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THE SEARCH FOR TOM MERRY.

A Splendid, Long, Complete School Tale of "Tom Merry and His Chums at St. Jim's."

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1

Breaking-Up at St. Jim's.

ST. JIM'S was breaking up for the Christmas holidays. It was a hard, frosty December day, clear as crystal, and bitterly cold. The fellows, as they came out of New House or School House to take their places in the brakes, were wrapped up in great coats, muffled in scarves, enveloped in ulsters, and still they had to stamp their feet to keep warm. Their breath, as they exhaled it, hung like steam in the air, and cheeks were blue and noses were red.

"My only hat!" ejaculated Blake, of the Fourth, as he came out, and snorted on the steps of the School House. "This is what I call kik-kik-kik-cold!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, jamming his monocle into his eye and surveying the old quadrangle, which had disappeared under six inches of snow. The steps of the School House were clothed in white, and the gaunt, leafless elms stood up like grim spectres. "Bai Jove, deah boys, it's been snowing!"

"Go hon!" said Blake. "I say, you chaps, it's been snowing! Gussy says so!"

"Weally, Blake——"

"I always said that Gussy ought to be a detective," said Monty Lowther, of the Shell. "The way he discovers things at a glance——"

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"It takes the cake!" agreed Digby. "Herries's bulldog couldn't have discovered a thing quicker—not even a kipper."

"Where is Herries?" demanded Blake, looking round. "The brake's waiting, and the ass has disappeared somewhere."

"Oh, he's gone for Towser!" said Digby.

Arthur Augustus started.

"Towsah!"

"Yes. You don't think Herries would leave Towser to the tender mercies of Taggles during the Christmas holidays, do you?"

"I twust Hewwies does not intend to have that howwid beast in the bwake. I shall have to entah a pwotest. That dog has no wespect whatevah for a fellow's twousahs."

Gr-r-r-r-r!

"Here comes Towser," grinned Jack Blake, as he heard the old familiar growl of the bulldog. "Buck up Herries! The train won't wait all day, you know."

"I'm ready," said Herries.

"Hewwies, old man, it will be wathah wuff on Towsah havin' to wun behind the bwake in the snow!"

"Eh?" grunted Herries. "What?"

"Hadn't you bettah leave him with the school portah? He will get his feet vewy cold in the snow, you know."

"Catch me letting him run in the snow!" grunted Herries. "He's jolly well coming in the brake!"

"But there is no woom for Towsah."

"One of the fellows can walk, then."

"Weally, Hewwies——"

"Oh, scat!"

And Herries lifted his big favourite into the brake that was waiting outside the School House. D'Arcy surveyed this proceeding through his eyeglass with great disapproval, but that seemed to have no effect whatever upon either Herries or Towser.

Monty Lowther chuckled softly.

"I should advise you to sit on his head, Gussy, and that will keep him quiet," he said, poking the swell of the School House in the ribs.

D'Arcy twisted away.

"Pway don't puncture my wibs in that way, Lowthah! And I uttahly wefuse to sit on Towsah's head. I wegard it as extwemely pwob. that he would bite me."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I object to Towsah's pwesence. If it were not Chwistmas time, I should feel gweatly inclined to give Hewwies a

Next Thursday: "TOM MERRY'S RESOLVE" and "THE IRON ISLAND."

feahful thwashin'. I wegard puttin' Towsah in the bwake as an unfwiendly act."

"Rats!" said Herries.

"Tumble in!" said Manners. "The New House brake is just going to start, and we've got to be out of the gates first."

"Yaas, wathah! Buck up, deah boys!"

"Tumble in!" shouted Blake.

There was a brake piling full of juniors outside the New House, on the other side of the snowy quad. At breaking-up time several trains were run in quick succession from the little country station at Rylcombe to Wayland Junction, where the fellows separated in various directions, scattering to the four corners of the kingdom for the holidays. It really mattered very little which brake started first; but the School House was always up against the New House, and a race to the station was likely to be exciting.

Figgins & Co., of the New House, were already in their brake, and other juniors were piling in fast. Figgins was looking over towards the School House through the clear, frosty air, and the idea of a race had evidently entered his head, too.

"Buck up!" exclaimed Manners.

"Where's the dwivah, deah boys? Call the dwivah!"

"Rats!"

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"We can drive ourselves," sniffed Lowther. "The driver wouldn't understand how important it was to beat the New House, anyway."

"Yaas, that is vewy twue. I will——"

"Figgins is taking the ribbons over there," remarked Blake.

"Yaas, wathah! I'll——"

"I wish old Tommy were here," said Lowther. "We want Tom Merry to drive. How utterly rotten it is breaking up without him!"

Manners gave a grunt.

"Of course, it is," he said. "Hang it! It spoils everything for the Christmas holidays, Tommy being off on his lonesome."

"Don't you chaps know where Tom Merry is?" asked Kangaroo, the Cornstalk.

"In London."

"But where?" asked the Cornstalk. "If a chap knew his address, he might look him up in the holidays."

Monty Lowther shook his head.

"I don't know his address. He wouldn't let us know."

Kangaroo whistled.

"Why not?"

"I suppose it's because he's hard up, and he won't let us help him." Lowther made an exasperated gesture. "Isn't it rotten?"

"Beastly!"

"He always was a wathah obstinate chap," said D'Arcy thoughtfully. "Do you wemembah how he nevah could see that it would be advisable to wesign the football captaincy to me?"

"Ass!"

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"Chump!"

"I shall be sowwy to thwash you at Chwistmas-time, Lowthah——"

"Fathead!"

"But under the circs.——"

"Noodle!"

"I have no othah wesource. Pway put up your hands!"

"Duffer!"

"Weally—— Leggo, Blake! I insist upon your lettin' go my collah instantly!"

Blake grinned.

"Get into the brake, fathead!"

"I decline to be called a fathead, and I wefuse to get into the bwake until I have thwashed Lowthah."

"Ass! The New House will be getting ahead," roared Blake.

"Bai Jove, I had forgotten them!"

"Jump in!"

The swell of St. Jim's jumped into the brake. Lowther and Manners and Kangaroo followed. The brake was very nearly full now. It was supposed to take more, but Blake did not mean to let Figgins get ahead. Figgins was in the driver's seat on the New House brake, and he was already setting the horses in motion.

"Blake, deah boy, I'd bettah dwive."

"Rats!" said Blake, settling down with the reins. "You can't teach a Yorkshire chap anything about horses. I'm driving."

"Weally, Blake——"

"Oh, lie down!"

"I wefuse to lie down! I—— Oh! Oh!"

Arthur Augustus had refused very properly to lie down; but when Lowther bumped against his knees from behind, he had very little choice in the matter. He lay down!

There was a horrid growl from Towser as D'Arcy bumped on him.

"Look out!" roared Herries. "Do you want to make him bite you?"

"Ow! Yow!"

Arthur Augustus leaped up like a jack-in-the-box, with a wild howl.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Manners. "Where has he bitten you?"

"It's all wight," said D'Arcy, calming down. "He hasn't bitten me, deah boy."

"You ass! What did you make that row for, then?"

"Well, I thought he was goin' to, you see."

"Chump!"

"Weally, Mannahs——"

"Hould on!" roared a voice, as Reilly, of the Fourth, came pounding through the snow. "Hould on, Blake! Sure, I'm coming in that brake!"

Jack Blake did not look round. He was whipping up the horses, and they were tearing towards the gates. Reilly waved his hand, and roared.

"Hould on, ye omadhaun! Hould on, ye thafe of the world! Ye spalpeens, hould on!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Lowther.

Reilly's eloquence was wasted on the desert air. The brake tore on. Down the gravelled drive from the New House the other brake was tearing, and it was a race between Blake and Figgins.

———

CHAPTER 2.
School House Wins.

"BUCK up, School House!" roared the fellows in the quadrangle.

"Buck up, New House!"

"Go it, Blake!"

"On the ball, Figgins!"

Jack Blake cracked his whip furiously.

The New House brake had a slight start, but Blake was determined on passing it to the gate.

The crowd of fellows outside both Houses watched the race in great excitement, yelling encouragement to either side.

"Go it, Figgy!"

"Put it on, Blake!"

"Bai Jove, we're winnin'!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. And in his excitement he waved his silk topper in the air. "Buck up, deah boy!"

Blake did not reply.

He was bucking up.

The brake rolled on behind the galloping horses to the wide gateway. Wide as it was, it was not wide enough for two brakes to pass abreast.

If both kept on, it looked as if they would be jammed in the gateway, and there would be a smash.

"Pile it on, Figgy!" shouted Kerr, behind his chum in the brake. "We'll beat them."

Fatty Wynn jumped up.

"Hold on!" he exclaimed.

"What's the matter?"

"Hold on, Figgy! Stop the brake!" shouted Fatty Wynn, in excitement.

Figgins took no notice.

With a hand like iron on the reins, he kept the brake steady for the gateway, and the two vehicles were now almost level.

Fatty Wynn grasped his chum by the shoulder from behind.

"Figgy! Figgy! Hold on!"

"What is it?" exclaimed Figgins.

"Stop!"

Fatty Wynn was so earnest that Figgins, in spite of himself, slackened his efforts for a moment, and looked round at his fat chum.

"What is it, Fatty? Anything wrong?"

"Yes. Stop!"

With a grunt Figgins drew in the horses.

The School House brake drew ahead.

There was a roar of derision from the School House fellows as they shot past the New House vehicle.

Figgins stared at Fatty Wynn.

"What is it, Fatty? Something rocky with the brake?" he asked.

"Oh, no!"

"Then what——"

"You've forgotten the lunch-basket."

"What!" roared Figgins.

"Keep that door shut!" growled Rake. Tom Merry drew back but Joe marched in. "Ere he is," he announced! (See page 6.)

"What!" yelled the New House crowd in the brake.

"You've forgotten the lunch-basket, Figgy, the one I trusted you to put in the brake," said Fatty Wynn. "Lucky I noticed it in time."

Figgins glared speechlessly at the fat Fourth-Former.

That Fatty Wynn had stopped the brake, and lost the race with the School House, because he missed a lunch-basket, seemed incredible at first.

"Bump him!" yelled Figgins, at last. "Bump him! Squash him! Jump on him."

"Oh, I say, Figgy—— Ow! Yow!"

Fatty Wynn went down in the bottom of the brake under a dozen juniors.

He struggled and gasped as he disappeared under them.

"Squash him!" roared Kerr.

"Groo! Hoo! Yarooh! Help!"

"Bump him."

"Jump on him!"

Figgins cracked the whip, and urged on the horses again. But he could not recover the lost ground.

The School House brake was three lengths ahead, and entering the ancient gateway of St. Jim's, as Figgins whipped on again.

The New House brake dashed on, and the juniors yelled with rage as the School House fellows, ahead, looked back at them and made derisive gestures.

"Oh, go to sleep!" shouted Kangaroo.

"Have another rest!" sang out Lowther.

"Ha, ha! Who's cock-house at St. Jim's?"

"School House! School House!"

"Hear us smile!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Out into the snow-deep road swung the School House brake, with Figgins's team snorting just behind it.

Away down the road it went, the horses snorting and steaming, the snow kicking up from their heels.

Fast behind rolled on the New House brake.

All the way down Rylcombe Lane the race went on, but Blake was driving well, and Figgins never made up the ground lost.

Fatty Wynn, meanwhile, was suffering severely for having delayed the vehicle. He was extended on the floor of the brake, and Kerr was standing with one foot on his chest, and Pratt was sitting on his shoulder, and French was squatting on his legs, and two or three other juniors had their feet on him. Fatty Wynn wriggled in vain; there was no getting up for him till the station was reached.

"Lemme gerrup!" he mumbled. "I'm spoiling my overcoat—or you're spoiling it, you silly asses! Chuck it!"

"Stay there, you chump!" growled Kerr. "You've lost us the race with the School House."

"Look here——"

"Cheese it!"

"The lunch-basket's left behind——"

"Blow the lunch-basket!"

"That's all very well!" roared Fatty Wynn, exasperated. "You won't say blow the lunch-basket when you're famishing in the train."

"Rats!"

"Lemme gerrup!"

"More rats!"

Fatty Wynn struggled in vain.

Many feet pinned him down, and he rolled and wriggled under them as the brake rocked on the snowy road.

It was a wonder that the horses did not lose their footing; but the two brakes rattled into the High Street of Rylcombe at last without mishap.

Blake drew up before the station with a flourish, and the School House fellows yelled:

"Hurrah! School House wins!"

"Who's cock-house at St. Jim's?" yelled Lowther.

"School House! School House!"

And the New House fellows could only reply with catcalls; they couldn't deny that the School House had won.

Blake & Co. tumbled out of the brake, leaving it there for the driver to recover. That individual was labouring through the snow after the brake, and no doubt would appear in the course of ten minutes or so. He had been liberally tipped already, and so was likely to take the incident with good humour; but in any case, the train would be gone before he arrived, so, as Lowther remarked, it really did not matter very much.

In the station vestibule there was a surging crowd of juniors.

Figgins & Co. were greatly inclined to go for Blake and his chums, but the remembrance that they were parting for the Christmas holidays had a soothing effect.

Blake slapped the New House leader on the shoulder.

"All serene, old son," he exclaimed. "We can't help being best, you know."

"Rats!" grinned Figgins. "It was Fatty made me lose the race; we should have beaten you hollow."

"Weally, Figgins——"

"Look at my overcoat!" roared Fatty Wynn.

"Bai Jove! I wegard that as a simply disgustin' state to go home in for the Chwistmas holidays, Wynn."

"Been using him as a doormat?" asked Blake.

"Yes; he lost us the race."

"Oh, you were beaten to the wide, anyway, you know."

"Rats!"

"Look here, Figgins——"

"Oh, please be quiet!" exclaimed Kangaroo. "What's the good of rowing when the train's starting? Tumble in!"

"Yaas, wathah! But——"

"Come on, Gussy!"

"You are intewwuptin' me, Blake."

"Quite aware of that, my son. Come on!"

And Arthur Augustus was rushed into the carriage. The train started from the station with the windows crammed with juniors, shouting and cheering in the exuberance of their hearts.

But in the midst of the general jollity, clouds would settle every now and then upon several faces there.

Tom Merry's chums could not help thinking of him.

Where was he that Christmas-tide?

Where was Tom Merry?

— —

CHAPTER 3.

Tom Merry in London.

TOM MERRY was thinking about his chums at St. Jim's, while that very race was going on in the frosty morning.

The day that was so clear and bright and bitter in the lanes of Sussex, was bitter enough, but not clear or bright, in London town.

Grey mist hung over the great city; slush was in the streets, damp was in the air; and in the mist and the slush, and the damp, the cold was piercing.

It bit through thick furs, and well-clad men walked quickly in the streets, to keep themselves from chilling. It gnawed into the limbs of hungry, ill-clad vagrants.

Men and women, with rags on their limbs, and want of food eating the very heart out of them, shivered in the bitter wind, and shuddered at the cold damp of the air.

In the streets of London was the glare of lights, the hustle and bustle of the Christmas shopping.

Rich and poor jostled in the never-ending crowds, bright faces, gleaming with hope and happiness, passed by thin and meagre countenances upon which grim poverty had set its mark.

In the midst of the crowd Tom Merry walked, like one in a dream.

Tom Merry had been up and down in London many a time. Now, in his dark days, he remembered many a merry excursion there—excursions to the Zoo, the Exhibition at Shepherd's Bush, and to the Crystal Palace—with his chums, in the flush of youth, and hope, and careless gaiety.

He was seeing a very different London now.

London from the under side is very different to the view. Tom Merry was seeing the great city now as many a hundred thousand of its crowded inhabitants always had seen it—the great city, flowing with wealth, yet hard as iron to those who needed it most; the city of boundless charity, and of boundless want— the maelstrom where the wrecks from all quarters drift and whirl before they are at last sucked under.

Tom Merry was walking the streets of London as many a poor lad has walked them before; with empty pockets, an almost empty stomach, and a heart that was growing empty of hope. To Tom Merry, as to many another, London had been the Mecca—the goal. Once in London, in the greatest and richest city in the world, surely there was work for one who was willing to do it; money to be earned by the industrious and honest!

Not always so, alas!

To the steady and skilful workman, work is seldom wanting. But to the crowds of unsteady, unskilled, who have never had a chance, from birth, of becoming either steady or skilled!

What of them?

And of that number, Tom Merry of St. Jim's found himself now.

At St. Jim's he had been head of his Form, captain of the juniors, a favourite pupil with exacting masters, a credit to the House and to the College.

In London he found that he was nothing.

What could he do?

Latin hexameters were useless to him now; he could translate Virgil almost as fast as he could write, but nobody wanted Virgil translated. He could have given a very accurate account of English history from the time of the Romans; but with the present moment he was powerless to deal. He could have talked to a Frenchman or a German in his own tongue; but he could not win a meal thereby.

His education at St. Jim's had fitted him for a different life—not for this. Now that he was thrown upon his own resources, he realised that he was less able to provide for the passing day than the raggedest urchin who raced up and down Fleet Street with the "Evening News" under his arm.

It was not a gratifying discovery for the hero of St. Jim's—the hero of the school, who had always seemed to his schoolfellows the ideal of what a British boy should be. But it was so; and Tom Merry accepted the knowledge of the inevitable, and tried to make the best of it.

But what was he to do?

To ask his friends for money was a thing he determined not to do; to write to Miss Fawcett, and tell her his straits, was impossible.

Miss Fawcett had nothing. Tom was only too glad to know that she had found a safe refuge with Cousin Ethel; that she, at least, would be taken care of.

And Tom set out bravely in search of employment.

Surely a brave, strong, honest lad should not have to seek long for that—in vain! But even so it was. Many a weary day Tom Merry passed in the search, and failure after failure was his reward.

Others, less gifted, and less educated in many ways, were more fit for the keen, merciless struggle of London, and they passed him in the race.

On that grim morning Tom Merry walked the streets in the jostling crowds, and thought of St. Jim's.

He knew that it was breaking-up day.

The fellows would be going off in swarms from Rylcombe Station, home for the holidays; and he——

What was his Christmas holiday to be like?

That morning he had risen at six, and had examined the earliest papers with sedulous care, and had walked, and walked, till his legs were aching to the bone, to answer advertisements.

Oh, those grim, dry columns of advertisements—that sickly smell of the newly-printed paper—that sickening, hopeless reading! And all for nothing.

There was nothing for Tom Merry. It was borne in grimly upon his mind that he was an object upon which the community placed no value—that the nation did not consider him worth keeping alive—for with all his efforts he could not extract a living from the community he formed part of.

It was terrible, and it was true!

If he died in the cold, heartless streets, his body would be swept away to a pauper's grave, as so much rubbish, and no one would shed a tear.

And to the poor lad London began to assume a terrifying aspect—the hard, cold streets did not seem harder than the hearts of those who dwelt in them.

In that he was wrong; hearts are as kind in London as anywhere else, though it may not seem so—they are kind everywhere. It was the scramble for existence that was to blame—the fact that there is a battle of life to be fought, instead of the mutual help and good fellowship that ought to be—because men have forgotten the teachings of the great Teacher, and blindly refuse to follow the light.

Tom Merry was walking slowly homeward.

He had parted with his last coin that morning; and he had not spent it upon himself. He had given it to a shivering child. Nothing would ever alter Tom Merry's nature in that respect; while he had anything to give, he would never refuse one who was in want. And surely sometimes, as the old proverb says, giving brings good luck.

Tom Merry turned out of the misty streets where the lamps were burning in the grim yellow morning, into the street, or, rather, alley, where he had his home.

His home!

He turned into a great house that, many a long year ago, had been tenanted by wealthy people, before fashion migrated to another quarter of the town.

Now the house was swarming with unshaven men, slatternly women, squalling, quarrelsome children—children whose faces might have been merry and bright, women who might have been sweet and tender and kind, men who might have been decent and sober and hardworking—if the great ones of the world, who govern them, could be taught wisdom instead of folly!

Tom Merry passed up a great staircase—a staircase with a carved oaken balustrade, and great wide steps, where handsome men and graceful ladies once had lightly stepped—now abandoned to squalor and misery.

He reached the top of the house and entered his room there—a small room, with rags stuffed in the window in place of glass, and the paper peeling off the damp walls, and the ceiling discoloured with the rain that soaked in through the roof; and for furniture, a rickety table, a still more rickety chair, and a bed made up on the floor. That was what Tom Merry had come to, and that would not last him long; that den, miserable as it was, was paid for only till the end of the week, and if he had no more money by then he would have no home.

Tom Merry sank wearily upon the chair.

He was tired, and he was hungry. He was hopeless. Again the search for employment had failed.

What was he to do now.

There was a sound of heavy feet on the stairs—clump, clump, clump!

A slight smile broke over Tom Merry's weary face.

He knew the step.

From the sound, it might have been a large and heavy man who was coming up the stairs; but he knew that it was Joe—and Joe entered the next moment.

Joe was a lad of about twelve, but so pinched and thin that he might have been eight or nine. Joe was clad in an enormous pair of trousers cut down for him, an ancient waistcoat used as a coat, and a pair of large and heavy hob-nailed boots four or five sizes too large for him. Joe's father had lately died, and Joe was dressed in some of his raiment, and those enormous boots were not a burden to Joe—for they were the first boots he had ever possessed in his life, and they kept his feet—not warm—but unfrozen.

The little lad came in and gave Tom Merry a grin. His dirty face had certainly not been washed for weeks; there were still furrows in the dirt upon it, showing where Joe had been crying before. Joe generally cried at the top of his voice, and shed copious tears when his mother beat him. His mother beat him whenever she was intoxicated. She was intoxicated whenever she had any money. And so money coming into the family coffers was not an unmixed blessing to Joe.

"I thought it was you, ole pal," said Joe. "I thought I knew yer step. Did you get the job?"

Tom Merry shook his head.

"None of 'em?"

Another shake of the head.

"Love yer!" said Joe. "And you won't either. Look here, old pal, ain't you got any friends?"

"Yes."

"Ain't they got any tin?"

Tom Merry smiled; something like his old smile.

"Yes."

