpedo?"

"Yes," grinned Cavendish. "That wasn't any plan of mine, though—it was just an inspiration of the moment!"

"It saved your ship as surely as you're alive! I never heard of such—well, I won't call it luck! But that one thing just upset my whole scheme!" said the German. "Even then I never dreamed that the vessel could get away in time to escape me—but those torpedo-tubes in the Hartmann submarines take such a confoundedly long time to recharge! If the dock had been fifty yards further off I should have got you! Well, we did our best!"

"And did it jolly well!" said Sam. "But what I thought the smartest thing was the way you pipped our pinnace! We never knew you were within half a mile of us till we found ourselves boosted into the air!"

"Rather sport, wasn't it?" said the lieutenant, smiling. "My junior spotted you from the conning-tower spyhole when we showed for a moment out in the middle, so we came in to look for you."

"You found us all, right enough!" said Cavendish. "The rum thing is, although we have all had close calls on both sides, none of us are killed! My engineer will soon get over his bump on the head. Well, lieutenant, I must get on with my duties—we've a lot to do. You'll be quartered ashore till the war's over. I'll give you a message to a friend of mine for yourself and your sub., and I think you'll find that he'll do you well. There isn't much society at Sheerness these days."

Cavendish entered his cabin and wrote a note to Colonel Blake, asking him to do his best for the prisoners, and the Germans left the Furst Moltke after a courteous farewell to her commander. They were very grateful for the treatment shown them.

"Good chap, that!" remarked Cavendish to Sam. "He'd be a credit to any navy! And now we'll slide out of dock to our moorings again as quick as we can. That steamer outside has got to be let in at once, and the guns taken aboard."

The Furst Moltke steamed steadily out, picked up her moorings again, and rode off the Lapwell Bank, ready to depart at any moment. Outside Garrison Point the steamer that had come down the Thames from Woolwich had been waiting, hove-to, for the booms to be opened. They were wound back enough to let her in, and as soon as she had entered the harbour they were closed again. Cavendish had been blaming himself enough for letting the submarine get in, and he meant taking no more chances.

The steamer came alongside the Furst Moltke, and was made fast. She had the big guns aboard, to Cavendish's delight, and they were hoisted on to the cruiser. The young commander positively licked his lips at the sight of them.

By this time it was nearly dark, but there was no slackening of duties on that account. The big arc-lamps lit the cruiser from stem to stern, and throughout the night the work of mounting the big guns went on.

Cavendish was able to leave it to his subordinates at about midnight, and turned in for a spell of much-needed rest. The brothers, too, seized the opportunity—none too common—to get a good night's rest.

The German Renegade.

In the morning a wireless message reached the cruiser. It was from Admiral Howard, off the Lincolnshire coast, bidding Cavendish report the progress of his ship. He did so, and anxiously awaited further orders.

"She can go at any moment now, if necessary," he said to Stephen, "though a few more hours to get her in trim would be a blessing, too. It's no joke getting an enemy's ship of this size into condition to use in your own fleet!"

"You've got the hang of her well now!" said Stephen. "Yes, but there are two or three things about her gear and working which I can't quite make out, try as I will! There are some secrets about her that only her commander,

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knew, and one can't find out from him. But we must chance that. What we want now is to get her to sea!"

"I hope there won't be any more of those beastly submarines snooping around outside!" remarked Stephen.

"So do I. But it isn't likely. They wouldn't spare more than one to come up this way, considerin' we're the only ship in the place. Besides, it's much easier to deal with 'em at sea, when you're under way!"

All through the morning till eleven o'clock the message was awaited, and Cavendish opined that the Admiral had too many other things to think of to bother about a stray cruiser—for the young commander was getting rather despondent.

There was no need to sit down and twirl one's thumbs, however. Any amount of work remained to be done, and all hands were kept busy. Tugs and tenders kept racing to and from the quays and dockyards, and the cruiser was like a beehive.

Just after eleven the sergeant of the Marines came to Cavendish, and reported that he believed he had taken a spy.

"What!" said Cavendish.

"He's in bluejacket kit, sir, and came aboard on one of the dock tenders. There was something about him I didn't fancy, so I kept my eye on him; and he don't talk white. I'm pretty sure he's a German."

