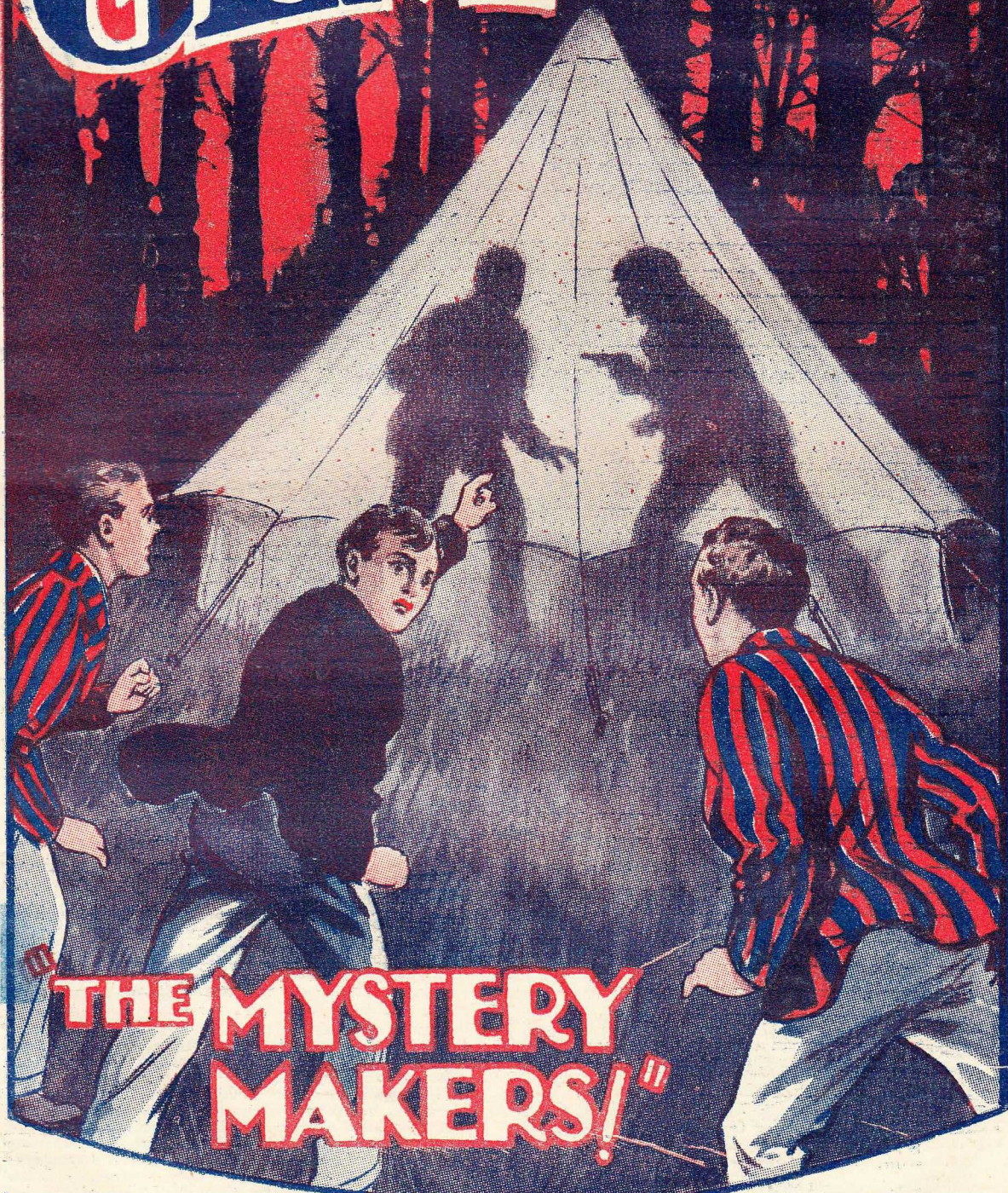


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THE GEM 2^d



THE MYSTERY MAKERS!"

WHERE IS KERR'S FATHER? WHO'S THE 'ARTIST' CAMPING ON—

The MYSTERY MAKERS/

By
Martin
Clifford

CHAPTER 1.

Tricky Trimble!

"AND two dozen jam-tarts—
twopenny ones!"
"Very good, Master
Figgins!"

"And a large shilling madeira
cake, and one of those two-bob
plum cakes!"

"Oh, yes, Master Figgins!"

"And a couple of dozen cheese-
cakes, three pounds of chocolate
biscuits, and one of those five-bob
boxes of choocs, Mrs. Taggles!"

"I—I say, Figgins—"

"Hallo! Kick that fat rotter out,
Kerr!"

"Oh, really, Figgins—
Yaroooop!"

Trimble of the School House
Fourth yelled as Kerr obeyed Figgins,
but he quickly sidled back into
the old tuckshop again, rubbing
himself.

The fat junior seemed almost to
be in a trance, in fact. He just
rubbed himself mechanically as he
blinked with goggling eyes at
George Figgins.

Rarely had Baggy Trimble heard
any fellow give such a lavish order
to Dame Taggles as Figgins had
just given. Trimble's mouth was
watering, and the fear of a second
kick from Kerr's boot did not keep
him out of the tuckshop.

Figgins was going on again:

"One dozen fresh sausage-rolls, Mrs. Taggles! Two
dozen bottles of ginger-beer! Two tins of pineapple!
Three pounds of mixed biscuits! And—and, yes—we'll
want two large tins of condensed milk! Think that's
enough, Kerr, old chap?"

"I think so!" said Kerr, with a chuckle. "Should be
enough! If we manage to pack that little lot into six of
us we'll have to get a steamer to tow us home!"

"I say, you fellows—"

"Well, it's your giddy birthday picnic, and you're paying
for it!" chuckled George Figgins. "So it's for you to
say, old top! I fancy that's enough, though! That's the
lot, then, Mrs. Taggles!"

"Thank you, Master Figgins!"

Obviously, Dame Taggles was more than impressed by
the enormous order Figgins had been giving on behalf of
his chum Kerr.

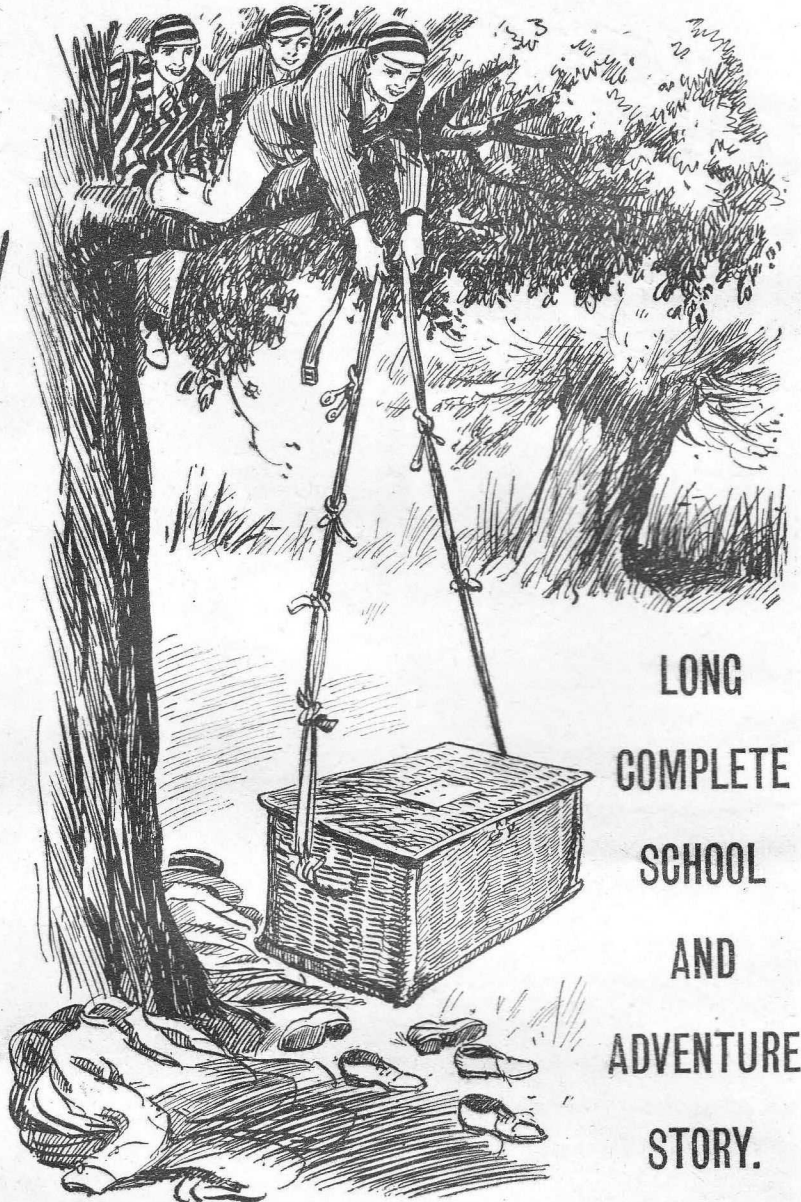
"I say, Figgins, old fellow—"

Trimble was interrupting again. Trimble spoke to
Figgins as if he was speaking to a long-lost brother who'd
turned up as a millionaire.

"Hallo! That fat worm here again—"

"Oh, really, Figgins. I've as much right in the tuckshop

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LONG
COMPLETE
SCHOOL
AND
ADVENTURE
STORY.

as you have, old chap!" said Trimble reproachfully. "I
say, what a whacking lot of grub you've ordered! Look
here, you'll want someone to look after it for you! I'm
your man, Figgy!"

"Are you?" ejaculated Figgins.

"It makes all the difference on a picnic—having someone
to look after the grub while you enjoy yourselves," urged
Baggy earnestly.

"It certainly would—if you happened to be looking after
it!" agreed Figgins grimly. "It would be a giddy picnic
without grub—for us! Hook it, you fat ass!"

"Outside, you podgy School House worm!" snorted
Kerr.

"Hop it!" said Fatty Wynn aggressively. "Of all the
nerve!"

Baggy Trimble certainly had "a nerve." His company
was never sought after by School House fellows. It was
less likely to be wanted by the fellows from a rival House.
But Baggy was an optimist.

He tried again, undeterred by the New House glares.

"I—I say, look here! I know I'm a School House man,
but my—my heart's in the New House, you know!" he said.
"In fact, I'm thinking of getting transferred—I can't stand
those School House worms, and— Here, wharrer—
Yoop! Yow! Yarooogh!"

Three boots helped Baggy through the school tuckshop

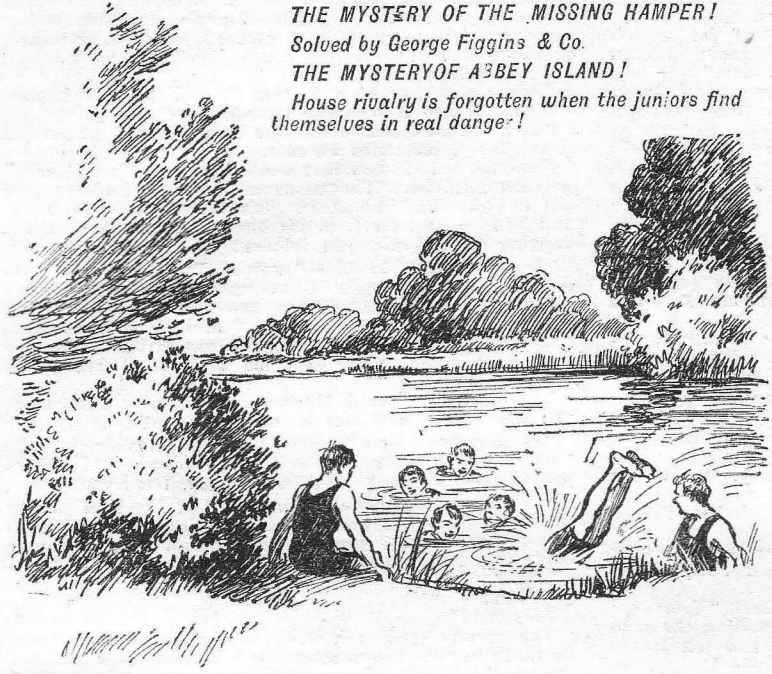
—ABBEY ISLAND? TOM MERRY & CO. SOLVE THE MYSTERY!

THE MYSTERY OF THE MISSING HAMPER!

Solved by George Figgins & Co.

THE MYSTERY OF ABBEY ISLAND!

House rivalry is forgotten when the juniors find themselves in real danger!



With the book was a birthday-card—"To darling little Francis, from his loving Auntie Flora."

"He, he, he!" giggled Trimble. "I bet old Kerr will use it as a football! Never mind, he'll take the will for the giddy deed! Here goes!"

Cramming the paper and the card into a ball and throwing it away, Baggy tucked the book under his arm and hurried towards the tuckshop. Kerr would be obliged to do the decent thing now. A fellow who gave a birthday present was always asked to the birthday party.

He sighted the New House trio just emerging from the tuckshop, and he hurried over to them.

"Hallo, here he is again!" remarked Figgins. "Get your boots ready, chaps!"

"Oh, really, Figgy! I say, Kerr, old chap!" said Trimble, eyeing the trio's boots cautiously. "Dash it all, can't you be decent to a fellow who only wants to give you a thumping present?"

"Eh? What's that?" said Kerr, staring.

"You kicked me, Kerr!" said Trimble reproachfully. "And I only wanted to tell you that I'd bought you a birthday present. I—I always thought a lot of you, old chap. It's only a book—"

"Well, my hat! You've bought me a present?" ejaculated Kerr.

"Yes, old chap!"

"Then go and bury it!" said Kerr. "Or, better still, sell it to pay one of your giddy debts with, old fat man!"

"He, he, he!" giggled Baggy, deciding to take that as a joke. "I say, here you are, Kerry, old man—a ripping book! It cost rather a lot, but I don't mind shelling out at a time like this. Many happy returns, old chap!"

And Trimble handed over the book. Kerr blinked at it. Then he turned over the pages. He gave a sudden jump as his eyes fell on a written inscription on the flyleaf of "Good Little Georgie."

"What the thump—" he ejaculated. "Why, you fat beast, look here!"

Trimble looked. The written inscription, in a decidedly feminine hand ran: "To my dear nephew, Francis, from his loving Auntie Flora. September, 1930."

"Oh lor!" gasped Trimble.

He was undone. Tricky Trimble had been a trifle too tricky. He turned abruptly, intending to go while the going was good. But the wrathful Kerr was too quick for him, and Trimble roared as the Scots junior grabbed him.

"What's the game?" demanded Figgins. "What—"

"Look at the book!" gasped Kerr wrathfully. "This fat rotter must have met the postman and opened the parcel, of course!"

Figgins picked up the book from the ground and glanced inside. Then he understood.

"Well, my hat! And he tried to palm it off on you as a present from himself!" stuttered Figgy.

"I—I say, it's a mistake!" gasped Trimble. "Oh dear! I never thought of looking in—I mean, the people in the shop must have written that inside!"

"You fat fibber!" roared Kerr. "This is from my Aunt Flora at Carlisle. You've collared it from old Blagg—"

"Nothing of the kind!" gasped Baggy. "I—I bought it in Wayland—went over specially for it. Besides, the parcel was addressed to me—you can ask old Blagg! I never even dreamed of chucking away the wrapping and saying it was from me, and—yaroooooop!"

Bump! Bump! Bump!

Baggy's yells were ear-splitting as the New House trio fell upon him. They bumped him, and they rolled him, and then, as he staggered to his feet, they planted three boots behind him. Breathless and winded as he was, Baggy fairly flew into the distance.

"Well, the fat little cad!" panted Kerr. "Did you ever hear of such—Hallo, what's this?"

It was a letter addressed to Francis Kerr, and it had obviously fallen from Trimble's pocket. Kerr breathed

doorway. Even the prospect of having Baggy as a New House man did not seem to do the trick with Figgins & Co. The next moment Baggy's face, red with wrath, popped round the tuckshop doorway again.

"Yah! Beasts!" he hooted. "Keep your rotten picnic! Yah! New House beasts! I'll tell Tom Merry about the picnic now—you see if I don't! I wouldn't be found dead in your measly New House—"

Figgins made a move towards the door, and the fat youth broke off hastily and bolted across the quad towards the gates.

There he mouched about disconsolately. He was disappointed. Really, he had not had much hope of persuading Figgins & Co. to let him come to the great birthday picnic—hardly any at all. But hope springs eternal in the human breast. Baggy was human, and he hoped a little. Now he was disappointed.

"Beasts!" he murmured. "My hat! I'm forgetting! I must find Tom Merry and get him to raid that blessed New House picnic somehow. I'll get my whack then, anyway!"

Baggy was just about to hurry indoors when the postman came through the gates. Being an optimist, Baggy rushed towards him at once.

"Anything for me, Blagg?" he exclaimed eagerly.

"Nothin' for you, Master Trimble!"

"Rotten! I say, who's that parcel for, Blagg, old chap?"

"Which it's for Master Kerr of the New House!" grunted the postman.

"Oh good! Just going to ask if there was anything for my pal Kerr," said Trimble. "Hand it over! I'll take it along to him, Blagg!"

"There's a letter as well for Master Kerr—" said Blagg.

"Right-ho!" said Trimble, holding out a fat, not over-clean hand.

Blagg grunted. Trimble was not given to handing out tips, and he was not popular with Blagg. But he was a St. Jim's fellow—above any sort of suspicion—and the postman handed over parcel and letter unhesitatingly, and trudged off towards the School House.

Trimble made off towards the tuckshop again, more hopefully now. After doing a kind action for Kerr—taking the trouble to fag about for him like this—Kerr ought to do the decent thing and invite him to the picnic!

And then a new idea came to Trimble, and he paused. After a moment's reflection he chuckled, and, going behind the trunk of an old elm, he sat down on the seat encircling it, and opened the parcel.

It contained a book—Trimble had already guessed that from the feel of the parcel. He chuckled as he noted the title of the book—"Good Little Georgie; or, Bit by Bit!"

hard as he saw that it bore the Edinburgh postmark, and was in his pater's handwriting.

"That for you, tea?" demanded Figgins.

"Yes, it must have dropped from that fat worm's pocket!" said Kerr, brightening up. "Oh, good! I knew the pater wouldn't forget my giddy birthday."

"Buck up and see how much!" said Figgy hopefully.

"Nothing!" said Kerr, tearing open the envelope. "But—"

"Nothing—not even five bob?" said Figgy, in dismay.

"No, but—well, my hat! How perfectly ripping!" said Kerr, his eyes dancing as he scanned the letter. "The pater's coming to-day!"

"To-day?"

"Yes! He's coming down from London this afternoon—combining business with pleasure, so he says, though goodness knows what he means by that. Anyway, he's coming, and will be here at 5.30 this afternoon. And he's bringing me my giddy present then!"

"Ripping!" said Fatty Wynn. "You've already had a fiver from your uncle, and if he forked out a few quid—"

"But what about our picnic?" said Figgins, frowning. "If he's coming at five-thirty, old chap—"

"Does rather muck that up," admitted Kerr. "Still, it can't be helped, and I wouldn't miss seeing the pater for worlds. I'll tell you what! We'll have the picnic early and get back here easily by five-thirty. Or, if you like, you fellows can stay up river—"

"What rot! We'll come back with you, fathead!" said Figgins warmly.

"Yes, rather! And we can have another tea with your pater in the study, Kerr, old chap!" said Fatty Wynn eagerly. "Ripping!"

"Right-ho!" said Kerr, with a chuckle. "Trust old Fatty to suggest that! Come on, let's be getting the grub packed, and then we'll get off. Trot off and tell Reddy and his pals, Fatty! As for that fat rotter—"

"You'd have missed your pater if he'd kept that letter back!" said Figgins. "Chuck that book away, and come on!"

"No fear! My aunt may turn up some time and want to see me about it," said Kerr, shaking his head. "Besides, it's just the thing to shove under the study table leg where the castor's missing. That Latin dic's getting too ragged for the job, and this will do nicely."

"Ha, ha! Right-ho!" chuckled Figgins, and led the way indoors to get ready for the birthday picnic up river.

CHAPTER 2.

With Fell Intent!

"WELL, buck up and decide, you chaps!" remarked Jack Blake. "At this rate we'll be sitting here by tea-time. Is it to be footer, a cycle spin, or the river, or—"

"Weally, Blake—"

"You ring off a bit, Gussy—do!" pleaded Blake. "A whole half hol spent listening to you wag your chin isn't good enough!"

"Bai Jove! Weally, Blake, you have been talkin' just as much—"

"Cheese it, old chap! Now my idea is to walk over to Rylcombe, and—"

"The woods are so feahfully dustay, Blake!" objected Gussy. "A fellow must considah his bags—"

"I vote for a cycle spin!" said Manners. "I can take my camera—"

"That will be worse still for a fellow's bags, Mannahs!" said Arthur Augustus. "I considah—"

"I say, you fellows—"

"Hallo, kick that fat rotter out, somebody!"

"Really, Blake, you know—"

Baggy Trimble rolled into Study No. 10.

"What about a walk over to Wayland?" suggested Monty Lowther, not observing Trimble's entrance. "There's a ripping film on there—"

"Ass! Aren't we all stony?" snorted Blake. "And who wants a three-mile walk in this weather? Rot! What's it to be, Tommy?"

Tom Merry, who was standing at the window staring out into the sunlit quadrangle, turned round with a grin.