"Why don't you write to 'em, then, and ask for some?"

Tom Merry was silent. Joe, in his experience of life, had never come across anybody who would not take money whereever and whenever he could get it.

"P'r'aps you ain't got a stamp?" suggested Joe.

"No."

"Nor a penny to buy one?"

"No."

"Send the letter without one, then," said Joe. "They can pay twopence on it."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Why don't you do it?" argued Joe. "On'y look 'ere, if you get any money, don't you give mother none. It means a 'iding for me. I was beat fair blue over that bob you gave 'er last week."

"I'm sorry, Joe."

"Orl right, ole pal," said Joe. "But if you ain't got a job, and you won't ask your pals for the rhino, wot are you goin' to do?"

"I don't know."

"I do," said Joe.

"Yes—what?"

"Starve," said Joe laconically.

Tom Merry shivered a little.

"I hope it won't come to that, Joe," he said. "I'm going to have another try."

"Look 'ere," said Joe, lowering his voice. "Why don't you try the captain?"

"The captain?" said Tom Merry, puzzled.

"Yes; Captain Rake."

Tom Merry wrinkled his brows in thought. He had seen the man who was called the "captain" in that wretched building; a man who was sometimes flashily dressed, with gaudy rings on his fingers, sometimes in tatters, sometimes wildly intoxicated, and fighting with other ruffians in the court below. The captain had puzzled Tom Merry a great deal, and he repulsed the lad quite as much. There was something about him that raised Tom Merry's instant distrust.

He had shown some desire to make the lad's acquaintance; but the language Tom had heard him pouring forth in one of his drunken fits had been quite enough to choke off any chance of that.

Tom Merry had fallen into deep poverty, but there was a lower deep he would never fall into—blackguardism. No foul word was ever likely to pass Tom Merry's lips, nor was he likely to feel friendship for anyone whose language was not fit to hear.

And so he had avoided the flashy captain.

"What could Rake do for me, Joe?" he asked.

"Find you a job," said Joe.

"How so? He does not seem to have a job himself."

Joe grinned.

"You're green, old pal," he said. "But you sha'n't starve even if you are green. You come along o' me, and I'll show you to the captain."

"But——"

"Come along, ole pal; you ain't goin' to starve."

"But he may not want to see me."

"That's all right!"

"But——"

Joe dragged him by the arm, and Tom Merry went. After all, he was at the last ditch now—and if the captain could and would help him—at all events, he would see.

CHAPTER 4.
A Promise of Employment.

"'ERE 'e is!"

Joe pushed open a dirty door, which gave admittance into a dirty room. Misty daylight came faintly in through a dirty window, and mingled with the glimmer of a dirty lamp. A dirty man sprawled in a rickety chair, with an old coat round his shoulders, warming his feet at a fire, and sipping brandy-and-water.

He looked round as Joe opened the door.

"Keep that door shut!" he growled, adding an adjective that was not at all descriptive of the door.

Tom Merry drew back. But Joe marched him in.

"'Ere 'e is!" he announced.

Rake looked at Tom Merry dubiously, and finally gave him a nod.

"Sit down!" he said.

"'Ere's a chair!" said Joe, dragging one forward. "Mind, one leg's gammy!"

Tom Merry sat down, keeping in a sitting posture by a feat of balancing. The captain sipped, and kept his eyes upon Tom Merry the while.

"My ole pal wants a job, Mr. Rake," said Joe. "He's down on his uppers, he is. Ain't you, ole pal?"

"Yes," said Tom Merry.

"I can help you, if you like," said the captain lazily. "You can get out, Joe. Will you have a drink, youngster—what's your name?"

"Tom Merry!"

"Well, Tom Merry, so you want a job?"

"I've been trying to get work," said Tom Merry quietly. "I can't get it, and I won't ask help of my friends. If you could give me any information, or anything, to help me get work, I should be very much obliged."

"Won't you have a drink? It's a cold day."

"I don't drink, thank you!"

"A cigarette, then?"

"I don't smoke."

The captain sneered for a moment.

Tom Merry rose to his feet.

"Joe brought me here," he said. "I don't want to bother you. I have no right to ask favours of a stranger. Good-morning!"

"Hold on!" said Rake.

Tom Merry hesitated. After all, if the captain could somehow find him a chance of getting employment—— And it was certain that the captain had ways and means of raising money himself, for he was frequently in funds. It was true that drink and gambling soon reduced him to poverty again after he was in funds.

"Well?" said Tom Merry.

"Come back."

Tom Merry returned.

"I can help you, if I choose," said Rake. "You're down on your uppers—no work—no money—nothing between you and the Thames—eh?"

Tom Merry flushed.

"I should never come to that," he said. "I may starve."

"But you'd rather work."

"Of course."

"Anything, I suppose?"

"Anything, so long as it's honest."

The captain's eyes twinkled in a peculiar way.

"Honest?" he queried. "What do you call honest?"

Tom Merry's eyes widened.

"I don't quite understand you," he said. "But I suppose what I call honest is what everybody calls honest. I cannot do anything else; but, of course, you are not suggesting that I should."

"Of course not," said the captain, sipping his brandy and water. "Of course, I am a man of strict principles myself."

This was said in a tone that implied that Rake regarded the statement as something extremely good, and to be enjoyed. He chuckled over his glass.

"Now, look here," he went on, as Tom Merry drew back a pace. "Look here, my lad, you're a clever youngster, and you can think. Mind, I am only putting a case. Suppose the current ideas about honesty are a little rocky—suppose the good things of this world are not fairly divided; then wouldn't it be right, eh, for a fellow to help himself a little from those who can spare it?"

Tom Merry flushed.

"You're a sensible lad," urged the captain. "You know it isn't right for some to be so very rich and others so very poor."

"I suppose not," said Tom Merry. "But if you think it can be remedied by a poor man becoming a scoundrel as well as poor, you are quite mistaken. Anybody who steals is vile and base and cowardly, however great his need. I may starve, but I will cut off my hand before I will steal. I would not touch a thief with my hand. It would make me feel unclean!"

Tom Merry's voice rose, and his eyes flashed, as he spoke. There was no mistaking the lad's sentiments on that subject, at all events.

The captain looked at him with an amused smile.

"Burn my eyes!" he exclaimed. "One would think I was offering you a job as a pickpocket. Ha, ha ha!"

"Well, from what you said——"

"I was only testing you, my lad," said the captain, in a tone of great heartiness; "as a matter of fact, I can find an opening for a lad, but he must be strictly honest. Any lad who has the slightest taint of suspicion against his character would be of no use to me."

Tom Merry's face brightened up.

"I'm sorry!" he exclaimed impulsively.

The captain waved a dirty hand.

"Not at all!" he exclaimed. "I'm glad you answered up as you did; it shows me that you are the lad I want, one I can thoroughly rely upon."

"Then you can give me employment?"

"I can get it for you," said the captain. "I mean business." He thrust his hand into his trousers-pocket. "Look here, here's a half-crown in advance."

Tom Merry hesitated.

"I'd rather earn it first, sir," he said.

The captain grinned.

"Very well," he said. "I'll see that you do. You can come out with me now. Wait for me in the passage, and I'll join you as soon as I'm ready."

"Certainly. Thank you so much!"

"Not at all. It's a real pleasure to me to help a lad who has such strict principles, and is prepared to stick to them through thick and thin."

Tom Merry's face was much brighter as he waited in the hall outside. The wind blew cold and keen in at the open doorway, and the lad shivered there. But work was to be had—work at last—honest work. Poor Tom Merry! He had much to learn yet. Anyone in Blucher's Buildings could have told him the real character of Captain Rake; but Tom had little in common with the other occupants of the house, and had little to say to them, and never even thought of asking them for information.

Clump, clump, clump!

Tom Merry smiled as little Joe came clumping up in his heavy boots. The little lad's pinched and wan face was very eager.

"'E's took you on?" he asked.

"He is going to find me employment," said Tom Merry.

"A l," said Joe. "You mayn't like it at first—I know you're queer—but it's the only thing, ole pal. And you sha'n't starve."

"What do you mean, Joe?"

But Joe clumped off without vouchsafing any explanation, leaving Tom Merry considerably puzzled.

Captain Rake did not seem to be in a hurry to join his young protege. It was more than half an hour before he emerged from his room.

He had made a great change in his appearance in that time. He was shaven, and his clothes were brushed, and his face washed, and he looked much the better for it—but he was not likely ever to look respectable. He had a horsey, flashy appearance, which would have marked him down in his true character for anyone better acquainted than Tom Merry with the seamy side of the great metropolis.

He clapped Tom Merry on the shoulder.

"Ready, my lad?"

"Quite, sir," said Tom Merry brightly.

"We'll start, then. Sure you won't have something to drink first?"

"Quite sure, thank you!"

"It's a cold day, you know," urged the captain.

"That stuff does not make you warmer for long," said Tom Merry. "But, anyway, I don't want it, sir."

"Just as you like, my lad; I couldn't live without it," said Rake. "It's the staff of life, my boy."

Tom Merry thought it was much more like the road to death, but he did not say so. It was not for him to judge his elders. He followed the captain down the dirty, misty street, into one of the broad, echoing arteries of London's traffic, and in a few minutes they were in the midst of the crowd.

CHAPTER 5.

A Really Brilliant Idea.

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY polished his eyeglass with the corner of a cambric handkerchief. There was a wrinkle of thoughtfulness on the aristocratic brow of the swell of St. Jim's. He sat in the corner of the railway-carriage, with his silk topper safely deposited on the rack above him. Blake was sitting opposite to him, with the latest number of "The Boys' Herald" open in his hand.

"Blake, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus, at last.

Blake did not look up.

Arthur Augustus ceased polishing his eyeglass, and jammed it into his eye, and regarded Jack Blake through it.

The two Fourth-Formers of St. Jim's had the carriage to themselves. Blake was going down to Eastwood with D'Arcy for Christmas. Most of the other chums of St. Jim's were

to turn up there during the holidays, but at present they were off to their own homes. D'Arcy and Blake were going down to D'Arcy's home by themselves.

"Blake!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" shouted Blake.

"Weally, Blake- - -"

"Ha, ha ha!"

"I fail to see any cause for laughtah, Blake——"

"That's because you're not reading the story," said Blake.

"Oh, I see! If you are laughin' in that extwemely wude way at somethin' you are pewusin', I will ovahlook it."

"Go hon!"

"But pway pay me a little attention," said Arthur Augustus. "I have an ideah, Blake."

"Leave it till we get to Eastwood, Gussy."

"Weally, deah boy——"

"Cheese it, old son! Read the 'Times,'" said Blake. "I saw you bring a copy of the 'Times' into the carriage."

"Yaas, wathah, but I am not goin' to wead it. It looks vewy wespectable to twavel with the 'Times,' but weadin' it is quite anothah mattah," said Arthur Augustus. "I have an ideah, you know, about Tom Mewwy."

Blake laid down his paper.

"About Tom Merry?" he asked.

"If you are intewested——"

"Of course I'm interested, fathead," said Blake. "You haven't heard from Tom Merry?"

"Oh, no! I am thinkin' of doin' somethin' for him."

"What can you do?"

"The poor chap is down on his uppahs," said Arthur Augustus, looking quite distressed. "He has had to leave the coll., and look for work. Work is a howwid thing at any time, and to have to look for it is—well, it is weally like adding insult to injuwy. I have made up my mind that somethin' must be done for Tom Mewwy."

"I jolly well wish we could do something," said Blake, with a sigh.

"I have an ideah. I am goin' to use my influence with my governah——"

"But Tom Merry has already refused to let your governor do anything for him," said Blake, with a shake of the head.

"Yaas, but he would not wefuse an appointment if my governah obtained it for him, I suppose. Chaps always expect to get appointments by influence, you know."

"What sort of an appointment?"

"Undah Government!"

"Eh?"

"I suppose you know," went on D'Arcy, evidently very much taken up with his idea—"I suppose you know, deah boy, that if you get a Government appointment, you have a jolly good salawy, and pwactically nothin' to do. That is weally why Governments exist, I believe; for if there were no Government appointments, all the youngah sons of our class would have to work, which would be howwid. Now, why shouldn't Tom Mewwy have an appointment undah Government?"

Blake stared.

"No knowledge of anythin' is wequired," said Arthur Augustus. "You don't have to have any expewience or intelligence for a Government appointment, you know. You simply walk down to Whitehall at ten o'clock in the mornin', and leave at four in the aftahnoon, and have two hours of lunch out of that, and dwaw a jollay good salawy. I should think an appointment like that would suit Tom Mewwy down to the gwound."

"My hat!"

"Then he would be pwovided for," went on D'Arcy; "and the only difficulty of the posish would be that he would not be able to come back to St. Jim's. But I think that could be awwanged too."

"Oh, that could be arranged, could it?" said Blake.

"I wathah think so. You have heard of the cowwespondence ideah, of course?"

"The what?"

"The cowwespondence dodge."

"Correspondence?" said Blake, puzzled.

"Yaas. You teach a thing by cowwespondence, you see. Suppose you teach German, you get your pupils by post, and give the lessons by post, and weceive the cheques by post, and nevah see the pupils at all. That is what is called teachin' by cowwespondence. Well, why shouldn't a chap fill a Government appointment by cowwespondence?"

"What?"

"Suppose Tom Mewwy is appointed Third or Fourth Secretary to the Sealing-wax Department of the Wed-tape Office, or somethin' of that sort, I suppose he would have to answah a lettah now and then. Well, he could get one of the chaps to send the lettahs on to St. Jim's, and weply to them there. That's what I should wegard as a good ideah—holdin' an appointment by cowwespondence, you know."

Blake grinned.

"Well, I dare say a good many Government appointments could be filled just as well that way as any other," he remarked. "But I fancy Tom Merry is too young!"

"Oh, that's all wight! I wemembah hearin' my governah say that exceptions were sometimes made for exceptional ability. Now, you will admit that Tom Mewwy has exceptional ability—I mean, compared with a Cabinet Ministah, or any fellow of that sort."

"Ha ha! Yes, rather. But how are you going to get him the appointment?"

"My governah ought to be able to work it," said D'Arcy. "I shall make it a most particular wequest. In fact, I shall tell him that if he can get Tom Mewwy a Government appointment I will wegard it as a Chwistmas pwesent to myself."

"That's bound to do it, I suppose."

"I suppose so. I believe the governah has lots of influence in political mattahs," said Arthur Augustus. "I know some of my welations are always askin' him to get them appointments, and he has pwovided for a lot of them that way. Of course, he does that fwom public spiwit. The countwy is vewy fortunate to secure the services of a lot of chaps of weally good families, and they nevah do any mischief, you know; in fact they nevah do anythin' at all. It would be all wight for Tom Mewwy to get a Government appointment; and if he pweferred to work, he could always change latah on."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I fail to see any cause for wibald laughtah, Blake. Don't you think it would be a wippin' ideah?"

"Ripping! Gorgeous! I fancy I can see your governor's face when you ask him to use his influence to make Tom Merry First Commissioner of Works, or First Sea Lord!" chuckled Blake.

"Weally, Blake——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blake——"

Blake roared.

Arthur Augustus slipped his monocle into his pocket, and took off his gloves very carefully.

Blake watched these proceedings with interest.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"I am goin' to give you a feahful thwashin', deah boy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I wefuse to have my wippin' ideahs tweated in this wibald spiwit. Will you have the gweat kindness to put up your hands, deah boy?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, you know——"

Jack Blake rose to his feet, and jerked D'Arcy's silk topper from the rack. He held it out before him as a shield.

Arthur Augustus drew back in haste.

"Put that hat down, Blake!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You uttah wottah——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake, behind the safe shelter of the hat.

D'Arcy brandished his fists. But the topper was in danger, and he could not rush upon Blake without the risk—or, rather, the certainty, of spoiling it.

"You uttah ass!" he exclaimed. "I wegard this as not playin' the game, Blake."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake.

"You feahful outsidah——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus rushed forward, forgetful of the hat, hitting out. Crash, crash, went his fists in the topper, and it buckled and caved in at once.

"You—you feahful beast!" gasped D'Arcy.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Blake was laughing too much to defend himself. He went down under Arthur Augustus's fiery attack, and sat on the floor of the carriage, still laughing.

"Bai Jove! I'll——"

"Oh, Gussy!" gasped Blake. "Do you always treat your guests this way?"

D'Arcy jumped.

In the excitement of the moment he had forgotten that Blake was his guest; and certainly he had not been acting exactly like a host.

"Bai Jove, I nevah thought of that!" he exclaimed.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Blake, you are a most pwovokin' beast——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And I apologise most sincerely——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And I withdwaw that punch on the nose."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake.

He staggered to his feet, and sat down, still yelling. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy sniffed, and began to squeeze out his silk topper into what semblance he could of its former shape. But that topper was never likely to be the same hat again.

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CHAPTER 6.
The Pickpocket.

TOM MERRY walked with a lighter step as he accompanied the captain down the misty, crowded street. Tom Merry was hungry, and he was tired, but the thought of obtaining work at last cheered him on wonderfully.

As yet he knew nothing of what the captain intended for him, but he did not suspect that he was being deceived. Why should Rake deceive him? The man had nothing to gain by doing so—nothing that Tom Merry could see.

The captain was silent for some time. He looked at Tom Merry sideways several times, and always there was a peculiar gleam in his eyes.

Tom Merry ventured to ask a question at last.

"What kind of work am I to do, sir?" he queried.

"Well, let me see. I believe you've had a good education?" the captain said.

"I think so, sir."

"Can you translate French?"

"Oh, yes, easily!"

"Would you be willing to take on a post of translator, say, to an elderly gentleman?" asked the captain thoughtfully. "I could not obtain more than a pound a week for you at first, but the work would be light."

Tom Merry's eyes danced.

A pound a week!

He had tramped weary mile on mile after "jobs" that offered ten shillings a week and less. A pound a week—for work of an agreeable and refined nature—he could have hugged the gallant captain on the spot.

"Oh, sir!" he exclaimed.

"You'd like it?"

"Yes, rather! I don't know how to thank you!"

"Oh, not at all!" said Captain Rake airily. "I'm only too glad to help you. It's a thing I couldn't do myself, you see, but I can get you the job—and I will."

"Oh, thank you so much!"

The captain halted suddenly. He stooped, and rose with a little leather purse in his hand.

"Run after that gentleman!" he exclaimed. "He has dropped his purse."

Tom Merry lost no time. He dashed after a stout, elderly gentleman whom the captain pointed out to him, and the captain followed him more slowly.

"Excuse me, sir, youve dropped a purse!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Eh!" exclaimed the old gentleman. "What?"

"You've just dropped a purse, sir."

"Bless my soul!"

The captain came up with the purse in his hand. The old gentleman was unbuttoning his overcoat in a very fussy way, and feeling in his pockets. Captain Rake's foot slipped on the slippery pavement as he came up, and he lurched forward, and fell against the old gentleman, and threw his arms round him for support.

"Bless my soul!"

"Sorry, sir!" gasped Rake. "I slipped—here's your purse, sir—I saw it drop from your pocket, and sent my boy to call you back."

"Thank you very much!" exclaimed the old gentleman. He might not have been much impressed by Captain Rake, but Tom Merry's honest, frank, obliging face was a passport to his character. "Thank you—but—that is not my purse."

"Not your purse?"

"No. Dear me!" said the old gentleman, feeling in his pockets. "I have lost my purse, however—but that is not it."

"But this dropped from your pocket, sir," said Tom Merry.

"No; you must have been mistaken, my purse must be still there," said the old gentleman, hurrying back the way he had come.

Captain Rake looked very concerned.

"Somebody else must have lost a purse," he remarked. "I have picked up the wrong one, Tom. It's very odd. I will take this to the police-station. Come on!"

"Hadn't we better help him look for his purse?" asked Tom Merry.

"No; we'd better get on."

The mist of the street soon shut them out from the view of the old gentleman, who was peering about for his purse. Rake sauntered on with a careless air, but he seemed to be in no hurry to reach the police-station to give up the purse he had found, or to get to the place where Tom Merry was to be introduced to his employer.

As a matter of fact, the captain was beginning to puzzle Tom Merry a great deal.

He did not seem to be in a hurry to get anywhere, and the course he followed seemed more designed for covering as much ground as possible than for any other purpose.

But Tom Merry had learned to be patient.

The captain halted at the wide corner where Shaftesbury Avenue crosses Charing Cross Road. A number of people, as usual, were loitering outside the Palace, some of them reading the notice-boards of performances to be given that night.

Among the latter were three individuals who would have attracted a second glance anywhere.

One of them was a negro of splendid build, and the other two stalwart fellows with sun-tanned faces, showing, that they had spent a great deal of their time at sea and in tropical climes.

The coloured gentleman was reading a notice of a ventriloquial performer, who was to appear at the Palace that evening, and remarking upon it with interest, a broad grin upon his black countenance.

From where he stood, Tom Merry could hear what he said; indeed, there were few people up and down the pavement who could not hear the negro's powerful voice.

"Golly! Dat seems like old times, Jack!" the negro remarked to the younger of his two companions. "I tink we will go and see dat show to-night!"

Jack laughed.

"Just as you like," he said. "Though I don't suppose it will be anything like you could give, Pete."

"Oh, I gib in dere," said the negro. "Dere is only one Pete, and I'm dat nigger. Golly, we'd better be mobin', I tink; it's cold!"

"You would naturally find London cold in December, Pete," said the other of the party, laughing. "It's different from Darkest Africa."

"Bery different, Sammy. Come along."

The three moved off.

Captain Rake ran towards the spot where they had been standing, and stooped to the muddy pavement. He rose, and showed Tom Merry a gold cuff-link.

"One of those chaps dropped that," he exclaimed. "Did you see which one it was, Tom?"

Tom Merry looked puzzled.

"No," he said.

"Better run after them and tell them," said the captain.

Tom Merry hesitated a moment.

Why, he could hardly have told.

But he had been greatly struck by the kind good-nature in the face of the negro, and by the looks, too, of Pete's white companions. He ran after the trio, who were waiting at the edge of the pavement for a seemingly endless stream of taxi-cabs to pass to cross the road.

