

36 Ken
"HERE THE HUNTER!" FIRST CHAPTERS OF THIS AMAZING THRILLER TO-DAY!

The RANGER

New Series No. 35. Vol. 2.
Every Saturday.

Week Ending
April 7th, 1934.

2^D



Here the Hunter!
Wonderful Old-time
Romance

THE CHEERIO CASTAWAYS!

By FRANK RICHARDS

Fritz—As Usual!



PLITZ!"

No reply.

"Where is Splitz?"

Still no reply.

Dr. Samuel Sparshott frowned. Jim Dainty & Co. grinned. As there was work to be done, it was not surprising that Fritz von Splitz had disappeared from sight. It would have been

surprising if he hadn't!

It was a hot morning on Castaway Island. The tropical sun blazed down on the white beach and the green, dark jungle. The tide was going out in the bay, and the boat rocked on the water at the end of the painter, tugged at by the receding tide.

From where the Grimslade castaways stood in front of their hut the boat looked empty. It did not occur to them that a fat and podgy figure was crouching in it under the gunwale. Fritz Splitz, safe out of sight of Sammy Sparshott's keen eyes, grinned, as he heard his headmaster's voice. He heard it, but he heeded not.

There was hoeing and weeding to be done that morning in the cultivated patch by the hut. Neither hoeing nor weeding had any appeal for Fritz von Splitz. He disliked work in any shape or form. Fritz Splitz, like Brer Fox in the tale, "lay low and said nuffin'."

"Splitz!" roared Sammy. But only echo answered, and Sammy gave an angry grunt.

"Dainty!"

"Yes, sir!" said Jim Dainty cheerfully. "I shall be absent most of the morning. You will work in the garden till noon. But first, find Splitz, and give him six with a bamboo and see that he does his share."

"What-ho—I mean, yes, sir!" answered Jim. And Dainty and Dawson, Ginger and Bacon and Bean spread along the beach looking for the elusive Fritz.

Dr. Sparshott gave a last frowning glance around, and then walked into the hut. A short, squat man, with a hard, tanned face and icc-old eyes, sat there, his arms bound behind his back.

Slim Stack, the gangster, was a prisoner in the hands of the castaways, but he was taking the turning of the tables with his usual coolness. Chewing tobacco, he was squirting the juice round him on the floor of the hut, while he waited to learn what his fate was to be. He stared up at the tall figure of the headmaster of Grimslade as it darkened the doorway.

"I'll say you've got me, schoolmaster," drawled Slim. "What's it going to be? You ain't the guy to knock me on the head, I guess. Say, I reckon I'm ready to talk turkey. You let me rip, and I'll sure mosey across the island to where I left my plane. I'll light out, and you'll see the last of me. That's what you want, ain't it?"

"Not quite, Mr. Stack!" said the headmaster of Grimslade. "In the first place, as you came here after the treasure of the island, I've no doubt that you would return if I let you go—and bring with you enough rascals of your own stamp to give you the upper hand here."

The gangster grinned.

"I'll say that you won't ever be caught asleep with both eyes shut, schoolmaster!" he said.

"In the second place," went on Dr. Sparshott, "I am fortunately able to pilot a plane. I am going to borrow yours, Mr. Stack."



"I guess you won't get all your crowd on that plane, schoolmaster."

"Not at all! My intention is to take your plane, get away to an inhabited island, and return in a ship for the boys under my charge."

"Leaving me here?"

"Hardly!" Dr. Sparshott pointed from the doorway to the sea, and the gangster, following the direction of the pointing finger, discerned a speck far out on the Atlantic. "On that rock, Mr. Stack, I have marooned a scoundrel named Ezra Sarson, who scuttled the ship we sailed in, and caused us to be cast away here. I've no doubt he will be glad of your company."

Slim shut his teeth hard, and his icy eyes gleamed at the headmaster of Grimslade.

HOW FRITZ VON SPLITZ, BY HIS COWARDICE, THREW AWAY THE ONE REAL CHANCE OF RESCUE THAT CAME TO THE SCHOOLBOY CASTAWAYS!

