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"AGES OF THE LEGION" AND SIX OTHER EXTRA SPECIAL THRILL YARNS!

The RANGER 2^D

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*Skull
of the
Skies!*
**THRILL-PACKED
PIRATE STORY**
Inside



THE CHEERIO CASTAWAYS

By FRANK RICHARDS.

Up to Sammy!



GINGER!"

Ginger Rawlinson started violently.

The last thing he expected at that moment was to hear the voice of Jim Dainty.

It was a strange scene in the rocky ravine on Castaway Island. Five Grimslade fellows sat on the

rugged rocks by the stream, their hands bound behind them, a knotted rope connecting the five in a string. Dr. Samuel Sparshott, also bound, lay at a little distance from the schoolboy castaways.

Slim Stack, the American gangster, stood with his back to his prisoners, staring into the gloomy opening of the cavern, chewing an unlighted cheroot. His knitted brows showed that he was thinking hard. Slim had a problem to think out, for he knew now that the treasure he sought on Castaway Island lay at the bottom of the deep pool in the cavern, guarded by the giant octopus.

Cool as ice, with nerves of iron, reckless of his own life as of the lives of others, still Slim knew that he could not, and dared not, tackle the sea-devil in its den. His confederate, Luz, the half-breed, had been dragged down in the monster's tentacles, and the thought of sharing his fate made even the iron-nerved gangster shudder.

He was master of Castaway Island; but the treasure was out of his reach.

Ginger & Co. sat in dismal silence on the rocks, waiting. Of all the Grimslade castaways, only Jim Dainty was free; and he had had to flee from the spattering bullets of the gangster's revolver.

How this was going to end they could not guess; but Ginger and Bacon and Bean and Dick Dawson kept a stiff upper lip and were silent. Only Fritz Splitz expressed his feelings in an occasional grunt or groan. But Ginger's heart beat fast as he heard the whispering voice behind the rock on which he sat.

He was about to turn his head, but he remembered himself in time. He sat still, his heart thumping, and whispered back:

"That you, Dainty?"

"Yes! Keep quiet!"

Ginger was at the end of the string of prisoners, a few feet from the others. So faint was Dainty's whisper that it did not reach other ears. Ginger's whispered reply, however, drew their eyes upon the red-headed junior of Grimslade.

"Sit tight, you men!" breathed Ginger. "Don't get that villain looking round! Not a sound."

And the Grimsladers, realizing that something was on, sat tight and made no sound. There was a faint splashing in the water of the stream below the rocks. Jim Dainty was there, with the water to his waist, crouching out of sight below the rocky bank. Ginger was the only fellow he could reach without

revealing himself, and he had whispered to warn him of what was coming.

"My giddy goshes!" murmured Ginger Rawlinson, as he felt a knife sawing at the knotted rope on his wrists behind him.

His heart beat almost to suffocation. The knife was sharp and held in a steady hand. Hardly a minute was needed to free him. But if the gangster looked round—if he came across from the cave—

But Slim Stack did not stir. He knew that his prisoners could not free themselves, and he had no suspicion that Jim Dainty had crept up the stream, neck-deep in water, out of sight. His thoughts were concentrated on the treasure of King Christophe of Hayti, sunk a hundred years ago in the sea-pool in the cavern, and the problem of raising it.

Ginger felt a thrill as the cut cords dropped from his wrists and he knew that he was free. Into one of his hands he felt the handle of the knife thrust by the junior crouching behind the rock, and his fingers closed on it. His eyes met those of Dick Dawson, who was next on the string.

Holding his hands behind him, as if they were still bound, he shifted his position to get nearer to Dawson. If Slim Stack noted the

THE TREASURE THAT WAS GUARDED BY AN OCTOPUS!

movement, there was nothing in it to make him suspicious. He stood still, staring into the cavern, buried in thought.

Ginger pressed close beside the next fellow so that he was able to extend an arm behind him unseen—the knife in his hand. Slowly, carefully, with great caution he felt for the knotted cord on Dawson's wrists, and sawed at it with the knife.