"Please stop a minute, sir," he exclaimed. "One of you has dropped a gold sleeve-link outside the Palace."

"Golly!" exclaimed Pete, turning his big, dark eyes upon Tom Merry. "Dat is bery obliging of you, my boy. Where is de link? Sammy, it is you who are scattering your wealth in dis way."

"I reckon not," said Sam.

"Den it is you, Jack."

"Not guilty," said Jack, laughing.

"Den it must be me," said Pete. "Here—— Hallo! Hold on, old hoss!"

Captain Rake bumped into him on the slippery pavement.

"Sorry, sir!" exclaimed the captain. "My foot slipped—quite an accident. Here is the gold link you dropped, sir."

"But I didn't drop it, old hoss," said Pete. "De missing link doesn't belong to me."

"My mistake," said the captain. "Sorry! It must have been that gentleman."

And he dashed away, pursuing an imaginary gentleman in the mist.

"Tank you bery much, all do same, my boy," said Pete.

"Not at all," said Tom Merry.

He was turning away to follow the captain when a grasp of iron was laid upon his shoulder.

"Hold on, sonny!" said Sam quietly.

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Tom Merry indignantly. "Let go my shoulder."

"I reckon not."

"Sammy, dat is bery impolite," said Pete. "I'm surprised at you, old hoss. Why don't you let de young gentleman alone?"

"See if your pocket's picked first, Pete."

"Eh?"

"Pocket!" howled Sam. "See if it's picked."

"Picked?"

"Yes, you duffer!"

"But how should my pocket be picked, Sammy?"

"By a pickpocket, chump!"

"Oh, Sammy!"

"Will you look?"

"What's de good ob looking, when I know it's all right?" demanded Pete. "I tink you hab gone off your rocker, old hoss."

"Is your watch safe?" demanded Sam.

"Yes, ob course—— Oh!"

"Well?" said Jack, with a grin, as Pete pulled an empty hand out of his watch-pocket. "Isn't it there?"

"Golly!"

"Is the watch there?" roared Sam.

"No!"

"I thought not," said Sam grimly, and his hand tightened upon Tom Merry. "Your pocket's been picked, and I've got hold of the thief."

CHAPTER 7.

Pete Knows.

TOM MERRY gave a low, hoarse cry. He realised it all now, and he realised too clearly how blackly suspicion must fall upon himself.

He realised that he had been used as a tool by the pickpocket, for that Captain Rake was a pickpocket he could have no doubt.

The earlier incident of the old gentleman whose purse Rake had pretended to find was exactly on a par with this.

Tom Merry's innocent face and evident honesty were of great use to the thief, and he was of use, too, to hold the victim in talk and give Rake an opportunity and an excuse for bumping into him and relieving him of his watch or purse in the same moment.

Rake was gone now.

Tom Merry was left to bear the brunt of the rascal's guilt.

The boy was almost sick with horror.

Sam's grasp was firm upon his shoulder, and he could not have escaped if he had wanted to, but he did not even think of it. To prove his innocence—to clear his character in the eyes of these three men—that was all he thought of. And although Sam's grasp was like iron, his face was not hard. He believed Tom Merry to be a thief, but he pitied the lad's youth and evident shame.

"Golly!" said Pete, with a look of great distress upon his black face.

"You'll get the watch back all right," said Sam. "Come back here out of the way, and we can make him give it up. I suppose you don't want the young rascal to be arrested?"

"Neber."

"I—I am not a thief!" panted Tom Merry. "I—I did not take your watch. You can search my pockets if you like."

"I reckon your partner took it, then," Sam remarked drily.

"He is nothing to me; I don't know him."

"You were with him."

"He promised to get me a situation," said Tom miserably. "I—I suppose you won't believe me. Heaven knows, I never would be a thief—I'd die a thousand times first!"

The negro nodded.

"Dat is right, my boy," he said. "Stick to dat."

"I reckon he hasn't stuck to it."

"Wrong, Sammy."

"What do you mean, Pete?"

"Dat boy ain't a thief," said Pete, with a shake of his woolly head. "Thieves don't speak and look like dat, Sammy. When you'm as old and unexperienced as I am——"

"Ha, ha!" roared Jack. "I suppose you mean experienced?"

"I don't see dat it makes any difference, Jack, but hab it as you like. When Sammy hab reached dat state he will be able to tell a thief when he sees him. If my dog Rory were here he would be able to tell at once. Dat boy is all right."

"Well, I reckon I hope so," said Sam doubtfully. "I wouldn't be hard on him, anyway. But a thief's a thief, and ought to be punished."

"Dat is right, Sammy, but a person who ain't a thief ain't a thief, and ought not to be punished."

"Right!" grinned Jack. "I'm rather inclined to side with Pete, Sam. The boy doesn't look like a thief."

"I reckon I'd think the same from his looks," said Sam; "but if he isn't a thief what was he doing with one?"

"I've explained that," said Tom Merry. "I'm looking for work, and he offered to help me get a job."

"And you didn't know he was a thief?"

"No."

"Nor suspected it?"

"Certainly not."

"It's a tall story, I guess, but I'm rather inclined to believe you, youngster," said Sam. "I should advise you to be a little more careful in the company you keep, that's all."

"I shall be more careful," said Tom Merry.

"And your watch is gone, Pete. Anything else?"

"Only my purse, old hoss."

"Anything in it?"

"Nothing but my money," said Pete.

"You chump!" exclaimed Sam. "Did you think I was asking you if your Sunday trousers were in it?"

"Don't get excited, Sammy. The money doesn't matter, as I can borrow of you two," said Pete cheerfully. "But about dis boy——"

"I reckon he can go."

"I reckon not, Sammy."

"Look here——"

"Don't argue, Sammy. You know I'm always in de right."

Tom Merry's lip trembled.

If he once got out of that terrible scrape he resolved that he would be more careful, and his heart was warming towards the big negro for his kindness.

But Pete's declaration that he could not go struck a chill to him again.

"Oh, sir," exclaimed Tom Merry, "if you will let me go I will be more careful, and you have said that you believe me."

"I beliebe you, my boy."

"Then why can't he go, you old image?" demanded Sam.

"Because he's hungry," said Pete. "Hasn't he said already dat he's looking for a job? I'm goin' to find him a job—eating a good dinner."

Tom Merry flushed scarlet.

"Oh, sir——"

"You leabe it to me, my boy."

"But I cannot——"

"Eh? You cannot what?"

"I cannot accept charity from you, sir," said Tom Merry, with scarlet cheeks and a firm voice. "I'm not a beggar, sir."

"Who's talkin' about charity?" demanded Pete angrily. "Sammy, were you talking to the young gentleman about charity?"

"No, old chump!"

"Were you, Jack?"

"You know I wasn't, Pete."

"And," said Pete, "I wasn't eider. You'm on de wrong hoss, my boy. Nobody was talking to you about charity, and you'm been misjudging these respectable young men. I am going to stand you a good dinner, but dat is a different matter."

"But——"

"Dis way," said Pete, putting his hand through Tom Merry's arm. "Look here, have you had your dinner?"

"No."

"Hab you had any brekker?"

Tom Merry was silent

"Are you hungry?"

"Ye-es."

"Dere, I knew it!" exclaimed Pete, triumphantly. "Come along! Sammy, you know where dere is a really first-chop, first-class, bang and slap-up grub department?"

"I reckon not," said Sam.

"Jack, I call upon you to be de guide. You'm de chap dat knows London."

"Right!" said Jack, laughing. "Follow me."

"Come on, boy. What's your name?"

"Tom Merry."

"I like dat name. So you'm looking for work?" said Pete, as he followed Jack and Sam, still retaining a hold upon Tom Merry's arm.

"Yes, sir," said Tom Merry.

"Dat ain't my name," said Pete. "My name's Pete.'

"Yes, sir."

"You can call me Pete; it comes more natural, I tink."

"Yes, Pete," said Tom Merry, smiling.

"What sort of work was it dat bad man promised you, Tom?" asked Pete.

"French translations, sir."

"Pete!"

"Sorry, sir—I meant Pete."

"French translations," said Pete, rubbing his nose thoughtfully. "Sam!"

"Hallo!"

"Hab you any French translations dat must be done in a hurry?"

"No, you duffer!" said Sam, laughing. "I reckon not."

"Hab you, Jack?"

"No, Pete."

"I habn't any, eider," said Pete musingly. "Can you do anyting else, as well as French translations, Tom?"

Tom Merry laughed.

"Yes, sir—Pete——"

"Not Sir Pete," said Pete seriously—"just plain Pete; bery plain, some folks tink. I ain't a knight, or a barrow-night yet, am I, Sammy?"

"I reckon not."

"P'r'aps you can do some American translashums?" exclaimed Pete, as if struck by a sudden brilliant idea.

"What's that?" growled Sam, turning round.

"I am tinkin' ob gettin' some American translashums done, Sammy," said Pete firmly. "I want some books translated out ob de American language into de English language, and I tink dis young gentleman can do de work."

"Ass!"

"Now, look here, old hoss——"

"But the American language is English!" howled Sam.

Pete rubbed his nose.

"Golly! Fancy me not tinking ob dat! P'r'aps you can do some—some Australian translations, Tom?"

"From English to English?" said Tom Merry, smiling.

"Well, dat would make it all de easier, wouldn't it?"

"Here's the place!" exclaimed Jack.

"Good! I am gettin' bery hungry myself. Come in, Tom!"

And Tom Merry followed Pete into a restaurant.

CHAPTER 8.

Friends in Need.

TOM MERRY wondered whether he was dreaming when he found himself sitting at a table, with a spotless serviette over his knees, and a good dinner before him, and three cheerful faces turned towards him. The meeting with Jack, Sam and Pete seemed like a dream. Three kind faces, and the kindest and jolliest of them all the black visage of the big negro, with its flashing white teeth and big, dark, tender eyes. Tom Merry had not realised how hungry he was till he saw the food before him and its scent greeted his nostrils. It was as great a change after Blucher's Buildings as Blucher's Buildings had been after St. Jim's.

Pete beamed upon his youthful protege.

Pete enjoyed a good meal himself, and, just as much, he enjoyed seeing another fellow enjoy one. And to help the poor or downcast, to assist a lame dog over a stile, that was always a pleasure to Pete, whose big heart matched his big body. Tom Merry, though he tried not to show any great keenness, could not help letting it be seen how hungry he was. As a matter of fact, he was almost famished. Where would he have dined that day had he not met Jack, Sam and Pete? Nowhere, in all probability.

Pete gave his orders with great significance, apparently oblivious of the fact that he had lost his purse, and had no money about him. But doubtless one of his friends was prepared to settle the bill, which was certain to be a large one.

Pete had a gigantic appetite, and he made Tom Merry eat as if the lad were endowed with a similar one.

If Tom had eaten a quarter of what his kind host pressed upon him, he would certainly have been ill.

As it was, he ate well and heartily, and, with the good food inside him, he found his courage and his spirits slowly but surely return.

Pete, with a delicacy that one would have hardly expected of so big and powerful a fellow, asked Tom Merry questions about himself.

His intention was so evidently kind that Tom Merry never thought of concealing anything, and he told his story simply. After the view the three comrades had taken of the affair outside the Palace, too, he felt that they were entitled to know all about him.

"I reckon you've had bad luck," Sam remarked.

"Golly, it's too bad!" said Pete, whose eyes were moist. "Look here, Sam, can't you tink ob anyting for our young friend to do?"

"I reckon I'll try," said Sam.

"And meanwhile," said Jack, "you must allow us to look after you a little, Tom."

"Thank you!" said Tom Merry.

"I tink I can easily find some translashums to do," said Pete, with a sage nod of his head. "I tink dat will be all serene, old hoss."

Tom Merry's lip quivered.

He could see that the three kind comrades were thinking of helping him, and he knew, too, that they, birds of passage in London as they were, could not find him any employment, and that their help would only be some form of charity, skilfully disguised to save his feelings.

And grateful as he was, Tom Merry did not mean to accept it.

He meant to fight for himself, and although he might not refuse a helping hand, charity in any form he would never touch.

The dinner was finished at last.

"Do you smoke, Tom?" Pete inquired, as he pulled out a pipe.

"No, sir."

"Pete."

"I mean Pete."

"Good! Bery good!" said Pete, with an approving nod. "Don't you do it. It's a bery bad habit to get into, 'specially cigarettes. Wait till you're my age, Tommy, and den smoke a pipe. Where's my matches?"

"I reckon you've lost 'em," said Sam.

"Golly! Where are yours, den?"

"You borrowed 'em this morning."

"Where are your matches, Jack?"

"I lent them to you last night."

"Golly! I say, waiter—waiter, old hoss!"

The waiter came up, and many a head was turned round in the restaurant as Pete hailed him in stentorian tones, more suitable to the deck of a ship in a hurricane than to the place where Pete now found himself.

"Yessir."

"It's all serene," said Pete, pulling out a matchbox and striking a match. "I tought I had lost my matches, but I hadn't, so I don't want any."

The waiter gave him a very peculiar look, and retired.

Pete smoked in contentment.

"I tink dat we will pay a visit to Blusher's Buildings dat our young friend has told us about," he remarked. "If dat rascal hab gone back dere I should like to gib him a frashin'. And dere's dat boy Joe—I must do someting for him."

"Oh, all right!" said Jack, who knew that there never was any chance of turning Pete from a purpose he had formed. "Let's be off!"

"Waiter!" roared Pete.

The man came up.

"Yes, sir?"

"Gib me my bill, please."

"Yes, sir. There you are, sir."

"Only two pounds free shillings," said Pete, glancing at it. "Sure you habn't made a mistake, waiter?"

"Certainly not, sir."

"Den it is bery cheap," said Pete. "Look here, I suppose you don't mind if I send you dis money later?"

"Eh?"

"I hab had my pocket picked," explained Pete.

"Sir!"

"It's all right," interposed Jack, before the waiter could explode. "Hand me the bill, waiter. My friend has had his pocket picked, but I will settle the bill."

"Yes, sir."

"Really, Jack, I am sure de waiter would not hab de slightest objection to leabin' it ober for two-free days?"

Jack laughed, and paid the bill, with so considerable a douceur that the waiter brightened up wonderfully.

"Come on, den," said Pete. "You'm de guide, Tom."

"Yes, Pete."

Tom Merry led the way through the misty streets, in which the early winter dusk was falling thickly.

Pete's jolly face grew graver and graver as they turned out of the lighted streets into poorer quarters, where gloom and damp, and cold and fog reigned. His kind eyes were shadowed as he saw thin, gaunt faces—thin hands—stretched out for charity. He felt in his huge pockets for money, but he had none, and he borrowed nearly all that Jack and Sam had, and it was all distributed before Blucher's Buildings were reached.

To the inhabitants of that delectable mansion the sight of the three comrades was as novel and interesting as that of a fire-engine.

A crowd gathered round to watch them.

A very brief inquiry elicited the fact that nothing had been seen of "Captain" Rake, and, indeed, the gallant captain was not likely to return there, and place it in Tom Merry's power to denounce him to the police.

Little Joe came clumping up on his big boots to meet his friend. He glanced in a startled way at Jack, Sam and Pete.

"Wot luck, old pal?" he whispered.

"None," said Tom Merry, looking steadily at the urchin of the gutter. "That man Rake was a thief, Joe. Did you know it?"

Joe sniggered.

"You 'ad to do something, ole pal," he said.

"You knew he was a thief, and you let me go with him, Joe?" said Tom Merry, reproachfully.

"You was bound to come to it sooner or later, old pal. No good starvin' first," said Joe, with a grin.

"I shall never come to it, Joe, but I don't reproach you. I suppose you meant to help me, in your way," said Tom Merry, with a sigh.

"I just did, ole pal."

"Golly!" said Pete. "Dat is a bery bad way ob helping anybody! I am goin' to help you, Joe, but in a very different way. Lend me some money, Sam."

"I reckon you've nearly had the lot," said Sam. "Here's the rest."

"Tanks, old hoss."

"I say, don't you go givin' no money to mother!" exclaimed Joe, in great alarm.

"Why not?" demanded Pete.

"'Cause she'll get squiffy and lam me," said Joe promptly. "She 'arf-killed me the last time she was squiffy, all over Master Merry giving 'er something."

"Golly!"

"What can we do to help you, then?" asked Jack, in a low voice.

Joe cocked his eye thoughtfully at the sun-tanned young man.

"Gimme 'arf-a-crown," he said.

Jack handed him the coin, and Joe rushed out into the court with a whoop. In a moment he had a crowd of equally ragged and dirty little urchins round him, and was hurrying off to spend the precious coin—a mine of wealth to him.

Jack, with a saddened face, tapped Tom Merry on the shoulder.

"You have a better chance of getting out of this than that lad has," he said. "We must do something for you, Tom Merry."

"If you can give me work, sir, I shall be grateful," said Tom Merry. "But real work—not charity. I've got nothing but my self-respect left, and I don't want to lose that."

"Golly! Dat is all right, Tom, but—but you must live!"

"I shall find work, Pete."

"You will take dis sobereign to go on wid," said Pete. "Take it as a Christmas present from Pete, Tom."

Tom Merry hesitated, but he could not refuse the man who had been so kind to him. He took the sovereign.

"Thank you, from my heart!" he said.

"Dat is all right. I shall look into de matter of finding some employment for you, Tom, and let you know."

"Thank you, sir!"

And the three comrades shook hands heartily with Tom Merry, and left him. Tom Merry looked after them down the misty street with tears in his eyes.

"Heaven bless them," he muttered, "and Heaven bless Pete most of all!"

And in the dark days that followed, it was like a gleam of sunlight to Tom Merry to think of the kindness of the three comrades, and he seemed to draw comfort from the remembrance of the kind voice and the friendly face of Pete.

CHAPTER 9.
To Look for Tom Merry.

"WOTTEN!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy made that observation. He flung himself down in an armchair in an apartment at Eastwood House before a big, blazing fire.

Jack Blake was seated at the table, playing chess with Monty Lowther. Manners was roasting chestnuts at the fire. The two Shell fellows had come down to Eastwood together to spend Christmas with D'Arcy. They had brought many of their St. Jim's habits with them to the stately home of Lord Eastwood.

"Wotten!" repeated D'Arcy.

"Hallo!" said Blake. "What's the trouble? His lordship been cutting up rough?"

D'Arcy sniffed.

"I am sowwy to have to say it, deah boy, but my governah has wefused to play the game."

"Off with his head!" said Monty Lowther.

"Pway be sewious, Lowthah!"

"What has he done?" asked Manners. "Stopped the flow of fivers, on account of the Budget?"

"Worse than that."

"Is he limiting you to fifteen silk hats a term?"

"Pway don't be an ass!"

"Has he barred monocles in any place within the meaning of the Act?"

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"Has he given Wally permission to bring Pongo indoors?"

"It is worse than that, deah boy. He has wefused to co-opewate in my wippin' scheme for settin' Tom Mewwy on his feet."

"But what do you want to set Tom Merry on your father's feet for?" asked Monty Lowther innocently.

"Weally, Lowthah, I don't mean anythin' of the sort, and I believe you are wottin'. I mean settin' Tom Mewwy on his own feet."

"Oh, I see! And what was the scheme?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake. "Was it the Government appointment wheeze?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I fail to see any weason for this diswespectful mewwiment, Blake. I have suggested to my governah gettin' Tom Mewwy appointed to some secwetawy's post undah Government, with a big salary and nothin' to do, you know. It would suit Tom Mewwy's posish. admiwably. But the governah says it's imposs."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Pway cease that howwid cacklin' Blake! I have been urgin' the governah, but he has done nothin' but laugh. I wegard it as wotten."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Somethin' else will have to be done for Tom Mewwy," said D'Arcy. "Look here, you chaps, we've got to find him."

"Find him?" said Lowther.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"That would be rather difficult," Blake remarked, becoming grave again. "He's in London, and we're in the country."

"We can go to London."

"My hat!"

"I've been thinkin' of it," said Arthur Augustus firmly. "Look here, Tom Mewwy has w'itten only once since he left St. Jim's, hasn't he?"

"Yes."

"Since then we've heard nothin' fwom him?"

"Not a word."

"He hasn't even given us his address in London."

"No."

"He thought he had a chance of employment when he went up to London, and he was goin' to let us know if it turned out all wight. As he hasn't let us know, I pwesume it has turned out all w'ong."

"Most likely."

"Then the poor chap is there on his uppahs, without any work and without any money," said Arthur Augustus. "Look here, it won't do."

The chums looked grim enough.

As a matter of fact, the doubt as to the fate of Tom Merry was weighing upon their spirits and shadowing their Christmas holiday

The little party at Eastwood House would have been very different if Tom Merry had been there. Where was Tom Merry?

The chums of St. Jim's shuddered at the thought that he might be in some dark den in London, perishing, perhaps, from want of food.

It was a terrible thought, and only too possible.

"We simply can't stand it," said D'Arcy. "I suggest goin' and lookin' for Tom Mewwy, and bwingin' him back here, whethah he likes it or not."

Monty Lowther nodded.

"I'm on, for one," he said.

"What-ho!" exclaimed Manners.

"Of course, it's a good idea," said Blake. "Blessed if I know how Gussy came by such a good idea."

"Weally, Blake——"

"Any of the other fellows coming?"

"Yaas, I will wire to Hewwies. I know he can come. Dig is with his people, and can't leave them for Chwistmas. Figgins and Kerr are in Wales with Fatty Wynn, and they won't be able to come. But five of us will be enough to look for Tom Mewwy."

"Good! Then send the wire to Herries, and we'll go at once. We might as well leave first thing in the morning—Christmas Eve," said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I suppose your governor will approve?"

"He has alweady given his permish. I explained to him that I should look aftah you fellows and see that you did not get into any mischief."

"Rats!"

"Weally, Blake——"

"Oh, buzz off and send the telegram to Herries, and let's see if he can come," said Blake.

"Vewy well."

And the telegram was sent.

The chums of St. Jim's made their preparation for going up to London on the following morning.

Arthur Augustus was gently dissuaded from taking a cabin trunk and a hat-box, and to satisfy himself with a gladstone bag.

