

Starring Tom Merry & Co. in Big-Thrill Adventure on—

THE
GEM
2^P

*The
River
of
Death!*





Blake Answers Back!

Jack Blake's here to answer your letters and deal with your queries. Write to him c/o The GEM, Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Be as candid as you like—Jack Blake likes a plain speaker, being by nature a John Blunt himself! But keep your letter **SHORT**, and enclose if possible a photo of yourself for reproduction on this page. No photos can be returned.

W. M. A. Brauer, of London, N.W.11, writes:
I am Jewish refugee and my name is W. M. A. Brauer. I want to know, please, why has Gussy got such a funny accent?

To what nationality does he belong?
Is it possible to obtain the GEM in foreign countries?
Yours troublesome.

ANSWER: *Gussy has an impediment in his speech, which makes it difficult for him to pronounce the hard "r," sound. He is definitely British—"Yaas, wathah!" He's always telling us that his ancestors came over with William the Conqueror. The GEM reaches all quarters of the world; but it's always safer to place a standing order with a newsagent. Yours hospitably.*

Don MacRae, of East Kildonan, Winnipeg, Canada, writes:

- Dropping in on your cosy corner:
1. Is every boy's father at St. Jim's a millionaire?
 2. Is Tom Merry supposed to be the central character in the stories?
 3. Which is the most popular out of George Figgins, Gussy, Baggy Trimble? Tell Baggy from me I think he's a FLOP with a capital 'F'! P.S.—Note my Pathes War Service Revolver!



Don MacRae, of Winnipeg, Canada. Rustlers, beware!

ANSWER: *Glad to see your cheery features. Drop in any time.*

1. Gosh no, but we all wish they were!
2. Yes, and he usually is, isn't he?
3. Both Figgins and Gussy have many friends, so it's hard to choose. Baggy Trimble is definitely among the "also-rans" in the "popularity stakes." In fact, at times he wonders if he is without a friend in the world. His own fault, however, don't you think? P.S.—Quick on the draw, eh, pardner? Rustlers, beware!

P. Worsdale, of Leeds 9, writes:
Get ready! Off!

1. What are the actual colours of St. Jim's blazers?
 2. When was the first £5 note issued?
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3. Does Gussy ever wear a cap?
 4. What is the weight of a full-grown elephant?
 5. Who killed Cock Robin?
- Thanks! I thought you'd know.

ANSWER:
Stand back! Here I come!

1. Red and white stripes.
2. In 1826, when the virtual monopoly of the Bank of England began.
3. Yes, quite often. But he prefers to wear a "topper."
4. The effelant—sorry, the elephant is a proboscidean mammal of which only two species now exist—the Asiatic and the Indian. An elephant weighs approximately 7,000 lb.
5. Dunno offhand. I'll get Detective Kerr to investigate, and telegraph you important discoveries. 'Twasn't me, anyhow. Was it YOU?

"?????" of Hastings, Sussex, writes:

When is Tom Merry leaving St. Jim's? When would it be convenient for me to visit St. Jim's? Who published the first English dictionary? How old is Mr. Selby? Is there a First Form at St. Jim's? Put on your thinking cap, Jack. Happy thinking!

ANSWER: *Not this week. Any time you're passing. Other questions, in order: The first English dic was Samuel Johnson's (1755), though Valerius Flaccus had got the idea in the time of the Emperor Augustus (no relation to D'Arcy). Mr. Selby is round about the fifty mark. No First at St. Jim's, though most of the Fourth rank the Fourth "first" in most respects!*

"Cadd," of Beaufort Place, Bath, writes:

I doubt if this will help you, but I'm called a cad at my school. I am sixteen, five feet six, eight stone seven, dark brown hair, brown eyes. Who do I resemble at St. Jim's?

ANSWER: *You'd be a little older than Racke or Crooke, and taller—almost as tall as Grundy, who could give you half an inch. But why not aspire to be something more than a "cad"—if you really are one? Somehow, I doubt it. Maybe you're more of a "card" than a "cad."*

IN THEIR SEARCH FOR GUSSY'S BROTHER, TOM MERRY & CO. RISK HIDDEN DANGER
AND SUDDEN DEATH IN THE UNEXPLORED WILDS OF BRAZIL!

The RIVER of DEATH!



An arrow whizzed from the island and stuck in the canoe. Next moment Gaston's rifle was roaring.

MUDDY!

"JUMP!" said Tom Merry.

"Go it!" hooted Jack Blake.

"Get a move on, Gussy!" said Digby.

"Can't you follow your leader?" demanded Herries.

"Jump, you ass!" roared Manners and Lowther together.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy did not jump.

He stood where he was, jamming his eyeglass a little more firmly into his eye, and scanning the muddy creek in front of him.

Six fellows had already jumped that muddy, slimy, swampy creek, a trickling tributary of the Rio Preto, a mile or so from the Quinta da Silva.

Tom Merry & Co. had gone on a ramble down the river, and now they were on their way back to the hospitable villa of Monsieur Moutarde, the French trader, in the back-country of Brazil.

The creek barred their way.

It was not more than six feet wide. But on either side the banks were soft and swampy—deep in oozy mud.

It was an easy jump for a fellow who did not mind landing in mud that would splash up round him in showers.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy did mind!

Gussy was prepared to face all the perils of the wilds of Brazil. Jaguars and pumas, wild Caraya Indians and Brazilian bandits, alligators and anacondas, had no terrors for him. But he objected to getting muddy—if he could help it.

Six fellows had got muddy—some of them very muddy.

Tom Merry had cleared that creek—Blake had cleared it—with only a few splashes. But Digby had gone up to his knees in mud—Herries had gone over his ankles. Monty Lowther had stumbled in it, and gone on his hands and knees—Manners, still more unlucky, had sat down in it! Still, they were across—which was the chief thing.

Great New Yarn of
Thrilling Adventure
in South America

by

MARTIN CLIFFORD

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Arthur Augustus did not follow.

The muddy state of the fellows already across did not seem to encourage him to make the attempt.

Calmly and thoughtfully, he surveyed that creek with the aid of his celebrated monocle—while six fellows shouted to him to come on.

Tom Merry & Co. were tired after a long ramble in rough country. The "quinta" was still a mile away. They wanted to get in. They were ready for a meal, and readier for a rest. They were not ready to wait an indefinite time while Arthur Augustus D'Arcy made up his noble mind.

"Are you coming?" bawled Blake.

"Are you going to stick there like an image all night?" howled Dig.

"Afraid of getting your poor little feet wet?" hooted Herries.

"Fathead!"

"Ass!"

"Get a move on!"

"Pway don't woah at a chap, you fellows!" said Arthur Augustus. "I do not want to get into a howwid mudday state like you fellows. A fellow is bound to considah his clobber."

"And that's the fathead who's talking about making an expedition up the Preto into the desert!" said Jack Blake. "That's the blithering chump who's gassing about going up into the mountains among the Indians and bandits. Do you think you can explore the Rio Preto without getting a spot of mud on your bags, Gussy?"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Jump, you ass!" howled Tom.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Jump, you chump!"

"Weally, Mannahs—"

"Let's shy something at him!" suggested Monty Lowther.

"Weally, Lowtah—"

"Oh, let's sit down and wait an hour or two!" said Blake with deep sarcasm. "Nice soft mud for us to sit down in."

Arthur Augustus did not heed the sarcasm.

He looked up and down that creek. He would have preferred to go round. It was worth a little extra time, and a little extra exertion, to avoid that slimy, swampy, sticky mud. Except for dust, mud seemed to Arthur Augustus to be the chief product of South America. Mosquito-haunted mud seemed to be everywhere. Gussy could not always avoid it. But he was going to avoid it if he could.

But going round was impracticable. On his right was the wide, rolling Rio Preto. On his left, that creek extended apparently for miles. There was no going round for Gussy. He had to go across—or remain where he was for the term of his natural life.

"It's all wight, you fellows!" called out Arthur Augustus. "I can manage it all wight! Hold on anothah minute."

He walked a little distance up the creek.

From the other side, his comrades watched him in puzzled impatience. The creek was no narrower farther up—the banks were just as swampy and slimy.

But Arthur Augustus knew what he was about.

He had spotted at a little distance a huge log lying in the middle of the shallow creek, with the muddy water trickling round it.

By jumping on that log, and then jumping from the log to the farther bank, Gussy was going

to get across quite easily—thus solving the knotty problem in the simplest possible way.

Tom Merry & Co. had not noticed that log upstream. Neither had Gussy till he looked. Now he had spotted it, and was going to take advantage of it.

He reached the bank opposite that log, took a little run, and jumped.

He landed fairly in the middle of the log.

But before he could take off again, quite a surprising thing happened to that log!

It rose on one end, and the upper end revealed a huge, hideous pair of jaws that seemed crammed with sharp teeth.

Arthur Augustus gave a startled yell as he slid down the alligator's back.

That log was an alligator! Alligators, lying in the mud, often looked so exactly like logs that a scrutiny was required to see the difference.

Gussy had not noticed the difference—till he landed on the log! Then he noticed it at once!

The startled alligator reared up, revealing the fact that he was not a log but an alligator. The enormous jaws opened like a cavern, the hideous head twisting round at the startling object that had landed on his back.

Arthur Augustus toppled along that log as it heaved, and pitched off over the alligator's tail.

There was a yell of alarm from Tom Merry & Co. as they saw the cayman.

"Gussy!" shrieked Blake.

"Oh crumbs!"

"Look!"

"Gussy!"

Arthur Augustus rolled in mud and smelly water in the middle of the creek. He rolled heels over head, fortunately beyond the radius of the alligator's tail.

But he was up again in a twinkling.

The sudden discovery that the log was an alligator had caused Arthur Augustus to forget even his clobber!

A whizzing arrow from a Caraya bow had nothing on Gussy as he bounded up from the splashing mud. Streaming with mud from head to foot, Arthur Augustus bounded for the bank like an indiarubber ball.

The alligator was not long in revolving on his axis. The vast jaws yawned behind Gussy. But Gussy was quicker. He shot out of the creek like a bullet from a rifle.

Snap!

The jaws snapped a yard behind him.

"Oh cwikey!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

Tom Merry grasped his muddy arm and dragged him on. The alligator—perhaps ready for supper, like the juniors—was crawling out of the creek.

"Bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "I—I thought it was a log, you know—"

"Oh, you howling ass!" hissed Blake.

"Weally, Blake—"

"You frumptious chump!"

"Bai Jove! I'm feahfully mudday," gasped Arthur Augustus. "I am smothahed with mud! I am the muddiest of the lot, bai Jove!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, you fellows, there is nothin' to laugh at in a fellow gettin' feahfully mudday. I feel howwid!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "Pway do not huwvy on—I shall have to scwape this mud off."

"Oh, let's stop!" said Blake. "I dare say that alligator's as hungry as we are; and if he wants Gussy, I'm sure Gussy's too polite to refuse."

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Bai Jove! Pewwaps we had bettah push on!"
 said Arthur Augustus.

"Perhaps we had!" grinned Tom Merry.
 And the St. Jim's party pushed on, Arthur Augustus, the muddiest of the lot, squelching smelly slime at every step.

THE MYSTERY OF LORD CONWAY!

"It is ze bosh!" said Gaston Moutarde.

"My deah sir—"

"It is vat you call, in ze English language, piffle!" said the French trader of the Rio Preto.

Monsieur Moutarde gesticulated with both hands. He shrugged his shoulders almost up to the brim of his hat.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was not convinced.

Six fellows could not help thinking that "Mister Mustard"—which was their translation of the planter's name—was right. Nevertheless, they were backing up Gussy.

It was after supper, and the St. Jim's party were in the shady veranda of the Quinta da Silva with their friend and host, Monsieur Moutarde.

They had been a week at the quinta. Monsieur Moutarde's hospitality had been boundless. He spared nothing to make his schoolboy guests happy and comfortable.

Every day he had ridden or canoed in all directions up and down the country, seeking news among the natives of Gussy's brother, Lord Conway, who had disappeared weeks ago in the trackless wilds of Brazil.

Monsieur Moutarde had spared no effort, but the result had been nil; there was not a whisper of news to be had of Gussy's missing brother.

But the suggestion of the schoolboys going in search of him up the wild and unexplored Rio Preto made Gaston gesticulate and shrug till he almost tied himself up in knots.

"It is ze bosh—ze piffle—ze rot!" said Mister Mustard. "Zis quinta, zis is ze last house of ze white man, on ze verree edge of ze unknown! Up ze Preto no white man go and live! Non! Ze wild Carayas are zere—ze white men are only Joao Rabeira and his bandits! Ze life is not more zan zat of one mosquito, in ze sertao—ze desert! Pas possible!"

"You see," explained Arthur Augustus, "I've got to find my bwothah Conway! Somethin' has happened to him, and I'm goin' to see what it is."

"I zink somezing happen to you also if you go up ze Preto," said Monsieur Moutarde. "And he happen verree quick!"

"Yaas, I shouldn't wondah!" agreed Arthur Augustus. "But I'm going, all the same!"

"We came out to South America to look up old Conway, Monsieur Moutarde," said Tom Merry.

"Allons!" said Gaston. "My friend Lord, he go up ze Preto. It is many weeks ago. I say good-bye to him here, before zat I go to Europe. I zink I see him of return when I come back to my quinta. But he is not of return. But if somezing happen to him, vat do you zink zat ze schoolboy can do? Nozzing! Rien de rien—nozzing of nozzing!"

"We're going to twy!" said Arthur Augustus. "You see, sir, I had a lettah fwom my bwothah just befoah we bwoke up at St. Jim's, and it wathah alarmed me. It was such a vewy extwaw-ordinawy lettah that I feah that he has had

sunstwoke, or somethin'. That may be why he has not turned up."

"That villain, Rabeira, has something to do with it!" said Blake. "That must be his reason for trying to stop us from going in search of Lord Conway."

"Ecoutez!" said Monsieur Moutarde. "Listen! Ze Rio Preto—he is fatal! Ze white man zat go up ze Preto, he go to his death! Many have gone while zat I am at zis quinta. But do zey come back? No. Ze wild Indian, ze bandit, ze jaguar, ze poison snake—zat is vat you find on ze Rio Preto. I zink, I hope, zat my friend Lord come back some day, but I do not zink zat you find him if you go. I zink zat you find your death in ze sertao."

"We're going, sir!" said Arthur Augustus.

Gaston shook his head emphatically.

"Je vous dis, non!" he answered. "I say no! It is to ask for ze death, and zat is ze bosh—ze piffle!"

And to end the argument on the subject Monsieur Moutarde left the veranda and went into the house.

Tom Merry & Co. looked at one another.

"I suppose Gaston's right, really!" said Blake slowly. "If we go up the Preto we're asking for it. But—"

"But we're goin'," said Arthur Augustus. "I am certainly not goin' back to St. Jim's till I've found old Conway."

"Gaston thinks that he's lost in the wilderness, and that looking for him is like looking for a needle in a haystack," said Tom. "He's right, of course! We haven't an earthly chance of spotting him, wherever he is. If we only had some clue—"

"All we know is that he went up the Preto, months ago, in a canoe, with an Indian crew, to explore the upper waters," said Lowther. "The queerest thing is that letter getting to Gussy at St. Jim's. Conway must have given it to one of the Indians who was with him to get away with and put in the post. An Indian could get through where a white man couldn't, I suppose. But—"

"That isn't the queerest thing," said Manners. "The queerest thing is that he should write Gussy a letter without any sense of meaning in it—"

"And that's not all," said Tom. "Rabeira had a letter exactly the same. Gussy saw it. Conway must have written two letters the same as one another, word for word. Why?"

"And no sense in either of them!" said Blake. "It must have been sunstwoke!" said Arthur Augustus quietly. "Unless poor old Conway was a bit cwacked, there's no accountin' for it."

The juniors were silent. That seemed, indeed, to be the only explanation of the strange mystery of Gussy's missing brother.

"But," said Tom at last, "if it was that, where does Joao Rabeira come in? We know that he knows all about Conway—that he knew there was a letter to England, and he came to the school about it, and he believes that it was something in that letter that brought you out here, Gussy. Yet there was nothing at all in the letter."

"Yes, where does he come in?" said Blake. "He's determined to stop a search for Lord Conway. If it was simply a case of sunstroke, or something, Rabeira wouldn't come into the picture at all."

"It's just a hopeless puzzle," said Tom. "But one thing's certain—Lord Conway went up the

Preto and never came back, and we're jolly well going to find him if we can!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus emphatically.

"We shall have to be a bit tactful with Gaston," said Tom. "He's worried about us, and anxious for us—and he's been a good friend to us! I've no doubt that if he fancied there was a dog's chance of finding old Conway he would set off into the sertao himself. They were friends, and Gaston is a good friend. But he thinks there's not a single spot of a chance, and—and I suppose he's right."

"You never know your luck!" said Blake. "The other day we went after that nigger, O Pepino, who bagged Gussy's wallet, and never dreamed that there was a spot of a chance of getting him. But we did get him!"

"Yaas, wathah, and we may get old Conway!" said Arthur Augustus. "I jolly well know that I'm not goin' back without him!"

"That letter beats me," said Manners, whose brows were wrinkled in thought. "It's a potty letter for a man to write from the wilds to a chap at school and send by an Indian through hundreds of miles of desert and swamp. That man, Rabeira, thinks there was news in it. Yet he has an exact copy, so he must know there was nothing! Is it possible—?"

"What?" asked Tom Merry.

"Some sort of a code?" said Manners. "Cryptogram, or something. Did you ever fix up any sort of a secret code with Conway, Gussy?"

"Nevah, deah boy! Nevah dreamed of such a thing."

"Let's have another look at the letter," said Tom. "It doesn't seem possible, but now Manners suggests it, let's have a squint."

Arthur Augustus took out his pocket-book and drew from it the letter that had caused so much amazement when it was delivered at St. Jim's in far-off England.

There was no doubt that it was an amazing letter for a man lost in the untrodden wilds to have written to his brother at school.

"Dear Arthur,—Do you remember a trick I showed you last Christmas? I hope you do. Keep this letter.
CONWAY."

Many times had Tom Merry & Co. scanned that strange and mysterious letter, which had been written somewhere in the trackless wilds of the sertao, carried long distances by some unknown Indian, and finally put in the post to cross the ocean to St. Jim's.

They had been able to make nothing of it, and they could make nothing of it now—unless, indeed, Lord Conway had had a touch of the sun, and was a little "cracked" when he had written it.

Manners scanned it very keenly.

But there was nothing that could be supposed to be anything like a secret code or cryptogram. Moreover, it was hardly possible to suppose that a man would write in code unless such a code had been arranged in advance, which certainly had not been the case.

"Beats me hollow!" said Manners. "Unless there's more in that letter than meets the eye, Lord Conway was cracked when he wrote it. That man Rabeira believes that there's something in it—something that has brought us out to Brazil. It's a dashed mystery all round!"

He handed the letter back to Arthur Augustus.

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The swell of St. Jim's gave it another glance and shook his head.

As he stood with the letter in his hand, leaning on the rail of the veranda in the golden sunset, he gave a sudden jump, and the letter dropped from his hand on the floor planks.

Crack!

A report rolled from the orange-trees across the garden of the Quinta da Silva.

"Oh!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

He clapped his right hand to his left shoulder. There was a thin boze of red through his white jacket.

"Gussy!"

"It's all wight—only a sewatch!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "But who—what—"

"Look!" roared Blake

All eyes turned on the distant grove of orange-trees from which the shot had come.

From the trees two struggling figures rolled in sight.

One was the dark, evil-faced Joao Rabeira, the Brazilian bandit; the other, the black man, O Pepino. Locked in a desperate grapple, they staggered out from under the trees and rolled on the earth, fighting like tigers.

"Come on!" shouted Arthur Augustus.

Unheeding the red trickle from the graze on his arm where the bandit's bullet had cut the skin, Arthur Augustus rushed down the steps, and Tom Merry & Co. tore after him, to race to the aid of the negro who was struggling with the desperado of the Rio Preto.

CAPTURED!

O PEPINO, his black face set, and his dark eyes rolling fiercely, grasped the bandit in the grip of a giant. Burly as he was, muscular and powerful, Joao Rabeira was no match for the gigantic black man.