Streaky Bacon and Sandy Bean sat tight, their hearts throbbing. Even Fritz Splitz forgot to grunt and groan. Sammy Sparshott, from where he lay at a little distance, could not see what was happening.

If only the gangster remained unobservant for a few minutes more the whole bunch would be free. Then there would be a chance of either tackling Slim by surprise, before he could use his revolver, or of getting Sammy loose to tackle him.

Suddenly the gangster moved. He turned from the cavern-mouth, and instantly the Grimsladers sat motionless. The cold, hard eyes glanced over them, but it was only a cursory glance. Slim Stack stepped towards Dr. Sparshott and stood looking down at him.

Jim Dainty crouched low under the rocky bank of the stream. He was hardly ten feet from the gangster, little as Slim suspected that he was there.

Dr. Sparshott, helpless in his bonds, looked up quietly and steadily into the hard, tanned face looking down on him. He knew that the man who had come to Castaway Island in the

plane had arrived at some decision now, and wondered what it was.

"I guess I got it, schoolmaster," said Slim in his cold, hard voice. "There ain't nary a doubt that the treasure lies in that pesky pool—Luz dived and touched the sunken chests and called up to me afore the big squid got him. I reckon the gold's there—and according to the story there's a cool five million dollars of it. I ain't leaving this here island without it."

"You are welcome to lift it and carry it off in your plane so far as we are concerned," answered Dr. Sparshott quietly. "I have told you that we should not attempt to interfere, and you would be perfectly safe in setting us free. I would give you my word to stand clear and leave you to carry on."

"I guess I ain't a trusting sort of guy," said Slim, with a grin. "With chests of gold bars lyin' around loose I wouldn't bank on you keeping your word, schoolmaster. But I got to let you loose to raise that dust. I guess I ain't no swimmer, or I'd do the job myself—though sure the big squid got Luz, who was as good a swimmer as any guy in the West Indian seas. But you're a better man than Luz ever was, schoolmaster."

"I hope so!" said Dr. Sparshott. "You're going down the rope after the gold," said Slim.

Dr. Sparshott stared at him. "I am going to do nothing of the kind!" he answered curtly. "Do you fancy for one moment that I will face the fearful fate of your confederate to gratify your greed for gold?"

"Yep! I'm going to set you loose and give you a knife and an axe—I guess a gun wouldn't be no use in the water, nor I sure wouldn't trust you with one, neither. You're going after the gold—or—" The gangster broke off and grinned mockingly.

"Or what?" breathed Sammy. "Or I'm going to throw the boys down into the pool for the big squid," said Slim. "You can chew on that and take your choice, schoolmaster."

Ginger for Pluck!

DR. SPARSHOTT lay on his elbow, silent, his face a little pale, staring up at the gangster. He did not speak, for he knew that it was futile. He knew that Slim meant every word he uttered, and that the ruthless rascal was no more to be turned from his purpose than a stream from its course.

The juniors listened in utter horror. Ginger Rawlinson clenched his hands behind him in silent fury. Those hands were free now. To attack the ruffian meant sudden death under his revolver. But Ginger was ready for it before Sammy should face such a fate as that of Captain Luz.

But for the present he made no stir. The ice-cold eyes were on him. He had no chance now, but a chance might come. He slipped the knife into his trousers pocket and wound the cut rope round his wrists to give it an appearance of being still secure if the gangster should look at it.

For a full minute there was silence, then Dr. Sparshott spoke.

"I am in your hands, and my boys are in your hands! Get on with it."

Slim nodded and grinned.

"I reckoned you'd play up," he assented. "You got to if you don't want the young guys to go where the breed went." He jerked Sammy to his feet. "Get back into the cave. You guys follow on!"

His icy eyes glittered at the schoolboys, and they rose to their feet.

Not till the whole party had gone into the cavern, and the hurricane lamp carried by Slim winked in the distant darkness like a firefly, did Jim Dainty venture to crawl out of the stream. He shook the water from him like a dog after a swim, and cautiously approached the cave mouth. Once inside in the deep gloom, there was little danger of being spotted, and he had only to keep the distant light in sight.

