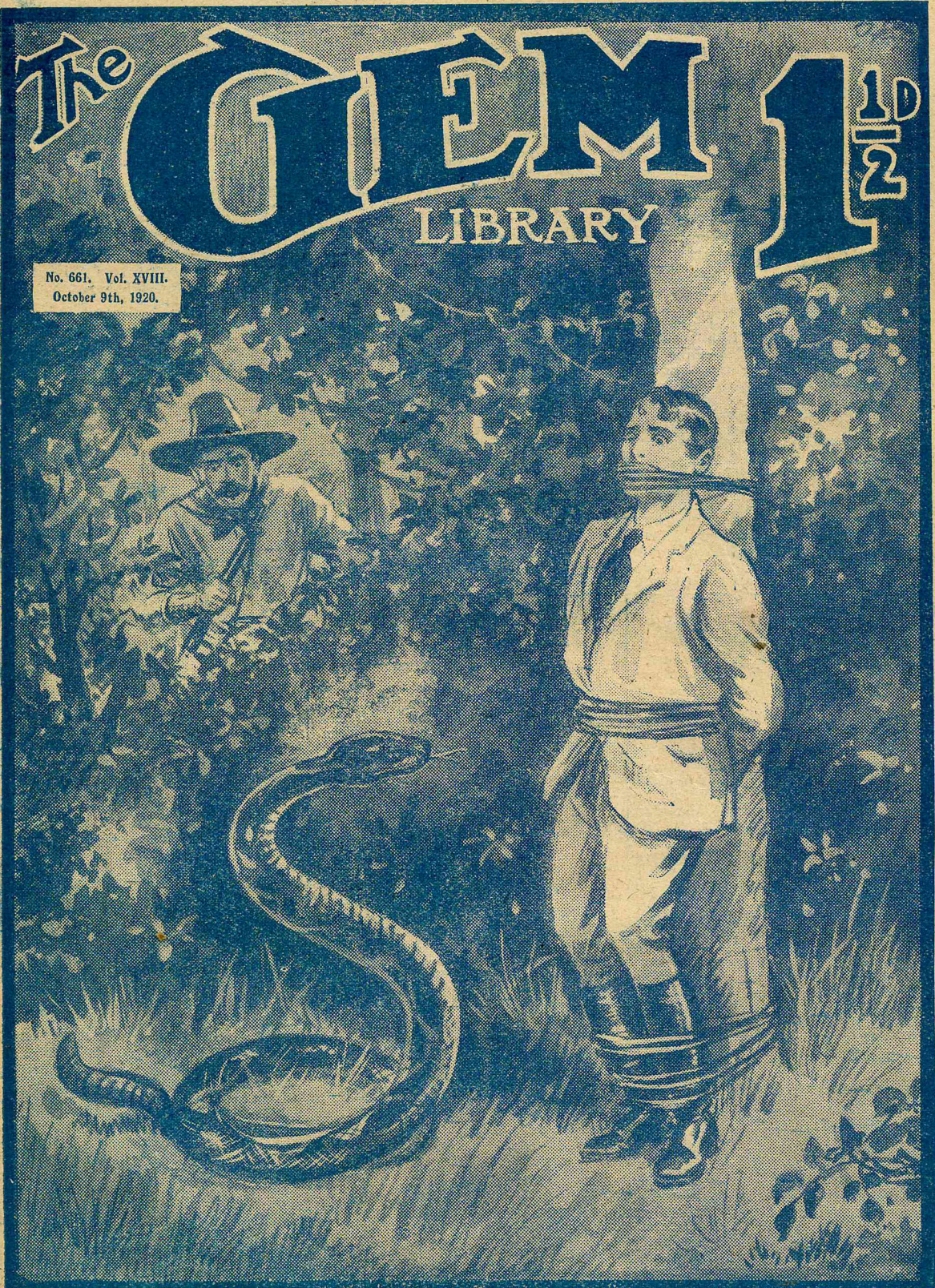


TEN SHILLINGS A WEEK FOR A YEAR!

This is only one of the Many Valuable Prizes offered in our Grand Competition. (See page 19.)

The GEM LIBRARY 1^{1D}/₂

No. 661. Vol. XVIII.
October 9th, 1920.



TOM MERRY IN DEADLY DANGER!

(See the Thrilling, Long, Complete Story inside entitled: "Hunted Down!")

MY READERS' OWN CORNER.

NOTE.—Half-a-crown is paid for every par published on this page.

CHICHESTER.

Chichester is one of the oldest and most historical cities of the country. It is even believed that Pudens and Claudia, referred to by St. Paul in the Second Epistle to Timothy, were early citizens of Chichester. The city was the capital of the Roman Regni, but was renamed Cissacestra by the Saxon leader, Cissa. Cook describes Chichester as a very neat little city, walled about in circular form, with four principal streets which meet in the centre, where there is a beautiful cross. All that now remains of the wall are the portions north and east of the city, now converted into promenades. The fine cathedral was commenced in 1100, and completed in eight years. In 1114 and in 1187 it was much damaged by fire. The spire fell in 1861, and was rebuilt in the next five years at a cost of thirty-eight thousand pounds. The cathedral is 131ft. across the transept, and 380ft. long. Sir Christopher Wren offered many suggestions with regard to the completion of the building. Wren's name is honoured in Chichester, where Wren House and Pallant House are evidences of the great architect's talent.—W. J. Hunt, 26, Whyke Road, Chichester, Sussex.

THE KING OF BIRDS.

A magnificent eagle is the harpy, America's strongest bird, and the terror of smaller birds and beasts. But the harpy does not content himself with attacking weaker birds. He is so strong that he can kill animals more than three times his own size. He will pounce on foxes and fawns, and even that savage pig the peccary. The harpy is a wonderful scarer. He rises in the air till he looks no bigger than a lark, and then vanishes from sight altogether. His wings are motionless all the time. The giants of the race of eagles are the sea variety. Our country boasts only the white-tailed sea-eagle, which is the master pirate of the sea. It builds in dizzy spots on the coast of the Hebrides. Its nest is six to eight feet round, and five to six high. Whitetail is a rare fisher. It swoops on its victim and disappears in a cloud of spray, to reappear with a fish in its claws. But sometimes the fish is too heavy for it, and the eagle is dragged under and drowned.—John Rhodes, Tudhoe C.E. School, Low Spennymoor, co. Durham.

NOTEWORTHY STAMPS.

Bosnia has a new stamp of 10 krona, issued just prior to the outbreak of war. It is uniform with other stamps of the current type, and bears the Austrian Emperor's head. As if Belgium had not enough to endure, the country was victimised during the invasion by having a German stamp foisted upon it. This was in line with the ordinary German stamps, with the overprint "Belgien."—W. Hull, Daisy Bank, Whittaker Lane, Heaton Park, Manchester.

EAVESDROPPER.

The following is said to be the origin of the term. During the revival of Masonry in 1717 a curious punishment was inflicted upon a man who listened at the door of a Masonic meeting in order to hear its secrets. The offender was summarily sentenced to be placed under the eaves of an outhouse while it was raining hard, until the water ran in between the collar of his coat and his skin and out at his shoes.—A. E. Bond, 43, Field Road, Forest Gate, E. 7.

THE STEEL PEN.

We owe the steel pen to Joseph Gillott, a Birmingham jeweller. One day whilst at work he accidentally split the end of one of his fine steel jeweller's instruments, and tossed the ruined article on the floor. Later he wanted to write a letter, but failed to find his quill. Looking down, he espied the broken bit of steel. "This might do at a pinch," he said to himself. He started writing with the novel pen, and was delighted with the result. The steel point did not splutter as a quill often did, and Gillott realised that he had made a most useful discovery.—Miss E. Hornsby, 55, Jenner Road, Stoke Newington, N.16.

A PARISH OF KINGS.

Eldon, in Hampshire, is the smallest parish in England. It consists of two cottages, which are occupied by Mr. and Mrs. King and their twelve children. The Kings are the parish, and every second Sunday the rector travels five miles to preach to them.—W. T. Clarke, 9, Hartington Avenue, Birkenhead.

TAKEN DOWN.

A man, thinking he possessed a fine natural voice, made up his mind to cultivate it, and, accordingly, went into the country, where he established himself in a little village, and practised singing from the early morning. Opposite the cottage where he was lodging lived a poor washerwoman, and whenever the man sang she wept bitterly. "Ah," said the vocalist to himself, "it is my heart-stirring singing that makes that poor soul weep!" One day he crossed the road and asked her why she was crying. He thought he would receive a beautiful compliment on his art. "Oh, sir," replied the washerwoman, "whenever I hear your voice I always think of my poor donkey that died early last year!"—Harry Finch, 40, Westbury Road, Bowes Park, N. 11.

THE WAITER.

Waiter: "Am, sir? Yessir! Don't take anything with your 'am, sir, do you, sir?" Customer: "Yes, I do. I take the letter 'H'!"—J. Mumford, 137, Arlington Road, Camden Town.

YOUR EDITOR'S CHAT.

Address: Editor, The GEM, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C. 4.

NEXT WEEK'S PROGRAMME.

Next Wednesday's splendid number of the GEM Library will contain a grand, extra-long, complete tale of Tom Merry & Co., entitled,

"CONDEMNED BY THE STUDY!"

By Martin Clifford.

Back again at St. Jim's, after their breathless adventures of the last few weeks, the famous schoolboy chums resume their school life with zest. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy soon shows that he is the same old Gussy, and that, in spite of his recent experiences, he is as fastidious as ever.

You will enjoy this amusing story. The next instalment of

"RENTON OF THE ROVERS"

is particularly interesting. Renton finds his passion for football leading him over rough ground; but it is born in him. He simply can't help it!

In the next instalment of that wonderful new serial,

"SLAVE ISLAND!"

my readers will find their imagination thrilled and gripped by this amazing narrative from Matthew Ironside's masterly pen.

Tell your chums about this unique story.

Other items are our Grand "Missing Letters" Competition, with its splendid cash prizes; "My Readers' Own Corner," with half-a-crown paid for every paragraph published; and, lastly, an odd corner for Your Editor's Chat.

You will find it a hard job to get better value anywhere for the sum of three-half-pence than is offered to you in next Wednesday's GEM.

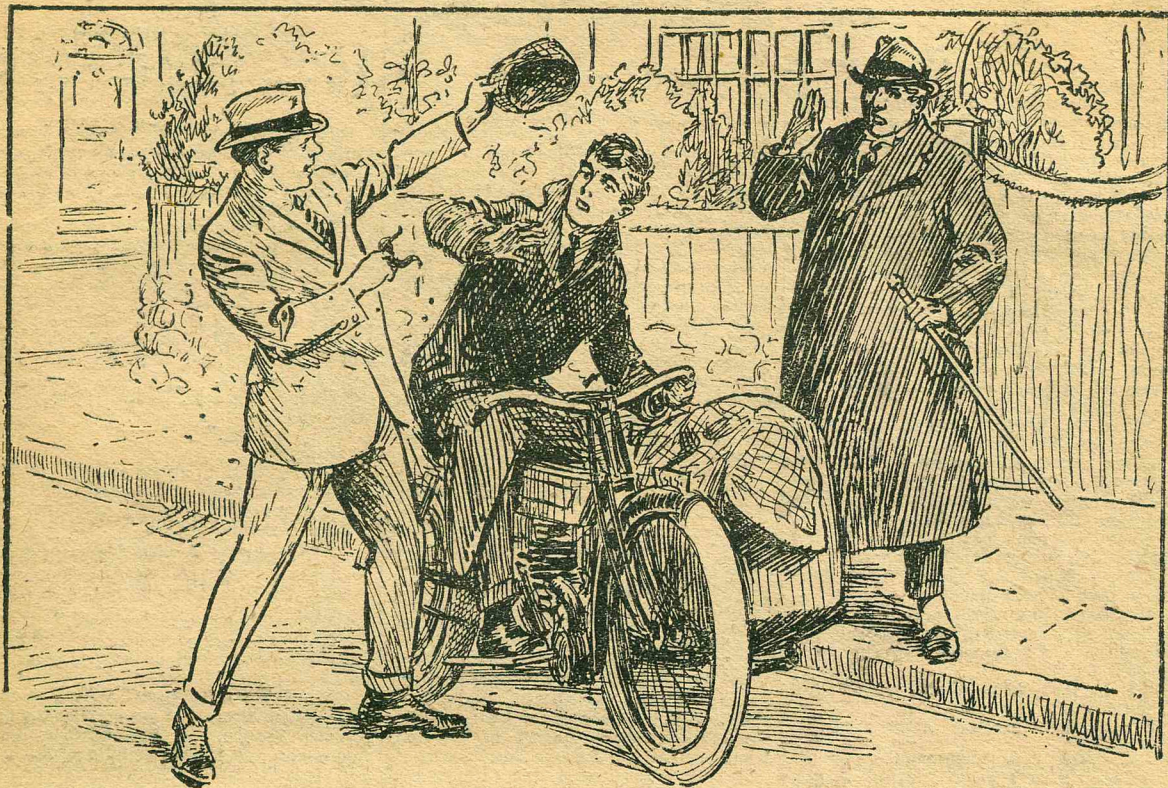
A GENTLEMAN!

It is the word that is in question. For long years the French have made use of it just as it is written in this country. The word has been turned as well into "gentilhomme," which is a pretty exact translation, but, of course, does not carry the whole meaning of the term, as is the case with most translations. But now the French Academy has officially recognised "gentleman" as a part of the French language. It was not because of any lack of gentlemen in France, but just because the absence of a word which meant all the British word means. The French Academy can do this kind of thing. We have nothing quite the same in England—more's the pity! The French Academy is the great authority on French literature, and sees to it that the language is maintained at its high standard. The Academy of France dates back to the times of King Louis the Fourteenth, and it has a pretty well unbroken record through all the changes of the centuries.

Your Editor

Contributions are invited from all readers for publication on this page. "Pars" should not be more than three hundred words long. Address all contributions to The Editor, The GEM Library, The Fleetway House, Farringdon St., London, E.C. 4, and mark them "Readers' Own Corner."

RENTON OF THE ROVERS!



A Magnificent New Football Serial. By PAUL MASTERS.

Real This First.

JIMMY RENTON is a sterling footballer, and a reporter on the staff of the "Burchester Times." His work brings him into contact with

BILLY DESMOND, a fellow-reporter, with whom Jimmy strikes up a friendship, and

LUKE RAYNER, a rank outsider, who, like Jimmy, covets a high position in the football world, and who is jealous of Jimmy's skill at the game.

Jimmy is asked to play for Burchester United against St. Clive's, his old school; but Mr. Wilberforce, the editor under whom Jimmy works, refuses to let him go. However, Jimmy takes French leave, and from the window of the dressing-room at St. Clive's he observes, to his horror, that Mr. Wilberforce is on the ground, chatting with the Head.