"Well?"

"The man has the impudence to say, sir, that he came aboard to see you. Wants an audience with you, sir. I told him—"

"To see me? Pooh!" said Cavendish. "Ask him what his business is, sergeant. See he's kept under guard meanwhile."

The sergeant departed on his errand, and soon returned.

"Prisoner says, sir, that he's got valuable information he's willin' to give you. He's a German right enough. I think he wants to be paid for it."

"A German renegade—eh?" murmured Sam.

Cavendish frowned.

"It's a dirty sort of business," he said, half to himself. "I don't relish it. However, I'm bound to take advantage of it if there's anything in it. Bring the man here, sergeant!"

In a few minutes a tall, keen-looking man, in seaman's uniform of the British Navy, was brought into the cabin between two Marines, whom Cavendish told to retire.

"Now," he said sharply to the stranger, "who are you, and what do you want?"

"I am a German subject, sir," said the man, with a noticeable Prussian accent, "and I can be useful to you."

"Do you know the penalty, in that case, for being on a British warship in disguised character?"

"Yes, sir; it is to be shot," said the man, quite unmoved.

"Where did you get those clothes?"

"I procured them in order to get aboard and reach you without its being known to any of the German prisoners that I had done so. I was one of them myself—in fact, I belonged to this ship till yesterday."

"Ah, then you must be an officer on parole," said Cavendish, in disgust.

"That is beside the point, sir," said the man, with a shrug. "Officer or not, I am a poor man, and in return for my complete liberty and a hundred pounds, I will give you information relating to this ship of the highest importance, and which you cannot get elsewhere. I will reveal to you several details about her gear and construction which you did not know, and, still more vital than all, I will tell you where the key of the German secret code of war signals is to be found."

"What need have I of you when I command the ship and can find these things for myself?" said Cavendish sourly.

"You might command her for a year, but you would never find them, especially the secret code," said the German calmly.

"Humph!" grunted Cavendish. He rose from his seat, frowning thoughtfully. "I have the strongest dislike to this sort of thing," he said, facing the man with a look of contempt, "and, personally, I would rather have you pitched over the side. Still, it is my duty to obtain this information if it is possible to get it, so I shall accept your offer. But first, I shall test you to see if what you have said is genuine so far."

He put several questions to the German, but the answers soon convinced him that the man certainly knew the First Moltke thoroughly. Cavendish was puzzled, not remembering his face among the officers who had been sent ashore, and he found it hard to believe that anyone holding a commission in the German Navy should turn renegade in such a way. However, there was no doubt the man knew what he was talking about.

"That's enough," said Cavendish, eyeing him keenly. "You are apparently what you say, and I have no choice

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but to make use of you. You will receive the hundred pounds and your liberty, provided your information turns out correct."

"Very good. I am quite content to trust to your honour, sir."

"It's a lot more than I'd do to yours," said Cavendish under his breath. And then aloud: "Is the key to the code in this cabin?"

"No; it is in the strong-room, and in a perfectly secret place."

"The strong-room? That's down the lower alley-way past the magazine," said Cavendish to himself.

"Shall I accompany you there, and find it for you?" said the German.

"No," replied Cavendish. "You will furnish me with full directions, and I will go and prove them for myself while you remain here."

"I can hardly do it," said the man. "It is almost impossible, without showing you."

"You will either do as I bid you," replied Cavendish calmly, "or be taken on deck and shot for a spy, as you deserve."

The German shrugged his shoulders.

"I am afraid there is no use in my telling you," he said. "No directions will help you much. You had much better let me accompany you. Still, if you insist on it, I will try."

"Take care you instruct me well enough then," said Cavendish grimly; "for if I fail, it will be disastrous for you."

"Then go to the strong-room, obtain the keys, and get from the largest safe a small key from a steel box on the upper shelf. In one of the rivets that stud the back wall you will find a tiny keyhole. Insert the key and turn it, and in a recess which will open you will find a secret code-book of the Kaiser's fleet."

"Which rivet?"

"That I cannot possibly describe, though, if there, I could point it out to you. If I am not to come, you must try them all."

