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The RANGER 2^D

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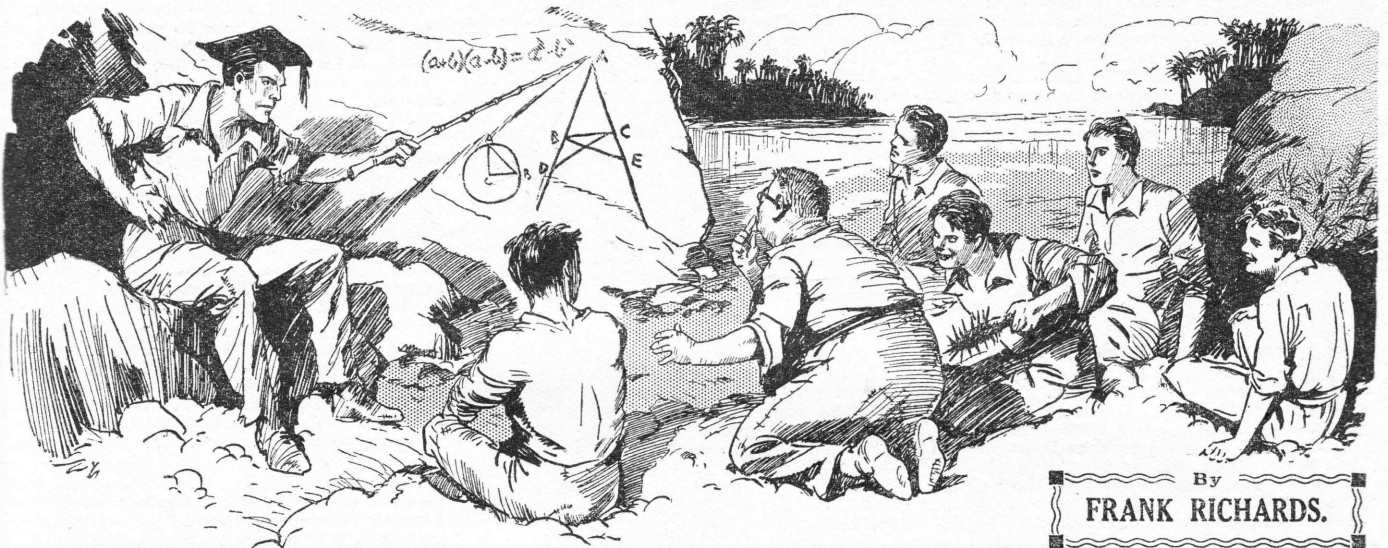
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THRILL-PACKED ADVENTURES ON CASTAWAY ISLAND FOR JIM DAINTY & CO.—AND FOR YOU!

THE CHEERIO CASTAWAYS!



By
FRANK RICHARDS.

Fritz in a Fix!



"RITZ!" roared Jim Dainty.

"Mein gootness!" groaned Fritz Splitz, under his breath.

He dared not answer. It was almost dark on Castaway Island. The sun dipped behind the island hill; the brief tropical twilight was about to fade into night.

Standing on a rock on the southern shore of the lonely island, Jim Dainty was shouting at the top of his voice. From other directions other voices were calling.

Dainty's shout came clearly to the fat ears of Fritz von Splitz, huddled in the boat among the reefs; he heard, but he dared not heed. Crouching in the boat beside him was Ezra Sarson with a knife in his bony hand. One glimmer of the steel was enough for Fritz! He did not need the whispered threat of the Frisco ruffian:

"Jest one yaup and I guess you'll never yaup again!"

Fritz shuddered and was silent. The boat, with the sail dropped and the mast lowered, lay out of sight under the lee of a great rock. Jim Dainty was not thirty yards away; but he saw no sign of it. He shouted again and again, and then his trampling footsteps were heard coming nearer.

Ezra Sarson's sunken eyes glittered, his gash of a mouth set in a hard, savage line. His grip on the knife tightened. But Dainty stopped again and shouted:

"Fritz! You Boche bloater, are you anywhere about?"