In order to avoid detection, Jimmy wears a false moustache and a pair of false eyebrows. He plays through the match without his identity being discovered, but when the game is over Mr. Wilberforce asks Jimmy to take him back to Burchester by sidecar, Jimmy having borrowed Billy Desmond's motor-bicycle. Although fearful lest the editor should penetrate his disguise, Jimmy consents.

(Now read on.)

A Nightmare Journey.

EVANS, the burly skipper of Burchester United, was in the dressing-room when Jimmy Renton burst in, in a state of great agitation.

"What's up, man?" asked Evans, in surprise. "You haven't been bowled out by Wilberforce, surely?"

"No; but I'm afraid it's only a matter of time!" replied Jimmy breathlessly. "Why do you say that?"

"Wilberforce insists on my taking him back to Burchester in the sidecar." Evans gave a low whistle.

"You'll have to mind your eye, kid!" he said. "Don't go giving yourself away, whatever you do!"

"I'll try not to, for my own sake," said Jimmy. "But there's a chance that Wilberforce will recognise my togs. He hasn't twigged me while I've been in football clobber, but the moment he sees me in my blue serge suit he'll tumble to my identity."

"Then you must borrow my rainproof," said Evans, "likewise my cap, which you must pull well down over your eyes. The risk of your being spotted will then be reduced to a minimum."

"That's awfully good of you!" said Jimmy gratefully.

"Rot! Buck up and change your togs!"

Jimmy Renton hastily discarded his football attire, and donned his blue serge suit. Then he was helped into Evans' rainproof, which enveloped him from head to foot. He retained his false moustache and his false eyebrows, and he pulled Evans' cap well down over his forehead.

Jimmy made a hasty farewell to his St. Clive's friends, and apologised for not being able to spend more time in their company. Then he made his way to the ground exit, where Mr. Wilberforce was waiting for him.

Billy Desmond's motor-bike was standing close by. Jimmy rearranged the rugs in the sidecar.

"Hop in, sir!" he said.

The editor clambered in, and a moment later the machine was speeding along the main Burchester road.

Mr. Wilberforce was in a conversational mood.

"It was a splendid game," he observed—"splendid! You were in excellent form, Mr.—er—"

"My name's Vernon," said Jimmy truthfully. His second Christian name happened to be Vernon.

"Your winning goal was a master-
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piece, Mr. Vernon, and your play reached a very high standard throughout. There is a marked similarity between your style of play and that of a youth named Renton, who works in my office. Being a Burchester man, you probably know Renton?"

Jimmy shivered a little as he bent over the handlebars. He was feeling very uneasy, and he tried hard to change the subject.

"Wonder how the skating carnival went off at Abbotsford?" he said.

"I shall get a first-hand report of it this evening from Renton," said Mr. Wilberforce. "He is one of the reporters, and I sent him over to Abbotsford to describe the proceedings. He badly wanted to play for Burchester United this afternoon, but I declined to let him come. Duty comes before sport. Do you agree, Mr. Vernon?"

"Oh, absolutely!" said Jimmy. It was he who had been detailed to report the skating carnival at Abbotsford. But his staunch chum, Billy Desmond had undertaken to do the job in Jimmy's absence.

When Mr. Wilberforce got back to the newspaper office at Burchester he would find the report duly set up in type, and it would never occur to him that it had been written by anybody but Jimmy Renton. Jimmy hoped so, anyway.

There was silence for a time as the motor-bicycle negotiated a steep hill.

Jimmy hoped the silence would continue, but he was unlucky.

"Curious that I've never met you before, Mr. Vernon," said the editor presently. "I know nearly everybody in Burchester."

"I haven't been there long," said Jimmy.

"You are in business in the town?"

"Yes."
"In what capacity, might I ask?"
Jimmy hesitated. He hated telling downright fibs.

"I'm a journalist," he said at length. Mr. Wilberforce looked up quickly.

"A journalist?" he echoed.
"Yes. I work for one of the local papers."

"But there is only one local paper, and that is the one under my control, and you are not in my employ."

Jimmy Renton groaned. He was in a very tight corner, and he scarcely knew what to do.

"Your statement calls for an explanation, Mr. Vernon!" said the editor, rather sharply.

Having climbed the hill, Jimmy quickened his speed, and he pretended not to have heard his companion's remark.

"You say that you are a journalist on the staff of a local paper," said Mr. Wilberforce. "And the only local paper is my own. Yet you are not on my staff. What is all this mystery, Mr. Vernon? Pray enlighten me!"

"Sorry!" shouted Jimmy, as they dashed on at breakneck speed, with the wind rushing past their ears. "Can't hear what you say!"

Mr. Wilberforce repeated his remarks in a louder key. But Jimmy Renton seemed to have become afflicted with sudden deafness.

"It's no use, sir!" he panted. "Can't catch a single word!"

The editor gave a snort.
"I wish you wouldn't travel at such an excessive speed!" he growled. "I am not in a desperate hurry."

"But I am!" muttered Jimmy, sotto voce.

They were nearing Burchester now. Jimmy was compelled to slow up when they reached the High Street, with its
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congestion of slow-moving traffic. He turned to his companion.

"Where do you want me to put you down, sir?"

"I will go to my private house first," he said. "The Laurels, in Dudley Road. Perhaps you would be good enough to wait outside while I have some tea, and then take me along to the newspaper office."

"Sorry, sir," said Jimmy, "but I sha'n't have time for that! I've got an important appointment to keep."

"You are a very disobliging young man!" said Mr. Wilberforce. "Most people would be only too pleased to render assistance to a member of the Town Council and the editor of the local paper. However, I will not press you. If you will put me down at my private residence that will suffice."

"It'll jolly well have to!" muttered Jimmy under his breath.

He steered the machine into Dudley Road, and slowed up outside the editor's house. And as he did so he noticed, with a gasp of alarm and dismay, that Luke Rayner, his sworn enemy, was lounging on the pavement.

Jimmy hoped that Rayner would not suspect his identity.

Alas for his hopes!
Rayner came forward as the motor-cycle halted.

"I say, that's Billy Desmond's motor-bike!" he exclaimed. "How did you come by it?"

"I've got Desmond's permission to use it," said Jimmy. "It's quite all right."

"It's quite all wrong, in my opinion," said Rayner. "Who are you?"

"My name's Vernon."

In his agitation and bewilderment Jimmy Renton spoke in his natural voice. And both Rayner and Mr. Wilberforce, who was in the act of alighting from the sidecar, became suspicious.

Rayner stepped close up to Jimmy and peered into his face.

"Thought so!" he said, with a malicious grin. "The game's up, Renton!"

"Shurrup, you cad!" muttered Jimmy. "Don't give the game away!"

But the mischief was done. And in order to prove to Mr. Wilberforce that the driver of the motor-cycle was Jimmy Renton, Rayner tugged at Jimmy's false moustache, and it came away in his hand. Then he wrenched off the cap and the false eyebrows, and there could no longer be any doubt as to the driver's identity.

Mr. Wilberforce nearly collapsed on the pavement, so great was his surprise.

"Renton!" he gasped.

Jimmy said nothing. But the look he darted at Luke Rayner boded ill for that youth.

"Renton!" repeated the editor, like a man in a dream. "I have been deceived, misled—bamboozled! You shall pay dearly for this, Renton!"

"I spotted him right away, sir!" said Rayner proudly.

"Your powers of discernment do you credit, Rayner!"

"You can see what's happened, sir. Renton was supposed to go over to Abbotsford this afternoon to report the skating carnival. And he sent Desmond in his place. He borrowed Desmond's motor-bike to go to St. Clive's, and he adopted this disguise so that you wouldn't spot him!"

Jimmy's eyes were blazing with indignation. He could not trust himself to dismount from the motor-cycle. Had he done so Rayner would have got hurt—badly.

"You are undoubtedly correct. I will deal with you on Monday morning!" said Mr. Wilberforce sternly to Renton.

So saying, the editor went into his house. And Rayner, who for reasons of

his own did not wish to linger in the vicinity of Jimmy Renton, walked rapidly away.

As for Jimmy, he set the motor-cycle in motion once more, and rode slowly and thoughtfully away to Billy Desmond's lodgings.

The Order of the Boot.

BILLY DESMOND was awaiting his chum's return. He stood at the front gate, with a smile on his face.

Billy was always smiling. And it was characteristic of him that his smile was brightest when things looked blackest. He would have laughed through a howling wilderness.

He was smiling cheerfully now, though he could tell from the expression on Jimmy Renton's face that something was wrong. His first impression was that Jimmy was feeling sore because Burchester United had been beaten by St. Clive's. He did not dream that the worst had happened—that his chum had been bowled out.

"Hallo, Jimmy!" he sang out. "Licked?"

"No, we won!"
"Ripping!"

"But it was a costly victory, so far as I'm concerned," said Jimmy gloomily, as he dismounted from the machine.

Billy Desmond stared.

"You're speaking in riddles, old man," he said. "What's happened?"

"It's all up!" said Jimmy.
"Eh?"

"Wilberforce knows I played."
"Great jumping crackers!" gasped Billy Desmond. "How did you come to be bowled out?"

"When I got to St. Clive's, I found Wilberforce there. It appears he's a pal of the Head's. I borrowed a false moustache and a pair of false eyebrows, and played right through the match without being spotted. And then Wilberforce asked me point-blank if I'd bring him back to Burchester in the sidecar. Of course, I couldn't very well refuse without rousing his suspicions. So I brought him back, and ran the gauntlet of all sorts of awkward questions on the way. But I got through all right until we reached Wilberforce's house."

"Go on!" said Billy Desmond breathlessly. "What happened then?"

"That worm Rayner was hanging about outside. He recognised your motor-bike, and then he recognised me."
"Phew!"

"And he promptly gave me away to the chief. Result—I'm going to be dealt with on Monday morning—sacked, I suppose."

During the evening Billy Desmond did his level best to take his chum's mind off the calamity which Jimmy felt sure was impending. And Billy's good-humour proved to be so irresistible that by the time they parted Jimmy Renton was almost as cheerful as his chum. And instead of passing a sleepless night, as he might otherwise have done, Jimmy slept soundly in the little bed-sitting-room which constituted his home.

But when Monday morning came—one of those cold, bleak, cheerless mornings when everything seems out of tune—Jimmy Renton's spirits sank to zero.

Mr. Wilberforce would never overlook his offence, he reflected. He would not be given another chance. He would have to quit.

Jimmy ate practically no breakfast, and his landlady surmised that he was ill, and had "a high temperament." Possibly the good dame meant "temperature."

"I shouldn't go to that there orfis this mornin', Mr. Renton, if I was you!" she said.

"Afraid I must, Mrs. Higgs," said Jimmy.

"Surely the boss won't mind if you stops away jest for one mornin'?"

"I rather think he'll want me to stop away a good many mornings!" was the grim reply.

"You don't mean to say that you're goin' to be sacked, Mr. Renton?"

Jimmy nodded gloomily.

"But why?" asked the good-hearted Mrs. Higgs. "You ain't bin flirtin' with any o' them female typewriters, I 'ope?"

"I played footer when I ought to have been on duty, and the chief caught me."

"Ow very unforchunit!" said the landlady. "But cheer up, sir! 'Ope springs eternal in the long lane that 'as no turnin', as the proverb says."

Jimmy smiled slightly at Mrs. Higgs' quaint rendering of the proverb. Then, refusing her repeated invitations to "sit down an' 'ave some breakfuss," he set out for the newspaper office.

Billy Desmond was there when he arrived, but Luke Rayner had not yet put in an appearance. Probably he meant to keep out of Jimmy Renton's way as long as possible.

"Top of the morning, Jimmy!" said Billy Desmond. "How do you feel?"

"Down and out!" was the reply.

"Pull yourself together, man! I know what's wrong. You've got that Monday morning feeling. It'll pass off presently, when you've done a spell of work!"

But Jimmy Renton found it impossible to concentrate on work just then. His mind was full of dark forebodings.

If he lost his job—and he felt certain that he was about to lose it—how and where could he find another at a time when unemployment was rife?

"Buck up, Jimmy, for goodness' sake!" urged Billy Desmond. "You look about as cheerful as Charles Peace when he faced the hangman. Are you still worrying about Saturday's affair? You can take it from me, old man, that Wilberforce has forgotten all about it."

But Mr. Wilberforce hadn't forgotten. He arrived at the office half an hour later, and the violent manner in which he opened his roll-top desk showed that he was in a very bad temper.

There was a brief interval of suspense, and then the editor's face appeared at the peephole in the wall, and he said:

"Desmond!"

"Adsum!" murmured Billy.

"Step into my office for a moment. I wish to speak to you."

Billy Desmond walked fearlessly into the editor's sanctum.

"Rather a dull morning, sir," he remarked.

Mr. Wilberforce frowned.

"I am not prepared to discuss the climatic conditions with you, Desmond!" he said. "It has come to my notice that you were a party to a deception on Saturday afternoon. You went to Abbotsford to report the skating carnival in Renton's place, so that he might go off and play football. You aided and abetted him in deceiving me. Is that not so?"

"You've got rather an unpleasant way of putting things, sir," said Billy.

"What!"

"You talk as if it was a terrible crime; but there was nothing in it."

"Nothing in it?" snorted the editor.

"Why, you encouraged Renton to neglect his duty!"

"So long as the skating carnival was reported, I don't see that it mattered much who reported it, sir," said Billy Desmond. "Besides, it's a bit thick that we should have to work on Saturday afternoons. People in other professions have the afternoon free."

"A journalist, Renton, must be pre-

pared to work day and night if necessary. But I will not argue with you on the matter. I am the controller of this paper, and so long as I hold that position I shall do my utmost to discourage slacking. You have behaved outrageously, but on this occasion I will content myself by administering a severe reprimand. If there is a recurrence of such conduct, however, I shall ask you to take a month's notice."

Billy Desmond was silent.

"I have nothing more to say to you, Desmond," said the editor. "Send Renton in to me."

"Very good, sir."

Billy was smiling broadly when he emerged into the outer office. But from the very fact that he wore a broad smile Jimmy Renton knew that there was trouble brewing.

"I rather fear, brother James," said Billy, "that the chief's liver is out of order this morning. I expect he backed a couple of gee-gees on Saturday, and they both fell at the post. He wants to see you."

Jimmy Renton's face was pale, but his head was erect as he stepped into the editor's room.

The interview with the editor lasted barely a moment.

"In view of your recent abominable conduct, Renton," said Mr. Wilberforce, "I have decided that you cannot remain any longer in my employ. I had already warned you what would happen if you again neglected your work for football."

Jimmy said nothing. There seemed to be nothing to say. He watched the editor unlock the safe, and he wondered vaguely what was going to happen.

Mr. Wilberforce took out a bundle of Treasury notes, and proceeded to count them. Then he handed them to Jimmy Renton.

"One month's salary," he said briefly, "in lieu of notice."

Jimmy's head seemed to swim.