That he consented to do, on condition that he was allowed to place the overflow of shirts and collars in Blake's bag.

"Shove 'em in, my son," said Blake generously.

Arthur Augustus shoved them in.

As soon as his back was turned, Blake shoved them out again—out of sight under the elegant junior's bed.

D'Arcy, in blissful ignorance of the fact that the greater part of his spotless linen was reposing under his bed, finished packing his bag carefully.

He had finished by the time the answer to his telegram was brought.

He opened it.

He gave a little grunt as he read the answer, and the juniors looked at him.

"Can't he come?" asked Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"It's all right, then?"

"Yaas, it's all wight."

"What are you grunting about, then?" demanded Monty Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah, I was not aware that I was gruntin'."

"Let's see the telegram."

D'Arcy held it up for the chums to see. Then the cause of his grunt was apparent. The message over the wires ran as follows:

"All serene. Coming to-night. Will bring Towser. He'll be useful. HERRIES."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake. "He's going to bring Towser."

"Bai Jove!"

"Ha, ha! You might have expected it."

"Yaas, but——"

"Herries thinks that Towser will be useful in tracking down Tom Merry," grinned Manners. "You should have warned him off."

"Pewwaps he may forget to bwing Towsah," said D'Arcy.

"Ha, ha! That's not likely."

"It's weally howwid! That wotten bulldog has no wespect whatevah for a fellow's twousahs, you know."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I do not wegard it as a laughin' mattah."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally Blake——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, wats!"

And a couple of hours later Herries arrived—with Towser.

CHAPTER 10.

Moved On.

TOM MERRY had reason to be glad that he had accepted the sovereign that Pete had so kindly insisted upon his taking.

It was all that stood between the boy and starvation during the following days.

In the grim, grey streets of London the hero of St. Jim's tramped to and fro in search of work. But work was not to be found. An odd job here and there, that meant a shilling or two; that was all.

In the hurrying Christmas crowds there were many like Tom Merry, in search of jobs, in search of food, and finding none.

He was only a unit amid the many thousands.

Many a night he crept home hungry to bed. Many a grim winter morning he started out to look for work with an empty stomach to begin the day upon.

He had said farewell to Blucher's Buildings now. He could not afford even the miserable room there. And he was afraid that Pete or his friends might look for him there. Tom Merry had nothing left now but his pride; but, as is not uncommon in such a case, that was growing more dominant, almost touchy. He was penniless, shabby, well-nigh hopeless; but his cheeks were ready to flame, and his eyes to flash at the thought of being considered a beggar.

Better anything than that!

Often in these dark days he thought of his friends—how gladly they would have helped him!—of the chums of St. Jim's, who would have shared their last crust with him.

But he did not write.

If he could not pull ahead by himself, he would not become a burden on his friends. He was long past the thought of picking and choosing his employment. He would take anything that offered food and shelter. But nothing offered.

What did the future hold for him?

He could not think of it. And he was growing dulled with want and suffering, and could not think clearly now. He was falling into the fatal way of the poor, of thinking only of the passing day and never looking before or after.

Christmas Eve!

Tom Merry thought of the day, and all that it implied, as he moved with the busy crowd through the foggy, slushy streets.

Many a Christmas Eve could he remember in his young life; but nothing like this!

He remembered the old house at Huckleberry Heath, the rooms decorated with holly, the happy faces and bright laughter, the smoking Christmas pudding—all the old associations of Christmas-time—his chums, his old governess, and Cousin Ethel.

The grim, grey streets, the unthinking, hurrying crowds, the lowering sky, and hideous buildings—they seemed like the phantoms of a horrible dream, as he thought of the past.

But they were real enough.

It was no dream—it was all real, and what was now real to him, had been real enough to many a thousand hapless lads while he was in comfort and contentment.

What was this boasted civilisation, where a human creature could sink down for want of food in the midst of a crowd—wherein did it excel the barbarism of the Kaffir or the Australian aborigine?

Tom Merry stood at a street corner, shivering in the cold wind, his shabby clothes an ill-protection to his shivering limbs, his cheeks pale, his nose red—an unpicturesque figure of want and pain.

Where was he to go now?

Where?

A hand fell upon his shoulder. He started, and turned round, and looked into the stolid face of a policeman—a not unkindly face.

"Yes?" he said inquiringly.

"Move on!" said the constable.

"What?"

"Move on!"

"Move on!" repeated Tom Merry dazedly. "I am doing no harm."

His eyes burned, and then filled with tears. Move on—move on! It was brought home to him, with the clearness of a knife-cut, that he had fallen into the class that is "moved on" by the police.

He looked shabby enough, and thin enough, and starved enough, to steal, perhaps; in any case, he was a member of the submerged classes now, and he had to "move on."

The policeman tapped him on the shoulder again.

"Come, my lad," he said, "you can't stay here. You must move on."

"Where?" said Tom Merry unconsciously.

The constable looked at him, and then his big gloved hand touched Tom Merry's, and there was a glisten of a sixpence in it.

"Take it," he said quickly, "and go! Move on there!"

And he repeated "Move on!" in a loud and ferocious voice, as if afraid that someone might have observed his act of kindness.

"Thank you!" said Tom Merry.

He could not refuse the man's kindness. But, hungry as he was, he could not use that sixpence. He passed an old woman selling matches, and dropped it into her lap. The old woman stared at him; surprised that one evidently in greater want than herself should give her so much.

"Heaven bless yer!" she said.

Tom Merry moved on.

He had nowhere to go—nothing to do. In the busiest city in the world, his hands were idle. In the richest city in the world, he was starving. But it was against the law to stand still; he had nowhere to go, but he must move on. for the wisdom of the lords of the earth extends so far and no farther—they will provide nothing for the vagrant to do, they will give him no chance to earn his bread with honest labour, but they will see that he "moves on." So long as he keeps in motion, apparently, all is deemed to be well, and everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.

So Tom Merry, with aching limbs and aching heart, moved on.

CHAPTER 11.

Off to London.

"TIME!"

"Eh?"

"Time!"

"Weally, Blake——"

"Time!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy sat up in bed, and rubbed his eyes, and groped for his eyeglass. He jammed it into his eye, and stared at Jack Blake through it.

"What do you mean by wepeatin' that widiculous word in that widiculous mannah, Blake?" he demanded.

"It's time to get up."

"Oh, I see!"

"Up you get! Do you want to lose the train?"

"Certainly not, deah boy."

"Then get up!" roared Blake. "By Jove, I'll swamp you with water if you don't turn out of bed!"

"I should uttahly wefuse to be swamped with watah—— Oh, stop it, you ass! I am gettin' up!"

"Buck up, then!"

Arthur Augustus turned out. He wrung the cold water from his pyjama-jacket, and stared at Blake with a desolating glance.

"You uttah ass——"

"What?"

"You fwabjous duffah——"

Blake brandished the sponge, and D'Arcy dodged round the bed.

"Hold on, you uttah ass, I will dwess!"

"Buck up, then. I'm not going to have this expedition mucked up because you're a slow ass," said Blake severely. "Buzz!"

"Weally, Blake!"

"Buck up, Lowther! Get a move on, Manners!"

"Oh, rats!"

"The train goes at nine, and it's past eight, and we've got to get breakfast and get to the station. Herries has gone for Towser."

Herries was already down. He had arrived the previous night, bringing the famous bulldog.

Arthur Augustus, being host at Eastwood House, put on a smile of forced politeness to greet Herries and his bulldog. He could not say what he thought of Towser, while Towser's master was his guest.

But he thought the more.

Herries was very enthusiastic about the search for Tom Merry. He pointed out very keenly to the other fellows what a splendid acquisition Towser would be in the search. The other fellows snorted.

The chums hurried down, and found breakfast ready, and a good many of the Eastwood House guests at table, and Herries with them. Lord Eastwood greeted his youthful guests in his kindly and somewhat stately way.

"Arthur has told me where you intend to go to-day, and I wish you every success," he said. "I shall be only too glad to see Tom Merry if you succeed in bringing him home. But mind you do not get into trouble in London."

"Oh, that's all wight!" said D'Arcy. "I am goin' to look aftah them, you know."

Lord Eastwood smiled.

"And who is going to look after you, Arthur?"

"Oh, weally, dad——"

"I'm sorry I can't come," said Wally, from the other side of the table. "But, look here, if you chaps don't find Tom Merry, I'll run up to town with Jameson to-morrow morning, and find him for you."

"Weally, Wally!"

"It's a go!" said Wally. "Pass the toast, Gussy!"

After breakfast the chums walked to the station. A single gladstone-bag contained their belongings, D'Arcy's bag having been left behind. The swell of St. Jim's was halfway to the station before he discovered that he was carrying the wrong bag.

"Bai Jove!" he exclaimed. "This is your bag, Blake."

"Is it really?" exclaimed Blake, with an air of the greatest astonishment.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Never mind; I've no conscientious objection to your carrying it."

"That's all wight; so long as you have mine."

"Eh?"

"I say it's all wight so long as you have mine.'

"Oh, I see!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"Buck up!" exclaimed Herries.

"What for, Hewwies? We are in good time for the twain!"

"Yes; but Towser would like to run."

"Weally, Hewwies—— But, bai Jove! You are not cawwyin' a bag, Blake!"

"Great Scott!"

"My bag has been left behind."

"My word!"

"This is wotten! I must go back for it," said Arthur Augustus.

He dropped Blake's bag into the road, and started back. Jack Blake caught him by the shoulder.

"Hold on, ass——"

"Weally, Blake——"

"You'll lose the train."

"I will huwwy!"

"Rats! The train goes in seven minutes, and it will take you that to get to Eastwood House, without getting to the station afterwards."

"I am afwaid it cannot be helped, Blake. I cannot go to London without even any pyjamas, in case we have to stay the night."

"I'll lend you some."

"Yaas, but your pyjamas are such a howwid inartistic colour, Blake; besides, there are othah things."

"Oh, all right—you can lose the train, and we'll go on without you," said Blake resignedly. "Come on, you chaps."

"I wefuse to lose the twain."

"Come on, kids!"

"We will go by a latah twain——"

"Rats!"

"Weally, Blake——"

"Bosh!"

"I wefuse to have my wemarks chawactewised as bosh. I insist upon your withdwawin' that expwession, Blake!"

"Poof!"

"I decline to——"

Blake seized the gladstone-bag and rushed on. The other fellows followed him. Arthur Augustus hesitated a few moments, and then hurried after them.

"Upon the whole, deah boys, I will come with you now!" he exclaimed. "But it is wotten to leave my bag behind."

"Rats!"

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"Buck up!" exclaimed Herries.

"I wegard it as wotten of you to have forgotten my bag, Blake."

"I!" exclaimed Blake, in astonishment. "I forgot your bag!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"But I didn't!"

"But you left it behind."

"Yes, but you can leave a thing behind without forgetting it," said Blake cheerfully.

"Weally, Blake——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I twust, Blake, that you did not leave my bag behind delibewately, and with malice aforethought!" exclaimed D'Arcy.

"Rats!"

"I should wegard it as a wotten act——"

"Here comes the train."

The juniors broke into a run. And a few moments later Arthur Augustus forgot all about the bag that had been left behind, in insisting that Towser should not occupy a seat in the carriage.

And so, through the grey misty morning of Christmas Eve, the juniors of St. Jim's started off for London to search for Tom Merry.

CHAPTER 12.
In Search of Tom Merry.

"Bai Jove!"

"What's the matter?"

"It's foggay, deah boys."

"Go hon!" said Blake, as he stepped out of the railway train at the London terminus. "You surprise me!"

"Weally, Blake——"

"It's jolly foggy, and no mistake," said Herries anxiously. "I hope this won't be bad for Towser's chest."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, blow Towsah!" said D'Arcy. "I was only wondewin' how we are to find Tom Mewwy in this fog."

"Well, I don't suppose we shall run against him at the first street corner, anyway," Monty Lowther remarked. "London is bigger than the quadrangle at St. Jim's."

"Yaas, wathah! As a mattah of fact, deah boys, we have entahed on a big task," said the swell of St. Jim's thoughtfully. "We ought weally to have taken a more business-like step, such as puttin' an advertisement in the 'Evenin' News.'"

"This way!" said Blake. "Did you say you wanted to carry this bag, Gussy?"

"No, Blake; I did not say anythin' of the sort."

"Are you going to carry it, Manners?"

"Not much."

"Well, we can leave it at the cloak-room," Blake remarked. "This way! Take care of that beastly dog, Herries. They ain't allowed a free bite now."

"Towser won't bite anybody, unless they look at him."

"Weally, Hewwies——"

"This way!"

The juniors of St. Jim's left the station.

When they stood outside, in the deep London mist, the hopelessness of the task they had entered upon occurred to them.

To search for anybody in London was like looking for the

proverbial needle in the haystack; and such a search was likely to be as successful as the one the juniors had entered upon.

They stood and consulted on the slushy pavement.

"Anybody got a suggestion to make?" asked Blake.

"Blessed if I have," said Manners.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Oh you have, have you, Gussy?"

"Yaas. Let's take a taxi."

"What?"

"Let's take a taxi-cab."

"Why?"

"Well, it will be less exertion than walkin', you know, and we may as well save up our stwength."

"Ass!"

"Weally, Blake——"

"Come on," said Blake, "we'll make a start. Let's trot along the streets and have a look round."

And that the juniors did.

Arthur Augustus kept his monocle jammed into his eye, and he peered into face after face, in the hope of recognising Tom Merry among the passing throngs.

Needless to say, this method did not succeed.

The juniors spent some hours in walking about, till they were tired and very hungry, and then Blake proposed an adjournment for lunch.

This motion was seconded and passed unanimously, and they entered a restaurant for a meal, and ate it with a good appetite.

Over the lunch they discussed the programme.

How to find Tom Merry was a puzzle; but upon one point the juniors were determined; they wouldn't give in till they had found him.

They did not know his address in London, and had no idea even in what quarter of the city to look for him.

Herries depended very much upon Towser's instinct; but if Towser had possessed the gift of scent of Sexton Blake's famous bloodhound, it was not clear how he was to track down Tom Merry in the vast extent of London.

Herries, it is true, had shown him a boot belonging to Tom Merry, and Towser had sniffed it over, apparently thinking it was offered to him to eat, and had rejected it with scorn. Now he was trotting along beside his master, not in a very good humour, for the fog annoyed him, and the crowds of people jostled him, and Towser, as Herries explained, did not like being jostled.

The discussion came to nothing, and the chums left the restaurant, and tramped the streets again in the misty day.

Suddenly, to Herries's delight, Towser began to show signs of excitement.

He tugged at the chain by which his master held him, and tried to get away, and Herries had plenty to do to hold him in.

Herries turned an excited face to his chums.

"Come on!" he shouted.

"Weally, Hewwies——"

"Keep that dog in!" shouted Blake. "He'll get under a motor-'bus, and drag you under."

"Rats! He's on the track."

"What?"

"Towser's on the track."

"Bosh!"

"Look here, Blake——"

"Hold him in!"

"Oh, come on, and don't jaw!" said Herries crossly. "We came to London to find Tom Merry, and I suppose you're not going to hold back now Towser's got on his track."

"Well, you ass——"

"Come on, I say!"

And Herries was dragged off by Towser. The chums followed; not because they believed that Towser was on the track, but because they did not want to lose Herries.

"The ass!" growled Manners.

"Yaas, wathah! I must admit that Hewwies is actin' like a chump," remarked Arthur Augustus.

"Come on!" cried Herries breathlessly. "See how eager he is! You remember the last time he did some tracking, Blake?"

"Yes; he tracked down a steak and kidney pie in the New House."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, don't be an ass!" growled Herries. "I mean the other time——"

"The time he tracked down the kipper, do you mean?"

"Look here, if you're going to talk piffle, you may as well shut up," said Herries angrily. "I should think you can see that Towser means business this time."

Towser certainly meant business, whatever it was. He was dragging furiously at the chain, and several times almost jerked it from Herries's hand.

As the chums were close to Oxford Circus now, and the streets were crowded with Christmas traffic, Herries and the bulldog excited a considerable amount of attention.

Pedestrians who found Towser dodging among their legs, or running into them, did not bless Herries; and several of them said uncomplimentary things about Herries and his bulldog.

But Herries did not mind.

He kept on, till the chain became entangled in the legs of a stout old gentleman, who brandished a fat umbrella and made a swipe at Towser.

"Hold on!" roared Herries. "He'll bite!"

Towser growled ferociously. The old gentleman tried to get free of the chain, and it was jerked from Herries's hand.

"Look out!" shouted Herries.

But Towser was gone.

He was not likely to let an opportunity like that pass him unimproved.

He dashed away among the legs of the moving throng, and Herries rushed after him, bumping into people in the most reckless way.

"After him!" cried Blake. "There'll be trouble soon."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Hark! There's trouble now!" grinned Monty Lowther.

A terrific noise of barking, snapping, growling, and scrambling came from a quiet entry at the side of the path, and the chums of St. Jim's burst upon the scene in time to see Towser rolling over and over in deadly combat with a big dog.

Blake burst into a roar.

"Ha, ha, ha! It's a giddy dog-fight—that's what Towser wanted."

"Bai Jove!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Herries was trying to catch hold of the chain. It was whisking about and clinking as the two dogs struggled, and Herries had no chance.

"Towser!" shouted Herries. "Come off! Quick! Good dog! This way! Towser!"

But Towser did not heed.

"Call the brute off!" exclaimed Monty Lowther. "If the owner of that dog comes by, there will be trouble. He looks a valuable dog, too."

"Call him off, Hewwies, old man."

"All right," gasped Herries. "It's all serene. Towser obeys me like a lamb. Towser! Towsy, old boy! Good doggy! Towser!"

Towser heeded not. Like the expiring gladiator, he heard it, but he heeded not. He was too deeply interested in his combat.

"Hewwies, you ass! Call him off!"

"Ain't I calling him off?" roared the exasperated Herries.

"Yaas, but make him come."

"He won't come," said Herries. "Towser isn't one of those rotten, poor-spirited beasts that slink about just as you tell 'em."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake.

"Look here, Blake——"

"Bai Jove! There will be a wow soon!"

"Stop 'em!"

A voice was calling from the mist.

"Rory! Rory! Stop dat! Stop it, I tell you! Golly!"

Monty Lowther chuckled.

"Here comes the owner of the dog, Herries, old man, and he's a big nigger. Now you can explain matters to him!"

CHAPTER 13.

Pete Gives a Clue.

RORY'S master dashed up. The big dog at once ceased to fight Towser, and extricating himself from the bulldog, he trotted over to the big negro. The latter patted his head, and put out an enormous boot to push Towser back as he would have pursued Rory. But his action was very gentle, and he did not hurt Towser.

"Golly!" exclaimed the dark gentleman. "You had better hold in dat dog, my boy! I tink dat Rory will tear him into two-free pieces."

"Rats!" growled Herries. "You've come up just in time to save your dog's life, that's all."

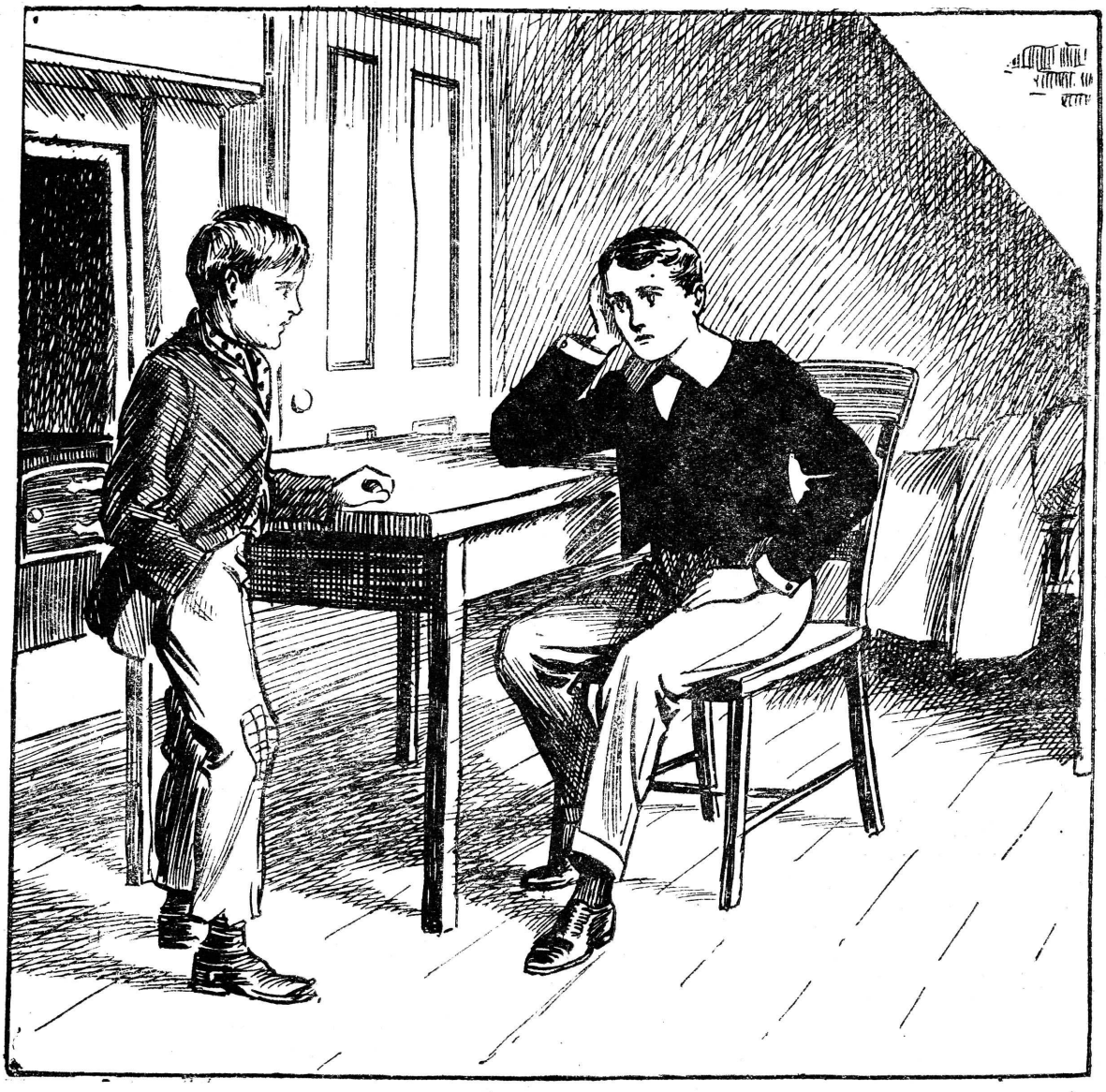
He gripped Towser by the collar, however, and held him quiet.