"I will do so," said Cavendish, "and you had better pray that I find that keyhole. It will be an awkward thing for you if you have tried to deceive me. Will you two chaps come with me?" he said to Sam and Stephen, who had been silent witnesses of the interview. "We'll soon test this information."

He opened the door, and, walking out, called to the Marine sentry just down the passage.

"Pass the word for those two men to return, and take charge of this prisoner in my absence," he called out.

Sam and Cavendish were outside the door while the order was given, but Stephen had not quitted it. Something in the face of the disguised German had struck him—a queer, strained look, as if he were waiting anxiously for something. Stephen hung back, and kept a wary eye on him.

Hardly were Cavendish and Sam out of the cabin, and Stephen nearly so, when the German darted across to the other side, and, pulling back a curtain that hung across the wall, opened a door that was behind it, and disappeared in the twinkling of an eye.

The Bomb in the Magazine.

Stephen dashed after him with a cry. None of them had suspected that any door was behind that curtain, or that the cabin had two entrances. The boy grabbed the door-handle, and felt it violently pulled from the other side, as though the prisoner were trying to slam and lock it.

The resistance ceased at once, however, and Stephen, darting through, saw the German sprinting off at full speed down a narrow alley-way. The door did not open on to the part where Cavendish and Sam were at all. A couple of steel bulkheads and the stewards' room, to boot, lay between it and them once outside, for it gave upon the starboard-side passage, while the main door opened on the port.

Wondering whether the other two had heard him call out, and full of apprehension, Stephen scudded away after the man as hard as he could. What the German wanted to do he could not guess, but it was plain he must be stopped. Stephen saw the fugitive run round the bend of the alley-way and down the hatch stairs that led down two decks below, covering them in a few breakneck bounds, and nearly knocking over a seaman-gunner at the bottom.

"Stop him! Stop that man!" cried Stephen, as he bounded down after the German, who was now scurrying along the lower alley-way.

"What the blazes is up?" said the bewildered gunner, seeing nothing more alarming than an able seaman of his own Service running away from a military cadet.

There was no time to explain anything, and Stephen dashed past, calling on the gunner to follow, but scarcely noticing whether he did so or not.

The starboard alley-ways were almost deserted, and the German was now round the next corner. Stephen, getting him in view again, saw the man making at a more quiet pace, with as little noise as possible, for a door at the end.

A thrill seized Stephen as he realised the goal the man was seeking. Behind that folding iron door lay the upper starboard magazine, where the six-inch and larger shells were stored, and beyond was the ammunition lift. The place was not guarded now, for so many hands were needed on deck, and for the time nobody was there. The man thrust back the door swiftly and entered.

Stephen was close upon his heels, and rushed in after him a second or two later. One glance showed him the masses of stacked shells, all in their partitions, and charged with deadly, high-power explosives. And at the same moment, the German, plucking something that was evidently a bomb or a canister of dynamite from the loose fold of his serge jumper, raised it quickly aloft to hurl it among the shells.

With a cry of horror, Stephen leaped upon him from behind like a wild-cat, one arm flung over the German's shoulder, and the other hand grasping at the raised bomb.

Another second and the missile would have left the man's hand, and magazine and ship would be doomed. A sharp, querulous cry broke from the man's lips, and then a frantic oath as he tried to shake himself free. He made a furious effort to wrest the bomb loose and hurl it, but Stephen's fingers, endowed with new strength by the knowledge that failure meant certain death, tightened so desperately over the man's own, that the bomb was held fast, and, crooking his leg round the spy's with a sudden jerk, both of them fell heavily.

Every nerve in Stephen's body tingled as they fell, for fear the deadly thing should explode. His hand was underneath the bomb, and his knuckles struck the floor with a crashing thud as the two combatants, struggling for possession of the missile, held on to it and came down together.

"Let go, you British brat!" hissed the German, nearly tearing his arm away. "Let go!"

"Help here!" shouted Stephen, grabbing with both hands at the bomb. "Help, I can't hold him! Will no one come?"

He managed to save the thing from being thrown, but the German was far more powerful than he, and in another moment would have succeeded.

But in through the door burst the seaman-gunner, who, seeing the frantic struggle on the floor of the magazine, and hearing the harsh German voice, flung himself on the man below.