"I've got it!" he said. "What about hunting trouble with those New House bounders? It'll liven things up a bit."

"Too hot for rows!" said Digby, shaking his head.

"Rats! I say, I fancy—"

"He, he, he! Listen to me, Tom Merry—"

"Outside, Trimble!" snorted Tom. "Who let that fat animal in here?"

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"But listen to a fellow!" said Trimble excitedly. "I've got news you'll be jolly glad to hear. Who wants a ripping picnic up river—tons and tons of grub—jam tarts, cakes, preserves, tongue, ginger-pop galore! A blinking record-breaking picnic!"

"You fat ass—"

"It's the chance of a lifetime!" said Trimble impressively. "Those New House bounders—"

"Eh? What's that about the New House?" exclaimed Tom Merry, interested at once.

"He, he, he! I knew that would fetch you, Tom Merry!" grinned Trimble. "They're having a picnic up river at the old oak—a whacking affair. It's Kerr's giddy birthday, and he's had a fiver from his blessed uncle. What about bagging their picnic, you fellows?"

"Is that a fact, Trimble?" gasped Tom Merry, his eyes dancing. "Are Figgins' lot having a picnic—"

"Yes, I was in the tuckshop and heard Figgy ordering the stuff—tons and tons of grub!" said Trimble, his eyes glimmering at the recollection. "I was seated behind the door, and Figgy didn't spot me at first. I heard 'em planning it!"

"Spoof, I bet!" said Manners cynically. "They knew you were there, and this is some jape—"

"It jolly well isn't!" snorted Baggy Trimble warmly. "Why, I took Kerr a parcel myself from old Blagg—a present from his aunt. It's his birthday, I tell you!"

"I believe it's genuine enough!" said Tom Merry eagerly. "I've just been watching Figgins' lot trotting in and out of the tuckshop. I knew they'd something on—that's why I suggested hunting for trouble with 'em!"

"Oh!"

"Good!"

"My hat!"

The juniors eyed each other with grins on their faces. Certainly it was hot weather for scrapping with the rival juniors of the New House. But if there was a good prospect of bagging their picnic—

"We're on this, Tommy!" said Blake firmly. "Fancy those measly New House worms with a fiver and us with not a bob between us! Scandalous! And—and don't forget they mucked up our last picnic—collared half the grub!"

"Bai Jove! Yaas, wathah!"

"So they did!" said Tom, his eyes gleaming now. "That settles it, of course! Tell us all about it, Baggy!"

Baggy did so—only omitting his unfortunate luck over "Good Little Georgie!" He knew they would not understand that!

"Six of them, counting Redfern, Lawrence, and Owen!" murmured Tom Merry thoughtfully. "And we're seven—"

"What about me, Tom Merry?" snorted Baggy.

"Nothing about you, old chap!" said Tom. "Seven against six! We shall have to go carefully—use strategy, you know! Even with the odds against 'em they're a tough handful. My hat! Let's get a move on and get to the old oak before them."

"Good wheeze!" agreed Blake quickly. "Ambush 'em—that's the idea!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Buck up!" snapped Tom, brisk at once. "Not a moment to lose, you men!"

"I say, you fellows—"

"You ring off, Trimble!"

"But, look here," snorted Baggy. "I'm coming, of course! I brought the news—"

"Certainly you did, old chap! You're entitled to come! We shouldn't dream of stopping you, in the circles!" chuckled Tom. "You'll have to keep up with us, though!"

"I'll do that jolly quickly," grinned Baggy. "I'm coming!"

"That's right, old chap!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I can see anything to cackle about!" said Trimble.

But apparently the others did. And Baggy found out what it was, three minutes later, as they were crossing the quad towards the gates.

Tom Merry & Co. fairly scudded, leaving Baggy struggling in the rear.

"Here, wait for me!" he bawled breathlessly. "I say, wait for a fellow Tom Merry!"

"Can't be did, old fat man! No time!"

"Why, you awful beasts, you said I could come!" shrieked Baggy furiously. "Hold on—"

"So we did—if you kept up with us!" called back Tom cheerily. "If you can't keep up with us, Baggy, that's your look-out, old chap—"

"Beasts!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

EVERY WEDNESDAY.

"Wait! Hold on, you beasts! Stop! I can't keep up! Stop!" shrieked Baggy.

Tom Merry & Co. increased speed and vanished through the gates, laughing. They had no time to waste upon Baggy Trimble. It was up to him to keep up with them if he wanted to come.

With the furious Trimble panting and gasping in the rear, the School House fellows scudded on to the boat-house. They arrived there breathless and perspiring. Several boats were out in readiness, and, taking charge of one of the bigger boats, the chums started off, Tom and Blake rowing their hardest.

A faint, furious howl from Baggy Trimble followed them upstream.

Past the green and-gold autumn woods, past sunlit meadows, swept the School House boat with its cheery load of juniors. The old oak was a favourite spot with picnickers. The oak itself stood at the edge of a little glade on a high

The juniors had had doubts as to Baggy Trimble's information. But they had no doubts now. Soon the juniors lower down the tree could see the boat pulling upstream with its load of six New House juniors.

The boat pulled in to the bank almost opposite to the old oak.

"Ripping!" grinned Tom Merry. "Spot the basket?"

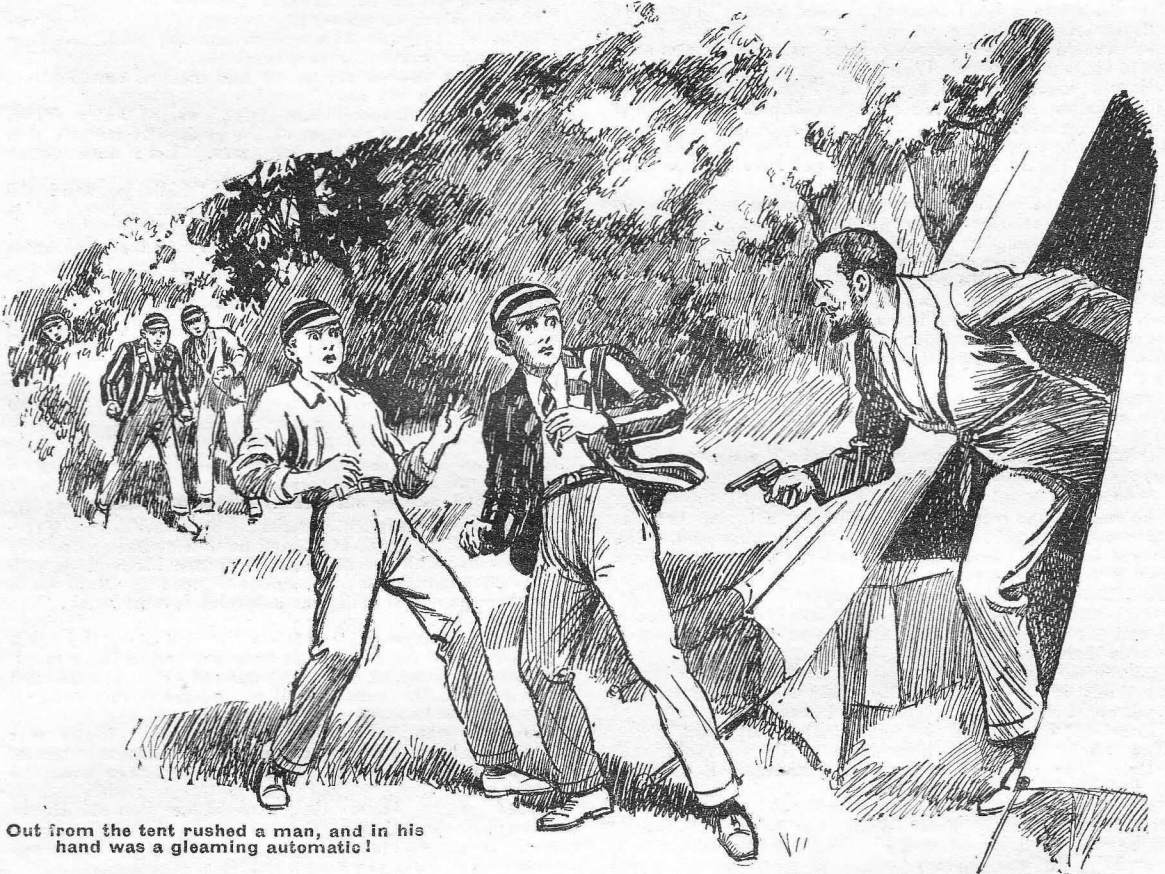
"Yaas, wathah!"

Through the screen of leaves they saw the New House fellows land with the picnic-basket—and a big basket it was!

The cheery voice of George Figgins reached them.

"Here we are, you men! No need to open the giddy basket yet, Fatty, you greedy ass! I say, we're here first, after all. I was afraid someone else might have bagged this spot. Good!"

"Ripping!" said Fatty Wynn. "Shall we have the feed now, Figgy? Nothing like having the feed first—"



Out from the tent rushed a man, and in his hand was a gleaming automatic!

bank overlooking the river, and with the deep brown woods behind.

Willows and reeds fringed the river bank, and the juniors pulled in and hid the boat among the reeds some distance from the spot, tying it up to an overhanging willow.

They jumped ashore and made for the glade.

"Hold on!" said Tom, glancing about him keenly. "We'll not hide in the trees, after all—I mean, in the wood there. They're bound to have the feed just here, and they'll spot us coming easily. We want to take 'em by surprise, you men!"

"Then what—"

"Why not shin up the old oak?" grinned Tom. "Then, when I give the word we'll swarm down and take 'em by surprise. See?"

"Good wheeze, Tommy!"

"Yaas, wathah! The vewy ideah, deah boy!" chuckled Arthur Augustus.

The juniors followed Tom's example as he shinned up the old oak and vanished amid the thick foliage. Monty Lowther climbed high up the branches to keep a look-out.

He had not been on the look-out long when he called down to them.

"Here they come, you men!"

"Oh, good!"

"Ha, ha! No, you fat cormorant! We're having a bathe first!" chuckled Figgins. "Out with that giddy basket, Reddy!"

Redfern and Lawrence handed the heavy basket ashore to Figgins and Kerr, who carried it up the bank and dropped it right underneath the spreading branches of the old oak.

Tom Merry & Co. did not move—they almost held their breath. But not once did the New House fellows look upwards. Had they done so they could scarcely have seen their rivals who were well screened from below by the leaves.

The news that Figgins & Co. intended to bathe first was good news to Tom Merry. He gave his chums a warning look to keep still and silent.

"Here we are safe and sound!" went on Figgins cheerfully. "I was afraid that fat rotter Trimble might bring Tom Merry & Co. on the giddy warpath."

"Better keep a good look-out still, though!" said Kerr, shaking his head. "Those bounders would raid us for a cert if they did know."

"We'll spot 'em coming upstream all right!" said Figgins confidently. "Besides, there's six of us, and we're equal to a School House seven any day!"

"Yes, rather!" said Fatty Wynn.

Up in the oak-tree Tom Merry & Co. grinned at each other. Figgy's sublime confidence and "swank" made them smile. They watched cheerfully as the New House fellows leisurely undressed, chatting and laughing as they did so. Fatty Wynn wanted to stay by the hamper, but his chums would have none of it, and Fatty had to undress also for a dip.

"Give you a better appetite, old Fatty!" said Figgins. "We're not allowing you to sample anything until Kerr's ready to start. Don't forget it's his giddy birthday feed, you fat cormorant!"

"Oh, all right!" said Fatty, grinning feebly.

And to the great relief of Tom Merry, Fatty also followed his chums to the edge of the bank and dived into the river. Soon all were splashing about amid yells of laughter.

Tom Merry's eyes gleamed as he watched them.

"Now's the time, you men!" he whispered, his eyes on the unwary bathers. "Look here, you chaps keep still and leave this to me. I've got a better wheeze!"

"What's that?" breathed Blake.

"You'll see in a sec, I fancy!" grinned Tom. "The other way's too risky. Before we could get far with the giddy basket they'd all be whooping after us, and it won't be easy to settle six fellows. Wait!"

Without explaining his new plan, Tom, his eyes on the bathers below, softly moved from his branch and shinned down the big oak.

Once on the ground the high bank hid him from the view of the New House bathers, and Tom got busy at once with reckless haste.

He started to make two long ropes, using belts, braces, and other odd articles for the purpose.

Satisfied at last, he tested the two ropes, and then fastened one end securely to each handle of the basket, his ears on the alert all the time he worked.

It was done at last. And then Tom took the roughly improvised ropes and flung the loose ends up to the grinning Blake above him in the oak-tree.

All the School House fellows had grasped the game by this time, and as Blake grabbed the ends of the ropes, Tom swarmed up the tree again.

No outcry came from the splashing, yelling bathers—he had not been spotted!

"Over that branch with the ropes, Blake!" whispered Tom Merry. "See the wheeze?"

"What-ho!"

The ends of the ropes were thrown over a higher branch. Tom seated himself safely on his branch again and, with his eyes fixed on the bathers, waited his chance and then began to haul on the ropes.

The basket left the ground and danced up merrily into the air, twisting and turning gently. Blake came to Tom's aid and together they hauled, and the basket fairly leaped upwards then.

It vanished amid the foliage of the big oak, and was soon safely in the hands of the raiders, resting on a big branch and held steady by Tom and Blake.

"Done it!" breathed Tom Merry, with a soft chuckle.

The whole thing had been done swiftly, silently and neatly. The raiders now had the plunder. But would they be able to keep it?

Still no outcry from the happy bathers!

But it soon came. Fatty Wynn was a good swimmer, and he was fond of swimming. But he was fonder still of grub. He was anxious to get to more serious work than swimming—serious to Fatty, at all events! Also, Fatty didn't at all like the idea of the basket of beautiful grub being out of his sight for so long.

"You've jolly soon had enough, Fatty!" called Figgins, as Fatty left the water and climbed the bank.

"I—I'm just going to see if the grub's all right!" said Fatty Wynn. "You never know, and—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgins and the others laughed at Fatty's eagerness to get to the basket.

"Nothing to cackle about," said Fatty, a trifle shamefacedly, as he topped the bank. "I'm only going to start getting the grub out, and the cloth—the cloth—the—the—M-mum-my hat! Why, where's the basket?"

He ended in a startled, horrified yelp.

Figgins and Co. stopped gambolling in the water and blinked out at him.

"Anything the matter, Fatty?" shouted Figgins, in some alarm.

"The—the basket's gone!" shrieked Fatty, gazing about him wildly. "It's gone, Figgy! The basket's gone!"

"Gone! What the thump—"

Figgins broke off in sudden alarm. As a matter of fact, he had had slight qualms in regard to the wisdom of leaving the basket unguarded. But that was after he had

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given his valuable opinion to Fatty Wynn, and he had not wanted to change it. He had been almost on the point of shinning up the bank and making sure all was well, in fact, when Fatty himself did so.

And now—George Figgins forged ashore in a shower of spray, and fairly flew up the short bank. He topped it, and then he gave a terrific howl.

"Gone! It is really gone, you fellows! Come on—quick!"

There was a ferocious rush ashore, and a swarming up the bank. Then came a chorus of howls of wrath, as eyes scanned the empty glade—empty, that is, save for sundry stray articles of attire.

"Now for it!" murmured Tom Merry, with a soft chuckle. "Dear me! What a pity to upset the dear little fellows' happiness like this! Hark to 'em! Now, watch out for a general stampee, you men! Them's our chance! We'll shin down, rush the giddy basket to their boat, and get clear!"

"Good wheeze!"

"Wippin', bai Jove! Weally, Tom—"

"Shush! Here they come!"

Figgins led the way with a rush into the glade, his face growing more wrathly every second.

"Gone!" he howled again. "And most of our clobber's gone, too! Oh, my hat!"

"Those awful School House cads!" wailed Fatty Wynn, ready to weep as he thought of the grub. "I warned you, Figgy—you know I did! Oh dear. Let's look about for it!"

"Look about!" hooted Figgins. "Let's go after the cads, you mean! Come on—before they can get far. We'll soon catch them up if they're carrying that heavy basket, you idiots! Scatter, and give a yell when anyone spots 'em!"

He rushed off into the woods. To the left and right, meadows could be seen easily through thin foliage. But facing the river was the woods, and it was obviously into the woods the raiders had vanished, with their prize—obvious to Figgins, at all events—and to his chums.

They instantly followed Figgy's example, and scattered into the woods to begin the search, only stopping to shove on shoes. Fatty Wynn, groaning in deep anguish of spirit, brought up the rear, and he also vanished into the woods.

Really, for once, the usually keen-witted George Figgins was being much too impulsive. Tom Merry chuckled as they vanished, yelling out wrathly remarks to each other.

"What simple-minded infants!" he chuckled. But—buck up! Old Figgy's keen, and he'll come back when he's had time to think—or he'll send someone back, if only to guard the giddy boat. Sharp's the word! We'll leave them their bags and things as a special favour, what?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The School House raiders fairly tumbled down the trunk of the oak, once the basket had been lowered to the ground. Tom Merry wrenched free the ropes of belts, and he and Blake grabbed the handles and rushed the basket towards the New House boat.

The last man had jumped aboard when Blake cast off, and the heavily laden boat rocked out into midstream. As it did so, there came a terrific howl of rage from the woods.

"Great pip! There they are—those School House bounders!" came George Figgins' voice, in an enraged bawl. "Stop, you fearful bounders! Stop! Bring our dashed basket back, you bounders!"

Figgins' voice ended in a shriek.

Tom Merry stood up in the boat, and kissed his hand to him.

"Good-bye-ee!" he called sweetly. "Tell Kerr we'll remember his birthday when we're scoffing the grub. Many happy returns—of another School House victory!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

The boat shot away upstream with the plunder. Figgins rushed down to the bank, where he was joined quickly enough by his equally enraged companions.

"Come back!" shrieked his chums, while Fatty Wynn nearly shed tears.

But their triumphant rivals did not "come back." They vanished round the next bend in the shining river, leaving Figgins & Co. to dance and shake their fists in impotent rage. It was a School House "win"—so far!

CHAPTER 3.

The Artist!

"THIS is ripping!"

"Tophole!"

"Yaas, wathah! Turnin' out wathah a happy aftahnoon aftah all, deah boys. I'm wathah sowwy for Figgay, though!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

From their laughter, Tom Merry & Co. didn't appear to be very sorry for Figgins of the New House, however.

The juniors had pulled on upstream, and then they had landed on an island higher up—on Abbey Island, a popular spot with St. Jim's fellows. The island belonged to Colonel Bland, the local squire, and though he did not encourage visitors on his island, he did not forbid them. The island did not bristle with notice-boards, warning schoolboys and others of various penalties if they trespassed. Had it done so, no doubt the St. Jim's fellows would have patronised it more than they actually did—on the principle that stolen sweets are best.

Tom Merry & Co. felt they had effectually put the "kybosh" on their enemies of the New House by decamping with their boat. They felt that Figgins would suppose they had arrived at the spot from inland, as no boat was to view. And, in any case, they were sure the New House men would not find the boat, hidden as it was so cunningly in the rushes.

So Tom Merry and Co. landed on the island, not troubling whether they had been seen landing there or not. They had selected a little clearing just in the trees, well within sight of the river, and there they had started to unpack the raided basket.

Their eyes danced with delight on beholding the contents. Trimble's words had been true enough—it was a whacking amount of grub. Kerr was not sparing expense over his birthday picnic.

"Too bad to do the poor old chap out of it!" chuckled Blake. "But war is war, and, after all, they raided the last picnic we planned—did us one in the eye fairly. Now it's our turn."

"Yaas, wathah! I considah we're quite justified in the circe, deah boys! I'm wathah disturbed about Twimble, though," remarked the good-natured Gussy, shaking his head. "Twimble put us on to this—"

"We'll take some grub back for Trimble, then!" laughed Tom Merry. "Though he may turn up yet—will, I bet! When once Trimble's scented a feed he sticks to the trail like glue! If we spot him on the river, we'll give him a yell!"

They went on laying the good things on the table-cloth. "Anybody got any matches?" said Tom Merry, looking round from the small spirit-stove.

Nobody had, as it happened.

"Have to do with the ginger-beer!" said Tom. "After all, it's rather hot for tea or coffee!"

"Not much ginger-beer for the lot of us though!" said Blake. "I say, there's a giddy tent over there! Someone camping out! What about trying to get a match from them?"

"Camping out?" ejaculated Tom Merry. "Who the thump can be camping out here?"

The juniors jumped up, not a little surprised at Blake's news.

Occasionally, Boy Scouts had camped out on the island, but it was rather unusual to see a solitary tent there. The juniors could glimpse it now through the trees.

"Somewhere among the ruins, I fancy," said Tom, looking surprised. "I say, let's go and see who the merchants are. Old Bland must have given them permission, I suppose?"

He led the way through the trees to the old abbey ruins.