There was a trampling on the rocks again, and Ginger Rawlinson joined Jim. Fritz heard the voice of the red-headed junior of Grimslade.

"My giddy goloshes! He's vanished! No good looking for him here—he wouldn't have come this way!"

"We've looked jolly nearly everywhere else." "He's hiding," said Ginger. "Sammy's got a whopping ready for him when he comes back. Fritz isn't in a hurry to turn up."

"He's too big a funk to stay out of camp after dark if he could help it. He's lost!" said Jim Dainty. "Sammy Sparshott's told us to find him, and we've got to do it if we can."

"The fat, frowsy fathead!" growled Ginger. "All this trouble because he pretended he saw a sail, just to get out of class with Sammy! Sammy will take the skin off him when he turns up, and serve him jolly well right! Let's get back—he's not here anyhow."

Trampling footsteps again! The two juniors

were going up the shore, little dreaming that they had been within ear-shot of the missing German junior.

Fritz suppressed a groan of disappointment. Ezra drew a deep breath of relief. His return to the lonely island was a secret from the castaways, so far, and he desired to keep it a secret—till he could deal with them by treachery. The schoolboys he did not fear, but his fear of Dr. Samuel Sparshott was deep and deadly. Not till Sammy had fallen under a shot from ambush did the ruffian dare to make his presence known.

"Gone!" muttered Ezra. "They won't find you in a hurry, you fat gink. Say, what did that young geck mean about you seeing a sail?"

"I see tat sail tis morning," groaned Fritz. "But te odders see him not, and tey tink it vas vun lie, because I dodge te class. So I gum here to find out vat pecome of tat sail, so tat I tell Sammy, and he vhop me not!"

Sarson chuckled hoarsely.

THE DISAPPEARING SCHOOL-BOYS!

"I guess you never reckoned it was my sail!" he said. "They don't know I've come back. They won't know till I've got that gink Sparshott where I want him, either. Say!" He bent over Fritz, his eyes gleaming. "Have they been looking for the treasure—have they found it?"

"Nein!" gasped Fritz. He realised that it was for the lost treasure of Castaway Island that the ruffian had come.

"I reckon it's in the cavern up the ravine," muttered Ezra. "That's where we found the skeletons—that's where the Black Marquis hid it. We'd have had that treasure but for the hurricane. The schooner went down, and Captain Luz is ashore at Martinique now, a ruined man—but I guess I knew how to get hold of a boat, and I guess I knew how to run back to this island—and if Luz tries it on again I calculate he's going to be too late!"

The Frisco ruffian chuckled again. Captain Luz, rascal as he was, had saved him from the solitary island; but there was little gratitude in Ezra's composition. He was stealing a march on the other treasure-seekers, returning alone to the treasure island in a stolen boat.

"If it wasn't for that gink Sparshott—" he muttered. His sunken eyes glittered at Fritz. "You flabby geck, do you savvy why I don't drop you into the water this minute? I got to deal with Sparshott first. He may get the upper

hand of me—he's the man to do it, dog-gone him. And if he does he's the man to string me up on the first tree if I've hurt any of his gol-darned schoolboys—I reckon I'm wise to that!"

He turned away from the fat German, with a muttered imprecation. Fritz trembled in every podgy limb. His fat life hung on a thread, and he realised it very clearly.

Sarson rose to his feet, his head coming over the level of the rock under which the boat was moored. He stared across rocks and reefs and tangled seaweed up the shore. Jim Dainty and Ginger Rawlinson had disappeared, and all was deserted and silent. Far away on the east side of the island by the bay, there was a distant ruddy glare—the camp-fire lighted by the castaways near their hut. Ezra watched it, with scowling brows, while Fritz huddled, trembling, in the boat.

The ruffian threw himself down at last. He opened a can of beef and a tin of biscuit, and began to eat. Fritz watched him in the deep gloom with hungry eyes. Fritz had had no supper and he was famished. But he did not dare to speak. When his meal was over Sarson threw himself on his blankets and lighted a pipe, taking no further notice of the fat German. He was waiting—for what? Fritz did not know—and he could only wait—watching the ruffian with bulging, terrified eyes.