But there was a knife in the hand of the bandit, and O Pepino was unarmed. Twice, thrice, as they ran towards the spot, the juniors saw the knife slash in the bandit's desperate hand, and each time it seemed as if it must sink to the hilt in the glistening black skin of O Pepino. But with a nimble activity strange in a man of his huge size, the negro somehow eluded the stabs of the bravo's knife, and at length succeeded in getting a grip on Joao's right wrist, holding the knife back.

The bravo still fought like a jaguar, struggling, tearing, with hands and feet and teeth; but he could not use the knife, and the great strength of O Pepino was overpowering him when the juniors arrived, breathless and panting, on the spot.

"Collar him!" breathed Tom Merry.

"Get the brute!" muttered Blake.

They flung themselves on Joao Rabeira. Three or four pairs of hands grasped him.

Already he was succumbing to the strength of the negro. The aid of the juniors finished the struggle.

The evil-faced ruffian rolled helplessly on the earth, his arms held, his legs trampled on, and O Pepino's big black knee grinding on his chest.

"Got the brute!" panted Blake. "Oh, what ripping luck to lay him by the heels!"

"Yaas, wathah!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

The panting bandit lay on his back, pinned down, his dark face convulsed with mad fury, his black eyes glittering, his teeth gritting. But he was in the hands of his enemies now, and there was no escape for him.

It was, as Blake said, lucky for the St. Jim's party. Joao's savage, inexplicable enmity had haunted their footsteps with deadly peril in South America. Now that they were planning to penetrate into the unexplored interior, far from the remotest outpost of civilisation, their savage enemy would have been infinitely more dangerous. It was a tremendous relief to the whole party to lay him by the heels before they started on that dangerous voyage up the Black River.

And they had him now—safe!

"Look!" muttered Herries. He stepped into the orange grove, and came back with a smoking rifle in his hand.

Evidently it was Rabeira's, and he had dropped it when the negro sprang on him and seized him.

In his fierce and savage determination to prevent a search for the missing man, Joao had taken risks before. Now he had taken risks once too often—creeping into the precincts of the quinta, taking cover in the orange grove opposite the veranda at the house, and watching for a chance of picking off Arthur Augustus with his rifle.

He had come near to success—terribly near! His bullet had grazed Arthur Augustus' arm, and there could be no doubt that another would have followed swiftly which would hardly have missed. Desperate as the bandit's venture had been, only the watchfulness of O Pepino had prevented him from succeeding in his object. The juniors did not like to think of what would have happened had the black man given Rabeira time to pull the trigger a second time.

"The murderous villain!" muttered Lowther. "Well, we've got him! There isn't a lot of law in this part of Brazil, but they'll keep that brute safe."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Your arm's bleeding, Gussy."

"Only just a scwath, deah boy; nevah mind that now. Cucumbah, old boy, I'm feahfully obliged to you!" said Arthur Augustus, forgetting for the moment that O Pepino did not speak English.

O Pepino looked at him, with a flash of white teeth.

"Bom!" he said.

"That means good, you fellows," said Arthur Augustus. "Bai Jove! It was wathah a good day's work when we got this chap away from the alligatah up the wivah, what?"

"You got him away; we were only audience," said Tom Merry. "Pepino doesn't seem to forget it."

"He is a vevy good chap," said Arthur Augustus. "He wobbled me of my wallet, and we went aftah him; but aftah we got him away from that beastly alligatah, he handed it back like a good little man, and this is the second time he has saved me from that howwid beast Wabeiwah; and now he has caught the bwute, and we shall be wid of him."

O Pepino grinned at the juniors. He did not understand their words, but he could understand their looks.

A few days ago Arthur Augustus had run a ferrible risk to save the black man from an alligator's jaws. O Pepino's only claim on Gussy was that he had stolen his wallet, but that had made no difference to Gussy. Since that time O Pepino had constituted himself Gussy's special guard, watching for the murderous bandit who had attempted his life. The juniors had not had the faintest idea that O Pepino was on the

watch while they were talking in the veranda. It was very fortunate for Arthur Augustus, and perhaps some of the others, that he had been.

O Pepino still held the right wrist of the desperado as he pinned him under a brawny knee.

Rabeira's fingers were gripped convulsively on the handle of the knife. But he could not use it; he was helpless in the hands of his captors.

The big black man now grasped the bandit's right arm with both hands, twisting it to force Joao to release the knife.

Helpless prisoner as he was, the bandit resisted with all his strength. Perhaps he read in the negro's face what the juniors did not see there.

But his resistance was futile. O Pepino unlaced his desperate fingers from the handle of the knife and twisted it away from him.

He gripped it in his own big black hand.

The rage and fury died out of Joao's face, replaced by utter terror. The juniors wondered for a moment what caused that startling change in his looks. Then Arthur Augustus gave a yell.

"Stop him!"

O Pepino flung up his black hand, the knife in it, his eyes gleaming down at the man under him.

In another moment the blow would have descended, and Joao Rabeira would have been transfixed, pinned to the earth with his own knife.

But Arthur Augustus and Tom Merry together caught the brawny black arm in time and dragged it back.

"Stop!" panted Arthur Augustus.

The bandit, with the sweat thick on his face, stared up from the earth. He had had the narrowest escape of his wild and desperate life.

"Oh crumbs!" gasped Blake.

O Pepino stared round at the juniors, evidently surprised and perturbed. He had been about to kill the captured bandit, as unhesitatingly as he would have crushed a mosquito.

But desperate and dangerous rascal as Joao was, the St. Jim's fellows could hardly stand for that. They were in the wilds of South America, but they had not picked up the manners and customs of the "sertao."

"Nao?" asked O Pepino.

"No!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "Bai Jove! Nao! Nao!" he added in Portuguese. "Nao! Nao!"

"My hat! What a jolly old ferocious Cucumber!" grinned Monty Lowther. "O Pepino" was Portuguese for "cucumber," which was the big black man's remarkable name.

"Porque?" persisted O Pepino.

"Bai Jove! What does he mean by porky?" asked Arthur Augustus.

"'Porque' means 'why' in Portuguese," said Tom Merry, laughing. "He doesn't understand why he isn't to stick Rabeira."

"Oh cwumbs! No good twyin' to make him undahstand, I suppose? But he mustn't, all the same."

"Hardly," said Tom.

"Porque, senhor?" exclaimed O Pepino. "Inimigo do Senhor Um Olho."

"Oh cwickey! What does that mean, Tom Mewwy?"

Tom Merry chuckled.

"He says why. The man is an enemy of Senhor One-Eye!" he answered. "You're Senhor One-Eye, old bean! Your eyeglass has done it."

"Weally, I am vewy gwateful to Cucumbah, but I wish he would not give me such a wicidulous name."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Inimigo!" repeated O Pepino. "Inimigo do senhor!"

"Yaas, but nevah mind, we're not goin' to let you stick him," said Arthur Augustus, shaking his head. "Tie his hands, you fellows, and make him safe."

O Pepino, puzzled and disappointed, gave in. Joao Rabeira panted with relief as he realised that the knife was not to descend upon him. He lay, gasping, his face thick with sweat as the juniors bound his muscular, dusky wrists together, and he was allowed to rise to his feet.

Then, in a triumphant crowd, they marched the captured bandit across the garden, and marched him up into the veranda to be handed over to Monsieur Moutarde.

THE TREASURE OF POTOMAYO!

"MON DIEU!" roared Gaston Moutarde. The French planter came out of the house into the veranda, jumping nearly clear of the floor planks in his surprise at the sight of the most desperate bandit in South America, a prisoner in the hands of the schoolboys.

Joao stood with his bound hands, regarding him with a savage scowl of defiance, mixed with apprehension.

The juniors explained what had happened in the orange grove, and Herries handed over the bandit's rifle.

Monsieur Moutarde took the rifle and put it under his arm. His face, which was almost always smiling and good humoured, had set in a grim expression. The bandit leaned back against the rail, breathing hard, the sweat trickling down his hard, evil face.

"Bon!" said Mr. Mustard. "Verree good! More zan one time, ee sclerata would take ze life of ze young brozzer of my friend Lord. I zink he vill not play zat game any more times. Non, I zink not."

Monsieur Moutarde, as the only white man in the district, was the man to take charge of the captured bandit. The juniors supposed that he would dispatch him under guard to the nearest place where the law could deal with him—more than a hundred miles from the Quinta da Silva. It did not occur to them for the moment that in that wild region, far from law and order, "Mr. Mustard" was a law unto himself.

"What will you do with him, sir?" asked Tom Merry. "Now we've got the brute, he will be kept safe."

"Verree safe!" said Monsieur Moutarde dryly.

Tom gave him a rather startled look. It came into his mind that, but for the presence of the schoolboys, Gaston Moutarde might have dealt with the bandit as summarily as O Pepino would have done.

"Not——" exclaimed Tom.

"Zat man," said Gaston Moutarde, "is bandit. He have kill more men zan he have ze finger and ze toe. His life is forfeit to ze law."

"But——" exclaimed Tom.

"My deah sir——" ejaculated Arthur Augustus.

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Gaston shrugged his shoulders up to his ears.

"Allons done!" he said. "I vill not put ze bullet zrough zat rascal! He shall go to Salvador, and ze governor shall deal viz him. Comme vous voulez. It is as you s'all please."

The juniors saw Joao catch his breath. They could see that he had dreaded that the planter of the Quinta da Silva would order him to be shot out of hand, as there was little doubt that he would have done if left to himself.

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Blake.

"He s'all be a prisoner in one hut, viz ze hand and ze foot tie, and a guard," said Monsieur Moutarde, "and in two-three day, when ze bataloa go down ze river to Salvador, he go in zat boat to be give up. Zat is all left. Zat is to say, it is all right."

The juniors felt more easy in their minds when Monsieur Moutarde made that pronouncement. Life was cheap in the South American wilderness; but it was not easy for fellows fresh from the island in the North Sea to adjust their ideas to those of the sertao.

"So long as the wottah is kept safe, it is all wight," said Arthur Augustus.

"Vunce he is at Salvador, he vill be verree safe," said Monsieur Moutarde. "Until zen, he is a prisoner!"

He put down the rifle, and stepped closer to the bandit, scanning the evil, dark face.

"Now you say why for you seek ze life of ze young brozzer of my friend Lord," he said quietly. He made a gesture towards Arthur Augustus. "For why you seek to take ze life of ee garcon?"

Joao's black eyes blazed for a moment at the swell of St. Jim's. His lip curled in a savage sneer.

"Does he not know?" he answered. "Does he keep it a secret from you?"

Monsieur Moutarde stared at him, and then stared round at the swell of St. Jim's.

Clearly the bandit believed that Arthur Augustus knew the cause of his mysterious emity.

"But you do not know, my young friend?" exclaimed the trader.

Arthur Augustus shook his head.

"I haven't the foggiest," he answered.

"Nobody here knows," said Tom Merry, looking at the bandit's evil face in wonder. "Only we think that that brute has had something to do with Lord Conway's disappearance, and he wants to prevent him from being searched for."

"Zat is perhaps so," said Gaston Moutarde. "But I do not zink, and zat villain he do not zink, zat a schoolboy find my friend Lord if he is lost in ze wilderness. Zere is somezing ozzer."

All the juniors realised that. But what the "something else" was they had not the faintest idea.

"You speak, I zink," said Gaston, making a gesture towards the rifle. "It will be dangerous for you, Joao Rabeira, if you do not speak."

The bandit gave a savage laugh.

"Then he has not told you!" he sneered. "Nao! Perhaps he would not tell you, for fear that you should rob him of the treasure. Nao!"

"The what!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

"Oh crumbs!" said Blake. "What are you going to hear now? You don't know anything about a jolly old treasure, Gussy?"

"No fear!"

"Uma mentira! Uma mentira! A lie—a lie!"

snarled Joao Rabeira. "Did not the letter tell of the treasure of Potomayo? Was it not for that that you came to Brazil? A lie! A lie!"

"Is the man pottay?" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, in wonder. "You fellows all saw old Conway's lettah. You saw it, Mr. Mustard. There was not a word about a tweekure or anythin' of the kind."

"Nothing of the sort," said Blake. "Rabeira knows that, as he had the duplicate of the letter."

Gaston was staring hard at the bandit. It was clear that Joao believed what he said; that he had no doubt of it; that it had never occurred to him to have any doubt of it. But Gaston had seen Lord Conway's letter, and he knew, as well as the juniors, what it contained.

"Lies! Lies!" repeated Rabeira savagely. "But you will never lay hands on the treasure of Potomayo, little senhor. If I am a prisoner, my comrades watch and wait. You will find death up the Rio Preto!"

"You uttah ass!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "I have nevah even heard of the tweekure of Potomayo, whatever it is—"

"Lies—lies!" snarled Rabeira.

"I cannot vevy well punch your nose, you wottah, while your paws are tied up!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus wrathfully. "But—"

"Zis is verree strange," said Monsieur Moutarde. "My friend Lord he zink perhaps he find ze treasure of Potomayo when he go up ze Preto—but in zat letter zere is nozzing!"

Rabeira gave a scoffing laugh.

"He has not told you, fool that you are! But he knows—he knows—why else did he come to Brazil after getting the letter? He knows!"

Monsieur Moutarde gave him a penetrating look. Then he called an order to the mordomo, the black steward of the quinta, who was looking out from the doorway into the veranda.

"Sim, senhor!" answered the steward, and he hurried away, returning in a few minutes with three burly black servants.

They grasped Joao Rabeira by the arms, and walked him out of the veranda. The sunset was deepening to dark, and, in the thickening shadows, the bandit disappeared from the sight of the St. Jim's fellows.

LOST!

GASTON MOUTARDE stood leaning on the veranda rail, an expression of deep thought on his face. Tom Merry & Co. looked at one another in wonder. The bandit's words had puzzled them all.

What the "treasure of Potomayo" might be, they had not the faintest idea. Certainly they had never heard of it.

Yet it was clear that it was fixed in Rabeira's suspicious and savage mind that Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had come to Brazil on account of that treasure, and that some clue to it had been given him in the strange letter from his brother in the wilds.

Only a few days ago, the juniors had come across the name "Potomayo" for the first time. On an island in the Preto, where they had run down the fugitive negro, a hut stood, and in the hut they had come upon an old, rusty dispatch-box, in which was a newspaper cutting—a photograph of a military man, with the name "O General Potomayo" underneath.

But for that they would never have heard the

name at all. As for a treasure, they had never even dreamed of it.

But they could see that Gaston Moutarde had heard of it—whatever it was. And from what he had said, Lord Conway had heard of it.

"Zis is verree strange," said the French trader at last. "You know nozzing of ze treasure of Potomayo, my young friend?"

"Nevah heard of it," answered Arthur Augustus.

"What on earth is it, sir?" asked Tom Merry. "We've heard the name of General Potomayo—that's all. Who was he—and what the dickens was his treasure?"

Gaston smiled.

"It is many years," he said. "In Brazil zere are many revolutions. Ze General Potomayo make one revolution, it is twenty years since. He is defeat, and he fly to ze sertao—ze desert. He flee from ze soldados—ze soldiers of ze Government, and viz him he take all zat he can lay ze hand on—ze funds of ze revolution."

"Oh!" exclaimed Tom.

"Some say zat it is verree much money, zousands and zousands of English pounds." Monsieur Moutarde shrugged his shoulders.

"Some say zat zere is a sack of gold money—and some zat zere is vun big box of ze American dollar money. Nobody know."

"What became of the general?" asked Tom.

Gaston shrugged his shoulders again.

"First he hide on an island in the Preto, and live in a choupana—a hut—viz ze ozzers zat flee viz him!" he answered. "But ze soldados come—and he run. He flee up ze Preto, and ze Caraya Indians finish zem—I zink perhaps he hope to escape across ze forests to Paraguay or ze Argentine—but zere is a massacre, and ze Indians know."

"But the treasure—"

Another shrug from Monsieur Moutarde.

"It is said zat he bury him when ze Carayaz come," he answered. "If zat is true, zat treasure he lie buried somevere up ze Rio Preto. My friend Lord, when he go up ze river so long ago, he say perhaps he find ze treasure, and he laugh. Zere are many who seek zat treasure—I zink zat Joao Rabeira is one zat seek him—but zat treasure he is never find!"

"So that's the treasure of Potomayo—the warchest of some jolly old revolutionary general!" said Blake.

"But what makes that black-jowled blighter think that Gussy knows anything about it?" exclaimed Herries.

"Goodness knows!"

"He thinks it was in that letter," said Dig.

"Yaas, wathah! But there was nothin' in the letter—"

"Nothing at all," said Lowther.

"It's a giddy mystery!" said Tom Merry.

"We've looked at that jolly old letter often enough and we all know it by heart."

"Zat you show me zat letter vunce more," said Gaston Moutarde. "I see nozzing in zat letter when zat I read him—but perhaps I see somezing if I see him again."

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus gave a jump.

"You've got the letter?" exclaimed Tom.

"I dropped it when that wottah fired at me, and I nevah thought of it atahwards! It is lyin' about heah somewhah!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "Pway look for it, deah boys! Old

Conway asked me to keep it, you know—though goodness knows why.”

In the excitement of the capture of the bandit, Arthur Augustus had forgotten that he had dropped it in the veranda. They expected to find it lying there—but it was not to be seen. They hunted up and down the veranda, from side to side, and end to end, searching for the letter.

It was dark now, and Gaston called to the mordomo for lights.

Several lamps were brought out by the black servants, and the veranda thoroughly searched.

But the letter was not to be found.

There was a breeze blowing from the river, and it was clear that the fallen letter must have blown away in the wind, through some space between the uprights of the veranda rail.

“Bai Jove!” said Arthur Augustus. “This is wathah wotten, you fellows! I am bound to keep that lettah, as old Conway asked me to—though there seems no sense in it!”

The juniors gathered at the rail, and looked down into the dark gardens.

Somewhere in those extensive gardens the lost letter lay, but finding it after dark was obviously impossible.

Gaston dispatched some of the servants with lamps to look for it. The juniors watched the lights twinkling to and fro in the darkness, but they had little expectation that the letter would be found.

“We’ll find it in the morning,” said Tom Merry. “It can’t be far away—we’ll find it all right by daylight, Gussy.”

“C’est ca!” said Gaston. “In ze morning, you will all search for zat letter, and he will be find. C’est ca.”

“I suppose we must leave it at that!” said Arthur Augustus.

And it had to be left at that.

“That’s the second time, you’ve dropped that letter and lost it, fathead!” said Blake. “Still, Baggy Trimble isn’t here to pick it up this time, so we shall get it back all right. Not that it will be any use when we get it—we all know it by heart, as far as that goes.”

“There’s something in it,” said Manners quietly. “Goodness knows what—but there’s something, and Rabeira knows what it is, and thinks that Gussy knows. But what—that’s got us all beat.”

Tom Merry & Co. went to bed early that night, with the intention of turning out at dawn to hunt for the lost letter. And when the sun came up over the wild forests of Brazil they were early astir.

LIGHT AT LAST!

“CUCUMBAH!”

O Pepino grinned with a flash of dazzling teeth.

“Sim, Senhor Um Olho!” he answered.

“Bai Jove! I weally wish you would not call me by that ridiculous name, Cucumbah!” said Arthur Augustus, while his comrades grinned.

“Nao entendo, Senhor Um Olho,” said O Pepino, meaning that he did not understand.

“Oh, all wight! Nevah mind—but I weally wish you wouldn’t, all the same. Howevah, I want you to help me look for a lettah, Cucumbah.”

The big black man blinked at him. O Pepino was willing and eager to do anything he could for the young senhor who had saved him from an alligator’s jaws in the swamps of the Preto. But

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as he did not understand a single word that Arthur Augustus addressed to him, there were difficulties in the way.

The juniors had eaten an early and hurried breakfast, and turned out to the search. Seven fellows, searching up and down and round about the extensive gardens of the quinta, had no doubt that they would light upon the lost letter sooner or later. Still, they were glad of assistance from O Pepino.

“Can you tell the chap what a lettah is, Tom Mewwy?” asked Arthur Augustus. “You seem to pick up this weird lingo bettah than I do.”

“Uma carta,” said Tom to O Pepino.

“Bai Jove! We don’t want to call ewevybody heah, old chap. Mistah Mustard might not like the cartahs called away ffrom their work.”

“Fathead!”