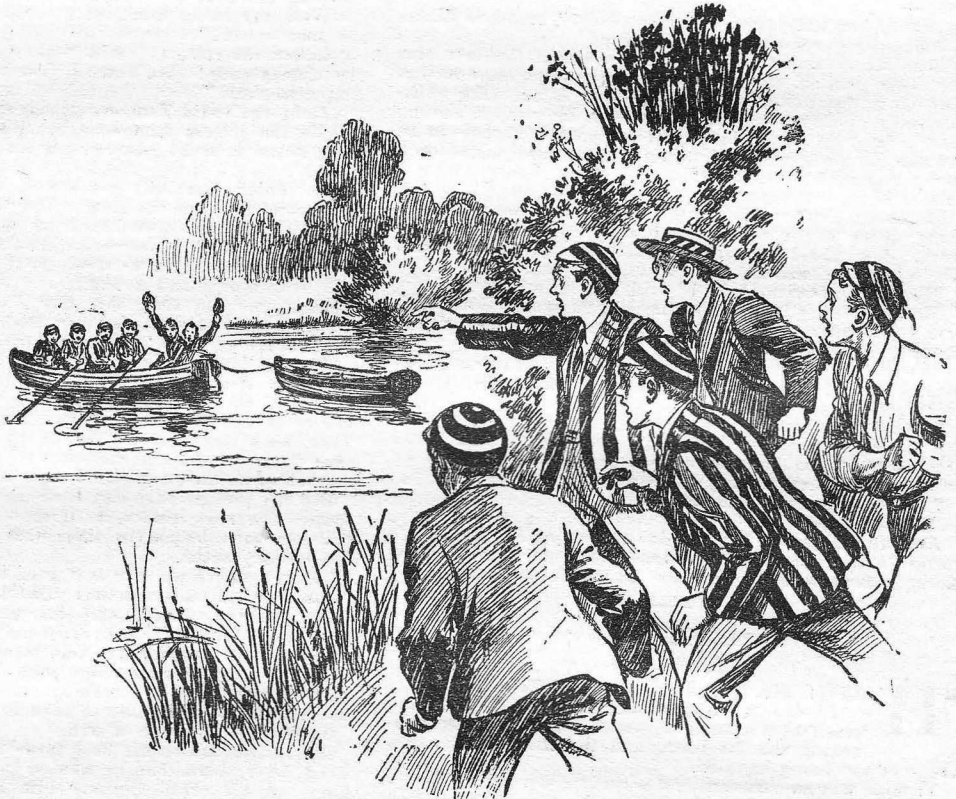
They stopped at the fringe of trees that surrounded the clearing in which the ruins stood. A bell-tent stood there, surrounded by various camping oddments. There was also a folding easel and a camp-stool, while scattered about the grass in the sunlight were several canvases.

Tom Merry's eyes couldn't help lingering on these, for the paintings were rough and crude, with curiously vivid colourings; flat washes of river scenes, with one landscape showing the ruins. They looked unfinished, and they certainly did not show exceptional ability.

"Nobody about!" whispered Jack Blake. "I say, look at these giddy paintings! Fancy sticking 'em out in the strong sunlight! If the chap's an artist—"

"Not our bizney!" said Tom, though he himself was puzzled. "I'll see if anyone's at home."

He stepped into the clearing and approached the tent, Blake going with him. They reached the tent, and Tom was about to pull the flap aside when a startling thing happened.



A yell of laughter came from a skiff which held six cheery juniors and a big basket, and behind them they towed another skiff.

Out from the tent rushed a man, and in his hand was a gleaming weapon—an automatic!

"Great pip! Look out, Blake! Look out, Tommy!" yelled Lowther, who glimpsed the weapon first. "What the thump—"

But they need not have feared. The man sighted the boys, and his grim expression changed swiftly as he pocketed the weapon hastily.

"You—you quite startled me!" he gasped, with rather a breathless laugh. "I—I thought I had burglars or poachers to deal with. Ah! You are St. Jim's boys, I see!"

Tom Merry and Blake stared at him blankly. He was a tall man, with keen, grey eyes, and a moustache and pointed beard. He was dressed in rough, somewhat stained and well-worn flannels, yet a glance told them he was a gentleman. But he did not look like an artist, somehow.

"We—we're sorry to disturb and startle you, sir!" said Tom Merry a trifle hesitatingly. "We came wondering if we could beg a match."

"A match?"

"Yes, sir! We're picnicking, and haven't a single match between us to light the spirit-stove!" explained Tom.

"Well, I think I can oblige you with that," said the man, producing a box. "Here, take the box—I have plenty more, my boys! So you are picnicking here?"

"Yes, sir!"

"You—you should not picnic on this island," said the man, frowning. "I myself have obtained permission to camp here from the owner, Colonel Bland. There are plenty of places along the river—"

"Colonel Bland doesn't object to us coming here," said Tom curtly. "We're doing no harm—"

"Then I'm afraid I can't order you off!" exclaimed the artist, with a sudden laugh. "Not that I wish to do so—I'm an old Saint myself, and I've often enough picnicked on this island. But— However, there are your matches, my boys!"

He handed over the box, and with muttered thanks the juniors moved off. It was easy to see that their visit was not exactly a welcome one. Possibly the man was annoyed at being startled, for he did not look an irritable individual.

"Well, of all the queer things," remarked Tom Merry as they hurried back to the basket, over which Herries stood guard. "Fancy the fellow being an old St. Jim's boy. And—"

"Fancy him carrying a giddy revolver!" breathed Blake. "Something queer about this, Tommy!"

Tom Merry nodded. It was obvious that the man was genuinely startled, and fully expecting to meet more serious and dangerous visitors than Tom Merry & Co. The swiftness with which he had rushed out with his weapon showed that. Yet why should he expect—or anyone expect—to be attacked by dangerous visitors on that peaceful island on a sunny September afternoon?

It certainly was queer.

Moreover, Tom couldn't help feeling that there was something queer about the artist himself—and especially his work. Was the fellow really an artist? If so, he had a whole heap to learn about painting, Tom considered.

"Still, it's not our bizney!" said Tom grimly once again. "The fellow may be a giddy lunatic, though. Blessed if I feel quite myself yet! That revolver gave me quite a turn!"

"Same here!" agreed Blake. "Look well if he's a giddy escaped loony! There'll be two on the island then—counting old Gussy!"

"Weally, Blake, you wottah—"

"All right, Gussy—only pulling your leg!" said Blake soothingly. "You happen to be a loony at large, not an escaped one. That's all right! Now what about grub?"

"Weally, Blake—" shouted Gussy.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And Tom Merry & Co. sat down to enjoy Figgy & Co.'s picnic, Arthur Augustus deciding—wisely perhaps—to treat Blake's levity with the dignified disdain it deserved.

CHAPTER 4.

The Attack!

"HALLO! Ha, ha! Here comes old Trimble!"

There was really no mistaking the figure in the small skiff coming upstream; there was no mistaking the fat form, and the manner in which the boat was being handled.

Trimble was no oarsman, and without a steersman Baggy was finding progress exceedingly difficult. The boat waddled across from one side of the Rhyll to the other, while Baggy pulled away at the sculls, perspiration raining down his fat features.

As he came along, Baggy Trimble scanned the banks eagerly, anxiously. By the time he arrived near to Abbey Island he was looking very anxious indeed. He had already seen Figgins & Co., and Figgins had used all his flattery, all his skill at pleading, in order to persuade Baggy to pull into the bank.

But Baggy had wanted a promise to be allowed a share of the picnic first. And in an incautious moment Figgins had owned up that the grub was gone—had been raided by Tom Merry & Co.

That was enough for Baggy. He had no further interest in Figgins & Co. His interest now was settled upon finding Tom Merry & Co., who had the wherewithal for the picnic. Despite Figgy's entreaties and threats, Baggy had jeered at the raging New House men, and had pulled on upstream.

But it was warm work, and Baggy had just paused to take a rest when Monty Lowther had sighted him.

The picnickers, though fairly well shielded from the river, could see out themselves, and as they devoured Kerr's birthday delicacies they grinningly watched the perspiring, almost exhausted Baggy Trimble.

They saw him start pulling at the sculls again after a brief rest, and then they were surprised to see him suddenly stop again as a hail echoed across the river.

Standing on the farther bank were two men, and one of them had shouted to Baggy. The next moment, Baggy was

pulling his boat in towards them. A few yards out he stopped and held the boat steady.

They saw Baggy talking to the two men for several moments, and suddenly one of the men took something from his pocket and held it up for Baggy's inspection.

"What the dickens—" began the mystified Blake.

"I see it," said Tom Merry, staring keenly. "They're offering Baggy cash to bring them over to this island. Phew! See—that chap's pointing this way!"

"And Baggy's pulling in!" breathed Blake.

The juniors ceased their gastronomic exertions to watch.

They saw Baggy work the boat inshore awkwardly. But he managed it, and as it nosed into the bank one of the men leaped into it, followed instantly by the second man.

Then—to the surprise of the juniors as much as to Baggy—the first man grasped the fat youth and simply chucked him overboard into the shallow water among the rushes.

The next moment the boat was being propelled swiftly across to the island, leaving Baggy yelling furiously, and standing in a couple of feet of water.

"Well, my hat!" breathed Tom Merry. "Did you ever see such cheek?"

"Collar the rotters!" said Blake, jumping up. "Collar the cheeky cads! We'll teach 'em to handle a St. Jim's chap like that!"

"Hold on!" said Tom swiftly, his eyes gleaming. "We'll handle the rotters soon enough. But we'll find out what their game is first! Down and hide—quick! Here they come!"

The juniors hurriedly got out of sight as the splash of oars sounded out on the river. They heard the boat ground on the shingle, and they heard the two men jump out.

Peering from the bushes the juniors watched breathlessly.

That the men were up to no good seemed fairly obvious, and Tom Merry had a vague sort of suspicion as to their destination. He soon saw that he was right.

For several seconds the men stood on the bank getting their bearings, and then they moved cautiously inland.

Tom motioned to his chums, and they followed, moving with the stealth and caution of Scouts. As Tom fully expected, the two strangers made for the ruins. Soon the trees thinned out, and the juniors saw them clearly. They were crouching on the fringe of the clearing, their eyes fixed on the bell tent—or rather, on the artist who was seated on the camp-stool before it, smoking and reading.

But the juniors only had time for a bare glimpse of the scene. For next instant, as if moved by the same spring, the two men leaped to their feet and made a rush at the unwary artist.

"Here's where we chip in!" breathed Tom Merry grimly. "Just what I half-expected! On the ball!"

He led the attack, and his chums followed without question. Whatever the artist might be, there was no doubting that his two attackers meant him no good. Well-dressed as they were, the men looked a lawless pair who would stick at nothing, and the chums did not hesitate as to which side to take in the strange business.

They piled in with a will.

The artist was on his back now—he had had no time to draw his revolver had he wanted to. One of the strangers knelt on his chest, pinning him down; but he did not remain long in that position.

Crack!

Tom Merry's fist connected with the fellow's chin with a dull smack, and he went over as if he'd been pole-axed. The next moment Tom Merry & Co. were swarming over the pair, hitting out with a will.

It was soon over. Eight against two was long odds, and after a brief, whirling fight, one of the men gave a savage order, wrenched himself free with a desperate effort, and bolted for his life.

"Let him go!" called the artist, jumping to his feet, breathlessly. "Never mind—"

"What about this merchant?" panted Tom Merry.

"We've got him!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

They had got him. The fellow—a young man of thirty or so—was on his back, pinned down by the triumphant juniors. He glared up at them savagely.

"Let him go also!" said the artist, smiling grimly. "I won't be caught napping a second time!"

"But—but he attacked you, sir! The police—"

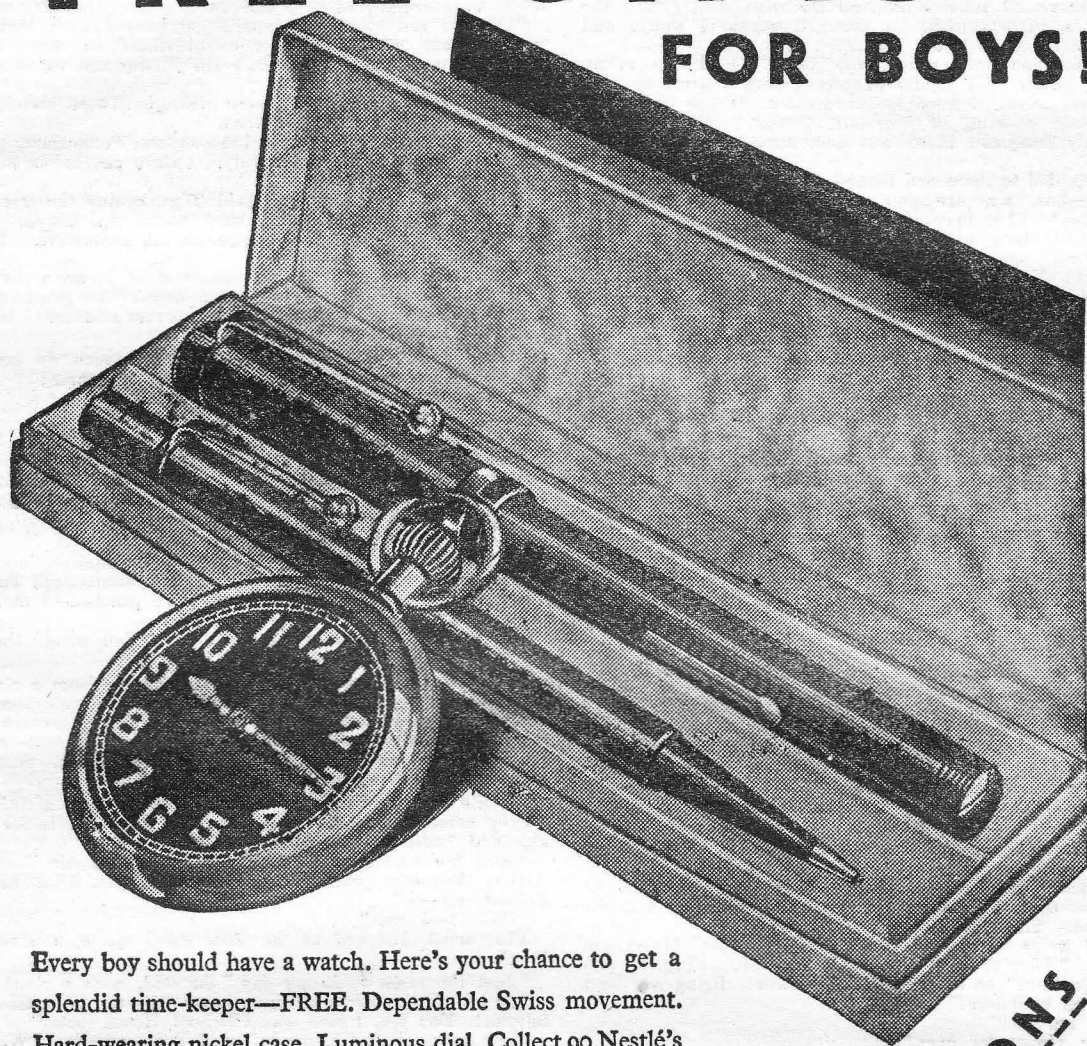
"I don't wish the police to be brought into this, boys! Kindly release this rascal! I don't think the fellows will risk a second visit. If they do—"

The artist drew the automatic from his pocket significantly, and eyed the man steadily.

"Now clear!" he snapped. "I shall not hesitate to use this if you worry me again, my man! Go!"

(Continued on page 10.)

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THE MYSTERY MAKERS!

(Continued from page 8.)

The surprised juniors released the man, and giving the juniors a furious look, he tramped savagely away, and disappeared towards the boat.

"Thank you very much, my boys!" said the artist, smiling coolly. "I hardly expected more visitors so soon after you came. I must be more alert. Please oblige me by saying nothing of this to anyone. Those rascals evidently imagined there was something of value in my camp."

He nodded to them and turned as if to end the visit.

"But—but, sir, are you going to let them get clear after this? They may come again—"

"Possibly they will. But I shall be ready for them next time," said the artist calmly. "I'm much obliged, my boys! You have acted as St. Jim's boys should."

He nodded and turned away again, smiling. Obviously he had no intention of satisfying their keen curiosity. The juniors touched their caps and departed from the clearing, mystified and a trifle sore at the strange camper's off-handedness.

"Well, what a queer affair!" said Blake, as they returned to the spot where they had left the basket. "That chap might have explained—"

"They were not ordinary sneak-thiefs, anyway," said Manners quietly. "This is a giddy mystery, and no mistake!"

"We've let them get off again with Trimble's boat," said Tom Merry suddenly. "Come on—let's see if they take it back to Baggy!"

"Yaas, wathah! We weally ought not—oh, hai Jove! Where—is the gwub, deah—"

"My hat! Where— Oh, great pip!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was a yell of laughter from the river. The same moment that Tom Merry & Co. saw that the picnic-basket was missing, they saw how it had gone. For the yell of laughter came from six cheery juniors on a skiff out in midstream. Behind that skiff another skiff was tied. In the former, with the six juniors, was a big basket.

It was the grub. The raiders had been raided in their turn. In the first boat sat Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn, and Redfern, Owen and Lawrence, and they were all yelling with triumphant laughter.

"Oh, my only aunt!" groaned Tom Merry. "Dished and done!"

Obviously they were! While they had been absent from the spot, Figgins & Co. had come along and taken the grub. They had also taken the boat.

"But we're marooned now!" gasped Tom Merry, in alarm. "They've got our boat as well. Figgins, you fearful rotter!" he howled. "Come back! Bring our boat back, you bouncers!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"New House for ever!"

The juniors glanced helplessly about them, Tom Merry thinking at once of the boat the men had crossed in. But there was no sign of the men or the boat. They had had plenty of time to get clear, in fact.

It was a most alarming situation. The juniors did not mind losing the remains of the picnic so much. They had had a good feed out of it before the men had turned up and interrupted them. They did not mind Figgins & Co. having what was left. But they hated to have the tables turned on them like this. Moreover, they were now marooned, which was very serious.

"Oh, my only Sunday topper!" exclaimed Tom Merry, with a deep groan. "What awful idiots we were not to take precautions! Now—how the thump are we to get back?"

"Piggy won't leave us all here all night!" said Manners. "He's not such a rotter as that."

"I know. But he'll keep us here as long as he dare, you can bet!" snorted Blake in reply. "Dare one of us swim across and get a boat—"

"Shouldn't care to try it," said Tom, eyeing the stream glumly. "The current fairly swirls round this island, and everybody knows it's jolly dangerous for swimmers. Not worth the risk!"

"What about that artist merchant—if he is an artist?" said Monty Lowther, with a sudden hope. "He must have a boat somewhere. One good turn deserves another! Why not ask him—"

"Good egg!" said Tom eagerly. "I've seen no boat, but the chap must have crossed in one, of course!"

"Yaas, wathah! Come on, deah boys!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A last yell of laughter came from Figgins & Co. in the fast-disappearing boat. Shaking their fists in that direction, Tom Merry & Co. turned and hurried inland. They soon reached the camp, and this time Tom Merry wisely gave a warning shout.

The artist frowned as he sighted them.

"Here again?" he said. "Is anything the matter, boys?"

"We're sorry to bother you again, sir!" stammered Tom. "But our boat's gone—some chaps have pinched—I mean, taken it!"

"Taken it?" ejaculated the artist. "You mean those rascals—"

"Nunno, sir! Some of our fellows—fellows from a rival House! We're in the School House, and the New House fellows are always scrapping with us. The—the fact is we raided their picnic," said Tom, blushing. "And—and they've raided us in return and got it back again. And—and they've taken our boat, too!"

"While we were helping you, sir!" said Manners artfully. "They came along and took the lot! The fact is we're stranded here, sir—marooned!"

"And we wondahed if you could help us, sir!" said Arthur Augustus gracefully. "We know you must have a boat, sir—"

"Oh! I—I see!"

The artist laughed as he understood—quite a cheery laugh.

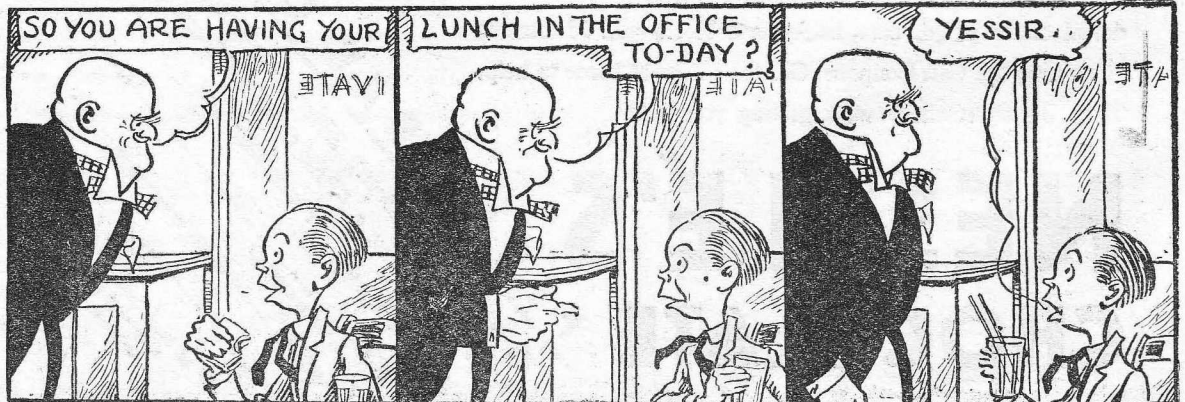
"Just the same as in my day," he said, with a chuckle.

"In my day we were always rowing with the New House fellows! You see, I also was a School House man!"

"You were, sir? Oh, good!" said Tom eagerly. "We—we thought perhaps—"

"Yes, I can help you, and I shall be glad to return the help you have rendered me," smiled the artist. "My name, by the way, is Curey. Possibly I shall see you again

Potts, The Office Boy



at St. Jim's some time. I prefer not to have visitors here, as I wish to be alone to carry out my work!"