He had expected anything but this. He had reckoned on getting a month's notice, so that he would have time to look round for another job. But Mr. Wilberforce, in his drastic way, had decreed that he should go at once.

Jimmy's first passionate impulse was to tear up the notes and hurl the fragments into the wastepaper-basket. But he wisely refrained from making such a rash move.

"Your heart is not in journalism, Renton," said the editor. "It is in football. And I cannot afford to keep any man in my employ unless he puts the interests of the paper before all else. Good-bye!"

Mr. Wilberforce held out his hand. Jimmy Renton scarcely seemed to see it. He turned abruptly on his heel and quitted the room.

In the outer office Billy Desmond was anxiously waiting to hear the result of the interview.

"You're a rotten prophet, Billy!" said Jimmy Renton.

"What! You don't mean to say—"

"I've been given a month's money, and ordered to quit!"

"Good heavens!"

For once in a way Billy Desmond was not smiling. Had the misfortune been his own he would have smiled, and trusted to luck that he would fall on his feet. But it was his chum who was in trouble—Jimmy Renton, one of the best fellows breathing.

Billy Desmond had honestly believed that the worst would not happen. He had thought that Mr. Wilberforce would have overlooked the offence.

But Jimmy was sacked without even

the consolation of a month's notice. He was to go at once.

Fierce anger surged up in the breast of Billy Desmond. He rushed straight into the editor's office, and confronted Mr. Wilberforce with gleaming eyes.

"Desmond!" thundered the editor. "How dare you enter my room in this manner without knocking!"

"You've no right to sack Jimmy Renton!" exclaimed Billy Desmond. "It's unjust!—It's monstrous!"

Mr. Wilberforce rose from his revolving-chair.

"I will not be spoken to in this way!" he said angrily. "Leave my room at once!"

Billy Desmond realised that he had gone the wrong way to work—that he could not possibly do Jimmy Renton any good by slanging Mr. Wilberforce. So he calmed himself with a great effort, and made a quiet but eloquent appeal on behalf of his chum. He pointed out that Jimmy was a good worker and a good fellow, and that what had occurred on Saturday afternoon was merely a boyish escapade.

"It is no use, Desmond," said Mr. Wilberforce. "I appreciate your loyalty to a friend, but I cannot overlook Renton's conduct. He must go."

Billy Desmond saw that the editor's mind was made up—that nothing could shake his decision.

Further appeal would be worse than useless; and, realising this, Billy rejoined his chum in the outer office.

"I've argued with the chief, and tried to get him to change his mind," he said; "but it's not a scrap of good."

"You're a brick to put in a good word for me, Billy," said Jimmy Renton. "But Wilberforce doesn't seem disposed to grant me a reprieve, so it's no use my hanging around here. The sooner I shake the dust of this place from my feet the better."

"You're going now—at once?"

"At once," repeated Jimmy.

"What are you going to do, old man? What are your plans?"

"Haven't made any," was the reply. "You'll stay in Burchester?"

"No; I think I shall take to the road."

"Tramp the country, d'you mean?"

"That's it."

"Then, by gosh, I've a jolly good mind to come with you, Jimmy!" exclaimed Billy Desmond.

"I shouldn't let you, Billy. There are some lean times in store for me—some ugly times—and I shouldn't dream of asking you to share them. You've got a fairly decent job here. Hang on to it. You might not find it very easy to get another. And now I must be going. Heaven knows if I shall ever see you again, Billy. But I hope I shall. You've been a jolly good pal to me, and I sha'n't forget it. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye, Jimmy!"

The two chums shook hands, and neither could trust himself to say another word in that tense moment.

Jimmy Renton turned away rather abruptly, hoping that Billy Desmond had not noticed the tears which had welled to his eyes.

The door closed behind Jimmy Renton, and he was gone. And it seemed to Billy Desmond that a black shadow had fallen across his existence. His friendship for Jimmy Renton was of that loyal and unselfish kind which is so rare nowadays. And there was despair in his voice and in his heart as he muttered:

"Gone! And I shall never see him again!"

(Another grand instalment of this magnificent serial next week.)

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Magnificent Long, Complete Story of the Thrilling Adventures of Tom Merry & Co. with the Levisons.
By **MARTIN CLIFFORD.**

CHAPTER 1.

A Blow in the Dark!

A SHOT rang out sharply in the still night.

Tom Merry started from sleep, and sat up in his blanket, rubbing his eyes.

Tom had been dreaming of St. Jim's, as he lay rolled in his blanket under the southern stars; and for a moment, as he awakened, he fancied himself back in the dormitory at the old school. But recollection returned the next moment, as he rubbed his eyes and glanced about him.

The camp-fire was burning low; only a dull red glow came from the embers.

It glimmered on sleeping forms, stretched in dry grass with their feet to the fire.

Manners and Lowther lay on either side of him; farther off were Figgins and Fatty Wynn and D'Arcy, and Levison of the Fourth and his brother Frank.

Round them, dimly seen in the gloom, were the cowboys of Frio—two dozen sturdy men, rolled in blankets or thick Mexican serapes.

Texas Bill, the sheriff of Frio, sat on a log by the dying fire, talking in low tones with Mr. Levison.

Somewhere in the darkness outside the camp were the sentries, set by the Frio sheriff to keep watch and ward.

For the sheriff's "outfit" of Frio Crossing was in dangerous country now—on the borders of the Staked Plain of Texas—the refuge of the rustler, the cattle-lifter, and the fierce, wandering Apache.

The night was still on the Texan prairie; the silence broken only by the sigh of the wind in the branches of the great ceiba that shadowed the camp, and the occasional howl of a hungry coyote far out on the plain.

The sudden shot, echoing from the darkness, startled the cowboy camp; and as Tom Merry looked round him, sleeping forms started up, and blankets and serapes were thrown aside. A low, faint cry followed the shot.

The Frio sheriff leaped to his feet.

With a stamp of his heavy boot, he extinguished the last red embers of the fire, and darkness rushed on the camp.

Crack!

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Another shot rang from the night, and Tom Merry felt the wind of the bullet as it whistled over his head.

"Bai Jove! What's the wow, Tom Mewwy?" whispered the voice of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy at his elbow.

"An attack!" breathed Tom.

"Dirk Power again!" muttered Levison.

"Likely enough!" From the darkness came the thudding of a horse's hoofs, dying away in the distance towards the Staked Plain.

Texas Bill muttered an oath.

"He's gone!"

"Dirk Power!" whispered Mr.

Levison.

"I guess so!"

"But the sentry——"

"I guess the first shot came from the sentry," said the sheriff of Frio grimly.

"I guess he'll never fire another. Follow me, boys!"

With his revolver in his grip, the burly sheriff of Frio, strode out of the camp, with a dozen men at his heels. Tom Merry caught up his rifle and followed.

Tom's heart was throbbing.

Was the unseen assailant of the night Dirk Power, the man from Alaska—the half-mad avenger who had tracked the Levisons half across the world?

The tables had been turned upon the outlaw—he was now the hunted man, hunted for his life on the Texas prairies.

The sheriff's outfit was on his track—again and again his trail had been picked up, as the hunted man fled towards the desert of the Staked Plain. Like a hunted wolf, he had turned upon his pursuers in the darkness of the night.

The hoof-beats had died away in the distance; if it was Dirk Power, he was gone. But his victim remained.

The sheriff flashed the light of a lantern upon a figure that lay huddled in the grass by the stream where the camp was pitched.

It was the figure of the cowboy who had been keeping watch outside the sleeping camp. The man lay very still.

"I reckoned so!" muttered the sheriff of Frio.

"Is he—is he——" Mr. Levison muttered the question in a husky voice, but he could not finish.

Texas Bill nodded.

"I guess Dirk Power played Injun on him," he said quietly. "He crept

on him through the grass, and his knife did the rest. I reckon the galoot ought to have kept his eyes peeled!"

Tom Merry shuddered.

He turned back quietly to the camp.

"What's happened?" whispered

Figgins, as he came back.

"It's Dirk Power, without a doubt,"

said Tom. "He must have crept on the sentry, and—and——"

"Good heavens!"

"The man was able to pull the trigger

and give the alarm, or——" Tom Merry

shivered. "But for that, Dirk Power

would have riddled some of us 'as

we slept!"

"Bai Jove!" murmured D'Arcy.

There was no more sleep in the cowboy

camp that night.

Glad enough were the St. Jim's

juniors when the stars paled and the

flush of dawn crept over the prairie.

At the first gleam of dawn the sheriff's

outfit broke camp.

Tom Merry & Co. were saddling their

horses when a burly cowboy came in

from the plain. He had been seeking the

"sign" of the night-rider.

"You've got the trail, Buckskin?"

asked the sheriff.

Buckskin nodded.

"Plain as daylight, sheriff—right on

towards the Staked Plain. I guess we

ought to round him up under the bluffs

to-day."

"I reckon so!"

With Buckskin in the lead, the Frio

outfit rode from the camp, Tom Merry &

Co. following the cattlemen. And as the

sun climbed higher in the sky the great

bluffs of the Staked Plain loomed up

against the blue to the north-west.

CHAPTER 2.

On the Staked Plain—Missing!

BAI JOVE! What's that?" asked Arthur Augustus, waving his hand towards the horizon.

Texas Bill glanced round with

a smile.

"The Staked Plain, sonny!" he said.

The outfit rode on.

They were following the course of a

stream that ran down from the uplands

of the Staked Plain, along which ran

the trail of the horseman who had fled in the

night.

Ahead of them rose a long line of high bluffs, shutting off the horizon.

It was the edge of the great tableland known as the Staked Plain, or Llano Estacado, which rises almost sheer from the level of the prairies of Texas.

In the old days, when Texas was a part of Mexico, the Spaniards had marked the trail to the west—across the tableland—with high stakes planted in the ground. Long since the stakes had disappeared, but the tableland still retained its old name of the Llano Estacado, or Staked Plain.

Arthur Augustus surveyed the bluffs with a puzzled eye.

"Are we going up theah, deah boys?" he asked.

"Looks like it," answered Levison.

"I weally don't see how we shall do it—wathah like climbin' the wall of a house!"

"We shall get up by the river course," said Tom Merry, "unless we find Dirk Power on the lower plain."

"Yaas, I nevah thought of that!"

Near as the bluffs looked in the clear air of Texas, the Staked Plain was still at a good distance, and it was past high noon when the steep ascent of the tableland loomed close ahead of the sheriff's outfit.

Where the stream flowed and tumbled down from the uplands to the lower prairie a deep canyon split the line of bluffs, worn deep, from the upper level to the lower, in the course of many centuries.

Following the stream, the Frio outfit rode into the canyon, keeping their eyes well about them now.

The trail of the fleeing outlaw led them unerringly.

There was no doubt that Dirk Power had fled to the Staked Plain to escape the vengeance that was on his track, evidently hoping to find refuge in the wild and unexplored recesses of the desert.

Tom Merry wondered, too, whether the hunted man hoped to find friends there among lawless rustlers and wild Apache Indians.

The tables had been turned on the man from Alaska; but he was not beaten yet.

The outfit halted in the canyon for rest and food, and when they resumed their way it was necessary to lead the horses by the bridle up the steep watercourse.

Dusk was falling when they came out on the summit of the tableland.

The juniors looked round them with eager interest when they emerged from the canyon at last, upon the plain above.

Before them lay the famous Llano Estacado, stretching westward many a long mile—farther than the eye could reach.

There was no sign of a rider on the plain.

The outlaw's trail, which had been picked up more than once in the canyon, was lost now.

But they knew that Dirk Power was ahead of them, lurking somewhere on the dusky upland, and that he could not be far away.

The outfit pushed on in the falling dusk towards a big clump of timber that loomed up in the distance. It was a "motte," or timber island of the plain.

"I guess we camp there," said Texas Bill, "and to-morrow—"

The Frio sheriff's jaw set grimly.

Mr. Levison nodded, with a gleam in his eyes.

He did not seem now the same man who had fled in despair before the relentless pursuit of the half-mad man from Alaska. He seemed only keen to come to grips with his foe. It was Dirk Power now who was fleeing for his life, and the pursuit was as determined and unrelenting as his own had been.

A dozen great ceiba-trees, seventy or eighty feet high, rose from the plain in a group, laced with lianas, and mingled with giant cactus. Among the great trunks a spring bubbled up.

Texas Bill uttered an exclamation as he halted by the spring, under the roof-like branches of the ceibas.

In the mud by the water was the fresh print of a horse's hoof.

"I guess we're not far behind him now!" said the Frio sheriff. "I reckon we'll follow this up! The skunk may be hanging up among the timber at this minute!"

Buckskin dropped from his mustang, and examined the trail, and led the way on foot through the timber island.

On the farther side—the distance of two or three hundred yards—the horse's track entered the open plain, and ran on westward.

There it was lost, at a short distance from the timber, in an outcrop of sandy soil.

The sheriff stared westward over the darkening plain.

"I reckon it's no use till morning," he said. "Off-saddle here, boys, and we take the trail again at dawn."

And the outfit returned to the timber island, to camp under the trees.

"All the same, he ain't fur off," said Buckskin. "If I know anything of a hoss' track, his critter has gone lame, and he won't travel fur on the Staked Plain with a lame hoss!"

The sheriff nodded.

"To-morrow is Dirk Power's last day out!" he said. "The horse is dead lame—one of the hind tracks hardly marked. With another hour of daylight we'd run him to earth. But to-morrow I reckon we're roping him in!"

"Just a few!" grinned Buckskin.

There was a ringing of rifles in the timber, as the cowboys of Frio scattered to shoot game for their supper. There was plenty of game in the "motte," which was probably not trodden by a human foot once in the space of a year.

Tom Merry took his rifle, and plunged into the trees to lend his aid in providing supper. The Frio outfit travelled light, depending chiefly on their rifles for their food.

By the bank of the little spring the cheerful blaze of a camp-fire leaped up in the dusk. The juniors gathered fallen wood to feed the fire, while the cowboys brought in game to broil over it.

"This is something like!" remarked Fatty Wynn, as the agreeable smell of cooking spread about the camp.

"Yaas, wathah! It's time Tom Mewvy came in," said Arthur Augustus, glancing towards the shadowy trees round the camp. "I suppose he is still lookin' for game."

Crack!

A rifle rang in the distance.

"That's Tom, I suppose," said Monty Lowther. "His contribution will be rather late for supper."

It was quite dark now, and the outfit began their supper by the dancing light of the camp-fire. Lowther and Manners glanced several times towards the trees.

"Why the dickens doesn't Tom come back?" said Monty Lowther at last. "He can't be looking for game now."

"He can't have lost his way in the timber; the place isn't big enough," said Manners uneasily.

"Bai Jove! Nothin' can have happened to Tom Mewvy—"

"Impossible!" said Levison. "Dirk Power's far enough off; his trail led away from the timber, out on the plain."

"But—"

The juniors looked at one another, with a growing uneasiness in their breasts.

Where was Tom Merry?

CHAPTER 3.

A Fearful Doom!

