

"TRACKED UP THE THAMES!" A **SPLENDID STORY OF TOM MERRY & CO. OF ST. JIM'S INSIDE.**

EVERY WEDNESDAY.

The GEM 2^D

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AT THE MERCY OF COKER & Co.!

The St. Jim's Holidaymakers have a rough time at the hands of their rivals of Greyfriars!



Address all letters: The Editor, The "Gem" Library, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London E.C.4. Write me, you can be sure of an answer in return.

OUR COMPANION PAPERS.

"THE BOYS' FRIEND" Every Monday
 "THE MAGNET" Every Monday
 "THE POPULAR" Every Tuesday
 "CHUCKLES" Every Thursday
 "THE HOLIDAY ANNUAL" Published Yearly

My Dear Chums,—For next Wednesday there is a bigger treat than ever in the new yarn of the wonderful river trip undertaken by Tom Merry & Co.

"TOM MERRY'S PASSENGER!" By Martin Clifford.

Who is the passenger? It will be remembered that from the very outset Tom Merry, as skipper, was against having anybody in the party who did not contribute his quota of hard work. But owing to one cause and another, Tom Merry does ship a sort of supercargo, and the weight of the new arrival is calculated to add no end to the responsibilities of the leader. The plain fact is that the visitor is Billy Bunter of Greyfriars. An event of this kind cannot be hidden. There is no concealment possible where the Owl of Greyfriars is concerned. We know his marvellous reputation as a trencherman, and considering all things, the wonder is that the porpoise did manage to get on board the well-found craft, as D'Arcy called the boat. But Bunter is a true diplomatist. He explained that he was touring that part of the country on visits to his titled relatives; and the subsequent proceedings are related in Mr. Martin Clifford's most amusing style.

WHERE IS TALBOT?

That is the question put by a Birmingham reader, who says: "By the way, Mr. Editor, we do not hear much of Talbot the last few months. I hope to hear of him again shortly. Of course, I know you cannot grant every wish you receive, but perhaps you can manage this shortly. I do not think I am alone in supporting Talbot." The concluding sentence hits the target bang. Talbot's popularity is immense. For some reason or another, Martin Clifford has been giving that character a brief rest. But Talbot will soon be making his presence felt again. In fact, I had already arranged for a series of yarns bringing in this always popular character. These stories will be appearing very shortly. More about them later.

"BILLY BUILDS A BOAT!" By Elmer K. Arter.

This is a screamingly funny story which will appear next week in the GEM. It describes in hilarious fashion how Billy Burton and his staunch chum, Michael

McAndrews, construct a boat. I predict as big a success for this tale as that which attended the recent yarn about Mike. You will appreciate the resourceful Billy as much as you did Mike. There is more ingenuity required in the building of a boat than some folks imagine. You will hear all about that part of the job next Wednesday, and you will laugh till you ache over Billy's quaint experiences.

THE AMAZING MIKE!

Mike and his amazing motor-car, about which we heard recently in the GEM, caused a big sensation, and no wonder. "An Aged Parent" writes to me in this wise: "My boy was in fits of laughter over the tale of Mike. I admire this story, also Martin Clifford's yarns." So long as the GEM can win tributes of this kind I am content.

THE "HOLIDAY ANNUAL."

No more cheery companion for the long evenings could be imagined than the new volume of the "Holiday Annual," the book which has a special appeal to all readers of the Companion Papers, for it includes long and splendid stories of St. Jim's and Greyfriars, as well as a host of other fine attractions. This time the "bill" is phenomenally good, and surpasses anything we have had in this line. The grand yarn of St. Jim's is 50,000 words in length, and I honestly consider it the best story Mr. Martin Clifford has ever written. You must also see the visit paid to Greyfriars by the world-famous GEM author. It is something not to be missed, and most assuredly it will never be forgotten.

"THE SHARA PEARLS!" By Roland Spencer.

Next week's issue of the GEM is noteworthy for a good many things—one of



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them being the new story about that plucky fellow, River-wise Ned, whose exploits have caused amazement and admiration. Your interest in this character will be redoubled after you have read the new romance. These yarns have run up the curtain on a phase of life which is so full of interest that the wonder is some author has not taken the matter in hand before. Anyhow, the work is being done with splendid skill now, and the tales of the great estuary with its shipping, its mysteries, and romance thoroughly deserve the triumph they have won.

A BUDGET OF SUGGESTIONS.

There is no time like the present, so they say, and I will seize this opportunity to thank all my correspondents for their suggestions regarding the GEM programme, and their cheery compliments to the stories. One of my friends says he would like to hear all about Tom Merry from the very start! Some order, that! The point is that circumstances do not permit me to gratify this reader in his wish, but, anyhow, his notion contains a magnificent tribute to the series about St. Jim's. Tom Merry is known and liked all over the globe. He is much appreciated in New Zealand as he is here at home—T. M. and the "Co.," and all the other good fellows who appear on Martin Clifford's stage. Another fact to be noted is that readers like the other features I have introduced. As the scope of the GEM enlarges so does the popularity of the famous Wednesday paper increase.

MORE GOOD THINGS COMING!

Please remember that fact. I have made arrangements for the coming winter which will astonish and delight everybody.

GRAND COMPETITIONS!

Look out for these. There will be big money prizes offered, and there is a chance for all.

AN OFFER FROM LEICESTER!

My best thanks go to a chum at Leicester who makes an offer to me of some very old copies of the GEM. I am not in want of these numbers. I hope next time this correspondent writes he will enclose his address.

SUNNY NEW ZEALAND!

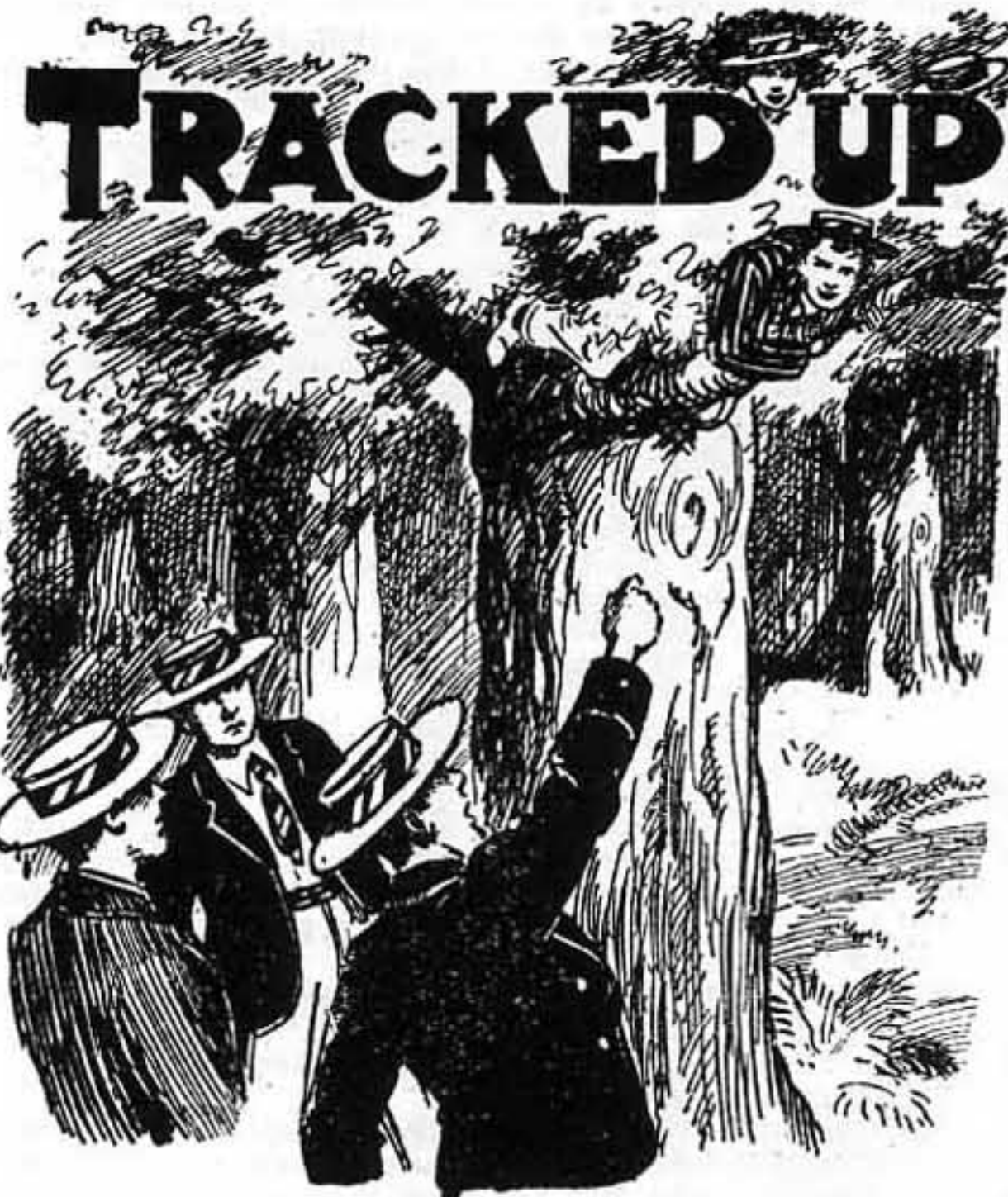
That's where Dicky Roylance hails from. Dunedin, in South Island, is his native place, and, as a supporter in that part of the world points out, it is interesting to note that Dunedin is the Gaelic name for Edinburgh. The first Scotch settler gave Otago's capital its name, as a compliment to Modern Athens. My correspondent on the other side of the world has any number of good things to say of the GEM. There is mention of that fine tale, "The Pluck of Edgar Lawrence!" also of Gussy, the Levisons, Wildrake, and "old Ratty." Altogether just such a letter as I was proud to receive.

BUDDING CAPTAINS!

What's wrong with the Third Form? Trouble has been brewing there for some long time. Some of the leading spirits profess themselves dissatisfied with the captaincy of Wally D'Arcy. The movement has the enthusiastic support of Curly Gibson; he thinks he would make an excellent captain. Joe Frayne and Manners minor also hold strong opinions. These are exciting days for Gussy's junior. Wally is too busy looking after his own rights to jape his major, and he has no intention of being shifted!

Your Editor.

TRACKED UP THE THAMES!



A Great Story of the Holiday Adventures of Tom Merry & Co., of St. Jim's.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1. He Cometh Not!

"THAT ass!"
"That duffer!"
"That chump!"
"That frabjous ass!"

Needless to say, Tom Merry & Co. were discussing Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. Only upon the subject of Arthur Augustus could they have been so eloquent.

Arthur Augustus was not present. That was the trouble. It was the head and front of his offending, so to speak, that he wasn't present. For he should have been present half an hour ago at least. And he wasn't even in sight, neither were the supplies for tea.

Six juniors of St. Jim's were camped by the silvery Thames, somewhere between Sonning Lock and the mouth of the Kennet. The Old Bus was drawn up to the bank and made fast to a tree. It was a picturesque spot, and the juniors had it to themselves. All was ready for tea—an early tea and a high tea it should have been. Foodstuffs had run out. New supplies were to have been taken on board at Reading. But owing to delays of all kinds, Reading was still far off. A church steeple, indicating a village, had been sighted over the trees, and so the juniors had camped ashore—six of them getting the camp ready while one of them went shopping.

Unfortunately, that one was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. He had not returned.

All was ready—the oil-stove, and the spirit-stove, and the kettle, and other things—and especially Tom Merry & Co. were ready. They had lunched lightly on bread and cheese, while still pushing on their way up the river. So they were ready—more than ready—for high tea. But there was no sign of Gussy.

Hence the remarks of the Co., which grew more eloquent and emphatic with every passing moment.

"If Gussy had crawled on his hands and knees," said Blake, "he could have crawled back by this time."

"We oughtn't to have trusted the silly owl!" grunted Herries.

"Well, he's no use about the camp," remarked Digby. "But even Gussy ought to be able to buy things at a village store."

"Bless him!" growled Monty Lowther.

"Bother him!" snapped Manners.

"What on earth's happened to him?" asked Tom Merry.

"He can't have found a fashionable tailor's in a little Berkshire village, or a shop with something new in neckties or silk hats. That would account for it, of course."

"The fathead!"

"The ass!"

"The frabjous dummy!"

The chorus recommenced. Six juniors were ravenously hungry, and their wrath grew by leaps and bounds.

Tom Merry mounted upon a little knoll, and looked away up the narrow, winding lane that led to the village. Of the village itself nothing could be seen, excepting the steeple over the tree-tops in the distance.

"Sister Anne, Sister Anne! Do you see a born idiot coming?" sang out Monty Lowther.

"Not a sign of him," said Tom Merry, coming down from the knoll. "I think some of us had better go and look for him. He may have missed the way, and headed for the Channel instead of the Thames. It would be like Gussy."

"Just like!" groaned Herries. "I say, I'm hungry!"

"Come on!" said Tom to Manners and Lowther. "You Fourth-Form kids can look after the camp and the boat."

"Us what?" roared Blake.

"My mistake. I meant cads!" said Tom Merry politely.

And he dodged a whizzing turf, and started up the lane with Manners and Lowther.

Blake and Herries and Dig remained on guard in the camp, and continued to make observations on the subject of the missing Gussy. Their observations, like those of Truthful James' patient, were "frequent and painful and free." Really, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's noble ears ought to have been burning at that moment.