“Weally, Tom Mewwy, it would be wathah inconsiderate to call a cartah to help us look for that lettah, when—”

“A carta is a letter in Portuguese!” howled Tom.

“Bai Jove! Is it? All wight! Cartah,” said Arthur Augustus, addressing the black man.

“A cartah—”

“Uma carta,” said Tom, and he waved his hand to indicate that the carta was somewhere in the gardens.

O Pepino nodded his woolly head. He was quick on the uptake, and having learned that it was a letter that was wanted, he could guess that the letter had been lost somewhere in the precincts of the quinta.

“Sim, senhor!” he answered. “Entendo!”

And O Pepino began industriously to search, in company with the seven schoolboys.

They scattered over the gardens. That the letter was somewhere about they were sure; it was not likely to have blown away over the high fences.

But there was plenty of space to cover, and the gardens were thick with tropical luxuriance. That letter might be almost anywhere among the flower-beds, or in the bushes, or in the orange-grove.

But the juniors were determined to find it. Since the bandit’s strange words, they were very keen to examine that letter once more, often as they had already scanned it.

How it could possibly contain a message, apart from what was written, they could not imagine; yet it was clear that Joao Rabeira believed that it did—indeed, he was so sure about it that it was that belief that had caused him to make his desperate attempts on the life of Lord Conway’s schoolboy brother.

They wondered whether, after all, there might be some secret code to be discovered, as Manners had suggested, for, after all, the letter as it stood had no sense in it. Why should a man write from the wilds of Brazil to ask Arthur Augustus whether he remembered a trick he had shown him in the Christmas holidays? That was not sense, and it meant either that Lord Conway had gone cracked, or that there was something in the letter that did not meet the eye.

But the morning passed without any luck. That letter was somewhere, but they did not discover where.

When the heat of the tropical noon came on, they gave up the search to take a rest in the shady veranda. It was impossible to carry on in the fierce heat of the South American sun.

O Pepino, however, did not follow their example.



From the thick branches a rifle dropped, to be followed by a falling body. Gussy had made an unexpected catch.

Cucumber had a full share of South American laziness, but his devotion to "Senhor Um Olho" was unlimited. "Mister One-Eye" wanted that lost "carta," and that was enough for O Pepino. Disregarding the blazing heat of noon, the big black man carried on with the search without pausing for rest.

"You find?" asked Gaston Moutarde, when he joined the schoolboys at lunch in the veranda.

"Not yet, sir," answered Tom Merry. "We shall have to make a day of it. We're going to find it."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Isn't it just like Gussy to lose it when it becomes interesting!" sighed Jack Blake. "He's carried it safely in his pocket from St. Jim's to Brazil, and now he scatters it about all over the shop!"

"Weally, Blake——"

"Gussy all over!" agreed Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies——"

"Gussy couldn't help dropping it when that bullet scratched his arm," said Dig. "But why couldn't he pick it up again?"

"I did not think of it, deah boy, until——"

"How could Gussy think of it?" argued Monty Lowther. "Can't make bricks without straw! Has Gussy got anything to think with?"

"Weally, Lowthah, you ass——"

"Oh, we'll find it all right!" said Tom Merry cheerily. "Though I'm dashed if I see what we're going to make of it when we do."

"There's something in it," said Manners. "Unless Lord Conway is cracked, he must have meant something by mentioning tricks he showed Gussy in the hols last Christmas. I suppose you remember, Gussy?"

"Yaas, I wemembah that old Conway showed us some conjuwin' twicks one evenin'," answered Arthur Augustus.

"What sort of tricks?"

"Oh, quite a lot! I wemembah he made a wabbit come out of a hat, and he made a missin' article turn up in my waistcoat pocket, and so on. Of course I can't wemembah the lot. But I weally do not see what conjuwin' twicks at Christmas have to do with anythin' in South Americah, especially the tweek of Potomayo."

"That's a giddy mystery!" said Tom.

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The juniors finished their lunch, and remained in the shade of the veranda till it should be cool enough to get going again. Gaston Moutarde sat smoking a long brown charuta, with a thoughtful brow.

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus suddenly. "Heah comes Cucumbah!"

"He's found it!" roared Blake.

"Oh, good egg!"

O Pepino, his black face glistening with perspiration, and wearing a wide grin, came up the steps of the veranda. In his big black hand was a letter—evidently the lost letter.

He ducked his woolly head and presented it to Arthur Augustus D'Arej.

"A carta, Senhor Um Olho!" he said.

"Thanks vewy much, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus. "I mean to say, muito obrigado."

"Nada, senhor, nada!" said O Pepino.

And he ducked his woolly head again and departed.

"That's the letter, Gussy?" asked Tom.

"Yaas, wathah! Oh ewikey!"

"What—"

"Cweat Scott!" howled Arthur Augustus, in astonishment.

"What the dickens—"

"Oh cwumbs!"

The lost letter was in Gussy's hand. He was staring at it with utter amazement and bewilderment in his face.

He looked as if his noble eye would pop through his eyeglass in astonishment.

The juniors were all on their feet now. Every face was eager. Something in that letter, which they had read so many times, had startled and amazed the swell of St. Jim's.

"What—" howled Blake.

"Oh scissahs! Look at it!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "There's somethin' in it that wasn't there befoah—"

"What?"

"Look!"

All the juniors looked. Gaston looked. And there was a general exclamation of astonishment.

The original wording of the letter was still there as they had seen it so often, but along with it were a number of other words, in the same hand, which had not been there before. They were written in Lord Conway's hand, the same as the original letter; but how they had got there was, for some amazing moments, an utter and staggering mystery.

Then Manners gave a yell:

"Invisible ink!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Invisible ink!" gasped Tom Merry. "Oh, my hat! That was it—the letter had to be heated to make it visible."

"And the sun—" said Blake.

"That's it!"

The mystery was revealed at last!

A secret message was written in invisible ink which had to be held to a fire to make it visible.

That letter had lain all the morning exposed to the burning glare of the tropical sun of Brazil, which had had the effect of applying the necessary heat, and the invisible writing had been brought to light.

THE SECRET MESSAGE!

"Bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

"Got it!" said Blake. "Got it at last!"

And look at it!"

"By gum!" breathed Tom Merry.

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Clear and distinct, every word, every letter brought out clearly now, the secret message from the man lost in the wilderness of Brazil was before their eyes.

Every eye read it eagerly. Every eye was glued on that mysterious letter, of which the mystery at last had been elucidated by happy chance. Crowded round Arthur Augustus, Tom Merry & Co. read what had been written by Gussy's brother in some remote recess of the Brazilian wilderness.

It ran:

"I have found the treasure of Potomayo. Joao Rabeira and his gang of bandits are hunting me, and I have little hope of escaping them. I am sending two copies of this letter by the two Indians who still remain with me, and hope that one of them may get through. The treasure of Potomayo is buried on the Ilha dos Macacos in the upper Rio Preto. Keep the secret till the time comes when you may be able to search for it.

"CONWAY."

"Mon Dieu!" said Gaston Moutarde. "Zen zat is ze secret—my friend Lord he write in ze ink zat is not to see."

"By gum!" murmured Blake.

"Poor old Conway!" said Arthur Augustus. "His lettah made me think that he had gone cwacked, but what was a fellow to think? That was why I came out to Brazil to look for him! And all the while—"

"You ass!" said Manners.

"Weally, Mannahs—"

"You chump!" said Blake.

"Weally, Blake—"

"When Conway was showing you conjuring tricks last Christmas did he show you a trick with invisible ink?" asked Tom Merry.

"Yaas, I wembah that he did, deah boy."

"So that was the trick he wanted you to remember?"

"Bai Jove! I suppose it was, now you mention it, Tom Mewwy!"

"What a brain!" murmured Monty Lowther.

"Weally, Lowtah—"

"The whole thing's clear now!" said Tom. "Lord Conway never expected to get away from those villains, and he wanted to pass the secret on to Gussy before they got him. He wrote two letters, one each for the two Indians he still had with him—and one of them got through and posted the letter—the other must have fallen into Rabeira's hands, as he has the other copy."

"That's it!" said Blake with a nod.

"And he put a spoof message to be read in case the letter was captured, with the real message in invisible ink!" said Manners.

"And as Gussy was the only fellow he'd done the invisible ink trick with, he had to send the letter to Gussy!" said Herries. "Otherwise, he might have sent it to somebody with a spot of sense."

"Weally, Hewwies—"

"He gave the clue," said Manners. "He hoped that Gussy would remember the invisible ink trick he showed him last Christmas, and think of applying it to this letter. Of course, Gussy never did."

"Weally, Mannahs—"

"That's why he said keep the letter," went on Manners. "Knowing what a howling ass Gussy was, he knew he wouldn't tumble to it, but hoped that it might dawn on him sooner or later."

"That's it!" said Tom.

"It might have dawned on Gussy in about a hundred years!" remarked Dig.

"Say five hundred!" suggested Lowther.

"I wegard all you fellows as unweasonable asses!" said Arthur Augustus. "Old Conway showed me a lot of conjuvin' twicks that time, and the invisible ink twick was only one of them, and, of course, I nevah thought of it specially."

"With a brain like yours, you wouldn't!" agreed Blake.

"Wats!"

Gaston Moutarde smiled.

"But now we know, mes enfants," he said.

"And from zis, we get verree good news of my friend Lord. He is still, as you say in English, alive and to kick."

"Rabeira must have spotted the invisible ink in the other letter," said Tom. "He's rather sharper than Gussy. And when he saw us on the steamer bound for Brazil, he took it for granted that Gussy had read what was really in the letter, and that that was why we were coming out to Brazil!"

"He couldn't think anything else," said Blake. "He wasn't likely to guess that Gussy was coming out to look after his brother because he fancied he had gone cracked!"

"All this time Rabeira has believed that we all knew the whole bag of tricks, and knew that Potomayo's treasure—that we'd never heard of—was buried on an island in the Preto!" said Manners. "That's why he was ready to go to any length to stop us. But, as Mr. Moutarde says, this is good news for us—"

"How is that, Mannahs?"

"They never got Conway, and they never got the treasure!" answered Manners. "If they had, Rabeira wouldn't have been after us—he would have been done with the job."

"C'est ca!" said Gaston. "Zat is so! Yes! If zat rascal Rabeira lay hands on ze treasure, zat is all he vant, and all is finish. Zey know zat it is on ze island in ze Preto, but zey have not find."

"But Conway!" said Herries. "It's a good many weeks since that letter was written, and they were hunting him then—"

"Zey did not get him," said Gaston, shaking his head.

"You feel suah of that, sir?" asked Arthur Augustus.

"Zat is quite sure!" said Gaston. "If zey get my friend Lord, zey get ze treasure. Lord know where ze treasure is, and zey make him to tell."

"He wouldn't—" said Blake. But he broke off.

"Zere are rays and means to make to speak, and Rabeira, he is verree bad man," said Monsieur Moutarde. "If zey get him, zey make him to speak."

The juniors stood silent.

They realised that the Frenchman was right. They knew the evil, cruel nature of the bandit and that there was no Indian torture at which he would have hesitated to tear the secret from the man who knew it, had Lord Conway fallen into his hands.

It was clear that Rabeira could not yet have found the treasure that was buried on the "Ilha dos Macacos"—the Island of Monkeys—some-where far up the unexplored reaches of the Preto River. And from that circumstance, it could be taken as fairly certain that Lord Conway had not fallen into the hands of the bandits. Alone in the wilderness, hunted and desperate, the missing

man had so far escaped the hands of the desperadoes who hunted him.

Arthur Augustus drew a deep, deep breath.

"That settles it, you fellows, if it was not settled befoah," he said quietly. "I am goin' up the Pweto to look for my bwothah."

"And so say all of us!" agreed Blake.

Monsieur Moutarde gave a nod.

"Now zat we know, we go!" he said. "Ze Island of Monkeys, zat is yun hundred miles and more, far up ze Preto, in ze mountains. But now we know ze starting-point to look for my friend Lord, I go to search for him, viz a crew of Indians in yun canoe, and you boys—you wait at ze quinta—"

Seven heads were shaken at once.

"We're going!" said Tom.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus emphatically. "Sowwy to argue the point with you, sir, but I'm startin' up the Pweto at dawn."

Gaston smiled and shrugged his shoulders up to his ears.

Probably he had not expected the juniors to agree to be left behind, safe at the quinta, while he hunted for the missing man in the wilderness. Anyhow, it was clear and certain that they were not going to stay behind.

"C'est ca!" he said. "Ve all go togezzer. Now I give orders for ze big canoe to be prepare, and dawn of anozzer day we go."

"Good egg!" said Blake.

And that was settled. And during the remainder of the day, Tom Merry & Co. were busy making preparations for the expedition into the heart of the unknown wilderness—well knowing that it was an expedition from which not one of the party might ever return.

UP THE BLACK RIVER!

"MILLE tonnerres!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Nom d'un nom d'un chien!"

"Mister Mustard seems to be excited!" remarked Blake.

It was early dawn at the Quinta da Silva. The first beams of the sun, gleaming over the Brazilian forests, found Tom Merry & Co. astir. As they came out of the quinta, after an early breakfast, they heard the voice of Gaston Moutarde on its top note.

Gaston was gesticulating wildly with both hands, and almost with his legs, in his excitement and rage. The juniors wondered what was the matter. It was clear that something was.

"Zousand zunders!" hooted Monsieur Moutarde. "Name of a name of a dog! Ce coquin—ce sclerata—ce bandit—Mon Dieu!"

"Rabeira!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Zat rascal, he is gone!" roared Monsieur Moutarde. "Allons! Why for did I not put one bullet zrough zat rascal! Now he is too late."

The juniors knew that Joao Rabeira had been placed under guard in a hut. But from the enraged ejaculations of Monsieur Moutarde, it seemed that he was no longer there.

"He has escaped?" asked Tom.

"Mais si, si!" howled Gaston. "Yes, yes, yes! He is to go! He is to mizzle, as you say in English. He is to bunk! Zey sleep on ze guard, and zat rascal—he is to make one escape."

Gaston waved his excited hands, and once
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more invoked a thousand thunders, and the name of a name of a dog! The juniors had never seen the good-tempered trader so excited and exasperated before.

"But it is not to help," said Gaston at last. "It is no use to weep over ze milk zat is spill. C'est ma faute—it is my fault zat I do not put one bullet zrough zat rascal while zat I have him! In zat hut he make to bite ze cord viz ze teef, and ze guard he sleep—voila tout! Now he is to make vat you call one getaway in ze night. Zousand zunders!"

"It is wathah unfortunate, Mr. Mustard, but weally, you could not have blown the wottah's bwains out!" said Arthur Augustus.

"Pouf!" snorted Gaston.

Evidently it was the trader's opinion that he could, and should, have done precisely that.

It was not pleasant news to the juniors that their deadly enemy was free again—free to track them, and to watch and wait for them, in the wilderness up the Rio Preto. At the same time, they could not quite concur in the planter's opinion on the subject.

Anyhow, as Gaston said, it was no use crying over spilt milk. Joao Rabeira was gone, and that was that.

The juniors went down to the landing-place. A long, roomy, clinker-built canoe was in waiting, with four Indians at the paddles. Baggage had already been stacked in—the minimum that was required for an expedition into the wilds. All the schoolboys knew that once the quinta was left behind they had to rough it, and rough it hard.

There was room in the canoe for the eight of them, the trader, and the seven schoolboys, with four paddlers. But there was none too much room, and quarters were rather closely packed. Tom Merry & Co. were not thinking of comfort and ease.

Gaston saw them all aboard, stayed a few minutes to give final instructions to his steward, and then followed them in.

The Indians were pushing off, when a gigantic figure came running down to the landing-place.

O Pepino waved his big black hands to the canoe, and called out in Portuguese. Apparently Cucumber had just discovered that Arthur Augustus was about to start on an expedition up the Preto.

The juniors could not understand his words, but his looks and actions were easy to understand. O Pepino wanted to accompany the schoolboy to whom he had attached himself, on that perilous trip into the sertao.

Gaston shook his head impatiently, and waved the negro back. The canoe slid out into the yellow waters of the Preto.

Arthur Augustus waved a friendly hand to the black man on the bank.

"Good-bye, Cucumbah!" he called out. "See you again when we come back, deah boy!"

"Meu senhor, meu patroa, Senhor Um Olho!" exclaimed O Pepino.

"He wants to come with Mr. One-Eye!" grinned Blake. "No room in the canoe; and he's rather an outside."

The canoe was fairly well packed already, and Gaston evidently had no idea of adding the gigantic negro to the crew. The paddlers drove the long craft out into the river, and O Pepino, standing on the landing-place, watched it go, with a dismayed expression on his black face that touched the hearts of the St. Jim's

fellows. But it was for Gaston to give orders, and he had given them.

Arthur Augustus waved again to O Pepino as the landing-place fell behind the canoe. The big, black man stood staring for a long time. Then suddenly he ran along the bank and disappeared from sight.

But he was not gone for good, though the juniors supposed that he was. Ten minutes later, looking back, Tom Merry spotted a little dugout on the river, with a single paddler in it.

"Oh, my hat!" he exclaimed. "There he is again!"

"Bai Jove!"

The St. Jim's fellows looked back. O Pepino, in the little dugout, was paddling in pursuit of the big canoe. Evidently he was not going to be left behind, if he could help it.

Gaston's eyes fell on him a few minutes later. The French trader frowned, rose to his feet, and waved his hand to the black man, waving him back.

O Pepino stared at him from the dugout, and ceased to paddle. The dugout remained motionless on the broad bosom of the Preto, and the canoe, surging on, lost it to sight.

"Gone!" said Blake.

"Perhaps," said Tom Merry, with a smile.

The big, black man had not ventured to disobey his master's gesture of dismissal. He was no longer to be seen. But the juniors did not feel at all sure that he had paddled back to the quinta. However, he was not seen again as the canoe went swiftly up the river.

The sun rose higher and higher, pouring down burning heat on the Rio Preto and the surrounding forests. The paddlers made good speed against the sluggish current. Mile after mile slid behind the canoe. Twenty miles had been covered when, in the blaze of a tropical noon, the canoe pulled into one of the numerous islands for the usual midday rest and siesta. Dozens of forest-clad, swampy-banked islands were strung out along the Black River, swarming with squawking parrots and grinning monkeys. On one of them the St. Jim's adventurers landed and ate their lunch and rested in the shade of mighty branches while the fierce heat passed.

Blake gave a sudden chuckle as he glanced down the river.

"Look!" he murmured.

And the other fellows chuckled, too, as they looked. In the distance, down the Preto, a dug-out shot into view for a moment. It disappeared behind one of the islands, and did not reappear, but the juniors had seen it, and seen the big black man who paddled it. O Pepino had not stayed behind.

THE FOE IN THE NIGHT!

NIGHT in the Brazilian forest!

The blaze of the camp-fire leaped, casting strange lights and shadows among the mighty trees.

Blackness hung over the forest, every gleam and glimmer of a star shut out by the massive roof of foliage.

Tom Merry & Co. were feeling rather a thrill as they sat by the camp-fire, with the forest shadows thick about them and the strange sounds of the wilderness coming to their ears.

It was cold by night, hot as it was by day, and the fire was needed. But it was needed also to scare creeping wild-beasts from the camp.

Again and again the juniors heard the faint rustling that told of creeping jaguar or puma; more than once they saw eyes that looked like balls of glowing fire gleaming from the dark.

It was the first night the juniors had had in the wilderness. To Gaston it was all in the day's work, and he was used to it, but to the schoolboys from England it was new and strange and thrilling.

The Indian paddlers slept, rolled in their ponchos, in the canoe in the darkness under the bank, after eating their supper of tough dried meat, washed down by the native tea. The St. Jim's party were to sleep in hammocks slung on branches. They were used to hammocks by this time, but hammocks in the open air, deep in the wilderness, were new to them.

Gaston glanced from face to face as he sat by the fire with his rifle over his knees. Perhaps he was watching the juniors to spot whether there were any signs of nervousness or uneasiness. But, new and strange as the experience was to the St. Jim's juniors, Tom Merry & Co. were not troubled by funk. They had set out on this expedition knowing what they had to face, and they were prepared to face it with a stiff upper lip.

The Indians had slung the hammocks for the juniors before retiring to the canoe to sleep themselves. But Tom Merry noticed that only seven were slung, and he wondered whether the French trader intended to remain awake and on the watch.