And he nodded briefly towards the sketches. Then he turned and led the way across to the far side of the little island. Hidden among the reeds beneath an overhanging willow he showed them his boat—a small skiff.

"Jump in and seat yourselves as best you can!" he said crisply, glancing up and down the river. "I can just about squeeze you all in!"

They swarmed aboard the boat, and he followed them and took the sculls. He ferried the heavily-laden boat across to the mainland, and the juniors thanked him and jumped out.

They had just done so when Blake sighted another boat bearing down on the island from the direction of Wayland Bridge.

"Hallo, another visitor for you, Mr. Curey!" he called, pointing. "Looks like it, anyway!"

"What?"

The artist frowned and stared angrily out towards the boat.

"That's a Wayland boat, and a Wayland boatman rowing, sir!" said Tom Merry, his eyes fixed upon the two men in the distant boat. "I don't think you need fear—"

"That's all right!" said the artist, his face suddenly clearing as if he had recognised someone in the boat. "It is a friend this time, my boys! A welcome visitor! Good-bye!"

He rowed off hastily towards the distant boat, which had just reached the island. They saw the well-dressed man jump ashore.

"Phew!" breathed Tom Merry, his face showing great astonishment. "Well, this beats the giddy band! I—I'm sure I know that chap!"

"The chap on the island?" said Blake. "Well, he seems familiar to me, somehow! I've seen him before!"

"So've I!" said Lowther. "Who the dickens—"

"I'd swear it is Kerr's pater!" breathed Tom Merry, still staring at the distant figure. "Hallo, he's spotted that chap Curey! Look at him—you can see his face more clearly now!"

"It is Kerr's pater!" gasped Blake. "Phew! I've seen him more than once, and I've spoken to him. It's Kerr's pater! Did you ever!"

"And he's friendly with that artist chap!" said Tom. "Look!"

They saw Mr. Curey jump ashore from his boat and clasp the hand of the tall gentleman who had landed from the Wayland boat. They stood in conversation for several moments, and then, after pulling in his boat under the old willow, Mr. Curey led his visitor inland, and they vanished among the trees towards the ruins.

The juniors fairly blinked at each other.

"It was Mr. Kerr—I'd swear it was!" breathed Tom Merry. "Well, if this don't beat cock-fighting, you fellows!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Kerr can't know he's in the district—at least, he can't be expecting him to-day, or he wouldn't be up the river!" said Tom, frowning in puzzled wonder. "He lives in Edinburgh, you know—I've been to their house once. But this makes the affair more mysterious still!"

"None of our bizney, anyway!" said Manners, shaking his head. "Better not mention this to anyone—that artist chap asked us not to, you know."

"I think I shall ask Kerr if he's expecting his pater down, though!" said Tom, setting his lips. "There's something a bit too queer about this for my liking, you men! Anyway, no good standing here—let's get back home. We've no hope of catching those New House bounders a second time!"

"Well, we've had half the feed, after all!" chuckled Blake. "It was a score, and Figgy can't deny it!"

"Wathah not! Bai Jove! Those New House men will have to go back again to take us off, you know!" smiled Arthur Augustus. "What a sell for them!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And, feeling quite cheery, despite the recent reverse, Tom Merry & Co. started back for St. Jim's. After all, they had had half of the feed—quite a good half—and they were satisfied to let it go at that. It was more than likely that Figgins & Co. were far from being satisfied—especially when they came to examine the inroads made on their foodstuffs!

CHAPTER 5.

What Baggy Saw!

BEASTS!" Baggy Trimble sounded both unhappy and wrathful.

Rarely had the fat youth had such a shock as when the affable strangers, who had offered him a quid to row them over to the island, had treated him so disgracefully.

Baggy felt deeply aggrieved. He had lost the picnic, and now he had lost his boat, likewise the quid he had expected to earn so easily. Baggy wished now that he had accepted the half-a-crown they had offered him at first. They might have played the game and treated him decently. Instead of that they had dropped him overboard like dropping an anchor.

Baggy fairly seethed with rage.

"Beasts!" he mumbled. "They're all beasts—Figgy and Tom Merry and all the lot of them!"

He blinked across at the island. The men had vanished into the trees, and he saw nothing, Tom Merry & Co. having followed the men, of course. Baggy stopped a moment or two to tip water from his shoes and to squeeze water from his soaked socks, and then he plunged into the wood, intending to make for the spot where he had seen Figgins & Co.

It came to him now that, possibly, the beasts had spoofed him—just to get rid of him. Their anger had been assumed, probably. They may have had the grub all the time.

"Beasts!" he murmured again, as he tramped on. "I'm not going to be done, anyway, if I can help it!"

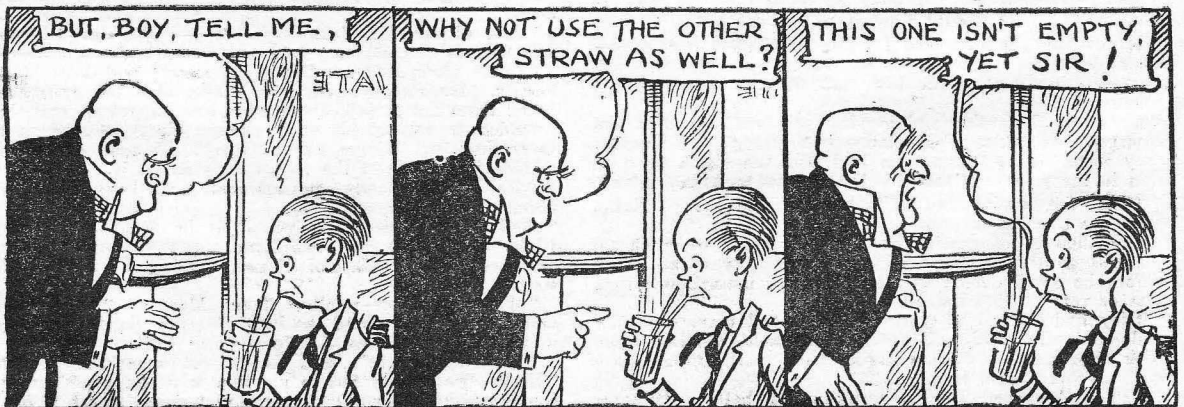
He reached the spot where he had seen Figgins & Co. on the bank. It was empty now, though from the trampled grass he knew it was the spot. For several minutes he wandered about dismally, and then suddenly his eyes lit up.

He was out on the bank again now, and coming downstream he sighted a skiff, crowded with juniors. It was Figgins & Co., and they seemed in high feather, laughing uproariously.

"Beasts!" murmured Trimble. "My hat! I wonder—"

He did not wonder long. The boat grounded and the juniors sprang out eagerly, dragging from the boat a big picnic-basket!

The Last Straw!



It was the grub, without a doubt.

"Here we are!" said Figgins cheerily. "We've put the kybosh on those bouders, and got the grub back, after all! We'll let 'em cool their heels there until nearly call-over, and then we'll get old Bates to go and fetch 'em off!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I say, you fellows—"

"Hallo! Here's that fat little beast, Trimble!"

"Oh, really, Figgy—"

"Hook it!" said Figgins. "Hop it! Likewise scoot, old fat worm! Vamoose while you're safe, Trimble!"

"I—I say, Figgy, you might be decent!" said Trimble pathetically. "I've had an awful time. Some beasts—"

"Cheese it! You had a chance to help us a few minutes ago, and you refused, you fat worm!"

"And he checked us!" snorted Fatty Wynn, who was the last person to ask a fellow like Baggy to a feed. "I say, Figgy, the beast checked us, you know!"

"So he did!" said Figgins. "Let's see who can get most kicks in before he lands in the river! Go it!"

"Here, I say, Figgy— Yarroop! Keep off, you beasts! Yoooop! Oh crumbs!"

Trimble flew, six shoes helping him considerably on his way.

Obviously there was to be no picnic for Baggy Trimble.

Figgins & Co. chased him a few yards and then returned to the picnic. Baggy Trimble gave up all ideas of a free feed and trudged on dismally along the river bank. At a safe distance from Figgins & Co. he sat down on the bank to rest his weary, fat little legs.

It had not been a happy or successful afternoon for Trimble. He was tired, and he was hurt, both physically and mentally. He had fagged at sculling, and he had trudged, and he had schemed—all for nothing, nothing worth having, at all events. All he had gained was a few kicks and a wetting, while he had lost his boat.

This didn't trouble Baggy overmuch at the moment. He would have to account for the lost boat, of course. Bates, the school boatman, had helped him out with it, so he could not deny having taken it out. Still, it had not been his fault. The only fear was—that he would not be believed! Nobody ever did seem eager to accept Baggy Trimble's word!

For some time Baggy watched the river. He had seen that behind Figgy's boat was another boat being towed, and he guessed it had belonged to Tom Merry & Co., and that Figgy had come out of a scrap victorious. But where were Tom Merry & Co.?

For twenty minutes or so Trimble sat there resting and grousing to himself disconsolately when he heard the splash of oars again.

This time it proved to be the Wayland boatman with his passenger. Baggy heard the passenger's voice—a deep, pleasant voice.

"This will do, I think, boatman!" he said. "You can drop me off here and I will walk across the fields to the school."

"Werry good, sir!"

The boatman pulled inshore and the gentleman stepped out, handing the boatman some money. Then the boat pulled away back towards Wayland, while the stranger walked off along the towing-path in the direction of St. Jim's.

But was he a stranger? Trimble wrinkled his brows. He felt sure he had seen the tall man before.

"I've seen the chap before—and he's going to St. Jim's!" murmured the fat junior. "May be one of our chap's paters—must be! Perhaps there's a chance of a tip! That's the wheeze! I'll offer to show him the way to St. Jim's! That should fetch a bob at least!"

It was a bright idea, and Trimble acted upon it at once—or, at least, he started to do so. He got up, and was just about to hurry after the tall man when a strange thing happened.

Out from the bushes and overhanging trees ahead of him emerged two men. One glance was enough for Baggy; they were the two men who had had the cheek to drop him in the river and take his boat across to Abbey Island.

"The—awful beasts!" grunted Baggy. "Hallo, what are they up to now?"

The thought of passing the men in order to catch up the tall gentleman did not appeal to Baggy at all. But before he could decide at all, the men's behaviour struck him as very curious indeed.

They had started to creep after the tall man, stealthily and obviously with evil intent. Trimble watched them with goggling eyes until a sudden turn in the towing-path hid all three from him.

"Phew!" gasped Baggy, trembling a little. "What—

what are the beasts up to now? Dodging the chap like that! I—I think I'll follow 'em!"

Baggy was not a courageous youth. But curiosity overcame his fears now, and he started off cautiously in the tracks of the men. He came round the bushes and trees at the bend at last, and then he halted, his jaw dropping in sheer astonishment. And at the same moment he heard a muffled cry from the thick woods to his right.

Just one cry—that was all. And the towing-path ahead of him was empty. The tall stranger and the two "beasts" had vanished.

"M-mum-my hat!" panted Trimble.

He was shaking with excitement.

But he did not linger in that spot too long. It did not strike Baggy Trimble as a healthy spot. Moreover—just then Baggy's scared eyes fell upon a boat rocking on the stream just under the bank.

It was his own boat—the boat the men had stolen from him.

Dare he risk it? Baggy listened, and looked this way and that way, and then he suddenly decided to risk it. With a sudden rush he left the shelter of the foliage and dived across the towing-path.

A sudden heave and the boat was off the shingle, and as it began to move Baggy scrambled aboard, his heart in his mouth.

But no shout came telling him that he was seen, and grabbing the sculls Baggy pulled for his life. Trimble had had quite enough adventure for one afternoon.

CHAPTER 6.

Alarm!

"I TELL you it's true—honour bright!"

"Rats!"

"But it is!" almost shrieked Baggy indignantly.

"I tell you it's a solid fact—I saw it!"

"What eyesight you've got, old fat man!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You awful disbelieving beasts!"

"Bow-wow!"

"Yah!"

And Trimble rolled off into the School House to seek less suspicious and more believing fellows to hear his story.

The doubting Thomases—otherwise Cardew, Levison, and Clive chuckled. Seven fellows came through the gates and stopped and eyed them.

"Well, what's the joke?" asked Jack Blake.

"What's Trimble been telling you?" inquired Tom Merry.

"About us this afternoon—"

"Eh? Oh, no," chuckled Levison. "We're just laughing at his latest yarn—a bit more untruthful than usual. He says he's seen some chap attacked by giddy footpads or something."

"And that they pinched his boat first and chucked him in the giddy river!" added Cardew sadly. "Isn't it a thousand pities they didn't stop to finish the job and drown him? Gad! We ought to be weeping instead of laughin', you know!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Levison and Clive.

"Well, that's true enough, anyway!" said Tom Merry, looking surprised. "Some chaps did pitch Trimble out of a boat and pinch it. We saw 'em do it!"

"What-at!"

"Mean to say Trimble's speakin' the truth, Thomas?" ejaculated Cardew.

"He's speaking the truth as regards the giddy boat and being chucked in," grinned Blake. "We spotted the men do it."

"And aftahwards, deah boys, we— Bai Jove! Pway stop nudgin' me, Blake. As I was wemarkin', we saw—"

"Come along and see Baggy about it," said Tom Merry hastily. He remembered, like Blake, that the artist had asked them not to talk about what had happened, and they intended to respect his wish—though Gussy seemed to be forgetting it. "Come along, Gussy! Trimble must have added the bit about the footpads to it."

"Bai Jove! Weally—one moment, deah boys, I was just about to tell—yoooop!"

Arthur Augustus fairly yelled as he was rushed away, Blake taking one arm and Tom Merry the other. They vanished into the School House, leaving Levison & Co. staring after them.

"Weally, Blake—weally, Tom Mewwy, you feahful wuffians—" spluttered the irate Gussy as they rushed him into the School House. "How—what—"

"You silly owl!" said Blake, in measured accents.

"Hadn't we agreed not to mention what happened on the thumping island, and you were just going to let it out."

"Oh, bai Jove! I—I had weally forgotten all about that,

deah boy. I was only thinkin' about Twimble, you know! Bai Jove!"

"No need to tell anyone, Gussy!" grinned Tom Merry. "Sorry we had to rush you in like that, old bean! Well, cheerio, chaps!"

The Terrible Three parted from their Fourth Form chums. But Tom Merry was looking very thoughtful. On the way home the chums had discussed the strange happenings on the island—and especially the arrival there of Kerr's pater—if it was Kerr's pater, though more than one of the juniors felt sure of that.

What did it all mean? And what was Trimble telling now?

Tom was always keen on a mystery, and this affair certainly shaped like one. All through prep Tom Merry pondered over the matter. It was clear to him now that the artist had expected to be attacked, else why had he leapt from the tent with a revolver in his hand when they had turned up? But why should two lawless-looking individuals attack an inoffensive artist? Tom felt that he ought to consult someone in authority in regard to the strange affair. Yet the man was an old St. Jim's boy—Tom saw no reason to disbelieve him on that count—and he felt it was up to them to back him up and to respect his request to keep silent.

It was some time after prep that Jack Blake, with Arthur Augustus, Digby, and Herries, entered Study No. 10. They were looking rather disturbed.

"Hallo, what do you Fourth kids want?" asked Lowther cheerily.

"Just a chat with you Shell infants!" returned Blake coolly. "I say, Tommy," he added seriously, "have you heard the yarn Trimble's been spinning since he got back?"

"Eh? Only what Cardew and Levison said!" said Tom.

"They didn't tell the yarn as Baggy tells it," said Blake grimly. "Baggy's been telling it all evening; but nobody believes it, of course—at least none of the other fellows believe it. They just think it's more of his wonderful tales. But—but—"

"Cough it up, Blake," said Tom, eyeing him curiously. "The fact is, I wondered if Baggy had seen those merchants

again, though I only heard what Cardew said! I've been thinking about it!"

"Come along and see the fat ass!" said Blake. "It sounds queer to me, and I shouldn't be surprised if there is truth in it. I say, fetch Baggy here, you chaps—better here than the Common-room!"

"Wight-ho, deah boy!" Arthur Augustus, Herries, and Digby hurried off in search of Baggy Trimble. They were not long away. Trimble was with them when they returned. The fat youth looked eager.

"Is it a feed?" he demanded, staring round rather suspiciously. "You said—"

"Not exactly!" smiled Jack Blake. "Only we're hungry to hear that yarn of yours, Baggy, and we'll promise to swallow it greedily. Cough it up, old sport! What happened after those merchants pinched the boat this afternoon, Baggy?"

"Eh? Oh, that!" said Baggy, eager enough to tell the story, but disappointed that it wasn't a feed. "What's the good of telling it, nobody will believe a fellow! As if I ever tell untruths, you know!"

"Well, hardly ever!" agreed Blake sympathetically. "When you're asleep, of course! But never mind what other fellows think, Baggy! We're ready to believe anything, old chap. What happened?"

The story lost nothing in the telling. It appeared, for instance, that Baggy went to the man's rescue, but was stunned and left for dead on the towing-path. Also the two rascals had grown to five by this time—owing to the richness of Baggy's fertile imagination and his delight in causing sensations.

But the chums soon saw which was truth and which was fiction.

"And you don't know who the fellow was, Baggy?" asked Tom, eyeing Blake meaningly.

"Blessed if I know—though he seemed familiar enough to me!" grunted Baggy.

"Was he a tall, upright man, with a keen, strong face?" asked Tom.

(Continued on next page.)



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"Just that!" agreed Baggy, with a nod. "Big chap—said he was going to St. Jim's, you know. I say, he must be pater of one of our fellows! Think so?"

"You never know!" said Tom Merry, his eyes gleaming a little. "You didn't see him actually attacked, then? If you heard the yell from the woods—"

"Eh? Oh, yes, I saw it all—piled in, you know! It was a terrific scrap. I floored two of them before—"

"We're asking you for facts, not fancies, Baggy!" chuckled Blake. "Stick to the truth for once, old bean!"

"Oh, really, Blake—if you can't believe a fellow—"

"Not quite, old chap! Have you told any of the beaks or prefects?"

"No fear! They'd disbelieve me and lick me, you know!" said Trimble indignantly. "I'm not chancing it—no fear!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Evidently Baggy had had experience of telling yarns to masters and prefects—painful experience! The juniors were not the only ones who know that truth and Baggy Trimble of the Fourth were total strangers—or almost that. Baggy wasn't risking being disbelieved—and licked for telling fibs!

"Well, we've heard enough!" said Tom, his face going serious. "Cut off, Baggy—"

"Oh, really, if it isn't a feed, then what about some toffee? Any of you fellows got some toffee?" grumbled Trimble. "Like your cheek to bring a fellow here for nothing. My time's valuable!"

Fortunately Manners had some toffee in the table drawer, and with it they bribed Baggy to make himself scarce.

"Well, what d'you think of it?" demanded Blake, as the fat junior rolled away, his fat cheeks bulging out with toffee. "It—it sounds like Kerr's pater! I'm certain it was Kerr's pater!"

"You believe Baggy's yarn, then?" asked Manners.

"I can't help believing it, after what's happened!" said Blake grimly. "We saw those men, and we saw the Wayland boatman land that fellow on the island. It all fits in—Baggy couldn't have invented it. If they were after that artist chap, they might easily be after his friend, too. And if I'm not grievously mistaken, that chap is—"

"Kerr's pater from Edinburgh?"

"Just that!"

Tom was silent for a minute, as the startled juniors eyed each other. Then he spoke.

"We must go and speak to Kerr about this," he snapped. "If his pater was visiting the school he's bound to have let Kerr know."

"It's Kerr's birthday," said Herries, with a start. "A likely time for his pater to visit him, you know!"

"Bai Jove! Yaas, wathah! Come on—let us wush ovah, deah boys!"

It was against rules to visit another House without authority after calling-over, but the chums decided to risk it, though it was decided that only Tom, Blake, and Gussy should go. Moreover, it was risky from another point of view. Fellows from the rival House were not always welcome, and often ragged for their temerity.

But Tom Merry decided to risk that, despite the raid of the afternoon.

Luckily they managed to get into the New House safely, and with more luck they managed to reach Figgins' study. That important member of the New House Fourth was at home with Kerr and Fatty Wynn. Kerr was looking far from happy, for his father had failed to turn up, and he felt rather sore in consequence.

"It's the first time the pater's ever missed my giddy birthday," he was telling Figgins and Fatty, with a rueful grin. "I was banking on at least a quid from him, too! Still, he may turn up—Hallo! Well, of all the nerve!"

Kerr had sighted Tom Merry and Co. in the doorway. There was a sudden scurrying as Kerr grabbed the poker, Fatty Wynn the tongs, and Figgins a shovel.

"Pax, old sports!" said Tom, grinning, as he entered the study. "We're on a peaceful mission, old scouts. Put those giddy fire-irons down and listen to us."

"You—you cheeky bounders!" gasped Figgins, eyeing them blankly.

"How could you have the nerve to come here after this afternoon—"

"Cheese it, Figgy!" said Tom Merry earnestly. "We've come here about something serious—or something that looks to us jolly serious! Look here, Kerr, were you expecting your father here to-day?"

Kerr jumped.

"My—my father!" he stuttered. "Yes, I was! But what the thump do you know about it?"

"I'll tell you, Kerr," said Tom quietly. "It may not be as serious as we imagine, and we may be worrying

for nothing. But now you tell us you were actually expecting your pater—"

"What is the ass burling about?" demanded Figgy, in wonder.