The Terrible Three walked up the lane, not very quickly. They were tired with a hard day on the river, and they were hungry. And they hoped to sight Gussy at every turn of the lane.

It was really a puzzle what could be keeping Gussy. The village was not half a mile away, and Gussy had been gone long enough to cover miles and miles.

It was scarcely possible that even Arthur Augustus could have met with any accident in a quiet Berkshire lane. Tom Merry & Co. couldn't even begin to guess why he hadn't come back with the sorely-needed supplies.

They were suddenly enlightened.

As they came round a winding bend in the lane they caught sight of a surprising figure ahead.

For a moment they did not recognise Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

D'Arcy of the Fourth had left the camp looking his usual neat and elegant self, from the crown of his handsome Panama hat to the tips of his beautifully-pipeclayed shoes.

And now—

Was this object Gussy? Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther stared blankly as they drew nearer to it.

It was Gussy!

He was dusty—thick with dust—from head to foot. He looked as if he had been rolled in dust—rolled in lots of dust—tons of it. It was rubbed into his noble features, plastered on his aristocratic countenance, so that now he was seen as through a glass darkly. His panama hat had been crumpled up and shoved down his back. His wrists were tied to his belt, and his ankles were shackled by a short cord that just allowed him to shuffle along somehow. There was no sign of the provision basket, but some of the provisions were to be seen. Jam, for instance, was thickly laid on Gussy's hair, which had been ruffled up into it. Marmalade oozed over him. Honey was running down his neck. Two kippers stuck out of the back of his neck as well as the crumpled panama. A string of sausages adorned him in the style of a necklace.

"My only hat!" said Tom Merry, as soon as his breath came back. "Is—is—is that you, Gussy?"

"Gwoooogh!"

"Gussy!" gasped Manners.

"Oh deah!"

"What have you been up to?" roared Lowther.

"Oh cwumbs!"

"Who's done this?" demanded Manners.

Arthur Augustus groaned.

"It is all your fault, Mannahs!"

"My fault?" howled Manners.

"Yaas, wathah!" Arthur Augustus gave Manners of the Shell a sticky, jammy, dusty glare. "All your fault, you ass! I have been attacked by a gang of feahful wuffians, and it is all your fault. It was you that pwovoked the howwid beasts!"

"I did?" stuttered Manners.

"Yaas, you and your beastly camewah," groaned Arthur Augustus. "You wemembah vevy well that we met Cokah of Gweyfwiahs on the wivah the othah day, and you snapped him followin' his punt-pole into the watah. He came aftah us to get that photogwaph back."

"Well, he never got it," said Manners.

"He is aftah us now to get it—he is followin' us up the Thames, and twackin' us like a beastly bloodhound!" groaned D'Arcy.

"What!" exclaimed the Terrible Three together. They had not expected to see anything more of Horace Coker, of the Fifth Form at Greyfriars, whom they had last seen on the other side of Sonning.

The Greyfriars senior had hunted for trouble with the St. Jim's juniors, and had found it—bad. He had not fared well in the encounter. And Tom Merry & Co. certainly had not guessed that Horace Coker, like Oliver Twist, was asking for more.

Arthur Augustus gave a deep groan.

"The uttah wottahs were in the village," he said, "Cokah and Pottah and Gweene. I wegarded them with distant contempt, but they followed me when I started back to camp, and—and you see the result!"

"And what about our tea?" said Tom.

"We can't eat that jam!" said Monty Lowther, with a shake of the head.

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"The sosses will come in," said Manners. "That is, if Gussy's done using them as a necklace!"

"Weally, Mannahs—"

"So that silly ass Coker is still on the warpath, is he?" said Tom Merry, with a whistle. "We'll give him all the warpath he wants, the thumping duffer!"

"It is all Mannahs' fault," groaned Arthur Augustus. "Cokah is aftah that sillay snapshot, and he won't be happy till he gets it. He said that he is goin' to make us sit up till it is handed ovah."

"Perhaps Coker will do the sitting-up next time," said Tom Merry. "But they've made a picture of you, and no mistake."

The Terrible Three released Arthur Augustus from his bonds. But they could do nothing for the provisions. The jam and marmalade and honey could not possibly be collected from Gussy's person. Even the sausages looked rather too jammy and dusty for real enjoyment.

"You'd better hop on," said Tom. "Take a header into the river when you get there, with your clobber on. Come on, you chaps, we shall have to get some grub."

The Terrible Three started for the village again, quickening their steps. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, in a dismal mood, tramped on towards the camp by the riverside. For the first time since he had encountered the St. Jim's juniors in the valley of the Thames, Coker, of Greyfriars, had scored, and Arthur Augustus had been the unhappy victim.

He was not enjoying it. But Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther grinned as they walked on to the village. There was an element of the comic in this incident, though Arthur Augustus D'Arcy certainly could not see it, even with the aid of his celebrated eyeglass.

CHAPTER 2.

Coker on the Warpath!

"THERE are fellows who are born strategists."

Coker, of the Greyfriars Fifth, made that remark. He was standing on a grassy slope within sight of the winding Thames with a pair of field-glasses in his hand. Potter and Greene, his chums in the Greyfriars Fifth, were sprawling in the grass, with straw hats shading their faces from the sun, evidently not in the least interested in strategy, or in Horace Coker.

Coker glanced down at them with scorn. Coker was full of energy. He prided himself on being efficient. Perhaps Potter and Greene thought that a holiday up the river was not a proper occasion for the display of energetic efficiency. At all events, they did not display any.

"I made a remark!" said Coker.

Potter yawned.

"Did you?"

"I did!" snorted Coker.

"Right-ho!" said Potter.

Potter seemed to think that that ended the matter. He

displayed no curiosity as to the remark. If he had heard it, he heeded not. And he did not want to hear it again.

"I remarked," said Coker, "that there are fellows who are born strategists."

"Shouldn't wonder!" yawned Potter.

"Some fellows can make far-reaching strategic plans," said Coker, "while other fellows are loafing in the grass."

"You don't say so!"

"I do say so!" roared Coker.

"Right-ho, then, you do say so!" assented Potter. "I say, doesn't the river look jolly from here?"

"Top-hole," said Greene. "Not so nice up towards Reading, I believe. But here it's ripping!"

"Blow the river!" exclaimed Coker.

"Why?" yawned Potter.

"I'm thinking of those cheeky St. Jim's fags."

"They're not worth thinking of, old chap. Dash it all, we're Fifth Form fellows," said Potter. "We can't waste time thinking about dashed fags."

"Well, there's something in that," conceded Coker. "But those fags, as it happens, have checked me."

"Never mind—"

"But I do mind!" roared Coker. "It isn't as if they'd only checked you or Greene."

"Oh, isn't it?" said Potter rather tartly.

"No; they've checked me. That's rather serious, I think," said Coker, with a glare at his comrades. "You know what that fellow Manners did—snapped me with his rotten camera when I was falling into the river over a punt-pole. It makes a fellow look ridiculous."

"You did look a bit ridiculous," agreed Potter. "With your legs flying in the air—"

"Comic!" assented Greene. "No end comic."

Coker frowned darkly.

"Manners has got a photograph of that—that accident," he said. "I followed the young scoundrels to get it away from them, and they had the nerve to collar me, and tie me to their dashed tow-rope, and make me tow their boat—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What are you cackling at?" bawled Coker.

"Eh? Oh, nothing! What about getting back to the village to tea?"

"Blow tea! I've told you that we're on the warpath, and we're not letting up on those cheeky fags till they've been properly punished, and made to hand over the photograph. We've made an example of one of them—that young ass D'Arcy! I fancy he won't forget his meeting with us in a hurry."

"Very likely not!" grinned Potter. "We made a picture of the cheeky young ass, and no mistake."

"They're a cheeky gang," continued Coker. "There's seven of them, and they've got the cheek to put up a fight if a fellow thrashes them. It's a bit difficult for us three to tackle the whole gang of them at once. That's where my strategy comes in."

"Does it?" murmured Potter.

"We left D'Arcy hobbling along the lane," continued Coker. "Well, from this hillside I've been watching their camp through these glasses. Three of them have gone off towards the village—"

"Looking for D'Arcy, perhaps," grinned Greene. "They'll get a shock when they meet him."

"While they're gone," said Coker, "we're going to tackle the other three."

"Oh, are we?"

"We are!" said Coker firmly. "Most likely that photograph is on the boat, and we shall be able to get hold of it. Anyhow, we're going to thrash those three young cads, and rag their boat. You fellows ready?"

"We're ready for tea."

"There's not going to be any tea till this job's over. We've got to strike the iron while it's hot. That's strategy."

"Oh, bless your strategy, Coker," said Greene rather sulkily. "We didn't come up the river this vac to get into rows with fags from another school."

"I've got to capture that photograph—"

"What does it matter?"

"Matter?" roared Coker. "It makes me look an ass, doesn't it?"

"Well, what else could a photograph make you look?" asked Potter in a tone of patient wonder.

There was a chuckle from Greene, and the clouds of wrath gathered on the brow of Horace Coker. He came over towards Potter, and that too-humorous youth jumped rather hastily out of the grass.

"Where will you have it?" demanded Coker.

"Now, look here, old chap!" murmured Potter, backing away. It really was too warm that afternoon for a scrap with Horace Coker.

"Are you backing me up or not?"

"Oh, yes! Any old thing! Where are the blessed fags?" groaned Potter. "Anything for a quiet life! Let's go and srew the hungry churchyard with their bones."



Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther stared blankly as they drew nearer to the object. "My—my only hat!" said Tom Merry, as soon as his breath came back. "Is—is—is that you, Gussy?" "Gwoogh! Oh cwumbs! Yaas!" (See page 3.)

"Come on, Greene!" snapped Coker. Greene suppressed a groan, and detached himself from the grass. The grass was very comfortable, and Greene was not bursting with energy like Coker. But Coker was not a leader to be argued with. It was less trouble to scrap with the St. Jim's fags than to scrap with Coker, and that really was all the choice that Greene had.

"Follow me!" grunted Coker. And he jammed the field-glasses back into their leather case and led the way.

Potter and Greene suppressed their feelings and followed him. This was not their idea of a holiday jaunt up the river. They found Coker trying—very trying indeed. They would, in fact, have walked off and abandoned Coker to his own devices but for one important consideration. Coker was standing the expenses of their walking trip up the Thames Valley, and he was "doing" the party well. A fellow who exuded quids, like Coker, was a fellow to be treated with tact.

After all, his followers considered, Coker wasn't a bad sort, though certainly he was every known kind of an ass. They would give him his head, especially as he would take it anyway. It was just like Coker to get into a row with a gang of fags in a boat—just like! Potter and Greene had to back him up or desert him. And his loyal followers couldn't desert him, especially with teatime so close at hand.

So they followed on.

Coker, the master-strategist, had spotted the St. Jim's camp through his field-glasses, and he led the way down to it. Doubtless it was due to his masterly strategy that the three Fifth-Formers found their way barred by a deep and rapid ditch that flowed into the Thames. Coker stopped, and Potter and Greene stopped, and exchanged a private wink.

"Do we jump this?" asked Potter blandly.

"It's too wide to jump," said Coker.

"Not for you, old fellow. You know what a jumper you are," said Potter. "Go ahead, and we—we'll watch you!"

"Do!" said Greene.

"Well, I dare say I could jump it," said Coker, measuring the flowing ditch with his eye.

"Sure you could!" said Potter and Greene together. They

felt that if Coker got a thorough ducking he might be ready to get off the war-path, and let them return to the village for tea.

"Yes, I'm fairly sure I could," said Coker.

"Go it, old chap!"

"But it's no good my jumping it and leaving you slackers behind," said Coker. "So we'd better look for a crossing."

With deep disappointment Potter and Greene followed their leader up the bank of the ditch. Fortunately, they found a plank bridge, and crossed. Then they came out on the bank of the Thames, at a short distance from the St. Jim's camp. By that time the Terrible Three had reached the village and were busy shopping, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was half-way back to camp. Blake and Herries and Digby were waiting, hungry and impatient and rather cross. But they forgot that they were hungry, as they suddenly discovered three hefty fellows bearing down upon them.

"Coker & Co.!" ejaculated Blake.

"My hat!"

"Look out!"

Coker & Co. came on with a run to the camp—three big seniors against three juniors, whose comrades were too far off to help. Certainly, Horace Coker was a strategist!

CHAPTER 3.

Captured by the Enemy!

"HERE we are again!" chortled Coker.

Coker was triumphant.

Blake and Herries and Dig drew together. They knew that they hadn't much chance in a scrap with three big fellows like Coker & Co., but they were game. Coker & Co. had cut them off from the boat, getting between them and the river with a rush, so the St. Jim's juniors could not even get hold of an oar or a boathook.

"Well, what do you bounders want?" asked Blake. "I don't remember inviting you to our camp!"

"Still cheeky!" grinned Coker. "All right, we'll give you something to cure all that!"

"Yes, rather!" said Potter, entering into the spirit of the thing, as it were, as he saw an easy victory ahead.

"Where's that photograph?" asked Coker.

"Which?"

"The one that young cad Manners took of me!"

Blake chuckled.

"Is that what you're after? Well, Manners has got it with him, and he's not here."

"It's not in the boat?" demanded Coker.

"Fathead!"