The big negro grinned.

It was clear to everybody excepting Herries that Towser had taken on too large a contract in tackling Rory, and had not the big negro stopped the fight, matters would have gone very hard indeed with the bulldog.

"Dat is all right," said the black gentleman, good-humouredly, "I tink dat your dog must hab started it, young gentleman. Rory is bery peaceful."

"Well, that's right," said Herries. "You see, Towser



"You won't get a job," said Joe. "Look here, old pal, ain't you got any friends, and ain't they got any tin?" (See page 5.)

was following on a track, and your dog must have got in the way."

"Weally, Hewwies——"

"Rats!" exclaimed Blake warmly. "Towser went for Rory because he was spoiling for a fight. He wasn't following any giddy track."

"Look here, Blake——"

"Look here, Herries——"

"You ass——"

"You fathead——"

"Yah, yah, yah!" roared the big negro. "Don't you begin to fight, too, den. Let dogs delight to fight at night, it is deir nature to. But children you should neber——"

Blake burst into a laugh.

"It's all right," he said. "Only Herries thinks too much of that ghastly beast. We're sorry your dog was attacked, sir."

"Dat is all right. I tink dat my dog hab not been much hurt, and I hope dat de young gentleman's dog is all serene."

"You owe the gentleman an apology, Hewwies, deah boy."

"Well, I'm sorry!" growled Herries.

"Dat is all right!"

"Come on, you kids!" exclaimed Blake. "We sha'n't find Tom Merry by letting Towser fight every blessed dog he comes across. Come on!"

The big negro uttered an exclamation.

"'Scuse me, young gentlemen!" he exclaimed. "What name did you say?"

"Tom Merry!" said Blake, in surprise.

"Golly!"

"Surely you don't happen to know him?"

"Golly!"

"My hat!" exclaimed Blake. "If we've happened on a chap who has met Tom Merry——"

"Bai Jove!"

"Golly! Of course I hab!" exclaimed the big negro. "I'm Pete!"

"Pete?"

"Yes. I hab met Tom Merry!" exclaimed Pete. "I suppose dat it is de same Tom Merry. You belong to St. Jim's?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Den it is de same."

"Bai Jove!"

"So you are looking for him?" exclaimed Pete, his face brightening. "You are de friends ob dat poor boy?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"We're his best chums, sir!" exclaimed Monty Lowther eagerly. "If you could tell us where to find him——"

"I don't know 'bout dat," said Pete. "But I can take you where he lives, or where he hab libed. I don't rightly disremember de name ob de place, but I can take you dere."

"My hat!"

"What luck!"

"By Jove! You are a fwiend in need, and no mistake, sir," exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "Will you allow me the honah of shakin' hands with you, sir?"

"Golly! Dere you are!"

D'Arcy's slim fingers disappeared within the huge black palm, and the swell of St. Jim's gave a wail of agony.

"Ow!"

"What's de matter!" asked Pete.

"Ow! You are cwushin' my fingahs, my deah sir! Ow!"

"Golly! I'se sorry!" said Pete. "I was so pleased to meet a friend ob Tom's. You'm come to London to look for him?"

"Ya-a-as, wathah!"

"Den follow me!"

Pete started off at a tremendous pace. The boys broke into a trot to keep pace with him; but suddenly Pete halted.

"It's a long way from dis place," he remarked. "Dis place is called Oxford Hippodrome, ain't it?"

"Oxford Circus," said Blake, with a grin.

"I don't see any bery great difference. Dey are bery unsimilar tings," said Pete. "Howsumever, dis ain't de place. We had better take a cab."

"Six of us?" said Manners.

"Golly, yes! Hi, hi, you taxi!"

"Taxies take only four!"

"Two ob you can sit on de floor."

"Then the dogs——"

"Dat is quite right," said Pete. "We will hab two taxies. Hi, anoder one!"

Two taxies were captured, and the party embarked. Pete and D'Arcy and Blake went into one, with Rory. Herries and Manners and Lowther entered the second one with Towser. Pete gave some directions to the driver, and the taxies started off.

"Well, I'm blessed if this isn't a go!" Lowther exclaimed. "Fancy happening on Tom Merry's track like this!"

Herries snorted.

"Happening! What do you call happening?" he exclaimed indignantly. "It was Towser!"

"Towser?"

"Yes, certainly. He hasn't followed up the track exactly as I expected; but if he hadn't gone for Rory we should never have met Pete."

"Well, that's true enough," said Manners. "But I don't see that we owe Towser any thanks for being a quarrelsome beast; that's what it amounts to."

"Oh, I don't expect you to do Towser justice!" snorted Herries.

And he patted the huge head of the bulldog, which was resting on his knee, as if to assure Towser that there was one person in the world, at least, who understood him, and fully appreciated his wonderful gifts.

Meanwhile, in the other taxi, Pete was explaining how he had met Tom Merry, and from his description of Tom Merry's lodgings, the chums were able to instruct the driver to reach within a certain distance of Blucher's Buildings.

"I tink I take you dere," said Pete. "Den I hab to leabe you, or Jack and Sammy will be tinkin' dat dere has been an accident. I hab come out only to take Rory for a run, and dey will tink dat I hab been gone a bery long time."

"It's awf'ly kind of you to take all this trouble for us, sir," said Arthur Augustus gratefully.

"Yah, yah, yah! Dat is noting!" said Pete. "I tink dat I take any amount of trouble to help dat poor boy!"

"You're a jolly good sort, sir," said Blake.

"Yah, yah, yah! I'm Pete, dat is all, and I am bery fond of children," said Pete. "I like all you nice little boys!"

The juniors smiled in a sickly way. They did not mind being considered nice, but to be classed as little boys was a descent from their great dignity. But they could forgive even that to the generous, great-hearted negro.

The taxicabs stopped at last.

"This is near as I can get, sir," said the driver, looking in at Pete and the juniors in the cab.

"Dat is all right, old hoss. Here you are, and de house is de first down dat turning," said Pete, pointing. "Now I must go, or Jack and Sam will be going out to look for me. Good-bye, and good luck, laddies!"

The juniors shook hands with the big negro, and then Pete, paying the taxi-drivers in a way that made them open their eyes, strode off with his huge strides, with Rory at his heels.

Blake looked after him.

"Well, that chap's as black as the ace of spades," he remarked. "But that chap's a gentleman, every inch of him, and I never met a more decent fellow."

"Yaas, wathah! I quite agwee with you, Blake, and I twust I shall have some furthah opportunity of impwovin' the acquaintance of our fwiend Pete."

"Well, here's the way!" Lowther remarked.

And the chums of St. Jim's went down the misty street to Blucher's Buildings.

CHAPTER 14.

Too Late.

BLAKE and his comrades shivered as they looked at the grim, gaunt building. This was the place where Tom Merry had—or had had—his lodgings—this hideous swarm of the poor and the criminal. The great house had once been a grand residence, and in the old days long gardens had surrounded it. Long ago they had been built upon, and the house, once approached by sweeping drives, was now hemmed and crowded in on every side by ramshackle buildings and the walls of warehouses. The broken windows, the dirty walls, the pinched and quarrelsome children, and women disfigured by want and drink—struck disgust and horror to the juniors. But it was useless to shrink from the place—they were there to find Tom Merry!

"Spare a copper, sir!"

An under-sized, pinched-looking lad in a pair of huge boots clumped up to them. He held out a skinny hand for coppers. D'Arcy felt in his pocket, but Blake laid a restraining touch upon his arm.

"Hold on!" he said.

"Weally, Blake——"

"Let me speak, Gussy. What's your name, kid?"

"Joe, sir."

"Do you live in this house, Joe?"

"Yes, sir; I lives 'ere," said Joe.

"I suppose you know most of the people who live here?"

"I jest does, sir."

"We've come here to look for somebody——"

"If it's the captain, he's flitted," said Joe, with a grin.

"It isn't the captain, whoever he may be," replied Blake. "It's a lad—a chap about my age, named Tom Merry."

Joe jumped.

"Tom Merry!"

"Yes."

"Blow me!" said Joe.

"Bai Jove! What does that mean? Are you speakin' a foweign language, deah boy?"

"Strike me pink!" said Joe, staring at the chums of St. Jim's. "Maybe you're pals of Tom Merry's, genelmen?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"That's just what we are," said Manners. "Is he here?"

"It's a sovereign for you if you can tell us where to find him," said Blake.

Joe's face fell.

"Which I wish I could," he said, with evidently genuine regret. "But 'e's lef', sir."

"Left?"

"Yus! 'E's been gone two days, sir."

"And don't you know where he has gone?"

Joe shook his head.

"I'm sorry I don't, sir. Which he was the real sort, 'e was, and he was kind to me, and I'd ha' done anyfing for 'im, sir. But he went, and I don't know where he's gone."

"Haven't you seen him since?"

"Not a 'air of 'im, sir."

"Nor heard from him?"

"No, sir."

"Rotten!" said Herries. "Luckily, we have Towser. He may be able to pick up the trail from here."

"I'm sorry I am unable to tell you anyfing," said Joe, looking hungrily at the glistening golden coin in Blake's hand. "But it ain't no good tellin' you lies, sir. I don't know. I only know that he ain't anywhere near here, 'cause I does the begging up and down round 'ere, and I should have kim acrors 'im, sir."

The disappointment was sickening, after the chums had allowed their hopes to rise so high.

They had discovered Tom Merry's lodgings, only to find that Tom Merry was gone, without leaving a clue behind.

"You see, sir, he couldn't 'ave paid the rent any longer, sir," explained Joe. "'E was only payin' two bob for the room, sir, but 'e was broke."

Blake shuddered.

Tom Merry could not afford to pay the rent of that hideous den in the black heart of London! In Heaven's name, where was he now, then?

"Good heavens!" muttered Monty Lowther, and his face was quite pale.

"Well, it can't be helped," said Blake bravely. "We shall have to look further, that's all. You can have the sov. all the same, kid."

"My Heaven!" said Joe hoarsely. "You're a gentleman, you are, sir!"

"Here it is!"

Joe hesitated.

"Could you gimme small money, sir?" he said. "I couldn't get that thick 'un changed, sir. They'd say I'd stole it."

"Bai Jove!"

"I could only get it changed at Nobby Jones's, sir, by pretendin' I'd pinched it, and 'e'd charge me four bob on it."

Blake counted out a sovereign's worth of silver, and Joe, with his face beaming with delight, secreted it amongst his rags. Then the chums of St. Jim's slowly left the grim alley, and made their way into a lighted street again.

"Bai Jove, it's wotten!" said Arthur Augustus.

"Where now?" said Blake.

"Towser——" began Herries.

"Oh, blow Towser! We're not looking for a dog-fight; we're looking for Tom Merry!" said Blake crossly.

"Look here, Blake——"

"Oh, rats!"

"Suppose we twy the Park?" said Arthur Augustus reflectively.

"Hyde Park?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"What for?"

"Well, I have heard that the unemployed often west on the benches in the Park," said the swell of St. Jim's. "Tom Mewwy might be there."

Blake shivered.

"Well, I suppose we may as well look there as anywhere else," he exclaimed. "We've had enough of wandering up and down the streets."

"Yaas, wathah!"

The juniors tramped onward, through streets that were lighted up, although it was early in the afternoon.

At the Marble Arch they turned into the misty Park.

It was cold and windy, and wayfarers hurried on with their collar turned up against the chill.

The juniors shivered as they looked about them.

In spite of the bitter cold, many of the benches had occupants. Perhaps the weary wretches sitting there were too aching and numbed to move. Other vagrants limped and slouched to and fro, and begged.

Towser strained at the chain almost every time he came in sight of another dog. Towser seemed to be in a fighting mood that day.

But even Herries had given up supposing that Towser's desire to bolt might indicate that he was on the track of Tom Merry.

In the misty afternoon skaters were gliding merrily on the frozen surface of the Serpentine.

In one place, a board indicated that the ice was thin, and dangerous to skaters; but in other places it was covered with merry whirling forms.

"That would warm a chap up a bit," Blake remarked, as he looked on.

"We've got to look for Tom Merry, though."

"Hallo, Towser!"

"Stop him!" shouted Herries, as Towser jerked away the chain and ran.

"He's gone!"

"Why didn't you stop him?" roared Herries.

"Why didn't you hold him?" roared Blake.

"Bai Jove! Let the beast go, Hewwies! You can advertise for him in 'The Daily Mail,' you know," said Arthur Augustus.

Herries made no reply to that remark

He was breaking into a run on the track of Towser. If the bulldog lost himself in the recesses of the misty Park, he might never be found again.

"Oh, come on!" said Blake resignedly. "More time to be wasted by that blessed bulldog. I suppose it can't be helped."

"Well, he won't get across the Serpentine, so we can soon run him down."

"Won't he? Look there!"

Towser could be seen dashing out across the ice, suddenly, from the legs of a crowd of people who were watching the skaters. Herries did not see him; he was rushing on. Blake and the rest followed Herries, but by the time they overtook him, Towser was far out of their sight, and where he was, or what he might be doing, they did not know.

"I'm not going without him," Herries said.

"But he's lost!"

"I don't care!"

"You can advertise for him."

"Rats!"

"Weally, Hewwies——"

"I shouldn't wonder if he's on the track of Tom Merry all the time, too," Herries declared.

"Wats!"

"Well, I'm going to look for him, anyway," said Herries.

And he did, and the juniors of St. Jim's followed him, consoling themselves for the waste of time by making all sorts of remarks about Towser.

CHAPTER 15.

Tom Merry—Hero.

TOM MERRY paused.

The lad was walking slowly along the bank of the Serpentine. He was cold, and he was hungry. He had no skates, but the thought had come into his mind that by sliding on the ice, he could warm up his shivering limbs, and restore the circulation that seemed to be dying in his fingers and toes.

A sudden shout from a group of skaters had caught his ears, and he turned towards the frozen stream.

From the opposite side of the Serpentine, a dog had come upon the ice, and was running directly past the notice-board that gave warning that the ice there was thin, and that there was danger.

The ice was cracking under the dog's weight as he ran. He was a big, heavy bulldog, and the ice there was thin and brittle.

"My hat!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

He recognised the bulldog.

Bulldogs may be very much alike, but there was only one Towser, and Tom Merry knew that it was Towser that he saw.

Even as Tom Merry uttered the exclamation, the ice gave a loud crack, and the bulldog disappeared under the water.

There was a gush of black water over the thin ice, and it crackled and gave in still more, and there was a rapid scurrying back of any skaters that happened to be within measurable distance of the danger spot.

The head of the bulldog came into view.

Towser could swim, and he was a strong and brave dog. But it was clear that the bitter, icy cold of the water was paralysing him.

Twice he strove to drag himself upon the ice, and each time it crackled under him, and he sank back right under the dark water.

Then he was seen with his front paws on the ice, and the water round him bubbling and frothing as his back legs paddled it.

He was not trying to drag himself out again—the cold had gripped him too hard.

The look on the dog's face as he battled there with bitter cold and death, went to many a heart.

But there was no help for him.

To venture out on the ice within a dozen yards of the spot where the dog was swimming, meant being engulfed.

There were exclamations of pity and concern on all sides.

But when Tom Merry, with a gleam in his eyes, ran down to the bank, half a dozen voices shouted to him to come back.

"Stop!"

"Come back!"

"You young fool! You'll be drowned!"

Tom Merry paid no heed.

He did not even think of the danger. He could not see that look on Towser's face and leave him to die. He meant to go to Towser's aid.

He stepped out on the ice.

Half walking, half sliding, he drew near to the spot where the hole gaped in the ice, till the crackling of the thin crust beneath his feet warned him that it was dangerous to go further.

There he halted.

"Towser! Towser!"

He called to the dog.

Towser gave him an eloquent look, but that was all. The dog's strength was fast going, and already the battling of his legs was becoming feebler.

"Towser!"

Tom Merry ventured nearer.

There was a loud crack, like a pistol-shot, under his feet, and he realised that the ice was going.

With a great effort he flung his weight forward before he went through, and slid on at top speed towards Towser.

It was the only way of reaching the dog, and he succeeded.

In a moment more he was struggling in the icy water beside the dog.

There was a cheer from the crowd on the bank, now growing and thickening in numbers, at the heroism of the boy.

It was followed by a groan. They watched him with tense anxiety. Surely the only result of that brave action would be that the boy would perish as well as the dog.

Tom Merry shuddered from head to foot as the icy water closed round him.

The icy coldness of it seemed to penetrate into his very joints with the keenness of a sharp knife.

The water was up to his neck, but his head did not go under, for he struck out and swam, and kept afloat.

"Towser!" he gasped.

The ice had cracked again under the bulldog's forepaws.

Towser's hind legs had ceased to battle, and the ice was too thin to support his weight. It had yielded, and he had plunged in again.

But Tom Merry's grasp was on his collar.

Tom Merry's firm hand held the head above water.

The lad drew the bulldog to him, and the dog's forepaws rested on his shoulder, as he swam and battled for life in the chilly water.

There was only one chance for him, and Tom Merry knew it.

That was to smash a way through the crackling ice to a spot where it was firm enough to bear his weight.

Could he do that? Would his strength last against the bitter chill of the water? And he was faint with hunger and fatigue.

Tom Merry set himself to the task.

Men in the crowd had rushed for help to the life-saving station, but Tom Merry knew that the end, one way or the other, would come long before help could arrive.

He struck his arm down upon the ice, smashing it to splinters, and forced a passage through the yielding crust towards the shore.

The crowd there saw his object, and encouraged him with loud shouts, and many of the more venturesome came out upon the ice to help him as soon as he should be near enough to reach.

But a dozen yards of ice separated him from the nearest.

Crash! Crash!

The ice broke, and splintered and crackled, and Tom Merry, slowly but surely, forced his passage onward.

Twice he tried the ice with his weight, and each time it gave in, and he sank back into the biting waters.

All the time he held Towser fast to him.

It was sink or swim together for the boy and the dog.

A constable was the furthest out on the ice to help him, and he was kneeling down with his hands outstretched to aid.

Closer and closer Tom Merry drew to him.

"Come on, my lad," said the policeman. "Buck up! You're nearly here."

Tom Merry looked at him; he knew the voice.

It was the kindly policeman who had moved him on in the street. Tom Merry was very near at this moment to the last "move on," after which the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest.

The shadow of grim death was upon Tom Merry, and he felt it.

His limbs were numbed, his breath came in short, choking gasps, and a light was swimming before his eyes.

Still he clung to the bulldog, and still he fought his way onward—blindly, desperately, instinctively.

Was it the end? He felt himself sliding—sliding back—back—and the mists were closing in upon him, black and grim!

But a sudden grasp fastened upon his shoulder—it was the firm hand of the constable.

Tom Merry felt vaguely, as in a dream, that he was drawn from the water. He was freezing with cold, but the biting chill of the water was gone, and the weight of the bulldog was no longer upon him.

Then all fled, and darkness rushed down upon him, enveloping him.

His eyes opened.

They wandered round a circle of anxious faces. The sound of a loud cheer was in his ears with an echoing boom like distant thunder.

A dog was licking his face.

Where was he?

Darkness again!

CHAPTER 16.
Found!

"BAI JOVE!"

"Can you see him?" asked Herries eagerly.

"Look!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy pointed across the Serpentine.

There was a crowd on the ice, a crowd on the bank, and a constable was dragging a boy and a dog from the crackling ice.

Herries gasped.

"That can't be—be Towser!"

"He went out on the ice," said Monty Lowther.

"And he's been in, and somebody's fished him out," said Blake. "Trust Towser to get somebody into trouble."

"Well, he must have been a jolly decent chap to go in for him," said Herries. "I'm going across."

"Come further along first, ass. You don't want to follow Towser through the ice, do you?" demanded Blake

"Oh, buck up! Towser may be hurt!"

The chums ran out on the ice, where Blake judged it was safe, and slid rapidly across to the other side of the Serpentine.

They landed very quickly, and ran towards the crowd that was still gathered round the fallen lad. Someone had run for a taxicab to take Tom Merry away, and others were chafing his hands and feet.

"Towser!" shouted Herries. "Towser!"

Towser whined.

"That's Towser!" shouted Herries. And he burst through the crowd.

There were angry exclamations on all sides.

"Stand back there!"

"Stop shoving!"

"Now, then——"

"It's my dog!" cried Herries.

"Then you ought to have taken better care of him," said the constable. "He's near been the death of this young chap."

Herries glanced at the insensible form.

Then he staggered, and almost fell.

"Tom Merry!" he gasped.

"Do you know him?"

"Know him!" panted Herries. "Blake—Lowther—it's Tom Merry! Towser's found him!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Great Scott!"

The chums of St. Jim's rushed up.

"Tom Merry!"

"Tommy!"

Tom Merry's eyes opened for a moment, as if the voices of his chums had the power to call him back from the land of the shadows.

"Hallo, kids!" he said faintly.

Then he was senseless again.

"Put this round him, quick!" exclaimed D'Arcy, stripping off his thick coat, with the tears running down his cheeks the while. "Quick, officah!"

The coat was slipped on Tom Merry. Lowther's coat was round him in another moment, and then Manners's.

"Here's the taxi!" exclaimed a voice.

Tom Merry was carried to the taxi.

"The nearest doctor's!" exclaimed Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

The juniors bundled into the taxi with their chum. Towser dragged himself in very quietly, as if he knew that he had been to blame. Herries was surreptitiously rubbing his favourite dry with his own muffler, and chafing his frozen limbs. Towser might have nearly caused the death of Tom Merry, but—Towser was Towser!