It was a late hour when Sarson stirred at last. The midnight stars were glittering in a sky of deepest blue. In the star-shine, Fritz saw him examine a revolver, and thrust it back into his belt. Then he took a cord and knotted one end to Fritz's fat wrists.

"Get a move on, you fat geck!" he muttered. "And chew on this—if you make a sound where we're going, you'll never make another."

"Ach! I make no sound mit meinsel pefore!" groaned Fritz as the ruffian picked up a heavy dunnage bag and slung it over his shoulder.

Sarson stepped from the boat, holding the cord. Fatty Fritz followed him. Hardly glancing at the terrified German, Sarson tramped away up the rocky shore, Fritz Splitz following him.

Sea and reefs were left behind, and Sarson plunged into the jungle. In the darkness, Fatty Fritz had no idea whither he was being led; all was dark and trackless to him. But Sarson, in his weeks on the island, had learned his way about, and he kept on steadily, without a pause.

Fritz tottered and panted behind him, his fat limbs aching with fatigue, but not daring to utter a word. They came out of the jungle at last, on the bank of the stream that flowed down from the island hill. Through the palm trees, the ruddy glare of the camp-fire danced; it was

still burning, as a beacon to the lost Fritz. Sarson stared towards it for some moments and then turned to the stream.

He tramped up the stream to the cascade and clambered up the rocks through the falling water, Fritz panting and clambering after him, drenched to the skin. He guessed now where the ruffian was making for—the cavern in the ravine, where the skeletons had been discovered, and where there was little doubt that the treasure of King Christophe of Hayti had been hidden. Ezra had waited for midnight in order to make the trip unseen by the castaways.

By the rock-shelf beside the tumbling stream they reached the dark mouth of the cavern. Ezra plunged into it, dragging the fat German after him. The starlight faded behind as they tramped under the arched rock. Ezra halted at last and flung down his bag of dunnage, scratched a match, and lighted a lantern.

Fritz Splitz, sinking with fatigue and terror, blinked at him. Ezra knotted the loose end of the rope to a high point of rock. Then, lantern in hand, he went farther up the cavern, leaving Fritz Splitz a prisoner in the darkness.

Trapped!

DR. SAMUEL SPARSHOTT came out of the castaways' hut at dawn, with a knitted and troubled brow. He looked along the beach, glistening white in the rising sun; at the palm grove towards the stream; at the shadowy green jungle and the wooded slopes of the island mountain.

Nowhere was there a sign of the missing German junior.

The camp-fire was still smouldering; it had

burned all night as a guide to Fritz, if he was seeking his way back to camp. He had not come, and the Head of Grimsdale was deeply perturbed and anxious. A whopping awaited Fritz when he showed up, and for that reason Sammy was not surprised at his failure to return the day before. But at sunset he had expected to see him—and now it was sunrise, and he had not come!

What had happened to Fritz? Angry as he was, Dr. Sparshott was, by this time, more anxious than angry.

Of the presence of his old enemy on the island he knew and suspected nothing. He could only believe that Fritz had lost himself, and as the camp-fire had failed to guide him back, it looked as if he had wandered far afield. Dr. Sparshott dreaded that he might have wandered into the swamp on the northern side of Castaway Island, from which it was very unlikely that he would find his way again unaided.

Jim Dainty & Co. turned out. They took their usual dip in the bay before breakfast, but there was not the usual cheery larking this morning. All of them were anxious about Fritz. They sat down to breakfast on the beach before the hut, almost in silence. The meal was brief. Dr. Sparshott was very soon on his feet.

"Splitz must be found!" barked Sammy. "There will be no lesson this morning; all of you will search for him. I shall take the direction of the swamp, you will take other directions. Return to this spot at midday."

"Yes, sir!" answered the juniors.

Dr. Sparshott started off and disappeared towards the northern swamp. The five juniors discussed their plans for a few minutes, and then took various directions.