"Well, I'll deal with Manners another time," said Coker.

"At present I'll deal with you cheeky young cads."

Blake cast a longing look round. But there was no sign of his comrades yet.

"Collar them!" ordered Coker.

"Hands off!" roared Blake, as the three Fifth-Formers of Greyfriars advanced to the attack.

Coker & Co. did not heed. Herries and Dig put up their fists, and Blake caught up the kettle. It was full of water, but, unluckily, it was not hot!

"Put that down!" roared Coker.

"Come on!" retorted Blake.

Coker came on, and there was a crash. It was a tin kettle, and it was dented by its contact with Coker's nose. Coker's nose felt more than dented, and the hero of Greyfriars sat down with a bump and a roar.

"Whoooooop!"

Herries and Dig were struggling with Potter and Greene. But Blake could not rush to their aid, for Coker was on his feet in a twinkling, and springing on him. Heedless of the crashing kettle, Horace Coker grasped the junior and brought him to the ground.

"Got the cads!" he panted.

Potter grinned, and sat on Herries' chest. Greene sat on Robert Arthur Digby. Coker planted a knee on Blake.

"Gerroff, you beast!" howled Blake.

Coker's nose was streaming red. He frowned blackly over the crimson stream.

"I'll give you banging a fellow's boko with a kettle!" he gasped. "Now, quiet, you young cad, or I'll hurt you!"

Blake struggled desperately, but Coker's hefty knee pinned him down. And Coker jerked off Blake's necktie, and in spite of his resistance, fastened his wrists together with it. Then, leaving Blake wriggling in the grass, Coker went along to Herries and Dig, and tied their hands also.

Then he had leisure to dab his nose with his handkerchief. The nose was red, and the handkerchief looked redder as it came away.

"The young ruffian!" breathed Coker. "Look at my nose, Potter. How does it look?"

"A bit like a crushed strawberry," said Potter, eyeing it.

"More like a tomato that's been trodden on," said Greene critically.

Coker breathed hard.

"I'll make those young villains squirm!"

"Let us go!" roared Herries.

"Bundle them into their boat!" said Coker.

"You Greyfriars rotter!" howled Dig.

"Get a move on!"

The three juniors were hustled into their boat, and rolled in the bottom of the Old Bus. Then Horace Coker proceeded to "rag" the Old Bus, with chuckling assistance from Potter and Greene. The sail was shaken out and crumpled up in a heap on the three juniors, then the tent was tangled over them, with ropes and pegs. The lockers were turned out, and their contents strewn over Blake and Herries and Digby. The tap of the oil drum was turned on over the gunwale. Every loose article was taken out of its place and strewn along the boat. It was a thorough "rag," and the Old Bus looked as if a cyclone had hit it by the time Coker & Co. were through. Blake and Herries and Digby, squirming under the heaps of things piled on them, wriggled with rage.

"Gweat Scott!"

It was a sudden amazed exclamation from the shore. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had arrived.

"Hallo, here's the tailor's dummy!" grinned Coker.

"Bai Jove! Cokah, you insultin' wottah—"

"Collar him!" shouted Coker.

The Greyfriars seniors jumped out of the boat. Arthur Augustus had already fared roughly at their hands once that afternoon. Now he had another experience of the same kind. He was collared by the three, and tossed into the boat, where he sprawled on the crumpled sail—and also on Herries and Digby and Blake, as muffled yells from underneath testified.

"Bai Jove! I—I—I—" stuttered Arthur Augustus breathlessly. "You—you howwid wuffians! You feahful wascals! You—you—you—"

Coker took a turn of the tow-rope round Arthur Augustus, and knotted it behind his back.

"That's one more to the collection," he remarked. "Now

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we've only got to wait for the other three to come back. What did I tell you fellows about my strategy?"

"Oh, ripping!" said Potter.

"Top-hole!" said Greene. "But what about tea? There doesn't seem to be any grub here."

Coker did not even answer. He was too happy and triumphant to care about such base considerations as tea. His strategy had justified itself—the enemy had been taken in detail, and vanquished. Four of the St. Jim's seven were helpless prisoners in the boat, and Coker & Co. were more than a match for the other three. They had only to wait for Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther to return, and then—

"I fancy we're getting that photograph!" grinned Coker. "I fancy they'll be sorry they cheeked us—what?"

"Perhaps they'll bring some grub back with them," suggested Greene hopefully. "I dare say that's what they've gone for."

"Let's hope so," said Potter, brightening up.

Coker gave a scornful sniff.

"Isn't it just like you fellows to be thinking about tea at a time like this!" he grunted.

"Cokah, you wottah, I insist upon bein' weleased at once!" howled Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Dry up!"

"You uttah wottah—"

"Shove some water over him!" said Coker. "There's a top-hat there you can use."

"Gweat Scott! My toppah!" shrieked Arthur Augustus. "Put that toppah back in the hatbox at once, you howwid wuffians! If you dare to use that toppah to dip watah— Oh cwumbs! Gwoooogh! Ooooooooch!"

Potter, grinning, baled water from the river in that beautiful top-hat, and swamped it over the helpless Gussy. It was not a beautiful hat by the time Potter had finished using it as a dipper.

"There they come!" exclaimed Greene suddenly.

And Coker & Co. turned to face the new enemy, as Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther came running down the bank.

CHAPTER 4.

Treed!

TOM MERRY halted.

The Terrible Three had returned from the village laden with provisions—they had not even stopped for a snack themselves. As they came in sight of the camp by the river they caught sight of Coker & Co. in the boat. Of Blake and Herries and Digby they could see nothing, but they could see Arthur Augustus sprawling on the heap of wreckage, with Potter using the silk-hat over him as a watering-can.

"Stop!" exclaimed Tom.

"Those cads—" exclaimed Monty Lowther.

"They've got the boat!" ejaculated Manners.

"And they've got us, if we're not jolly careful!" said Tom Merry grimly.

Coker waved an inviting hand from the moored boat.

"Come on!" he shouted.

"This way!" chortled Potter. "This way, if you want your old boat!"

"Waiting for you!" yelled Greene.

Coker's followers, for once, were keen and quite enthusiastic. It could not be denied that Coker's strategy had been a success. The Greyfriars trio were masters of the situation, and they felt pleased accordingly. They had no doubt whatever that, in hand-to-hand combat, they were immensely more than a match for any three juniors. So they only wanted the Terrible Three to come on, in order to make their "bag" complete.

"Wescue, deah boys!" shouted Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Where's Blake?" shouted back Tom Merry.

"Undah all this stuff, deah boy. At least, I think so. I can head somebody yellin', and it sounds like Blake."

"They've bagged those Fourth Form asses," said Manners. "How jolly lucky I took my camera with me!"

"What the thump—"

"They've ragged the boat from end to end. Suppose they'd got hold of my camera!" Manners shuddered at the thought. "Might have busted it!"

"Blow your camera!" grunted Lowther. "Your dashed camera is the cause of all the mischief! That idiot Coker's after that silly snapshot!"

"He won't get it!" said Manners. "I've got it in my case, in my pocket."

"Are you coming aboard?" yelled Coker.

"Wescue!"

Tom Merry's eyes glinted as he looked at the boat occupied by the enemy. Tom was a great fighting-man, for a junior in the Shell, and at a pinch he would not have hesitated to tackle a Fifth Form fellow. But his comrades were not equal to such a hefty task; it was not to be expected that



There was a fiendish yell from Coker. A boot clumped on his right ear, and then a boot clumped on his nose, and then on the back of his head. Coker lost his hold, and slithered down the trunk. "Whoooooop!" he roared. (See this page.)

they should be. Now that numbers were even, the advantage in a scrap was hugely on the side of the three seniors of Greyfriars.

"Are we going for them?" asked Monty Lowther dubiously.

"I shall have to put my camera somewhere safe first!" said Manners hastily.

"Bother your camera!" shrieked Lowther.

"Look here, Lowther—"

"We can't attack three fellows who are too big for us," said Tom Merry. "We don't want to be added to that jolly old heap in the boat. Keep off at present."

"They're coming!" said Manners.

Coker & Co., seeing that the enemy did not mean to advance, jumped ashore from the Old Bus. They advanced on the Terrible Three with grinning faces.

"The mountain won't go to Mahomet, so Mahomet's coming along to the giddy old mountain!" remarked Lowther. "What's the word of command, O King?"

"Hook it!" said Tom briefly.

"But, I say—"

"Wescue!" yelled Arthur Augustus.

"Follow on!" said Tom. And he ran back from the bank as Coker & Co. came on triumphantly.

Back from the towpath was a wood, close by the lane, where conspicuous notice-boards warned trespassers that they would be prosecuted. But the Terrible Three, pressed by the enemy, had no time to heed notice-boards; or, perhaps, having seen so many during their voyage up the Thames, they had ceased to take note of them. At all events, they ran into the wood; and their bags of provisions were hurriedly thrust into cover under a thick bush, out of sight of the enemy. Then they ran on deeper into the wood, and at a distance they heard Coker & Co. whooping in pursuit.

Relieved of their bags, the juniors ran on swiftly. Tom Merry in the lead. The underwoods were too thick for the enemy to keep them in sight, or for them to see their pursuers, but they could hear Coker & Co. all the time, not very far away, trampling and rustling and searching for them.

Tom Merry halted breathlessly under a big oak-tree.

"Up here, you two!" he whispered.

"And you—"

"Take my straw hat," breathed Tom. "Quick—and let Coker think we're all three there! Catch on?"

Lowther gave a breathless chuckle.

"All serene! Clear!"

Tom Merry ran on into the wood, and Manners and Lowther climbed the oak-tree. They sat on branches well up from the ground, but in full view of anyone passing below, and Monty stuck Tom Merry's straw hat in thick foliage on a higher branch, jamming it securely there. Louder and nearer sounded the trampling of the pursuers.

"Here they are!" roared Coker, bursting out into the glade over which the big oak towered.

"Got them!" panted Greene.

"Come down, you young cads!" shouted Potter.

The three Greyfriars seniors halted under the tree, staring up. They could see Manners and Lowther plainly enough, and on a higher branch they saw Tom Merry's straw hat, looking exactly as if it were on the head of a fellow lying along the branch hidden by foliage.

Coker had no doubt that he had run down the Terrible Three. He shook his fist at them.

"Come down!" he roared.

"Dear man!" smiled Lowther.

"Are you coming down," bawled Coker, "or do you want me to come up after you, you young cads?"

"Come up, dear boy!" grinned Manners.

"I jolly well will! Come on, you chaps!"

Coker started to climb the tree. Potter and Greene watched him, to see the result. They did not seem keen on climbing themselves. Horace Coker went clambering up breathlessly.

"Look out, Coker!" shouted Greene suddenly.

Monty Lowther, hanging on to his branch with his hands, felt for Coker's head with his boots.

He found Coker's head!

Clump, clump, clump!

There was a fiendish yell from Coker. A boot clumped on his right ear, and then a boot clumped on his nose, and then on the back of his head. Coker ducked his head to escape the clumping, lost his hold, and slithered down the trunk. He sprawled in the grass at the feet of Potter and Greene.

"Whooop!" he roared, as he landed.

Monty Lowther sat on his branch again.

"Come up, old nut!" he called out. "Do come up again! Aren't you trying it on, Potter? What about you, Greene?"

"Do come!" urged Manners.

But Potter and Greene took no heed of that pressing invitation. They had no desire whatever to feel boots clumping on their heads. Coker sat up in the grass and rubbed his head savagely.

"I'll smash 'em!" he gasped.

He staggered up.

"Going up again?" asked Potter, with a wink at Greene.

Horace Coker snorted.

"No; it's a bit undignified for a Fifth Form chap to go clambering into trees after cheeky young monkeys. We'll wait for them to come down. They'll soon get tired of hanging on there."

"What about tea?" asked Greene.

"What?" bellowed Coker.

"Tea!"

"If you say 'tea' again, William Greene, I'll mop up the ground with you! Now, say 'tea'!" said Coker ferociously.

Greene did not say "tea." Coker looked much too dangerous. The three Greyfriars seniors leaned on tree trunks and watched the St. Jim's juniors in the branches of the oak. Potter and Greene would rather have walked back to the village to tea. But Coker would have missed a dozen meals in succession rather than have allowed the enemy to escape unpunished. Manners, he knew, had the offending photograph about him, and Lowther had clumped his head—Coker's important head! Coker was prepared to wait till nightfall, if necessary, for the St. Jim's juniors to drop into his hands like ripe fruit—in fact, all night. If the treed juniors did not come down sooner, it would be a case of not going home till morning for Horace Coker.

No doubt Coker would have revised his strategy if he had known that Tom Merry was not in the oak-tree, but was only represented there by his hat. Fortunately, Coker did not know it.

CHAPTER 5.

Turning the Tables!

TOM MERRY scudded out of the wood at a point some distance away. Coker, as he declared, was a master of strategy, but Tom was not without strategic resources. His comrades—and his own straw hat—being "treed" by the Greyfriars party, Tom Merry was at liberty, and he did not lose a moment. He emerged from the wood, and cast a hasty glance up and down the river bank. There was no sign to be seen of Coker & Co.—evidently they were

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"treeing" the juniors in the oak. And with breathless haste Tom Merry ran for the Old Bus.

He jumped hurriedly on board.

"Bai Jove! Welease me, Tom Mewwy!" gasped Arthur Augustus, who was still struggling laboriously with the tow-rope.