WHERE was Tom Merry?

Tom had left the camp by the spring without a thought of danger in his mind.

The timber island was tenanted only by small animals and wildfowl, with perhaps snakes in the bunches of chaparral under the thick trees.

Of the madman from Alaska Tom was not thinking at all. Dirk Power's trail led away across the plains to the west, and there was no returning trail. But Tom Merry & Co. had not yet fathomed the cunning of the ruffian from the Yukon.

Tom was at a distance from the camp when a soft footfall behind made him turn his head.

He glanced round, expecting to see one of his comrades.

But the face that looked at him among the hanging lianas was a dark, coppery one, with burning black eyes; and Tom Merry almost staggered as the black eyes looked into his.

"Dirk Power!" he panted.

The man was springing upon him.

Tom Merry threw up his rifle instantly, and fired. But the shot was too hurried, and it missed the ruffian by a foot or more as he came on.

The next moment the St. Jim's junior was in the madman's grip.

He dropped his rifle, and returned grasp for grasp, struggling fiercely. But the junior, sturdy as he was, was an infant in the powerful grasp of the man from Alaska.

He was borne backwards into the grass, and as he opened his lips to shout for help a fierce hand gripped his throat and choked back the cry. A sinewy knee was planted on his chest, and the coppery face loomed over him, the burning black eyes gleamed down upon him.

Tom Merry gazed wildly upward at the savage face.

He expected instant death.

His heart throbbed almost to bursting. He was helpless—helpless in the grip of the madman, and the savage grasp on his throat choked into silence the cry he would have uttered.

As he pinned the helpless junior down in the grass the man from Alaska turned his head a little, listening.

They were not more than two hundred yards from the cowboy camp by the spring, but the thick tropical vegetation shut off every glimmer of the camp-fire.

Tom Merry groaned silently.

He knew that his comrades must have heard the rifle-shot; but he knew, too, that they would suppose that he was shooting game. Even the keen sheriff of Frio did not dream that the outlaw was still in the timber, and that the westward trail of the horse had been a cunning trick.

While his right hand gripped the junior's throat, Dirk Power had drawn a knife with his left.

With a sickness at his heart Tom waited for the thrust he could not escape.

But it did not come.

The man was listening.

Tom's brain cleared, and he understood. If there was a sound of his comrades coming to his help the knife would be driven to his heart, and the outlaw would flee. But there was no sound.

By the spring on the other side of the motte his comrades were eating their supper round the camp-fire, unconscious of his peril.

The man from Alaska seemed satisfied at last. He looked down at Tom Merry again, and made a motion with the knife, grinning.

Tom closed his eyes.

Still the lunge did not come.

There was a faint sound as the knife slid home into its sheath. Tom opened his eyes again, his face like chalk.

Dirk Power had sheathed his knife. The cruel, half-insane grin still played over his coppery face.

Tom could not speak. But his eyes sought the coppery face with a mute question.

The man could not intend to spare his life. He knew it. But what did he intend?

Tom's heart beat almost to suffocation. Still gripping the junior's throat with his right hand to keep him silent, the ruffian groped over him with his left. He snatched out the schoolboy's handkerchief and forced it into his mouth. It was a gag, and the ruffian bound it there with a wiry liana, almost choking the hapless junior.

Then he removed his grip from Tom Merry's throat.

"Safe now!" he grinned.

He cut several lengths of the wiry liana, and, using them as cords, bound the junior hand and foot.

Tom Merry had no power to resist.

In a few minutes he lay in the grass, utterly helpless, and the madman rose to his feet and stood looking down on him.

"You thought that I was gone—on the plains to the west?" he whispered, bending over the bound junior.

Tom Merry nodded.

"The sheriff reckoned so?"

Another nod.

Dirk Power laughed softly.

"I reckoned that was how they would figure it out," he said, in his sibilant whisper. "My horse was lame—you understand? He could not have carried me much farther." He laughed again, the soft, silent laugh that made Tom shudder. "I drove him out on the plain to leave a trail to deceive the Frio men when they arrived. I have succeeded. They do not know I am here—they will not know till they see me."

He grinned evilly, and his black eyes glinted.

"And you will not tell them, boy. When they find you again you will not be able to speak!"

Tom lay silent.

The man from Alaska stared again in the direction of the camp, and listened.

Then he bent over the junior and lifted him in his powerful arms.

Helpless in the grasp of his savage enemy, Tom Merry was carried deeper

into the thickest of the timber. Dirk Power stopped at last, and placed him upright against a tree. With fresh lianas he bound him there, securing the junior to the tree-trunk.

What did he intend?

Tom Merry could not imagine; but it was borne in upon his mind that the madman's revenge had planned for him some cruel death.

To his surprise, Dirk Power cut a long, slim branch, and thrust the end of it into the thicket close to the tree.

He was stirring up the thicket, and a sudden hissing and rattling sound showed what was his object.

A hideous head showed itself through the leaves, and the man from Alaska sprang back.

"Good-bye!" he said mockingly. "When your friends find you—"

He did not stop to finish, for the enraged serpent was wriggling angrily from the thicket.

Tom Merry's eyes distended in horror. The low, whirring sound, strangely like a rattle, that sounded in the thicket as the serpent moved, told him what it was—a huge rattlesnake, whose bite was death.

That was the revenge of Dirk Power.

The blows of the madman had disturbed and enraged the reptile, couched in the thicket, and Dirk Power had fled from its fury. But Tom Merry remained—bound and helpless.

Tom's eyes almost started from his head as he gazed at the fearful reptile. Two evil, glinting eyes seemed to meet his.

"Oh, Heaven!" the junior whispered inwardly. And he strove with all his force to move the gag in his mouth to cry for help to his comrades.

But the gag was too firmly fixed.

He could not utter a sound. The silence of the grave was round him, broken only by the gliding sound of the huge reptile in the grass, and the low whir of the warning rattle.

Closer and closer!

With white face and staring eyes the bound junior watched the reptile as it crept closer and closer—and closer still.

CHAPTER 4.

The Stampede!

"The horses seem to be restless," remarked Mr. Levison. He was sitting on a log by the camp-fire, his rifle across his knees, sipping hot coffee from a blackened tin can.

Texas Bill looked up from the fowl he was picking with the aid of his bowie-knife.

"Sure!" he assented.

The horses were staked out near the spring, close by the camp of the Frio outfit.

They had fed and drank, and were lying in the grass to rest. They lay beyond the radius of light from the camp-fire, but as the flames danced, an occasional gleam fell upon a glossy hide or a glimmering mane.

"A jaguar in the trees, perhaps?" said Levison of the Fourth.

The sheriff shook his head.

"Conchos Dick is looking arter them," he said. "I guess Dick won't let any painter come near the hosses."

But he rose from the log and stretched his brawny limbs, staring through the moving shadows towards the group of horses. There were sounds of stirring among them, showing that the animals were restless.

"What's wrong with the critters, Dick?" he called out.

There was no reply.

"Conchos Dick!" shouted the sheriff. His voice echoed among the trees, but there came no answer from the cow-

puncher who was guarding the horses. Texas Bill gave a start.

"Why the thunder don't he open his yamp-trap?" he ejaculated. "I guess Conchos Dick ain't gone deaf! Speak up, you galoot!"

But only the echo of his voice came back, and a renewed stirring among the staked horses.

Mr. Levison rose quickly to his feet, rifle in hand.

"It's not possible—" he began, with a startled look. Back into his mind came the remembrance of the sentry's fate the previous night, on the lower prairie.

The Frio sheriff gritted his teeth.

"I guess that fire-bug Power is fur enough away at this minute," he said. "But—"

Texas Bill did not stop to finish.

He grasped his rifle and ran towards the staked horses. Conchos Dick should have been watching them close at hand, but— In spite of himself, a chill dread was at the sheriff's heart.

Crack, crack!

Two sharp shots rang out suddenly among the horses, and there was a wild trampling and squealing.

A thunder of hoofs followed at once.

Texas Bill shouted a curse.

"Stampeded, by thunder!"

He rushed on savagely, half the camp at his heels. The horses were all on their feet now and trampling wildly. The trail-ropes had been cut, and the sudden firing in their midst had startled and frightened them.

"Round them in!" shouted the sheriff.

The frightened horses were dashing in all directions. Texas Bill threw up his rifle and fired, as he caught a glimpse in the shadows of a form mounted on one of the stampeding horses.

A yell of defiance answered.

"Dirk Power!" panted the sheriff.

A wild laugh came back from the darkness amid the thunder of trampling hoofs.

The horses were nearly all loose now, and those that were free of the trail-ropes were stampeding in all directions. Texas Bill stumbled over something that lay in the grass, and bent over it.

"Conchos Dick!" he said hoarsely.

The cowpuncher lay on his back in the grass, his eyes staring upwards at the branches of the ceibas—staring without sight. There was a crimson pool in the grass-roots by his side.

The sheriff's teeth came together hard. He was looking down upon a second victim of the outlaw.

"Round up the hosses!" he shouted hoarsely.

The Frio cowboys were already seeking to round up the scattering animals, and lassoes were slinging and whizzing on all sides.

But a number of the horses were plunging away wildly into the night, and were already beyond capture.

On one of them, as the sheriff now knew, was mounted the man he had believed far away—Dirk Power.

Once more the madman had outwitted his pursuers.

The horses that remained were roped in and led back to the camp; but nearly a dozen of them were missing.

Pursuit of the scared animals in the darkness was impossible. The Frio outfit gathered at the camp again, savage, and muttering curses.

"It was Dirk Power, Bill?" Mr. Levison asked huskily.

The Frio sheriff nodded.

"I guess so. I never saw him clearly, but who else? He was in the timber all the time—"

"But his trail—"

"A trick!" said Texas Bill through his

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teeth. "A trick. His hoss had fallen lame, and he meant to have one of our critters; that was his game. He drove his critter off to make a trail to blind us, and he's been hidden in the timber—" He gritted his teeth. "He crept on Conchos Dick from behind, and cooked his goose. Then he was loosing the horses—the hull caboodle would have been stamped in a few minutes more—and we'd have been left on foot—"

"Poor Dick's gone up," said Buckskin. "And—Tom Merry—" gasped Monty Lowther. "Mr. Levison, Tom hasn't come back to camp, and if that villain has been in the timber all the time—"

Lowther broke off, almost frozen with the horror that was in his mind. His face was white.

"It's nearly an hour since we heard Tom's rifle," Manners muttered. "Good heavens! What has happened to him?"

"Bai Jove!" whispered D'Arcy, white to the lips.

The St. Jim's juniors stared at one another.

The sudden discovery that Dirk Power had been at hand all the time since the outfit camped threw a light upon Tom Merry's absence.

They pictured him lying in the grass under the trees, in some remote recess of the timber island with sightless eyes looking up, as they had seen Conchos Dick.

"He must be searched for at once!" said Mr. Levison hastily. He looked at the sheriff of Frio.

"Keep together, and stop where you are!" snapped the Frio sheriff. "No man's to leave the camp, or boy either!"

"But Tom—" panted Lowther.

Texas Bill's jaw set grimly.

"If your pard's fallen in with Dirk Power, he's dead meat long ago," he answered.

"But—but—"

"Keep to the camp!" growled the big Texan. "If we scatter in the timber, Conchos Dick ain't the only galoot that will go up the flume this night!"

"But Dirk Power is gone—"

"More likely he's behind a tree only a dozen yards away, waiting for his chance with his knife!" growled the sheriff. "Stamp out that fire! Nothin' can be done till morning. Keep to the camp!"

"Oh, Heaven!" muttered Lowther.

He cast a desperate glance towards the surrounding trees. Black darkness enveloped them, as the last embers of the fire were stamped out.

Was the madman lurking at hand, with his knife in his grip, on the watch for a straggler from the camp?

It was only too likely.

Lowther realised that the sheriff was right. It was asking for death, without a chance, to plunge into the tangled recesses under the ceibas, amid the wild growth of liana and mesquite.

Every shadow might hide the ruffian, with his ready knife, lurking to claim a victim.

Within a dozen yards of the outfit he had crept on Conchos Dick, and the hapless cowpuncher had perished with a knife in his back, and a grip on his throat to keep back his last cry.

It was madness to scatter among the black thickets in search of Tom Merry—and the sheriff was in command. He had to consider the safety of the whole party, and the success of the expedition; and a straggler had to take his chance.

Texas Bill was right; but the hours that followed were terrible to Tom Merry's chums.

That he had fallen in with Dirk Power was certain now; and there seemed little chance that he was living.

There was little sleep in the cowboy

camp that night. The Frio outfit lay by their horses, and half the outfit remained awake. And of Tom Merry's chums not one closed his eyes.

They waited in the dragging hours of darkness, and prayed for dawn.

CHAPTER 5. A Night of Horror!

TOM MERRY stood against the tree, writhing in his bonds, dumb, his face pale with horror.

Dimly, like a black shadow in the darkness, he could make out the form of the reptile writhing closer to him.

He struggled madly to free himself.

But the tough lianas tied about his limbs held him as securely as cords could have done.

He could not move hand or foot, and the gag in his mouth silenced him. In dumb horror he awaited his fate!

There was no hope of rescue. Even if his comrades sought for him, they might be hours finding him in the dense mesquite thickets under the ceibas—if they found him at all. He could make no sound, and he could not be seen. Even if his comrades were seeking him at the moment, Tom Merry knew that he could not be found before dawn.

And long before that—hours before that—in a few minutes, probably, he would have fallen a victim to the rattlesnake.

In the dimness the whir-r-r of the rattle was faintly audible to his ears.

Something touched his leg, brushing him, sending a thrill of horror through his whole body.

It was the touch of the gliding coils of the serpent.

With dizzy horror he waited for the poisoned bite.

He knew that the reptile was savage and irritated by the blows Dirk Power had given it. The angry writhing and twisting in the grass showed that. Any instant it might strike—

He almost longed for the end, to finish his fearful suspense.

Would the reptile never strike?

His friends would find him in the morning, hanging in the liana ropes to the tree, dead, with the poison of snake-bite in his veins.

Would the end never come?

Minutes, that seemed like ages, dragged by over the horror-stricken junior.

Again something touched his leg and glided by, thrilling him with horror.

An angry hiss sounded in his ears, but it was farther away. Still he heard the reptile writhing in the mesquite.

The whir of the rattle was still in his ears; but it seemed farther away in the darkness. He strained his eyes, but he could no longer make out the thrashing coils of the rattlesnake.

A silent sob shook him.

Whir-r-r!

The junior comprehended, and hope, like new life, sprang up in his heart.

He had struggled to move, but the outlaw had done his work too well; and Tom realised that he had done it too well for his own purpose.

Had he moved, the rattlesnake would have struck at its victim; but it was the utter immobility of the intended victim that puzzled the reptile. A movement would have been fatal, but the tight liana cords, that cut into his flesh, had prevented a movement—and saved Tom Merry's life.