Tom Merry and Blake soon left them no room for doubt about that.

The New House trio lowered their weapons, and stared in growing amazement, as Tom went on to tell the strange events of the afternoon. Kerr's face was almost like chalk when Tom had finished.

"It—it must have been my pater!" he panted. "He wrote saying I was to expect him at five-thirty, and my pater's a man who never breaks his word or fails to keep an appointment. It must be! Good heavens!"

"Trimble may be yarning, of course," said Tom soberly.



Kerr bunched his muscles

"And on the other hand, it may not have been your pater, and, also, he may not have been attacked at all. Trimble may have imagined it. But—but—"

"You don't believe so, no more do I!" snapped Kerr fiercely. "Three or four of you couldn't have mistaken my father! But—but it's too amazing for words! My pater, mixed up in some shady work like that! It's impossible!"

"We've told you just what happened, and what Trimble says happened afterwards," said Tom. "I suppose you don't know the other man—the artist fellow; he called himself Curey—Mr. Curey, and he said he was an old St. Jim's boy!"

"So is my pater!" said Kerr thickly. "And—and the name of Curey does seem familiar to me! I must have

heard my father speak of the man before—in fact, I'm certain I have, more than once; but I can't just place who he is."

"Well, this beats the band!" said George Figgins, eyeing his chum curiously.

"What can we do?" said Kerr, almost wildly. "If we were only certain it was the pater—"

"We can only find out by asking that artist chap!" said Tom Merry. "My suggestion is that we all go up river to-night, and see him!"

"What? But it's after lock-up—it's close on bedtime, you idiot!"

"I know. And it's no good asking the Beak's permission, of course," added Tom, with a faint grin. "We shall have to break bounds and chance it!"

a prefect or master who happens to be up late. Anyway, it'll give us more time if we start early. Are you New House fellows on?"

"Of course!"

"Then we'll be there at eleven. Cheerio! We daren't stay longer now. Let's hope it is a mare's nest, Kerr, and that your pater is O.K., old chap!"

And with that, Tom Merry led his chums back to the School House. With due caution again they managed the perilous journey without incident, and soon Tom was explaining the daring plan to the startled rest of the School House chums. And, daring and dangerous as it was, it met with general approval, and Tom Merry and Co. went to bed that night in a state of subdued excitement.

CHAPTER 7.

The Scene in the Vault!

"ALL aboard, chaps! Quietly, now!" Tom Merry spoke in a whisper, though it was unlikely anyone from St. Jim's was abroad at that time of the night. But it was a thrilling business, and Tom could not help his voice shaking a trifle.

It was chilly on the river. Past the school boathouse the Rhyt swept strongly, starlight glimmering on the water. Overhead clouds moved slowly, hiding stars and moon now and again. A soft breeze rustled and murmured amid the dark trees ashore.

Quietly the adventurers, under Tom Merry, boarded the boat. It was the biggest boat in the boathouse, but it was a tight squeeze to get ten fellows into it for all that. Tom Merry had not wanted such a crowd on such a dangerous expedition, but none of the chums of the School and New House would be denied; they all insisted upon coming.

Kerr himself was impatient to be off. The more the Scots junior thought of the strange business, the more his fears grew. The very fact that his father had failed to keep the appointment was enough for him.

Something was wrong! Something had happened to his father!

The boat moved off from the stage. Tom Merry, Blake, and Herries were at the sculls, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy being at the rudder-lines. The current was strong, and the juniors pulled hard and long. Past dark, wooded banks and dim, misty meadows swept the big skiff, the cold water hissing and rippling past in a continuous murmur.

Half-way to Abbey Island the boat halted while Lowther, Digby, and Figgins took a turn at the sculls. The boat moved on again, at greater speed now.

Abbey Island loomed up ahead at last, and Arthur Augustus steered the boat towards it.

The sculls ceased to splash at last, and the boat grounded gently on shingle. The juniors jumped out, Tom Merry and Blake holding the boat steady. Then the boat was dragged up higher.

"Well, here we are!" murmured Jack Blake. "I don't fancy that artist chap will give us a cheery sort of welcome, coming at this hour of the night."

"Rather not!"

"Bai Jove, no!"

"But it can't be helped," said Tom Merry, frowning in the deep gloom as he stared inland. "No light showing; must have gone to bed. I say, we shall have to go cautiously. If the beggar takes us for a giddy enemy, he may start shooting!"

"Oh, bai Jove!"

The juniors stared at each other. Now they were here, the adventure seemed just a trifle futile—at least, it did to some of them. And, in any case, the man camping on the island was not likely to be pleased by a visit at that hour. Possibly, as Tom suggested, he might take them for an enemy, and act without asking questions.

The task before them was not a pleasant one.

Yet the matter could not be allowed to remain as it was until morning. Indeed, it was unlikely they would get a chance to visit Abbey Island until the evening if they waited until the following day. But even had the rest hesitated at coming, Francis Kerr would have come on his own.

And they were here now.

"Here we are, and now we've got to go on with it, chaps!" said Tom Merry, voicing the thoughts of all. "I vote we creep up to the camp, and then give a shout. That chap will recognise our voices, perhaps; he'll know they aren't men's voices, at all events."

"That's the idea! Oh, good!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Come on, then! Go quietly until we reach the ruins."

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apt right down on top of Bolle.

"Yes, yes—that's it!" said Kerr, jumping at the idea at once. "And, you fellows will come—"

"Yes. We should go if you did not!" said Tom Merry calmly. "I mean to find out what's going on at Abbey Island, anyway!"

"Figg—" began Kerr.

"If you're going, Kerr, Fatty and I are coming, too," said Figgy promptly. "It seems a wild sort of yarn, if you ask me, and it may all be a mare's nest. But—we're on, old chap!"

"That's enough, then!" said Tom Merry, the leader, at once. "Be outside the wall by the old chestnut tree at eleven!"

"Phew! Think that's late enough?" said Blake.

"Yes—if we're careful, we aren't likely to bump into

"Hold on! Look here!" said Blake.

He pointed a few yards along the shore to where a dim shape showed—the shape of a boat.

They hurried to it, and saw that it was not a skiff, but a dinghy.

"Phew!" breathed Tom Merry. "This was not here this afternoon, you men! Then—"

"Someone else is on the island!" whispered Blake. "This is not Mr. Curey's boat, that's certain!"

"Bai Jove!"

"This means we shall have to go jolly carefully!" breathed Tom Merry, his face setting rather anxiously. "Let's hope it isn't those fellows again, and that anything's happened to the artist. Follow me, and, for goodness' sake, go quietly now!"

"Lead on!" snapped Kerr impatiently.

Tom Merry led the way slowly—he was not the fellow to take chances in such circumstances. The usually cautious Kerr could scarcely contain himself, however.

The white tent gleamed up at last.

Behind it, against the dark trees, showed the ancient stonework of the ruined abbey, moonlight glimmering upon it. An eerie stillness hung over the clearing.

Tom Merry called a halt, and his eyes scanned the ghostly ruins and the encampment.

That the artist was asleep he did not doubt. The tent-flap seemed to be closed, and all was still.

"I'll give a call now, I think," whispered Tom. "Better still, we might chuck a few stones at the tent before doing so. I— My hat! Quiet!"

He broke off abruptly as he breathed the warning.

A sudden light had gleamed in the tent. At first glance he imagined it was the artist waking, but just as suddenly Tom stiffened.

On the white canvas of the tent, shown in clear relief by the light, were the outlines of two figures, and one of them held a gun!

"Not a sound!" breathed Tom Merry warningly. "See? Two men in there, and— By jingo!"

"They're hunting for something!" whispered Manners, his voice thrilling.

The figures outlined on the canvas were moving to and fro, obviously searching. That one of them could be Mr. Curey they did not believe for one moment.

It was the two rascals again. They had failed once, but now they were making a midnight raid. But what had happened to the artist? Had they already dealt with him? Or had he taken warning, and was he hiding somewhere, watching just as they were watching?

Somewhat the whole mysterious affair made Tom Merry shiver almost unconsciously. Trembling with excitement, the juniors watched until suddenly the two men emerged from the tent, and the light vanished.

"No go!" said one of them curtly. "And where in thunder is the blamed old fool? Look here, we've got to find him, Kirkham!"

Kirkham did not seem to relish the task. He glanced about him with obvious lack of enthusiasm.

"The man's armed, Bolle!" he grunted. "I—I don't like this! Curey must have seen us coming, and I bet he's hiding, watching us now! Let's clear!"

"What? You blamed fool—"

"I don't want a bullet in me, if you do!" snarled Kirkham, still staring round the ghostly clearing. "We'd make darned good targets— What's that?"

For the moment the juniors were startled, thinking the man had spotted them. But they saw that he was pointing now—in the direction of the ruins.

They followed his startled gaze, and then they saw a feeble sort of glow hovering over the ruined flagstones against one of the shattered walls.

"What—what—" went on the scared raider.

"Fool!" hissed Bolle. "Can't you see? It's a light! And, if I'm not mistaken, it comes from those vaults! Gee, I reckon we've got our man now, Kirkham! Stow your darned whimpering, and follow me! And not a row, on your life!"

"Oh, my hat!" breathed Tom Merry.

He, like the rest of them, had been scared at first by that ghostly glow from the vaults of the ruins, well as they knew the spot. But Tom was alarmed as he heard Bolle speak again. Obviously, the light came from the vaults, and equally obviously the person who had the light there was the missing artist—the man the two rascals were after.

"Get ready for trouble, you men!" whispered Tom. "Give them time to get out of sight, and then we're on the job!"

"Why not rush 'em now?" gasped Kerr, in an agony of anxiety and fear. "If they capture that chap, too—"

"No good rushing things!" said Tom crisply. "They're

armed, and we can help Mr. Curey best by acting cautiously. Hallo! They've gone down the steps into the vaults! Now come on, and don't make a sound!"

With the stealth of Red Indians on the trail, the chums of St. Jim's stole towards the dimly seen glow from the vaults. It was not easy going, for the moon was behind a heavy bank of cloud, and they could scarcely see anything now, save for that dim glow which guided them. Underfoot were trailing creepers, and the ground was covered with scattered masses of broken masonry.

But they reached their destination without giving warning of their approach. Tom reached the top of the steep steps at last, and, after a glance downwards, began to descend stealthily, his heart in his mouth.

No sound came from the vaults. But to his nostrils came the strong smell of tobacco. At the bottom of the steps Tom halted, his heart thumping painfully.

Still no sound, and it was weird and eerie standing there in the faint glow, with the black shadows around him. An uncomfortable feeling came to the junior that the two men might be standing within a yard of him for all he knew. A chilly draught, accompanied by a dank smell, came from the great arched doorway before him.

Quietly, without sound, Tom's chums joined him at the bottom of the steps, and together they stared into the lighted vault at a scene that made them blink.

CHAPTER 8.

Trapped!

"Q U I E T !"

Tom breathed the word tensely as one of his chums gave a half-stifled gasp of surprise.

The scene they beheld was a strange one.

The light within the vault came from an electric hand-lamp which stood on a great, massive slab of stone, and glimmered on stone pillars and arched roof. Beyond the light's radiance were deep shadows, and then blackness, swallowing up the ancient, carved stonework.

On the great slab beside the lamp stood bottles, jars, crucibles, test-tubes, and other laboratory stuff in profusion, including a number of notebooks.

Leaning on the slab of stone, puffing contentedly at a pipe, was a man wearing a dressing-gown over his ordinary clothes. He had a notebook open before him, and he was busy writing in it.

It was a strange scene—strange, that is, in such eerie, dismal surroundings.

Tom Merry's eyes glimmered in the darkness. It began to look as if his vague suspicions were correct—that Mr. Curey—as he called himself—had assumed the guise of an artist to cloak some other, and less innocent, activities.

"What's he up to?" breathed Lowther. "A blessed counterfeiter or a forger or what?"

"Quiet!" hissed Tom.

He was puzzled, perplexed. If Mr. Curey's game was an innocent, lawful one, then why had he chosen such a secret, unearthly place for his chemical experiments—for they were obviously chemical experiments he was engaged upon? Yet the face of the writer standing in the clear, bright light of the lamp was not a lawless face—it was not the face of a criminal. Indeed, Tom rather liked the look of the Abbey Island lone camper.

A restive, excited whisper came from Francis Kerr.

"I—I know that man!" he breathed. "I've seen him with my father, but—but I can't just place him!"

"Quiet!" breathed Tom. "Keep back!"

The men had vanished down the steps. They were slinking somewhere in the darkness of the vault, Tom felt certain. Indeed, Tom had been almost expecting them to spring upon the juniors every second from the dark shadows around.

Breathlessly they watched. And then, suddenly, Blake gripped Tom's arm with painful intensity.

A movement had come from the deep shadows behind the unconscious artist.

From behind a stone pillar emerged the dim, vague form of a man. A second dim form followed, and both came out into the light.

It was Bolle and Kirkham, and their faces were evil and resolute as they crept stealthily towards the back of the writer at the slab of stone.

Fascinated, too scared even to move for the moment, the juniors watched, their hearts thumping madly with the excitement of the scene. The slinking figures looked gigantic in the shadows—terrifying.

Nearer and nearer they crept—only a couple of yards now separated them from the artist. Then, abruptly, some slight sound they made caused the artist to wheel in alarm, and as he did so Tom Merry yelled:

"Look out! Now, you men!"
 He leaped into the vault, and his chums were not a second behind him. But Bolle and Kirkham had also leaped forward, and now they were at grips with the startled artist, fighting and struggling furiously.

Crash!
 They went down on to the flagstones in a struggling, confused mass.

The next moment the juniors were on the spot. They piled in with a will, the spell that had gripped them broken now. Over and over on the damp, chilly flagstones they rolled in hopeless confusion, their numbers hindering rather than helping.

Mr. Curey seemed to have grasped the position almost at once, for he yelled out to the juniors to stand back. But they scarcely heard, much less heeded.

Then came a sudden crash, and darkness fell upon the vault—deep, velvety blackness that seemed to envelop them as in a cloak. The lamp had been knocked off the slab and the light had gone out.

In the deep blackness the struggle went on, however, nobody knowing friend from foe. Yells, gasps of pain, and breathless grunts came from the struggling mass. And then with startling abruptness a light flashed on again, and a cold voice rang out:

"That's enough! Hands up, the lot of you—sharp now!"
 "Oh, bai Jove!"

It was Bolle. He stood a few yards away, dishevelled and ominous, a savage glint in his eyes. In one hand was an electric torch, from whence the light came. In his other hand was a glinting automatic—the hand holding it was as steady as a rock.

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Tom Merry.
 In the hopeless confusion and darkness, Bolle had obviously managed to scramble free, and now he held the whip hand.

His eyes glinted alertly in the gloom.
 "Remain just as you are!" came his cold, incisive voice.
 "One movement, Mr. Curey, and you'll have cause to regret it! You kids watch your blamed step, or you'll be sorry you ever chipped in on what don't concern you!"

"You—you scoundrel!" breathed the artist.
 But he remained where he was, leaning on one elbow on the floor.

"Now, Kirkham, look lively!" said Bolle curtly. "There's a bag on the slab there. Shove those notebooks and anything else useful into it—sharp! And run your paws through Curey's pockets! No wonder we couldn't find what we wanted in the blamed tent!"

"You—you dare to touch those things!" panted the artist, but Bolle laughed.

"We dare do more than that!" he said. "I s'pose it's no good asking you to come in with us on this, Mr. Curey—it'll pay you! You could tell us a lot—"

"I shall tell you nothing, you villains!" gasped Mr. Curey angrily. "How you have discovered my whereabouts I do not know! But you will never be allowed to make use of—"

"Stow it!" sneered Bolle. "Shove those small bottles and packets in, too, Kirkham. That's right! Now get out with the stuff, and I'll follow you."

"What about trussing 'em up?" asked Kirkham, glancing at the juniors and Mr. Curey. "If they follow us—"

"They won't!" chuckled Bolle. "We'll soon fix that door up!"

"You—you'll leave us prisoners—trapped in this hole?" gasped Mr. Curey.

"Just that!"

"But these boys—you couldn't leave them—" began the artist, horrified.

"They weren't asked to chip in, were they?" sneered Bolle. "But I s'pose someone will come looking for 'em sooner or later."

"You—you ruthless villains—"

"Stow it!"

Kirkham had left the vault now, and was waiting in the doorway. Bolle, his sharp eyes on the prisoners, began to back towards the door. Blake made a restive movement, but the automatic was pointing at him in a flash, and he was still.

Bolle laughed harshly and vanished backwards through the doorway. Then the door slammed, and they heard heavy stones being thumped against it from without.

Silence followed—a silence that could almost be felt in the black, dungeon-like vault.

There was a scuffling in the darkness, and after a moment or two came a muttered exclamation of satisfaction, and then a sudden, brilliant flash of light lit the gloomy vault.

It came from the electric lamp which Mr. Curey had searched for and found.

He stood it on the slab of stone, and the scared, dismayed juniors crowded round him.

"Well, this is a go!" groaned Tom Merry. "I—I'm sorry, sir! We did our best, but those brutes—"
 "You certainly did your best, my boys!" said the artist grimly. "You should not have come here at all. But—well, you are here now, and we must make the best of our predicament."

He hurried to the door and pushed at it with all his force. The big oaken door, black with age and studded with great iron nails, did not budge.

"I'm afraid we're in rather a tight corner, boys," said Mr. Curey, his face white and anxious in the light. "It would take a battering-ram at the very least to break down this massive door!"

"You—you think they mean to leave us here—to starve?" breathed Digby.

"They certainly intend us to remain here prisoners until they get clear," said Mr. Curey quietly. "They know, however, that you, at least, will be searched for! They are relying on that, and I fear they will not trouble about us!"

"Good heavens!"

"Does anyone know you have come to Abbey Island?" demanded the artist anxiously.


"Nobody, sir!"

"Then they won't dream of looking for you here!" exclaimed Mr. Curey, his face going whiter still as he realised how hopeless the position really was. "But—but there is your boat, which will be missed and most likely found. That—"

"Unless the rascals send it adrift!" said Manners in a husky mutter. "They're not likely to risk us being found quickly, are they? They may hide the boat for that matter!"

(Continued on next page.)

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Mr. Curey did not answer. They could see that he was deeply distressed and hopeless. He spoke at last.

"Why did you come here?" he demanded.

"Kerr wanted to ask you about his father, sir! We—we fancied we saw him meet you on the island yesterday—"

"That is so," said the man, with a grim smile.

"Then—then it was Kerr's father?" gasped Tom.

"Yes—he is a very old friend of mine, as well as my chief!" said Mr. Curey. "But—but did not he come to the school this afternoon?" he added, with a sudden start. "He was going there to see his son—"

"He didn't, sir—though Kerr was expecting him," explained Tom. "And—well, that is why we came. We believe something has happened to him!"

He told the startled artist what Baggy Trimble claimed to have seen. Mr. Curey's face showed amazement and great alarm.

"The—the villains!" he breathed. "They have captured Mr. Kerr! It was Bolle and Kirkham, of course! They had failed in their attempts upon me, and have got Mr. Kerr in their power. But—but Mr. Kerr is not the man to give way to those rascals!"

"But—but what does it all mean, sir—" began Tom hesitatingly.

"That would scarcely interest you, and, in any case, I am not at liberty to explain," said Mr. Curey. "But—but this is far more serious than I had supposed, my boys! I had hoped—I was cherishing a faint hope that Mr. Kerr himself might return, though I know he was to return to Edinburgh in the morning. But—you should not have come—you should have gone to your Housemaster!"

"We—we simply couldn't believe anything serious had happened!" said Tom. "We feared it, but—it seemed too wild and weird. Kerr was certain, though— My hat! Where is Kerr?" demanded Tom, suddenly breaking off and looking round him.

"Bai Jove!"

There was a sudden silence, followed by startled gasps.

The fellows scanned each other's faces, and blinked about them in sudden alarm.

There was no sign of Francis Kerr in the vault.

"Kerr!" shouted Tom Merry, a break in his voice. "Where are you?"

"Did the boy come in with you?" demanded Mr. Curey.

"Yes—I was behind him!" said Figgins, going white. "Kerr, old chap—Kerr!"

He shouted, but like Tom's shout it met with no response. No sound came from the still gloom of the shadowy vaults around them. Mr. Curey raised the lamp on high and flashed it about him.

But the ancient, arched vault was empty—Francis Kerr had vanished.

During the trip up the river to Abbey Island, Francis Kerr had been in a state of agitation and excitement—an unusual circumstance with the canny, level-headed Scots junior. His thoughts had been chaotic, confused; all he could think of clearly was that something serious had happened to his father.

But the moment danger had threatened, Kerr's brain had cleared, and he became his old cool, calm and collected self.

He had been excited enough, certainly, during that fierce fight in the blackness of the vault. But when the light had flashed up again and Bolle's harsh voice had sounded, Kerr found himself cool and his wits on the alert.

To his joy he found himself just on the edge of the shaft of light from Bolle's torch, and even as Bolle's order rang out, Kerr had slipped softly back into the shadows.

It came in a flash to the sharp-witted Scots junior what Bolle and his accomplice would do. They wanted the artist or something the artist had got in his possession. They were not interested in the juniors.

Yet they were unlikely to let the juniors escape to bring help; that much was certain, in fact. What would they do? The answer came swiftly into Kerr's keen mind.

They would imprison them in the vault—an easy way to dispose of the unwanted juniors! Nor would they be likely to allow them to escape quickly.