Tom Merry dragged him loose.

Then he dragged away the tangled sail and canvas covers and tent and other impedimenta that hid Blake & Co. from sight. The voices of the three were audible, their tones were emphatic. Their red and furious faces were now revealed to view.

"Oh, you!" gasped Blake. "Where——"

"Let us loose!" panted Herries. "I'll smash those rotters! I—I——"

"Quick!" mumbled Dig. "I'm jolly nearly suffocated! That idiot Gussy has been sprawling on my face."

"Weally, Dig——"

Tom Merry opened his pocket-knife, and cut the Fourth-Formers loose. As he did so he hurriedly explained the situation in the wood.

"Oh, good!" gasped Blake. "We'll handle the rotters! Let's get a chance at them, that's all."

"Come on!" exclaimed Herries.

"Yaas, wathah!"

Jack Blake picked up a boat-hook and jumped ashore. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy seized his Malacca cane. Tom Merry and Herries and Dig each seized a weapon of some sort.

Then the five juniors started for the wood at a run.

They plunged into the wood, eager to get to close quarters with the enemy. Tom Merry led the way to the oak-tree. A bawling voice fell on the ears of the juniors as they advanced.

"Will you young cads come down?"

It was the powerful voice of Horace Coker.

"We'll jolly well wait for you all night, if you stick up in that tree!" roared Coker. "You hear that?"

"Bow-wow!" came Lowther's polite reply.

"You've got that photograph about you, young Manners?"

"You bet!" answered Manners.

"Hand it over, and I may let you off with a cuff or two. Otherwise I'll jolly well thrash you."

"Dear man!" answered Manners.

Tom Merry laughed breathlessly.

"We're close on them! Come on!"

The rescue-party ran on into the glade by the oak. Their arrival took Coker & Co. utterly by surprise. They had believed Tom Merry to be in the oak-tree, where a straw hat could still be seen peeping over a high branch. His sudden appearance on terra firma astounded them, especially in company with the four juniors they had left tied up on board the boat.

"Why—what—how——" spluttered Coker.

"Give 'em socks!" roared Blake.

"Yaas, wathah! Wush them, deah boys!"

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Greene. "I'm off!"

"Hook it!" panted Potter.

The rush of the five juniors fairly broke up Coker & Co. Manners and Lowther came slithering down from the tree to join in the fray, but they were hardly in time.

Coker faced the enemy like a lion at bay, but even Coker hated close contact with a boat-hook. He roared and backed away.

Potter and Greene stood not upon the order of their going, but went at once. Potter captured one terrific lick from Gussy's Malacca, and yelled wildly as he went. Greene caught a jab from the boat-hook and a hefty kick from Herries, as he fled, and he did not linger. The two fugitives went through the wood at the fastest speed they could put on, and it was quite a high speed. They knew that the tables were completely turned, and that was enough for them.

But Horace Coker was made of sterner stuff. He was defeated, but it was not given unto Coker to know when he was beaten. He dodged the boat-hook and several sticks desperately, but he did not flee. Potter and Greene fading away into the distance, Tom Merry & Co. were able to devote their whole attention to Coker. They jabbed him, they lunged at him, they rapped him and tapped him, to an accompaniment of infuriated roars from Horace.

"Wag him, deah boys!" chuckled Arthur Augustus.

"Give him jip!"

"Ha, ha, ha! That's for your napper, Coker!"

"Yarooob!"

"One for his nob!"

"Yooooop!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Coker made a desperate rush at the enemy, heedless of raps and taps and lunges. He succeeded in grasping Tom Merry. The next moment the whole party grasped Coker. He came to grass in the clutch of seven pairs of hands.

"Bump him!" roared Blake.

"Wag him!"

"Ow, ow, ow! I—I—I'll——"

"Look out!" shouted Monty Lowther suddenly.

A man in gaiters and a velvet coat came through the trees, with a cudgel under his arm. The St. Jim's juniors were suddenly reminded of the fact that the wood was private property, and that two or three notice-boards announced the fact.

"What's this 'ere?" shouted the man in velveteens. "Trespassing! I'll give you trespassing!"

"Hook it!" said Blake.

The seven juniors let go Coker. They did not stop to argue with the man in velveteens.

Leaving Horace Coker sprawling breathlessly in the grass, they scudded away through the wood towards the river.

Tom Merry and Lowther paused for a minute to recover the bags of provisions from their hiding-place, and then ran on after the rest of the party.

As they fled, they heard the voice of Horace Coker, raised in wrath.

"Hands off, you blackguard! Trespassing? Blow trespassing! You touch me, and I'll punch your cheeky nose! Yoooop! Oh! 'Ow, ow!"

There were sounds of a distant struggle. Tom Merry & Co. did not heed it. If Coker was not tired, by that time, of scrapping, he was welcome to scrap with all the keepers in the Thames Valley, so far as the St. Jim's juniors cared. Seven breathless and untidy, but gleeful, juniors scudded on to the Old Bus.

Tom Merry dumped down his bag and cast off the moorings, while the other fellows pitched on board the camping utensils from the shore. Then they jumped aboard, and the Old Bus was pushed off.

"May as well get going," Tom Merry remarked. "We can have tea on board. And we don't want to argue with silly keepers."

"Wathah not!" grinned Arthur Augustus.

A man in gaiters came running out of the wood. He was in time to see the Old Bus float out into the middle of the river, with four oars pulling.

The keeper shouted after the boat, but his voice was lost in the distance. Tom Merry & Co. pulled on, leaving the scene of the late combat far behind. And when they moored to the bank again, and prepared a late tea—very late but very welcome—they discussed what might have become of Coker, and wondered whether he had been "run in." And they chuckled joyfully at the idea.

CHAPTER 6.

The Avenger on the Trail!

"WE ought to see Weadin'!"

"Whose wedding?" asked Monty Lowther.

"Weally, you ass!"

"We shall see Reading all right," said Tom Merry. "We've got a lot of shopping to do at Reading. We sha'n't let you do it for us, though, Gussy."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"That's the Kennet," remarked Blake.

"It would be wathah a good ideah to explore the Kennet, while we are in Berkshire," remarked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "You can get along the Kennet all the way to Newbury, where there was a battle or somethin', once upon a time."

"Good egg!" said Tom. "There are over a hundred locks on the Kennet. It seems attractive."

"Bai Jove! On second thoughts, pewwaps we had bettah give the Kennet a miss," said Arthur Augustus, thoughtfully.

"A hundred locks—and no quays!" observed Monty Lowther.

"Bai Jove! Is that a wotten pun, Lowthah?"

"Not at all. It's a jolly good one."

"Wats! Weadin' is a vewy histowic place, you fellows," said Arthur Augustus. "It was always celebated for—"

"Biscuits," said Lowther.

"Yaas, but chiefly for backin' up the Woyalist side in the civil wars," said Arthur Augustus. "I wegard that as vewy wippin' of Weadin'."

"Is that how it came to take the Huntley and Palmer?" inquired Lowther.

"Wats! We must have a look at Weadin'. A celebated king named what-do-you-call-him was buried in the—the thingummy centuwy. And there is a famous what's-its-name, too!"

"We mustn't miss those," said Blake gravely. "And mind, you fellows, keep your eyes open for the thingumbob!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was a sunny morning on the day following the strenuous warfare with Coker & Co. Tom Merry & Co. towed cheerfully up to Caversham Lock.

Stores of all kinds in the Old Bus required renewing, and there was a great shopping expedition in Reading. Tom

Merry & Co. kept their eyes open for Coker & Co., but they did not sight the enemy in the busy streets of the Berkshire town.

Tom wondered whether Coker was still on the track. He knew that Horace was a sticker, and he knew how determined Horace was to capture the photograph which represented him adorning the top end of a punt-pole with no other visible means of support. That photograph was to be framed, to be hung up in Tom Merry's study next term at St. Jim's. So, obviously, Coker couldn't be allowed to raid it. Manners generously intended to send him a print of it to Greyfriars. But it was doubtful whether that would please Coker, especially as Manners intended to dispatch the gift in the form of a picture-postcard.

It seemed probable, on the whole, that Horace Coker was still tracking the St. Jim's party up the Thames, in search of the negative and vengeance. So the heroes of St. Jim's were very wary.

But if Coker & Co. were in Reading, Tom Merry & Co. saw nothing of them in the old Royalist city. They were quite pleased to see nothing of them. As Monty Lowther remarked, the absence of Coker's features improved the view considerably.

Leaving Reading behind, the Old Bus rolled on to beautiful Pangbourne.

"This is weally a lovely quartah, deah boys," Arthur Augustus D'Arcy remarked.

"Yet one cannot see this place without a pang," said Monty Lowther regretfully.

"Bai Jove! I am weally surprisid, Lowthah, to find you in a poetical mood," said D'Arcy. "You are usually such a funnay ass. You are wewewin' to what the poets wemark about the element of melancholy in all beauty—"

"Not at all," said Lowther. "I'm referring to the tributary of the Thames from which this place takes its name."

"Wha-a-at?"

"The Pang!" explained Lowther blandly. "It's a stream. Hence Pangbourne."

Passing Pangbourne, and the Pang, the Old Bus floated onwards towards Goring. Here the tow-path was on the Oxfordshire side, after Basildon was passed. The Terrible Three walked with the rope, while Arthur Augustus steered, and Blake and Herries and Dig took their ease in the boat.

"We are gettin' towards Oxford now, deah boys," Arthur Augustus remarked to his comrades.

Blake held up a warning hand.

"Not a word about ye distant spires, ye antique towers!" he exclaimed.

"Weally, Blake—"

"Not a syllable about giddy old quadrangles, and storied windows richly dight, casting a dim, religious light," said Blake, with emphasis. "We've had enough of that in Milton, in Saturday prep, at school. You begin, and I'll give you the boathook!"

"You are an unpoetical ass, Blake!"

"Bow-wow!"

"And a Goth, a Vandal, and a Hun!" said Arthur Augustus warmly.

"Hear, hear!"

"I wewew now to give you any desceiption of the histowic beauties of Oxford."

"You'd better!" agreed Blake. "There's the boathook ready for you, if you change your mind!"

"Wats!"

And Arthur Augustus steered, and kept his stores of historic knowledge bottled up, as it were, for private consumption.

"But we're not near Oxford yet," said Dig. "We sha'n't be safe from Gussy till we're through."

"I wegard you as an ass, Dig. I considah—"

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Blake, jumping up suddenly in the boat. He stood and stared over Arthur Augustus' head.

"What is it, deah boy?"

"There he is!" exclaimed Dig.

"My hat!" ejaculated Herries.

The three juniors stood and stared back along the river. Coming up the stream was a skiff, with two fellows pulling and a very burly youth steering. Only the backs of the oarsmen could be seen; but the steerman was in full view, and his features—not at all ordinary features—were recognisable. It was Horace Coker of the Greyfriars Fifth.

"What on earth are you fellows lookin' at?" demanded Arthur Augustus. And he turned his head to look behind him.

Naturally, he pulled hard on the wrong line as he did so. Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther were walking on with the tow-rope without looking back, as Gussy inadvertently steered into the bank.

The next moment the Old Bus was trying to climb the bank to the towpath, and Blake and Herries and Digby pitched over as one man.

The nose of the boat rose in the air among the rushes, and

Blake and Herries and Dig plunged headlong astern, sprawling on Arthur Augustus.

"Yawooooop!" roared the surprised steersman of the Old Bus.

"Oh, my 'eat! What the thump——"

"Look out——"

"Wow-wow!"

"Oh cwumbs! Gewwoff!" howled Arthur Augustus. "You uttah asses, what are you spwawlin' ovah me for? Oh cwumbs!"

"You silly chump!" roared Blake, struggling up. "Are you trying to wreck the boat?"

"Weally, Blake—— Ow! Take your sillay elbow out of my wibs, Hewwic, you dangewous chump!" wailed Arthur Augustus.

Blake yelled to the towing-party. The Terrible Three were deep in conversation, and did not seem to be aware of the disaster going on behind them. They pulled on the rope, and the Old Bus seemed to be making frantic efforts to get on the towpath.

"Stop!" yelled Blake. "You dummies, stop! You, frabjous chumps, halt! You burbling cuckoos, chuck it!"

Tom Merry looked round.

"Blessed if I didn't think something was up!" he remarked. "Those Fourth Form kids are bound to wreck the boat if we take our eyes off them! I say, if you fellows want to come ashore, there's no need to bring the boat with you!"

"You silly owl!" roared Blake.

The Terrible Three slacked on the rope, and walked back. Blake shoved the boat free with an oar, thoughtfully jamming it against Monty Lowther for the purpose. Lowther sat down and yelled. He had been grinning a moment before. Now he was not grinning.

"All serene now!" said Blake. "Get on!"

"You clumsy ass!" roared Lowther, staggering to his feet. "Can't you see where you're shoving?"

"Certainly!" said Blake. "Come a little nearer and I'll shove again!"

"I—I—I'll——"

"Bai Jove! There's Cokah!" shouted Arthur Augustus. "I say, those Gweyfwiahs boundahs are followin' us!"

"Coker!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

The delay of the Old Bus had brought Coker's skiff alongside. The Terrible Three jumped into the Old Bus at once, ready to help in resisting an attempt to board, if that was Coker's intention. Potter and Greene rested on their oars.