Of foes, nothing had been seen or heard, so far. But at this distance up the Black River danger dogged every step, as the juniors well knew.

They were now within touch of the wild Caraya country, inhabited by Red Indians who had never been subdued by Brazilian rule, and very different indeed from the "tame" Indians at the quinta.

But more dangerous than the Redskins were Joao Rabeira and his gang of outcast desperadoes.

They had seen a good deal of Joao himself, but not of his crew of outcast ruffians. Now that they had learned the hidden message in Lord Conway's letter, they thought that they could guess the reason.

One of the two letters had fallen into Joao's hands, and it was evident that he had penetrated the secret of the invisible ink. From the letter, therefore, he knew that there was another, which had not fallen into his hands, and which must have been sent to its destination. Knowing that it contained the clue to the hidden treasure of Potomayo, he had followed it across the ocean, to learn, if he could, whether the secret message had been discovered in it. That was why he had been seen at St. Jim's, but at the school he had been satisfied that Arthur Augustus knew nothing of the secret—which, indeed, the swell of St. Jim's had not suspected for a moment.

It was only when he had found Arthur Augustus and his friends on board the steamer, bound for Brazil, that Joao's belief had changed, and then his actions had shown plainly enough how he planned to deal with a rival seeker of the treasure of the Ilha dos Macacos.

But there was little doubt that his "banda" were still on the upper waters of the Preto, hunting for the missing man, who had so far eluded them, or searching on the Island of Monkeys for the buried loot of the revolutionary general—probably both.

Hitherto the St. Jim's fellows had had only Joao to deal with, but now they were drawing

near to the region where his banda had been left, and from Gaston they knew that Joao was the "capitao" of a gang of more than a dozen armed and desperate men.

The Ilha dos Macacos was still the best part of a hundred miles ahead of them, but with every day's travel they were to draw nearer and nearer to the remote spot in the wilderness where the bandits lurked.

Neither did they doubt that Joao, now that he was free again, was following them up the river. Indeed, it was more likely than not that he was watching the flicker of their camp-fire from the forest, and watching and waiting for a chance.

What he had believed ever since he had seen the party starting for Brazil was now true. They knew the secret of the letter, and that expedition up the Black River meant that they were seeking the treasure of Potomayo, though, in point of fact, the juniors were thinking of Lord Conway, not of the treasure he had discovered in the wilds.

That, however, came to the same thing, so far as Joao was concerned, for if they found Lord Conway they would find the treasure also. They, like Joao, knew that it was buried on the Island of Monkeys, but only Lord Conway knew the exact spot.

Tom Merry & Co. were thinking of it as they sat round the camp-fire and ate their supper, and if their hearts beat a little faster at the thought of what awaited them in the sertao, their nerves were steady enough.

Gaston rose at last from the log on which he was seated.

"Allons, dormez!" he said. "I zink zat you go to a bed, isn't it?"

"And you?" asked Tom.

"I keep ze vatch!" said Gaston. He waved a hand towards the surrounding forest. "In ze sertao it needs to sleep viz ze eye open."

"We are weady to take it in turns to keep watch, sir," said Arthur Augustus. "Fair play all wound, you know. We can't leave it all to you."

Gaston grinned.

"I zink perhaps it is better zat I keep ze vatch," he answered. "Demain—to-morrow—I sleep in ze canoe, so it is all left. But I close not ze eye in ze dark." He waved his hand to the forest again. "Perhaps in zis verree moment ze eye of Rabeira is on us—or zat of some of his amis—his friends."

"But his gang are up the river," said Tom. "Far enough away at present."

"Zere are ozzers," said Gaston. "Easy for Joao to pick up rascals zat he knows. Perhaps two-zhree of zem, who knows? I close not ze eye."

The juniors turned into their hammocks under the branches. Gaston piled logs on the fire and then disappeared into the shadows, his rifle under his arm. Through the dark night in the forest he was to keep watch and ward while the juniors slept.

They were soon fast asleep in the hammocks. It was past midnight when Tom Merry suddenly awakened. Some sound had startled him and he lifted his head and looked and listened.

The camp-fire burned with a dull, red glow, but under the branches, where the hammocks hung, it was very dark.

He could see nothing of Gaston; but a strange

and startling sight, close at hand, caught his eyes.

It was a sound of scuffling that had reached his ears, of brushing movements and panting breath.

"Oh!" gasped Tom.

Half-seen in the dim shadows, two figures were rolling over and over on the earth, locked in a savage and desperate struggle.

He could not make out either of them, only that both were of burly frame; but it leaped into his mind that one of them was Gaston, and that he had been taken by surprise by a sudden attack.

He leaped from the hammock and grasped at his rifle. From the other hammocks came startled exclamations; the sound of the struggle had awakened the other fellows.

"What—"

"What's that?"

"Look out, deah boys!"

Even as Tom grasped his rifle there was a sudden terrible cry, and the desperate struggle ceased. One of the struggling figures lay on the earth; the other darted away into the forest and disappeared.

"Gaston!" panted Tom.

A terrible dread was in his heart that it was the kind and friendly French trader who lay at his feet in the shadows.

But the next moment he was relieved.

"Alors, c'est moi ici!" came the well-known voice of Monsieur Moutarde. "I am here, mon garcon! Vat zen?"

Monsieur Moutarde came hurrying from the trees, his rifle half-raised. He kicked the campfire into a blaze.

"Then you are safe!" panted Tom.

"Mon Dieu!" gasped Gaston Moutarde.

The fire blazed up, dispelling the shadows. All eyes fixed on the figure that lay on the earth, terribly still and silent. It was a half-breed, with a dark, bearded face, and in his right hand was still clutched the knife he had been unable to use.

"Bai Jove!" breathed Arthur Augustus, with a shake in his voice.

"Dead!" muttered Tom.

They gazed at the still form in horror.

Evidently it was an enemy that had crept into the sleeping camp with all the stealth of the creeping puma, eluding even the watchfulness of Gaston Moutarde. He had crept to the camp unseen, unheard. He had reached it, knife in hand! But now he lay on his back, his savage eyes fixed and staring, drenched in blood. Dead—stabbed to the heart!

"Allons, donc!" Gaston stared round blankly. "Zat bandit, he is dead; but what hand strike ze blow?"

It was amazing to the juniors. What would have happened had not the stealthy, murderous outcast been struck down, they knew only too well. But what friendly hand had struck in their defence while they slept?

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "Old Cucumbah!"

"Wha-a-t?"

"Bet you old Cucumbah is still on the twack! Who else can it have been?"

"O Pepino!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah!"

If it was O Pepino, he was gone. That he had followed the party up the river, the juniors knew, and his master's orders prevented him from joining up with them. Had he followed on to the

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camp, watching over the safety of "Senhor One-Eye," who had saved him from the alligator? It seemed to Tom Merry & Co. the only explanation.

Gaston shrugged his shoulders up to his ears. "Allons! Dormez!" he said. "Sleep, mes enfants!"

He dragged the body of the outcast away and flung it into the thickets. Within a minute after he returned to the camp the juniors could hear a sound of snarling and snapping in the thickets and knew only too well what it meant.

"Dormez!" said Gaston.

He remained on the watch, doubly vigilant now; but it was not so easy for the juniors to sleep after what had happened.

But they slept at last, and when their eyes opened again the sun was glinting through the foliage over their heads.

GUSSY'S CATCH!

"CHUCK it!" hooted Blake
 "That's what I'm goin' to do, deah boy!" grinned Arthur Augustus.
 "You dangerous ass!" hooted Herries.
 "Wats!"

The canoe was gliding up the Preto in the sunny morning. The four Indians plied their paddles tirelessly, while Gaston Moutarde lay and slept—not having closed his eyes during the night. In the day-time, on the river, the French trader had to trust to the schoolboys to keep watch for danger. He slept with his rifle at his side, ready to start up in an instant.

Tom Merry & Co. kept watch from the canoe on the vast forest that walled in the river on either side, and on the wooded islands that glided by. So far, all was plain sailing on the Rio Preto, but farther up the river the juniors knew that there were shallows and rapids, where navigation was more difficult. So far, however, all was going well, and Arthur Augustus had the bright idea of improving the shining hour by handling the "bola."

Arthur Augustus had been putting in a good deal of practice the last few days with that weapon of the gaúcho of the pampas, O Pepino, who was an expert in its use, willingly giving Senhor Um Olho untiring instruction.

He was getting quite skilful and was no longer in danger of knocking out his own brains, or anyone else's, with the iron balls at the ends of the long rope.

Nevertheless, there was little space in the crowded canoe for whirling the bola, and six voices in unison called upon Arthur Augustus to chuck it.

"My deah chaps," said Arthur Augustus patiently, "the bola is a vevy useful thing, and the more wpractice a fellow gets, the bettah. We are goin' to have some tough times befoah we see the quinta again—"

"We are, if you bang that bola about!" agreed Monty Lowther.

"I mean, deah boy, we may wun out of cart-widges, and all sorts of things, and have to wely on the bola instead of the wifle," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Perhaps our dinnah some day may depend on my wopin' in game with this bola."

"We shall get jolly hungry, then," remarked Manners.

"Wats! Now, keep your sillay heads out of the way, and watch me," said Arthur Augustus.

"That black chap Cucumbah has been teachin' me, and I am picking it up at a great wate! I am goin' to wope in a bunch of bananas next time we pass one neah the watah."

"I don't think!" grunted Blake.

"Wait and see!" said Arthur Augustus confidently. "I don't know whethah they are bananas or plantains—but I have seen a lot of them along the banks, and I am goin' to bag the next lot that's neah enough."

"If you bag me," said Blake, "there will be a dead donkey found in this canoe soon afterwards."

"Don't you wowwy, deah boy—even if I did bag you it would not be fatal," said Arthur Augustus reassuringly.

"What?" howled Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You're going to be the dead donkey, you howling ass, if you bag me with that bola!" roared Blake, making the meaning clear to the aristocratic intellect of Arthur Augustus.

"Wats!" said Gussy cheerfully.

Bola in hand, Arthur Augustus watched the banks for a shot—and Tom Merry & Co. watched Arthur Augustus. None of the juniors was keen to be bagged by the cord of the bola—and they were still less keen to feel the iron ball banging on their heads.

Here and there, where the river narrowed, the canoe glided under wide branches from the bank, and among the other trees the juniors had seen many laden with clusters of fruit.

But they assuredly did not think that Gussy was as yet skilful enough in the use of the bola to bag a cluster of bananas in passing.

In the opinion of his friends, Gussy was more likely to bag one of his fellow-voyagers, or one of the Indian paddlers, or to pitch head-first into the waters of the Rio Preto.

Arthur Augustus, as usual, knew best! He was going to bag a cluster of rich, ripe bananas—or plantains—just to show those doubting Thomases how he had profited by the instructions of O Pepino in the handling of the bola.

"There you are, Gussy!" said Tom Merry, laughing, pointing to a golden cluster of bananas that shone in the sunshine, a little ahead, amid masses of tropical scenery.

"Wight-ho!" said Arthur Augustus. And he prepared to make his cast as the canoe glided by.

"Look out for your nuts!" murmured Monty Lowther.

The juniors were looking out for their nuts. That was rather necessary when the swell of St. Jim's handled the bola.

Arthur Augustus whizzed the bola round his head, preparatory to letting one of the iron balls fly and wind the rope round the object aimed at.

It would not have been an easy shot even for O Pepino, or a South American gaucho. Tom Merry & Co. did not expect for a moment that Gussy would get away with it. And he didn't!

The whirling ball missed the banana cluster by about six yards. It crashed into the branches of a great ceiba-tree overhanging the water close at hand.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the St. Jim's crew.

But the next instant that roar of laughter died away as there was a sudden, fearful yell from the branches of the ceiba.

The juniors jumped almost clear of the canoe.

"What—" stuttered Blake.

"Look!" yelled Herries.

From the thick branches something dropped and splashed into the river. It was a rifle.

It was followed by a whirling body falling from the tree!

A big grass-hat whirled in the air—the man who had worn it splashed into the Rio Preto, in the grip of the bola.

Arthur Augustus had made a catch—though an utterly unexpected one!

He had missed his cluster of bananas by six yards or more—but the iron ball, crashing into the ceiba branches, had found a billet! The man with the rifle had been crouching there, hidden by the foliage—and probably he was more surprised than the juniors when the iron ball spun round him, winding him in the rope, and dragging him headlong from his perch.

"Oh cwikey!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

Gaston Moutarde leaped to his feet, awakened by the frantic yell that had pealed out as the man in the ceiba fell.

"Qu'est-ce-que-c'est?" he exclaimed. "Vat is zat?"

"Look!"

Tom Merry pointed. The fallen man had gone deep, but he had come up again, still entangled in the bola.

He was striving wildly, striving to disentangle himself from the rope, and as his dark evil face showed above the water, the juniors recognised it!

"Rabeira!" breathed Blake.

"Bai Jove! That wascal! He was in ambush in that twee, waitin' for us!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

Gaston stared for an amazed moment; then he clamped his rifle to his shoulder. But even as the shot rang, Joao Rabeira plunged under the water, and the bullet flashed along the shining surface of the Preto.

"Bai Jove! I will dwag him in!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, and he threw his whole weight on the rope and dragged.

The next moment he was flying over backwards among the legs of his comrades. The weight was gone from the bola; Joao had succeeded in getting free of it. The iron ball whisked up over the side of the canoe as Arthur Augustus sprawled on his back, yelling.

"Oh cwikey! Oh cwums! Yawooh!" roared Arthur Augustus.

Crack! Crack! Crack! rang the trader's rifle, searching the water with bullets.

But Joao was not seen again. Doubtless he had found cover among the half-submerged roots of the forest giants growing on the edge of the water—ample cover to screen him from the trader's rifle. But he had had a narrow escape.

Gaston, with a grunt, dropped the butt of his rifle. Then as Arthur Augustus scrambled to his feet, he looked at the swell of St. Jim's with wonder and admiration in his face.

"But zat is wonderful, petit!" he exclaimed.

"You catch zat rascal in ze bola when zat he is in ambush in zat tree!"

Tom Merry & Co. chuckled.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "I caught him all wight, Mistah Mustard—"

"Zat is wonderful! Even I could not do zat viz ze bola!" said Monsieur Moutarde. "It is verree wonderful!"

Arthur Augustus' cheeks were pink. Certainly, to the French planter, it looked like a really marvellous shot with a bola, displaying a skill excelling his own. He was not aware that Gussy's target had been six yards from the bandit in the tree.

"You see him zere, and you get him viz ze bola!" exclaimed Gaston.

"Hem! No! I did not see him," stammered Arthur Augustus.

"Mon Dieu! You get him viz ze bola vizout seeing him!" exclaimed Monsieur Moutarde.

"Zat is some more wonderful!"

"Nummo!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "I was twyn' to get some bananas—and the bola went into that tree by accident!"

"Oh!" gasped Gaston.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the juniors.

"Weally, you fellows, there is nothin' to cackle at!" said Arthur Augustus warmly. "As that wottah was waitin' to pot us with a wife, it is wathah lucky that I missed the bananas and got him."

"No end lucky!" chuckled Tom Merry.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Gaston. "You do not know zat he is zere, and you miss somezing else and catch him by ze accident! Ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Zat is verree lucky shot viz ze bola!" chuckled Gaston. "You do not mean him, but he come off! Ha, ha!"

The juniors chortled. Gussy's catch had been a very fortunate one—but it undoubtedly had its comic side.

"All wight, deah boys!" said Arthur Augustus. "You can smiggah—but you wait till I spot some more bananas, and wope them in."

But though Arthur Augustus spotted a good many more clusters of bananas as the canoe glided up the Preto, he did not succeed in roping any of them in. Joao Rabeira was his only catch that day.

THE MAN WITH FOUR EYES!

"GREAT Scott!"

The sunset was red on the Rio Preto.

The patient Indian crew, tireless as it seemed, paddled steadily on against the sluggish current. The canoe was gliding between a long swampy island, clothed with trees and thick bush, and the forest-clad bank, when Arthur Augustus uttered that surprised and startled exclamation.

His eye and his eyeglass were fixed on the tangled thickets lining the swampy shore of the river-island.

Tom Merry & Co. looked round at him, wondering what was up.

Gaston Moutarde was standing in the bow of the canoe, his rifle in his hands, watching the forest on the bank. Passing the island, the canoe had to come in close to the bank, under overhanging branches, and the French trader was watchful for another ambush.

"Bai Jove!" breathed Arthur Augustus. "Am I dweamin', deah boys?" He stared blankly at the island shore. "Did you see it?"

"What and which?" asked Tom.

"That extwaordinawy face!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

"Somebody on the island?" exclaimed Blake.

The juniors were on the alert at once. Every fellow grasped a rifle, ready for trouble.

But if there was anyone screened by the thickets on the island, he was not to be seen or heard. They scanned the tangled bush in vain.

"Sure you saw him, Gussy?" asked Blake doubtfully.

"Yaas—but it was most extwaordinawy!" stut-tered Arthur Augustus. "I have nevah heard of

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such a thing! I suppose you fellows have nevah seen a chap with four eyes befoah?"

"What?" howled the juniors.

"It almost makes a fellow wondah whether a fellow's dweamin'! I saw a face in those bushes with four eyes—"

"Four eyes!" gasped Tom.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Well, you howling ass!" said Manners, putting down his rifle. "We've seen some queer things in South America—but we haven't spotted any four-eyed sportsmen yet."

"Not yet!" said Tom Merry, laughing.

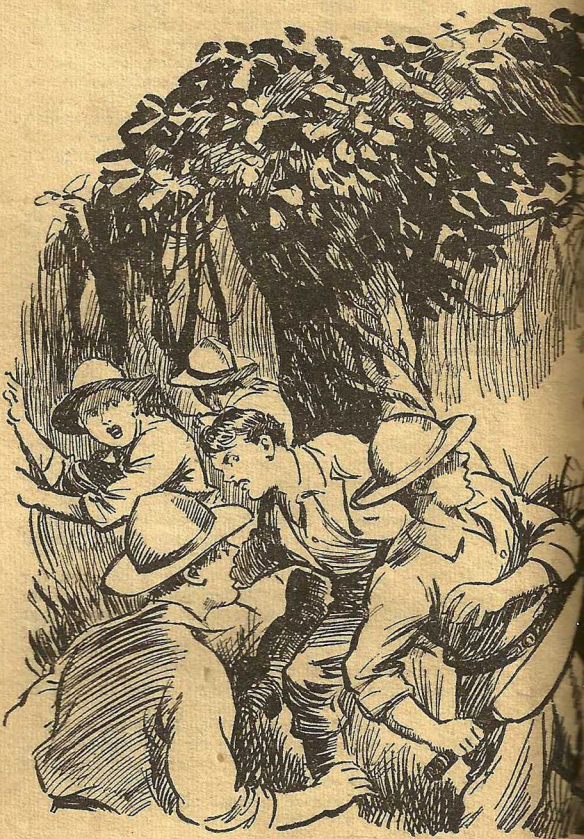
"Dreaming, you ass!"

"But I saw him quite distinctly for a moment before he popped out of sight!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, quite bewildered. "It was a b'rown face with four eyes—"

"Do you mean he had specs on, fathead?" asked Herries.

"No, you ass, I don't mean anything of the sort! I mean that he had four eyes in his face—or else my eyes deceived me."

"Perhaps your eyeglass deceived you, old chap!" suggested Monty Lowther. "By gum! If we pick up a chap with four eyes here, we'd



As the jaguar came hurtling through the

better take him home for the British Museum! Frightfully rare specimen!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a ripple of merriment up and down the canoe. Whatever it was that Arthur Augustus had seen, or fancied that he had seen, the St. Jim's fellows were not likely to believe that he had seen a human countenance supplied with eyes to the unusual and extraordinary number of four!

Gaston Moutarde glanced round at the juniors with a smile at the sound of laughter. Arthur Augustus was looking bewildered, but six fellows were chortling.

"Vat is it you see zat you go to laff?" asked the French trader. "Zere is somezing zat make to laff?"

"Yes, rather!" chuckled Blake. "D'Arcy's just spotted the most extraordinary sight in South America on that island."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But vat is it zat he see?" asked Gaston.

"A man with four eyes!" chortled Blake.