The disturbed reptile, after writhing round in the herbage for long, terrible minutes, had crept back into its lair.

Tom understood at last.

Within six or seven feet of him the rattlesnake was coiled up under the mesquite.

Tom waited. The whirring rattle was still now. There was deep silence in the thicket under the ceibas.

Was the horrible creature sleeping? He did not know. He knew that it had crawled back into its lair, from which the madman's blows had drawn it. He knew that it was still.

He knew, too, that had he been able to make a movement it would have drawn the reptile's attack upon him. He breathed a prayer of thankfulness.

He was in pain, his limbs ached with the tight bonds that confined him; but that seemed little to bear now that his fearful peril had passed, for the moment, at least.

Darkness shut him in—the darkness of black night. Silence, as of the grave.

But the silence was suddenly broken by the sound of firing and trampling and squealing horses in the distance—in the direction, as he guessed, of the camp.

What was happening there?

The madman, single-handed, could not have attacked the camp. But Tom Merry remembered the murdered sentry of the previous night, and he could guess something of what had happened.

The uproar died away.

Silence again.

The thought came into his mind that the din might have disturbed the rattlesnake in its lair, and he listened with anguished intentness.

But no sound or movement came from the reptile.

The hours of darkness crawled by.

Tom Merry's head fell upon his breast. In spite of his fearful danger, in spite of the pain in his limbs, sleep overcame him.

Again and again he dropped into sleep, only to reawaken with a start and a thrill of horror.

And again and again he dozed.

The long, long night wore away.

But for the gag in his mouth, Tom Merry would have cried aloud with joy when a faint, pearly light began to creep over the branches about and above him.

In the thicket the cicadas began to chirrup, greeting the new day.

Dawn at last!

With the first gleam of the sun started the merry chorus of the cicadas, and a prairie rabbit scuttled by the bound junior, almost touching him.

The pale gleam strengthened; a faint glow of the coming summer warmth penetrated to the chilled junior.

His weary, reddened eyes glanced round.

The rattlesnake was still quiet. But if it awakened with the day—

Were his friends seeking him yet?

There was a stirring in the mesquite, where the rattlesnake lay coiled. Tom Merry suddered as he heard the whir of the rattle.

Faintly through the trees and thickets came an echoing voice, faintly from afar.

"Tom! Tom Merry! Tom!"

It was Lowther's voice, calling.

"Tom Merry!"

He could not answer. He could not move. He could only hope and pray that his chums would find him.

"Tom!"

Many voices were calling now—he recognised Manners' voice from one direction, and D'Arcy's from another.

Whir-r-r!

Perhaps the shouting and the crashing in the underwood had disturbed the rattlesnake. A hideous head whisked from the mesquite, a dozen feet from the bound junior—the same horrible head that he had seen in the dying dusk of the previous evening.

Since then he seemed to have lived through a lifetime of horror.

"Tom, Tom!"

Then the voice of Buckskin, the cowboy.

"Hyer's a track, I guess—hyer's the kid's track. And I guess this hyer is that fire-bug's trail!"

"Tom, Tom!"

They were not a dozen feet away, but the thick mesquite shut him off from their sight like an impenetrable screen. He could not warn them of the rattlesnake. He heard the trampling in the thickets coming closer, and he could not warn his friends of their peril. There was a faint hiss, and the reptile writhed closer to Tom Merry—closer, till the terrible coils were brushing on his riding-boots. He caught the glint of evil eyes. He heard Buckskin's voice shout:

"Look out! Can't you hear the rattle? Stand back, I tell yer! There's death in the mesquite!"

A crash in the thicket, an angry hiss from the reptile, and Tom Merry saw the hideous head drawn back to strike, and he closed his eyes. And at that terrible moment his senses mercifully failed him; his head sunk forward on his breast, and was still.

Tom Merry had fainted.

CHAPTER 6. Left Behind!

"TOM!"

"Tom, old fellow!"

Tom Merry opened his eyes dizzily.

Where was he?

He tried to raise himself, and sank back, with strange pains shooting through his limbs.

"Tom!" Monty Lowther's voice was husky and broken. "Safe now, old chap—all safe now!"

Tom glanced round him dazedly.

He was lying on the grass, close by the dead camp-fire; overhead the morning sunlight streamed through the interlaced branches of the ceibas. Texas Bill and Mr. Levison were at his side—his head rested on Mr. Levison's knee.

"What—what's happened?" breathed Tom.

"Quiet, my boy!" whispered Mr. Levison. "You'll be all right soon. The water, Frank!"

Frank Levison handed his father a tin pannikin of water from the spring. With a tender hand Mr. Levison bathed Tom's brow with it. The Shell fellow of St. Jim's tried to pull himself together. He remembered the horror of the night, and shuddered.

"Was I—was I bitten?" He shuddered again. "Oh, Heaven, was I—"

"No, no!" said Mr. Levison. "The pain you feel is only from the cords that bound you—"

"Oh!" panted Tom.

"All wight now, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus, half crying. "It's all sewene now, old top. Wight as wain!"

"But the snake?"

"Buckskin killed it just as it was about to strike," said Mr. Levison. "He was just in time to save you."

"I calculate it was touch and go, sonny," said the big cattleman, looking down on Tom Merry, with a grin. "But you're safe and sound. You wasn't touched by the sarpaint, arter all."

Tom Merry rose to his feet, with Monty Lowther's assistance. His face was white, and the horror of that fearful night lingered in his eyes. But he was coming to himself again.

"I'm all right now!" he muttered. "You saved my life, Buckskin!"

"I guess so, kid. I reckon it was Dirk Power that tied you up and left you to the rattle?"

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"Yes," breathed Tom.

"And—and all night——" faltered Lowther.

"Yes."

"Poor old chap!" whispered Arthur Augustus. "What you must have gone through! But, thank Heaven, we found you in time!"

"Oh, that villain!" muttered Manners, clenching his hands.

"I guess he's going to pay for it, along with the rest," said the sheriff of Frio. "It's a rope and the limb of a tree for Dirk Power when we lay hands on him. Saddle up, boys!"

Tom Merry sat on a log by the dead fire. A can of coffee revived him a little, and he soon found that he was able to eat. His chums remained with him while the sheriff's outfit were saddling up.

"Is Texas Bill starting now?" asked Tom.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"But we——"

"We're staying here!" growled Levison of the Fourth. "There's not horses enough for all now."

He explained what had happened at the camp during the night. Mr. Levison came over to the group of juniors.

"You understand, my boys?" he said. "Dirk Power's trail has been picked up. He is fleeing to the west across the Staked Plain on the horse he stole last night. We are going to follow. And you will be in no danger here; but you must keep a sharp look-out, and not separate. I can trust you to do that."

"Yes, father," said Levison. "But if——"

"But——" said Tom Merry.

"It cannot be helped," said Mr. Levison. "The horses were stampeded last night by that villain Power, and some of them have galloped too far for recovery. If we spent our time hunting for the horses Dirk Power would get clear away. There are enough horses to mount the sheriff's men, and as some must remain behind, it is better for you boys to stay."

"Bai Jove! I don't quite see that, sir," said Arthur Augustus warmly. "I wathah think we should be quite as useful as the cowpunchahs in dealin' with that wascal when we come up with him."

Mr. Levison smiled slightly.

"You cannot expect the sheriff to think so, my boy," he said. "You boys will remain here. We shall pass this way on our return, after tracking down Dirk Power. Wait here for us. Keep your rifles loaded, and keep a sharp look-out; and, above all, do not separate. It is not likely that Power will double back in this direction, but you must not be off your guard for a moment."

"Oh, vewy well, sir!"

"Good-bye! We hope to be back by to-night."

The sheriff's outfit was already starting, and Mr. Levison hurriedly mounted his horse and followed.

The cowboys rode out of the timber island to the west, and disappeared from view on the grassy plain.

Tom Merry & Co. remained in the timber island.

They were in a far from contented mood.

No doubt the sheriff of Frio was acting for the best; the loss of the horses left him nothing else to do. There were enough horses saved from the stampede to mount the Frio outfit, and as some members of the party had to be left behind, the sheriff had naturally decided to leave the schoolboys.

Tom Merry & Co. admitted that he was right, so far as that went, but they were very far from pleased.

It was very probable that Dirk Power

would be run to earth that day on the Staked Plain, but if he was not the chase would go on. And the juniors did not want to kick their heels in camp in the timber whilst the last fight was fought out with the desperado from Alaska.

Tom Merry was thinking the matter out as the sun rose higher towards noon. After the departure of the outfit Tom had rolled himself in his blanket to sleep. He needed repose after his fearful experiences of the night. But he did not sleep for long. He woke to find Fatty Wynn broiling meat over a new fire, with a contented expression on his fat face. The other fellows were conversing in very dissatisfied tones. Tom Merry lay in his blanket, watching the cooking at the fire, and thinking.

"How do you feel now, Tommy?" asked Lowther, as he saw that his chum's eyes were open.

Tom smiled.

"Right as rain!" he answered. "A bit stiff in places, where that villain tied me up, that's all."

"Thank goodness it was no worse," said Manners, with a shiver.

"Yaas, wathah! You must be vewy careful not to wander out of my sight again, Tom Mewwy," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy impressively. "I am speakin' for your own good, you know."

"Fathead!" said Tom cheerily.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"I've been thinking, you fellows," said Tom Merry abruptly. "We're left behind, and that's right enough, as far as it goes. I'm willing to admit that the Frio cow-punchers are more useful on Dirk Power's trail than we are——"

"I hardly agwee with you, Tom Mewwy——"

"Rats, old chap! But the fact remains that we don't want to kick our heels here," said Tom. "I can see you think the same, Levison?"

Levison of the Fourth nodded.

"I'm not going to kick my heels here!" he said grimly. "If we can't go forward riding we can go on foot. The trail's enough to follow—there's two dozen horses' tracks."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Mr. Levison told us to keep together," said Tom. "Well, we can keep together—on the trail!"

"Hear, hear!" said Figgins heartily.

"If there's a fight we may come up in time to take a hand in it," said Tom.

"Who knows that Dirk Power mayn't have friends in this desert? He was a cattle-lifter in this region once. The sheriff's outfit may run into a gang of rustlers."

"Not at all unlikely," said Manners. "But there's two dozen of them. They could deal with a good many rustlers."

"Every little helps in a scrap," said Figgins. "And the fact is we're not going to stick here."

"That's my idea," said Tom.

"I approve of your ideal, deah boy," said D'Arcy. "I vote that we take the twail atah lunch, and follow on."

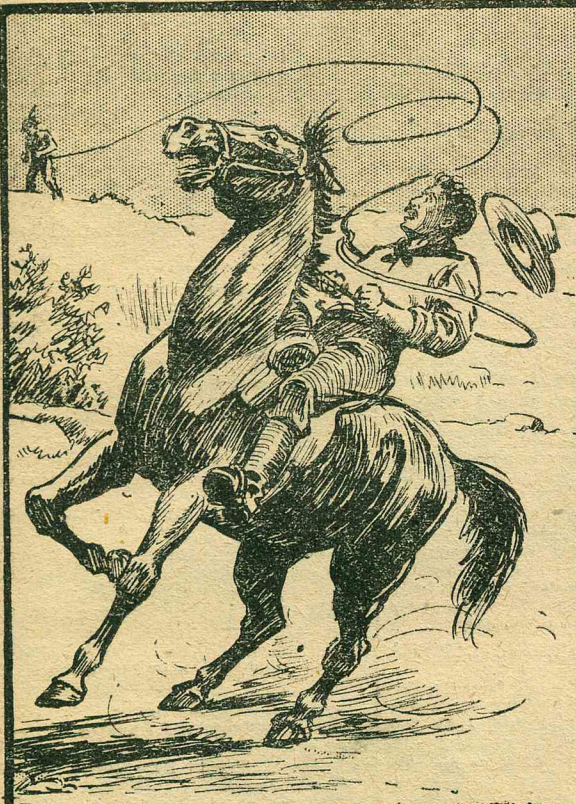
"Hear, hear!" chirruped Frank Levison.

"I am determined on it!" said Levison of the Fourth. "My father's there in danger, and I'm going on. You fellows all agree?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

There was not a dissentient voice. And when Fatty Wynn's cooking had been disposed of Tom Merry & Co. looked to their rifles and quitted the timber island, tramping forward on foot on the well-marked trail left by the sheriff's outfit of Frio.

(Continued on page 12.)



1. Suddenly there came the whiz of a hurtling lasso. Before Dirk Power could escape the noose had settled over his shoulders. (See page 12.)

2. Tom Merry was borne backwards, and as he opened his lips to shout the fierce hand of Dirk Power gripped his throat, and choked back the cry. (See page 7.)

3. Tom Merry cautiously climbed the trunk of the ceiba-tree and peered down into the ravine below. "Oh heavens!" he muttered. "Redskins!" (See page 14.)

CHAPTER 7. The Apaches!

WHIZ! Dirk Power gave a jump. A curse dropped from his lips as the rope settled over his shoulders, and he clutched at it with savage haste.

It was high noon, the sun blazed down upon the dusty levels of the Staked Plain, and the cactus scorched in the heat. Dirk Power had halted on the steep bank of an arroyo that split the plain, and he was looking back the way he had come, ere he descended the slope to water his horse at the stream.

He was not many miles ahead of the Frio outfit, he knew, for after stampeding the horses he had lingered in the motte for hours in the darkness, in the hope of picking off stragglers from the camp. It was only an hour before dawn that he had turned his stolen horse westward and had ridden away from the timber. And at dawn he knew the Frio outfit would be riding fast on his track.

The outlaw was well mounted now; he had seized one of the best of the stampeded horses. On the edge of the arroyo he sat in the saddle, looking back to read the slightest sign of the pursuers in the distance on the sun-scorched plain.

But there was no sign yet. High in the distance a black vulture wheeled to and fro, a speck in the blue. It was the only living thing to be seen as far as the eye could reach over the expanses of the Staked Plain.

And then from the dusky arroyo at his side came the sudden whiz of a hurtling lasso.

Well the outcast knew the sound of the whizzing rope, but before he could escape it the noose had settled over his shoulders.

He tore at it fiercely. Who had roped him in he could not guess. He knew it could not be one of Texas Bill's outfit. The Frio men were far behind. Some lurking denizen of the desert, hidden in the arroyo, had seen him and flung his lasso; and the man from Alaska, though he struggled fiercely in the encircling rope, knew that he was a prisoner.

A sudden jerk at the tautening rope, and the outlaw was plucked from his saddle.

He came to the hard earth with a dizzy crash, sprawling there, panting, his arms pinned to his sides by the tightening noose.

Footsteps sounded on the rocky slope of the arroyo.

An exclamation of triumph fell upon his ears in a strange tongue, which, strange as it was, the outlaw knew. It was an Apache Indian who had roped him in.

The Redskin scrambled out of the arroyo, still gripping the lasso, and his dark face bent over the sprawling outlaw.