The taxicab whizzed off at a spanking speed.

In three minutes or less it drew up outside a house where a red lamp burned through the gloom of the December afternoon.

Tom Merry was rushed indoors, and was in the doctor's hands in a very short space of time.

The medical man acted with promptitude.

Half-an-hour later, Tom Merry came to himself, in a warm bed, with hot-water bottles at his feet, and a warm atmosphere round him, and a shaded lamp burning.

He opened his eyes and looked round in amazement.

"What—what——" he began.

He was going to ask what had happened, but the remembrance of it flashed back into his mind before his lips had fairly formed the question.

"Towser!" he gasped. "He's all right?"

"Yes, my lad," said a kind-faced man at the bedside. "The dog's all right, and thank goodness you're all right too, now!"

"Good old Towser! I thought he was gone, once!" said Tom Merry. "I thought I was gone, too, for that matter. Herries would have been off his rocker, I think, if old Towser had gone down."

There was a choking sound from the bedhead.

Tom Merry turned his glance in that direction.

"Hallo, Herries!"

"I—I—I——" stammered Herries. "I—I don't know what to say, Tom Merry! You're the decentest chap that ever lived!"

"Oh, rats! Look here, where am I? How did I come here?"

"You're in my hands," smiled the doctor, "and your

friends brought you. And in a few hours' time they'll be able to take you away, if they wish."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Hallo! You there, too, Gussy!"

"Yaas, wathah, Tom Mewwy, old son!" said the swell of St. Jim's, coming to the bedside with the rest. "Thank goodness we have found you!"

"Yes, rather!"

Tom Merry stared at them blankly for some moments, and then he grinned faintly.

"Well, I suppose I had better say thank goodness too!" he exclaimed.

CHAPTER 17.
A Merry Christmas.

TOM MERRY, an hour later, was sitting up at a table in a thick dressing-gown, enjoying a hearty dinner. His chums were not eating, but they watched him eat. Tom Merry was in a perplexed frame of mind. He did not understand it all yet, but he felt much better for the rest, the dinner, and the cheery looks of his old chums.

"You've been looking for me, then?" he exclaimed.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Without knowing your address, either," said Monty Lowther, reproachfully. "You might have let us know it, Tom."

Tom Merry flushed.

"You know my reason, Monty."

"Yes, I know it, and I think it's rotten not to let your friends know where to find you. You ought to let us help."

"I can't, Monty."

"We twacked you to Bluchah's Buildin's," D'Arcy remarked.

Tom Merry started.

"You've been there?"

"Yes."

"How on earth?"

"It was through Towser," Herries explained.

"Towser!"

"Yes. It was my idea to bring Towser to help search for you, and it has been a ripping success," said Herries.

"Wats!"

"Look here, Gussy!"

"I wepeat, wats!"

"The fact is," said Blake, laughing, "that Towser got into a fight with a dog belonging to the negro chap, Pete, and we learned from him about your lodgings."

"You've met Pete?"

"Yes, and a ripping chap he is!" said Blake.

"But we lost your track again at Blucher's Buildings," said Herries. "No one knew where you had gone. Towser picked up the trail again."

"Towser!" yelled the juniors.

"Yes, Towser," said Herries obstinately. "I haven't the slightest doubt—I mean there isn't the slightest reasonable doubt—that Towser was scuttling across the Serpentine like that because he had scented out Tom Merry on the other side."

"My hat!"

"Rats!"

"Wats!"

"Bosh!"

"Oh, all right! You needn't do Towser justice!" said Herries. "I know Towser, and I know what he can do. I don't care."

"Weally, Hewwies——"

"Anyway, it was through Towser, by accident, that we found you, Tommy," said Manners. "And now we've found you, we're not going to let you get away again—I can promise you that!"

"Wathah not!"

Tom Merry looked troubled.

"I'm more than obliged to you chaps," he said. "It does me good to see your chivvies again—more good than you'll understand, after what I've been through lately. But——"

"No 'buts,' deah boy. We are goin' to take you down to Eastwood."

Tom Merry shook his head.

"The situation's unchanged," he said. "I have no money, and I must look for work. I can't sponge on you, Gussy."

"My dear chap——"

"It's impossible, old fellow. You can't spend your money on me! My hat!" Tom Merry broke off suddenly. "This is a giddy West End doctor's place, and it must have run you into a pretty penny on my account already!"

"Oh, no! Not five pounds, so fah!" said D'Arcy innocently.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry wrinkled his brows.

"It's jolly good of you, and you know I don't mind being obliged to you," he said. "But I can't take more—it's impossible!"

"Well, that's all right in a way," said Blake, after a pause. "But you can come down to Eastwood for a holiday, at least. Everybody has a Christmas holiday, you know."

"But——"

"You must come!"

"But——"

"I have pwomised my fathah to take you home," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I twust you will not make me bweak my word, Tom Mewwy."

Tom Merry smiled.

"But——"

"Look here, you've got to come!" said Monty Lowther resolutely. "If you're not willing, we shall take you by force. Anyway, you're coming."

"If we have to run you down there by the scruff of your neck and the seat of your bags," said Blake grimly.

Tom Merry laughed—his old cheery laugh, that rang very pleasantly in the ears of his chums.

"You see, you can't do any good by starving in London," Manners remarked. "Work isn't so easy to get. Down at Eastwood we'll have a jolly Christmas, and talk over the future—all of us put our heads together, and make some plans, you know."

"Yaas, wathah! I feel that I shall hit upon a weally stunnin' plan, you know, when I've had time to think it out."

"But I've no tin——"

"Well, Gussy doesn't charge his guests admission fees, or send in a bill, do you, Gussy?"

"Wathah not!"

"I've no clothes——"

"I'll lend you some of Gussy's," said Blake.

"But——"

"No 'buts!' You're coming down with us by the next express."

Tom Merry laughed again—merrily, happily.

"Right you are!" he said. "I'm coming!"

"Hurrah!"

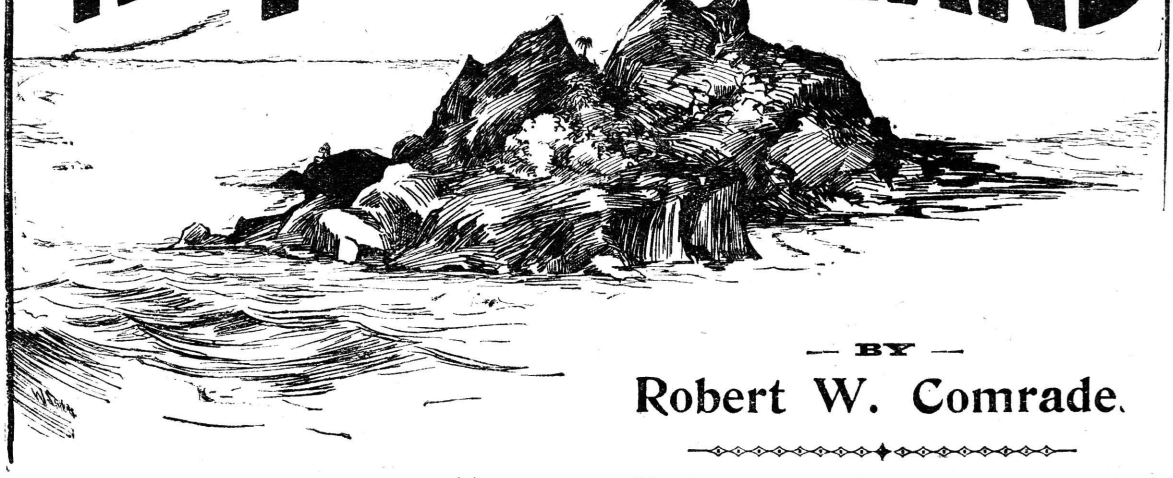
"Bravo, deah boy!"

And by the next express Tom Merry went. And after what he had been through, it is needless to say how he enjoyed his Christmas at D'Arcy's place. And so for Tom Merry, after all, it turned out to be a Merry Christmas!

THE END.

A Wonderful New Story!

THE IRON ISLAND



— BY —

Robert W. Comrade.

THE FIRST CHAPTERS BRIEFLY RE-WRITTEN.

Philip Graydon is a young Englishman, who has been marooned for eight years on an uncharted island in the Pacific Ocean by a criminal society called the Brotherhood of Iron, of which Graydon is an ex-member. He was astounded one day to meet a fashionably-dressed young lady on the island of which he had for so long been the only occupant. The new-comer was Dolores de las Mercedes, an actress, who had caused serious disturbance in France by adopting the title of Queen of France for the sake of advertisement. The French Government had considered it necessary that she should retire from civilisation for a time, and had landed her, with a tent and complete equipment, on the Iron Island, little knowing that it had already an occupant. Dolores and Graydon put their heads together, and evolve a plan of escape. The plan is successful, and Graydon and Dolores, as Frank Kingston and Kathleen O'Brien, arrive safely in London, where they each engage suites of rooms at the Hotel Cyril. The identity of Frank Kingston, who is ostensibly a young man who has made his fortune in the goldfields, is quite unsuspected by the Brotherhood, and with the help of Fraser, an ex-member of the Brotherhood, Kingston opens his campaign against the formidable society.

His first victim is Detective-inspector Caine, who is completely ruined, no one save Kingston knowing whence the blow fell. Sir Robert Gissing, banker and, like Caine, Inner Councillor of the Brotherhood of Iron, is next the object of Kingston's attention. Dolores kidnaps Ivy, the banker's daughter, on board Kingston's steam-yacht, the Coronet; while Kingston himself steals £35,000 worth of Government bonds from Gissing's bank, and plants them in Sir Robert's own desk at his private residence. Thus the plot develops itself.

(Read on from here.)

The Forged Bonds.

Ivy Gissing took to "Miss Beck" from the very first, and Dolores, being by nature kind, loving, and considerate, rapidly won her way into the little girl's affections. After a couple of days the two were like mother and daughter. Ivy was a winning little creature, and quite a surprise to Dolores.

Some people would have remained cold towards Ivy, knowing what her father was; but Dolores was different. Ivy knew nothing of her father's wrong-doing, and it would have been a crying injustice to treat her coldly because of that. She was pure enough herself—loving, merry, and winsome. The dulness which Dolores had first noticed had entirely disappeared. It was plain Ivy had had very few pleasures, despite her father's high position in the world.

And Dolores, because she knew what the end would be, decided to make her little charge's life as merry a one as possible. Very often she found herself thinking that it was hard on the mite—hard to grow up and find her father had been a condemned criminal.

Yet Sir Robert could not be spared; his punishment would have to be meted out. If Kingston did not invent a scheme whereby his true colours were shown, he would probably go undetected for ever.

Kingston endeavoured to punish in as fitting a manner as possible; and Sir Robert's punishment was fitting to a degree. During his life of roguery he had sent many men into penal servitude on charges of forgery, theft, etc., while they had been absolutely innocent of crime. They were ruined men when they came into the world again, with black stains on their honour.

Sir Robert Gissing had done these actions with no compunction, and his reward was to be of a precisely similar nature; he was to be imprisoned for a crime he never committed. And even then it would be light punishment, when compared with the enormity of his own crimes.

Events moved quickly now. Kingston kept his eyes and ears open, and took in everything. In a very short space of time the climax would arrive, and then——

. . . . . .

"Everything is working splendidly, Fraser," drawled Frank Kingston, as he lolled back in one of the luxurious armchairs in his study. "To-day I hope to see the end of this particular case. Yet, somehow, there is a feeling at the back of my head that everything isn't right."

"No, sir?" said Fraser respectfully.

"It is the child, Fraser, that's what it is. If Gissing was alone I would let him bear his punishment, as he should do. But when I planned this scheme I did not know that he even had a child. Miss O'Brien suggested the kidnapping idea."

"She's a nice little mite, sir, from what I saw."

"That is where the difficulty comes in. It seems so deucedly hard on her to have her father taken away. Why, when he comes out of prison she won't know him."

"But you ain't goin' to alter anything, sir?" asked Fraser eagerly. "Gissing is one of the worst of the band, sir, you know that. He can't escape——"

"Of course not, Fraser. Everything will go ahead as originally planned. He will be exposed as a scoundrel, tried, and convicted. That alone will be a terrible degradation. He will be nobody afterwards. And I have a notion simmering—— But that does not matter at present. Let the scheme work itself out first."

"Scotland Yard don't seem to get no further, sir, in the search for the child. The papers are beginning to rag them for failing."

"They can't possibly find her, Fraser," drawled Kingston. "They never dream of looking for her where she is, in full

sight of everybody, enjoying herself like a princess, off Algiers. But there's a terrible change in Sir Robert—a terrible change. I believe the blow of losing his child was greater than that which is to come to-day."

"It's rum, sir, how a scoundrel like him could 'ave any feelings at all."

"It is his only child, Fraser, and she is, I suppose, the only being in the world he cares for. Well, I shall have to be off. I have an appointment in half an hour. And don't forget, the instant you receive a telegram from me saying 'Yes' on it, go to a public telephone call-office and ring up Scotland Yard. You know what to say?"

"Yes, sir. I sha'n't shift from here till I get the wire."

"Exactly. I trust you, Fraser."

Five minutes later, he was lounging along the Strand with that peculiar walk of his. At first sight he appeared to be moving slowly, but when tested it was found he was walking with unusual swiftness. He turned in the imposing doors of his club, and in a few minutes was in conversation with young Lord Askew.

"It's all right, old fellow, the pater's dubbed up rippingly. He particularly wants those bonds, y'know, and would give half as much again to get them out."

"By Jove, what a dodge!" exclaimed Kingston.

"Yes, it was rather neat, wasn't it? He'd never have let me have the money otherwise. He's got to pay it now to get the beastly bonds back."

Lord Askew giggled hugely over the joke.

"There's no time to lose," interrupted Kingston, "so I should advise you to go with me now to the bank."

"Will you come, Kingston? Thanks, awfully!"

They strolled out of the club arm-in-arm, and several people winked and shook their heads. Although Askew saw nothing of this, Kingston was aware of it all. He smiled to himself, and realised that he was as safe and secure as the skies.

The journey to Lombard Street did not occupy much time, and the two walked into the bank together, chatting animatedly on the subject of horse-racing. The manager of Gissing's Bank attended them personally, and they were shown into his private office. Sir Robert had not yet arrived, although he was expected every minute.

"I'm very sorry, my lord," apologised the manager, "but Sir Robert is unusually late this morning. He has the key of the strong-room himself, so I am afraid you will have to wait."

"By Jove, I hope he won't be long!" began Askew. "I have an appointment——"

The door opened, and Sir Robert Gissing himself appeared. Kingston almost allowed the dreamy expression to fade from his eyes as he saw the terrible change in the banker. His face was haggard, his eyes hollow and sunken.

"I should never have suspected it," thought Kingston—"never!"

Sir Robert merely nodded to the two visitors, then spoke to the manager. After a moment he produced the key, and passed through into his inner office.

"I won't keep you a moment, gentlemen," said the manager. "If you will excuse me, I will run down and get those bonds myself."

Kingston and Askew were left alone for a few minutes, and although the former knew quite well what development was coming next, he showed no sign whatever. The two of them, as they sat there, appeared to be merely a couple of well-to-do dandies.

"I think this is correct, my lord," exclaimed the manager politely, holding in his hand the packet of bonds Kingston had so cleverly substituted. "I will just run through them to see if they are correct."

"It doesn't matter, really," began Askew.

"A mere matter of form, my lord. They have not been touched since Sir Robert had them placed in the safe."

He opened the flap of the envelope, drew the bonds out, and laid them on the table before him. The next moment he started up in surprise, gazing at the papers in perplexity.

"Why, these are not—— Dear me, there is some mistake!"

"What do you mean?" asked Askew. "How could there be a mistake? Really, I don't see——"

The manager's expression became an alarmed one, and he rose hurriedly to his feet, gathering the substituted bonds together as he did so. Without even excusing himself, he hastened into Sir Robert's private office.

"By Jove!" ejaculated Lord Askew. "What on earth's the matter? You might think there was something wrong, but——"

"There was something wrong, too," said Kingston. "They weren't your bonds at all, old man. He's got the wrong packet."

Suddenly Sir Robert's voice was heard, for the door was ajar.

"But they were the only bonds in the safe," he cried loudly. "I tell you there were no others."

"Then where are they, sir?" cried the manager.

"Give them to me—let me see them! Yes, the envelope is the same, the same wording on—— Good gracious!"

There was silence for a moment, then Sir Robert dashed out of his office, his eyes staring and half frightened. Behind him came the manager.

"These are not the same," cried the banker in alarm—"these are not the same! They seem so at first glance, but it is very evident——" He mopped his brow. "No, it cannot be; and yet—— There is nothing else to believe. These bonds seem identical with Lord Askew's at first sight, yet they are not the same!"

"Not the same!" cried Askew. "Great Scott, what do you mean? What has happened?"

"I am at as great a loss as you yourself are, Lord Askew," replied Gissing agitatedly. "I cannot understand it. These bonds are not those you deposited three days ago; they are practically worthless!"

"B-but," gasped Askew, after a moment's gaping, "b-but you d-don't m-mean to say these are forgeries, Sir Robert? By Jove, I can't realise it!"

"Forgeries!" echoed Sir Robert, with a start. "What else can I think? Yet how could they have been exchanged? I examined them myself, and they were perfectly correct. Nobody has been to the safe except those who can be absolutely trusted. It would have been impossible for anybody to change them—impossible!"

"Yet they are changed!" exclaimed the manager excitedly. "There is something fishy here, Sir Robert. You know the bonds were in order when you left on Tuesday?"

"I am as certain as I am standing here. It can't be—it can't be that the bank has been robbed of £20,000! Great Heaven," he groaned, pressing his hands to his head, "everything seems to be going wrong—everything!"

The manager rushed out, and soon a buzz of conversation among the clerks told Kingston that the news of the robbery had reached them. A frenzied search was made for the missing bonds. Both the manager and Sir Robert knew that there had been some trickery; but it was so astounding. There had been no tampering with the safe whatever; the bonds had been only in trusted hands, yet they were changed. It savoured of the uncanny.

Sir Robert Gissing's feelings were terrible. Coming right on top of his other worry, it was a fearful shock. What would his partners say? This loss would affect them more than himself. He would be blamed, he would have to bear the brunt of it. Kingston had not one spark of pity for him, for he knew he was only receiving his just deserts.

"It is a mystery, Lord Askew," he said hoarsely. "I am at an entire loss to account for it. Of course, if the bonds are really lost, you will be recompensed to the full amount; but I cannot believe it—I refuse to believe it! The police must be rung up immediately. This is a serious business, and will have to be investigated properly."

Frank Kingston Decides.

"Arrest of Sir Robert Gissing!"

The newsboys were yelling it over all England, and people were staring at the placards and buying the papers as fast as they could be served.

Sir Robert Gissing arrested! It seemed ridiculous. The baronet had been looming largely in the public eye lately, owing to the interest taken in the disappearance of his little daughter, and now this last development was startling.

Kingston was feeling decidedly pleased at the success of his plans, yet something seemed to cause him uneasiness. The thought of that innocent little girl at Algiers, knowing nothing about the fate of her father, was a little disconcerting.

"The coup came off splendidly, Fraser," remarked Kingston, as he glanced at the morning's paper before him. "As you weren't there, I'll just outline the facts. After the police had arrived at the bank and had failed to find any real clue, they were at a momentary deadlock. Their thoughts had already turned on the coincidence of the amounts—twenty thousand pounds demanded for the child, and bonds on which twenty thousand pounds had been advanced. Sir Robert was known to be rather short, and it seemed—well, peculiar."

"The police realised he was the only man who could have taken the papers, didn't they, sir?"

"Yes, Fraser. They questioned him very closely, but, naturally, he protested his innocence. Then your message was received at the Yard, and everything was set in a flutter. You, of course, were untraceable, as you had rung up from a public call-office."

"It was a place in Fleet Street I went to, sir, so there

wasn't no chance of my bein' discovered. As you told me, I simply said it might lead to something if the police searched Sir Robert Gissing's library, as I knew for a fact that he was the thief."

"That was right, Fraser. Inspector Richards was on like a shot, and while Sir Robert was detained at the bank, he took a couple of men and searched the house in Kensington. Everything has worked as I planned it should; nothing has miscarried. The bonds were found, Sir Robert was proved to be guilty, and arrested on the spot."

"He's tastin' some of his own medicine," growled Fraser, with a frown. "The case is as clear as daylight against him, isn't it, sir?"

"Absolutely! Sir Robert will be sentenced right enough," replied Kingston grimly. "The newspapers are all in condemnation, although they make some excuses for him because of his child. But the case is as black as ink against him, Fraser, and he can't escape."

Fraser left the room after a moment, and Kingston, having made the fire up, lay full length on the carpet before the grate. It was rather a peculiar position, but Kingston could think better when looking into the embers of a glowing fire. The habit had grown upon him while upon the Iron Island.

He had received a letter not an hour ago from Dolores, and in it she told him what a winning little girl Ivy Gissing was, and how she had grown to like her. It worried Kingston, for he knew that when the child returned to England her father would be in prison.

"I don't like it," he thought. "Decidedly I don't like it. The little mite Dolores speaks so rapturously about never entered my calculations at first, but she must now. I cannot leave her out. And it will alter things, for I couldn't think of her suffering for the sins of her father. She must never know anything about it. Yet, if he is sentenced to seven years, she will be thirteen when he joins her, and she will be old enough——"

Kingston frowned into the glowing cinders.

"I shall have to do something. Ivy must know nothing about her father's wickedness. He is as good as sentenced now, so nothing can prevent his fate. He deserves it, if any man ever did. Yet he has suffered a lot, a tremendous lot this last day or two."

For fifteen minutes he wrestled with the problem.

"There is only one way," he finally decided—"only one way. Shall I do it? His honour is gone, his name—everything. The thought of it will last for evermore to taunt him. He will never be able to hold up his head again. The child, too, poor innocent thing—— Yes, I'll do it—by Jove, I'll do it! It's only justice to Ivy."