"You figure on marooning me there?" he muttered.

"Exactly! You will be out of harm's way, and will find sufficient food to support life till you can be taken off—with the other rascal. That will be when I return in a vessel to take the boys."

"And the treasure?" muttered Stack.

"And the treasure!" said Dr. Sparshott calmly. "If it is possible to raise it from the pool where the great octopus guards it, I shall certainly take away the treasure also—quite regardless of your wishes and views on the subject. Now kindly get on your feet. We are going out on the tide—the boat is ready."

Slowly the squat ruffian picked himself up. He gave a last squirt of tobacco-juice and set his teeth. His muscles almost cracked as he made a fierce and desperate effort to break the cords that secured his powerful arms behind his back. The sweat stood out on his forehead with the effort. But it was in vain; he was too securely bound. Dr. Sparshott watched him, with a faint smile, his hand near the butt of the revolver in his belt.

Slim relaxed at last, and stood panting. He was a helpless prisoner, and there was no chance of getting loose. Dr. Sparshott signed to him to follow, and strode from the hut. The gangster tramped after him, with a black and bitter face. He could hardly have hoped to be allowed to leave the island free in the aeroplane in which he had come—but he had not expected this.

Marooned on the lonely rock far out at sea, he would be helpless, with nothing to do but to wait and watch during the weary days, all hope lost of ever laying hands on the treasure of Castaway Island. A desperate light was in his hard, cold eyes. He was ready to take the most desperate of chances, even if it cost him his life.

Jim Dainty & Co. were along the beach, hallooing to one another as they hunted for Fatty Fritz among the palms and the rocks by the stream. Fritz, in the boat, lay low and grinned as he heard their distant shouting.

So long as they did not think of coming down to the boat and looking into it, Fritz was satisfied. He was not aware that Dr. Sparshott was taking out the boat that morning—or certainly he would not have selected it as a hiding-place. And he started and pricked up his fat ears at the sound of tramping footsteps on the sand, coming down to the sea.

"Mein gootness!" murmured Fritz in dismay. "Is tat tat peast and a prute Sammy! Vy for he gum tis vay, plow him!"

He crouched lower in the rocking boat. It rocked at the end of a long rope that was fastened to a peg driven in the sand. Fritz had waded out through shallow water when he got into the boat. Now he heard the voice of Dr. Sparshott.

"Get in!"

Whom he was addressing Fritz did not know, for a moment. Then he heard a muttered curse, and there was a splashing as Slim tramped through the shallows. The squat, stocky figure of the gangster appeared beside the boat, and Fritz's saucer eyes blinked up at him in alarm.

Slim was not looking at him, however. He, like Sammy, supposed the boat to be empty. He turned as he reached it, standing knee-deep in the sea, and looked back at Dr. Sparshott. Sammy had stooped, and released the rope from the peg in the sand. Coiling it over his arm,

he came towards the boat, which bobbed and tugged under the pull of the tide.

Slim's eyes glittered. A sudden desperate shove at the boat would have torn the rope from Dr. Sparshott; he could have hurled himself into it, and the running tide would have whirled him away out of reach. Had his hands been free—

But to float out to sea with his hands bound was to condemn himself to a lingering death of hunger and thirst. Desperate as he was, he was not desperate enough for that. He dismissed the thought and turned to the boat to scramble in—and his eyes fell in amazement on the fat German crouching there.

For a single instant the gangster stared. His active brain worked swiftly. Fritz blinked up at him dismally. Discovery was inevitable now, and it meant a whopping from Sammy. Little did the fat Rhinelander guess what was flashing into the ruffian's brain. What followed took not only Fritz, but Dr. Sparshott by surprise.

Suddenly, sharply, Slim lurled his whole heavy weight on the boat, already tugged by the tide. The sudden unexpected jerk tore the rope from Dr. Sparshott's hands and it slithered into the sea. That sudden shove, added to the tug of the tide, sent the boat shooting out—and as it went, Slim, with a desperate spring, threw himself in headlong over the gunwale. He landed with a crash, and rolled over Fritz Spltz, from whom there came a suffocated howl. The impact added to the boat's way, and it fairly shot seaward.