The thought made Kerr see that he would have to act—and act swiftly. Whether his prophecy proved correct or not, Kerr felt that a friend outside was better than imprisonment for him as well as for his chums.

He acted swiftly, cautiously. The moment the plan occurred to him, Kerr started to worm his way towards the door, keeping deep in the shadows. The flagstones struck chilly, but he scarcely noticed that as he crawled onwards, his heart thumping madly. Once a loose stone rattled

under his knees, but Bolle and the rest did not seem to hear the noise, or if they did they took it for a rat. And Kerr reached his objective at last.

Watching his chance he slid like a ghost across the faint glow of light that just reached the doorway. In a moment he was out in the open, with the cool night wind blowing on his face, and stars above his head.

He stood listening for a brief instant. But no sound—no outcry telling that his escape was discovered—reached him. And then, with his plan formed in his mind, Kerr started off for the landing place.

He reached it in a few seconds, though the trail was none too easy in the deep gloom. But he found the boats, and he acted with characteristic thoroughness.

He flung the skiff's oars far out on the shining river, and then he got his shoulders to the skiff's side, and sent it rocking out after the oars. The current caught oars and boat, and they drifted on with the stream.

Where Mr. Curey's boat was he did not know, but he guessed from what Tom Merry had told him that it would be safely hidden. In that case the rascals were unlikely to find it in the darkness. Tom Merry & Co. were trapped in the vaults of the ruins, but Belle and his rascally accomplice were also trapped—marooned on the island. If they had not dared to risk the current and swim across in daylight, they were certainly not likely to risk it at night!

With this thought Francis Kerr jumped into the dinghy and pushed off. Then he settled down to the sculls, the nose of his boat pointing upstream towards Wayland Bridge.

The sergeant on duty, snoring over his desk in the police station at Wayland, was likely to get a surprise that night.

CHAPTER 9.

The Tables Turned!

FRANCIS KERR pulled hard at the sculls, steering "by his toes"—not an easy thing to do in the darkness and with a big skiff to handle. But he was returning from Wayland Police Station now, and the current was with him and pulling was easy.

The Wayland Police Force were not used to shocks; they were used to a leisurely existence, only broken by occasional excitements when stray tramps gave trouble, or—very occasionally indeed—poachers and sneak-thieves. But the sergeant in charge got a shock when Kerr coolly told his story—or as much as he felt was necessary to tell.

The half-asleep sergeant took some convincing, but Kerr convinced him at last, and leaving him to awaken Inspector Skeat and get his men together, Kerr had started back, anxious to see how things were going on Abbey Island.

That he was risking a lot by visiting the island with Bolle and Kirkham at large he knew.

They would be furious at the loss of their boat—their only means of escape from the island. They would probably be on the look-out—though on the lower end of the island, But Kerr intended to land at the spot nearest Wayland, and to go very cautiously indeed.

He regretted now that he had not taken a bigger risk, and attempted to trap them in the vault with the juniors and Mr. Curey. He would have stood a good chance of getting the door shut with stones piled against it before the men had grasped what was happening. But it was too late to think of that now.

Kerr could imagine them pacing the bank where their boat had been shelled like tigers, baffled and furious. He hoped they were doing that now, which would give him a chance to rush to the ruins and release his chums and the artist.

That the rascals would risk swimming to the mainland he did not believe. And soon a police-launch would be speeding to the rescue.

Kerr approached the island very cautiously, his sculls scarcely raising the faintest splash on the starlit waters. If his father was a prisoner in the rascals' hands, then at all costs they must be captured and forced to disclose his whereabouts. And Kerr realised the danger of the rascals capturing him also and making use of the boat he was in.

He intended to run no risk, however, of that happening. No sound or movement came from the island, and he turned and scanned it keenly as he neared it. But all was dark and still, and with a sudden movement of his sculls, Kerr sent the boat nosing into the sand and shingle. It grounded, and Kerr jumped ashore, eyes and ears on the alert. He listened a moment, and then—still determined to take no risks—he sent the boat rocking out on the current again.

There was no escape for him or the men now—not by that boat, at all events.

A moment later the daring junior was creeping inland. He soon reached the clearing, and began to worm his way to the top of the steps leading to the vault, eyes and ears alert. If the men were gone, then it would be an easy matter to release his chums.

But the men were not gone. Kerr suddenly froze in his tracks as he heard a voice—Bolle's voice. And it came from the vault.

Kerr hesitated, and then, after listening a moment, he crept cautiously to the top of the broken steps and peered downwards.

There was the gleam of an electric torch below. In the narrow splash of light he glimpsed the heads and figures of two men. The big door, he saw, was closed, with huge stones piled in front. Bolle was calling through the door.

"You hear me in there?" he was saying savagely. "Where is your durned boat Currey? You must have one hidden somewhere, durn you! Tell us where to find it and I'll shift these stones and let you out! Refuse and you can stay here and starve, and so can old Kerr, confound him!"

Kerr gritted his teeth, and his face hardened.

No answer came from the vault. Mr. Currey was not the man to give way to the rascals' request in such circumstances.

Bolle gave a savage imprecation.

"Shift the stones, Kirkham!" he snapped, whipping a glimmering weapon from his pocket. "I'll soon make Currey toe the line, hang him! Think we're going to be beaten on the blamed post like this? Shift 'em—sharp!"

Kirkham grunted and started to move the big stones from before the door. There was an evil glint in Bolle's eyes, and Kerr realised he was ripe for any villainy in his savage mood.

Kerr set his teeth, and his own eyes glinted. He waited, watching until the last stone was moved and the door dragged open. A glow came suddenly from the vault, and in it several dim figures showed.

"Now, my lads!" snapped Bolle. "I'm standing no—"

He got no further. In that instant Francis Kerr bunched his muscles, took a deep breath, and leaped down clean on top of the rascal.

Crash!

There was a startled howl, and Bolle crashed down, the revolver spinning from his fist. It dropped inside the vault almost at Tom Merry's feet, and that junior pounced on it at once, grasped it, and then sent it whizzing into the blackness behind him.

"It's Kerr—good old Kerr!" he yelled. "Go for 'em—on the ball, chaps!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

There were startled oaths, and next instant a wild and whirling struggle was taking place in the confined limits of the space at the bottom of the steps. Kerr was in the savage grip of Bolle, but he did not remain so for long. A dozen hands grappled with the rascal, and he was rolled over and pinned down, with Fatty Wynn and Lowther sitting on his back and legs, and numerous hands holding feet and arms.

Kirkham gave less trouble.

He caved in after a half-hearted fight, and, like his accomplice, he was pinned down and held fast.

"Done 'em!" panted Tom Merry, almost grinning in his relief. "Good man, Kerr! How on earth did you manage it?"

"I simply guessed what they intended doing, and I slipped out under their noses," said Kerr, rubbing a bruise on his forehead. "Then I sent their dingy adrift, boarded ours, and pulled up to Wayland Bridge."

"Wayland Bridge?" echoed Blake. "But why—"

"Inspector Skeat will be here soon with his men," said Kerr calmly. "I told them the tale and rushed back, just catching these merchants about to open this door again. Then I leaped down and piled in!"

"Then the police will be here at any moment?" said Mr. Currey, a peculiar look of mingled relief and alarm on his face.

"Yes—they have a launch and shouldn't be long now!"

"H'm! However," said the artist, with a grim smile, "after all, it will be best, perhaps! Your father—"

He was interrupted. Bolle had been listening with growing rage on his heavy features, but now he gave a furious oath.

"What's that?" he gritted. "The police are coming, you say?"

"Yes, you villains! They'll soon make you say what you have done with my father! Where is he, you scoundrel?"

The eyes of Bolle glinted.

"So—so Mr. Kerr is your father, my lad?" he snapped harshly.

"Yes!"

"And you want to see him again—alive?"

Kerr whitened.

"What—what do you mean?"

"I mean that unless you free us and allow us to get away before the police come, you will never see your father alive again!" said Bolle deliberately.

CHAPTER 10.

Kerr Sees It Through!

KERR caught his breath.

He stared at the cold, hard face of the man before him with frightened eyes.

"What do you mean by that?" he stammered at last. "The police will be here any second now. You can do no further harm, you villain!"

Bolle gave a harsh laugh.

"I mean this!" he said. "Your father is lying, a prisoner, bound hand and foot and gagged; he is lying in a place where neither you nor the police will ever find him—unless we choose to speak he will remain there and will starve! That is what I mean. Now, perhaps, you will release us!"

"You—you scoundrel!"

"I swear that I mean what I say!" snapped Bolle, with a glance at Kirkham. "If you wish to see Mr. Kerr again, you'll release us at once! Once I am in the hands of the police I shall never speak! Make your choice and make it quickly!"

He laughed again—this time sneeringly. It was clear the fellow felt certain what the answer would be. But he was booked for a surprise.

Kerr stared at him with anguished eyes for a moment. That the man meant what he said seemed clear enough—even Mr. Currey was sure of that, and his face was pale and drawn with anxiety and agitation. But suddenly Kerr grasped the lamp, and, to the juniors' astonishment, flashed it over the two men. Then he laughed—a mirthless, yet triumphant laugh.

"So you'll refuse to tell us where my father is hidden?" he said coolly.

"I will—unless you release us!" gritted the man.

"Well, I fancy I can find out for myself," said Kerr. "Tie the brutes up, you fellows—fast. You'll find rope in the camp—"

"Plenty of rope and cord here," said Mr. Currey, seeming to wake from a trance. "This way!"

"Hold on!" hissed Bolle. "You—you understand what this means, my lad? Your father shall starve—he will never be found—"

"Rats!" said Kerr coolly. "Cheese it! I'll find him all right, I fancy! And if you've harmed him—you'll suffer dearly for it, you scoundrels!" he added grimly. "Tie them up! The police—Hallo, that sounds like them now!"

There was a clatter of stones, and the hurried tramp of heavy feet. Lights flashed above ground, and then lit up the space below the steps.

Cautious feet trod the steps, and then the light flashed on uniforms and steel buttons. The juniors recognised Inspector Skeat. Behind him showed a sergeant and three constables.

"Oh, good!" said Kerr. "Here you are, inspector! We've— Look out, there!"

Bolle, his flabby face red with rage and bitter fear, began to struggle furiously, but he hadn't the ghost of a chance of escape. There was a brief struggle, and then came the clink of metal, and the handcuffs clicked round his wrists.

Kirkham made no effort to escape, and he was soon secured.

Inspector Skeat breathed hard. He had come, full of doubts, though he knew Kerr, and knew he was not the junior to pull his official leg to that extent. But he had doubted, and now his doubts had fled.

"Perhaps you'll explain what this all means, sir?" he gasped, addressing Mr. Currey. "Who are these men? And what's their game? What am I to charge them with, sir?"

"I suppose I shall have to explain that," said Mr. Currey, with a grim smile. "But—"

"And we'll leave Mr. Currey to explain," said Kerr grimly, nodding meaningly to his chums. "I'm going to hear the explanation from my father—if my idea's correct, that is. You fellows coming with me? I'm going to find him!"

"Bai Jove! But you don't know where to look, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus, staring. "We may have to search—"

"No need to do much searching, I fancy," said Kerr calmly. "That chap was bluffing a bit, of course. My

father's hidden not so far away, and I'm going to find him. If you're coming, buck up! Hold on, though! Mr. Curey," he added, interrupting that gentleman in his earnest talk with Inspector Skeat, "can we borrow your boat, sir?"

"My—my boat? Yes, certainly! But one moment, boys!"

He went on talking to the inspector, who was writing in his notebook. Kerr growled under his breath.

"I know where he keeps it," said Tom Merry quickly in a whisper. "We saw him hide it this afternoon, Kerr. But are you sure you know—"

"I'm sure! Come on! Mr. Curey says we can borrow it!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

Kerr grabbed Tom's arm with fierce impatience and rushed up the steps, the sergeant and constables having taken Bolle and Kirkham away. The rest of the chums, bewildered and mystified, followed them at once.

Tom Merry asked no further questions then. He had great faith in Kerr's keen mind, and he led the way at a trot towards the spot where they had watched Mr. Curey hide his boat. The moon was out now, and it was easy finding the way. Tom stopped by the marge of the river at last. After a few seconds spent in searching, they found the hidden boat under an overhanging tree.

"Some of us will have to stay behind!" said Tom crisply. "You, Kerr, Blake, Figgins, and myself will be enough. The boat won't hold the lot of us."

It was a disappointment to the rest, but they saw it couldn't be helped. The four jumped aboard the boat, and it was pushed off.

"Straight across!" said Kerr, as Tom grasped the sculls.

"Where the thump are we going, Kerr, you mysterious beggar?" said Blake, impatient and curious.

"The chalk-pit," said Kerr.

"Oh! But—but how—why—"

"And you call yourselves Scouts!" said Kerr calmly.

"You saw me flash the light on those fellows in the vaults?"

"Yes, yes! But— Oh!"

Tom fancied he understood now.

"There was chalk all over their boots," said Kerr. "There's only one chalk-pit in the district, and I guessed at once that that was where the brutes were hanging out. And it's just the place they would hide anyone—a prisoner."

"Phew! You're right, Kerr!"

"That's got to be proved yet," said Kerr, his face showing keen anxiety still. "It's only my theory, though I'm pretty certain I'm right. Buck up, Tom!"

The boat fairly hissed across to the mainland. It grounded, and the juniors jumped out, and followed Kerr as he led the way inland. Through a thin belt of woodland, and then across two fields they hurried, heedless of the rough going.

Kerr's face was white and drawn. If his theory was wrong, and if Bolle kept his threat not to speak—

The tortured junior dare not think of it. There were plenty of places in and around Rylcombe where a prisoner might be hidden and never found.

They reached the chalk-pit at last.

Dark and gloomy and forbidding it looked in the dim moonlight. In the bottom was a pool of water, shimmering like silver and showing the reflection of the moon and stars. Around the chalky cliffs showed black shadows—the mouths of caves or tunnels in the chalk. The pit had not been in use for long years, and an old broken fence encircled it.

Kerr led the way down recklessly, slipping and sliding on the wet, chalky declivity, where the pit shelved downwards gently.

"We'll separate and search," said Tom Merry. "What asses we were to rush off without that lamp or a torch! Who's got matches?"

Two of them had, and these were divided. It was not likely to be a long search, however, for the caves were small and few. Kerr gave a shout—a shout that echoed and re-echoed round the chalky walls of the pit.

He did not expect an answer—but he got one at once.

A faint cry answered him from somewhere behind where they were standing.

"You—you heard that?" panted Kerr, his heart leaping.

"It—it was my father's voice! Oh, thank Heaven!"

And so it proved.

In one of the caves, lying on a heap of straw, and tied hand and foot, they found Kerr's father. He was in a state of exhaustion, but he had managed to move the gag from his mouth. He nearly fainted with joy and surprise when he recognised his son and the other helpers.

"You, Francis!" he panted faintly. "How—how did you know I was here? And how—"

"By keeping my eyes open, dad!" grinned Kerr. "I say, you're fairly done up, sir!" he added, with sudden indignation. "Those brutes—"

"What has happened?" demanded Mr. Kerr, his face

showing sudden anxiety. "Mr. Curey—how on earth did you know I was here? What has happened? You cannot know—"

He was obviously bewildered by the sudden turn of events.

"Don't bother to ask questions now, dad," said Kerr quickly. "Everything's all right, I think. Mr. Curey is safe, and those two rascals who kidnapped you—Bolle and Kirkham—are in the hands of the police!"

"The police! Good heavens! But who brought them into it, Francis?"

"I did myself," said Kerr. "You see, one of our chaps saw those rotters collar you this afternoon. I didn't hear of it until late this evening, and so my pals and I came up river, and went to see Mr. Curey—to discover if it was actually you they had collared. Then—well, those merchants managed to turn up, and turn the tables on us. They fastened us in the vaults with Mr. Curey."

"Good heavens! My boy—"

"But I managed to slip out first!" said Kerr, with a chuckle. "I fetched the bobbies, got them collared, and came out to hunt for you. I knew you'd be here, because I spotted chalk on their boots! See? But you shall hear all soon, dad, and then we shall want a giddy explanation, too. If you can walk—"

"Yes; I can walk, you young rascal!" said Mr. Kerr grimly. "Lead on, boys! I'm afraid this escapade will get you into serious trouble at school!"

"We're chancing that!" said Kerr cheerfully. "Lend a hand, you fellows!"

They helped the still dazed and bewildered Mr. Kerr to the top of the chalk-pit. He was stiff and scarcely able to walk at first, but he recovered with remarkable rapidity once they were walking in the open air.

They found Mr. Curey alone when they landed on the island, and his joy was overwhelming when he sighted Mr. Kerr. Inspector Skeat and his men, with their prisoners, had gone some time ago. The rest of the chums had waited at the river edge for them to return, and they accompanied them back to the camp.

"Bai Jove, this is weally wippin', sir!" said Arthur Augustus gracefully, as he shook hands with Mr. Kerr. "We feached—"

"Only your son seems to have used his brains!" laughed Mr. Curey. "I certainly noticed chalk on their boots, but I did not place any importance upon it. Well, I suppose we shall have to explain what it all means to these young rascals!"

"We're longing to know!" said Tom Merry.

"Then you shall hear—the moment our camping friend has made some coffee!" said Mr. Kerr, smiling. "I confess that I could do with a cup—badly!"

The flames of the camp-fire were already leaping up high, and Mr. Curey was busy making coffee, helped by Lowther and Manners. The crockery was scarce, but they managed to find suitable vessels, and soon all were seated round the fire listening to Mr. Kerr.

"It's really not very exciting," he explained. "As you know, I am the head of a big Scottish dye firm. Mr. Curey—besides being an old St. Jim's boy and my greatest friend—is my head chemist, and"—he smiled across at Mr. Curey—"a very clever man. He is a specialist in aniline dyes, and—well, the great secret is that he is now engaged in perfecting a new, secret dye."

"Here—on this island?" gasped Blake.

"Yes; though he doesn't always work here, of course!" laughed Mr. Kerr. "He simply wanted a quiet place in which to spend a holiday, and do a little work also, and he suddenly thought of Abbey Island, where he had spent many happy hours as a St. Jim's boy."

"Oh!"

"It was very necessary for the place to be quiet—and secret," went on Mr. Kerr grimly. "for a certain rival firm were after our secrets. They were unscrupulous and ruthless in their methods. They were on Mr. Curey's track—"

"You mean, Bolle and Kirkham?" breathed Tom Merry.

"They were their rascally agents!" said Mr. Kerr. "And—how, I do not know—they have managed to track Mr. Curey down, after all."

"Then—then Mr. Curey isn't an artist, after all?" said Lowther tactlessly.

"Well, he likes to paint!" chuckled Mr. Kerr. "He has been combining work with pleasure, you see. Aren't boys frank, Curey? They must have seen your sketches?"

Mr. Curey chuckled ruefully, while Lowther went crimson.

"They—they were unfinished, of course, sir!" he stammered. "I could see that."

Continuing Our Series of Roaring Wild West Yarns!

Buck of the Broken K.

By PERCY A. CLARKE.



No. 4.

CHANGED BRANDS!

CHAPTER 1.

On the Twin Arrow!

"HEY, Buck!" called Colonel Worth, the owner of the Broken K Ranch, as he strode up to his foreman, Buck Moran. "Maybe you'll recall that white bull we had?"

"The white bull we've got," corrected Buck. "We branded the critter only a week ago, boss."

"Yeah, that's so," agreed the colonel. "Yet I've been riding the range and can't find the animal. You might take a ride round on that leggy mustang o' yours and see what's doing, will you?"

"Mebbe the critter's got stuck in the coulee," said Buck; "or lost itself in the foothills. Howsomever, boss, I'll take a look-see and report later."

He got his horse from the corral. Buck had a great regard for Smoke, his mustang. The animal was nothing much to look at—in fact, some ignorant hombres had the nerve to laugh when they saw it. Smoke was inclined to be all legs, with plenty of bony points; yet Buck knew from experience that there wasn't a horse in all Texas to match it for speed and endurance, while between its wagging ears were more brains than many human beings possessed. Buck Moran of the Broken K wouldn't have parted with his cayuse for all the gold in California.

He rode round the ranch all that day, over miles and miles of mesa to the distant foothills. He nosed around in canyons and gullies, he forced his way into the thick of the feeding herd, but he never got a sight of the thoroughbred white bull that had been turned loose a week or more ago.

Then, when the sun was setting, he found himself close to

the township of Snake Springs, and, being tired and thirsty, he left the ranch to ride down to the saloon, knowing that Colonel Worth would never begrudge him that little luxury.

There were many men in the saloon. Buck knew them all except one, and the more he stared at the stranger the more Buck had an idea he ought to have known him. There was something about the man's face that was familiar. He was clean-shaven; the fellow's nose was hooked, and had a peculiar twist half-way down as if at some time it had been broken; the eyes were black and glinted; the set of the lips betokened cruelty.

Buck kept staring at the fellow as he sat there playing cards. Several times the stranger glanced up, to find Buck watching him. At last he could stand it no longer; he rose to his feet and strode up to Buck.

"Say, cowboy," he snarled, "you're plumb interested in me! Let's have your address, and I'll sure send you a life-size picture of meself painted by the best artist in Noo Yark city!"

"Snap out of it, stranger!" said Buck. "I ain't meanin' no rudeness, nor nothin' a-tall that-a-way. But your mug sure does interest me. I feel like I ought to know you, yet I don't. Have you settled in these parts, or is you jest passin' through?"