He rose to his feet, and stood staring before him for a moment. Then he shook himself, and rang the bell for Fraser, the old, careless expression returning to his eyes.

Frank Kingston had decided.

* * * * * * *

"Will you step this way, sir?"

Kingston followed the constable along several plain, brick-floored passages, until he arrived at the door of Sir Robert Gissing's department. He had had some trouble gaining permission to see the banker; but at last his persistence had prevailed, and he was allowed half an hour's interview.

Sir Robert was not sentenced yet, not even proved guilty, so was allowed to receive visitors. The door was flung open, and Kingston stepped in. The baronet was seated in an easy-chair, making a pretence at reading, but his whole attitude was one of dejected hopelessness. His face was utterly altered. Not a vestige of his old genial self remained—that geniality which invited confidence, only to be betrayed.

"Kingston!" he exclaimed dully, as the visitor entered.

"Yes, Sir Robert. I feel awfully sorry for you, d'you know," cried Kingston, in his affected manner. "Everything seems to have turned upside down since we last met, doesn't it?"

Sir Robert rose to his feet, and a fierce, angry expression entered his eyes.

"I'm shut up here, like a felon," he cried, "made to suffer a most terrible indignity, all for a crime of which I know nothing—absolutely nothing! Somebody is working against me, ruining me in body and soul. Heaven help me, Kingston, if I am convicted, and Heaven help my little girl! She is lost, and I am unable to help her!"

He sank into his chair again, sobbing. Kingston looked on unmoved. He realised that Sir Robert Gissing's spirit was dead. He was dangerous no longer. Even if he walked out a free man, he could never be a criminal again. This taste had been enough for all time. He was dead to the Brotherhood as regards activity.

"I have come here," said Kingston quietly, "because I have a proposal to offer you, Sir Robert."

"A proposal?" echoed the other.

"Exactly! Very shortly you will probably be sentenced to several years' penal servitude, for your guilt is beyond question——"

"You know I am innocent!" cried Gissing fiercely.

"Nevertheless, the police believe the contrary," said Kingston coolly. "You may be innocent of this particular crime, but——"

He shrugged his shoulders expressively, and a look of fear crossed Sir Robert's countenance. He darted a keen glance at Kingston, whose eyes shone with quite an unaccustomed light.

"Who are you?" he asked hoarsely. "Who are you?"

"My name is, as I think you already know, Frank Kingston," drawled that individual coolly. "Now, this is my proposal. You wish to have your little girl back?"

"My child back! Don't taunt me, man! Don't——"

"I am doing nothing so mean. As I say, you want your daughter back, and you want your liberty. Very shortly, after the trial, you will probably be taken to a great convict prison——"

"Don't," groaned Gissing—"don't!"

"The situation must be faced. For your daughter's sake—understand, I say for your daughter's sake—I am going to take a great risk, and attempt something that you will think impossible."

"I—I do not follow, Kingston," exclaimed Sir Robert. "I cannot see what you are driving at."

"Then, listen! If you were alone in the world, I would not help you. You are a man, and ought to be able to take care of yourself. But you are not alone. There is that helpless child. For her sake I am going to do this thing."

"What thing?" cried Sir Robert frantically. "Tell me——"

"Don't raise your voice!" interrupted Kingston warningly. "If what I tell you is overheard, I shall be arrested myself. If you serve your term of imprisonment, what is to become of your daughter? Who is to look after her? I have got an idea that you love her——"

"She is the one ray of sunshine I have!"

"Then I am going to effect your escape from prison," said Kingston coolly. "When you are convicted, I will, within a month, set you at liberty."

Gissing started back.

"What are you saying?" he gasped. "What wild words are you allowing——"

"Pray keep calm! Every word I said I meant. I will rescue you from prison, disguise you, give you back your daughter, and take you in my own ship to a foreign country, where little Ivy will grow up in ignorance of all that has passed in London."

"But it is impossible," cried Sir Robert—"impossible!"

"And I say that it is not impossible," exclaimed Kingston tensely, "and to prove my words I am going to do it! Do you believe me? Will you trust in me?"

Sir Robert Gissing stared at Kingston as if he were a man from another world, as if he were a spirit.

"What else can I do?" he cried. "You say you will do all these things. Why? I am nothing to you, and yet you are going to risk your own liberty. What can I do but thank you with all my heart——"

"Sir Robert," replied Kingston coldly, "you are wasting your breath. I have said all I wanted to say, and now I am going. I give you my solemn promise that within a month of the day you are convicted, I will set you free, and give you back your child. After that, you will start life afresh in a new country under a new name."

"And why are you doing this?" demanded the degraded baronet hoarsely. "I believe you will do as you say, I can feel it in me that it will be so. But tell me why you are doing it. Let me know that."

"I will," answered Frank Kingston. "It is on account of your daughter, Sir Robert; on account of that poor, innocent little creature, who knows nothing of the wickedness of the world, so that she may grow up without knowing what her father really is. It is for her sake I am doing this, and for hers alone!"

— — —

Algiers by Night.

"Yes, Mr. Kingston, it was the best way."

Dolores looked over the deck-rail into the sparkling water of the Mediterranean. Away in the west the golden light of the vanishing sun illuminated the clouds. Not a breath of wind stirred the air, and it was pleasant in the extreme sitting out on deck, waiting for the first stars to show themselves.

Not far away, across a short stretch of water, could be seen the town of Algiers, with numerous lights showing here and there. The tier upon tier of white houses, built in the form of a huge amphitheatre, formed an imposing and magnificent picture, while the twinkling lights of the vessels

"Silence, Number 145!" said the prison Governor, sternly. "Remember, Sir Robert Gissing, that you are a felon now!" *(See next week's instalment of "The Iron Island," for this dramatic incident.)*

anchored in the harbour were already casting their reflections in the rippling water.

Frank Kingston, sleepy-eyed and indolent as usual, was lolling in a deck-chair, while Dolores—at present disguised as the elderly governess, "Miss Beck"—sat opposite to him. The crew were mostly for'ard, and the officers in their own quarters, so that the two were quite private.

"Sir Robert Gissing is a scoundrel, or was a scoundrel, whatever his child may be," Kingston declared. "I have an idea, however, that he is repenting, and if he escapes——"

"'If' he escapes?" repeated Dolores. "I thought it is certain you are going to release him from prison?"

Kingston smiled

"Pardon my slip," he said. "Gissing will escape, if I live to carry out my plans. I promised him I would release him and give him back his daughter, and I fully intend to keep my word. It is over a fortnight now since he was placed under arrest, and his trial comes on the day after to-morrow."

"You think he will be found guilty?"

"What other verdict can the jury bring in? The proof is as conclusive as if he had been caught red-handed. Oh, yes, Dolores, Sir Robert Gissing is as good as convicted."

"You will be present at the trial?" she asked.

"Of course. Immediately after the verdict I shall seek an interview with him, and tell him that I have found his daughter, and will keep my promise with regard to his own release."

She nodded.

"What else could I do?" he went on. "The man is a villain—as callous as any other member of the Brotherhood of Iron. Had he had his way I should have been dead now. But the advent of little Ivy altered his views, and of late years he has been improving."

"But that makes his offence no less wicked," said Dolores.

"I agree with you there, Dolores," drawled Kingston, closing his eyes lazily. "But think of the punishment he has received. Barely a fortnight ago he was one of the most respected men in England. His friends were numerous and influential—he was the head of Gissing's Bank. What is he now? A man accused of robbery, and the proofs are so conclusive that nobody doubts his guilt. He is ruined, utterly and irretrievably. If he served his sentence, when he came out of prison he wouldn't have a friend in the world. I intend to rescue him and banish him from England. He is not an old man, and will be able to take care of himself and his daughter. It is heavy punishment to a man like Gissing—very heavy punishment."

"But wouldn't the Brotherhood help him?" she asked, leaning back in her chair, and studying Kingston's weak-

looking features. She never could understand how much power he really possessed, but she knew it to be stupendous. His eight years' exile on the Iron Island had changed him entirely, though, to judge from outward appearances, no alteration was visible.

"The Brotherhood help him?" he repeated. "My dear Dolores, that is the very last thing they would think of doing. He is no good to them now, and never will be any good. They know it—and he knows it. If anything, they will do all in their power to keep him in prison, for any day he might give the game away. It is extremely unlikely he would, but, in spite of his imprisonment, his word would carry weight, the more so because, being a man of high rank himself, the police would not hesitate to suspect other gentlemen as being accomplices."

"So they will either keep him in prison or kill him!" exclaimed Dolores. "How awful! It seems impossible that the little darling asleep in my cabin is his daughter. But you are doing right, Mr. Kingston. It would be terribly unjust on Ivy to let her return to England and find her father in prison, for we cannot keep her indefinitely."

"The police are still as far off the track as ever. They are beginning to relax their vigilance a little now that Sir Robert has been arrested. In any case it will be quite safe for you to return to England with her."

"But they would recognise her——"

"Not at all, Dolores. She is rigged out in entirely new clothes, and the very fact of her being upon my yacht makes the idea seem absurd."

"But why is it necessary for me to leave here?"

"Because," he answered, "I am going to impose on your generosity, and ask you to help me——"

Dolores bent forward eagerly.

"You wish me to help?" she asked. "Oh, I am delighted, Mr. Kingston! But how can I? Of what possible use can I be to you?"

"I wish you to repeat your clever performance of the Iron Island."

Dolores looked at him expectantly, thoroughly interested now. In her keen and womanly sympathy for him—realising the boundless extent of the wrong that had been done him—she wished for nothing better than to assist personally in his great campaign against the Brotherhood of Iron.

"My performance of the Iron Island?" she repeated. "I don't think I understand, Mr. Kingston."

"You disguised me as Don Sebastian, after we had captured him, so perfectly that the captain and officers of his own yacht did not detect the difference. Well, I wish you to do the same thing in England."

"You enjoy puzzling me, Mr. Kingston."

"Perhaps I had better tell you how I intend effecting Sir Robert's escape——"

"I cannot see any way clear myself," she interrupted.

"Yet my method is very simple. If Sir Robert is convicted, it is practically assured he will be taken immediately to Cragmoor Prison, in Devonshire. It is there that most of the gentlemen, or higher-class type of convict, is situated. The rougher, violent, 'Bill Sykes' person is practically unknown at Cragmoor."

Dolores listened attentively. It was nearly dark now, but they were quite to themselves.

"Now, I know for a fact that the Governor of Cragmoor Prison, Colonel Marsden, is one of the members of the Inner Council of the Brotherhood."

"Really!" cried Dolores, in amazement. "You astound me! These men seem to be everywhere."

"It is a stupendous organisation, Dolores. Its members are in every corner of the United Kingdom—in every trade—while the Inner Councillors mostly occupy important positions either in Government or private institutions. Until recently Detective Caine held a high post at Scotland Yard; Gissing was the head of Gissing's Bank. Now comes Colonel Marsden as Governor of Cragmoor Prison. As soon as the present business is dealt with it is my intention to bring about the downfall of Marsden. This rescuing of Sir Robert is entirely a side issue, for I'm in my present position to deal vengeance—to punish my persecutors, and wipe out the Brotherhood of Iron—rather than to rescue the very person from prison I have been instrumental in placing there."

"The situation was unforeseen," said Dolores. "When you planned your clever scheme whereby to ruin Sir Robert Gissing you were unaware of his daughter's existence. And she, being such a dear little creature, must have some consideration."

"Of course," he answered. "Whatever her father has done, she is innocence itself, and will have to be kept in ignorance of his disgrace. She must never grow up to look upon him with scorn and disgust."

"So for once you are going to allow one of your victims to go free," exclaimed Dolores. "You have a kind heart, Mr. Kingston."

"I hope I am not so cruel as to wish to see the innocent suffer on account of the guilty," replied Kingston quietly. "There is a way to prevent such a thing as that, and I am not hesitating to adopt it. Sir Robert must be rescued."

"It seems impossible to get him out of Cragmoor undetected."

"Yet, as I said, it is perfectly simple, Dolores. I will not say it is not without risk, because the risk is considerable, and I am quite prepared to take my chance if you are."

"You know I am, Mr. Kingston," she cried. "I couldn't imagine anything you planned going wrong or failing."

Kingston smiled.

"Oh, come," he said; "you're too flattering, Dolores! But to continue. Taking it for granted Sir Robert is conveyed to Cragmoor, we have the additional difficulty of having a particularly keen governor to deal with. He is not an Inner Councillor for nothing, you may be well assured. When I was banished to the Iron Island, right away in the Pacific, he had only just become a member, so I know nothing about him except what Fraser tells me."

"And what is that?"

"Well, it seems that members of the Brotherhood who are unfortunate enough to get 'nabbed,' when convicted, find their way to Cragmoor. Of course, a considerable number are sent to Portland or Wormwood Scrubbs, but most, being swell cracksmen, go to Devonshire for their holiday. Marsden, although unable to materially help them, sees that they get every luxury a convict can, and so makes their lot lighter than otherwise would have been the case. Also, he generally gets their sentences reduced."

"But he will want Sir Robert to remain in prison," interrupted Dolores, "for he will naturally think him dangerous."

"Exactly: that is where our difficulty comes in. Gissing will be very strictly looked after. Nevertheless, I think my plan will succeed."

"How shall I come in?"as ked his companion. "Whom do I have to disguise you as—a warder?"

"I am more ambitious than that," drawled Kingston. "I intend taking the place of Colonel Marsden for a few hours. During that few hours much will happen."

"But," began Dolores, "what you suggest will be impossible——"

Kingston rose languidly to his feet and glanced at the deserted bridge. The electric lights of the saloon seemed inviting, for it was now practically dark. Algiers looked beautiful, with the twinkling lights of the streets, houses, and shops reflected in the still waters of the harbour.

"Really, Dolores," Kingston murmured, "I never use the word 'impossible.' Everything is possible if you choose to make it so; it is only a matter of will power and determination. Another thing I have learned, too, is that cheek and audacity are everything in my work. Combine these two with coolness and quickness of action, and I really think that one is prepared for anything that comes."

"You have all those accomplishments, Mr. Kingston," exclaimed Dolores, "only they are almost superhumanly acute and multiplied. I know that when you say you will rescue Sir Robert within a month you mean he will be rescued."

"I shall do my best," said the other quietly. "But, come. Suppose we adjourn to the saloon? We can talk quietly there, and you will hear my plans. I must be ashore within two hours, and off for England. Fraser is doing the work alone at present."

"Work?" repeated Dolores, rising to her feet. "I thought nothing would be done until after the trial?"

"Being practically certain as to how matters will turn out," he replied, "I availed myself of an opportunity, and secured for Fraser—in disguise—the post of chauffeur to Colonel Marsden at Cragmoor Prison."

Dolores looked at him quickly, and smiled.

"You think of everything, Mr. Kingston! Fraser can't possibly be suspected, for Sir Robert is not even tried yet. What a fine idea to establish him there beforehand!"

"It is the details which require the most attention," said Kingston coolly. "Once let details be forgotten or overlooked, and one is put out of action instantly."

He turned, and strolled into the saloon, Dolores following, her thoughts full of this new project. Very soon she was engrossed in his story. The plan of action he was going to adopt seemed almost perfect. Everything was remembered and provided for—nothing forgotten.

"I don't see how it can fail," Dolores declared. "Everything you do, Mr. Kingston, appears to be so easy after you have told me how you are going to do it. Before that the task seems impossible to accomplish. It is the daring with which you set to work that sees you through."

"If a man stealthily crept into the doorway of an hotel

he would be thrown out in a moment," smiled Kingston, "whereas if he went boldly in and up the stairs nobody would question him. Audacity is a great thing."

"I remember how it assisted you in your duel with Sir Robert Gissing. He was entirely unsuspecting until the bomb fell."

"He little thinks that I, who have promised to get him from prison, caused him to be placed there. It seems rather a contradictory state of affairs, but, even though he escapes the years of punishment, he will have to bear the disgrace, and that will be more bitter to Gissing than anything, for he was a proud man. With his name and honour humbled in the dust, he will be like wax in my hands."

"It is a great notion sending Fraser to Cragmoor beforehand. As you have told me, he will be invaluable——"

The door opened, and the pretty little face of Ivy Gissing showed itself. After a shy glance at Kingston, she ran forward and threw herself on Dolores' lap.

"Well, dear, do you feel better now?" inquired the latter.

"Oh, yes, thank you, auntie," answered the child. "Headache's all gone now. Who's that man?" she added, with candid curiosity.

"She calls me auntie now," explained Dolores to Kingston. "You really wouldn't believe how good she's been. I believe it will be a wrench when she has to go away——"

"Go 'way?" echoed Ivy blankly. "That man's not goin' to take me with him, is he, auntie? Oh, I don't want to go 'way!"

Dolores laughed, and stroked the little girl's hair.

"It's all right, dear; you're not going yet," she smiled. "You're going to stay with me for a long while yet."

"Don't want to leave you, auntie," said the child seriously. "Don't want to go back home—or to school."

Kingston watched interestedly. It was hard to look upon Ivy as the daughter of such a man as Gissing. She was such a lively, winning little creature. True, Sir Robert, as a rule, had always been genial and merry, but while his geniality had been merely a veneer, Ivy's winning manners were absolutely sincere.

"Jove!" said Kingston suddenly, as his glance fell upon the saloon clock. "I shall have to be moving. I'm sorry I can't stay longer, Dolores, but I think I have told you everything. All you have to do is to wait here until you receive a wire from me. After that——"

"I know exactly what to do, Mr. Kingston," interrupted Dolores; "and you can rely on me to carry out your instructions to the letter."

"It is very good of you, helping me in this way, Dolores, and I don't know what I should do without you."

He looked at her face earnestly, but saw only the kindly features of an elderly governess—her own beautiful face was hidden beneath the clever disguise. The eyes, however, remained the same—nothing could alter the brilliance of those.

"I swore, while on the Iron Island, to do all in my power to assist you in your work against this infamous Brotherhood," she said slowly, "and I am more than gratified that you are willing to accept my services."

"With both of us against them the Inner Council will very soon cease to exist. Once this little matter is out of the way, and Sir Robert settled in New Zealand—where I intend taking him—we can continue the work of destruction. Now, however, I really must be going. Just a word with Captain Morrison while the boat is being lowered, and then I'll say au revoir."

She watched his well-proportioned figure as he walked to the door of the saloon, then found herself compelled to answer the numerous questions put forward by her little charge.

Very shortly afterwards Kingston shook her very politely by the hand before a boatload of sailors, said "Good-bye, Miss Beck!" and stepped down the accommodation ladder.

And when the mail-boat for France left Algiers Frank Kingston, as one of the saloon passengers, was boring every other Britisher on the boat with his painfully inane jokes and idle conversation. His acting was superb—so superb, that only one man in England knew him at his true worth, and that man was John Fraser, his faithful ally.

Three Years' Penal Servitude.

"Sir Robert Gissing case! Verdict!"

The placards were all over London, and newsboys were doing a roaring trade. The case was one of unusual interest, and the evening papers were sold out almost before the ink was dry.

At the Hotel Cyril, in the Strand, Frank Kingston was reading the reports while he leisurely partook of tea. He had attended the trial himself, and was merely glancing through the newspaper to refresh his memory.

"I was certain of the verdict," he mused. "Right from the first the case went against him; nobody was surprised. I was right, also, in supposing he would be confined at Cragmoor."

He sipped his tea thoughtfully. Immediately after the sentence had been passed he had, after considerable trouble, been granted an interview with Sir Robert Gissing before the latter was conveyed to the train. He glanced at his watch now. The time was nearly half-past five; the interview was to be at six.

"Plenty of time," he thought. "I'm merely going to tell him I shall keep my word, and release him within a month. By Jove, this little affair is going to prove highly interesting, after all! Marsden is a member of the Brotherhood, so I shall be working against them even though I have temporarily changed my tactics. I have an idea that Sir Robert will change his character after this blow, and when a man reforms and becomes honest I can forgive him anything."

Ten minutes later the commissionaire at the main entrance of the hotel pocketed a liberal tip after having hailed a taxi. Kingston was soon whirled to the Old Bailey, where, after many formalities, he was conducted to the prisoner's cell.

"Only five minutes, officer," he said carelessly, to the constable who unlocked the door.

"Very good, sir," replied the man, who wondered what this young fop wanted with Sir Robert.

Kingston passed inside, and the door clanged to. Sir Robert, already in convict garb, which did not suit him at all, was seated on a bench, broken-spirited and sullen. At the sight of Kingston he started to his feet eagerly.

"Ah, Kingston!" he cried. "Thank Heaven, you have come! I had been thinking you had forgotten me in my terrible trouble. To-day's proceedings have entirely unnerved me—I am broken up."

"I have not forgotten you, Sir Robert," said Frank Kingston coldly, never overlooking for an instant that this man had been a cruel tyrant in the earlier part of his life, whatever he was now.

"But, tell me—have the police found my daughter?" cried Gissing, in genuine anguish. "Or is she still undiscovered—probably dead?"

"The police have got no further, Sir Robert, but," Kingston hastened to add, as his companion groaned aloud, "I know where she is, and can produce her at any moment."

Sir Robert started back.

"Is this the truth?" he cried; but Kingston grasped his arm firmly.

"Quietly!" he whispered. "Remember I am about to perpetrate a punishable crime. To effect your escape from prison is no light task——"

"Do you mean it, Kingston? Do you really intend to do as you say? I cannot believe it! You, of all the men in the world, offering to release me from prison! It is impossible—utterly impossible, and I am a fool to hope——"

"Sir Robert," interrupted Kingston coldly and tensely, "I have given you my word that I will do as I say. Will you take it—will you believe in me?"

"It seems so utterly——"

"Will you believe in me?"

Gissing shook himself, and looked Kingston straight in the eyes.

"Yes," he muttered excitedly. "I will believe in you. I will go to Cragmoor and await deliverance and the reunion with my little girl——"

"It is for her sake, remember," put in Frank Kingston—"for her sake, Sir Robert."

"And not for mine?" cried the baronet. "Why not for mine, Kingston?"