"Look out for that thing, for Heaven's sake!" shouted Stephen. "It's dynamite! Get it away from him while I hold his wrist."

"Crikey!" gasped the gunner, tearing it hurriedly out of the man's hand, in spite of his furious effort to keep it, while Stephen received a heavy blow across the face. "Dynamite! Hold 'im!"

The gunner lost no time. He was outside the magazine in a twinkling, hugging the deadly case of dynamite gingerly to him, and left Stephen to struggle with the spy.

The sound of voices and running feet were heard swiftly approaching along the alley-way, and the gunner was calling out loudly.

In a few moments more Cavendish, Sam, and two blue-jackets rushed into the magazine, and the former threw himself upon Stephen's captive.

They had little trouble with him, however. Once the bomb was wrested away from him the man struggled no longer.

Cavendish and Sam jerked him to his feet.

"Where is the thing? Who said 'dynamite'?" cried Cavendish.

"Here it is, sir!" replied the gunner outside, putting his head in gingerly. "I've got it."

"Take it away on deck and put it in a bucket of water," ordered Cavendish. "One of you go with him and see to it. Carry it as if it were eggs."

"Ay, ay, sir!" replied the gunner, with relief.

"Hold the fellow fast," said Cavendish to the others.

"Let's see if he's got any more about him."

"I don't think so," said Stephen; "he reckoned one'd be enough."

And so it proved, for nothing was found on the man, who still took things as calmly as ever.

"Pass the word for the Marines there!" said Cavendish; and he turned to Stephen. "Did you catch him with the stuff on him?"

"He was just goin' to chuck it among the shells," said Stephen, "when I grabbed him, so I guessed it must be dynamite, or something of the sort. We can soon tell."

"You need not trouble yourselves," said the German coolly. "The boy is right—it was dynamite."

"Then this ship was within a hair's-breadth of bein' blown to scrap-iron," said Sam quietly. "Well done, Steve!"

"So now we've got to the bottom of your visit on board my ship," said Cavendish grimly to his prisoner.

The man bowed with perfect effrontery.

"Bring him to my cabin," said Cavendish to the Marines.

And the party mounted again to the place where Stephen had begun the chase. The curtained door still stood open. Cavendish seated himself at his table, facing the prisoner.

"Anything to say?" asked the young commander curtly.

"Nothing," replied the German, "except that you may save yourself the trouble of searching the strong-room for that keyhole if you choose," he added, with a dry smile.

"Because it doesn't exist, I suppose?" said Cavendish.

"Exactly! The Kaiser's secret-code book for the German Navy is a myth, except the one in the small safe in the chart-room, which you have already found, containing the ordinary German Fleet code signals."

"That's another lie, no doubt," said Cavendish.

"Pardon me! I have lied to you a good deal up till now, but there is no further need for it. I am now speaking the truth."

"I shouldn't wonder if you are," returned Cavendish grimly. "It is proved, then, that your story about wishing to sell me information is false, and that you came on board in that disguise with the intention, if possible, of blowing up the magazine and sending this ship and her crew to destruction?"

"And myself with them," added the German, with a shrug.

"You would have been no loss," replied Cavendish.

"You've no defence to make, I suppose?"

"No. You may call out your firing-party and shoot me out of hand, of course."

"I shall shortly oblige you," said Cavendish. "There are one or two small formalities to go through first. Sergeant, pass the word for the armourer to put this man in irons, and take him to the guard-room."

The German, quite unmoved, made a grave bow to Cavendish before he was led away.

As the door closed, the Furst Moltke's commander turned to Stephen and held out his hand.

"Shake, old chap!" he said. "I have to thank you, and you alone, for saving my ship and her crew. We'd have been blown to pieces but for you. How in the world did you get on to him so quickly?"

"There was nothing in it," Stephen replied. "I hung back when you went out, an', seein' him scoot through that door, I bunked after him. He made straight for the magazine, an' I was just in time to trip him up before he chucked the thing. It did give me the cold shivers when we bumped down together, though. Did you as much as dream there was a door that side?"

"I didn't," Cavendish admitted; "I'd never even looked for one. We heard the row, and it took us a few seconds to find where you'd gone. Well, thank Heaven, we've nabbed the fellow! He was a pretty desperate hand."