Coker freed one hand, and waved it threateningly at the St. Jim's party.

"So I've caught you, you young scoundrels!" he shouted.

"Weally, Cokah——"

"You haven't quite caught us yet!" grinned Tom Merry. "But here we are, all ready to be caught. Barge on!"

"Will you hand over that photograph?" yelled Coker.

"The answer is in the negative!" said Monty Lowther blandly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Then I'm coming aboard!"

"Come on!"

"Yaas, wathah, you cheekay ass!"

"Close in, you fellows!" ordered Coker

Potter and Greene looked rather dubious. After Coker's earlier experiences with the St. Jim's party even Coker ought really to have learned that he could not handle that party. But it seemed to take Horace Coker a very long time to assimilate instruction.

"Do you hear me?" roared Coker.

"Yes," gasped Potter. "But——"

"Lay about that old tub. What do you think we've been following the young cads up the river for, you dummies?"

Potter did not reply that he had hoped not to find them. It was no use making any answer like that to Coker.

"Pull, I tell you! Go it!"

Coker steered for the Old Bus, regardless of the danger of collision. Four of the St. Jim's juniors reached out with oars and one with a boathook. Vigorous shoving from four oars and a boathook was bound to have effect on a light skiff. Coker's boat rocked and pitched, and a wash of the Thames came over the gunwale.

"Oh crumbs!" gasped Potter. "I'm wet!"

"You'll get wetter!" chuckled Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

Coker & Co. did get wetter—much wetter, especially Coker. Coker grabbed at Blake's oar and caught the blade, and held on furiously. Blake dragged at the oar, and as Coker refused to let go, he was jerked over the side of the skiff. There was a mighty splash as he went into the Thames. The skiff was dancing like a cork now, and Potter and Greene were holding on for their lives, their oars floating away down the river.

Coker came up spluttering, and grasped the gunwale. The skiff barely escaped capsizing as the burly Coker hung on it.

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"Help me in, you dummies!" howled Coker.

"You silly fathead!" yelled back Potter. "Do you want to get us all drowned?"

"You dangerous ass!" roared Greene. "You'll have the boat over in a tick!"

"I—I—I'll——" spluttered Coker. "You wait till I get on board, I'll mop up the boat with you!"

That was not an inducement to Potter and Greene to help him in. Potter seized the lines, and got the skiff under control. The oars were far out of reach, and Potter steered for the bank, the current taking the skiff down. Coker clung on to it and roared, and the skiff rocked like a cockleshell under his frantic attempts to climb on board.

"We'd better stand by a bit and see them safe ashore," grinned Tom Merry. "We don't want even Coker to be found drowned!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Fortunately, the Greyfriars skiff bumped into the rushes, and Potter and Greene jumped out. They seemed fed up with boating with Coker.

Coker scrambled out after them. Then the Old Bus went on its way, leaving Coker and Potter and Greene engaged in furious argument, their enraged voices accompanying the St. Jim's party for quite a distance up the river towards Goring. But that unmusical accompaniment died away at last.

"Bai Jove!" chuckled Arthur Augustus. "I wondah whether Cokah is fed up yet? He weally is a stickah, and no mistake."

And all the St. Jim's party wondered whether they had seen the last of Coker, or whether he was still tracking them up the Thames.

CHAPTER 7.

Carry On!

"I 'VE got it!"

Horace Coker made that announcement with the air of a fellow who has made a discovery of tremendous importance. He looked very impressively at Potter and Greene as he made it.

Potter and Greene did not look impressed. But they tried to be patient.

More and more, as they continued that holiday with Horace Coker, it was borne in upon Potter and Greene that there was a limit, and that Horace Coker was the limit.

How long they would be able to stand it was a puzzle that exercised the minds of Potter and Greene. But for the fact that Coker was handing out the expenses of the trip with a princely hand, Potter and Greene couldn't have stood it at all. But it had to be admitted that there were compensations even for having Coker as a travelling companion.

For instance, at the present moment Potter and Greene were sitting in a moored boat, eating and drinking of the best. The boat's locker had been stored regardless of expense by the open-handed Horace. Coker had hired that boat and provisioned it, and certainly the provisions left nothing to be desired. Potter and Greene admitted that. Cold chicken and ham, and sausages and jellies, and meat pies and other pies, and ginger-beer and currant wines—all sorts of good things rewarded them for their loyal adherence to Coker. And Coker had left them in the boat while he had gone scouting.

With Coker away, and the tuck present, Potter and Greene felt that they could stand it a little longer. It was only when Coker came along the bank and rejoined them that their doubts revived.

Coker announced that he had "got it!" and his comrades sighed. They knew that he was alluding to some new scheme for dealing with the St. Jim's party. Potter and Greene had had enough of the St. Jim's party. They were fed right up to the chin with the St. Jim's party. Unfortunately, Coker's word was law.

Coker joined his comrades in the boat, and started on the good things. As he ate he expounded.

"I've got it!" he said. "While you slackers have been loafing here I've been scouting. I've run them down!"

"Who?" asked Potter.

"Those St. Jim's cads, of course. They've camped less than a quarter of a mile from here. I've watched them!"

"Some scout!" said Greene.

"Well, I rather pride myself on being able to scout," said Coker. "I've fairly tracked them down. They've hired a field to camp in from a Johnny on the Berkshire bank, and they've camped there. The boat's tied up to the willows, and they've got the tent up ashore. They don't know that we're still on their trail."

"I'll tell you what, Coker," said Potter, as if struck by a sudden bright idea. "Those fags have been cheeky, of course. Impudent, in fact. But why not forgive them?"

"What a good idea," said Greene, taking his cue from



Blake dragged at the oar, and as Coker refused to let go, he was jerked over the side of the skiff. There was a mighty splash as he went into the Thames. "You silly fathhead!" yelled Potter. "Do you want to get us all drowned?" (See page 10.)

Potter. "A generous chap like you, Coker—really generous and—and lofty—high-souled and all that—"

"They're really beneath your notice, Coker," urged Potter. "It's scarcely consistent with your dignity to take any notice of fags like that lot. It isn't as if you were an ordinary fellow like—like Greene or me. You see that, Coker?"

Coker looked thoughtful. Greene eyed him a little anxiously. It was true that Coker "liked it in chunks." But Greene wondered whether this was laid on a little too thick even for Coker.

But he need not have been uneasy. It could not be laid on too thick for Coker.

"There's something in what you say," said Coker with a nod. "But it won't do. You see, they've got that photograph, which they've got to hand over. And I've told them I'm going to thrash them. I'm bound to keep my word."

"Ye-e-es! But—but—but—" "Enough said! I know you mean well, but there's nothing doing," said Coker. "I'm going to put those cheeky fags in their place. It's a matter of principle with me. I never stand any rot from the fags at Greyfriars—Wharton and Bob Cherry and that lot. So I'm certainly not going to begin standing cheek from fags belonging to another school."

"H'm! But—" "Don't talk any more, Potter. Listen to me! You talk a good bit too much, old chap!"

Potter breathed hard, and relapsed into silence. He comforted himself with cream tarts.

Evidently Coker was still on the war-path, and his hapless comrades had to follow him on the path of war. There was no help for it. His leg could be pulled, but not to the extent of getting him off the war-path. So Potter gave up pulling Coker's leg, and devoted himself to tarts.

"Now listen to me," resumed Coker. "I've mentioned before that some fellows are born strategists. I'm one of them. I don't brag of it—it just comes naturally. We really haven't had much luck so far in dealing with those cheeky fags. My strategy will alter all that."

"Same as last time?" asked Potter.

Coker frowned. "That was all the fault of you fellows. And then that keeper cad came on the scene. And then in the boat this

afternoon you fellows were responsible for getting me upset. You admit that?"

"Oh, any old thing!" said Potter resignedly. "It's our fault we've had such weird weather this summer, if you like. It's our fault that you've got the thickest head in the three kingdoms. It's our fault—"

"What?" roared Coker. "Oh, don't rag!" said Greene. "What about getting back in this boat? It's coming on dark now."

"We're not going back!" said Coker. "We're going on! You haven't heard my stratagem yet, owing to Potter butting in with his silly rot."

"Let's have the stratagem," groaned Greene. He realised that he had to have it.

"It's turned out," said Coker, "that we can't handle that gang of fags in a scrap—they're too numerous. If you fellows could scrap like me it would be easy. But you're so futile in a scrap that you're practically of no account. And I can't handle more than five or six at once—seven is rather too many, and I admit it."

Potter and Greene did not speak. It was not much use for a fellow to speak when Horace Coker's chin was fairly under way.

"Well, that's where my strategy comes in," said Coker. "I've scouted, as I told you, and spotted the enemy's camp. We're going to bear down on them after dark!"

"Are we?" murmured Greene.

"And bag their boat!"

"Bag their boat?" gasped Potter and Greene.

"That's it!" said Coker, quite pleased at having startled his comrades. "They're camping ashore, and we shall glide alongside in the dark and board their boat. Nobody will be in it, of course, as they'll be in the tent, and we shall cast it loose and tow it away."

"By Jove!" said Potter. "They'll be stranded," said Coker with a chuckle. "Fancy their faces in the morning when they turn out and find their boat gone. What?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" chortled Greene. "Then we can make terms with them," said Coker. "We'll make them hand over that cheeky photograph, and stand up in a row to be licked. I shall cane them, one after another, just like a Form master."

"Wha-a-a-t!"

"I shall insist on that!" said Coker firmly. "It's beneath our dignity to scrap with mere kids. But they must be punished. I shall cane them!"

"Oh crumbs!"

"Until they submit humbly we keep their boat," grinned Coker. "And if they take time about it, we'll jolly well clear off with the boat and take it down to Pangbourne, or farther still. The fact is, I'm going to bring them up sharp, and show them what's what and who's who."

"And which is which?" asked Potter.

"Don't be a funny ass, Potter. Now, what do you fellows think of the wheeze?"

Coker looked inquiringly at his comrades. Obviously, he was prepared for objections if they did not approve. Potter and Greene had to approve, and they knew it. So they approved. But as a matter of fact, they did seriously regard Coker's present scheme as a little less asinine than most of Coker's strategic schemes.

"It's a go," said Potter.

"That's that!" agreed Greene.

"Well, you fellows aren't such silly asses as you look," said Coker graciously. "You're no good without a leader, having practically no brains of your own. But with me to lead—"

"Oh! Ah! Yes! How well you put it, Coker!" gasped Potter.

"I have a way of putting things neatly," said Coker. "Well, you fellows, finish your tea, and after we've finished with those St. Jim's cads, what do you say to going back to Pangbourne and hiring an electric launch for a few days—hampers of grub, and all that?"

Potter and Greene looked almost affectionately at Coker. A few minutes before they had been wondering how it was they refrained from taking him by the scruff of the neck, and holding his head under the water. Now they felt chummy and quite admiring.

"Coker, old man, you're a giddy genius," said Potter. "It's a privilege to be your pal."

"Only Coker thinks of these things," said Greene heartily. "Cokey, old man, you're the real gilt-edged goods."

Coker smiled benignly.

"I do have ideas!" he said modestly.

"You do!" said Potter.

"Great!" said Greene.

And all was calm and bright.

CHAPTER 8.

Two of Them!

"I SUPPOSE the boat will be all wight!"

"Not likely!" said Lowther.

Arthur Augustus sat up.

"Bai Jove! Don't you think the boat will be safe for the night if we all sleep ashore, Lowthah?"

"Oh, yes! Quite! But it won't be all white," said Monty Lowther. "You see, it's painted a dark colour—"

"You uttah ass!"

And Arthur Augustus settled himself down in his blankets to sleep.

Seven juniors were under the cover of the tent ashore, and they were sleepy after a long day on the river and a substantial supper. The summer night was fine, though not warm. It looked as though it would remain fine all night, from which circumstance Monty Lowther deduced that it would probably rain before morning. Anyhow, the tent was up, and the St. Jim's crew was safe under shelter.

In the dark under the willows, the Old Bus was safely moored. The painter and the tow-rope both secured it to the willows, and it rocked gently to the current in the darkness. But the voyagers did not trust wholly to the ropes. They were safe for mooring purposes, but Tom Merry & Co. had already had some experiences with tramps and loafers along the river. They did not run any risk of the boat being filched by some wandering rogue during the hours of darkness. A strong chain, fastened by padlocks, secured the Old Bus to a stump in the shallows, a precaution the juniors never neglected when they spent a whole night ashore.

The tent was pitched in a field on the Berkshire side, leave having been obtained from the owner for a consideration in cash. Tom Merry & Co., cheerfully tired, turned in, prepared to sleep the sleep of the just till the sun came up over the silvery Thames.

"You fellows asleep?" asked Arthur Augustus, after a pause.

"Mmmmmmm. What's the trouble?" murmured Blake drowsily.

"I was wondewin' whethah one of us ought to keep watch," said Gussy. "That ass Cokah may still be aftah us."

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"Blow Coker!"

"Yaas; but suppose—"

"Too sleepy to suppose," grunted Blake. "Shut up and go to sleep!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Shurrup!"

"Yaas; but weally it would be only pwudent for one of you fellows to sit up and watch—"

"You can sit up and watch, if you like, fathead!"

"Bai Jove, I was not thinkin' of that, Blake! I was thinkin' that pewwaps you would like to sit up and watch."

"Think again!" growled Blake.