The black eyes glinted down at Dirk Power as he stared upward, his arms pinned to his sides, helpless.

In the sunlight the bare blade of a knife glittered in the dusky hand of the Redskin.

The Apache grinned down at him.

Lurking in the arroyo, the Redskin had seen him advancing, and lain in wait for him, and Dirk Power, thinking only of the pursuers behind, had fallen a helpless victim to the wandering Apache.

The coppery face of the man from Alaska blanched for a moment. There was murder in the eyes of the Apache as the dusky hand drew back the knife above the helpless white man.

Was that the end of the long trail, then, after escaping so many foes, to die

under the knife of an outcast Apache in the desert of the Staked Plain?

But even as the knife glittered before his eyes Dirk Power's expression changed as his glance read the dusky face above him.

"Chico Colorado!" he exclaimed. The Redskin paused.

For a moment or two he seemed puzzled, and the threatening knife still hung over the helpless man. And then a flash of recognition came into the Apache's eyes.

"El Cuchillo!" he said, and he lowered his knife.

Dirk Power nodded and grinned. "El Cuchillo" was the name he had borne among the Indian outcasts of the Staked Plain whom he had known in the old days. Chico Colorado, the outcast Apache chief, was an old acquaintance.

Chico sheathed his knife. Without a word more he released Dirk Power from the gripping noose of the lasso.

The outlaw rose to his feet. He was smiling now. The terrible danger he had passed through only a minute before left no trace on the hardened ruffian. He had fallen in with a comrade of the old wild days at an hour when he sorely needed aid.

"You had not forgotten me, Chico?" he exclaimed.

"Chico Colorado has not forgotten his white brother," he said. "But many moons have passed since El Cuchillo has been seen on the Llano Estacado, and at first his features were strange. My brother has returned to his old hunting-ground."

"And is glad to find an old comrade," said Dirk Power. "I am pursued at this moment—there are a score of braves on my track!"

"Palefaces?" "The sheriff's outfit of Frio!" Dirk Power looked back across the plain. Still nothing living was to be seen save the black vulture wheeling in the distance over the dusty cactus. "You are not alone here, Chico?"

Chico Colorado made a gesture towards the arroyo.

"My young men are there," he said. "How many?" asked Dirk Power eagerly.

The Apache held up his hands, with the fingers extended, thrice. The outlaw's eyes gleamed.

"Thirty braves? Good! That is as many as the sheriff's outfit numbers all told, and I guess some of them will be left behind on foot."

He went on to speak rapidly in the Apache tongue.

Chico Colorado listened in stolid silence, occasionally nodding his dusky head.

Dirk Power turned at last to lead his horse down into the arroyo, following the lead of the Apache.

At the bottom of the watercourse they stepped into the rippling stream, and followed its course for a few hundred yards.

Dirk Power's eyes were gleaming with exultation now.

The horses and arms of the Frio outfit were a prize more than sufficient to tempt the tattered braves who followed Chico Colorado. There was plunder for the outcast Apaches—desperate ruffians who had broken out of the Indian reserve and taken up a wild life on the llano, in defiance of the white man's government—and there was vengeance for the man from Alaska. Once more he was able to turn upon his foes, and become the assailant instead of the assailed.

Chico Colorado made him a sign, and

they stepped from the stream into a thicket of mesquite.

The Apache led the way through the thicket, and in a few minutes they were in the Indian camp.

Thirty or more tattered-looking ruffians were sprawling there in the shade of the rocks, resting till the noontide heat should have passed. They sprang up and seized their rifles at the sight of the white man.

But a word from Chico Colorado quieted them.

Among the red-skinned outcasts Dirk Power recognised more than one acquaintance of former days, when he had been a cattle-raider on the Texan prairie, and in league with the Apaches.

"At last!" he muttered, as he looked over the savage, motley gang. "At last! The sheriff of Frio is riding his last trail—he is riding to his death! And Levison—"

His eyes blazed with the light almost of madness as he thought of his old enemy.

For some time the man from Alaska was in deep consultation with Chico Colorado and two or three other Apaches, the rest listening stolidly. Then there was a move in the Indian camp.

Under the blazing southern sun the Frio outfit were riding on on the trail of the Alaskan. But it was to a deadly ambush that they were riding now.

CHAPTER 8.

Caught in the Ambush!

HALT!" Texas Bill pulled in his horse.

The sun had passed the meridian, and was sinking westward towards the distant Rocky Mountains.

The sheriff of Frio drew in his horse on the steep bank of the arroyo where a couple of hours before Dirk Power had been roped in by the Apache.

Buckskin, the tracker, had picked up the outlaw's trail to that spot almost without a halt.

A dozen of the stampeded horses had escaped from the camp in the motte, but it had been easy for the experienced plainsman to pick out the track of the animal ridden by the outlaw. The track of a ridden horse differs from that of a riderless animal in random flight.

"I guess he stopped here," said Buckskin, dismounting, and making an examination of the ground.

"There's water below in the arroyo," said the sheriff. "He stopped for that, I reckon. But he wouldn't camp here—he knows we're close behind him."

The horsemen waited while Buckskin made his examination of the trail. The plainsman seemed a little perplexed when he rose to his feet at last.

"I guess he went down into the arroyo," he said. "But the ground's been stirred up; he's been trying to wipe out his tracks. But there's no trail on from this hyer spot, and I reckon he went down into the arroyo, unless he flew up into the sky. Our way lies down the bank."

Texas Bill stared steadily down into the deep arroyo.

The stream flowed at a depth of fifty feet below the level of the plain, and the sloping side was rocky and abrupt. Down on the banks were thickets of mesquite and cactus and mimosa, with a few trees shadowing the stream. It was a place where a determined man, lurking among the rocks, could have put up a desperate fight against odds, and the Frio sheriff wondered whether the man from Alaska was turning to bay at last. But his way lay onward, whatever the danger.

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The outfit dismounted, and Buckskin led the way down into the arroyo. The cowboys led their horses by the bridles as they followed Buckskin and the sheriff.

Mr. Levison was at the sheriff's side, his revolver in his hand, as he led his horse.

The outfit reached the stream below, and halted in the shallow water, the precipitous bank giving little space.

"Up or down stream, Buckskin?" said the sheriff. "I guess he's taken to the water to hide his trail."

"Looks like it, sheriff."

Buckskin scanned the arroyo with searching eyes.

The horses' hoofs left tracks in the sand at the bottom of the shallow stream, but the flow of water rapidly washed them out. There was no trail of the outlaw to be picked up now.

All the Frio outfit knew that the desperate man might be lurking behind any of the jutting rocks along the river-course, and that at any moment the ring of his rifle might be heard.

Every eye was on the alert, every weapon was ready, while Buckskin was seeking up and down the arroyo for a trace of the fugitive.

A dozen yards down the stream Buck-

skin stopped, and waved his hand to his comrades.

"They led their horses onward.

"I guess he came this way, sheriff," said the burly plainsman, with a grin. "He's left his signature hyer."

"He's taken to a sandbank that rose a little above the level of the water. In the sand were the distinct marks of a horse's hoofs. Texas Bill stared at the track.

"I guess that's plain enough," said Buckskin.

"Too plain, I guess," said the Frio sheriff. "Dirk Power could have kept off the sandbank if he'd liked. Mighty keenness of him, I reckon."

"I guess he's getting rattled," remarked Buckskin.

"He was in haste to get away, of course," said Mr. Levison.

The sheriff nodded slowly. "Sure!" he assented. "But keep your eyes peeled, boys, and keep your guns handy. I reckon that trail is a bit too easy for my liking. It sure looks as if he wanted us to follow on."

"That is scarcely likely," said Mr. Levison, with a smile. "He knows what to expect when we come up with him."

"That's so; but—"

The sheriff scanned the lonely arroyo

suspiciously. There was no sign of life to be seen, save the fishes that were playing in the deeper pools of the stream.

"Well, get on!" said Texas Bill at last.

The outfit pushed on.

The led horses splashed on through the shallow water, along the course of the stream. Only the echoes of the splashing broke the silence of the deep ravine.

Twice or thrice again Buckskin picked up traces of the fugitive's horse on the sandbanks that rose from the shallow water. There was no doubt that they were close on the outlaw's track. Buckskin stopped at last where the mesquite-thicket on the bank showed torn and broken, as if a horseman had forced his way through from the stream.

Texas Bill's eyes gleamed.

Had the fugitive, wearied by the long pursuit, lain down in the thicket to rest at last, in the heat of the day? It seemed possible enough. Mr. Levison's grip closed more tightly upon the butt of his revolver.

"Keerful, now!" muttered the Frio sheriff. "I guess we're close on the outlaw now, but—"

"Look out for his gun now!" grinned Buckskin.

He led the way cautiously through the mesquite.

Beyond the thicket was an abrupt rise in the steep side of the arroyo to a rocky plateau half-way up to the plain above.

The rise was steep and rocky, and impossible for horses. Buckskin scanned the rocks with a keen eye.

"The trail comes up right hyer," he said. "But he never got his critter up those rocks. He—"

The plainsman was suddenly interrupted.

From the plateau on the arroyo side, twenty feet above the outfit, came a sudden blaze of rifle-fire.

It was not the crack of a single rifle, such as the outfit had been expecting every moment since they had entered the arroyo.

Thirty rifles at least rang out together, and a blaze of bullets tore down upon the Frio outfit in the mesquite at the foot of the slope.

There was a yell from the cowboys, and a wild squealing of wounded horses. The arroyo rang with deafening echoes.

Texas Bill uttered a fierce oath.

"Trapped!" he yelled.

Crack, crack, crack!

Hidden among the rocks above, the unseen riflemen poured in a savage fire upon the outfit below.

But for the thick mesquite that screened them probably every man in the outfit would have been shot down at first fire. As it was, half a dozen men, and twice as many horses, were writhing on the ground.

"Trapped!" muttered Mr. Levison between his teeth.

He understood at last.

Dirk Power was alone no longer. And his track had been left plain along the arroyo to lead the pursuers into the ambush laid for them.

Above the rattling of the rifles rose the savage yell of the Apaches.

"Injuns!" muttered the sheriff between his teeth. "Fire—fire!"

The Frio cowboys blazed away with rifle and revolver. Over the rocks appeared savage faces and flaunting feathers, as the Apaches rushed down to finish their deadly work at close quarters with knife and tomahawk.

But the fierce fire that met them on the rocky slope stopped the savage rush of the red men.

Five or six of them toppled over among

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the cactus, and the rest, as if by magic, vanished again among the rocks.

Dirk Power's voice was heard shouting in the Apache tongue. The fire recommenced from above.

"After them!" roared Buckskin, rushing furiously up the rocky slope.

The sheriff dragged him back into the mesquite.

"Cover, you fool!" he rapped out.

Crack, crack, crack!

There was no help for it.

The fire from above would have swept the whole outfit away in a charge up the steep rocks, and the bullets were already searching out every corner of the mesquite thicket that sheltered them on the bank.

Abandoning their horses, that went plunging wildly away through the scrub, the Frio cowboys surged back to the stream.

With bullets splashing round them they plunged across the shallow stream, to cover among the rocks on the other side.

The Frio sheriff's bronzed face was almost white with rage as he dropped into cover behind a boulder across the arroyo.

The Apaches were still firing, the bullets whizzing across the stream, but the fire was futile now; what remained of the Frio outfit was safe in cover.

Mr. Levison panted as he dropped beside the sheriff. There was a streak of blood on his cheek, where a bullet had grazed him.

Texas Bill ground his teeth.

Eight men of the outfit had been left in the mesquite, and their groans died away under the savage shooting of the Apaches. Half of the men who had escaped were scratched.

The sheriff, Buckskin, and Mr. Levison were safe in cover, with fourteen of the Frio cattlemen, some wounded. Their horses were gone—some of them dead in the mesquite—some trampling madly away down the arroyo. Mr. Levison's face grew pale. Across the arroyo came a shout, and they knew the voice of Dirk Power.

"Texas Bill! Are you skulking there, Texas Bill?"

The Frio sheriff ground his teeth.

"I guess I'm hyer, Dirk Power!" he shouted back. "Show yourself in the open, you skunk!"

A wild laugh answered.

"I guess not! Is Levison with you?"

"Sure!"

"Give him up to me, and I will spare the lives of what's left of you."

"Come and take him!" retorted the sheriff.

"I guess I'll do that at sundown."

The madman's mocking laugh rang again, and then there was silence, save for the muttering of the wounded cowboys among the rocks, and an occasional crack of a rifle across the arroyo.

Mr. Levison looked at the Frio sheriff. His face was almost haggard.

"What now?" he muttered.

Texas Bill shrugged his burly shoulders.

"I guess we're so close to the finish it makes no diff," he answered coolly.

"That devil has been one too many for us. Hyer we are—sixteen or seventeen of us, half of us wounded, and dismounted all. If we show our noses over the rocks they'll pick us off like prairie rabbits. They're higher up, and they have the pull on us. And there's twenty or thirty of the red demons. We've run into a trap, and—"

"And—"

"The game's up," said Texas Bill, shrugging his shoulders again. "We'll make them pay dear for it before they get our scalps, that's all. At dark they'll come creeping on us like the demons

they are, and it will be hand-to-hand, with heavy odds agin us. The cards have gone agin us in this game, pardner."

"And—the boys?" whispered Mr. Levison.

"I reckon, arter they've squared us, they'll go brak and look for the boys," muttered the Frio sheriff. "It's a black look-out for them; but we all knew we were taking our lives in our hands when we followed that devil incarnate into the Staked Plain, pard. The cards have gone agin us, that's all."

"And this—is the end of the trail!" muttered Mr. Levison, between his twitching lips.

"Sure!"

Then there was silence. In cover, safe for the moment, the remnant of the Frio outfit waited and watched. Escape was impossible, for the moment a head rose from cover a rifle rang across the arroyo. They could only wait—wait for the fall of night, which was to bring the rush of the savage Redskins—and the last desperate struggle—and death! Was that the end of the long trail?

CHAPTER 9.

Tom Merry & Co. to the Rescue!

TOM MERRY raised his hand.

"Hark!" he muttered.

"Shooting!" said Monty Lowther.

Tom Merry & Co. stopped and listened.

Under the westering sun they were tramping across the dusty plain. The long tramp had wearied them, but they were keeping doggedly on. There was no difficulty in keeping the track; the hoof-prints of the sheriff's outfit lay broad and well-marked before them, and they could almost have followed blindfold.

But on foot it was a weary trail.

The juniors tramped doggedly on, and mile after mile of the desert had vanished under their dusty boots. It was late in the afternoon when the sound of firing, far in advance, was borne to their ears by the wind across the Staked Plain.

"They've got him!" said Manners.

"Bai Jove! They've come up with the wottah, and he is holdin' them off, you know!" said Arthur Augustus. "We shall be in at the finish, aftah all, deah boys!"

Tom Merry's eyes gleamed.

"Come on!" he said.