Ginger wondered whether he might be following, but he could see and hear nothing of him. Slim did not give a thought to Dainty. His mind was on the sunken treasure, and he had forgotten the junior who was free. With the hurricane lamp in one hand, his other grasping Dr. Sparshott's arm, the gangster strode up the cavern, the schoolboys stumbling on before him.

They reached the fissure that led to the death-pit, where the great octopus had his den. A gesture from Slim drove the boys ahead by the narrow way, and he followed with Sammy. Where the fissure opened wider, on the edge of the chasm, they came to a halt, and Slim set down the hurricane lamp on a spur of rock.

The rope by which Captain Luz had descended still hung over the edge of the pit. Sixty or seventy feet below was the pool, fed by salt water from the sea, where the octopus lurked. The spot was full of horror to the Grimsladers.

They remembered Sammy's narrow escape, long ago, and the terrible fate of the half-breed, and it seemed to them that in the eerie silence they could still hear the cries of the doomed wretch dragged down by the octopus. And that was the fearful fate that Sammy was called upon to face, to save them.

Sammy was quiet and cool. Slim's knife cut through the rope that fastened his strong wrists, and he stood free. He rubbed his chafed, numbed wrists, and while he did so regarded the gangster in the glimmer of the lamp with a cool and calculating eye. Slim, as he read his thoughts, grinned sourly and jerked a six-shooter from his belt.

"Cut it out, schoolmaster!" he said. "You ain't got an earthly. You may as well try your luck with the squid as put it up to me to let daylight through you!"

"Quite," said Sammy calmly.

Slim Stack took the end of the rope that was fastened to the juniors and knotted it to a high point of rock, well back from the chasm. That kept them safe while he was occupied with Sammy's descent into the den of the giant squid.

Sammy, standing as firm as a rock on the edge of the pit, chafed his wrists, stiff from their bonds, and looked below into the blackness, where death in its most terrible shape lurked hidden.

How slim his chance of life was he well knew, but he was cool and calm. The boys were in his charge as their headmaster, and it was up to him to save them, even at the cost of his life. But if coolness and courage could pull him through, they would not be wanting.

The gangster, as he knotted one end of the long rope, did not dream that Ginger at the other end was no longer secured. Ginger kept the rope in position and played up with a cool head.

Leaving the schoolboys a dozen feet back from the edge, the gangster approached Dr. Sparshott. There was a grim approval in his hard face, as if he had some appreciation of the headmaster's quiet courage and resolution. There was, too, perhaps a slight trace of remorse.

"I guess there ain't no other way about it, schoolmaster," said Slim. "And I'll say that if I was a swimmer like that guy Luz I'd try

to do the job myself. I reckon he was some bonehead to let the big squid get him that easy. If he'd been wise to it he'd have had a better chance. I guess you'll pull it off, schoolmaster."

"I shall try," said Dr. Sparshott quietly.

"Luz allowed that he could fasten the end of the rope to the chests under the water if the squid hadn't got him. You'll have to dive to do it. I guess if we lift one of the chests to-day we'll give the big squid time to settle agin afore we come after the next. I'll say I'm making it as easy for you as I can, schoolmaster."

Dr. Sparshott gave him a glance of contempt.

"You are throwing away a life more valuable than your own from sheer rascally greed!" he said. "But if the boys are saved I am content. If I perish in that hideous den you will leave the island without the treasure. You cannot carry a crew in your plane, but you can give word on the mainland where the boys are to be found and rescued. That is all I ask of you."

"Sure!" said Slim. "Get on with it!"

Dr. Sparshott grasped the hanging rope to swing himself over the edge. Ginger's heart thumped. If the headmaster of Grimslade had been always admired and beloved by his boys he had never been more so than now—now that he was giving his life for them. Ginger at that moment would have risked his life, thrown his life away, to save him. But Slim was standing full in the light of the hurricane lamp, his revolver in his hand. It was death—and without saving Sammy!

Ginger, with an almost bursting heart, watched. It was sixty or seventy feet down, and descent would be slow. His chance would come before the headmaster of Grimslade was within the sweep of the sea-devil's tentacles. So long as Sammy was at hand the gangster was watchful, wary as a wolf, ready for a desperate attempt to turn the

tables on him. But soon—Ginger knew that there would be a chance soon!