"Or pewwaps you, Tom Mewwy—"

"Dry up!"

"Or you, Mannahs—"

"Ass!"

"Weally, Mannahs—"

"Was that boathook brought ashore?" asked Blake in sulphurous tones. "If anybody's got it handy, give that image a dig with it. It doesn't matter where you hit him!"

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus settled down again, and sleep descended upon the crowded tent. But the swell of St. Jim's slept lightly; perhaps thinking of the possibility of a night-attack, if the egregious Coker should be still sticking to the trail. He awoke suddenly.

"Bai Jove! What's that?"

Something was moving outside the tent.

Arthur Augustus sat up hurriedly. His head came into contact with slanting canvas and knocked on something hard outside the canvas. The swell of St. Jim's uttered a sharp exclamation.

"Wake up, you fellows."

"Grooogh!"

"Shurrup!"

"Wake up! It's an attack, deah boys!" gasped Arthur Augustus, scrambling to his feet. "There's somebody outside the tent!"

Arthur Augustus meant to give the alarm. He gave it effectually. One of his feet, as he scrambled up, was planted on Blake's neck. The other came into collision with Digby's nose. The yells that Blake and Digby gave were like rumbling thunder.

"Yoooop!"

"Gerroff!"

"Bai Jove! I tell you— Oh cwumbs!"

Hands in the darkness clutched at Arthur Augustus. Both his ankles were captured and dragged from under him.

The natural result was that Arthur Augustus went sprawling wildly. And the result of that seemed something like pandemonium.

It was quite impossible to sprawl in a crowded tent without something happening.

Arthur Augustus was strewn over sleeping forms. His thrashing arms came into violent contact with startled heads. He found a resting-place on Tom Merry's face; but he did not remain there long. He was shoved off in the most unceremonious manner possible, and rolled on Manners, and Manners hit out furiously, unfortunately missing Gussy and catching Herries on the chin. Herries gave a wild yell, and landed out in return—rather recklessly. He did not know who had punched him. But he knew whom he had punched in return—a fiendish yell from Monty Lowther informing him.

"Oh cwumbs!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "I—I say—"

"Kill him, somebody!" gasped Blake.

"Weally, you fellows—"

"Get a light!" hissed Blake. "Get a light and show me where that dashed boathook is. I'm going to slaughter him."

"Bai Jove! I—"

An electric torch streamed out light in the tent. Blake made a spring at Arthur Augustus. The swell of St. Jim's dived out of the tent just in time.

"After him!" gasped Lowther.

"Squash him!"

"Slaughter him!"

Six infuriated juniors streamed out of the tent after Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. In the soft starlight they gathered round him with homicidal looks.

"You uttah asses!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "I wepeat that there is somebody twyin' to get into the tent; somebody was buttin' against the canvas on the outside—"

"Fathead! There's nobody—"

"I wepeat—"

"Let's look!" growled Tom Merry. "Might be some tramp nosing about. If we don't find anyone, we'll slaughter Gussy!"

"Yes, rather."

The juniors ran round the tent. They stared about them in the dim starlight. But there was nothing alarming to be seen near the tent.

"The silly owl was dreaming!" snapped Manners.

"I was not dweamin', Mannahs. I wepeat—"



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"Hallo, what's that?" exclaimed Blake suddenly. A dim moving shadow loomed up for a moment, moving off towards the distant hedge.

"I told you so!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "It's a twamp or Cokah or somebody. We might have been wobbed, or attacked, or somethin' if I had not woused out you slackahs!"

"Come on!" exclaimed Blake, grasping the boathook.

If it was an enemy, Tom Merry & Co. were prepared to tackle him. They rushed after the moving shadow through the grass.

The enemy flitted away, dimly seen, a shadow among shadows. The juniors, fully on the alert now, followed him fast. The dark shadow disappeared into the thicker shadow of a high hedge.

"Come on!" exclaimed Tom Merry, turning on his electric torch.

"Hee-haw!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Hee-haw! Hee-haw!" came from the dimness under the hedge.

"Oh, great pip!"

The electric light flashed on the startled head of a donkey. The St. Jim's juniors stared at the donkey, and the donkey stared at the juniors. It was an unexpected meeting on both sides.

"Hee-haw!"

Apparently the donkey had wandered in from an adjoining field. It was his asinine head that had bumped on the tent; that was clear now. The aristocratic face of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy became a rich pink in hue.

"Bai Jove! It—it was that sillay ass!" he ejaculated.

"It's this silly ass that woke us all up, though," said Blake. "Bump him!"

"Weally, Blake—whooooooop!"

Bump, bump, bump!

"Oh cwumbs! You fearful wottahs! It might have been a twamp—yoop! It might have been Cokah—yawooh! Bai Jove! Yoooooooooooop!"

Tom Merry & Co. walked back to the tent, feeling solaced, and leaving Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gasping in the grass.

They had settled down in their blankets again by the time Arthur Augustus put his head in at the opening of the tent.

"You wuffians—"

"Shut up!"

"You fwightful wottahs—"

"Go to sleep!"

"You disgustin' wuffs—"

Whiz! A cushion caught Arthur Augustus under the chin, and cut short suddenly the flow of his eloquence. There was the sound of a heavy bump outside the tent, and a sleepy chuckle within.

"Ow! You awful wottahs! I—"

"You'll get the boathook next!" snorted Blake. "Keep quiet and let fellows go to sleep."

"I wegard you with such uttah contempt, Blake, that I wefuse to speak anotheah word to you."

"Stick to that, or you'll get the boat-hook."

"Wats!"

Arthur Augustus crawled into his blankets again. He was feeling wrathful and indignant. But, fortunately, he was feeling sleepy, too, and before long his wrath was forgotten in balmy slumber.

CHAPTER 9.

Held Fast!

"QUIET!" said Coker.

Potter and Greene were perfectly quiet. But Coker, as leader, was bound to give directions.

The hour was late, the river quite deserted, the water glimmering softly under dim starlight as it flowed and murmured on. It had not been easy in the darkness for Coker & Co. to locate the exact spot at which the Old Bus was moored. In fact, they might have missed the St. Jim's camp altogether, but for catching sight of an electric flash-lamp moving about in a dark field by the river. They could guess that that light belonged to the campers, though they could not guess why the juniors were showing a light close upon midnight, knowing nothing, of course, of the false alarm that had been given by the roaming donkey.

The light vanished again, but it had located the camp. A quarter of an hour later Coker's skiff was silently ranging under the willows.

"Quiet!" repeated Coker. "They may be awake on shore. That light was shown by some of them."

"Seems quiet enough now," murmured Greene.

"Yes; but don't talk! You shouldn't jaw when we're on a secret night attack, Greene."
 Greene breathed hard. Coker was "jawing," but that apparently did not matter.
 "Here's their old boat!" breathed Potter.
 "Yes; don't jaw."
 Coker took hold of the gunwale of the Old Bus, and drew his skiff close in alongside. The two boats bumped.
 "Careful, Potter! Don't make a row."
 "You bumped the boat, Coker," breathed Potter.
 "Don't jaw!"
 Potter, for a moment, had a wild idea of up-ending Coker over the gunwale. But he restrained himself.
 "All serene!" breathed Coker, after a careful survey of the Old Bus, that floated silent and deserted under the shadowy willows. "They're all ashore, the young asses. Safe as houses. You hold the boats together, Greene, while Potter and I get over."
 "Right-ho!" said Greene.
 "Don't shout!"
 Greene murmured something under his breath.
 Coker stepped from the skiff into the Old Bus, while Greene held the boats alongside. Potter followed him.
 The night was starry but dim, and under the willows it was very dark. Coker stumbled over a thwart, and there was a bump.
 "Don't make a row there!" said Greene victoriously.
 Coker sat up.
 "Do you want me to come back and knock your head on the boat, Greene?" he inquired.
 "Who's shouting now?" asked Greene.
 "Why, you—you—I'll—I'll—"
 "For goodness' sake let's get through before that gang gets wind of it," hissed Potter. "They'll chuck us into the river if they catch us here."
 "Quiet!" said Coker.
 "Look here—"
 "Silence!"

Potter suppressed his feelings. He had had a great deal of practice in suppressing his feelings during his career as Coker's pal.
 Coker crawled along cautiously, and cut through the painter with his pocket-knife. Then he sawed through the tow-rope.
 He grinned in the darkness as he rejoined Potter.
 "Got the oars?" he asked.
 "There aren't any oars. They're not dummies enough to leave the oars in the boat when they're camping ashore."
 "Don't talk so much, Potter. Anybody would think you were trying to give the alarm. Have you found a boat-hook?"
 "There isn't one here."
 "Probably there is, and you haven't found it. Never mind. I have to do everything," said Coker. "I expect that. Hand me a boat-hook, Greene! Ow! You silly dummy, I didn't tell you to bung it on my waistcoat."
 "Sorry!" murmured Greene; but there was not much sorrow in his voice.
 "Here's the tow-rope," said Coker. "Make it fast to the stern, Greene."
 "All right!"
 "Don't yell!"
 Greene took the tow-rope and fastened it to the stern of the skiff. All was ready now for towing away the Old Bus.
 "Get back, Potter," directed Coker. "Take the oars. The current will take us down, but you may as well pull, if you can do it without making a thundering row. You steer, Greene. Got the lines?"
 "I've got them!"
 "Don't bawl!"
 Potter and Greene, in a state of concentrated fury, settled down in the skiff, Greene taking the lines and Potter putting out the oars. Horace Coker remained on board the Old Bus to shove off. Coker was in a triumphant mood, and quite unaware of the fact that his devoted followers were yearning to drop him into the Thames.

"Ready?" he asked.
 "Waiting!"
 "Don't roar!"
 Coker shoved the boat-hook against the bank. The Old Bus rocked, but did not come off. There was a faint clink of a chain, but Coker did not notice it.
 "The blessed old barge seems stuck in the mud," grunted Coker. "She won't move. You'd better pull, Potter."
 "I'm pulling!"
 "Don't shriek!"
 Coker shoved off again rather savagely. Potter pulled at the oars in the skiff, and with Potter pulling and Coker shoving the Old Bus ought to have floated off comfortably, and followed the skiff down the river. But she didn't.
 "Stuck fast, by Jove!" growled Coker.
 "Is the beastly thing fastened somehow?" called back Potter.
 "How can it be fastened when I've cut it loose?" growled Coker. "Don't be a silly ass, Potter—not a sillier ass than you can help, I mean. Pull, and put some beef into it!"
 Rowing an anchored boat is hard and thankless labour. George Potter found it so. He pulled, and pulled again, but the skiff did not gain six inches; the Old Bus remained immovable, rocking in the current under the pull of the tow-rope. Coker shoved, and shoved, and shoved, desperately, but the Old Bus stuck fast, and it dawned even upon Coker's powerful intellect, at last, that it was not stuck in the mud, or it could not have rocked so energetically.
 "It's fastened somehow!" Coker gasped at last.
 "I told you so!" snapped Potter.
 "Don't scream!"
 "I can hear a chain clinking!"
 "What's that got to do with it, you yelling ass?"
 "It's fastened with a chain, somehow!"
 "Oh!" Coker was silent for nearly a whole second. "Ah! Of—of course! You needn't roar like a bull, and wake up those fags, George Potter. This rotten old barge is fastened

somehow, and I've got to get it loose. It's my job to do everything always."
 "I can hear somebody moving ashore!"
 "For goodness' sake shut up, Potter!"
 Potter shut up.

CHAPTER 10.
 Exit Coker!

TOM MERRY sat up in the darkness of the tent.
 Clink, clink, clink!
 Through the silence of the night the sound of a clinking chain was quite distinct. There had been other sounds—Coker's bull-like voice among them—which had probably contributed to awaken Tom Merry. Now he sat up and listened to the clinking of the chain.
 He did not need telling what that meant. There was only one chain in the vicinity that was likely to be clinking, and that was the padlocked chain that secured the Old Bus to the stump under the willows. The Old Bus was in motion!
 Tom Merry groped to his feet.
 "Wake up, you chaps!" he breathed.
 "Wharrer marrer?"
 "Something's up with the boat!"
 "Oh, rot!" murmured Blake. "It's that donkey again. Let a fellow go to sleep. You're as bad as Gussy!"
 "Weally, Blake—"
 "Listen!" said Tom.
 All the seven were awake now, and they all listened to the clinking of the chain. A few moments more and they were outside the tent. It was not a false alarm this time, they realised that.
 They seized boat-hook, oars, and sticks, and hurried down to the bank. Under the trees it was very dark, but out on the river, in the starry light, they made out a skiff, with one fellow pulling, and another at the lines, and a tow-rope



George Potter pulled, and pulled again, but the skiff did not gain six inches; the Old Bus remained immovable, rocking in the current under the pull of the tow-rope. "It's fastened somehow!" gasped Coker at last. (See page 15.)

trailing behind on the water. That tow-rope ran under the dark willows, and was evidently attached to the Old Bus.

"My hat!" breathed Tom Merry. "They're after our boat, whoever they are! Trying to bag our boat!"

"It's Coker's gang!" whispered Lowther. "That's Potter pulling yonder!"

"And Greene!"

"Where's Coker?" breathed Blake.

Coker's voice came in time to inform him. It came from the shadows under the boat.

"I've found it, you chaps! There's a padlock here, and a chain. I'll get it open with the boathook, I think."