"He was playin' for his own side all the time, then?" Sam put in. "That information about the strong-room was all bunkum, I suppose?"

"Yes, evidently—to get a chance to go there with me an' show me. The strong-room is just beyond the magazine, and he'd have taken his chance of darting in an' chuckin' that bomb. I hadn't thought of that, but I didn't mean to let him leave this cabin; so when he found he couldn't go, he looked for a chance to bunk through an' do it on his own. There ain't much doubt he's one of the officers we sent ashore yesterday, as he knows so much about the ship."

"What! And broke his parole an' got hold o' that uniform?"

"That's about it."

"The blackguard! And he nearly blew us all to pieces!" exclaimed Stephen. "Isn't he a—"

"Humph!" said Cavendish. "He's a daring beggar, at least. I don't mind owning I feel a lot more respect for him than when I thought he was a spy, selling his own side for money."

"Yes, he was givin' his life to prevent us usin' a captured warship against the Kaiser," said Sam, "and he gave his honour, too. Which, to a gentleman, is surely harder still. Breakin' parole is an ugly thing to do."

"He wouldn't have lived to regret it if he'd hove down that bomb," said Stephen simply.

"An' now you've got to shoot him," put in Sam.

Cavendish looked glum.

"I hate this butcher's business," he said. "Fightin''s worth living for, but executions are out of my line. Still, I've got nothing else for it after what he did," added the young commander, with a sigh. "I must hold a drumhead court-martial, an'—"

There was a sharp knock, and the sentry, after inquiring, ushered in the telegraph expert's orderly with a missive in his hand.

"Marconigram from the admiral, sir, just arrived," he

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said, saluting and handing it to Cavendish, who tore it open eagerly.

"Furst Moltke to proceed to sea at once, cleared for action. Rendezvous off Galloper Lightship. Join and take command of Torpedo Flotilla.—HOWARD."

"Good!" cried Cavendish joyfully, darting to the door. "Pass the word to Mr. Elcombe. Slip moorings and let's get to sea! This lets me out."

"Off at last!" echoed Stephen, as delighted as the commander. "What about that fellow in the guard-room?"

"I've no time to shoot prisoners, thank Heaven!" said Cavendish. "Here, sergeant, put that German over the side into one of the shore boats, an' send him to Colonel Blake, under arrest. An' I hope the beggar will escape," he added to himself, as he hastened up on to the bridge. "He's a brave man!"

Five minutes later the great cruiser, fully equipped, armed, gunned, and ready for war, was surging majestically out past Garrison Point, her bows turned to the open sea.

From the northward a slow, ominous sound grew more and more distinct above the storm that was brewing over the sea. It was the mutter of heavy firing, right in the cruiser's course.

The Trap at the Galloper.

"What d'you think that firin' is?" said Sam, as the officers and crew, strangely silent as the great steel ship ploughed her way over the murky sea towards the gathering storm-clouds, looked ahead and listened intently. "Can it be the fleet engaged?"

"Can't say," replied Cavendish laconically; "the wind carries the sound towards us, an' there's no tellin' how far off it may be."

"We're headin' for it, anyhow," said Sam, with satisfaction. "If only they—"

He was interrupted by a tremendous crash, not far to starboard of the cruiser, where a vivid white flash was seen for an instant and a fountain of water leaped into the air, mingled with fragments of wood and rubbish. Sam fairly jumped clear of the deck, so startled and surprised was he, and Cavendish turned round quick as lightning, ready for action.

What had happened was a surprise for everybody. Stephen, having nothing to do, and being exhilarated by getting to sea again, had taken the bomb of dynamite from its resting-place in the bucket of water where it had been placed. Going to the side and taking careful aim, he hurled it as far as he could at some floating wreckage that was drifting along about twenty yards away. The aim was correct, the bomb exploded, and blew the wreckage into matchwood.

"You young ass!" cried Sam angrily, when he grasped what had happened. "What d'you think you're doing?"

"All right, lieutenant," said Stephen cheerfully. "I wanted to see if the thing was really dynamite. An' it was. No harm done. Wasn't it a good shot?"

"I tell you what, Stephen," said Cavendish, "if it wasn't that you found that bomb yourself, an' were pretty useful over it, I'd shove you in the guard-room!"