"Why not for yours?" replied Kingston scornfully. "Because, Sir Robert, you are not worth risking my liberty for! Even if I allowed you to serve your full sentence, your punishment would be inadequate."

"But I am innocent!" cried Gissing. "Before Heaven, I swear that I know nothing of this charge made against me!"

"The jury have thought otherwise, notwithstanding your own declaration," exclaimed Kingston drily. "But seeing no reason why your child should suffer for your crimes, I pledge myself to release you from prison within a month from this date. After that you will start life over again in another country."

"And I swear that I will lead an honest life in the future!" cried the baronet. "Once let me clasp my child in my arms, and feel myself free, and I will work and let Ivy grow up so that she will respect her father."

"You mean that?" cried Kingston quickly, noticing the other's slip—the slip of saying he would lead an honest life, which proved that hitherto he had led a dishonest one.

"I mean it with all my heart!" cried Sir Robert. "I have done with everything, and will start all over again. The Brotherhood shall know me no more——"

He paused, remembering what he was saying; then, caring nothing for the Brotherhood, he continued:

"If you succeed in releasing me, I give you my word of honour I will do as I say."

Frank Kingston could see that he was speaking the truth, and held out his hand. All his enmity for Gissing was gone. The latter was punished severely, anyhow. He would never be able to call himself by his own name again, and when he fled from prison he would be practically penniless. Yes, his punishment was far from being light.

Somehow, Kingston knew he was speaking from his heart when he said he would go straight in future. The awful weeks he had lately passed through had opened his eyes: he realised that, after all, honesty was the best policy. So Kingston shook his hand heartily.

A minute later the constable came, and the visitor was escorted out. And that same night, while Kingston was lolling about at his club, as if he hadn't a serious thought in the world, Sir Robert Gissing, accompanied by two other convicts, travelled down to Devonshire in the charge of two stalwart warders.

Having arrived at the station for Cragmoor, the convicts were hustled to the waiting prison-van, and conveyed to the straggling pile of buildings which formed Cragmoor Prison.

The moon shone through a damp mist, and the dark outline of the convict settlement stood silhouetted against the sky. All round stretched the undulating moor, bleak and chill, with an appearance of loneliness and desolation about it difficult to describe.

A moderate wind sighed over the moor, and the giant tors stood out in black prominence from the rest of the country. Just a few lights showed themselves at the prison—otherwise none could be seen. What few cottages there were scattered about were invisible in the darkness.

A lonely spot—enough to strike chill in anybody's heart. Escape from that building seemed impossible, and even the chance of getting clear away was very remote. How was Sir Robert Gissing to be rescued?

It was a question the baronet asked himself every minute without coming to any satisfactory answer.

Colonel Marsden Goes to London.

The prison clock struck eight, and the doors of the garage adjoining Colonel Marsden's private residence swung open. The governor's house was quite separate and apart from the rest of the prison, though connected with it. The front of the house was ivy-covered and imposing—quite different from the rest of the dingy buildings.

The outlook from the front windows was better than might have been expected, for here a small avenue of trees on either side of a short drive took off some of that bleakness. On one side of the house the stables were situated, while on the other a well-kept lawn and flower-beds formed a pretty garden.

The doors of the garage swung open, and Colonel Marsden's new chauffeur appeared. He was a short man, attired neatly, with light hair and tawny moustache and beard. His name was Stewart, and he did his work well and conscientiously. Nobody could possibly have suspected him of being disguised, much less of his being Fraser, Frank Kingston's valet.

Having propped the doors open, Fraser proceeded to run the car out—a big, six-cylinder Daimler. It was rather fortunate for Fraser that the machine was a new one, and required very little attention, for although he could drive well enough, he was not a mechanic.

But Fraser, having learned the lesson of thoroughness from his master, was spending all his spare time in acquainting himself with the mechanism of the motor. The knowledge would always come in handy at future times.

"Say, Stewart!"

Fraser looked round. The governor's butler was standing at the kitchen door.

"Call me?" he inquired.

"Yes; the colonel wants you to have the car round to the front in half-an-hour."

"Where's he going? Do you know?"

"London, I think. Wants you to drive him to the station."

"Oh, all right!"

Fraser continued his work, and half-an-hour later, with his engine humming musically, he presented himself at the front entrance. It was a few minutes before the governor appeared.

"Ah, Stewart, you're ready, I see! There's plenty of time. I only want you to drive me to the station."

Colonel Marsden was a thick-set man, with plenty of brute strength and courage. He wore a thick, stubby moustache, and abundant side-whiskers, while his chin—clean-shaven—had a hard, determined look about it.

His walk was brisk, though ponderous, and his voice harsh. With a few words to his butler—the colonel was unmarried; most Inner Councillors were, in fact—he stepped into the waiting car. Fraser slipped the clutch in, and very soon they were bowling along the moorland road in the direction of the station—a distance of four miles.

About a couple of miles from the prison—standing quite to itself in a hollow—was a small cottage. It had been empty for some time, but the day previous the governor had learned that an old man from Tavistock had rented it. It was furnished, and all ready for occupation.

The colonel, being a talkative man, told the fact to Fraser as they passed. The latter, although apparently stolid, felt a feeling of chagrin pass through him as he heard the news; for he knew that Kingston, disguised as an artist, was after that very cottage himself.

"Confound it!" thought Fraser. "The boss'll either have to buy this old fellow out, or find another house—and they ain't very abundant about here, either. I shall have to let him know about this."

Arriving at the station, Colonel Marsden had ample time to catch the London train. It was a long journey to town, but the train was an express, so covered the distance in good time.

The colonel chartered a taxi, and drove straight to Grosvenor Square—to Lord Mount-Fannell's residence. The Chief of the Brotherhood of Iron was in, and his visitor was shown into his library immediately—the same room to which Sir Robert Gissing had been escorted but a few days previously. Lord Mount-Fannell rose from an easy-chair before the fire as Marsden entered.

Greetings being over, the Governor of Cragmoor Prison poured himself out a whisky-and-soda, lit a cigar, and settled himself in another easy-chair.

"Well," he said, "I've come here, Mount-Fannell, mainly to speak to you with regard to Gissing."

"Ah, yes!" said his lordship. "A most singular affair altogether, Marsden. Personally I am at a loss to account for Gissing's strange action. He came to me a day or two before his arrest, and asked me if the Brotherhood could assist in the search for his daughter. Of course, such a thing was impossible."

"Of course."

"Yet he was, apparently, very much concerned. I had never realised how greatly he was attached to the child until then."

"But why was he fool enough to steal those bonds?" asked Marsden. "An old hand like Gissing surely knew what the result would be. He left such a vast amount of simple clues!"

"It is evident he was terribly worried. The loss of his child preyed upon his nerves to such an extent that he took the bonds to pay the £20,000 ransom with. He had not got the money otherwise, and these exceptional circumstances caused the judge to make the sentence as light as possible."

The two men were silent for a moment.

"It is a pity he did this," said the colonel—"a great pity. He was certainly a hindrance rather than a help to the Brotherhood this last year, but to get himself arrested was the height of folly. It looks so bad among the common members, for one thing."

"Exactly!" agreed the chief. "Besides that, he is now a danger to us. During his three years' confinement he will have time to think matters over—to realise what his career has brought him to. He knows he is of no more use to the Brotherhood, and will probably get himself to believe that his downfall was our fault."

"That is very probable. Moreover, when his term is up he will know that he is looked upon with scorn by the general public—the whole world, in fact—and will have a desire to let us share his downfall. Having nothing to lose, he will undoubtedly give the police valuable information concerning us."

"And he knows a lot—quite enough to wreck our whole organisation," put in Lord Mount-Fannell, with a frown. "Something will have to be done, Marsden. A general meeting must be called, and the matter decided. For the present, however, you had better keep a very strict watch on him. See that he is kept to himself, and if he shows any tendency to be talkative, put him in——"

"I think I know best what to do, Chief," smiled the governor. "I can manage my own prison. It seems a pity to go against one of our own councillors, but we must take precautions."

"We are not going to see the Brotherhood wiped out of existence for the sake of one man!" exclaimed the Chief. "The difficulty is that we don't know whether Gissing is well-disposed or otherwise, but as the latter is more likely the case, we must take steps accordingly."

"I suppose," said Marsden slowly, "he will never be allowed to blab, even if he intends to?"

Lord Mount-Fannell gave his companion a quick glance.

"No," he said significantly. "Gissing's mouth will have to be closed, either before he leaves Cragmoor, or immediately afterwards, before he has a chance to lay any information."

"In other words, you mean to have him kil——"

Lord Mount-Fannell waved his hand.

"My dear Marsden," he smiled, "there is really no necessity to go into details at this stage. Everything will be decided at the general meeting. There is not the least hurry.

We have three years in which to form our plans, so you see the uselessness of discussing them now!"

"I only called to hear your views upon the matter," remarked the colonel. "I have other business in London, and as my train home leaves fairly early I am afraid I can stay only a few minutes longer."

"Despite your isolation when in Devonshire you appear to find time to run up to London fairly often."

"Once a fortnight, usually," replied the governor. "I simply couldn't live on that dreary moor if I didn't have my spirits enlivened every now and again."

Soon after he took his departure, and set about attending to his other business. As a rule he stayed the night in London, returning the following day. On this occasion, however, he intended returning almost immediately by the afternoon train.

His first-class compartment was occupied by several other passengers most of the way, but towards the latter part of the journey he was alone, except for an elderly gentleman and a young fellow, who gave every appearance of being an artist.

At Tavistock a slight incident occurred. Just as the train was about to start, and after the governor had closed the window after glancing out on to the platform, the door was wrenched hurriedly open, and a bent old man bundled in. The door slammed, and the train continued its journey.

The old fellow sat in the luxurious cushions awkwardly, looking about him with a half-fearful expression. His face was weather-beaten and wrinkled, while his eyes seemed rather watery. A mass of straggling grey whiskers surrounded his chin, giving him the appearance of an old salt more than anything else.

"Seems to me as if I'd got outer me course some'ow," he muttered. "That there guard's bin an' shoved me in the fust-class!" He looked up at the colonel. "I'm main sorry, sir, to disturb you like this 'ere, but it weren't my fault! That there guard, swab 'im——"

"Yes, sir; I meant to get there earlier, only I missed the last train. I'm sure I dunno 'ow I'm goin' to git acrost the moor."

"I am the governor of the prison," said Marsden importantly, "and as my car will go right past your cottage, I have no objection to giving you a lift. It is rather a rough journey on foot, especially if you don't know the road."

The old man opened his eyes in surprise.

"Did ye say ye'll gi' me a ride in yer motey-car?" he said. "Swab me, sir, I dunno 'ow to thank you!"

"I should be hard-hearted indeed if I allowed you to find your way alone," replied Marsden, noticing that his fellow-passengers were interested in the conversation.

"It's good on yer, sir," muttered the old mariner. "My name's Ben Jenkins, sir, an' if I can be of any service to yer——"

"No, my man. I imagine you'll have quite enough to do to look after yourself."

In a short time now the journey's end was reached. Old Jenkins and the governor were the only two who alighted at the little station. Fraser was waiting with the big Daimler, and very soon it was travelling rapidly over the bleak moor.

The ancient sailor sat in his seat rather uncomfortably. This was evidently a new experience for him, and he couldn't quite make it out. At last the distant lights of the prison came into view, and Fraser pulled up with a jerk. Colonel Marsden looked at the little cottage curiously.

"You are in darkness, I see," he said. "Have you any lamps?"

"Oh, that's all right, thankee, sir," replied Jenkins, clambering into the roadway. "I've bin 'ere afore, an' got 'er all snug. I knows where everything is, sir—candles an' that. She's all provisioned in ship's fare, sir. I've bin used to it all me life, so to speak."

The governor smiled.

"It was not your fault, of course," he said. "However, I suppose you don't object to travelling first-class, do you?"

"Can't say as I object, sir," answered the old man, clutching his basket. "Only I was a-thinkin' as you gents wouldn't like me 'ere——"

"Oh, you needn't worry about that, my man. It was better than losing the train, wasn't it?"

"It's late enough as it is, sir. It'll be that dark on the moor, I shall lose me bearin's afore I'm clear o' port—I mean ter say, sir, not bein' able ter git away——"

"The moor?" repeated Colonel Marsden. "Where are you bound for, then?"

The old chap looked at him respectfully.

"Yer see, sir, 'avin' given up sailorin', an' 'avin a little pension ter live on, I took a cottage on the moor, right out o' sight o' land, as it were, 'cept for the prison——"

"The prison!" echoed the young man, who looked like an artist. "Rather gloomy surroundings, eh?"

"Are you the man who has rented the little cottage on the main road, two miles from Cragmoor Prison?" inquired the governor curiously.

The old sailor looked up in surprise.

"That's me, sir!" he said. "You see, my boy's rather 'ot tempered, an' in a fight 'e knocked a chap about more'n 'e first meant. 'E didn't mean ter do it, sir, I knows that. It were only 'is 'ot temper."

"Are you referring to the young fellow who is sentenced for ten years for the manslaughter of a sailor at Plymouth?"

"That's 'im, sir! 'E didn't mean ter do it, swab me if 'e did. I shall be dead afore 'e comes out, so I thought that if I got near the prison I might catch a glimpse of 'im now an' agin."

"I understand," said the colonel. "You are taking up your new abode rather late in the evening."

"Oh, that's all right, then! You look after yourself now?"

Old Jenkins looked up at the governor in the glare of the acetylene lamps, and grinned.

"Lor' bless ye, sir, I ain't so old as all that there. I've tended myself this forty-five year past, an' I ain't struck no rocks yet. Don't you worry about me, sir, thankin' ye all the same for askin'."

"Well, good-night, Jenkins! I hope you'll get on all right in your new abode."

"Good-night, sir; thankin' yer for the lift. It's that dark I know I shouldn't 'a' bin able to keep to me course alone."

"Well, you're here now, anyhow," said the governor. "All right, Stewart!"

The latter slipped in his clutch, and the big Daimler continued its journey, leaving the peculiar old sailor standing in the middle of the road.

With a soft chuckle to himself he walked up the little pathway which led to the front door of the cottage, fumbled with the key for a moment, then stepped inside. As if well acquainted with his surroundings, he struck a match, and lit a couple of candles which rested on the mantelpiece.

Then he looked round him, and dropped into an easy-chair. On his features was a smile, but a smile hardly in keeping with his weather-beaten visage.

"Well," he drawled, in a languid voice, "I've pulled it off rippingly. During that short conversation with the excellent Marsden I have memorised the intonation of his voice and his manner of speech. Really a most simple task. It was real smart of Fraser to let me know of to-day's journey. Marsden will never suspect me in a thousand years."

(Next week's instalment of this popular serial will contain the thrilling story of Sir Robert Gissing's escape from the great prison on the moor.)

Concluding Chapters of this Great Sea Story.

In the Service of the King.

By LIEUTENANT LEFEVRE.

The Pirates' Last Stand.

"Stand by and load your guns!" said Captain Garvin coolly. "Round in the weather-head braces! Mind, Mr. Bigben, she is not to go about. Haul over the boom-sheet!" he added, as the frigate payed off. "Now, Mr. Bigben, helm amidships!"

The frigate had now sternway. It was a skilful manœuvre. The helm was shifted, and so the frigate backed between the schooners again.

By this time the guns were reloaded and run out, and once more both broadsides poured a deadly hail into the now riddled and shot-swept pirates.

As the smoke rolled away to leeward, some effect of the broadsides could be seen. Both vessels had suffered; but the Albatross had suffered most. Her foremast was down, and she had lost her main boom, while her hull was smashed in a score of places.

"By thunder!" muttered Captain Garvin. "I don't think we shall ever tow that fellow into Kingston Harbour, Mr. Lancing! If I make no mistake, she is sinking fast."

Mr. Lancing glanced at the weather schooner for a moment.

"Sinking fast!" he repeated. "It will be over in a few minutes!"

It was.

As they watched from the decks of the Cynthia, the stern of the Albatross began to settle rapidly in the water. Her bows rose up so that her bowsprit pointed to the skies.

They could see the half-maddened wretches on her deck leap into the sea; they could hear the helpless wounded shrieking for aid. Then she was gone. For some moments the water swirled round the spot where she had floated a few seconds before, sucking down the struggling wretches into the depths. They could see the swimmers vainly battling against that awful and irresistible power. Then slowly they sank one by one, some flinging up their arms and uttering one last cry for aid, some going to their doom silently.

With whitened face and starting eyes Oswald stood leaning against the bulwarks watching the foundering of the Albatross. Had Norah been in the ill-fated vessel? She had given him life. Was he numbered among those who had sent her to her death?

He shivered from head to foot, and leaned dizzily against the bulwarks; and while he stood there, Captain Garvin suddenly saw him.

"Mr. Smith, come up here!" he ordered.

Oswald mounted to the quarter-deck.

"Are you hurt? Have you been struck?" the captain said kindly.

Oswald shook his head.

"No, sir!" he replied quietly.

"But there is something wrong. Man, you look like death! Good heavens, I remember!" the captain added suddenly. "The Wilsons, and the niece—the girl who saved your life! Is that it, Smith?"

Oswald nodded dumbly.

"Perhaps she was on the schooner that went down," he said quietly, a moment later.

"By heavens, I trust not! No, no, it is not likely; she will be on the other—the Rattler, that is Kester's vessel; depend on it, she will be there. Our first duty is to our King and country, and to humanity; that duty demands the destruction of these pests; but that noble girl must not share the fate of those ruffians. I had intended to sink the Rattler, as we have sunk the other; but I will alter my plans now."

The Rattler lay as a log wallowing in the trough of the sea, weighed down by the wreckage of her overhead gear. Her decks were strewn with the dead and wounded; but those who lived bore upon their faces the look of desperate men, who, knowing that they had to look forward to nothing but death, were resolved to strike one last blow before being finally overcome. As the frigate ranged alongside, half a dozen shots were fired into her from the deck of the Rattler, but the fire was not returned this time.

"Ready grappling irons!" sang out Mr. Lancing. "Let go, my lads!" And the next moment the two vessels were locked together in a deadly embrace.

Already Oswald had leapt into the rigging. His was the first foot to touch the pirate's deck, and as he leapt forward waving his cutlass above his head, half a dozen swarthy ruffians rushed at him with long, murderous knives.

But a score of the frigate's crew were at his heels.

One of the pirates, whose hideous face even at that moment seemd strangely familiar to Oswald, lunged at him with his long knife. The knife ripped open Oswald's sleeve, and before the man could strike again, Oswald's cutlass had laid his skull open. Even as the man, uttering his death-howl, fell, Oswald recognised him. It was Bimby, the negro who had been their servant during their stay on the Black Rose.

And now among the hordes of pirates he caught a momentary glimpse of the hideous mulatto, Manuel, and close beside him the towering form and fine face of that arch-villain of them all, Kester.

There was a smile on Kester's lips—a smile, it seemed to Oswald, of contempt. The end that he had always known must come sooner or later had come at last, and it had found him prepared to die.

Hand to hand, the bright steel of their weapons dripping with newly-spilt blood, they fought, neither side giving an inch. They fell together, hacking at each other as they fell, pirates and Britons.

It was an orgie of blood. The decks were slippery with it; the smell of it hung in the air; and over all the bright sun shone down from a cloudless sky, and the waves danced in the sunlight beneath. Somehow, Oswald found himself for a moment by Maxwell's side. He saw a brawny negro raise his scimitar with both hands, and aim a terrible blow at Maxwell's head; but the blow never fell, for the negro reeled backwards with the point of Oswald's sword in his throat.

Maxwell never knew how near to death he had been at that moment. The next instant he sprang forward; there was a flash of steel, a shriek, and Manuel, the mulatto, fell screaming to the deck. A moment more and he was trodden underfoot by his own men, stamped out of existence by the frenzied miscreants over whom he had once ruled.

"One rush, and we carry the deck!" shouted Oswald.

He saw his chance. The pirates, reduced in numbers, were in confusion; their very lust for blood had blinded them as they staggered about the deck and stumbled over the bodies of their fallen comrades.

The men answered Oswald's shout with a hoarse yell.

"Charge!" he shouted, and they swept across the deck, cutting and slashing. Their rush was irresistible; the pirates fell before them like corn before the scythe of the reaper; but even when beaten to their knees, they struck back, fighting while even death had laid hold of them.

They had cleared the deck from side to side. A small group of pirates had retreated forward, where they took up their last stand. In the centre of the group stood Kester.

Even at that moment Oswald felt pity for the man. He knew how vile he was; he knew what enormities he had committed; but he stood there now, waiting for death, with none of the savage bitterness on his face that those who stood round him exhibited.

The sailors had wheeled round, and now, led by Maxwell, they charged the little group on the foredeck. For one moment more Oswald saw Kester's head and shoulders towering over the rest—only for a moment; the next he was gone, and the victorious sailors had passed over the spot where a few moments ago he had stood.

And now Oswald dashed down the companion-way, his heart beating rapidly, and quivering from head to foot with eagerness and anxiety.

Was Norah here? Was she safe, or had she been on the Albatross?

At the foot of the stairs he stopped and called her name aloud; but there was no answer.

Then suddenly a chill dread gripped his heart. He remembered that he had seen no sign of either of the Wilsons on the deck of the Rattler. Had they gone down with the Albatross? If so, then Norah, too, must have perished.

Maddened with anxiety, he forced open the doors of the cabins and peered in, to meet only with disappointment. Nowhere was there a sign of a living being. He turned the corner of the passage, and then sprang back with a low cry, for unexpectedly he had come face to face with a man.

It was Joseph Wilson.

He was standing there in the shadow with a pistol in his hand.

"You!" he cried. "You! Hang you!" he raised the pistol and fired, and as he did so Oswald sprang forward; he felt something sear his cheek like a hot iron, but he was unconscious of the pain, for his hand was on young Wilson's throat.

Here, in the narrow, dimly-lighted passage, they fought in silence, swaying backwards and forwards. Then, with a crash, they fell together, Wilson undermost.

(This splendid serial story will be concluded in an early issue.)

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