Dr. Sparshott grasped swiftly after the escaping rope. It whisked away far from his reach. The boat, rocking wildly and shipping water, rolled and plunged away on the tide.

"You madman!" roared Sammy. "Will you go to your death?" He stood for a moment or two anxiously watching, half expecting the boat to capsize. Then he plunged into the sea, swimming swiftly after the receding boat.

Hand to Hand!

"ACH! Mein gootness, I vas vun tead Cherman!" groaned Fritz von Spltz. Fritz hardly knew what was happening. But he knew that most of the breath had been knocked out of his fat carcass, and that he was crushed in the bottom of the boat by a heavy weight, and that salt water was washing over him. So wildly did the boat roll and pitch, that it threatened every second to plunge gunwale under, and the sea washed in fore and aft.

But the weight was removed from Fritz as the gangster rolled off him and gained his knees. One swift glance Slim gave back at the beach—he saw Dr. Sparshott plunge in and swim—and farther up the beach he saw Jim Dainty & Co. start running down to the water. But he had time to act—to carry out the desperate plan that had flashed into his mind at the sight of the fat German in the boat.

Dr. Sparshott was swimming strongly; but the tide ran hard, and carried the boat fast seaward. It was likely to be minutes, at least, before the swimmer overhauled him. And one minute, Slim reckoned, would be enough for him.

He gained his knees in the rocking boat, gave that one swift glance back, and then fixed his gleaming, icy eyes on the terrified face of Fritz. Before the fat German could even think of stirring, a sinewy knee was planted on his fat equator, pinning him down, gurgling wildly.

"Ach! Gerroff!" gurgled Fritz. "I have no more to breff! Mein gootness! I tink that I tie! Gurrgrgh!"

"Shut that bully-beef trap of yours, you fat guy!" Slim bit off the words. "Get me loose—hear me? You got a knife or something—get me loose! I guess you want to be quick!"

"I tink tat I gannot—yurrgrghhh!" gasped Fritz, in anguish, as the gangster's knee ground into his stomach. "Urrgh! Wurrgrgh!"

"I can't use my hands, you fat geck!" hissed Slim. "But I guess I can use my feet, and I'll sure tramp the life outer you if I ain't loose in two shakes of a 'possum's tail! You get me?"

"Urrgh! Mein gootness! Wurrgrgh!" gurgled the hapless Fritz.

The knee was removed from him, and the gangster stood up, heedless of the wild rocking of the boat. He gave Sammy another glance—coming on hard, but yet at a distance. His boot crashed on Fritz Spltz in a savage kick. There was a gasping howl from Fritz.

"You gettin' me loose?" snarled the gangster.

"Ach! Ja! Ja wohl!" gasped Fritz. "Kick me not after—urrgh!—I vill cut you loose so quick as neffer vas before! Mein gootness! Urrgh!"

"Quick, you fat guy, unless you want to be kicked over the side!" hissed Slim.

Fatty Fritz groaned, gathered himself up on his fat knees, and groped for his knife. He could not have stood on his feet in the rocking boat, though it gave Slim no trouble. With trembling hands the fat German opened his knife to carry out the gangster's orders. For his fat life he dared not disobey. He was utterly at the ruffian's mercy.

Any other of the Grimsladers would have put up a fight and held the gangster long enough for Sammy to come up. But Fritz would have laid hands on an alligator in the swamps of Castaway Island as soon as upon Slim Stack. The ruffian would have trampled him down without mercy, and Fatty Fritz was not the fellow to face that, or to take the risk of it.

Getting the knife open as quickly as his trembling fingers allowed, Fritz began to saw at the cord that fastened Slim's hands together.

As his hands were secured behind him, Slim had to turn his back for the fat German to free him. That would have given Fritz Spltz a chance, had his nerve been equal to taking advantage of it. But it did not even occur to Fritz to resist; his terror of the desperado was too deep for that.