"Comment!" exclaimed Gaston.

The juniors expected him to laugh also. But the French trader did not laugh—his face set hard and grim, and he swung round from the bows of



, the juniors scattered in all directions.

the canoe, gripping his rifle, his finger on the trigger.

"Vere you see him?" he exclaimed. "Quick! You point out to me vere zat you see him!"

Arthur Augustus pointed.

"In that bush, just under that big twee—"

"C'est ca!" breathed Gaston, and he clapped his rifle to his shoulder, his eye gleaming along the barrel.

Tom Merry & Co. gazed at him in amazement, almost in stupefaction.

That the French trader was alarmed, and instantly on the alert, they could see—but that there could possibly exist a man with four eyes was utterly impossible, so they were quite puzzled.

"Duck ze head!" rapped Gaston.

"But what—" stuttered Blake.

"Je vous dis, duck ze head!" roared the French trader. "Say nozzing, but duck down ze head."

The juniors obeyed, ducking their heads as low as they could in the cover of the sides of the canoe. Evidently Gaston suspected some ambush on the island they were passing—alarmed by Gussy's amazing fancy that he had seen a man with four eyes! They could not understand it, but they knew how to obey orders, and they did as Gaston directed without losing time.

There was a whizzing sound in the air. Something stuck in the canoe, and remained there quivering. It was an arrow.

Bang! Bang! Bang! roared Gaston's rifle.

From the bushy island where the bullets crashed came a loud, ear-piercing yell. A figure leaped into view—and the juniors had a moment's glimpse of a wild, dark face, with matted hair in which feathers were stuck.

Only for a moment was that face visible—but in that moment they could see that it had—or appeared to have—four eyes glaring from the dark brown skin!

The next moment, the Indian was plunging headlong into the waters of the Rio Preto. One, if not more, of Gaston's rapid bullets had found the ambushed savage in the thicket, and crashed through flesh and bone. Only that one wild yell came from the Indian—it was a dead man that toppled into the river and plunged among the hungry jaws of the alligators.

The Indian paddlers in the canoe put on speed, the paddles fairly flashing. The canoe shot on at redoubled speed.

As it went, Gaston Moutarde pumped bullets back at the bushy island till his magazine was empty.

But no more arrows flew. The savage on the island had perhaps been alone there—or, if he had comrades, they were cowed by the blaze of rifle-fire. The island was left behind as the canoe raced on.

"Allons done! Zat is vat you call in English ze close shave!" said Gaston, dropping his rifle-butt. "You keep verree good watch, mon petit." "Oh cwikey!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "Did you fellows see him?"

"I suppose we're not all dreaming!" said Tom Merry. "Did you see that Indian's eyes, Mr. Moutarde?"

Gaston stared at him for a moment, and then laughed.

"Mais si!" he answered. "You zink zat he have four of zem! C'est ca—ze Caraya Indian he look so! Zey cut ze circles on ze face! At a short distance, zey look like ze eyes—but it is one Indian decoration! Zat is ze first wild Caraya zat

you see—but up ze Preto, you vill see many of dem—and zey all look like zat—like ze man viz quatre yeux—four eyes!”

“Oh!” gasped Tom.

The juniors understood now why Gaston had taken alarm as soon as he heard that Gussy had spotted a face with four eyes in the bush.

“Bai Jove!” said Arthur Augustus. “It weally gave me quite a turn, you know—seein’ a face with four eyes! What a vevy extwaordinawy ideah of decowation—fancy a fellow choppin’ his face about like that! Weally, you know, it looked exactly like four eyes at the distance.”

Tom Merry pulled out the arrow that had stuck quivering in the woodwork of the canoe. It was not pleasant to think of one of the fellows stopping that whizzing arrow in its flight—as would very probably have happened had not Arthur Augustus given the alarm and Gaston weighed in so promptly with his rifle. Tom Merry & Co. were glad that Gussy had spotted in time that man with the four eyes!

JAGUAR!

“YOU like to stretch you one leg?” asked Gaston Moutarde.

“Eh?”

It was the following morning. The canoe was paddling up the Preto, now a narrower and shallower stream than where the juniors had embarked upon it at the quinta. They all looked inquiringly at the French trader as he asked them that rather surprising question.

“Oh! You mean walk it?” asked Tom, jumping in Monsieur Moutarde’s meaning.

Gaston nodded.

“Zere are shallows and rocks ahead of ze canoe,” he explained. “Ze Indians take up ze canoe vizout us, and we find him later. For zis morning, we go on ze pony of Monsieur Shank.”

The juniors understood that the canoe had to be lightened of its passengers for the difficult navigation ahead.

After a good many hours in the cramped space they were not sorry to stretch their legs on land, and proceed on Shanks’ pony—or, as Gaston put it, the pony of Monsieur Shank.

The canoe paddled in to the swampy shore, and they landed in thick forest. The Indian crew pushed off again, paddling up the shallow stream, and very soon disappeared from sight beyond the winding banks.

Gaston led the way through the forest.

It was impossible to keep to the bank of the Preto, thick with swamp and tangled with bushes and projecting roots. They had to lose sight of the river, plunging into the shadowy aisles of the great forest.

Once the gleam of the waters was out of sight, there was not a fellow in the St. Jim’s party who could have told whether they were proceeding in the right direction or not. Hardly anywhere was it possible to see for more than a few yards ahead, and whether they were following the direction of the river, or walking away from it, Tom Merry & Co. could not have said.

The French trader, accustomed to the trackless wilderness of Brazil, tramped on without a pause. Doubtless there were many signs visible to his eyes of which the schoolboys saw nothing.

“Bai Jove, you fellows,” Arthur Augustus remarked thoughtfully, “we’ve been fwrightfully luckay in gettin’ Mister Mustard to join up with us! Of course, I should have gone aftah old

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Conway on my own, but weally and twuly I don’t quite see how I should have got through.”

At which Tom Merry & Co. grinned.

Success was far from certain, even with the help of the experienced French trader. On their own, the juniors would have been hopelessly lost in the Brazilian wilds. Arthur Augustus would very soon have needed as much finding as his missing brother.

In places where the forest was more open progress was slow but not difficult; but in other places it was necessary to hack a way through tangled bush and rope-like lianas. Each of the juniors carried a machete—the sharp, sword-like axe that was used for hewing a path through the primeval forest. It was hot work in the steamy heat, but hot and fatigued as they soon were, Tom Merry & Co. kept on manfully, gasping for breath, dabbing streams of perspiration, smacking mosquitoes, and hacking at tropical undergrowth.

Gaston stopped suddenly.

“En garde!” he rapped. “Zat you look out!”

“What—”

“Jaguar!”

“Oh!”

The juniors stood grasping their machetes, staring round at the walls of tropical greenery.

From the thickets came a rustling sound, and a low, deep growl that made their hearts beat quicker.

Gaston gripped his rifle, his eyes gleaming over it, but the jaguar was not yet to be seen. He had glimpsed a spotted skin for a moment, that was all, but the fierce brute had immediately disappeared.

Tom Merry & Co. stood firm, but their hearts were beating fast. If the hidden brute sprang, no one could tell where it might appear, and the thought of the savage jaws and tearing claws was more thrilling than agreeable.

Bang!

Gaston’s rifle roared suddenly. He had glimpsed the great cat lurking on the branch of a tree, and fired instantly.

The shot was answered by a deafening, nerve-racking howl, and a great body came hurtling through the air. The juniors scattered at once from the leaping jaguar. One slash of those terrible claws meant instant destruction. They plunged through the lianas and tangled bushes right and left as the fierce beast crashed down, landing only a few feet from Tom Merry.

He made a desperate jump to escape; but the claws would have reached him had not Gaston fired again, sending a bullet through the jaguar’s body and causing it to turn on him, screaming with rage.

Twice wounded as it was, the savage brute leaped at the French trader, and Gaston had no time to fire again. Standing as firm as a rock, he drove the barrel of his rifle at the springing brute, checking it for a moment, and then, dropping the rifle, bounded away. The jaguar’s jaws snapped on the rifle, and the next moment it was in pursuit of the trader.

“Zat you run!” shouted Gaston. “Zat you run for ze life!”

He caught a branch and swung himself into a tree almost as the jaguar reached him. A lashing claw missed him by an inch.

“Zat you run!” he yelled from the tree. For himself the trader feared nothing, but he was in dread of one of the schoolboys being dragged down by the enraged brute.

He tore a revolver from his belt and spattered shots at the jaguar below him.

It was useless to climb a tree to escape from a jaguar, which could climb like a cat; but the brute was sorely wounded by the two rifle bullets that had lodged in its body, and it clawed at the tree-trunk in vain, rolling back as it essayed to climb after the trader.

On a branch a dozen feet up the trader clung with one hand, while he loosed off shots from the revolver with the other. He was more anxious than anything else to keep the brute's attention chained on himself to give the school-boys time to get clear.

Again and again the jaguar strove to climb, but it was too disabled to drag its weight up the trunk. Every shot from Gaston's revolver crashed into the sinuous body, riddling it through and through, and the jaguar at last rolled over, clawing up the earth and herbage, sending scream after scream pealing through the echoing forest.

Then Gaston dropped from the branch, his sharp-edged machete in his hand.

It was dangerous to approach the struggling brute, disabled as it was; but the trader watched for an opportunity and leaped in, and with a single stroke of the machete almost severed the savage head from the body. The jaguar quivered and lay still.

Gaston put a whistle to his lips and blew a loud note, a signal to the scattered juniors to gather. And Tom Merry & Co. were soon gathering round him as he stood by the dead body of the jaguar. But of the seven St. Jim's juniors, only six rejoined the trader of Brazil.

O PEPINO TO THE RESCUE!

"Oh cwumbs!" gasped Arthur Augustus. He stumbled and fell.

Something had caught his foot as he plunged through the tangled forest. He supposed for the moment that it was one of the trailing rope-like lianas sprawling on the earth. But a liana would not have whipped up and curled round his legs.

The swell of St. Jim's scrambled up, struggling. His legs were gripped in what looked like a swelling tyre to his startled eyes. He struggled in vain to drag them loose.

A strange low grunting sound came to his ears—it sounded more like a pig than a serpent—a strange new sound to him. But he realised that it was a serpent's coil over which he had stumbled, and his blood almost froze as he knew that he was in the coils of an anaconda.

"Oh ewikey!" he gasped. "Oh, bai Jove!" Madly he strove to tear himself away, but the coils were round his legs, pinning them helplessly. Another coil began to circle his body, round the waist, with a force and strength that was ten or twenty times stronger than his own—a coil that could have crushed a horse or an ox in its grip.

Hot as it was, blazing tropical heat, Arthur Augustus felt an icy chill run through him. The sweat was thick on his face, that grew white and drawn. He struggled, knowing that his resistance was unavailing.

"Help!" he shouted desperately. "Help! Oh, help! Tom Mewwy—Blake—Dig—help, deah boys! For mercy's sake, help!"

But none of his comrades was at hand. They had scattered in different directions to elude the jaguar. From a distance, Arthur

Augustus could hear the sound of cracking shots as Gaston's revolver streamed lead at the jaguar, but his panting voice did not carry that distance.

He grasped a branch to keep from falling, otherwise the winding coils would have dragged him over. As he stood they coiled and coiled, thickening as they coiled harder and harder. His machete was at his belt, enclosed in the coils. He could not get at it, and he tore frantically and uselessly at the gripping coils with his hands.

He could not see the serpent's head, but he could hear the strange, pig-like grunting sound that it made. It was the anaconda's way to crush its victim to a shapeless mass before devouring it, and that was the dreadful fate that hung over the unfortunate schoolboy.

The firing in the distance had died away. Sharp and clear, ringing through the forest, came the sound of a whistle—the signal from the French trader to call the juniors together if they should become separated in the forest.

Arthur Augustus heard it, but he could give it no heed. He could not stir a limb from where he stood, pinned in the coils of the anaconda.

"Help!" he shrieked wildly. "Oh, help! Wescue! Oh, help! Help!"

But his voice was little more than a gasp as the gripping coils compressed his chest.

Unless by chance his comrades came in that direction, they could not hear—they could not help!

And he knew, too, that the trader's signal whistle must be gathering them to the spot where Gaston Moutarde stood, and to which Arthur Augustus himself would have been hurrying had he been able to move. The spot was not very distant, for the blast of the signal-whistle came clearly and sharply to his ears, but it was far

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beyond the reach of any cry that he could utter. He gave himself up for lost, but he still struggled, futile as it was, in the deadly coils that thickened round him.

He tried to shout again, but only a gasping faint cry came. It seemed as if he was being crushed in iron bands, winding closer and closer—soon to crush and crack every bone in his body.

A low, faint groan came from the hapless junior. Then, even as he gave up hope, there was a crash in the thickets, and he knew that someone was coming.

Whether it was one of his friends, or a foe, he did not know, but he would have welcomed even the dark, evil face of Joao Rabeira at that fearful moment. Better a knife-thrust from the bandit than death in the crushing coils of the anaconda.

But from the parting foliage it was a big, black face that looked at him—and at the unexpected sight of O Pepino, Arthur Augustus gave a cry.

It was the black man who had tracked the St. Jim's party up the Rio Preto against his master's orders. Tom Merry & Co. had supposed that O Pepino had turned back at last, as they had seen nothing more of him. But he had not turned back—Arthur Augustus knew now that the black man had still been on the track, and that he must have left his dugout and followed the party through the forest when they landed from the canoe. For here he was—and the sight of the big black face was life and hope to the boy in the coils of the anaconda.

"Cucumbah!" Arthur Augustus's voice was a faint, almost inaudible whisper. "Cucumbah—help!"

Arthur Augustus had risked his life to save O Pepino from the alligator in the swamp of the Rio Preto. The black man had not forgotten.

"Meu patrao—Senor Um Olho!" As he uttered the words, O Pepino came leaping, with a machete flashing in his black hand.

The machete flashed and struck. The coil of the anaconda that compressed Arthur Augustus' chest almost to suffocation suddenly relaxed—cut almost through by the heavy slash of the machete in the powerful hand.

The swell of St. Jim's gasped for breath.

O Pepino slashed and slashed. Coil after coil dropped from the swell of St. Jim's, and suddenly he realised that he was free of the anaconda's death-grip.

He staggered and a big, bare, black arm caught him as he was falling.

"Venha, Senor Um Olho!" panted O Pepino.

He dragged the swell of St. Jim's away from the thrashing coils of the anaconda.

The fearful serpent was not killed, terribly as it was injured by the slashes of the negro's razor-edged machete. Grunting, hissing, coiling, winding, it thrashed and thrashed in a mad struggle, and only O Pepino's helping hand could have saved Arthur Augustus from the thrashing coils.

The black giant threw him on his bare, black shoulder as easily as if he had been an infant, and leaped away with him, crashing through the thickets. Behind them, the anaconda still thrashed and crashed madly.

For a hundred yards or more, O Pepino ran on, with Arthur Augustus across his brawny shoulder—Gussy's brain in a whirl. But he stopped at last, and set the swell of St. Jim's upon his feet—holding him steady with a brawny hand.

"Oh!" gasped Arthur Augustus faintly. "Oh ewikey!"

O Pepino grinned. From the depths of the

forest came pealing the note of the signal whistle, again and again.

"Oh cwumbs! You have saved my life, Cucumbah, old chap!" gasped Arthur Augustus. He shuddered. Faintly, from the distance, he could hear the thrashing of the anaconda in the thickets. But for O Pepino, he would by that time have been crushed out of recognition in those terrible coils.

"Sim, senhor!" O Pepino guessed the meaning of the words he did not understand. "Sim! O Pepino grato!"

The signal whistle rang and rang.

"This way, Cucumbah, old chap!" said Arthur Augustus, and he took hold of the big black arm, to lead O Pepino in the direction of the signal.

The black man hesitated.

"Nao!" he said. "Senhor Moutarde—isso e impossible—"

"Wats!" said Arthur Augustus. He could guess that much Portuguese. "It isn't impossible—Mister Mustard will be jolly glad to see you when he hears what you have done, old boy! Come along."

That was so much Greek to O Pepino so far as the words went, but he understood that Arthur Augustus was going to make it right with his master. He tramped along with the swell of St. Jim's, clearing a way for him as he went, in the direction of the signal whistle. In a few minutes they could hear shouting voices.

"Gussy!"

"Where are you, Gussy?"

"All wight, deah boys!" shouted back Arthur Augustus. "Comin'."

A few minutes more, and Arthur Augustus had joined his friends. They stared at the black man who arrived with him, and Gaston Moutarde frowned.

"Jolly old Cucumber!" said Blake. "Where did you pick him up, Gussy?"

"He picked me up, deah boys!" said Arthur Augustus, with a quiver in his voice. "I twod on an anaconda—"

"What?"

"I should nevah have seen you again, you fellows, if Cucumbah hadn't been followin' on our twack!"

"Gussy!" gasped Blake.

"Mistah Mustard, I twust that you will give leave for Cucumbah to join up," said Arthur Augustus. "I should have been cwushed to death by that howwible weptile. Old Cucumbah came up just in time to save my life! I feel suah that you will give him leave to join up after that."

"Mon Dieu!" said Gaston. "If he save ze life of ze brozzer of my friend Lord, zat is all left!"

"All wight, Cucumbah!" said Arthur Augustus.

Monsieur Moutarde spoke to the black man in Portuguese and O Pepino ducked his woolly head and grinned from ear to ear, displaying almost all the teeth in his head. The disputed point was settled to the general satisfaction.

When Tom Merry & Co. resumed the march through the forest, O Pepino marched in the lead, blazing the way through the thickets with his machete; and when they rejoined the canoe several miles farther up the Preto, room was somehow found for him on board the craft. And all the St. Jim's fellows were glad to see his cheerful, grinning black face there, as they pushed on into the unknown depths of the Brazilian wilderness.

THE END.

Next Week: "TRAIL OF PERIL!"

THERE'S BIG TROUBLE BREWING AT CEDAR CREEK SCHOOL WHEN—

GUNTEN GETS THE BOOT!

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

LANDED AT LAST !

"RICHARDS!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

Frank Richards stopped and raised his hat respectfully as Miss Meadows called to him from the porch of the Cedar Creek schoolhouse. The Canadian schoolmistress' usually kind face was very severe and stern, and Frank wondered what was the matter.

So far as he was aware he had not been guilty of any special delinquencies during the few days that had elapsed since Cedar Creek School had reassembled after the holidays. But Miss Meadows' next words showed him that he was not the object of her anger.

"Do you know where Gunten is?"

"Gunten?" repeated Frank.

"Yes, Kern Gunten." Miss Meadows' voice grew sharper in tone. "I see that you know, Richards. Answer me!"

Frank Richards did not answer, in spite of that direct command. He knew well enough where was Kern Gunten, the Swiss schoolboy—the rogue of the lumber school. He knew how the young rascal was occupied that very moment in the old corral near the school.

He had passed that way only ten minutes before with Bob Lawless and Vere Beauclere, and

had seen the Swiss, with two or three companions, playing poker in the old corral.

It was evident that Miss Meadows had some suspicion of the same kind; but it was not Frank's business to give away his schoolfellow, rascal as Gunten was, and much as he despised him.

His colour deepened as he faced the schoolmistress.

"Did you hear me, Richards?" exclaimed Miss Meadows sharply.

"Ye-es!" stammered Frank.

"Tell me where Gunten is!"

No reply.

"I am sorry that you intend to be disrespectful, Richards," said Miss Meadows.