Very slowly, cautiously, Dr. Sparshott's head disappeared below the edge of rock, sharp almost as a shelf. Then the gangster thrust the revolver back into his belt, relieved of any danger of an attack from Sammy. He leaned over the edge and handed a knife and an axe to the schoolmaster. Hanging by one hand over the giddy depths, Sammy Sparshott took them and put them in his belt. Then, hand under hand, grasping firmly, he went down the rope, and the gangster, lying at full length on the edge, lowered the lamp on a cord to keep pace with him as he had done when his confederate descended.

As the lamp sank below the edge the gloom above thickened, and Slim, watching Sammy as he went, had no eyes for the juniors. Ginger Rawlinson dropped the cut cord from his wrists and stepped forward. Streaky Bacon, Sandy Bean, Dick Dawson watched him eagerly, and Fritz Splitz's saucer-eyes were wide open and staring like a codfish's. Jim's knife was in Ginger's pocket, but there was no time to release his friends—every second was precious now that Sammy was going down to his death!

But as he stepped noiselessly behind the sprawling ruffian, Ginger hesitated. The man lay prone before him—at his mercy, in a sense. But at a touch he would turn like a tiger, and Ginger had no chance whatever in a struggle with him. He would be as helpless as a baby in that muscular grip.

There was only one way, and Ginger knew it. He shuddered at the thought, but pulled himself together with the knowledge that it was to save his headmaster. It was Slim's life or Sammy's, and a Grimslade man was not likely to hesitate long in making his choice. Already the giant octopus might be stirring, the eel-like tentacles winding over the dark water in quest of prey.

Ginger Rawlinson shut his teeth hard, stooped, and suddenly grasped the gangster by



Ginger Rawlinson shut his teeth hard, stooped and suddenly grasped the gangster by the ankles, and tilted him headlong over the rocky edge. For a moment Slim managed to grasp hold of the rock, but Ginger stamped fiercely on the grasping hand, and with a yell of agony Slim shot away into space—dropping into the pit of the octopus!

the ankles, and tilted him headlong over the rocky edge.

Swift as the action was, giving the ruffian no chance, Ginger was barely successful, for Slim was agile as a cat. He gave a startled gasp as he was pitched over the precipice, but, dropping the lamp-cord, he clutched at the rock to save himself and somehow grasped hold with one hand.

Precarious as the hold was, he might have climbed back into safety, but Ginger was not likely to give him a chance. He stamped fiercely on the grasping hand, and Slim gave a yell of agony and let go. He shot away into space, and Ginger, white as a sheet with the horror of what he had done, stood gasping for breath, the sweat pouring down his face.

"Mein gootness!" came from Fritz's chattering teeth. "Tat peast and a prute vas a tead man after."

Splash!

The light vanished, and all was blackness as the sound of the gangster's fall in the water floated up from below.

The Upper Hand.

HALF-WAY down, between the rocky edge and the deep, dark pool below, Sammy Sparshott hung on the knotted rope.

The headmaster of Grimslade had ceased his descent, as the falling hurricane lamp shot away, followed by the plunging body from above. What had happened Sammy did not know—but the crashing splash of a heavy body in the water told him that the gangster must have fallen; and he heard, too, a faint gurgling cry.

Hanging to the thick knots on the rope, Sammy stared below him, a prayer of deep thankfulness in his heart. The iron-nerved gangster was the last man he would have expected to fall from a precipice—yet it was clear that he had done so, and it meant life to Sammy Sparshott, safety to his schoolboy charges.

Deep below him came the glimmer of the lamp. Above was the blackest darkness; but the cord on which the hurricane lamp was strung was fastened to the rock, and it was a ten-fathom cord. The lamp, falling, brought up with a sharp jerk, a few feet above the water, and swung to and fro at the end of its cord, not extinguished by its rapid flight through the air, as an ordinary lamp would have been. Its rays glimmered over the dark sullen surface of the sea-pool, wildly ruffled by the crash of the falling gangster.