He cut and sawed at the cord, the shaking of his fat hands causing him to cut the bound wrists also, gashing the hairy skin in two or three places. But the pain seemed nothing to the gangster. His snarling voice breathed savage threats, urging Fritz to hurry.

There was a shout from the juniors on the beach. They could see Fritz Spltz in the

boat now, and though the distance was increasing, they could see how he was occupied. Ginger Rawlinson shook a fist at him, and Jim Dainty yelled:

"Fritz! You rotter! Chuck it!"

Fritz did not even hear. He cut and sawed, and sawed and cut, and the strands of the cord parted under the knife.

Slim panted. His eyes were on the dark head astern of the boat, where Sammy Sparshott was coming on with long, swift strokes. Sammy had seen Fritz, and he knew now why the gangster had taken that desperate chance.

With set teeth and glinting eyes, the headmaster of Grimslade put every ounce of strength into his strokes, to reach the boat before the ruffian had his hands free. Closer and closer he came, sweeping down on the drifting, rocking boat; and Slim knew that it would be touch and go. If he was not free when Sammy came, he would not have another chance.

He wrenched at the cord. It was cut half through, and it cracked and parted under that desperate wrench. The fragments of the cord fell away, and the gangster was free. A backward smack from his hand sent Fritz spinning helplessly. The fat German sprawled there, gasping and groaning, unheeded further by Slim.

The ruffian scrambled for an oar. As he grasped it, Sammy reached the boat and gripped at the gunwale.

Up went the oar in both Slim's sinewy hands, brandished in the air over Dr. Sparshott's head.

"My giddy goloshes!" panted Ginger, watching from the beach. "Sammy!" It seemed to the juniors that their hearts had stopped beating, as they watched their headmaster's terrible peril.

Crash! The oar came down, and for a second both the gangster and the watching juniors fancied that the blow had told. But it was only on the gunwale that the crash landed—Sammy had slipped deep in the water in time. So heavy was the blow that the impact jerked the oar from the ruffian's hand, and it dropped. He staggered as the boat rocked wildly. The next moment a hand was on the gunwale again, and Dr. Sparshott was scrambling over the side.

Slim spat out an oath and plunged at him. He had no time to catch up the oar again and aim a blow. Sammy was clambering in like a cat, and needed only a second, a split second! He had a leg over the gunwale as the gangster plunged on him and grasped him.

Sammy returned grip for grip, and they struggled fiercely. Sinewy and strong as the gangster was, a mass of muscle and sinew, Sammy was as strong, or stronger. But Slim Stack had the advantage of position. Sammy, half over the gunwale, struggled fiercely to get in, but he could make no headway.

The gunwale dipped, and the water rushed in a flood; and Fritz Spltz gurgled horribly as it washed over him. He scrambled to his feet, holding on, gasping for breath, and spitting out salt water.

"Spltz!" panted Sammy. "Lend a hand here! Spltz!"

"Urrgh! Mein gootness!" gurgled Fritz. "Back up, Grimslade!" yelled Sammy.

Even Fatty Fritz was not deaf to that appeal. The rocking of the boat tumbled him over on his podgy knees in the flooding water. But he realised that both Slim's hands were busy, holding Sammy, and he blinked round wildly for a weapon. He spotted the boathook, scrambled at it, and grasped it. Then, screwing up his courage to the sticking point, Fatty Fritz plunged at the gangster, lunging with the hook.

There was a fearful yell from Slim as the boathook jabbed in his back. He would have torn himself free from Sammy and turned on Fritz, but Dr. Sparshott's grip was like a vice—he could not get loose.

Fatty Fritz lifted the boathook and brought it down on the back of Slim's head, answered by another fiendish howl from the gangster. Then Slim kicked out suddenly backwards, catching a fat shin, and Fritz von Spltz went sprawling. He crashed on the gunwale, and plunged helplessly overboard.