The juniors tramped on.

That the sheriff's outfit had stopped was certain, if the firing came from them; they had been riding on they would have been many a long mile ahead of the followers on foot, and far out of earshot. Little as Tom Merry & Co. knew it, it was many hours since the outfit had stopped in the ravine; and while the schoolboys had been tramping on, mile after mile, the Frio cowboys had lain in cover in the arroyo, exchanging occasional shots with the Apaches across the stream. Tom Merry & Co. were far from dreaming of the true state of affairs. They pictured, in their minds, the man from Alaska cornered and desperate, turning to bay on his pursuers. That the madman now held the upper hand was far from their imaginings.

The firing had died away, but it was renewed—every few minutes there came the crack of a rifle in the still afternoon. Ahead of them, at last, the dusty juniors could see the cleft of the arroyo, splitting the plain. The well-marked trail ran right on to the arroyo, but they did not follow it to the end. The cracking rifle-fire came from the arroyo at a spot nearly a quarter of a mile down the course of the ravine, and Tom Merry & Co. turned from the trail, to approach the spot more directly.

Crack-ack!

The echoing shots seemed under their feet as they drew near to the abrupt edge of the arroyo.

Overhead black vultures were circling with hoarse screams, and Tom Merry shuddered as he noted them. He knew what the presence of the hideous "zopilotes" meant. There had been death in the arroyo deep below. Again a rifle cracked in the ravine.

"There's fighting going on," said Levison quietly. "Keep your eyes open. We don't want to run into the wrong party."

"Dirk Power must have been cornered down there in the ravine," said Figgins.

"We shall soon see," answered Tom Merry. "Wait here while I scout a bit!"

Tom crept forward to the edge of the arroyo on hands and knees, taking care to keep out of sight from below. How affairs were going on in the arroyo he did not know, but he knew that caution was necessary. Almost on the verge of the arroyo grew a stunted ceiba-tree, overhanging the rocky slope, and Tom Merry cautiously climbed the slanting trunk into the branches. He was now fairly over the ravine, concealed from sight in the foliage, and able to take a birdseye view of the whole scene below. In the west the sun was sinking in a blaze of purple and gold; sunset was close at hand now. But golden light still lay on the rocks, and rippling water at the bottom of the ravine.

"Oh heavens!" muttered Tom, as he peered downward from the thick branches of the ceiba.

A startling scene had burst upon his gaze.

Below him, among the rocks of the arroyo slope, were more than a score of wild figures, crouching, watching across the stream, and occasionally loosing off a rifle. Tom Merry knew them for Redskins at a glance, and among them he recognised the copper-faced man from Alaska. Dirk Power was seated on a rock, in talk with Chico Colorado, with a savage grin on his coppery face. Tom Merry could have tossed a twig from the ceiba upon his head as he sat.

But the eyes of the Redskins never turned upward; they had no suspicion of foes on the Staked Plain above. All their attention was fixed upon the Frio outfit across the stream.

Tom Merry's gaze travelled across the arroyo.

On the opposite side of the stream he could see the cowboys in cover among the rocks. A glimpse of Stetson hats showed him who they were. His face grew pale as he watched.

For many minutes Tom Merry watched the scene from the branches of the ceibas, while shots rang out below, either party firing across the stream at a sign from the enemy.

Tom crawled back down the slanting trunk at last and rejoined his comrades.

He put his fingers to his lips as he joined them.

"What's the row?" breathed Levison. Tom Merry explained in low tones what he had seen. There was a murmur of dismay among the juniors.

"The sheriff's caught in a trap, then!" muttered Frank Levison.

"It looks like it. Dirk Power has found friends in this desert—a gang of Redskins," said Tom. "Twenty or thirty of them, so far as I could count."

"Did you see—him?" muttered Levison.

"Yes!"

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "It's wathah lucky we followed on, aftah all, deah boys!"

Levison gripped his rifle.

"We've got to chip in here!" he said.

Tom Merry nodded.

"Yes, rather!" he said. "The

sheriff's outfit is held up—they're cornered in the ravine. I'm afraid they've had losses. I saw some dead horses lying in the stream, and—and—" He did not finish, but the juniors understood. "Texas Bill and his men are in cover, simply holding off the Indians. I suppose the wretches won't venture to rush them while daylight lasts, and they can see to shoot. But after sundown—"

"It won't last till then now we're here," said Mauners.

"No. The Redskins plainly don't look for danger on this side—Dirk Power isn't giving us a thought." Tom Merry smiled grimly. "I dare say he's noticed that we're not with the sheriff's party. Perhaps he intends to come back for us when he's wiped out the Frio outfit? He will soon find that we're closer than he thinks!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Not a sound!" whispered Tom. "See that your rifles are in good order. From here we shall take Dirk Power's gang from behind, and the first volley will mean a lot. If they get at close quarters with us you know what it means!"

"We're game!" muttered Figgins. "Give the word, Tom—you're leader!"

Tom Merry's face was a little pale, but quite calm and steady.

He gave his directions quietly.

There was no faltering among the St. Jim's juniors. Upon them, as they realised clearly, depended the rescue of the Frio outfit, cornered in the ravine by Dirk Power and the Apache gang.

They crept cautiously to the edge of the arroyo and looked down.

Thirty feet below them the rocky plateau jutted from the slope, and upon the plateau the Redskins were crouched in the rocks, staring across the stream, and loosing off a rifle every few minutes. Not a glance was turned upward. But the juniors did not waste time. Rifle in hand, each picked his man among the savage gang below.

Tom Merry made a sign.

It was followed by a volley.

Crack-ack-ack!

Loud and startled yells rang from the Apache gang at the sudden burst of fire from behind and above them.

Seven of the red-skinned ruffians sprawled on the rocks, hard hit.

"Fire—fire!" shouted Tom Merry.

The magazine-rifles poured out a hail of bullets upon the Apaches below.

The surprise was complete.

Almost before the Apaches knew that they were attacked half their number were sprawling on the rocks, yelling and groaning.

Five or six of the savages made a furious rush up the steep side of the arroyo, tomahawk in hand. But the rocks were too steep for them, and they slipped back. And all the time the bullets were raining from above.

It lasted hardly more than a minute.

The juniors were still pumping out bullets as the remnant of the Apache gang broke from the rocks and fled wildly into the mesquite lower down the bank.

There was a shout across the arroyo:

"At 'em, boys!"

The burly form of the sheriff of Frio leaped into view.

The sudden fire from the upper plain had startled the Frio outfit as much as the Redskins. But they were quick to realise that it meant help—help and rescue.

As the yelling remnant of the Apache gang broke cover and fled in wild confusion, Texas Bill and the cowboys leaped from cover and rushed to the attack.

"Father!" shouted Levison.

He recognised his father among the Frio men below, and his face lighted up.

"He's safe, Frank—he's safe!" panted Levison.

From the arroyo rang wild howls and yells as the Frio cowboys closed in on the remnant of the Apache gang, and revolver and rifle-butt finished the deadly work at close-quarters.

CHAPTER 10.

At Last!

"DIRK POWER!"

"Where is Dirk Power?" The struggle was over, the shouting and yelling and cracking of rifles had died away in the arroyo.

Few of the Apaches had escaped.

Chico Colorado lay in the stream, his savage, dusky face glimmering in the water. In the rocks and the mesquite sprawled the Apaches—save for the two or three that had escaped along the rugged bank.

Some of the Frio outfit were binding up wounds. Tom Merry & Co. had hurried along the arroyo, seeking a spot where they could descend to join their friends. But there was only one thought in the mind of Texas Bill. With his revolver in his grip he was seeking for Dirk Power among the mesquite and the fallen Apaches.

But he did not find him.

The man from Alaska had vanished.

Darkness was deepening in the ravine; the sunset was red on the Staked Plain, but down in the arroyo the shadows thickened as Tom Merry & Co. arrived on the scene.

"Father!" called out Levison breathlessly.

Mr. Levison gripped his son's hand.

"I thought you were still at the timber island miles away," he said, with a faint smile, "till I heard the firing. Then I guessed—"

"We had to come on after you, father," said Frank. "You're not waxy?"

Mr. Levison laughed.

"Not as it turns out," he said. "You came at a lucky time, my boys!"

"Yaas, wathah!" remarked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "We were bound to be in at the finish, you know. Pewwaps the shewiff won't want to leave us behind anothah time!"

"But Dirk Power—" began Tom Merry.

"They are looking for him," said Mr. Levison. The sheriff of Frio came up, with a black brow, his eyes glinting.

"Have you found him?"

"No!" growled Texas Bill. "He has Satan's own luck. I'll swear that not two or three of the Apache outfit got clear. But he was hit; he cannot have escaped."

Mr. Levison knitted his brows.

"We shall find him!" he said.

The Frio outfit camped in the arroyo as the shadows deepened. But as the shadows deepened Texas Bill, revolver in hand, was tramping down the water-course, with Mr. Levison and Buckskin and Tom Merry after him.

Dirk Power had fled down the stream, but it seemed impossible that he had escaped unwounded. Somewhere among the rocks and the straggling mesquite they were certain of finding him.

"Look!" exclaimed Tom Merry suddenly.

A black vulture swooped down from the darkening sky upon a sandbank in the stream ahead.

Tom shuddered.

He knew what the swoop of the vulture meant—that a dead man lay on the sandbank. Texas Bill's eyes glinted.

"Come on!" he muttered.

He rushed forward. A shot from his revolver drove off the settling vulture, and the obscene bird rose on the wing

again, with a hoarse scream. The pursuers plunged on through the rippling water to the sandbank.

A figure lay stretched there at their feet.

"Dirk Power!" whispered Mr. Levison.

He shivered.

"At last!" said Texas Bill grimly.

Tom Merry gazed down at the coppery face, still in death. Dirk Power lay on his back on the sandbank, his black eyes staring skyward, unseeing now. His old enemy bent over him, but Dirk Power could not see him.

The wild, fierce heart was still for ever. So far the wretched man, wounded half a dozen times in the last desperate fight, had dragged himself in flight; and there his strength had failed him, and he had crawled on the sandbank to die. The long trail was ended at last.

Mr. Levison looked long and steadily at the dark, still face. His hands trembled a little.

He raised his eyes at last.

"I never wronged him!" he said. "He believed it; but it was the evil in his own heart that made him believe it so easily. I never wronged him, though he was hunting me to my death when he met his own. May Heaven forgive him, as I forgive him now!"

The next day Tom Merry & Co. were riding back to Frio Crossing with the sheriff's outfit. The Apaches' horses had been discovered, concealed in the arroyo. Danger and death had beset the path of the Frio sheriff on the trail into the Staked Plain; but he returned successfully, and with a grim satisfaction.

At Frio Crossing Tom Merry & Co. rested for some days. The shadow of peril that had lain upon the Levisons was lifted now; the haunting danger was buried with the man from Alaska, in the lonely arroyo on the Staked Plain. And after a few days the St. Jim's party took their leave of Texas Bill, and set out upon their return journey. Their hearts were lighter when they found themselves upon a swift steamer ploughing the waters of the Atlantic once more.

"Homeward bound!" said Tom Merry, as he watched the land receding. "We've had an exciting time, and I shall be jolly glad to see St. Jim's once more, you fellows!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"We'll have a jolly good feed in the study when we get back!" remarked Fatty Wynn thoughtfully.

"Trust you to think of that, Fatty!" grinned Figgins.

It was a bright day for Tom Merry & Co. when they found themselves at St. Jim's again. Strange enough at first the old school looked to them after their wild adventures in the Far West. Old Taggles came out of his lodge and touched his hat, and, as they nodded cheerily and passed him, Taggles was heard to mutter:

"Nice goin's hon!"

In the Third Form room Wally & Co. made much of Frank Levison on his return. And in Tom Merry's study, in the Shell passage, here was a celebration, in which nearly all the Shell and the Fourth joined, till Kildare of the Sixth came up with his asphalt to inquire what the noise was about. But it was only Tom Merry & Co. cheerily making themselves at home in their old quarters.

THE END.

(Another grand story of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's next week, entitled "Condemned by the Study!" By Martin Clifford. Be sure and order next Wednesday's GEM in advance.)

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*(Now go on with the story.)***The Horror of the Cave.**

IN terror Elaine clutched at Dick. "One is clinging to me! Oh, kill it—kill it!" she cried frantically. Dick Harmer had seen the repulsive, hairy-shelled creature that had fastened its claws upon the girl's skirt. He kicked out blindly through the darkness in the direction in which he judged it to be.

His aim proved true. He felt his boot crash into the under-part of the crustacean's shell, and heard it rattle upon its back on the rocks as its hold was released. Almost simultaneously he himself let out a cry of surprise and pain he could not suppress.

The crab that had made a dart at his leg and clung to it had succeeded in gripping at his flesh through his clothing, and the clutch of its powerful claws was like the hold of a vice.

He struck down at it fiercely, madly. A claw was released from his calf and brushed his hand as it darted for it in vicious retaliation. Filled with an indescribable repulsion, he clenched his fist and hit at the creature again and again, and this time his blows compelled it to let go. As the other had done, it fell on its back to the ledge with a noisy clatter.

Promptly Dick set his heel upon it, though he could not keep back a shudder as he felt its shell splinter and its pulplike body collapse beneath his weight.

Elaine was trembling violently as she clung to him. Another low, terrified cry from her told of yet another of the

nightmare monsters making an attack upon her.

To Dick it seemed that she contrived to shake off its hold, and, dragging him with her by the hand, she recoiled to the rocky wall of the cavern.

"Oh, if only we had a light!" the girl moaned. "They will grow even bolder soon, and—and then we shall have no chance against them!"

Dick tried to comfort her with some reassuring words he was far from believing in. He was a plucky lad, but it was only by an effort of will-power that he could keep his hand steady as he held Elaine's arm.

He felt that the girl was right, and that soon the crabs would grow brave enough to attack them in force, unless there was some means of escaping from them. Already the creatures had proved their strength and their fierceness, and Dick knew that once they gained the courage or instinct to come at them in a body they would not remain long upon their feet.

The hideous things would cling to their bodies and—his blood chilled at the thought—their faces, blinding them and overwhelming them, and bringing them down amongst them.

The horror of their position is better imagined than described.

The darkness of the cavern seemed to cling about them like a pall, and in their ears was the continuous scraping and clicking made by the claws of the crabs as they moved upon the rocky surface of the ledge.

Their shells made the faintest of phosphorescent glows, to add to the weirdness of it all, and their movements could be dimly discerned by the boy and the girl, though not too indistinctly for Dick not to be sure that the eerie creatures were slowly but surely hemming them in.

"Cannot we run through them?" Elaine faltered, her hand clutching hard at Dick's fingers in a paroxysm of terror.

Mentally, the boy shook himself. For the moment he had succumbed to a sickening horror, and stood fascinated, as he stared through the darkness to the dim gleam thrown off by the terrible sea-fishes shells.

Could they rush through them? he wondered. It occurred to him that it might be possible.