Jim Dainty tramped up the shallow stream to the waterfall, and clambered up the rocks, drenched to the skin, which mattered little in the hot sun-glare of the tropic island. He clambered out of the water above the cascade and trod along the rock shelf towards the cavern. The steep ravine was almost like an oven in the blaze of the sun.

But the cavern, when Jim reached it and looked into its dark mouth, was gloomy and shadowy and chill. Outside there was no sign of Fritz, but Jim half-suspected that the fat German, in his dread of Sammy's whopping, was in hiding. Standing at the dark opening in the rock, he shouted.

His voice rang and echoed through the cavern. Booming echoes answered him, but otherwise there was no response.

"Fritz!" roared Jim.

"Fritz!" boomed back in a thousand echoes.

Dainty tramped up the cave, peering about him in the shadows. From the silence there came a sound, and he started and listened. He was certain that it was the sound of a movement, farther on up the cave. He knitted his brow. He had little doubt now that the elusive Fritz was there, dodging back as he advanced, in dread of being taken back to Sammy and Sammy's whopping!

"Fritz!" yelled Jim. "You blithering Boche, show up! I'll jolly well kick you all the way back to camp when I get you! Do you hear, you podgy oyster?"

Only the echoing of his voice answered. He tramped on angrily. The dimness deepened as he went, till he could barely see his way. Suddenly he halted, with a stare of blank amazement.

"Fritz!" he gasped.

Fritz von Splitz was before his eyes! The fat German, his face white with fear, sat on a boulder, staring straight at him. He did not speak—he only stared straight at Dainty, as if paralysed by some unknown dread.

"Fritz!" repeated Jim, hurrying on towards the fat German. "Why—what the thump—!" In utter amazement Jim discovered that Fritz's fat, white wrists were tied together with the end of a rope, of which the other end was fastened high up the rocky wall. "Fritz—what—!"

There was a sudden footstep behind the Grimsdale junior. He spun round—and then his eyes almost started from his head at the sight of a bony, tanned, evil face, with sunken eyes and a gash of a mouth—a face that he had never expected to see again, but which he had never forgotten.

"Sarson!" panted Jim.

With a savage grin the ruffian rushed at him. Staring spellbound with amazement at the sight of him, Jim did not stir till the Frisco tough's outstretched fingers were touching him. Then, as if electrified by the touch, he bounded backwards.

Sarson was between him and the cave-mouth. The other outlet to the cave was blocked. He was trapped, and it flashed into his almost dizzy brain that Ezra, hearing his shouting, had lain in hiding and cut him off from escape, and Splitz, who could have warned him of his peril, had been silent from terror.

But there was no terror in Jim Dainty's heart. He was in desperate danger and he knew it, but his courage rose to meet it. Barely eluding the clutch of the ruffian, he bounded back and back, Sarson following him up.

"Burn you!" snarled Sarson, between his teeth, and his bony hand clutched at the revolver in his belt. But he did not draw it. The shot would have betrayed him, and he dared not kill! For his life he dared not kill one of the schoolboys while Dr. Sparshott was alive and free. Relinquishing the butt of his revolver, he leaped after Jim again like a wild beast, clutching with clawing hands.

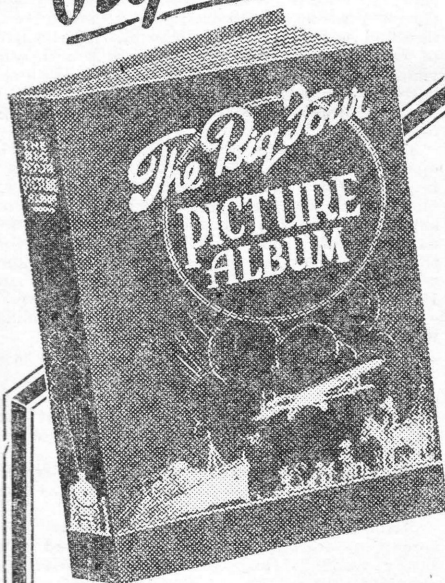
"Help!" roared Jim Dainty, in the faint hope that there might be ears to hear. "Help! Help!"