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SAMMY SPARSHOTT gritted his teeth. He had a footing in the boat now, and in spite of Slim's fierce resistance, he was gaining the upper hand. Fiercely, savagely, desperately, the gangster exerted all his strength, but the headmaster of Grimslade was forcing him back, gaining inch after inch.

If the boat did not capsize, it was fairly certain that Sammy would soon overpower Slim Stack. But to his ears, from the running sea, came the wild shriek of Fritz Splitz, cut off in a drowning gurgle as the tide washed over him.

Fritz could swim—at Grimslade all the fellows had to learn to swim. But he was as good at swimming as at anything else, and keeping himself afloat in a swimming-pool was very different from battling for his life in a fast-running tide.

Fritz went under, and went under again, dropping behind the drifting boat where his headmaster was fighting with the gangster. And Sammy knew what he had to do. Fritz Splitz was drowning—and his headmaster could not leave him to drown.

He gritted his teeth. If Slim captured the boat and hoisted mast and sail he could run round the island and reach the western shore, where the aeroplane lay, before the castaways could cross by land.

That was Slim's intention if he got the upper hand—there could be no doubt about that. And Sammy had to give him the upper hand to save the helpless fat duffer who was shrieking and gurgling in the tide. It was a bitter pill to swallow, but Sammy had to get it down. His grasp on the ruffian in the boat relaxed.

Slim did not know what was in his mind, but he knew that the iron grasp had loosened—that Sammy was no longer forcing him back. He freed a hand, clenched his fist to drive it in the face of the Grimslade headmaster. But the blow, as he gave it, met with no resistance, as Sammy slipped back into the sea and the gangster almost toppled after him.

"Doggone my cats!" he gasped.

Sammy, unheeding the drifting boat, was striking out for Fritz. A fat hand was thrown up from the water—the last sign of Fritz Splitz if help had not been at hand. The gangster stared, understanding now why Sammy had given up the struggle. Even his great strength had been exhausted, and he half-crouched in the boat, panting for breath, watching Dr. Sparshott as he reached the fat German, grasped him, and dragged him up to life.

Fatty Fritz, half-senseless, hung a dead weight on Sammy. His saucer-eyes were closed, and he gurgled faintly. Holding his head above water, Dr. Sparshott stared round grimly at the boat.

Slim grinned at him breathlessly from the boat, scrambled up, and seized the oars. They rattled into the rowlocks. The water washed round his knees as he sat to the oars. The boat had shipped so much that it floated deep. But it floated, and Slim did not lose time in baling. He dipped the oars.

"Good-bye, schoolmaster!" roared the gangster. "I guess you'll see me ag'in on your island—you sure will, schoolmaster! Say,

if you're going to borrow my plane, you'll sure have to burn the wind!"

The boat glided away. Sammy Sparshott made no reply to the gangster's taunt. He was a good half-mile from the shore, with the tide running strongly out of the bay—and if he was to save Fritz and save himself he had all his work cut out. With a bitter disappointment that was too deep for words—if he had had the breath to waste uttering them, Dr. Sparshott turned shoreward, leaving the gangster to his own devices.

Not till he was at a distance of two or three cables' length did Slim venture to pull in his oars and start baling the waterlogged boat. Then he stepped the mast, ran up the sail, and steered out to sea, to clear the rocks at the mouth of the bay before he tacked to the westward to run round Castaway Island. The sail, glancing in the sun, vanished seaward.

The strong and sinewy headmaster was almost at the end of his tether, when he felt the sand under his feet and dragged himself and his gurgling burden ashore. Utterly exhausted, the headmaster of Grimslade sank down on the sand, and did not stir till he heard the sound of running feet.

Jim Dainty & Co. were running along the curving shore of the bay, to meet him when he landed, but they had a great distance to cover to reach him. Sammy had recovered a little by the time they arrived. He sat up, passed his hand over his eyes, and blinked at them. Fritz Splitz, lying on the soft sand, did not stir. Fritz was hardly sure yet whether he was dead or alive.

"You're all right, sir?" gasped Jim Dainty, the first to arrive, breathlessly.