Whilst the torch had been alight he had seen that the ledge of the rock on which they stood was thick with the creatures in both directions for as far as the eye could see.

But that had not been a great distance. The crabs may have been attracted to the spot by the light, unless they had been able to scent them, as such creatures can certainly smell the near proximity of water. And if this were so it might mean that they had congregated in a body at this spot, and that their numbers thinned beyond where the light of the torch had been blotted out by the gloom.

New hope filled him. At no great way along the ledge it might be free of them altogether; and, even supposing they could move with sufficient rapidity, the uncanny monsters might not have the sense to pursue them in time to be able to overtake them and fall upon them.

For just a second or two Dick stared away in the direction that would eventually bring them back to the entrance of the cavern—if they could reach it.

The suggestion of radiance emanating from the crustaceans' shells was too faint to enable him to judge how far their ranks extended. Beyond a few yards the impenetrable darkness mingled with it and made it invisible.

With a start Dick found two of the creatures at his feet. Claws were feeling for a hold upon his legs. He gave two sharp kicks that sent them thudding into the midst of their fellows with broken shells. Then a scream from Elaine galvanised him into fresh action.

He snatched her bodily up in his arms. One of the crabs that had made a dart at her and was clinging to her clothing touched his hand, but with a quick grab and a vigorous wrench he tugged it from its hold and hurled it with a splash into the water. Then, kicking his own legs free of several of the monsters that were feeling for a hold upon him, he made his dash for safety.

He held the girl firmly as he carried her, and it was as well he did.

More than once he tumbled and slipped as his feet crushed the slippery shells of the crabs he trod down. Claws snapped viciously within a hair's-breadth of his legs, others actually closed upon his trouser-legs, and hung on with a tenacity there was no immediate shaking off.

Would the hideous horde never end? He smashed on through them, grinding some into a pulp, kicking others from before him with a strength and savageness born of horror.

Quite four or five of them were clinging to his legs, and their powerful claws were nipping at his flesh. But he forgot the excruciating pain of this for the time being as he suddenly found the ledge clear of the terrible foe.

For another dozen yards the lad stumbled on through the darkness. He set Elaine upon her feet then, and turned his attentions to the several crabs hanging to him.

He grabbed the first by its legs and wrenched it away by sheer strength. He believed that part of the flesh of his calf was torn away with its claws, and had to set his teeth hard to keep back a groan of agony.

He felt his way to the wall of the cave and smashed the next two against the rock by violently dashing his leg to it. One dropped from his other leg by its own accord, and the other, and last, he kicked off with a sharp blow from the top of his free foot.

"Hark! They are coming after us!" Elaine's voice was shaking, though she was trying to be brave.

The boy sought her hand in the darkness, listening intently as he did so.

She had made no mistake. Quite near was the gruesome scraping and clicking made by the crabs' legs upon the rocky face of the ledge, and now there was a scuttling sound as one or more of them advanced with a dart almost to their feet.

"Run!" Dick rapped through his teeth.

They raced along the ledge, the boy keeping a hand to the wall, in case they lost their sense of direction and fell into the water.

"Look, look!" Elaine exclaimed suddenly, as they rounded a curve in the cavern's formation; and Dick, also seeing that which had called forth her cry, could have shouted with relief.

Above their heads showed a gleam of moonlight. High up in the roof of the cave was a rugged hole, some three to four feet in circumference, which they had not noticed in entering the cavern, probably because of the light of the torch Dick had carried.

"Let's climb to it and get out that way!" Dick said, after looking up at the aperture for a moment. "It is get-at-able if I help you, Elaine."

She signified her assent by stepping quickly into the shaft of moonlight streaming through the hole. It was fully thirty feet above them, and although at this spot the cavern wall was sloping and rugged, to reach it would mean a stiff climb. But anything was better than remaining a moment longer than necessary in the dark home of the giant crabs.

"Better let me go first," Dick said; and with a spring he leapt to a boulder that offered the first foothold of the ascent.

He took her extended hands and swung her lightly up beside him. Then he clambered to the next rock, and again assisted her to join him.

In this way they ascended higher and higher up the face of the cavern wall until they were almost within reaching distance of the cavity.

At this point the hand and foot hold grew much more precarious, and Dick had to leave the girl with her toes resting upon the narrowest of ridges and her fingers crooked in a crack in the rocks above her head whilst he scrambled through into the open air.

But Elaine was possessed of a cool pluck and dauntless determination seldom found in a girl, and she calmly hung thus and waited until he leant through the hole, reached down, and gripped her hands.

It was not an easy task to hoist her through the aperture, and Dick was more than thankful for the athletic life he had led at his school and the wiry strength it had given him.

Her feet slipped on the treacherous, shiny face of the rock, and for a moment

she swung dizzily over space, clinging to his hands. The lad's muscles cracked beneath the strain, and he was almost dragged back through the hole. She managed to find foothold again, however, and at his quickly voiced suggestion managed to crook her arm about his shoulder.

He heaved himself back, slipped an arm about her, and, by exerting all his strength, dragged her through into safety.

"That was a near thing!" she said, as she rose, panting, to her feet.

"My hat, yes! I thought I was going to drop you, Elaine," he admitted, now that the danger was past. "I wonder how we are going to get down from this giddy perch? It's not very alluring, is it?"

They were in a narrow hollow amongst the giant range of rocky hills. On all sides barren boulders rose fully fifty feet above their heads.

It struck Dick that they might have to return to the cave as the only way of getting back to the lower ground, though he said nothing as yet to the girl.

The moonlight made their surroundings almost as light as day, and, both impressed by the silence and solitude, they stood for some moments looking about them.

In the direction for which they had been making when passing through the cavern beneath, the rocks were undoubtedly unscalable. They rose sheerly towards the sky, and an antelope could not have climbed them. The other way they were far more rugged and sloping, and it looked to be possible to ascend to their summit and pass over it, when they might find a way down to the level of the jungle beneath.

"I think we had better try to get below, Elaine," he said. "There is nothing to eat or drink up here, and before long we shall be needing a meal of some kind and some water. Would you rather rest for a bit, or should we try right away to get across those rocks over yonder and see what lies on the other side of them?"

"I think we had better try to get down, Dick," she answered. "I am not very tired, if you are not. We must have slept for some time in that horrible cave."

He nodded. "Yes, longer than I thought for," he returned. "I was surprised when I caught a glimpse of the sky through the roof of the cave and saw that the moon had risen. It's a pity, but we shall have to go back instead of forward."

"Well, we might risk going through the cave again to-morrow when the daylight comes," she suggested. "Those terrible creatures probably only come out at night."

He regarded her for a moment in undisguised admiration.

"You've a courage a good many fellows could envy!" he could not help exclaiming. "Do you really mean you would be game to enter that place again?"

"If we started early enough to reach its farther end and return by daylight should there be no way out there," she replied. "Think of what it means to us if we could pass through it and perhaps find a beach on the other side from which we could signal any passing ship! Stay, though, how should we light a torch? I don't think I would be brave enough to risk the journey without a light?"

"I fancy I could get over that difficulty," Dick said, "with the aid of the sun and this."

And he took from his pocket a circle of glass.

"Why, what is it, Dick?" she asked. "It looks like an eyeglass. Were you such a swell at school that you were conceited enough—"

"Perish the thought!" he laughed. "It's a watch-glass. The beastly thing came out whilst I was being brought here on old Meppel's boat, and, although the gaoler pinched my watch and my money when I was put in the prison, he evidently did not notice this, for he left it behind in my pocket. It's perhaps a slice of luck. It may prove more than valuable to us now."

"Why, yes," Elaine agreed. "If only there was a way of getting rescued from this hateful island! I think I would risk anything—face any dangers—if I thought it were possible! But come along! Let us try to reach the lower ground."

Dick carefully pocketed the watch-glass, and they made for the rocks they intended to scale.

They were soon scrambling over them, finding that their rise was even more gradual than it had appeared at a distance, though, for all that, it was tiring enough to mount it.

A quantity of sand and loose shingle lay scattered upon and between the boulders, and at times their feet sank into this past the ankle.

Some half-way up the ascent they were forced to rest, but they did not delay for long.

As soon as they had regained their breath they pressed on, until at length the summit of the exhausting climb was gained, and they had a birdseye view of the jungle far below.

Elaine raised her hand and pointed away to the right.

"It looks as though it might not be hard to scramble down over there, Dick," she said.

And as the boy turned his head he saw in the moonlight that the formation of the rocks at the spot she was indicating was far less sheer than beneath where they stood.

Together they made for it, and, going down on his hands and knees, Dick crawled to the brink of the drop and peered over.

He saw that rock lay beneath rock in a manner that would offer a means of descent to an active person; that is to say, that one might lower oneself from one boulder to another until, far beneath, was reached a broad ledge whence a twelve-foot drop would gain the level ground.

The lad had just time to observe this, and was about to draw back, when disaster overtook him.

He felt the rocky ground beneath him cracking and giving under his weight, and, with a startled gasp, he hurled himself backwards; but he was just too late.

A huge piece of stone and earth broke away from the edge of the abyss and went thundering from rock to rock below. It left him lying for the fraction of a moment with more than half his body over space, and Elaine uttered a cry of alarm as she started forward in the hope of being able to drag him back.

His hands were clutching at the crumbling rock left at the brink of the fall, and had it held a moment longer than it did the girl might have been able to save him. As it was, even as she reached him and stretched out her hands to grip at his clothing, the loosened earth he was clinging to broke away, and, describing a complete somersault, he disappeared from Elaine's horrified gaze.

Headless of danger to herself, she flung herself down upon the brink of the gulf and looked over.

A stifled little cry of concern broke

from her white lips as she saw him lying, huddled and motionless, on one of the protruding boulders some twenty feet beneath her.

"He is dead!" she breathed, with a shudder, as she waited for several seconds and the lad failed to move.

Then, with a seeming contempt for her own life and limbs, she had swung herself over the brink and was scrambling from boulder to boulder to reach him.

The girl was as agile as she was slender and graceful, and she reached the rock on which he lay without mishap. Flinging herself upon her knees beside him, she raised his head, and she drew a quick breath of relief as she saw his lids flicker. After all, it seemed that he was merely stunned, and, as far as she could tell, he had broken no bones, formidable though his fall.

He gave a quivering sigh, and opened his eyes, to stare up dazedly for a second or two into Elaine's white, anxious face.

"What the dickens—" he began blankly. "I—"

"You fell over the rocks," she said; and he saw that her eyes were full of tears. "I—I thought you had gone to your death, Dick."

"I believe I am dead," he declared, sitting up and tenderly fingering a terrific bump on the back of his head with one hand, whilst he gazed dully at the piece of broken rock he still held in the other. "Have me put in just a plain coffin, and request that the only flowers sent are sunflowers, or something else that is quiet and in good taste."

"Oh, don't joke about it!" Elaine cried, a little angrily. "You gave me an awful scare, and my heart still feels as though it is thumping in my throat! Are you sure you are not hurt?"

"Well, if that's not a silly question to ask!" Dick exclaimed so ruefully that she had to laugh. "Of course I am hurt! I am hurt all over! I have never been run over by a steam-roller, but I fancy that I feel now like a fellow must feel who has! I fell flat on my back on this giddy rock, hit the back of my napper, saw about four moons, several score of stars, and— Great pip, Elaine! Look at this!"

Forgetting his bruises and his stiffness, Dick suddenly struggled to his feet, and, although he swayed unsteadily, he managed to keep his balance. The cry had been brought from him as he had abstractedly turned over the fragment of rock he held and glanced at it.

"What is it?" the girl asked in surprise, wondering if the fall had affected his reason, as he stared with wide eyes and parted lips at the jagged piece of broken earth and stone.

"Silver! That's what it is!" he exclaimed, his voice husky with excitement. "And it means that, quite by accident, I have struck the position of silver mines which are my father's, and mine by right of inheritance!"

He thrust the rock beneath her eyes, and the astonished girl saw that, embedded in the rough surface left by its being torn away from the hillside, were streaks of a whitish metal which gleamed dazzlingly in the moonlight.

Tracked!

"SILVER!" Elaine gasped. "Is that really silver, and you say that it comes from a mine that is yours? I do not understand, Dick. What ever can you mean?"

"Let's sit down for a moment," he urged. "It'll give me a chance to get

over coming the cropper I did, which, although I joked about it, was—well, unpleasant, and I'll tell you the whole yarn. I know it must have sounded to you as though I had gone potty; but it's a fact, Elaine—the mine which evidently lies above us, in the heart of the rocks, and, for that matter, the whole island, belongs to my father, Richard Harmer."

She listened in growing amazement as they seated themselves, and he told her of how his ancestor had discovered the island and the signs of silver upon it; how he had given hints of having leased it, and of its wealth; how he had set sail to return to it fifty years ago, and from that day to this not been heard of again.

"I thought when I saw the rocks shaped like a Sphinx that this must be the identical island," he said, in conclusion. "Now I have actually come upon silver on it I am certain it is the one my grandfather obtained the rights of!"

"It sounds almost too wonderful to be true," the girl murmured breathlessly. "You being brought here may turn out a blessing in disguise, after all. If you can manage to escape from the island, your father will be able to claim it and work the silver mines."

Dick nodded, his eyes eager. "Should we have a go at getting below? Gee-whiz! Aren't I sore and stiff?"

"Do you think you are fit to climb down?" Elaine asked anxiously, regarding him with a doubtful look.

"Yes! Never say die!" he returned, forcing a smile. "It will do me good to keep on the move. The more I sit about the stiffer I shall get."

Something prompted Dick not to carry his find of silver with him on their

descent, though, as he thrust it between two jagged rocks and mentally marked their position, he little thought how fortunate his action was to prove.

Elaine watched him a trace fearfully as he advanced to the edge of the rock, lowered himself to it, and swung his legs over it preparatory to lowering himself down to the next; for he looked very white and shaken.

His strength, however, was speedily enabling him to shake off the effects of his ugly tumble, and he dropped to the boulder beneath in safety. The girl followed, and he steadied her as she landed beside him.

From rock to rock they scrambled or dropped, until they were upon the ledge some dozen feet above the ground. Dick slipped his foot over it, hung for a couple of seconds by his hands, then dropped to the sandy soil beneath.

Elaine had dropped next moment, and, although she would have stumbled to her knees, Dick's strong hands caught and saved her. She opened her lips to thank him; but the words she would have uttered were choked back by a gasp of dismay.

From no great distance away in the adjacent jungle had sounded a mournful, long-drawn-out bay—the deep-throated voice of a trailing bloodhound!

Instinctively the lad and the girl looked at each other, and the faces of both were hopeless. Meppel and his overseers were not only on their track, but close at hand, and, whichever way they turned, from the unerring scent of the dog there could be no escape!

(Another thrilling instalment of this wonderful story next Wednesday.)

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25	AR 26	KET 27	EAK
			
28	EAP 29	CT 30	ND

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