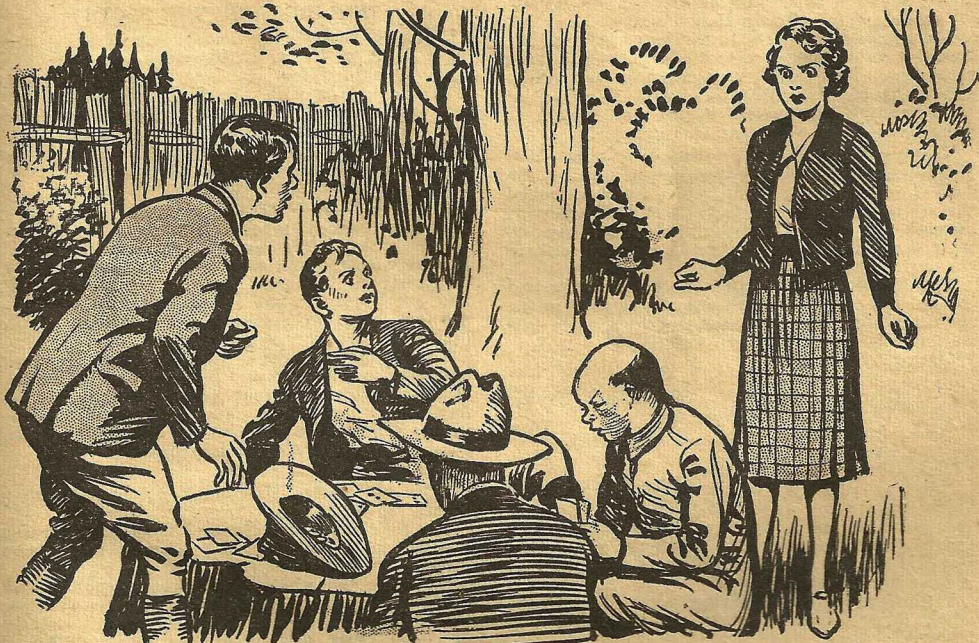
"Not at all, ma'am!" stammered Frank.

"But—but—"

"That is enough, Richards!"

Miss Meadows turned and walked away from the schoolhouse towards the gate of the school enclosure. Frank Richards made a step after her, but stopped. There was nothing he could say. If he told Miss Meadows where to find Gunten at that moment it was as much as betraying the Swiss to severe punishment, and that he could not do.

He was standing with a worried face when Bob



"Boys!" Miss Meadows' quiet voice broke in on the gamblers. They were fairly caught!

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and Beauclerc joined him. Bob Lawless had an axe under his arm.

"Hallo, here you are!" said Bob, tapping Frank on the shoulder. "Aren't you coming to help split logs for Mr. Slimmey?"

"Yes, I was coming; but——"

"What's up?"

Frank Richards explained, and his Canadian cousin gave a low whistle.

"I couldn't tell about Gunten, could I?" said Frank.

"Correct!"

"I don't think Miss Meadows needed telling much," remarked Beauclerc. "She's heading for the old corral now."

"Then she must guess," said Bob. "She caught Gunten in the same place once before with a merry little card-party—the time he was turned out of Cedar Creek, you remember. Pity Miss Meadows ever let him come back."

"There'll be trouble if she finds him," said Beauclerc, "and it looks as if she will. Gunten has been going it too strong ever since we came back from the holidays. It's pretty well known that he came back in debt, and he's been trying to raise the wind with poker and euchre. Succeeding, too."

Chunky Todgers came running towards the three chums.

"All U P with Gunten, you chaps!" he gasped breathlessly. "Miss Meadows is going into the corral. You know what's going on there."

"I guess it was bound to come out sooner or later," said Bob. "Gunten was getting a bit too reckless. Are we going to split those logs, you galoots?"

"I'd rather see what happens to Gunten," said Frank. "It will be rough on his people if he gets kicked out. Miss Meadows isn't likely to let him come back as she did before."

"Come on, then," said Bob.

The chums went down to the gates, where they found a good many other Cedar Creek fellows gathering. The news was already spreading. The sight of Miss Meadows, with a set, stern face, heading for the old corral was enough to warn the fellows what was on the tapis.

Keeping at a safe distance from Miss Meadows, the schoolboys kept her in sight as she walked quickly on. The schoolmistress looked neither to the right nor to the left as she headed through the trees for the old clearing. Apparently she was not aware of the keen interest in her movements of the Cedar Creek fellows.

Miss Meadows passed into the old clearing and entered the corral through one of the gaps in the old tumbling stakes. As she did so a voice was audible—the voice of Kern Gunten:

"Draw any, Keller?"

"Two," was Keller's reply.

"Me draw thlee cardce," came the soft, lisping tones of Yen Chin, the Chinese.

"One for me, Gunten." This was Dick Dawson's voice.

Kern Gunten dealt the cards.

The four schoolboys were seated round a log, which was serving as a card table. A hat on the log was used as a pool for the stakes. The quartet were so engrossed in their game that they did not see the schoolmistress approaching, or hear her footsteps.

At the edge of the clearing a crowd of Cedar Creek fellows looked on, without coming any nearer.

The four players were putting in their stakes

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now. Dick Dawson was looking moody and disturbed, and his expression was enough to tell that he was losing more than he could afford to lose.

"Boys!"

Miss Meadows' quiet voice broke in.

"Oh!" gasped Dawson.

Gunten sprang to his feet in dismay. Keller half-rose, his face growing scared. Dawson sat where he was, blinking up at the schoolmistress as if unable to move. Yen Chin darted away like a rabbit, and vanished round the hut at the corner of the corral.

"M-M-Miss Meadows!" stammered Gunten.

The schoolmistress' eyes gleamed at him.

"Gunten, this is not the first time I have caught you gambling, and inducing your schoolfellows to gamble!"

"I—I——" stammered the Swiss.

"Go to the house at once!"

Gunten, with a pale face, walked away. At a gesture from Miss Meadows, Dawson and Keller followed him. Yen Chin had vanished.

With hangdog looks the three culprits walked to the lumber school, Miss Meadows following them. The Cedar Creek crowd brought up the rear.

"That puts the lid on for Gunten!" said Bob Lawless, in a quiet voice. "I guess he knows it, too."

Frank Richards nodded.

"He fairly asked for it," he said. "But—but one can't help feeling a bit sorry for the poor brute."

"Oh, rot!" answered Bob. "Cedar Creek will be a bit better off without him."

And Bob Lawless' opinion was a general one.

THE ORDER OF THE BOOT!

THERE was a good deal of suppressed excitement at Cedar Creek when the school reassembled for afternoon lessons. Gunten & Co. came in with the rest. That something was going to happen to the detected gamblers was certain, but so far it had not happened.

When Mr. Slimmey and Mr. Shepherd, the assistant masters, came into the big school-room they were seen to be looking very grave. All faces, in fact, were grave.

Gunten looked moody, apprehensive, sullen; Keller was plainly scared and fearful. Dick Dawson was red and ashamed. As for Yen Chin, he presented his usual smiling aspect, as if he had not a care in the world. The little Chinese did not seem to realise the seriousness of the matter.

There was a sudden hush as Miss Meadows entered the school-room. She stopped before her class, to which all four of the delinquents belonged. A pin might have been heard to drop in the lumber school-room as Miss Meadows regarded her class with a stern brow.

She spoke quietly at last

"Gunten, Keller, Dawson, Yen Chin—stand out before the class!"

The four came out—three of them with burning faces, and Yen Chin with a calm and placid smile.

"I think the whole school knows your fault," said Miss Meadows, in a low, clear voice that was heard by all present. "Gunten, this is not the first time that you have been found guilty of gambling. On a previous occasion I sent you away from the school. I made a mistake in

pardoning you afterwards and allowing you to return."

Silence.

"That you are chiefly to blame in this unhappy matter I am well aware," continued Miss Meadows. "I have been observing you for some time, Gunten. You have not profited by the chance I gave you; rather, you have become worse and more unscrupulous. You have led better boys than yourself into your own degraded pursuits.

"This innocent Chinese boy and Dawson," went on Miss Meadows, "they are to blame, but I regard them rather as your victims than your confederates. Keller, also, I believe to have acted under your influence."

Gunten did not speak. Miss Meadows was too well aware of the facts for falsehoods to be of much use to him.

"These three boys," resumed Miss Meadows, "will be punished. I shall write to their fathers, explaining the matter."

Yen Chin and Keller looked relieved, but Dawson's look of utter misery seemed to intensify. But not one of them spoke.

"You, Gunten, must leave the school," said Miss Meadows. "I shall not inflict punishment, but I will not allow you to remain here to exercise a corrupting influence upon other boys better than yourself. You will leave Cedar Creek this afternoon, Gunten, and I shall write to your father informing him that you cannot be allowed to return in any circumstances whatever."

Gunten bit his lip.

"It's not fair," he muttered. "I won't go. You can't turn me out, Miss Meadows. You haven't the power to do it."

"What?"

"My father won't stand it, either. He's got influence—"

"Leave this school-room at once, Gunten!" rapped out Miss Meadows.

Gunten stood where he was, with a savage look on his heavy face. Mr. Shepherd came across to him and dropped a hand on his shoulder.

"Come!" he said briefly.

The Swiss gave him a bitter look and seemed for a moment to be thinking of resistance. But his courage failed, or he realised that it was useless. With Mr. Shepherd's hand on his shoulder he was marched out of the school-room, and disappeared from the view of Cedar Creek School.

Miss Meadows signed to the other three culprits to go back to their places, and the lesson commenced.

Mr. Shepherd returned quietly to the school-room, and as he came in the sound of horse's hoofs were heard in the distance. It was Kern Gunten departing.

Well deserved as his expulsion from Cedar Creek was, some of the fellows felt a little compassion for the wretched young rascal. But few considered that Miss Meadows could have acted in any other way. It was not only that Gunten was a rascal himself, but that he led others into his own dark ways, and his presence was harmful to the school.

The excitement did not die down easily, and lessons that afternoon were rather desultory. Most of the Cedar Creek fellows were in an expectant mood, fully looking for a speedy visit to the school from Mr. Gunten, the storekeeper of Thompson.

On the previous occasion when the rogue of Cedar Creek had been sent away Mr. Gompers

Gunten had visited the school in a towering rage—though that had had no effect whatever on the schoolmistress. It was for quite other reasons that she had allowed Kern Gunten to return that time.

Mr. Gunten, the richest storekeeper in the Thompson Valley, was a person of some importance, especially in his own eyes, and he was certain to be wrathful and indignant when his son came home in disgrace.

Somewhat to the disappointment of Cedar Creek, the podgy storekeeper did not come striding into the school-room during afternoon lessons.

The school was dismissed at the usual hour. But as Cedar Creek came streaming out into the playground a podgy figure came in sight, riding up from Thompson to the gates. It was Mr. Gunten. The storekeeper's fat face was dark and angry.

He rode up to the schoolhouse porch and jumped off his horse, throwing the reins over a post. With heavy steps he strode into the house.

"Old man Gunten's on the warpath!" grinned Bob Lawless. "I reckon he won't get much change out of Miss Meadows, though."

"He'll jolly well get chucked out on his neck if he cheeks our schoolmistress!" exclaimed Tom Lawrence.

Mr. Gunten was shown in by Black Sally, and disappeared into Miss Meadows' private study. What was said there was not known, but ten minutes later Mr. Gunten's loud and angry tones were heard as he came away from the schoolmistress' room.

"I repeat, madam, that I will not allow my son to be sent away from this school! Mark my words, I will not allow it!"

"I am sorry that I cannot alter my decision, Mr. Gunten."

Miss Meadows' voice was calm and quiet.

"You will be compelled to alter it, then."

"I think you had better go, sir!"

Mr. Gunten glared at the slim, graceful figure of the Canadian schoolmistress framed in the doorway.

"Miss Meadows, I warn you to have done with this! My son shall not leave Cedar Creek."

"He shall not return while I am headmistress, Mr. Gunten."

"Very well!" The storekeeper spoke through his set teeth. "It remains to be seen, madam, how long you will remain headmistress of Cedar Creek School."

"That is a matter that does not concern you, Mr. Gunten! Good-evening!"

"You will find that it does concern me, madam!" roared the Swiss storekeeper. "You will learn that my influence counts for more than you suppose. I warn you that if my son does not return you do not remain headmistress of this school."

"Nonsense, sir!"

"You prefer to put it to the test?" sneered Mr. Gunten.

"I have nothing more to say to you. Kindly go your way and let this disturbance cease."

"Be it so, then!" gasped Mr. Gunten. "I give you a last chance, madam. Write to me during the next twenty-four hours to tell me that my son may return, and I will let bygones be bygones. Omit to do so, and you, madam, shall be turned out of Cedar Creek School and a new headmaster appointed."

With that the storekeeper strode to his horse,
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dragged the animal round, and mounted. With a clatter of hoofs he rode out of the gateway and disappeared on the Thompson trail.

IN DOUBT!

FRANK RICHARDS & CO. rode homeward that evening discussing the affair of Kern Gunten and its possible outcome. Gompers Gunten's threat to the schoolmistress had surprised them and excited their contempt at first; but, on reflection, they wondered whether the storekeeper had the power to do as he threatened. "The jay was talking out of the back of his neck!" Bob Lawless declared. "How could he edge Miss Meadows out of Cedar Creek? It isn't possible."

"He spoke as if he meant it," said Vere Beauclerc thoughtfully.

"Oh, he was as mad as a dago chockful of pulque!" said Bob. "But he was only shooting off his mouth, I guess."

"Is old Gunten anything beside a storekeeper in Thompson, Bob?" asked Frank Richards. "Any sort of a local official?"

"He's on the board of school trustees," answered Bob.

"Could he make trouble for a schoolmistress there?"

Bob looked thoughtful.

"Well, he might," he admitted.

"That's what he means, then."

"But it wouldn't be easy," said Bob. "There are three trustees for the district, and my popper is one of them; Grimm, the farmer, is the other."

"Grimm, the fruit farmer?" asked Frank. "He treated us rather decently once, but he is a crusty old card, Bob."

"I guess so. He's a Galician by descent, and very chummy with old man Gunten. They stick together like foreigners," said Bob. "Of course, old man Gunten is a bit of a waster, and he had to do a lot of shoving to get on the board. I guess he thought it made him look a bit more respectable to be a school trustee, and helped to cover up his real character. Some galoots say that a faro game is run in his back parlour at times."

"Nice man to be a school trustee!"

"Well, he keeps it dark; but that's the talk in Thompson. Anyhow, he's a close-fisted, over-reaching storekeeper, that's a cert. A man has to keep his eyes peeled in doing business with old man Gunten. Kern is a chip of the old block," said Bob.

"Suppose he wants to make trouble for Miss Meadows, what could he do, then?" asked Frank.

"Well, I suppose he would call a special meeting of the trustees, who pay the school salaries and so on," replied Bob. "I suppose they could ask Miss Meadows for her resignation if they liked. But my father would have to be there, and he would be against it. He's got a great respect for Miss Meadows, and we'd jolly well jaw him if he let her be fired."

"Then it depends on whether old man Gunten could get Grimm to back him?"

"I guess so."

"I believe they do a lot of business together," said Beauclerc. "Gunten senior buys no end of his stuff at Grimm's farm. I don't know whether Grimm could afford to quarrel with him—or would care to—for the sake of a schoolteacher he doesn't even know."

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Bob Lawless looked rather troubled. "Still, Grimm is an honest man," he said. "He's known to be hard-headed, but he's honest enough. I can't think that he would let old man Gunten rush him into playing a dirty trick."

"Isn't there anything above the board of trustees?" asked Frank Richards thoughtfully.

"Lots; right up to the Minister of Education," said Bob. "But—I don't think a dismissed teacher could carry the matter farther up."

"Oh!" said Frank.

"You see, we're not a city district, or even a town district," said Bob. "We're a backwoods district, a bit off the main track, you know. The trustees are not paid and they have to be solid citizens of the district, and things are left to them. Old man Gunten is a bit of a queer bird to squeeze in; my popper and old man Grimm are fair specimens of the regular sort. If old man Gunten can twist Mr. Grimm round his finger, I'm afraid—"

Bob whistled.

"I'll jolly well speak to dad when we get in," he said. "If old man Gunten is up to his tricks the popper ought to be warned."

"Good egg!" said Frank. "We stand by Miss Meadows."

"You bet!"

"And if she has to go——" said Beauclerc.

Bob knitted his brows.

"If Miss Meadows has to go for turning that gambler and thief out of the school there will be trouble at Cedar Creek, and don't you forget it!" he exclaimed emphatically. "I guess they won't plant a new master on us in Miss Meadows' place without some galoots kicking up a dickens of a shindy. We'll give the new master the time of his life—if we let him come into the school at all."

"If!" said Frank. "My dear chap, you——"

"I said, if, and I mean if!" said Bob deliberately. "We're not in New Westminster or Vancouver, Franky, or even in Kamloops. We're in the backwoods, and in the backwoods a galoot can stand up and talk plain. And I tell you our schoolmistress isn't going to be edged out of Cedar Creek by old man Gunten!"

"Hear, hear!" said Frank with a smile. "If there's anything to be done, we're backing up Miss Meadows, Bob!"

And Beauclerc nodded assent.

As soon as the cousins arrived at the Lawless Ranch, Bob sought his father with the intention of explaining the matter to him, to put Mr. Lawless on his guard. Rancher Lawless was inspecting horses in the corral when his son and nephew joined him, and he listened to what they had to say with serious attention.

"I guess you did right to tell me of this, Bob," he commented. "I fancy Mr. Gunten was only blowing off steam; I hope so, anyhow. Young Gunten is the fellow who robbed you on your holiday in the North-West—eh?"

"The same rotter, dad!"

"Miss Meadows did quite right to send him away. I've heard talk about that lad in Thompson," said the rancher, frowning. "Mr. Gunten can send him to the new school across the valley, if he likes, and give him another chance, if they'll take him there. I shall certainly uphold Miss Meadows in keeping him shut out of Cedar Creek."

Which was good news to the chums.

Frank and Bob were anxious for news on the morrow, and Vere Beauclerc was in the same mood when they joined him on the way to school.

They found Cedar Creek in a rather excited

state. Old man Gunten's threat, uttered in the hearing of half the school, had not been forgotten, and boys and girls were curious to know whether anything would come of it.

The possibility of losing their schoolmistress made them all realise how much they liked Miss Meadows, and there was deep indignation at the mere suggestion that the schoolmistress might be "fired" for having done what the whole school knew it was her plain duty to do.

Lessons passed off as usual that day, but with that day passed the period of grace the angry storekeeper had allowed to Miss Meadows to change her mind. It was certain that Miss Meadows had not changed her mind, and that Kern Gunten would not return to Cedar Creek so long as she was headmistress there.

Whether the Canadian girl was troubled by Mr. Gunten's threat was not to be discovered; her quiet, impassive face expressed nothing of her thoughts. Even when Chunky Todgers, in an excess of devotion, induced a dozen fellows to give a loud cheer after lessons under Miss Meadows' window, there was no sign from the schoolmistress.

Perhaps she was not aware that all Cedar Creek had already taken sides in the expected dispute, and was blissfully ignorant of her pupils' devotion to her.

There was no news that night when Frank and Bob reached home. They found Rancher Lawless with a letter in his hand, and a frown upon his bronzed face.

"There's a special meeting of the school trustees to-morrow, my lads," he said. "It's called by Mr. Gunten."

"Oh!" said Bob. "Popper, you'll stand by Miss Meadows?"

"Rely on me, my boy; and I think Mr. Grimm will be of my opinion, too."

The chums of Cedar Creek could only hope so. But, remembering the bitter anger and malice of the Swiss storekeeper, they could not help feeling uneasy.

F I R E D !

THE post wagon stopped at Cedar Creek School on the following afternoon, and Black Sally took in a letter to Miss Meadows. The schoolmistress was attending to her class in last lesson when the letter was brought to the school-room. Miss Meadows went to her desk and opened the letter there.

The eyes of the whole class were upon her. Immediately the class jumped to the conclusion that the letter might have something to do with old man Gunten and the special meeting of the trustees.

As a matter of fact, they were right.

Miss Meadows' colour deepened as she read the brief but very expressive communication, which ran:

"Miss Ethel Meadows, Cedar Creek School.

"The trustees of the Cedar Creek School District regret that they do not find themselves satisfied with the present management of Cedar Creek School. They therefore request the resignation of Miss E. Meadows from the post of headmistress. Instructions have been sent to Mr. Slimmey, assistant-master, to carry on temporarily until a new headmaster is appointed.

"Signed for the Board,

"G. GUNTEN."

Miss Meadows looked at Black Sally inquiringly.

"Is there a letter also for Mr. Slimmey?" she asked.

"Yes, missy."

"Kindly take it to him."

Mr. Slimmey adjusted his gold-rimmed glasses, and read the letter as soon as it was handed to him. His kind if somewhat weak face flushed deeply as he read, and crushing the letter in his hand, he walked over to Miss Meadows' desk.

"Miss Meadows!" he exclaimed in a tremulous voice. "You are aware——"

"I am informed here that you have been requested to take my place, Mr. Slimmey, until a new Head is appointed," said Miss Meadows quietly.