Sammy smiled faintly. "Quite!" he said. He rose, slowly and rather painfully, to his feet. "Stack has taken the boat, owing to that incredibly stupid block-head, Splitz! He will make for the western shore, to get back to his plane. And I—"

Sammy shut his teeth. He was weary to the bone, and in no state for a desperate race across woods and jungles to the other side of Castaway Island. Jim broke out eagerly: "Let us go, sir! We've got a chance—"

Dr. Sparshott considered quietly for a moment or two with knitted brows.

"He's unarmed, sir, and there's five of us if we get there in time," urged Ginger Rawlinson. "We can handle him, tough as he is."

Dr. Sparshott took the revolver from his belt. It was soaked from the sea. Quietly, while he considered, he reloaded it with cartridges from his waterproof case. The juniors watched him eagerly. The Head of Grimslade nodded at last.

"You may try," he said. "I will follow as fast as I can. I shall trust you with the revolver, Dainty—you can handle it well, I know. Do not hesitate to shoot if you meet with that scoundrel."

"Trust me, sir," said Jim.

He put the revolver in his belt and started at once, the other fellows following. More slowly, breathing hard and deep as he went, Dr. Sparshott followed on. Fritz Splitz sat up on the sand and blinked after them.

Jim Dainty and Ginger Rawlinson were in

the lead, racing over the sand, leaping from rock to rock so long as the way lay by the shore, then pressing on without a pause through the thick jungle and the tangled woods. The other fellows were doing their best, but gradually tailing off.

If Slim escaped in the plane it meant the end of the hope of escape for the castaways from the lonely island. And they knew that the gangster would be losing no time—already, perhaps, he had run round the island in the boat while they were toiling through the tropical forest.

Neck and neck, Jim Dainty and Ginger emerged from the forest, on the western side of the island, aching with fatigue, streaming with perspiration. The wide sands and the western sea were spread before their gaze.

And to their ears came a sound that was familiar in far-off England—the humming buzz of an engine! Ginger gave a panting yell.

"My giddy goloshes! Look!"

The aeroplane, which had landed on a level stretch of firm sand, was now in motion. Jim Dainty snapped his teeth at the sight of the plane taxiing along the sands. Further in the distance he saw the boat bobbing in the shallows, where Slim had left it when he jumped ashore. The gangster had won the race!

As the plane taxied the Grimslade juniors could see the squat figure in the pilot's seat. Jim Dainty burst into a desperate race, and Ginger rushed after him. The revolver was in Jim's hand now.

Crack! Crack! Crack! He pulled the trigger as he ran. He saw the pilot in the plane start and flinch for a second. One bullet had whipped by Slim's head, grazing him as it flew. Another and another tore through the wings.

Crack! Crack! But even as the shots rang along the shore the plane took off, rising gracefully as a swallow. Jim Dainty, halting, threw up the barrel and fired his last shot after the plane as it flew. It seemed to him that he heard a yell through the roar of the engine and the rush of the plane, but he could not be sure. The plane rose and rose, heading seaward.

"Oh, rotten luck!" groaned Ginger.

"Gone!" said Jim Dainty, between his teeth. Higher and higher rose the plane, glancing in the sun, streaking away over the sea. Dawson and Streaky and Sandy came panting along as the two juniors stood watching it. It diminished to a mere speck in the fleecy clouds.

"We've got the boat back, anyhow!" said Ginger at last. And the juniors went down the beach to secure the boat. They dragged it up the sand and sat on it, watching the speck that gleamed in the deep blue of the sky, still visible. But they rose as Dr. Sparshott emerged from the forest, and came tramping down the sand.

"Gone, sir!" said Jim Dainty. "Just too late!"

He pointed to the glancing speck in the blue. Dr. Sparshott fixed his eyes on it, and it vanished as he looked. Slim Stack was gone from Castaway Island—but for how long?

(Boys, you'll enjoy every line of next week's full-o'-thrills story of the Castaways. Don't miss it.)

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