Again and again he dodged the savage rushes of the ruffian. But the fierce grasp closed on him at last, and he was dragged over.

For a long, long minute Jim Dainty fought, but it was in vain. He was dragged to the rugged floor and a sinewy knee planted on him, pinning him down. Ezra groped for his wrists, grasped them, and dragged them together. Still resisting with his last ounce of strength, Jim's hands were bound, and he lay, panting and helpless, at the feet of the ruffian.

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In Darkness and Despair!

DR. SPARSHOTT came tramping back to camp, muddy and miry from the swamp. It was past midday and four juniors were already there. The headmaster of Grimslade glanced sharply at Ginger & Co. and Dick Dawson.

"You have not found him?"

"No, sir!"

"Where is Dainty?"

"He went up to the cave in the ravine to look for Splitz, sir," answered Dawson. "He hasn't come back yet."

The castaways sat down to a silent meal. The mystery of the disappearance of Fritz Splitz was deepening and growing alarming. There was now a lurking fear in their hearts that the fat German might have tumbled into some crevice on the hill, or from a cliff, and that he did not appear because he could not!

The meal over, Dr. Sparshott directed the juniors to separate, each taking a section for searching—an order that he certainly would not have given had he dreamed that an enemy had landed on the island. But of that enemy, nothing had been seen or heard; and the castaways had no suspicion of his presence.

While the anxious headmaster and Ginger & Co. went various ways, Dick Dawson went up the ravine to look for Jim Dainty as well as Fritz. It was very unusual for Jim to disregard the instructions of the Head, and Dawson hoped that it meant that he had found some clue to the missing Fritz.

Dawson clambered up the rocks of the waterfall, and followed the ravine to the cave. He was thoroughly wet, and left a watery trail on the sun-baked rocks as he tramped on to the cavern. At the mouth of the cavern he stopped, looking into the gloomy depths. It was—or seemed—impossible for Jim to have lingered there so long—he must have gone on. But as he stared in at the gloomy opening, Dawson gave a start. From the deep darkness in the depths of the cavern there came the wink of a light.

He rubbed his eyes and stared again.

He was not mistaken; there was a light moving in the cavern. Evidently, it was a lantern-light—it was continuous, and could not have been the striking of matches. So far as Dawson knew, Jim had taken no lantern with him; but he could scarcely doubt that it was Jim Dainty there, searching the depths of the cave for Fritz von Splitz.

"The silly ass!" muttered Dawson. "It's hours since he came here—if Fritz was here he would have found him long ago. Fritz would never have the nerve to go so far from the daylight, either."

He tramped into the cavern, making for the distant light. It was moving slowly, as if the one who held it was in search of something. Dawson was more and more puzzled as he tramped on. That it was Ezra Sarson, searching for a trace of the treasure of King Christophe, in those shadowy depths, naturally never crossed his mind.

"Jim!" he shouted.

The light was suddenly still.

"Jim!" yelled Dawson.

No answer came back, save the echo of his voice. More and more amazed, the Grimslade junior tramped on.

He could make out the lantern clearly now, and saw that it stood on the cavern floor. No one was to be seen near it. So far as he could make out, Jim Dainty must have set it down and stepped away out of the radius of its light into the surrounding darkness—why, Dick could not even begin to imagine.

With a vague feeling of alarm in his breast for which he could hardly account, Dawson tramped on till he reached the lantern. Standing in its light, he stared round him into the black shadows of the mountain cave.

"Jim!" he shouted.

The lantern stood by one of the rugged boulders with which the floor of the cavern was strewn in places. Dawson stared round him. Suddenly, from behind, a grip was laid on him, and he gave a gasping cry.

"Jim! You dummy——" It was his thought that Dainty had crept out behind him to startle him with that sudden grip. But the next moment the words died on his lips. That iron grasp was not a boy's; it was a man—a powerful man—who had so suddenly seized him. With a rush of terror at his heart, Dawson strove to turn, but he was helpless in that gorilla-like grasp.