"An' serve you jolly well right!" growled Sam. "I'd do it now if it were my ship!"

"Sorry, captain," replied Stephen. "Didn't mean any harm. But I thought maybe you'd forgotten the dynamite, an' that it was safer overboard. Afraid I've upset my dear brother's nerves."

The others laughed, in spite of themselves, and the lower deck was seething with mirth, for most of the bluejackets had witnessed Stephen's exploit.

"Well, you just chuck it, my son," said Cavendish, "or I shall annex you by the left ear an' afterwards hang you from the yard-arm. There'll be plenty of explosions before this cruise is over, without amateur ones. Two points away, Mr. Elcombe!"

Sheerness was fading out of sight astern, and the Kentish coast receded gradually as the Furst Moltke surged away down Prince's Channel, bound for her open-sea rendezvous.

The distant sound of firing seemed to have ceased, and though those on the bridge listened intently, they could hear no more of the warning mutter to the northward.

"They've stopped," said Sam. "Perhaps Steve's too foolery scared 'em," he added, grinning.

"It can hardly be the main fleets at work," said Cavendish, "or they'd be hard at it all the time. Mr. Elcombe send a midshipman to the Marconi operator, and ask him to report to me every semblance of a message that the instrument records, whether he can read it or not."

"You'll get fresh orders at the Galloper, I s'pose?" asked Sam.

"Yes, of course. It's a handy place to rendezvous at—thirty miles from anywhere."

"Wonder what we shall be told off to do?" queried Stephen eagerly.

"Don't know; but it looks promisin', takin' over the torpedo flotilla," said Cavendish, with satisfaction. "Ne best thing to a job with the main fightin'-line. Maybe we're to go an' scour the coasts to the eastward, or else patrol this end of the North Sea, so as to catch any of the enemy who come south."

"We shall be a little fleet all on our own," put in Sam with gusto. "Will they be destroyers or torpedo-boats?"

"Only torpedo-boats, I expect, but good sea-goin' ones, at any rate. I'm a bit surprised they can spare any down this way. Should have thought the admiral would have wanted 'em to back his own line."

The afternoon was fast drawing in, the sky was overcast and the sea rising higher. Tearing along at her highest speed, the Furst Moltke left all land far out of sight, and was already nearing her goal.

There are few more lonely spots in the North Sea than the neighbourhood of the famous Galloper Lightship, which rides out the worst storms at her great cables and mushroom anchors, guarding the sunken Galloper shoal. All aboard the cruiser watched eagerly for the earliest glimpse of the round ball at her masthead.

"There she is!" cried Stephen, whose keen sight first made out the red globe, swaying and swinging over the seas.

Then the squat, heavy iron hull of the lightship could be made out, and a little later, several small dots were seen, in regular order, lying just beyond.

"There's our flotilla," said Sam. "One—two—seven or 'em altogether. Good business!"

"Yes, we ought to make our mark with that lot," said Cavendish cheerfully. "I expect some of my old pals are among them. We'll make things hum when we get to work. The commander'll probably have despatches for me."

"He'll take his orders from you as soon as you join, of course?"

"Rather! We haven't lost any time comin' out that's a blessing. The admiral's down on delay, an' don't take excuses."

The black dots resolved themselves into sea-going torpedo-craft as the cruiser raced towards them, now within about four miles,

but the light was bad. Cavendish eyed them keenly. His satisfaction presently gave way to a puzzled expression as he scanned them through the most powerful glass he could procure. The flotilla still remained motionless.

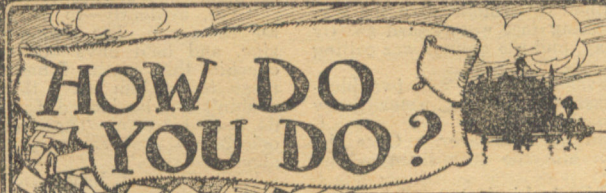
"Hum!" he grunted. "Something fishy here!"

"What's the matter?" said Stephen, as the cruiser still raced forward. "Are they a poor lot, after all?"

"Stop her way!" ordered Cavendish, in a ringing voice. "Hard a port; lay her due east. Crews to the guns!"

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