"Buck up!" called back Potter. "I'm sure I can hear somebody moving."

"Don't bellow!"

"Come on!" whispered Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah!"

The seven juniors ran down under the willows. Coker was leaning over the side of the Old Bus, striving to snap open the padlock with the boathook. He was not succeeding. The seven juniors swarmed on board, and Coker turned round with a startled gasp.

He had no time to do more than gasp.

There was a rush, and Coker sprawled in the bottom of the boat, with seven pairs of clutching hands on him. The yell that Coker gave rang across the river far into Oxfordshire.

"Oh! Whooooooop!"

"Chuck him out!" shouted Blake.

"Yaas, wathah! Dwop him ovah!"

Splash!

"Gr-r-r-r-r-r-rh!"

Horace Coker went headlong into the Thames. There was a startled howl from Potter and Greene.

"They've got Coker! They're up!"

"Pull on that rope!" exclaimed Monty Lowther.

The juniors grasped the tow-rope and dragged. The skiff was yanked back towards the Old Bus. In a minute more, Potter and Greene would have been in the hands of the enemy. But with really creditable presence of mind Greene grabbed out his knife and sawed at the rope. He sawed desperately, not thinking in the least of capturing the Old Bus now. The rope parted, with a twang, just as the skiff was drawn up to the Old Bus, and hands were stretching out to seize the Greyfriars Fifth-Formers.

Potter shoved off, and the skiff shot out of reach.

"Pull for it!" gasped Greene.

And Potter pulled as if for his life. They seemed to have forgotten the very existence of Horace Coker, who was making mighty splashes close at hand. Coker scrambled ashore through the rushes as the skiff vanished down the dim river.

"Come back!" roared Coker. "Come back, you rotters! Do you hear?"

If they heard they did not heed. Potter and Greene were gone, and there was a shout from the Old Bus.

"There's Coker! After him!"

Tom Merry & Co. rushed ashore. Coker, in a towering rage, faced the enemy for a moment. But only for a moment. Even Coker could not argue with a lunging boathook and several lunging oars. He turned and fled, gasping with wrath.

"Aftah him!" yelled Arthur Augustus.

Coker ran for his life with the juniors in pursuit. He crossed two fields at a terrific rate, helped from behind by a series of painful jabs. Then Tom Merry & Co. halted and Coker was able to dodge away and escape.

It was late on the following day when Coker, tired and footsore and furious, rejoined Potter and Greene. For a good hour he slanged Potter and Greene. But, to their great relief, he said nothing more of following the St. Jim's party up the river. Even Horace Coker was fed up, at last. Even that cheeky photograph in the possession of Manners did not tempt him to further pursuit. He never saw anything of that photograph till, the following term, he received it in the form of a picture-postcard at Greyfriars. And then he was not pleased.

Meanwhile Tom Merry & Co., in the Old Bus, were rolling on cheerily up the river to Oxford—done with Coker at last, and no longer tracked up the Thames.

THE END.



Tuck Hampers and Money Prizes Awarded for Interesting Paragraphs.

(If You Do Not Win a Prize This Week—You May Next!)

All Efforts in this Competition should be Addressed to: The GEM LIBRARY, "My Readers' Own Corner," Gough House, Gough Square, London, E.C.4.

A TUCK HAMPER GOES TO BLACKPOOL!

"RATHER!"

A factory worker, at the seaside for the first time, saw a fisherman looking out to sea—it was high tide at the time. "Hi, mister!" exclaimed the visitor. "Will tha sell me a bottle o' sea-water?" The fisherman, seeing a chance of making a few pence, filled the bottle for sixpence. Later, the man returned, and, seeing the tide right out, shouted in surprise: "My, tha's had a good day, mister! Tha's sold out!" —A tuck hamper filled with delicious Tuck has been awarded to Miss Elsie Schofield, 11, Alredale Avenue, Marton, Blackpool.

HIS MISTAKE!

A man entered a jeweller's shop and asked for a gold ring. "Eighteen carats, sir?" inquired the assistant. "Oh, no," replied the customer. "I'm only chewing a bit of toffee!" —Half-a-crown has been awarded to J. Foy, 1, Lake Eric Terrace, Stanningley Road, Bramley, Leeds.

PAYING HIM BACK IN HIS OWN COIN!

An Irishman was summoned to give evidence in regard to a shooting affair. "Did you see the shot fired?" asked the magistrate. "No, sur, I only heard it," was the answer. "That evidence is not satisfactory; stand down," said the magistrate severely. The witness turned round to leave the box, and laughed loudly. The magistrate, indignant at this, called him back and asked him how he dared to laugh in court. "Did ye see me laugh, your honour?" asked the offender simply. "No, sir, but I heard you laugh," answered the irate magistrate. "That evidence is not satisfactory," retorted the Irishman quietly, but with a twinkle in his eye. —Half-a-crown has been awarded to Edward O'Mara, 3, New Gate Place, off Nicholas Street, Limerick City, Ireland.

COUNTING A BILLION!

A billion is a million times a million. This is quickly written and quicker still pronounced. But no man is able to count it. Let us suppose you count 200 a minute, then an hour will produce 12,000, a day 288,000, and a year 105,120,000. Let us suppose now that Adam at the beginning of his existence had begun to count, had continued to do so, and was counting still, he would not even now, according to the believed age of our globe, have counted near enough, for, to count a billion he would require 9,512 years, 542 days, 5 hours, and 20 minutes according to the above rule. Supposing we were to allow a poor counter 12 hours daily for rest, eating and sleeping, he would need 19,025 years, 319 days, 10 hours, and 45 minutes. —Half-a-crown has been awarded to Philip Phelan, 28, South Main Street, Bandon, Co. Cork.

NO WONDER HE FAINTED!

Jones bought a motor-car. It was a lovely car, for he gave fifteen pounds for it. One day he went into a garage and said to the keeper: "Have you got any red oil?" "Red oil?" said the keeper. "Well, I've been in this business for fifty years, and I've never heard of red oil. Haven't you made a mistake?" "No, I've made no mistake," said Jones. "I want it for the back lamps." The keeper fainted. —Half-a-crown has been awarded to Cyril Knowles, 177, Hagley Road, Old Swinford, Stourbridge, Worcs.

(Continued on page 27.)

Another Screamingly Funny River Story Next Week:—

"TOM MERRY'S PASSENGER!"

To ensure reading this splendid yarn,
ORDER YOUR "GEM" WELL IN ADVANCE!



THE SHIP WITHOUT A CAPTAIN

A Stirring Story of Adventure on Sea and Land.
By **JACK CRICHTON.**

CHAPTER 1.

A Complete Surprise!

BEN HOLT, who rejoiced in exactly one gold stripe upon the sleeves of his monkey jacket, was enjoying the fine air of the exquisite town of Naples, moving slowly along by the sea, and looking out towards his destroyer, with that satisfaction which only a sailor can feel when he observes his watery home and feels himself free from it for a certain time, when suddenly he felt a tap on his arm.

"Excuse me!"

He turned, and found himself addressed by a tall, red-bearded man, who smiled down at him with a very pleasant expression in his bright blue eyes.

"Yes?"

"I wonder whether you would mind giving me five minutes of your valuable time, sir?"

Ben stared at the fellow. It is not usual for a British naval officer to pick up stray acquaintances in the street in foreign towns like this, and Ben was not very enthusiastic in his reply, though by no means rude.

"Can I help you in any way, sir?" he said.

"You can!"

"How?"

The tall man—he was really quite a giant of a fellow—pointed to a neighbouring cafe.

"By coming over to one of those tables with me, and doing me the honour of taking a glass of something with me. I am in great trouble; and, as one Englishman to another, I wish to make an appeal to you," he said.

Ben thought it rather an extraordinary way for one Englishman to address another, for it was his experience that the Englishman abroad differs from all other nationalities chiefly in as much as he keeps his troubles to himself, and gets out of his own particular mess without having to appeal to strangers.

But there was something so mysterious about this fellow, something so entirely unusual, that the youngster immediately felt a certain rather natural curiosity as to what it was all about; and although wisdom told him to refuse this strange request, he was very thirsty after his long walk in the Neapolitan dust, and so after a moment he bent his head civilly, and said that he had five minutes to spare.

They crossed the street, and took a seat

at one of the little tables, and immediately cool drinks were brought to them.

"You will be surprised," said the tall man, in a few moments, after the drinks had arrived, "to learn that I have the chance of becoming a very rich man within the next few days, and that it is within your power to help me—"

Ben stared.

"What?"

The stranger waved a hand, and then suddenly Ben put his own hand to his forehead. He began to feel dizzy. He tried to rise. The big man put out a hand. It seemed to be made of steel at that moment and to weigh a ton.

"Sit down," he said, and there was a command in that voice which went straight to the lad's understanding, "and I'll tell you. What—feel queer? Only the sun. This Italian sun! It's the very dickens—"

But Ben's head had suddenly fallen forward, and his companion was only just in time to catch him as he slipped sideways. There was a queer look in his eyes as he did so. A car had driven up to the cafe at that moment. Several people had jumped to their feet as they saw the young Englishman's plight.

But no one interfered. It would have seemed as though the sailor was in the hands of a very kind friend. The big man carried him out, and in another moment or so the car had moved quickly away with them both; those who had observed the incident only remarking that it seemed to be a great pity that Englishmen would drink so heavily.

CHAPTER 2.

At Sea!

WHEN Ben Holt opened his eyes he was at sea.

For many minutes he could not make out where he was. He looked about him, and the chief impression that he received was that of cockroaches. He shuddered at the sight. They seemed to swarm about the dingy, horrible hole in which he found himself, and he tried to move.

Then he realised that he was bound hand and foot, and he slipped off into troubled slumber again, so much surprised was he by what had happened.

Suddenly he opened his eyes. A light was blazing into them, and looking up, he found himself gazing into the smiling face of his bearded friend.

"How do you feel?" the latter asked.

Ben gave a gasp. It all came back to him, at least, everything up to the moment that he had lost consciousness.

"What the deuce has happened?" he demanded. "Where am I?"

The big man bent down and undid Ben's bonds.

"Sorry we had to take precautions with you until we were at sea," he said, "but we know what beggars you British sailors are. You would have thought nothing of swimming back to your ship, and we want you badly. Sorry if we have inconvenienced you at all; but if you behave yourself no harm shall come to you!"

Ben still felt dizzy from all that had happened, for evidently the dope which had put him to sleep had been very strong indeed, and his head still ached furiously; otherwise, he would have gone for the smiling giant at once. As it was, all he could do was to stare at him in absolute amazement, and do his best to keep his feet as he stood on the deck.

The big man put a hand on his shoulder, but this Ben would not have, and sharply he jerked the hand away.

"Look here, my friend," he said, "I want an explanation—and quick. I'm a British naval officer, and I ought to be back in my ship long ago, as far as I can make out. What time is it?"

The big fellow smiled at the lad's tone.

"It's to-morrow!" he said.

Ben gave a groan, and burst out angrily:

"Of all the confounded cheek. Well, come along. Out with it! What's the game? You doped me. I shall look a nice kind of a fool going back to my old man, who will probably be having a special liver for the occasion, and informing him that I accepted a drink in a dirty, dangerous hole like Naples from a bloke I had never seen before in my life, and that I was then surprised to wake up twenty-four hours later and find myself at sea!"

The other smiled again, and although Ben was furiously angry with him, and scarcely less angry with himself, he could not altogether dislike the fellow because of the innate, very natural charm of that smile.

"I'm sorry if I have inconvenienced you, Mr. Holt, but I could not help myself. I am playing for very big game. You see, this ship has no captain!"

Ben started.

"It's a ship without a captain!" said the other. "I—oh—I'm Captain Harvey, and ordinarily I can push the little hooker along well enough, when I have my mate with me. He's a seaman. I'm a professional scoundrel!"

Ben gave a little grunt. He was feeling stronger every moment, and it was coming to him that he must keep his head, learn all he could of what was happening about him, and why he had been dragged into his adventure, and then, when the right time came, hit out good and hearty so that his friend here should have no doubts as to his strength or his intentions.

"A professional scoundrel," Ben smiled. "Well, you'll pardon me for saying that that is not hard to believe. But will you kindly tell me why I am here? I don't understand!"

The other bowed.

"My name is Harvey — Edward Harvey, captain of that ilk. I am a scoundrel, and I live by my wits, my gun, and my lack of all moral sense!"

Ben blinked.

"You certainly do not endeavour to cloak your sins, Captain Harvey. By the way, what sort of a captain would you call yourself? Since the war there have been so many different sorts!"

Harvey threw back his red head and laughed.

"Good for you, youngster! Call me a captain of rascality. Anyhow, this is my ship——"

"You are owner?"

"I am, and master, though my navigation is slightly patchy in parts——"

"Ah!"

"And Mr. Webb, my mate, upon whom I rely when it comes to dealing with charts, was taken ill yesterday very suddenly—too suddenly in fact. He is suffering from the knife wound of an outraged husband between the shoulder blades!"

Ben grinned.

"I understand," he said. "You seem a cheery lot of pirates. I must say. Is Mr. Webb in the ship?"

Captain Harvey shook his head.

"No; he is in prison in Naples, and I fear will stay there some time, as the husband's wife is now a widow. However, to the point! I had to have in this ship someone who could read a chart quite well, and who was not altogether at sea with Admiralty charts."