"Help!" he shrieked, wildly struggling.



"Jim!" shouted Dawson, as he stared round the cavern, but there was no reply from his chum. Then suddenly, from behind, a vice-like grip was laid on him, and Dawson gave a gasping cry.

"Can it!" came a hissing voice in his ear. "Can it, you young gink, afore I twist your neck like a chicken's."

Dawson's brain seemed to spin. He knew the savage, husky voice of Ezra Sarson. He made a wild, terrible effort to tear himself loose, but it was unavailing.

With cruel force, the ruffian twisted the school-boy's hands together, and bound his wrists. Then, taking Dawson's arm with one hand, and picking up the lantern with the other, Ezra tramped up the cavern.

"You villain!" groaned Dawson. "What have you done with Jim?"

"I guess you'll soon see!" chuckled the ruffian.

He stopped where a great rock stood close by the wall of the cavern. Setting down the lantern, and releasing Dawson for the moment, he grasped the rock with both hands and pushed it aside. In the lantern-light, an opening in the cavern wall was revealed—a split in the rock not more than two feet in width and hardly so high. Ezra pointed to it, and as Dawson did not immediately understand, he grasped the school-boy and thrust him head first into the tunnel.

"Crawl, you gink, crawl!" he snarled. "I guess I found that outfit when hunting for the treasure, and you'll be safe here till I get Sam Sparshott! And I'll get him, you can bank on that. Crawl, you geek."

It was difficult enough for Dick to crawl along the rock tunnel, with his hands tied. But a savage kick from the ruffian's foot drove him on, and he plunged forward into the darkness. There was a heavy thud as the rock rolled into place behind him, shutting him in.

"Oh, heavens!" panted the junior.

He lay blinded by the darkness, panting. For the moment, it seemed to him that the merciless ruffian had imprisoned him in that narrow den to perish. He drove at the rock with his feet, but it was immovable—its weight had taxed all the ruffian's strength and Dawson could not make it stir.

He crawled on, feeling the tunnel widen as he went. He came suddenly into contact with something warm and soft, and there was a startled gasp.

"Ach! Vat vas tat? Mein gootness!"

"Fritz!" panted Dawson.

"Is that Dawson?" came the voice of Jim Dainty, from the blackness. "Dick, old man, has he got you, too?"

"Jim! You're here! Can you get me loose?"

"My hands are tied." Jim Dainty was hardly two yards from his chum, but neither could see the other—the darkness was intense. "We're helpless—and that fiend in the shape of a man is going to keep us here till he gets a chance of handling Sammy."

"Ve vas lost!" moaned Fritz Splitz. "Neffter, neffter shall I see mein pelofed Chermany again; And I vas hungry—ach! I vas so hungry as neffer vas before!"

And a deep, deep groan from Fritz Splitz followed.

Dainty and Dawson did not groan. They had no use for groaning. But their hearts were heavy with despair.

"He'll never get Sammy!" said Dawson, at last. "Sammy's too good a man for that villain. He'll never get Sammy!"

And that was the only comfort the imprisoned juniors had, as the weary hours wore away in the blackness of their prison.

When the sun was setting over Castaway Island, Ginger & Co. came back, tired from a long hunt, and found Dr. Sparshott already at the hut. But Dainty and Dawson had not come back; and with the fall of night, Sammy Sparshott's face took on a sombre shade of anxiety.

Ginger & Co., tired and weary, slept in the hut—but Sammy did not sleep. Through the long watches of the night, he waited for the missing juniors to return—but they did not return. It was with a grim brow and a heavy heart that the headmaster of Grimslade saw another sun rise over the wide Atlantic.

Three of the castaways were missing now—how, and why? Dr. Sparshott did not know—but he was going to know!

(One by one the schoolboy castaways are disappearing—and in next week's thrilling story you will read how the remaining three boys also vanish, thanks to the rascally Ezra Sarson. Don't miss this grand yarn—or the next set of Free Gifts.)