"Sammy!" Ginger's voice came shouting, in panting tones, from the blackness above. "Sammy!" Ginger, wildly excited as he was, remembered himself the next moment. "Dr. Sparshott! Sir! Hold on, sir, for goodness' sake! That villain's gone, sir!"

"Rawlinson! Keep back!"

Sammy's first thought was for the boy's safety on the terrible edge in the darkness.

"I'm all right, sir! I'm lying down—holding on—right as rain! Come up, sir—oh, come up while you can! He's gone!"

"Are you free, Rawlinson?" gasped Sammy.

He began to get a glimmering of what had happened.

"Yes, sir—Dainty cut me loose before we got into the cavern. He was out of sight—that villain never knew—I pretended I was still tied, and then"—Ginger's voice cracked—"I pitched him over—to save you, sir! Thank goodness you hadn't gone all the way down. Come up, sir—come up!"

"I am quite safe, Rawlinson! Keep back from the edge!" Sammy shouted back, and then he fixed his eyes again on the sullen pool below.

He remembered that Slim had said that he was no swimmer. He seemed to have gone down like a plummet as soon as he struck the water; but, swimmer or not, he would rise. If he had risen, he was out of the radius of light.

Dr. Sparshott searched the water with anxious eyes, so far as the hurricane lamp glimmered. It was like Sammy to think of his enemy, now that the tables were turned, and he had the upper hand. He would not

have left a worse enemy than Slim to the clutches of the giant octopus, if he could have helped it.

He gave a gasp of relief as a head appeared over the water, and he felt a drag on the knotted rope where the end slithered beneath the surface to the bottom of the pool. It could not have been design—it must have been sheer luck—that Slim had grabbed the rope trailing in the water. But he had grabbed it, with the tenacious grip of a drowning man, and he was clutching it as his face emerged into the light, with two eyes wildly staring.

Man of ice and iron, hardly capable of fear, Slim was in the throes of hideous terror now. His plunge had taken him to the bottom of the sea-pool, where he had struck on one of the heavy chests sunk there long ago by the Marquis of Marmalade, at the orders of King Christophe of Hayti—and he had touched, as he struggled, something soft and slimy and flabby, which he did not need telling was the loathsome carcass of the octopus.

The fearful guardian of the black king's treasure was sprawling among the sunken chests, which were embraced by his eel-like tentacles as he lay in repose—but the impact of the gangster had stirred him.

Slim's hard, tanned face was like chalk, his hard, cold eyes staring from it in fixed horror and fear, as he desperately grasped the rope and scrambled. The water below was agitated as the monster stirred; already one long, lashing tentacle was in the air, winding, creeping, feeling for its prey. Madly the gangster clambered up the rope, clutching with both hands, his feet against the wall of rock.

The eel-like arm of the giant octopus lashed to and fro below him; but the monster itself was rising now, the shapeless carcass looming in the lamplight. A tentacle reached after Slim and caught him round the waist. He tore madly, but in vain, for release.

Dr. Sparshott set his teeth as he saw. He slithered down the rope.

Ginger, from above, saw him as he came into the lamplight below. He held his breath. He saw Sammy holding on to the rope by a leg and an arm, his free hand grasping the axe from his belt. The clear, sharp steel gleamed in the light as he struck. It was a swift and forceful blow, and the keen edge cut clear through the gripping tentacle. The hideous thing dropped loose, and for the moment the gangster was free.

"Quick, man!" yelled Sammy.

He clambered up out of the ruffian's way. Slim followed him up the rope. The cut tentacle sank wriggling into the water, where the mass of the monster thrashed and rolled wildly. Two or three long tentacles wound upward, seeking; but before they could get a grip both Dr. Sparshott and the gangster were high beyond their reach.

"My giddy goloshes!" breathed Ginger, wiping the dripping sweat from his brow.

"Is Sammy safe?" came Streaky's husky voice from the darkness behind him.

"Safe as houses!" answered Ginger.

"Good—oh, good!" panted Dick Dawson.

Ginger pulled on the lamp cord, winding it in, to keep the light level with Sammy as he climbed the rope.