"I've come to stay, if you wants to know anything!" snapped the stranger. "I've been here about two weeks up to now. How come we never met afore?"

"Sure," said Buck, "I been busy—too busy to get to town for nigh on a month. I'm Buck Moran, foreman of the Broken K."

"You don't say? Waal, Buck Moran, since you're plumb curious, I don't mind tellin' you I'm Spike Rafferty. I hails from Arizona, and I've come to manage the Twin Arrow outfit to show you dumb Texas guys how to run a cattle ranch."

"Now, won't that be nice?" sneered Buck. "But tell me, Mister Rafferty, from Arizona, have you met me afore to-day?"

"No, I haven't," said Rafferty. "And I ain't plumb anxious to meet you no more! Now you've got me all set, and know who and what I am, kindly turn yore ugly mug away. Them eyes o' yours sure give me heebe-jeebies

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The Big White Bull!

And the men who saved each other's lives!

down me spine, and I'm plumb liable to poke 'em out wid me knuckles."

"Is that so?" said Buck coolly. "Waal, I don't want to spoil no hombre's pleasure; and ef it comes to eye-poking, you're sure welcome to begin—and maybe I'll finish it!"

But Spike Rafferty wasn't taking on the job. He had said his say, and he went back to his card game, sowing darkly as if he wasn't at all sure that he hadn't made a fool of himself.

Buck finished his drink and started walking towards the door. He paused half-way and stared at Rafferty.

"All the same for that, Spike," he said, "I still got that hunch I done seen you afore somewheres; and mebbe, when me memory really gets going and I places yore ugly mug, a gent from Arizona may start running out o' Texas. You never can tell, Spike."

Rafferty growled something under his breath and laid one hand on the butt of his six-shooter; but Buck Moran ignored him and walked stolidly out of the saloon. He unlatched his horse from the rail, leapt lightly into the saddle, and rode back to the Broken K.

Colonel Worth was waiting for him by the bunkhouse.

"Well?" he queried.

"It isn't!" said Buck. "That white bull has eether gone up in blue fire, boss, or sunk down in the airth out o' sight. I can't find so much as one hair of his tail!"

"No more could I," agreed the colonel. "And that animile was worth a heap o' jack. Looks like there's dirty work going on in these parts; though I don't see why there should be. I ain't heard o' any rustlers lately."

"But the Twin Arrow bunch have got them a new manager," said Buck.

"True!" admitted the colonel. "Old man Weston what owns the Twin Arrow show has gone 'way back east for a vacation, and he's got this Rafferty hombre down from Arizona to manage things while he's away. I've met Rafferty, and ef I don't cotton to him a lot, I ain't got a thing against him."

Buck rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Waal, boss," he drawled, "we'll leave that-a-way for a while. Give me leave to go riding at sun-up again after that white bull, and mebbe I'll find some-ut."

"I leave it with you, Buck," said the colonel.

But it was actually one hour before sunrise the next morning that Buck Moran rode out again astride Smoke, and he didn't just amble about the ranch; he headed straight for the wire fence that marked the boundary between the Broken K Ranch and the Twin Arrow ground.

He had a good many miles to travel to traverse the whole length of that fence, but he did it leisurely and systematically. Not for a long time did he get so much as a glimpse of the Twin Arrow herd, but about midday he caught sight of them clustered together on the edge of the mesa down by the foothills.

Buck halted and took stock of the countryside. Beyond himself and his horse and the grazing cattle he couldn't see any more living creatures; so he approached a bit nearer, keeping on his own side of the wire. From his saddle-bag he took a pair of binoculars and examined the herd. A splotch of creamy white had attracted his attention, and through the glasses he saw that he had found the missing white bull—at least, if it wasn't the one the Broken K had lost, it was a twin brother.

Buck stowed the binoculars away, then rode his horse away from the fence a bit till it could get a good run.

"Now, you old critter," said Buck, "kin you leap thet wire, or hev I got to cut it? Guess we'll try the air first."

He put Smoke at the fence, and the horse took it like a bird. Buck got his rope ready, and he galloped furiously at the grazing herd. The steers broke and fled, pounding away over the mesa. Buck singled out the big white bull and headed it off.

Nearer and nearer he galloped, his lariat swinging over his head. The rope sang in the air, and at the crucial moment it shot out like a striking snake. The noose dropped accurately over the animal's horns; and Smoke needed no orders, being trained to the job. It half-turned and went down on its haunches to counteract the sudden pull.

The bull went down on its knees, then came up again and raced off, trying hard to get rid of the lariat. Buck was after it, and Smoke ran a deal faster than the bull. The slack of the rope was drawn in. The bull was caught. Nearer and nearer came Buck. Smoke spun round, and the sudden jerk threw the bull. Before it could rise Buck was on him, slipping from his horse to seize the horn.

The perspiration dropped from him as he held the infuriated bull. He had one leg over one horn. He twisted the head round, round, until the bull was forced to drop down on its side and lay still. It was beaten—and knew it.

But Buck did not tie its feet. He got his lariat clear of the horns without giving the bull a chance to rise. As a

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matter of fact, the bull had no wish to rise; it lay still. And Buck moved cautiously from its head to its flanks and studied the brand.

His blood ran cold with anger. The brand had been changed. The Broken K brand was easily distinguishable. Take a large K, cut it in half, and remove the top half from the bottom half about three inches, and that was Colonel Worth's trade mark. It only needed one stroke on each half of the Broken K to turn that brand into the brand of the Twin Arrow Ranch, which consisted of two arrow-heads, one above the other and pointing at each other, separated at the points by about three inches.

Buck could see that the Broken K marks were over a week old, while the additional two lines turning the brand into the Twin Arrow were only two days' old at the most. There wasn't a cow waddy in all Texas who could have mistaken the signs for roguery.

CHAPTER 2

Cornered!

BUCK moved from the bull cautiously. The animal scrambled to its feet and stood there a moment, its head held low, its eyes gleaming wickedly. Buck waved his arms, and the bull galloped away some yards.

Then, before he could turn to his horse, Buck heard a snarling voice behind him.

"Put yore hands up, cowboy!"

Buck obeyed, knowing he was covered. He turned and saw the scowling face of Spike Rafferty.

"Waal, Rafferty," drawled Buck, "we have met again, after all!"

"Heck, we have!" snarled Rafferty. "And how! Haven't I got you cold on Twin Arrow land, monkeying with out best pedigree bull—"

"Easy, Rafferty!" snapped Buck. "You ain't fooling me none! Mebbe I am trespassin', but I'm here for a purpose. Thet bull b'longs to the Broken K; and ther' ain't a man in Texas but what could prove how thet brand has been tampered with. Ef you aims, eether to improve the Twin Arrow herd that-a-way or corral a few head for yoreself while you're here at the expense of the Broken K, I sure guess you've got me to deal with first."

"I'm dealing with you right now!" snapped Rafferty. "For a start, I deny them charges, and you're in the wrong for trespassing."

"Sure!" agreed Buck. "On the other hand, I have a reputation in these parts, and what I says will be listened to. Now laugh that off! And, further, Mister Spike Rafferty—"

"Shut up!" hissed Rafferty. "I know your sort. You'll talk an' talk till you kin pull yore guns on me on the sly. But I ain't sech a fool! Jest take them shooters from yore belt and drop 'em over here. Careful, now—and one at a time. No funny tricks, mind, or you get yours!"

Buck was at a disadvantage, but he didn't squeal. He obeyed, taking his shooting-irons from their holsters and flinging them down on the grass at Rafferty's feet. He was grinning significantly.

"Waal, man, what d'you know about that?" he queried. "Seeing you there coverin' me with a gun, yore hat pulled down, and yore ugly mug all twisted up some-at fierce, you done set me memory working."

"I don't give a hoot for your memory!" snarled Rafferty. "No?" retorted Buck. "Yet I seems to remember seeing you some ways north of the Pecos, when you done had a moustache under yore nose, and you was called Sam Rodgers, and the sheriff done put you in the hoosegow f'r rustlin' cattle—"

"You're a fool!" hissed Rafferty huskily.

"How so?" asked Buck.

"I could stop yore memory with a bullet. But I ain't a killer—yet. Besides, I got a better way. I tumbled to you back there in the saloon, and I knew it 'ud have to come to a show-down atween you and me, Buck Moran. It was you what collared me north o' the Pecos and handed me over to the sheriff. I got to get even for that, and you're goin' to suffer more'n a bullet through yore head. Git on that hoss o' yores—and make it snappy!"

"Sure!" said Buck. "Anything to oblige."

He knew now who this Rafferty was, and knew that if he were not careful he would get Rafferty's bullet in him. He aimed to stay alive as long as possible, because while there was life there was hope.

He mounted his horse, while Rafferty covered him with his gun. Rafferty got into his own saddle and came alongside.

"Put yore hands behind you, Buck Moran!" he said.

Buck grimaced, but obeyed; and he was tied—his wrists secured behind him, and his legs tied with a rope passed under his horse.

"Now ride!" snapped Rafferty. "And head for the gully by the big granite rock."

Buck said nothing, but obeyed. There was nothing else he could do. He was grinning as if he didn't care a lot; but his eyes glinted, all the same for that, and his jaw was thrust forward grimly.

For about three hours he rode, with Rafferty riding close behind, gripping his gun. Even with Buck tied hand and foot, he didn't feel too sure of himself. Buck had a reputation, and Spike Rafferty knew it.

But Buck couldn't do a thing for himself just then. They rode up into the mountains, and in a concealed gully Rafferty called a halt. He untied the rope under Smoke so that Buck could wriggle from the saddle, stiff and sore. Rafferty held a gun, so that there was no chance for a sudden kick, or anything like that.

"This," snarled Rafferty, "is where you stop for ever! But no hombre kin say as how I killed you."

With a quick movement he struck out with his clenched fist. The blow crashed on Buck's jaw and dropped him, half-stunned.

"Hit a bound man, you skunk!" hissed Buck. "You'll pay for that!"

"You'll never git out of here!" panted Rafferty.

He had flung himself on top of Buck and had bound his ankles together. Taking it all round, Buck was in a bad way.

"No one knows where you are," continued Rafferty. "I'm going to tie yore hoss to this tree-stump, so's he can't wander nowhere—like this." He suited the action to the words. "And you kin both stop here till you natcherally dies, while I helps meself to some prime Twin Arrow stock, to say nothing of a few head from the Broken K—and I kin take me time about it. And think o' this. I'll raise no end of a row about the missing Twin Arrow steers; and you'll be missing as well, so it'll sure look black against you, Buck Moran."

"It sounds okay," said Buck. "But things do have a way o' going wrong. And I've got a hunch I'll live to reward you some, Mister Spike Rafferty, or Rodgers! Ontie me, you skunk, and I'll fight you with me bare fists and you with yore guns! Yeah, I'll take you on—and a dozen like you, you rat! You durned horned toad! You gila monster! Once let me get me hands—"

He was wrenching at his bonds; but Rafferty snarled at him and kicked out savagely. The toe of his riding-boot crashed against Buck's head, and the Broken K waddy slumped back senseless.

When he came round again the sun was scorching him, and Spike Rafferty had gone. From the sun Buck reckoned he had been senseless over an hour. Smoke whinnied uneasily as he stood tethered to the tree-stump.

"Yeah, Smoke, you old critter," said Buck, "I'm thinkin' we're plumb up against things this time, but we'll try what we kin do."

He pulled and wrenched at the thongs that secured his wrists, but the more he pulled and struggled the tighter they seemed to become. He rolled over and over on the hot ground, trying to find a rock with a sharp edge to it, but the search was hopeless from the start. He sat up and blinked at the scorching sun.

"Dog-gone it!" he snarled. "I ain't givin' in yet a-whiles, not for a rat like Rodgers! But why didn't he kill me when he had the chance? Answer that one, Smoke, you knowing old bird? Why didn't he never kill me? Guess he hadn't the sand. He never was really hard-boiled enough to be a bad man, though his black soul is mean and low down—always was. And yit—I dunno, Smoke—some bad men would ha' killed me f'r remembering like I did, Mobber, for all he's bad, there's a streak of some-at good in him; though it ain't healthy f'r me lying here. Gee, whiskers, but it's hot!"

Fiercely he struggled, but it was of no avail. He sat up again, and, bending himself almost in half, managed to get his teeth against the cord that bound his ankles. He gnawed at it until his jaws ached. He spent the best part of one hour at that game, gnawing and resting, gnawing and resting. The cord grew thinner, then frayed, and after

more than sixty minutes of acute torture he tugged with his legs, and the cord snapped. His ankles were free.

But he could not get his head round behind his back.

Smoke whinnied and tugged at his tether, tossing his head wildly in an attempt to free himself. Buck watched him a moment, then had an idea.

"Guess I've wasted an hour on meself," he said. "Gee, Smoke, but for grey matter you get me whacked at times!"

He wriggled along the ground to the tree-stump, rolled over on his back, and kicked at it, hoping it would be rotten enough to snap. It wasn't, or Smoke would have broken loose long ago. So Buck wriggled close and got his head under the tether and gnawed at the knot where the rope was tied to the stump.

It was a long job. His jaws and teeth already ached from gnawing at the cords that had been round his ankles, but he kept on at it with all his might. He did not have



As Rafferty's gun roared, Buck hit out!

to gnaw the tether, but untie the knot. His gums bled in the process, but he stuck to it like grim death.

His idea was to get his horse free, then clamber up to the saddle as best he could, and so ride back to the Broken K to have his wrists untied.

But it took him an hour before he got the knot even loose, and the sun was sinking. Grimly he kept at his task; then, eventually, he pulled the end of the rope through the loop. Smoke did not budge, and all the time the tether hung limp from the stump. Buck untied the knot, and Smoke pulled the rope away. He was free, and whinnied as if with delight.

But before Buck could rise to his feet the horse went up to him, poking his muzzle against his breast with a force that amazed even Buck Moran.

"Yeah, I know you're glad, old critter," he said. "But stand aside till I kin get on me own feet, then I'll fork yore back and hit the trail for home. Git aside, Smoke."

Smoke, however, had other ideas. He opened his mouth, baring his great teeth, and took a grip on Buck's shirt and belt. He lifted Buck from the ground and walked off.

"Waal, I'm dog-goned!" gasped Buck. "But you can't do it, Smoke. She's every bit o' two miles to home. Put me down, you long-legged critter! It ain't comfortable—nary a bit! Put me—"

Then there was the sound of tearing cloth. Buck's shirt split in several directions, and he dropped heavily to the ground. Smoke stopped immediately; but, in case one of his hoofs trod on him, Buck rolled aside. He felt something fall from his belt, and when he looked back he saw his clasp-knife lying on the ground.

It gave him an idea. Smoke advanced, but Buck ordered him back.

"You meant well, Smoke," he said. "But I don't hanker for them sort o' joy-rides. Still, now, I got me an idee!"

He rolled until he got his bound hands against the clasp-knife. It took him several attempts to get it just right, but he managed it. He opened the blade and dug the haft into the ground. It was all guess work, because he couldn't see behind him.

Having got the knife set firm in the ground with the naked

blade uppermost, he applied the cords to the blade and chafed them backwards and forwards. At times the blade cut his flesh, but he ignored that while the cuts were not too deep. The cords were giving, and he thrilled at the sensation.

The light was growing dim by this time, and Buck was nearly all-in. His tongue was thick with thirst, and his head throbbled and ached. But he worked on and on until, with a sharp jerk, he snapped the cords, and his wrists were free. Then he slumped down on the ground as his senses reeled.

Smoke came and thrust his muzzle against Buck's face. That roused him, and, clutching at the saddle-straps, he hauled himself into the saddle, swaying like a drunken man. Smoke walked carefully, cautiously, but not along the trail. Buck said nothing about where they were going, because he was hardly in a condition just then to notice anything. But Smoke knew what he was about. He made his way in and out amongst the rocks until he came to where a brook babbled down the mountainside amongst the stones.

Buck swayed and opened his eyes. When he realised that he was looking at water he slipped from the saddle and buried his face in it. The coolness revived him. Smoke was already drinking.

After that Buck felt more like himself. His eyes glistened and his jaw was thrust forward with grim determination.

"That's better!" he muttered. "Gee, whiskers, Smoke, you old critter, I take off me hat to you! I sure does! And now, listen! I'm going high tailin' down to the Twin Arrow land; I'm going to call on Spike Rafferty, or Rodgers; and I'm going to paste him proper with me two naked fists! Let's go!"

CHAPTER 3.

Buck Wins Through :

BUCK climbed into the saddle and headed for the mesa. Smoke tackled the uneven ground in the uncertain light with care and method, losing no time, yet never placing a foot wrong. The sun was dropping behind the peaks, and the shadows were deepening and lengthening, when they left the mountains behind and rode out on the mesa.

Buck was feeling mighty sore. It wasn't merely because

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Spike Rafferty had stolen the Broken K pedigree out and was planning to get away with a number of the Twin Arrow steers; it wasn't merely because Spike Rafferty was merely a fellow named Rodgers, who had served a sentence in the State penitentiary for cattle rustling, and Buck had helped to send him up for his due punishment.

There was more in it than that. Spike Rafferty, as he called himself, hadn't even had the pluck to shoot Buck Moran. He had tied Buck hand and foot and left him to starve up in the mountains. More than that, Spike Rafferty had tethered Smoke, who would also have died miserably, secured to that tree-stump.

Whichever way Buck looked at it, the affair was mean, and he meant to even up without wasting any time. Smoke evidently felt that way about it, too; for as soon as he had even ground under his feet his tail went up and he galloped without being told to do so.

They travelled that way over the mesa towards the Twin Arrow outfit for, maybe, three miles, when suddenly Buck reined in his horse. It was dusk, and only wanted half an hour before it would be absolutely dark. Buck's keen eyes had seen something. He slipped from the saddle and made a detour. Smoke followed at a distance, knowing somehow that he wouldn't be wanted too close to Buck Moran just then.

The grass grew high, and here and there were bushes, which came in handy for concealment. Buck ran from bush to bush. In places he crawled through the high grass. The nearer he got the more certain he was. Spike Rafferty was out on the mesa alone—up to more crooked work!

Another twenty yards, and Buck began to understand. Spike had roped the white bull, had got him down on his side, had tied his feet, and was busy making the falsified brand look older than it really was, so that other cow waddies wouldn't spot the roguery as easily as Buck had done.

Buck watched until the work was complete and the ropes cut. The bull scrambled to its feet and ran off a little way, where it stood tossing its head, bellowing, and pawing the ground. It was obvious that, what with the branding, the false branding, the roping and inspection by Buck, and now the doctoring of the brands, that animal had had about as much as it was going to stand. Its temper was frayed at the edges, and it was ripe for mischief.

But Buck was too busy to worry about that. He came from behind a bush as Spike Rafferty came to his feet and looked for his horse.

"Jest turn this-a-way, Spike Rafferty!" called Buck. "I'm a-coming at you right now!"

Rafferty recognised that voice, and he spun round, whipping a gun from his belt. He brought up the weapon, and it spat fire; but as the gun roared Buck hit him. The shooting-iron was knocked aside, and the bullet went wide. Buck's fists came like a sledgehammer, with vengeance and wrath behind it.

Smack!

It crashed on Rafferty's nose and knocked him yards away; his gun flew from his hand, dropping on the grass, and Buck kicked it under a bush.

Then up came Rafferty, knowing he was in a jam. He had another gun, and his hand went for it. But Buck went for him like a whirlwind.

Crash! Biff! His fists were working.

Twice he slammed Rafferty in the face and half-dazed him; and as the new Twin Arrow manager reeled away from him Buck snatched the other gun from its holster and threw it behind him over his shoulder.

"Now, you rustlin' rat!" he snarled. "Neether of us has irons, and the odds is plumb even—though you ain't been left all day in the mountains!"

"Listen, Buck!" pleaded Rafferty. "You done got me all wrong. Listen!"

"I ain't listenin'!" roared Buck. "I aims to sock you a-plenty—and I'm coming! Look out!"

He pounced on his man with all the fury of a mountain lion. Rafferty had to fight whether he wanted to or not, and Buck was letting him have a two-fisted vengeance. His bunched knuckles crashed all over Rafferty, closing his eyes and knocking out his teeth, making him gasp as they thudded on his ribs.

Not that Buck had it all his way entirely. Rafferty fought back, goaded to fury with every smack he shipped. He got in plenty of shrewd blows at Buck; but the Broken K waddy was urged on by vengeance and the thought of what might have happened to Smoke, the leggy mustang, if his own teeth hadn't been so strong.

"You black-hearted skunk!" hissed Buck. "When I done finish with you—"

"But listen!" moaned Rafferty, his breath coming fast.

"Nix on listenin'!" snapped Buck. "Feel that one!"

Smack!

It was a daisy! It came straight from a powerful shoulder, and it got Rafferty on the side of the mouth. The

Twin Arrow man had his head jerked back, and he travelled backwards for three yards before he dropped.

Buck could have jumped on him then, Rafferty was so dizzy; but Buck Moran never had struck a downed man in his life, and he wasn't starting then. He stood there waiting, watching.

"Get up, you quitter!" he cried. "I ain't had enough exercise out o' you yet! Get up, I say, or—"

And then there was a thundering on the turf behind him. Buck half-turned. He had no time to do more than that when the thunderbolt hit him—at least, it seemed like a thunderbolt at first. Something caught Buck just by the belt and lifted him from his feet. He sailed up in the air, and came down with a thud and a jar on the hard ground, while a ponderous, white form thundered on, turned, and came back, bellowing with rage.