"Is it possible that you are dismissed?"

"I am asked to resign."

"It is infamous!" said Mr. Slimmey in agitated tones. "I shall, of course, refuse to do as is asked, and shall resign my post here if you leave!"

"I am not leaving yet, Mr. Slimmey. I shall refuse to resign," said Miss Meadows quietly. "I shall not go unless dismissed; and in that case I shall carry an appeal to higher quarters."

"I am glad to hear that, Miss Meadows. Surely they will not dare——"

"I hope not. We shall see."

Miss Meadows and Mr. Slimmey spoke in low tones, and not a word was heard by the hushed school; but the excitement was growing tense.

Miss Meadows took up her pen and indited a brief reply to the letter she had received. Brief as it was, it was very much to the point.

"Sir,—I refuse to resign.

"Yours faithfully,

"E. MEADOWS."

Mr. Slimmey scribbled a longer letter, pointing out to the board that in no circumstances would he consent to supplant Miss Meadows, even for one hour.

The two letters were handed to Black Sally to take out to the post wagon, which was waiting to collect correspondence from the school.

Then lessons were resumed.

That the incident of the letters had something to do with old man Gunten and the meeting of the trustees all Cedar Creek felt assured, but they knew no more than that.

But when Frank Richards and Bob Lawless arrived at the Lawless Ranch that evening they learned more.

Rancher Lawless had been outvoted at the meeting, Mr. Grimm, for reasons of his own, supporting old man Gunten all along the line. The angry storekeeper, therefore, had had his way.

Frank and Bob received the news with dismay and concern.

The refusal of her resignation by Miss Meadows only postponed matters. It was in the power of the board to dismiss her from her post, and there was no doubt that that was what old man Gunten intended. His threat, after all, had not been an idle one.

"And we shall get a new headmaster or mistress instead of Miss Meadows," said Bob gloomily. "You can bet that old man Gunten will have a finger in appointing him, and he will make it a condition that Gunten is taken back into the school."

Frank Richards' eyes gleamed.

"It's too rotten, Bob!" he said hotly. "Old man Gunten has worked this with Mr. Grimm. It's not fair! And—and we're not going to stand it!"

Bob Lawless nodded.

"We're not!" he agreed. "We'll have a jolly good talk to the fellows to-morrow, and old Gunten will find that he's got Cedar Creek to deal with, as well as Miss Meadows."

The chums were in a grim and angry mood when they rode to school the next day. Any compassion they might have felt for Kern Gunten was quite forgotten now. They were backing up Miss Meadows against the Guntens all along the line.

Injun Dick, the tattered vagrant of Thompson, was entering the school gates when Frank Richards & Co. arrived. He had a letter in his hand. The chums saw him speak to Miss Meadows in the porch and hand her the letter.

Miss Meadows opened it as the Redskin stalked away. It was brief.

"Miss Ethel Meadows,

"Madam,—As you decline to tender your resignation, as requested, the Board have no option but to dismiss you from your present post. You will therefore consider your engagement at an end on Saturday, and will inform your assistants that a new headmaster will arrive on Monday to take charge of the school.

"For the Board,
"G. GUNTEN."

Miss Meadows set her lips. It was the dismissal. The schoolmistress glanced out over the playground, crowded with boys and girls, waiting for the morning bell. Then she went back to her room.

The bell rang at the usual time, and Cedar Creek crowded into the school-room. Mr. Slimmey and Mr. Shepherd were looking unusually grave and thoughtful. Miss Meadows had her usual aspect, save that a bright spot of colour was burning in either cheek.

It was a bitter blow to the schoolmistress to be dismissed from her post so curtly and cruelly, and though she intended to appeal to authorities over the heads of the board, she had no choice but to obey the order for the present, and leave Cedar Creek.

In her appeal against the decision of the board she would have the support of one member—Mr. Lawless. She knew that—but the result was a doubtful matter, as she was well aware. She was aware, too, that if she had chosen to submit to the dictation of the storekeeper of Thompson, and taken his rascally son back into the school, the dismissal might have been rescinded yet. That she had no intention of doing. Her duty was clear, and while she remained at Cedar Creek it would be done.

Whatever her thoughts and feelings might be, she had no thought of taking Cedar Creek into her confidence, and it would probably have surprised her to discover that the school had a pretty clear idea of what was happening, and had already decided to "back up" in her support.

Under such suppressed excitement there was naturally some little inattention during lessons that day, and several fellows were called over the coals rather sharply by Miss Meadows—without in the least diminishing their loyal determination to stand by her.

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After school there was a crowded meeting in the corner of the playground, headed by Frank Richards & Co. From the distance Miss Meadows heard the sound of shouting and cheering, but she little guessed what it portended. She was soon to learn, however.

FRANK RICHARDS & CO.'S RESOLVE.

THE next day was Friday, when the lumber school broke up for the week-end, Saturday being a holiday. After last lesson on Friday the school was not immediately dismissed as usual.

Miss Meadows was not to see her pupils any more, and she could not leave them without a word of farewell. She was a little pale as she stood before the class to say the last few words before they parted.

"My boys and girls," said Miss Meadows, her voice faltering a little in spite of herself, "before you go I have something to tell you. I am leaving Cedar Creek to-morrow, and when you come back on Monday I shall not be here."

She paused, and there was a dead silence.

"I am very sorry to be leaving you," went on the schoolmistress, steadying her voice. "I have been very happy here, and have tried to do my duty by the school. I hope you will remember me with affection. That is all. Now we must say good-bye!"

Bob Lawless jumped up.

"Miss Meadows!"

The schoolmistress was turning away. She turned back in surprise. Bob's rugged face was flushed, his eyes sparkling.

"Miss Meadows, we're not standing for it!"

"Lawless!"

"Hear, hear!" came from Frank Richards.

"We won't stand it, ma'am!" shouted Bob Lawless. "We know all about it, Miss Meadows! Old man Gunten has got you fired because you turned out that thief and sharper, Kern Gunten!"

"Lawless!" gasped Miss Meadows.

"We won't let you go, ma'am! We won't have a new headmaster!"

"Never!" roared Frank Richards.

"I guess not!" hooted Eben Hacke. "We'll lynch him!"

"Hurrah!"

Miss Meadows stood dumb, petrified by the sudden outbreak from her class.

Mr. Slimmey and Mr. Shepherd looked on in amazement, but not with disapproval in their looks.

Miss Meadows found her voice at last.

"Lawless! Richards! You must not say—"

"We won't have a new headmaster, Miss Meadows!" said Frank Richards resolutely. "It's not fair play, and we won't stand it!"

"Never!"

"We'll fire him if he comes here!" roared Chunky Todgers.

"My boys," gasped Miss Meadows, "I—I suppose this extraordinary scene shows your attachment to me; but—but I must forbid you to show anything like disrespect to your new master when he arrives to take over the school."

"Never!"

"I am leaving to-morrow. You will find your new master here on Monday. You will treat him with the same respect you have always shown me."

"No fear!"

"We won't have him!"

"We'll keep him out!" roared Chunky Todgers

belligerently. "We'll hold Cedar Creek against him, and the board of trustees, too!"

"Hurrah!"

"Silence!" exclaimed Miss Meadows severely. "How dare you suggest anything of the kind?"

"Oh!"

"You must keep discipline for the good name of the school. Now please dismiss quietly."

Miss Meadows walked out of the school-room. Then the school dismissed, but not quietly. There was a buzz of excited voices as the boys and girls trooped out into the playground.

Bob Lawless jumped on a bench.

"Ladies and gentlemen—" he roared.

"Go it, Bob!"

"Our schoolmistress has been fired by the dirty trick of a sneaking foreign galoot—"

Groans!

"We're not going to have it!"

Cheers!

"New man hops in on Monday," continued Bob. "Well, we're going to be here early on Monday, and when that new man hops in we'll make him hop out pretty quick!"

"Hurrah!"

"And then we'll bar the gate, and hold Cedar Creek against them all till they agree to send Miss Meadows back!" roared Bob.

"A barring-out!" exclaimed Frank Richards. "And no surrender till our schoolmistress comes back. Is it a go?"

The roar of cheering that followed showed that it was a "go."

Still shouting, the Cedar Creek fellows trooped out of the gates.

Frank Richards & Co. mounted their horses and rode homeward with flushed faces, still a good deal excited. They were the leaders, and nearly all Cedar Creek was backing them up. Their determination did not falter.

Cedar Creek was in a state of revolt, and the new headmaster, whoever he was, was not to be allowed even to enter the school.

"If he's a decent man I'm sorry for him," said Frank. "But it can't be helped. We won't have him!"

"Don't worry about that!" growled Bob. "I'll bet you he's some friend of old man Gunten's. And in that case he won't be decent. Some hard-fisted old hunks like old man Gunten himself, I guess."

"Most likely," agreed Vere Beauclerc. "But, in any case, we won't allow any man to take Miss Meadows' place."

"No fear!"

"Not a word at home about this," added Bob sagely. "I don't believe the popper would disapprove, as a matter of fact; but, of course, he couldn't countenance such proceedings. I've warned all the fellows not to talk. If Miss Meadows isn't there on Monday, and if the new Head comes, we go on strike."

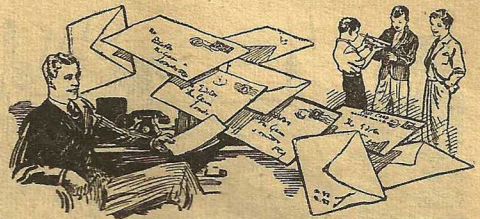
"That's the programme," said Frank Richards. "And we stick it to the finish!"

"You bet!"

And that remained the fixed determination of the chums of Cedar Creek, though little more was said on the subject then.

But on Sunday there was a good deal of riding to and fro, and meetings and discussions; and all Cedar Creek looked forward with keen excitement to Monday morning. That day was destined to be a remarkable one in the history of Cedar Creek.

Next Wednesday: "THE SCHOOL ON STRIKE!"



THE EDITOR'S CHAIR

Let the Editor be your pal. Drop him a line to-day, addressing your letter: The Editor, The GEM, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.

HALLO, Chums! A reference to tom-toms in a recent GEM story has prompted a Blackpool reader to write and ask me about them. Firstly, the word comes from the East-Asia and India. Sometimes it is pronounced tam-tam. The name is given to the drums beaten by savage tribes for the purpose of signalling and sending messages. Strictly speaking, however, tom-tom is the name for the flat metal discs used in the Far East as gongs.

Another query this week concerns the word "char." Jack Whiting, of West Wickham, wants to know how it came to mean a cup of tea. Well, the explanation is quite simple. "Char" is Portuguese for tea. If you were in Lisbon and asked for char, you would be served with a cup of tea. The word, I am told, first got used by our soldiers in India, who picked it up from the Portuguese colonists.

Talking of Portuguese reminds me that Tom Merry & Co.—and particularly Gussy—are having no little difficulty with that language in Brazil. But if that were the only difficulty they are experiencing the chums of St. Jim's would have nothing to worry about. The terrific heat, the dangers of the Brazilian wilds, and the menace of Joao Rabeira make language difficulties trifles light as air. Our favourites are following a

"TRAIL OF PERIL!"

in their plucky effort to find Gussy's brother, and they are determined not to let up till they have solved the mystery of Lord Conway's disappearance. In next Wednesday's great story disaster comes to them on the Rio Preto, due to the trickery of their enemy, and it's a very near thing for Tom Merry & Co.!

Readers cannot fail to be thrilled by this powerful story—don't miss it!

"THE SCHOOL ON STRIKE!"

As you have read this week, Frank Richards & Co., of Cedar Creek, are booked for an exciting time at the backwoods school. They are resolved to back up their schoolmistress, who has been sacked by old man Gunten, and their answer to the school trustee is to go on strike. It is a serious step to defy authority, but it's a case of "neck or nothing" for Frank Richards & Co. What comes of their rebellious attitude remains to be seen.

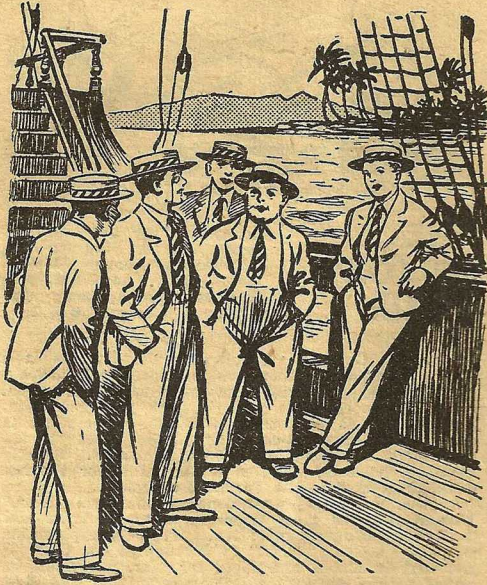
In the next story of the chums of the school ship—called "The Benbow Adventurers!"—Jack Drake & Co. set off in pursuit of the juniors who have taken French leave to go on the treasure trail, and their experiences in dangerous country make thrilling reading.

Before I sign off I should like to remind readers that three grand new numbers of the "Schoolboys' Own Library" are now on sale. "The Kidnapped Hiker!" is a sparkling yarn of Harry Wharton & Co.'s holiday adventures on the road. "The Rookwood Ragers!" is a lively long yarn of Jimmy Silver & Co.'s fun and japing. And "The Cannibal Invaders!" tells of the gripping experiences of the St. Frank's chums who are castaway on a South Seas island.

All the best!

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WITH A CLUE TO HIDDEN TREASURE IN THEIR HANDS, DAUBENY & CO. DON'T
HESITATE TO TAKE—



A TRIP ON THE ORINOCO !

"THERE'S the steamer!" said Tuckey Toodles.

The sun was rising over the Orinoco forests, glimmering on the masts and furled sails of the old Benbow.

Early as the hour was, the deck of the school ship was alive with juniors.

The Benbow was anchored off Barrancas, where the Rio Macareo joins the great Orinoco. Thus far the Benbow had ploughed her way up the great South American river, and here she was to stop.

From the anchorage a select party of the Benbow juniors were to go farther up the Orinoco, on board the steamer, and naturally there was great eagerness to be included in that party.

Most of the fellows wanted to get as far as Bolivar if they could, and observe the cheery Venezuelan on his native heath, so to speak.

The steamer, which came up from Trinidad by way of the Rio Macareo, had stopped at Barrancas, where it enters the main stream of the Orinoco. And the Benbow party were preparing to go on board.

Mr. Packe, the master of the Fourth, had the trippers in charge, and he looked not unlike a worried hen with an army of troublesome chicks.

"Now, please keep together. Toodles, take that ridiculous sombrero off, and put on your school hat. Do you hear me, Toodles?"

"But, sir——"

"Silence, Toodles! Daubeny, what are you doing with that gun-case? Put it down at once!"

"But, sir——"

"Rodney, what do you mean by making that—that disrespectful gesture?"

"I, sir?"

"I distinctly saw you close your left eyelid, Rodney!"

"Did I, sir?"

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FRENCH LEAVE!

By Owen Conquest.

"You did!" hooted Mr. Packe. "You were winking at Drake——"

"I—I—I just closed my eye, sir——"

"Do you wish to be left behind, Rodney?"

"Oh, no, sir!"

"Then you had better be careful—very careful indeed. I am not to be trifled with," said Mr. Packe breathlessly. "I warn you all that I am not to be trifled with. Has each of you his passport?"

"Oh, yes, sir!"

"You must be very careful with them; the Venezuelan authorities are very particular—very particular indeed. I shall send back any boy who cannot find his passport."

"Here's the boat, sir," said Jack Drake.

"You may get into the boat, boys. Drake, how dare you leap into the boat in that reckless manner?" shrieked Mr. Packe.

"I'm all right, sir."

"You may be all right, Drake, but your conduct is all wrong! Another act of recklessness like that, Drake, and I shall send you back. Daubeny, I have already told you you are not to take that gun-case!"

"But, sir——" murmured Daubeny of the Shell.

"Do you hear me? It is enough to have the whole party stopped and turned back! Put that gun-case down at once!"

Vernon Daubeny reluctantly relinquished the gun-case. He had his own reasons for wanting to take it up the Orinoco with him.

But Mr. Packe was too sharp for Daub.

The Benbow party were in the boat at last, safe and sound.

Drake and Rodney and Tuckey Toodles were together, and near them sat Daubeny & Co. of the Shell. Sawyer major and Troop and Rawlings and a dozen other fellows were in the party. Tin Tacks, the black Barbadian gentleman, had slipped into the boat, too, resolved to accompany "Mass' Jack" on the excursion. Mr. Packe did not object to Tin Tacks; the black gentleman was well acquainted with the Orinoco, and useful as a guide.

The boat pulled across to the steamer.

The fellows left on the Benbow lined the side, and waved their hats in farewell to the trippers.

"Thank goodness we're off!" Jack Drake murmured to Rodney. "I really thought Packe was going to have a fit."

"Which would have put off the excursion!" grinned Rodney.

"It's rather rotten having old Packe along with us," grumbled Tuckey Toodles. "How's a fellow to go and have a look for a gold-mine with old Packe worrying around?"

"You ass! If you begin looking for gold-mines you'll have the merry government on your track!" said Rodney.

"I'm jolly well going to. If old Packe——"

"Toodles!"

"Oh dear! Yes, sir?"

"Were you alluding to me, Toodles?"

"Oh, no, sir!"

"I distinctly heard you say 'old Packe,' Toodles!"

"Not at all, sir!" gasped Tuckey. "I—I said 'old Jack,' sir!"

"What?"

"I—I was talking to Drake, sir! I—I often call him 'old Jack,' sir, as—as we're so chummy!"

"Take care, Toodles!" rumbled Mr. Packe.

"Oh, yes, sir! Certainly, sir!"

The boat bumped against the steamer, and the juniors passed up the side. Mr. Packe breathed freely at last, when the party were safe under the awnings on deck, and the boat pulled back to the Benbow. The steamer puffed and glided out into the wide, brown waters of the Orinoco.

JACK DRAKE SAYS "NO"!

DAUBENY of the Shell joined Jack Drake as the latter stood watching the river banks. The steamer was gliding rapidly up the great river, with the Guiana sierras against the sky in the distance. On the banks stony bluffs alternated with stretches of grass-land and thick, primeval forest. More than once, through the whir of the steamer, the howl of some wild animal came from the deep forests to the ears of the Benbow juniors.

There were a good many passengers on the river steamer—planters and miners going to Callao, two or three American travellers, and a number of Venezuelan soldiers. The latter accompanied the steamer in order to protect her from any attacks from wandering revolutionists—of whom there were plenty along the banks of the Orinoco. In Venezuela "militarism" flourishes in all its glory; there is plenty of war, and still more "preparedness" for war—so that the happy natives really have not much time for work, and a country naturally one of the richest in the world is actually one of the poorest.

"Something would be made of this country if it were colonised from England," Dick Rodney remarked to his chum. "Look at the difference between this and Trinidad—which is really a chip off the corner of Venezuela. I suppose that little island would be a more valuable property than all this big country, as matters stand. Look at that ass!"

"That ass" was the officer in command of the military detachment on the steamer.

He was strutting along the deck, under the awning, with an extremely important air, twirling a pair of big black moustaches.

His uniform was gaudy, but sadly in need of needle and cotton. He was evidently very proud of himself, and regarded his noble self as a very fine officer in a very fine army.

His men loafed about the steamer, smoking cigarettes. They had their bayonets fixed; but the bayonets were rusty, and the rifles looked as if they would be nearly as dangerous to the owner as to an enemy!

Drake smiled.

"That ass ought to be at work," growled Rodney. "What is he loafing around for, with a silly sword hanging on him, when there's so much to be done? Hallo, Daub!"

"I want to speak to you fellows," said Daubeny, in a low voice.

"Go ahead!" said Drake.

"I believe we get to Las Tablas about noon."

"I think so."

"Are you game to go ashore there?"

Drake stared.

"I don't think Mr. Packe——" he began.

"Blow Mr. Packe!" said Daubeny. "I mean hook it!"

"What the dickens——"

"Peg Slaney deserted from the Benbow at Barrancas," said Daubeny. "You know he's got a Spanish paper with a clue to a buried treasure on the banks of the Orinoco——"

"So he has bragged when he was squiffy," said Rodney.