Up the rope came Sammy Sparshott, till he was close to Ginger on the edge. The red-headed junior of Grimslade reached out and grasped him, and Dr. Sparshott joined him on the rock shelf.

Sammy lifted the lamp and hooked it on a point of rock. Then he turned, to face Slim Stack, as the gangster would have followed him up. The headmaster's hand stopped him.

"Not so fast, my friend!" said Sammy Sparshott calmly. "Hang on while I have the pleasure of a little conversation with you. In the meantime, Rawlinson, you may release the other boys."

Ginger, grinning, went back to the others and began to cut them loose with Jim Dainty's knife. Slim, hanging on the rope at the edge of the rock, looked Dr. Sparshott in the eyes. He was far out of danger from the octopus; but he could not climb out of the pit unless Sammy chose. And Sammy did not choose yet.

"You got me, schoolmaster!" said Slim. "And I'll say I'm powerful obliged to you—the big squid would have had me! You ain't letting a guy drop back to that?"

He shivered.

"Not in the least!" answered Dr. Sparshott. "But, as you have so intelligently realised, I have got you. The tables are turned, Mr. Stack, what?"

"You've said it!" muttered Slim.

"I will trouble you to hand over your gun," said Sammy. "Probably it is useless to you after your dip. Nevertheless, I am taking no chances—hand it to me by the barrel. I advise you strongly not to play tricks—our friend below is probably hungry."

For a long moment Slim eyed him. Then, releasing one hand from the rope, he drew the revolver from his belt and handed the butt to Dr. Sparshott.

"Now the others," said Sammy cheerfully.

The two revolvers Slim had captured from the castaways were in his pockets, packed there for safety.

In grim silence he groped them out, and handed them up. Then he made a movement to climb; but the headmaster of Grimslade gently thrust him back, with a kind smile.

"I think," remarked Sammy, "that there was a knife! I have not failed to note the details of your arsenal, my friend!"

"I guess you won't never be caught asleep with both eyes shut, schoolmaster!" said Slim. "I'll say a lynx has got nothing on you!"

And the knife was handed over.

Dr. Sparshott stepped back.

"You may now," he said, "climb out, Mr. Stack. Need I say that at the first sign of hostility I shall blow your scoundrelly brains out with your own gun? No, I am sure that I need not point out such obvious things to a man of your intelligence. May I trouble you for your cartridge-case? Thanks!"

Sammy picked up the hurricane lamp with his left hand, holding a revolver in his right by the barrel, ready—and willing—to crack the gangster's skull with the heavy butt if he gave a hint of trouble. Slim, in the circumstances, was not the man to give trouble. He knew when he was beaten.

Dr. Sparshott glanced round. The juniors were all freed now, and in the light of the lamp their faces glowed with joyful satisfaction. Sammy gave a nod towards the remnants of the cord.

"Rawlinson, will you secure Mr. Stack's hands behind him?"

"Won't I just!" grinned Ginger.

And he did!

"And now," said Sammy, "we will lose no time in getting out of this disagreeable place. I am very anxious to see Dainty, to whom we all owe our safety. Dainty has been a rebellious young rascal—but this, I think, is a time to forget and forgive! Come!"

And with Sammy leading the way, lamp in hand, the Grimsladers gladly turned their backs on that den of horror. They left the fissure, and as the lamplight winked in the great cavern, there was a shout, and Jim Dainty came running into the light.

It seemed to Jim that he was dreaming, as he saw his friends free and the gangster a sullen, bound prisoner. His eyes danced as he came running up.

"All safe, old bean!" chirruped Ginger.

"Thanks to you!"

Jim looked at his headmaster.

Sammy smiled.

"Oh, sir!" gasped Jim.

Sammy was holding out his hand, smiling—and Jim took it, and his headmaster gave him a grip that made him jump.

There was no need for words—with that grip all past offences passed into oblivion.

It was the rebel of Grimslade who had saved the headmaster and his schoolfellows—and the Grimslade castaways were once more a happy and united family as they marched out of the cavern into the brilliant tropical sunlight.

(The Grimslade castaways now have the upper hand—but what will they do with their gangster enemy? See next week's gripping story featuring the schoolboy Crusoes.)