Buck was dazed, and his senses were reeling. He saw that great ton of beef and rage tearing down on him. Grimly he pulled himself together, trying to get up on his feet, when Rafferty came hurling himself at the enraged bull. At the crucial moment he got his hands on the curved horns and turned the animal aside, though he couldn't stop him. But Buck's life was saved. He managed to roll aside as they thundered past.

Spike Rafferty was holding on for dear life, but after the pounding he had received from Buck he wasn't in a condition to throw the bull. His heels kicked up the dust for several yards; then from sheer weakness he had to let go, and he dropped.

The bull came round in a wide circle, his beady eyes glittering wickedly. He saw Rafferty lying there and charged, head down, tail up.

Buck took in the situation at a glance, and he never hesitated. He ran faster and harder than ever he had run before. He ran in a half-circle, and came up beside the bull, pressing against the white shoulder.

Coolly he grabbed those horns, and his boots dug in the dust. The weight of his body pulled the bull out of its course, so that it sped past Rafferty, who had time in which to roll under a bush. Buck hung on, got a firmer hold, and tugged. The bull ran round and round in rings, bellowing and tossing its head. At every toss Buck was lifted clean off his feet, but he hung on. More than that, he got one leg over the nearest horn, and the other horn was in the crook of his arm.

Every muscle worked, and he had a good throwing hold on the great bull. He tugged and forced the head round. The bull came to a standstill, eyes bloodshot, tail swishing; but he was beaten already. His legs were wide apart, but wobbling.

Rafferty came from the bush, having got his wind back, and he went for his lariat. He came a-running and helped Buck at the horns. His extra strength defeated the bull. The slaving muzzle was pointed to the darkening skies, and he came down on one side with a crash.

Buck slipped round and sat on the head. Rafferty got his rope round the legs skilfully, and the animal was secured, lying there as peaceful as any lamb.

Buck sat on the great flanks, and, picking up his Stetson, fanned himself; while Rafferty took off his neckerchief to wipe some of the blood from his face that Buck had spilled for him.

"Now, what d'you know about that?" asked Buck.

"It was a near thing," growled Rafferty.

"Gee, whiskers, you've said something!" retorted Buck. "But it's all over, and I aims to finish that show-down we was havin'!"

"I ain't fightin'!" said Rafferty gruffly.

"How come?" asked Buck curtly.

"You sure saved my life. And how kin I fight you any more?" said Rafferty.

"Waal," drawled Buck, "come to that, you sure saved my life, so that evens things up. Though why you never let the bull finish me sure has me guessin'!"

"Listen, Buck!" said Rafferty. "I ain't a killer. Mebbe I have rustled cattle in me time, and I been plannin' to do some more in these parts. I won't deny it. You've stumbled on me plans and beaten me up. I ain't complainin'. I know when I'm whacked, but I never was a killer."

"Yet you left me up in them mountains—" Buck began.

"I never meant you to die there. I was going to bring you food and water when I'd finished doctorin' that brand. You'll find the grub stake in my saddle-bags. And I planned, when I'd got the rustled steers together, to leave these parts and let your Broken K waddies know where you was, so's they could rescue you. Get me?"

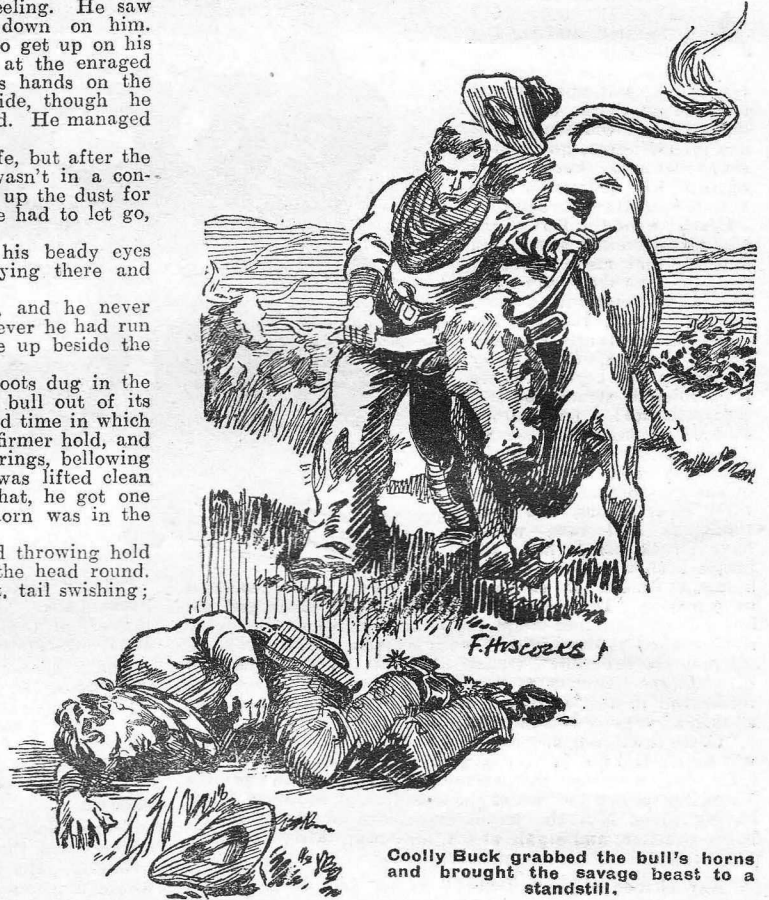
Buck scratched his head with bewilderment.

"Shucks!" he said. "What kin a guy do with a hombre like you? Tell you what, Spike—we can't leave thet bull

ueg up that-a-way all night; us'll get our hosses close handy, ontie him, then clear out of his way before he gets the stiffness outter his feet. And you'll go home, and I'll go home."

"And after that?" asked Rafferty.
 "Waal, I been thinking. I gives you a week, Spike, to get that bull back on Broken K land, with the brand back to what it ought to be; and you'll cable the owner of the Twin Arrow Ranch to say as how the job don't suit, and you resigns; and you'll clear out o' these parts. You do that inside a week, Spike, and I'm mum; I keeps my mouth shut. Is it a deal?"

"I ain't argue about it," said Rafferty.
 "And take my tip, Spike. Mebbe you has been bad and you is bad, yet there's some good in you. When you grabs another job jest go straight."



Coolly Buck grabbed the bull's horns and brought the savage beast to a standstill.

Some hours later, in the dead of night, Buck Moran rode home to the Broken K outfit.

In the morning he was sitting on the top rail of the corral, looking rather the worse for wear, when Colonel Worth found him.

"Hey, Buck," he said suspiciously, "I saw Spike Rafferty down by the post office in Snake Bridge jest now, and he looked sorter plastered up round the face. What about that bull you went lookin' for?"

"Don't you worry none about that, boss," grinned Buck. "In less than a week thet bull will be on yore range again. I gives you my word for that."

"How come?" asked the colonel.

"Waal," said Buck, "there's good and bad in all of us. I shouldn't worry none of I was you."

The colonel never did worry. And the bull came home; while Spike Rafferty left those parts and sought pastures new.

No one was more pleased than Buck Moran himself; he'd got the better of Spike Rafferty, and that was all that mattered!

THE END.

(Buck and Smoke are here again next week, boys. Don't miss their next thrilling adventure, whatever you do!)

Further Chapters of Our Rippling Story of Adventure in the Royal Navy!

THE FIGHTING MIDDY!

By
David
Goodwin

The Stolen Banknotes!

A STEAM cutter was lowered, and the big floating target set up. The Victorious turned her tail upon it and steamed off to the eastward, and at three thousand yards she turned again, going at a sharp twenty knots, and opened fire from her two turrets and fore barbette.

Crash! went the first of the mighty fifteen-inch guns, with a shock that made the ship tremble. The shell sang away across the water with a loud, tearing scream, the top left corner of the target was sent flying, and a spout of water leaped up just beyond, where the projectile struck the sea. "Good shot! A trifle high," said Jinks, under his breath.

One after the other the guns took their turn, and out of twenty shots there were but three clear misses, and even those, as Ned saw, would have struck home had the target been a ship instead of a mere square of canvas.

The crash and concussion were terrific. The gun-crews, in spite of the shock and the heavy back-blast that swept the turret's interior after every shot, worked as steadily and coolly as if at loading-drill.

Up in the fire-control station aloft the gunnery-lieutenant directed the batteries as the Victorious steamed back and forth, and in a few minutes the target, which looked tiny at such a range, was shot to rags and ribbons.

"Cease fire!" was ordered, and soon afterwards eight bells was struck and the watch changed.

In the morning the anchors rumbled down as the Victorious joined the rest of the squadron at Spithead, after having given Ned the triple experience of steam-tactics, battle practice, and a gale at sea, all within thirty-six hours.

"Any chance of shore leave?" asked Ned, as he sniffed the morning air on coming on deck at eight bells and looked across at Southsea basking in the early sunshine.

"Doubt it," said Jinks, shaking his head. "Number One looks a bit sour, and we were the last ashore before the ship went out, but we may as well try."

They betook themselves to the first lieutenant, and, with faces innocent as cherubs, besought him to let them set foot on English soil again. But the breakfast curry had disagreed with Number One, who was very grumpy.

"Ashore! No! You're always going ashore!" he snapped. "Get below to your duties!"

They had no duties at that hour, but neither of the boys minded a little set-back.

"I must get those things some other time," said Ned. "I could do with some bloater-paste, or something, for tea. It's a bit plain."

"You can get those things from the steward."

"Right. I'll get a supply, and we'll share 'em. I say, can you change a tenner for me, old chap? I spent all my change fetching Smiler."



"Great Scott, no!" said Jinks, as Ned took out his pocket-book. "D'you take me for a millionaire? The paymaster, or the paymaster's clerk, will change it for you. What's the matter?"

Ned had taken two banknotes from the pocket-book, and was looking at them with a puzzled frown.

"They aren't wrong 'uns, are they?" asked Jinks.

"No. But I'd have sworn the governor gave me a ten-pound note, and not these two fivers. It's a rum thing."

"You must have forgotten."

"I suppose so. But I thought I remembered it plain enough."

"You landlords who own half a county get so many tenners and things that you don't notice 'em," said Jinks, grinning. His father was a country parson, and could not afford him much allowance.

"Rats!" said Ned. "I've never had ten pounds of my own before, and it's got to last me all the quarter, too. Still, I don't remember these two notes. The governor said—"

"What does it matter, you owl? They're worth just as much, aren't they?"

"Sure thing. I'll go and change one," said Ned, making for the alleyway.

"Lucky beast! Nice and crisp they look—eh?" said Jinks enviously.

"I say, old chap, do you want any cash just now?" said Ned, pausing. "You're welcome to one of 'em—pay any time you like."

"No thanks, Ned; I've got enough for my humble needs," said Jinks. "It's decent of you."

"We'll split one of them when we go ashore," said Ned, and he departed to the paymaster's quarters.

One of the clerks changed a note for him, with some

HOW THE STORY STARTED.

MIDSHIPMAN NED HARDY, son of a line of sea captains, is appointed to the Victorious, the same ship from which his brother Ralph has been cashiered in connection with a robbery. Aboard the Victorious, Ned finds a friend in Jinks and an enemy in Sub-Lieutenant Grimshaw. Before very long the new snotty is put in charge of the third cutter and succeeds in winning his footing among the middies by saving a blue-jacket's life. Later, the squadron steams out of the Solent, the flagship leading, with the Victorious following majestically in her wake. Thirty miles out of sight of land the ship is cleared for target practice.

(Now read on.)

facetious remarks on the wealth of snotties, and Ned returned to negotiate with the gun-room steward.

"Your boat will be called away in the afternoon watch," said Jinks to him, "and you'll probably get four hours of it solid, so you'd better stoke up well at lunch. Hungry work boating. But that third cutter of yours is fast enough to keep one busy. I hate a slow boat."

"She's second cutter now," said Ned. "The other second's to be the first, the boatswain told me, and the new boat that takes the place of the one Wexton sank will be third. She comes off to-day. What a dickens of a lot of boats the Victorious has!"

"Best part of the ship," said Jinks. "It's wicked to think they'll all have to be chucked overboard and abandoned before the ship goes into action. About eight thousand pounds' worth of 'em, launches and all."

"Yes, a rotten shame. But better than having the crew mowed down by splinters," said Ned.

"You're in luck. I can tell you, to be running the second cutter of a ship like this in your first week. But that smash-up gave you a show. If I—"

"Mr. Hardy to the gun-room!" came the message down the alleyway.

In the Guard Room!

NED obeyed the order, as all orders are to be obeyed by juniors in the Navy, at the run. He found Sub-Lieutenant Grimshaw awaiting him in the gun-room, and it seemed to him there was a look of suppressed surprise on the senior's face. Before him stood Captain Raglan's messenger.

"Mr. Hardy, you will go to the captain's cabin at once!" said Grimshaw in a grating voice.

Ned saluted, and left immediately with the messenger, leaving Jinks wondering what had made the captain take to sending for midshipmen. Most of them hardly came before him once, officially, during their gun-room service, for the captain of a battle cruiser does not deal directly with his junior officers. It is the commander before whom middies usually appear, when necessary.

Ned was wondering, too. The messenger, of course, said nothing to him on the way. Mr. Hardy searched his conscience for any memory of wrongdoing. But his last visit to the owner had been a pleasant one, and resulted in compliment. Perhaps there was going to be more of it. Alas! Ned flattered himself in vain.

He was ushered in past the rigid Marine sentry who stood outside the cabin curtains, and, once inside, Ned's heart sank. Captain Raglan was stern and grim. There was thunder in the air.

The captain was sitting at his desk, and lying before him was the banknote Ned had changed twenty minutes before. He dismissed the messenger as Ned saluted and came to attention, wondering what was the matter. Was it forbidden for midshipmen to cash notes with the paymaster? Or was he going to be hauled over the coals for extravagance?

Captain Raglan picked up the note and bent his penetrating gaze on Ned's face, on which the light from the cabin windows shone full.

"You changed this banknote at the paymaster's office?" said the captain, in a sharp, decisive voice.

"Yes, sir," said Ned, glancing at it. His father had taught him to take the numbers of banknotes before parting with them.

"Where did you get it?"

"It was given to me as part of my allowance, sir," said Ned.

The captain's gaze became sterner still. He tapped the desk with his fingers as he spoke the next sentence.

"This note, Mr. Hardy," he said slowly, "is one of those stolen from the ship's safe in the robbery which took place last month. You understand?"

Ned stared at him absolutely aghast. One of the stolen notes! From the very robbery over which his brother had been court-martialled! He could not believe his ears.

"Have you any more notes in your possession?" asked the captain sharply.

"I—yes, sir. Only one."

"Give it to me. Your pocket-book, please—just as it is."

Ned handed it to the captain, who looked through it. He spread the second note out, and his lips grew harder still.

"This is another of the stolen notes. Have you any more of any description?"

"No, sir!" said Ned.

Captain Raglan laid the notes aside and fixed his eyes on the midshipman again.

"Mr. Hardy," he said, "you are in a serious position. We find you in possession of stolen property—of moneys

belonging to his Majesty and taken from the ship by felony. These notes are two of the many that are as yet untraced. I trust you will clear yourself without any difficulty. But you must explain fully, and keep nothing back. You understand?"

"Yes, sir," said Ned, rather hoarsely.

He began to realise how ugly this suspicion looked for him, of all people.

"I await your explanation, Mr. Hardy. Where did you get these notes?"

"My father gave them to me, sir."

"You are sure of that?"

Ned suddenly checked himself. There was the trouble—he was not sure. As he told Jinks, his impression was that his father gave him a ten-pound note, and these were two for five pounds.

He hesitated.

"Well, sir!" said the captain, his brows knitting.

"I—I thought so, sir," said Ned. "At least, he gave me—"

"Answer me, yes or no!"

"No, sir," said Ned desperately.

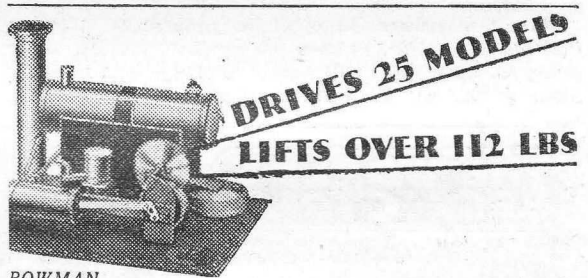
"What to make of it he could not tell. But he felt certain his father had not given him those two five-pound notes.

"If your father did not give you these notes, Mr. Hardy, where did you get them?" said the captain sternly.

Like a flash the truth suddenly came to Ned. It must have been the two men who drugged him in the railway carriage who put those notes in his pocket. There was no other explanation.

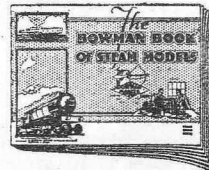
At last here it was. He remembered having glanced at the note when taking his ticket at the station; it surely was a ten-pound note then. And when he looked through his belongings before reaching Portsmouth he had a notion there were two notes, and not one, then. He had paid little attention, feeling sick and half silly from the effects of the chloroform. The pocket-book had never left him since then, and he slept with it under his hammock pillow.

But what was he to say? This was the forbidden subject. He had given Mr. Mytton his word never to mention it to any living soul. Mytton was in the Secret Service; great things might hang on the affair.



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"You hear me, sir?" said Captain Raglan sternly. "Answer my question!"

Ned, very pale, remained silent.

"Do you refuse to tell me?"

"I can't tell you, sir. I'm bound not to," said Ned in a low voice.

The captain stared at him in angry amazement.

"Unless you tell me instantly, Mr. Hardy, I shall put you under arrest and order a court-martial on this affair!"

"I'm sorry, sir. I've no choice."

Captain Raglan struck the hand-bell on his desk, and the sentry appeared.

"Send a corporal and file at once!"

The sentry saluted, and a corporal and two privates of the R.M.L.I. quickly appeared.

"You refuse to speak?" said the captain grimly to Ned.

The midshipman, though white as paper, only saluted.

"Corporal, take this officer to the guard-room. Put a sentry at the door!"

"Right about—turn! Quick—march!" said the corporal.

Ned, his throat dry and the blood singing in his ears, was marched off between the two privates. Two minutes later the door of the guard-room clanged behind him, the key turned in the lock, and he was alone.

Feeling utterly dazed, Ned Hardy sank down on the bench that ran along one end of the guard-room. He heard the sentry's sharp tread and halt, taking up his place on the other side of the locked steel door. The midshipman realised that he was a prisoner, and in danger of complete disgrace.

"Why am I in this ghastly mess?" muttered Ned. "I've done nothing?"

The suddenness of the catastrophe bewildered him. Twenty minutes ago he had been on the best of terms with himself and all the world, fearing nothing. Now he was in as tight a place as anybody could wish to avoid.

"Will they court-martial me," thought Ned, "or shall I be sent ashore to be tried? Why should I suffer, either? Mr. Elking must get me out of it somehow, if he can."

(Found in possession of stolen property! Without a doubt Ned Hardy's in a queer fix! How's it all going to end? Don't miss next week's gripping instalment of this serial, whatever you do, chums!)

THE MYSTERY MAKERS!

(Continued from page 20.)

"Exactly! They were merely washes. Mr. Curey places them out in the sunlight just to test the pigment when exposed to strong sunlight. He really can do better than that with his brushes. But he was not aiming to make pictures. Well, do you understand now, boys? It was just luck that they happened to turn up the afternoon I was here, and sheer bad luck on my part for walking right into the rascals on the towing-path. I fancy, though, that they were watching for me. If they failed to get the secrets from Mr. Curey, they intended to force them from me. That is all. Not very exciting and mysterious, is it, after all?"

But Tom Merry & Co. thought it was.

"But you boys had better return to school now," ended Mr. Kerr grimly. "I'm afraid you're booked for still more excitement when your headmaster hears of this. I shall stay with Mr. Curey for the rest of the night, and probably to-morrow. Come along!"

And Tom Merry & Co., bidding "Good-bye!" to Mr. Kerr, departed, Mr. Curey rowing them across to the towing-path.

Now the excitement was over, they did not feel any too happy. They managed to get into the School House safely, and crept to their dormitories, wondering what the morrow held for them. "Mr. Kerr could not, of course, keep their breaking bounds a secret, and though he had promised to plead for them, they could not help having dismal misgivings.

But Mr. Kerr's promise cheered them up, and his confident belief that they would escape severe punishment proved correct. The next morning the Head sent for them. He told them that Mr. Kerr had been, also, Inspector Skeat, and he gave them a severe lecture on the wickedness of breaking bounds. Their reason for doing so was no excuse; they should have reported the matter to him or to Mr. Railton.

And that ended the matter for the juniors, excepting that they all visited the island the next afternoon as guests of Mr. Curey and Mr. Kerr, and a wonderful tea it was.

Francis Kerr returned to St. Jim's with a crisp fiver in his pocket, which he expended the following half in a great feed of celebration, to which he invited the School House rivals—Tom Merry & Co.

THE END.

(Chums, don't miss: "The Prisoner of the Moat House!" next week! It's a real first-class, mystery yarn; but there's laughter in it, too.)

THE WORLD'S BEST CYCLE

26 The JUNO ROYAL

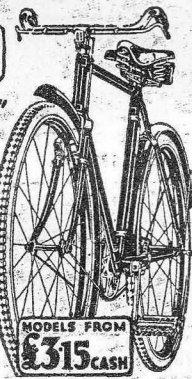
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