"I've got a copy of it."

"Wha-a-at?"

"How the dickens——" began Drake, in amazement.

"Never mind how; we got a copy, and we've translated it. We're going for the treasure," said Daubeny. "It's ours—Slaney stole that paper from my father, as Tin Tacks knows. Anyhow, the treasure's as much ours as Peg Slaney's. I don't see why that one-eyed ruffian should have it, if we can bag it."

"That's so; but——"

"We've got the clue—Egan and Torrence and I—and we're going to hook it at Las Tablas, and take our chance," whispered Daubeny. "I know it's risky, but we're goin' for it. Will you come?"

"Phev!"

Drake and Rodney exchanged a glance.

"You can't say the treasure's his, anyhow," went on Daubeny. "It must have been buried by some of the gangs who are always fightin' one another in this dashed country. The owner—if it ever had an owner—is most likely dead. The successful party always shoots the other party in their dashed revolutions. Why should Slaney bag it?"

"Well, he had the clue——"

"He stole it from my pater."

"How did your pater get hold of it?" asked Rodney.

Daubeny shrugged his shoulders.

"How should I know? He was here years ago, mixed up in a revolution run by some rogue named Ponce Garcia. That's all I know. It may have been the revolutionary funds that were buried; it may be gold from the old Spanish times. Anyhow, my pater had the clue, and Slaney bagged it from him—and I'm goin' to bag the treasure, if I can. Torrence and Egan are with me."

"But—we can't go ashore——"

"We can find a chance."

"There'd be a fearful row afterwards."

"I don't care, if I come back rich."

Daubeny's eyes glittered as he spoke.

Drake looked at him curiously and uneasily. The greed of gold had taken possession of Daubeny.

All his thoughts were running on the buried treasure of the Orinoco, to which he held—or believed that he held—a certain clue.

That the treasure clue was by right his, Daub also believed; but it was pretty clear that he cared little on that point. To the victor the spoils was the law in that wild Western land, and Daub had quite entered into the spirit of it.

"Will you come?" he asked. "I'll take you two into the thing on equal shares. I've not forgotten how you stood by me in Trinidad, Drake. If you come, Tin Tacks will come, and he will be no end useful as a guide, and—and in a fight, if there's trouble. But that's not why

I'm askin' you. I want you to come, and to share in the loot."

Drake hesitated.

The risk of the wild enterprise did not deter him; rather, it had an attraction for his adventurous nature.

But to take French leave from school, to plunge unarmed into the wild forests, was a reckless scheme enough.

And there was no proof that the treasure clue was really the paper Peg Slaney had stolen from Daub's father on the banks of the Orinoco long years ago, and that was a point that troubled Drake more than it troubled Daubeny of the Shell.

Daub watched his changing expression impatiently. He did not look at Dick Rodney; he knew that Rodney was opposed to the scheme. He did not care whether Rodney joined up or not. But he was very anxious to have Drake with him.

Once before he had found that his own comrades had proved a rotten reed to lean upon in the pinch of need; but he knew that Jack Drake was made of very different stuff.

Drake shook his head at last. Perhaps the expression on Dick Rodney's face helped him to make up his mind.

"You won't come?"

"I—I think not," hesitated Drake. "You see—"

"Well?" snapped Daub.

"Dash it all, Daub, the treasure isn't ours, and Slaney had the clue to it—"

"What does that matter in a country like this?" sneered Daubeny.

"Well, it does matter."

"There's one thing you seem to have forgotten, Daub," put in Dick Rodney quietly. "Slaney has the start of you, and knows the way. If there's a treasure to be bagged, he will have bagged it long before you can get on the scene."

"He may not have—who knows? He may have been nipped by an alligator or killed by a jaguar by this time, alone in the forests. Nothing's certain about that. He doesn't know we have the clue; he may not have headed straight for the place. Anyhow, he'll have to get some supplies to start. I wish you'd come, Drake. We're goin', anyhow."

"Better not, Daub. It's a wild-goose chase, and the treasure may be only a dream—"

"I'm goin'!" Daub gritted his teeth. "If you're funky, stay on the steamer, and be hanged to you!"

And Daubeny strode away with an angry brow. Drake flushed crimson.

That taunt from Daubeny struck him hard. He made a step after the Shell fellow, but checked himself.

Rodney was about to speak, but before he could do so there came a sudden and startling interruption.

Crack, crack, crack!

THE ATTACK ON THE STEAMER!

CRACK, crack, crack!

It was a sudden burst of rifle-fire from a belt of forest on the bank of the Orinoco.

Bullets whizzed across the yellow waters and crashed on the side of the river steamer and whistled over the deck.

Drake spun round.

"What the thunder—"

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"Bless my soul!" came from Mr. Packe.

Crack, crack, crack!

There was a terrified howl from Tuckey Toodles, and he dived below and vanished.

The passengers were all on their feet now, staring towards the bank.

Among the trees ashore ragged figures appeared, dodging and darting, loosing off rusty rifles at the steamer.

Crack, crack, crack!

The Venezuelan officer on the steamer, whom Rodney had described as "that ass," was yelling orders in Spanish.

The loafing soldiers put out their cigarettes and grasped their rifles. A scattering fire answered the fusillade from the bank.

From the thickets at the water's edge a boat pushed out, with two dozen ragged, brown-skinned ruffians in it, armed with rifles and machetes. The boat cut across to intercept the steamer.

"Revolutionists!" said Rodney.

"My hat!"

"Bless my soul!"

"Look out, there!" yelled an American commercial traveller. "Lie down! Lie on your faces till we get past the circus!"

That advice was at once taken.

Passengers and crew threw themselves flat on the deck, and the bullets from the shore whistled over them.

The steamer captain stood upright, however, rapping out orders. Probably he had been through little surprises like this before in his career on the rivers of Venezuela.

The engine was at full pressure, and the river steamer darted on at increased speed, swerving farther out on the broad bosom of the Orinoco.

Crack, crack, crack!

Splinters of wood flew on all sides and the canvas awnings were torn in strips.

But in a few minutes the swift steamer was past the danger and the boat was left labouring behind.

The ragged ruffians in the boat yelled to her to stop, and were answered only by the rifles on deck.

Drake, peering back as he lay, saw two or three of them collapse in the boat with fiendish yells.

The others were firing savagely, but the bullets soon dropped behind as the steamer drew out of range.

The skipper lighted a cigar with perfect coolness and put straight his peaked cap, which had been knocked askant by a grazing bullet.

"I guess that was a close call," Drake heard him remark, in a nasal twang.

The juniors scrambled to their feet.

There was a buzz of excitement among them. The Benbow trippers had looked for adventure on the Orinoco, but they had not exactly looked for an adventure of this kind!

"Gorgeous, isn't it?" remarked Sawyer major. "I wonder what would have happened to us if those fellows had known how to shoot!"

"Lucky they didn't!" said Drake, laughing.

"Now look at the ass!" whispered Rodney.

The "ass"—otherwise the Venezuelan officer—was well worth looking at. He was strutting on the deck with the air of a conquering hero, twirling his moustaches till they almost poked into his eyes.

Evidently, he was very proud of himself, and was thinking of the great figure he would cut at Bolivar when he would relate how he had

foiled and defeated a desperate attack on the steamer by revolutionists. As a matter of fact, it was the steamer's skipper who had saved the vessel from capture, by putting on speed in time.

"Like a dashed turkey!" grunted Rodney. "Hasn't the fellow any sense of humour? If he could only see himself—"

"As others see him!" grinned Drake.

"Hallo, he's coming to speak to us. I hope he didn't see me grin," murmured Rodney. "I don't want to hurt even a silly popinjay's feelings."

The juniors looked as serious as they could as the Venezuelan came up. He saluted them gravely and began to speak in Spanish.

Drake shook his head.

"Speak no Spanish, seniorito?" said the officer, with a smile. "But I—I speak ze English—oh, good! You shall see—you have seen—what? Oh, yes! Is it not so?"

For English, this was a little difficult to follow.

But Drake and Rodney nodded assent.

The Venezuelan, though undoubtedly he answered to Rodney's description as a prize ass, seemed a very good-tempered and polite young gentleman. It was also clear that he desired very much to impress the benighted foreigners.

"Me!" he said, tapping his chest. "I! Yes! You shall catch on? Is it not so? Me—Don Josef Cristofal Grandados y Palmillo y Garcia. El Coronel Don Josef Cristofal Grandados y Palmillo y Garcia. Yes!"

"A colonel, by Jove!" said Drake.

They would never have taken the gentleman for a colonel. Colonels in the little island they came from never went about in trousers, that wanted patching.

"You have seen—you shall see—yes!" he went on in English. "Oh, yes! Venezuelan soldier in battle—zat is what you see, you English! Ingleso—yes? Oh, yes! Brave—brave as one lion—yes! Lion he nozzing to Venezuelan soldier in battle—you think? Oh, yes!"

"Yes, rather!" assented Drake.

"Some soldier!" said Rodney.

"In Inghilterra you tell what you see—how Venezuelan soldier he shall face enemy," said the colonel, beaming. "Oh, yes! Si, si! Once it is said zat Inghilterra she shall go war with Venezuela." He laughed. "You see how it shall happen to Inghilterra if she go war—what? Oh, yes! I guess! Wipe off face of ze earth—you think?"

With that the colonel strutted away, under the happy impression that he had deeply impressed the foreigners.

"My only hat!" murmured Rodney. "Jevver see such a silly, conceited ass? Why, half a battalion of the Middlesex Regiment could wipe this country off the map! I've a jolly good mind to tell him so!"

"Let him rip!" said Drake, laughing. "He will wake up if Venezuela ever has a war with a European country. Where's Toodles?"

Tuckey Toodles had vanished below when the firing started, and he had not reappeared. It was terrifically hot below the deck of the steamer and Drake took compassion on the hapless Toodles and went to rouse him out.

A fat leg protruding from under a stack of canvas sacks, betrayed the hidden Toodles.

Drake gripped the fat ankle and pulled. There was a muffled howl from under the sacks.

"Leggo! Keep off! Yaroooh! Help! Mercy! I surrender! I'm a prisoner of war! Yarooop!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Drake.

He pulled, grasping the fat ankle with both

hands, and Tuckey Toodles came into view, crimson and flustered.

"Leggo! Help! Mercy! Spare my life!" howled Toodles.

"Wouldn't take it as a gift," answered Drake.

Toodles blinked at him.

"Oh! It—it—it's you!"

"Little me!" assented Drake. "All serene now, Tuckey—no danger."

"Those beasts—"

"They're ten miles behind now."

"Oh, good!" gasped Tuckey, scrambling up. "I—I say, Drake, I wasn't frightened, you know."

"Wha-a-t?"

"I—I rushed below to—to—to—"

"Hide?"

"Nothing of the sort!" exclaimed Toodles indignantly. "I'm not the fellow to hide in the hour of danger, I hope."

"Not?" howled Drake.

"Certainly not! I rushed below to—to to blow up the steamer if it was captured!"

"My hat!"

"That's the sort of man I am," said Toodles warmly. "As for dying in the explosion, I never gave that a thought. I'm ready to die gloriously, I hope. I was going to blow up the steamer and perish—"

"Under those sacks?"

"I—I—I was looking for the powder magazine—"

"You fat prevaricator!" roared Drake. "Do you think there's a powder magazine on a river steamer?"

"I—I—"

"Hallo, here they come!" exclaimed Drake, looking up the ladder.

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There was a wild yell from Tuckey Toodles and he disappeared under the sacks again.

"They" were a couple of the steamer's hands, but Tuckey jumped to the conclusion that they were the enemy—as, perhaps, Drake intended that he should. He vanished under the sacks, palpitating, and Drake returned to the deck, chuckling.

Tuckey Toodles remained in safety—and terrific warmth—under the sacks, till the steamer stopped at Las Tablas. When he crawled out he looked like a newly-boiled lobster.

DAUBENY'S DESPERATE ENTERPRISE.

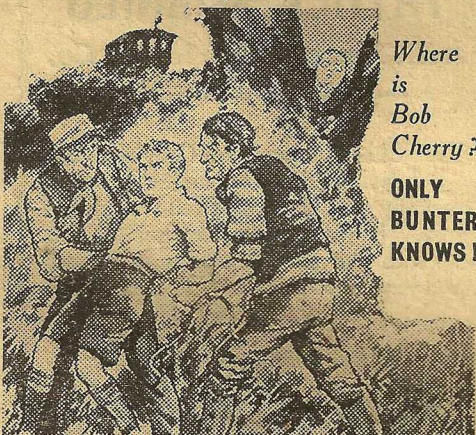
JACK DRAKE eyed Daubeny of the Shell un-easily as the steamer lay off Las Tablas in the shimmering heat of the tropic afternoon. It was at Las Tablas that the Shell fellow intended to make his desperate attempt, and Drake was sorely troubled in his mind. It was something like insanity to desert from the steamer and plunge into the wilds of the South American forests without even a guide. Drake wondered that Egan and Torrence had the nerve for it. But the greed of gold was strong upon the bucks of the Shell, and they were determined. Daubeny caught Drake's eye once and shrugged his shoulders scornfully.

He was going, and he affected, at least, to attribute Jack's reluctance to funk.

But it was not funk which chiefly troubled Drake. He was thinking of the fearful dangers into which Daub was about to plunge with such utter recklessness. Owing to the sharp eyes of Mr. Packe, Daub had not even a gun with him, and to go unarmed into the wild forest was sheer folly.

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Round the steamer a number of Indian canoes were paddling, with fruit for sale to the passengers. Daubeny had entered into talk with one Indian, who spoke a little English, and Drake could guess easily enough that he was bargaining for a passage to the shore.

There was no time to lose, for the juniors did not know how long the steamer was to stay at Las Tablas.

Daubeny & Co. were determined not to go on with the steamer.

Drake approached Daubeny at last.

"Look here, Daub," he began.

"Are you comin'?" asked Daubeny.

"No. But——"

"Then don't worry."

"It's madness!" said Drake. "That Indian is going to take you to the bank, I suppose——"

"Yes!"

"He looks a frightful ruffian," said Drake, with a glance at the Carib in the boat—a muscular, dark-skinned man, clad in a loincloth made of a wild animal's skin, and nothing else. There was a big, unsheathed knife attached to the Indian's girdle.

"Oh, rot! He's going to take me across the river to the Rio Catalina; that's where we start."

"But——"

"No time to waste talking!" snapped Daubeny.

"You're not even armed!"

"I've got a revolver and some cartridges. One of the soldiers sold it to me. Anyhow, I'm goin'."

"Blessed if I don't think I ought to warn Mr. Packe!" muttered Drake.

Daubeny's eyes gleamed.

"You won't sneak, after I trusted you?" he muttered. "You—you couldn't! By gad, if you do——"

He clenched his teeth.

"Don't be a fool, Daub! Your threats won't make any difference to me, and you know it!" growled Drake. "I'm not goin' to give you away—though I feel that I ought to."

"That's enough."

Daubeny and Egan and Torrence dropped into the Indian's canoe, as if to examine the fruit he had for sale.

Only Drake took any special note of their movements.

They sat in the canoe for a time, and then slyly slid under a sheet of canvas that lay there, and which concealed them from view.

Evidently Daub had taken the Indian into his confidence, and the copper-skinned man was lending his aid in the attempt to elude the vigilance of the Form-master.

Drake watched with deep uneasiness.

The Indian pushed off from the steamer and paddled the canoe out into the broad waters of the Orinoco.

The canvas hid Daubeny & Co. from sight, and no one on the steamer, save Drake, dreamed that they had departed.

Jack turned round, to find Dick Rodney at his side.

"They've cut!" he whispered.

"In that canoe?" asked Rodney, with a sombre look.

"Yes."

"The fools—the utter fools!"

"I don't like the look of that boatman," muttered Drake. "Daub's thinking only of getting to the treasure, but—but that ruffian looks

(Continued on page 36.)



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(Continued overleaf.)

D. D. Libby, 6, Hatherton Road, Shanklin, Isle of Wight; stamps; British Empire, Cayman Isles, Malaya, and British West Indies.

Miss M. North, 109, Victoria Avenue East, Higher Blackley, Manchester, 9; girl correspondents, age 17-20; anything; China and New Zealand.

Miss P. Ramsden, 36, Roseacre, South Shore, Blackpool; girl correspondents.

Miss B. Cook, 11, Wadley Road, Congella, Durban, South Africa; girl correspondents, age 13-14; anything except stamps; Hawaii, America, Canada, British Isles, and Malay States; all letters answered.

Miss J. Bolton, 7, Peploe Road, London, N.W.6; girl correspondent, age 17-20; all sports, books, and stamps; British Isles.

C. Doughty, 87, Birehdale Road, Erdington, Birmingham; age 13-16; films, sports, and other topics; United States and Canada.

J. Gray, 13, Clervaux Terrace, Jarrow, Co. Durham; stamps and science; anywhere; all letters answered.

Miss D. James, 284, Kings Road, Chelsea, London, S.W.3; girl correspondents, age 14; general topics; Egypt.

P. Mitchell, 7, Eastbourne Avenue, Ward End, Birmingham, 8; age 13-15; sports and movies; United States and Canada.

P. Hayes, 31, Seven Sisters Road, Holloway, London, N.7; stamps; anywhere.

S. Michael, St. Joseph's School, Kuching, Sarawak; age 10-20; stamps, physical culture, films, snaps; Europe and America.

B. Dury, 830, Greentown, Ipoh, Perak, Federated Malay States; age 14-16; stamps and film stars' photos; Europe, Rhodesia, New Zealand, and Canada.

C. Keat, 5, Parr Village, Taiping, Perak, Federated Malay States; age 13-18; stamps, film stars' pictures, and general topics; everywhere except Malaya; all letters answered.

A. Cleverley, Lower Belvedere, Devizes, Wilts; any age; stamps and wild life; Canada, U.S.A., Palestine, West Indies, Pacific Isles, and Australia; all letters answered.

L. Wachtel, Welteurenden Hotel, Church Road, Sea Point, Capetown, South Africa; age 13-15; sports; anywhere in British Empire except South Africa.

FRENCH LEAVE!

(Continued from page 34)

capable of sticking them, and pitching them into the Orinoco for what they've got about them. They've got enough on them to make a savage Carib rich for life, I should think."

"Hasn't Daub thought—"

"He's thinking of nothing but that confounded treasure."

Rodney knitted his brows.

"Drake, those silly asses are going into danger!" he muttered. "We—we can't let them go! We ought to tell Packe—"

"We can't!" said Drake moodily.

"I suppose we can't; but—but— Look here, Drake—"

Drake read the thoughts in his chum's mind.

"Let's cut off, too," he said. "We may be able to make the silly asses come back, especially if that savage turns on them, as I believe he will when they're out of sight of Las Tablas. We—we can't let them go into danger, and I'm certain that ruffian means mischief. Are you game, Rodney?"

"Yes," said Rodney, with a deep breath.

"Then I'll speak to Tin Tacks."

Drake hurried along to where the Barbadian coloured gentleman was stretched under an awning, lazily killing mosquitoes. Tin Tacks jumped up at once and touched his hat. Drake

explained hurriedly, and Tin Tacks' shining black face grew very serious as he listened.

But the simple black fellow had no idea of opposing any wish of "Mass' Jack's." He was there to obey Mass' Jack's orders, and he did not think of risking any objection.

"You leave it to me, Mass' Jack," he said. "I get a canoe from Injun—easy. Two dollar do dat. Me paddle—quicker dan Injun, I guess. You and Mass' Rodney be ready to drop in—all right, you bet!"

"You can handle a canoe, Tin Tacks?"

Tin Tacks grinned.

"You bet, Mass' Jack!"

"I'd like you to come, old fellow," said Drake. "But—but it may be dangerous—"

"Ole Tin Tacks no let Mass' Jack go into danger by hisself," answered the black man. "Ole Tin Tacks look after Mass' Jack. You go 'lone, me tell Mass' Packe."

"All serene, Tin Tacks. I want you, of course! It's a go, then!"

Tin Tacks hurried away to make his preparations and Drake rejoined Rodney.

"It's settled," he said briefly.

They looked after Daubeny's canoe. It was little more than a spot now on the wide, sunlit waters of the Orinoco.

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