"The dickens you did!" said Ben hotly. "If you think I'm your man——"

"I know you are my man, Mr. Holt."

"Oh, you do, do you, Captain Harvey! And may I ask why?"

A hard smile came into the other's very blue eyes.

"When I was your age, Mr. Holt," the captain said, "I had a great liking for my meals. I shall wish you to help me navigate this ship to a certain point on the North African coast, and pick up a certain Admiralty mark, which I do not understand, and, when the right time comes, unless you are a good boy, and obey my orders, you will go very hungry."

"You go to blazes!" said Ben.

The captain shook his red head, with a slight smile.

"I shall not do anything of the sort, Mr. Holt, because I am perfectly sure that I shall find you reasonable enough. Let me tell you the whole truth. Off the North African coast—I will show you the marked chart later—there lies a ship torpedoed in the war by an Austrian submarine. In her strong-room is more than a million pounds in gold. For a long time her whereabouts have been a mystery, kept closely by the sea. But a few weeks ago a British destroyer

located her, and the Admiralty propose within a few weeks to send divers to get the gold. Happily for me, being a man who never hesitates about paying properly for what he wants, I have friends in the Admiralty."

"I wish I had," said Ben, with a little grin.

Harvey laughed.

"Oh, I might even do something for you, Mr. Holt. But allow me to finish. I have friends, and the information was rushed across Europe to me, finding me in Naples. I was on the point of starting upon a little gun running to a certain seaport in Greece, where they have decided upon a new king for the next Bank Holiday; but this, of course, was too big a thing to be missed, and everything would have been well if that idiot Webb hadn't gone ashore and got quarrelling with a dago. There was not a moment to be wasted. I had to get off at once, not only so as to get ahead of your naval people, but in case any other gentleman of leisure, such as myself, might be after the boodle. I ask you, what was I to do? I had to have assistance, and so, seeing you, a pleasant, good-looking young fellow, and probably as poor as most naval officers——"

"Oh, I'm poor enough," said Ben, smiling.

"I thought I'd take you along—you must pardon the liberty I took in the manner of my persuasion—and reward you when our job of work is done, shall we say, with a cheque for a thousand pounds?"

"You rotten scoundrel!" cried Ben, and struck out.

It was a beauty he served out to his friend, with a real sting behind it; but it takes more than a sledge-hammer—even a very willing one—to bring down a mountain, and the fellow only recoiled for a moment, uttered a curse, as a spot of angry red came to his cheeks, and then rushed in.

To do him honour, he did not hit out. Ben was still weak from the effects of the drug which had put him away the previous day, and in any case it would have been a matter of fifteen stone, strong and virile, six feet four, if an inch, hitting ten stone, rather weak and done in, five feet ten. Instead, he put out a great paw, warded off Ben's next shot, and a few moments later had Ben nicely trussed up again like a very naughty boy.

"I'll send you some chow later, my lad," he said, "but I warn you I'm a funny customer to fool around with, and you'll be wise to do what I wish. That is to say, if you wish to get your grub at all regularly."

CHAPTER 3.

The Treasure!

FOR three days, as the little ship beat down towards the African coast, taking, as far as the youngster could make out in his pesty cabin, a strange and devious route, Ben Holt refused to have communion of any sort with Captain Harvey.

Not that the big fellow did not come to interview him, and urge upon him the wisdom of obeying. Indeed, he spent a good deal of time with Ben, with this object in view, and every day the grub got shorter.

It had not, indeed, started out to be much, and by the end of three days Ben was starving.

He awakened on the morning of the fourth day with a groan of pain. The night before he had had a miserable cup of soup, which had seemed to him like nothing so much

as the dirty water in which plates have been washed.

And now, as he opened his eyes, and found the blazing sun streaming in at the open port of the room, he realised that the captain had played a fiendish trick upon him.

He was almost mad with thirst.

Something had been put into the soup. He had evidently not noticed it at the time, but now he knew it all right, and as he sat up in his bunk with a groan—for his bonds had been taken from him a day ago, and his room very securely locked—he knew that his power of resistance was nearly broken.

"I must try another tack," he muttered to himself; "this fellow will do me in, if I am not careful, and then I will not have the pleasure of seeing him given about thirty years at the Old Bailey."

He turned with a start.

"Hallo!"

The door of the cabin was opened, the sun poured in, and then a nigger steward entered, followed by Captain Harvey himself.

The nigger bore on a tray a beautiful jug of iced drink.

Ben gave a groan.

"Give me a drink," he pleaded.

"What's that? For pity's sake, captain, give me a drink!"

The captain smiled.

"My dear fellow, thirsty? I'm sorry! It's a horrible experience, and one from which I endeavour, during a misspent career, never to suffer. John's got lime-juice, ice, and water there—or a syphon. John, take it up on the bridge. Mr. Holt will be there in a moment or two."

The nigger showed his teeth, and in another moment was gone. Ben got from his bunk to the deck. He was weaker than ever, for he had scarcely had food past his lips for four days now.

"You're a cheerful brute," he said in a low voice to Captain Harvey. "I should have thought that you would have been too much of a man to do this sort of thing, but one lives and learns. What do you want me to do?"

The captain grinned from ear to ear.

"My dear boy, to be reasonable—to come up on the bridge with me and help me locate this wreck. We are within five or six sea miles of her now, but I dare not move another inch, and there are certain marks on the chart I do not understand. Come, drink, eat, be reasonable, and take the luck which Fate and Captain Edward Harvey have put into your hands."

Ben staggered to the door.

"All right!" he said. "I'm beat. Come along!"

A great hand caught his arm.

"Listen, my lad! None of your tricks—none! You see! You try them on with me, and over into the ditch you'll go. See? I like you, and I'm not a bad-hearted sort of person when I'm not crossed, but Heaven help you if you try, in your idiotic naval fashion, to do the heroic stunt! Understand?"

Ben nodded, and went out on to the deck. It was the first real glimpse of the steamer he had had yet. A dingy little ship, and not much more than a thousand tons burthen. She was not too clean, and his naval sense was outraged immediately by the evil-looking lot of scoundrels who lounged about the decks, as he and the captain moved towards the bridge.

And over there was the African coast. He had never been quite hero before, but he recognised the rugged, low, unpromising coastline, that barrier between the desert and the ocean, and as he came into the chart-room, and looked down at the chart, he gave a quick start.

"I think we are about here," said Captain Harvey, with delightful optimism, laying a great thumb upon the chart—"somewhere about here. Looks a bit thick, eh?"

Ben gave a horrified grunt. The captain handed him a long glass, and gratefully the lad drank deep.

"Another?" asked the captain.

"Several!" said Ben, and he drank his fill.

Then he asked for a cigarette, and turned to the chart again. After a few moments he looked at the captain.

"Of course," he said, "I don't know if you are anywhere near here, or off Yarmouth, my good man, but you ought to bless your stars that you have not piled her up. You've got the cheek of the very dickens to come thrusting down here. You fellows have all the luck, I must say. Now, let's see!"

He gave himself, with a professional interest, to his task for a few minutes, and soon he had taken the ship's position, and had marked it carefully on the chart. He could not help laughing once or twice as he did so. The ship—Mermaid was her strange name—should, according to every rule and regulation of that old brute, the sea, have been at the bottom of the Mediterranean long ago.

Even at this moment about her were rocks on every side, hidden by the smiling sea, and waiting greedily to do their worst.

"Of course," he said, after a little, "if it comes on to blow, my friend, none of us will fuss very much about treasure ships!"

Harvey placed that heavy hand on the lad's shoulder.

"And now, have a look at this!" he said.

From a drawer beneath the chart table he had drawn a smaller chart.

In red ink certain directions and soundings were marked out quite clearly, and in one corner, in very small writing, still in red ink, was certain information as to the exact locality of the wreck.

Ben read it all through carefully, examined the chart closely, went to the chart-room door and glanced out, and then looked at Captain Harvey.

The blue eyes were smiling shrewdly upon him.

"Well?" he asked.

Ben turned rather pale.

"What do you want now?" he asked.

Captain Harvey waved a huge hand.

"The wreck."

Ben said nothing.

"When I said that I—I am not a seaman," Captain Harvey went on, "I—I did not exaggerate. But, at the same time, I am no fool. Webb was one of the best navigators I have ever known, and, naturally, I picked up a good deal from him. I think that, for a man who has not a ticket of any sort, I have done fairly well to bring my vessel this far—"

Ben's laugh stopped him.

"Fools, you know, captain, step in, et cetera."

The captain nodded.

"Precisely! But I am not a fool, and I think I could find my way out, dead slow, two men taking soundings, my dear fellow, and a steady eye— Oh, you sailormen make a lot of mystery of a lot of stuff which is simple enough. It's the same in every profession. A doctor covers a pill with sugar, and tells the world he's a clever fellow; but common sense cures the ill, eh? But, of course, when it comes to dealing with the navy, it's a bit different. I've got this thing all right, but what the dickens is a Dan-buoy?"

Ben started.



Harvey started studding the deck about the feet of his hapless men with revolver shots, so that they hopped and fumed, making even more confusion.

"I'm afraid I don't know," he said.

The captain came a step closer.

"Look here, young fellow!" he said.

"I'm not asking you to make trouble; but understand, I'm out for this treasure, and I mean to put a diver over the side to-day. Everything is in our favour, and the wreck is round about here. Take this ship to the right spot, or, by Harry, you go to feed the sharks!"

Ben was pale.

"Haven't you got a decent spark in you?" he asked.

The captain shrugged.

"That's not the point," he said. "You are either going to do as I say, or overboard you go."

"I should have thought," Ben argued, "that you would have realised that it was too dirty a game to force a fellow to rob his own country. Great Scott, man, you've brought your vessel here! If you are not lying, it's a wonder you did so without knocking a hole in the bottom of her. You evidently know you are close to the stuff. Be a good fellow; cut me out of it, and do your own dirty work, and I'll give you my word not to interfere with you until you put me ashore, and then I'll do my best to land you where you jolly well ought to be."

If the youngster had expected that his appeal to the captain would have a good effect, he was grievously mistaken.

An evil, cruel look came into those blue eyes. They were peculiar eyes in that way, capable of amazing change in a moment or so.

From his pocket he took a gun, and his lips curled.

"My young friend," he said, "cut out the cackle, and quick! I mean business. You're young enough to like life still. Which is it to be? Do you do your job of work for me, or do I put a lump of lead into you?"

"Neither, you brute!"

As he spoke, Ben's hand caught the heavy ruler which lay across the chart, and with one movement he brought it down as forcibly as he could across the great, menacing face of the man in front of him.

He might as well have hit out at a stone wall: but, at any rate, the very unexpectedness of the blow, together with the sharp sting of almost brutal pain, made Harvey stagger back, and in another moment Ben had bolted through the chart-room door.

On the bridge was a dago quartermaster, who, drawn by the captain's cry, had jumped round, and now, as he saw Ben, made a grab at him. But this fellow was more of Ben's own size, and a straight left not only sent him flying, but into such a position that he rolled across the bridge like a sack of potatoes, and there lay inert and groaning.

In a flash Ben was on the deck, but even at the same moment a revolver shot spat out, he felt a sharp twinge of pain in his shoulder, and a loud roar, as of a wild animal, infuriated and driven to savage brutality, above him on the bridge.

Ben did not hesitate a moment. With one wild leap he was in the sea, and, weak as he was, spurred on by the greatest, the sharpest of all spurs, he had started to swim for the shore.

On the deck of the Mermaid was every sort of confusion and shouting, and above it all there came the rattle of a revolver as Captain Edward Harvey stood at the rail of the steamer and took pot shots at the youngster.

"Lower away a boat, you swabs," the captain was roaring, as he reloaded his gun, "and jump to it there, my livelies, or, by old Harry, I'll teach you!" And suddenly, like a man maddened with drink, he started studding the deck about the feet of his hapless men with

revolver shots, so that they hopped and fumed, and made confusion the worse confused, in their efforts to escape his attentions, and at the same time to lower quickly away.

Luck was with Ben.

Had he been on the deck watching the performance he would have realised that here, indeed, was a ship without a captain. No one obeyed an order properly, and the men seemed to have but the haziest idea about the way in which to put a boat into the water.

They had almost succeeded, with a couple of men standing in the boat, some feet above the sea, when suddenly there came a roar from the captain.

"Up, you lubbers, up!" he cried, and at the same moment he rushed back to the bridge, Ben forgotten, his glasses to his eyes, as the smoke of a steamer on the horizon made it clear that he was soon to have a visitor.

"Let him go!" he muttered to himself, and put his great hand quickly to the telegraph, hoping for the best.

All this, of course, was lost on Ben.

As he swam towards the shore, wondering whether his waning strength would hold out long enough to enable him to reach it, he looked back once or twice, he even observed the antics of the dago crew trying to get a boat away, but he little imagined that he was going to have such terrific luck as to reach the shore without a further struggle for life.

Then suddenly he saw the Mermaid putting out to sea, and, swimming more easily on his back, he tried to imagine what was going to happen.

At last he stood, exhausted and utterly weak, amidst the heavy breakers upon the sandy shore, and looked out towards the ship.

"The brute! The callous brute!" he muttered. "He's going to leave me to starve to death on this! Anyhow"—he sank to the beach, exhausted at last—"I never found his rotten wreck for him!"

CHAPTER 4.

A Strange Friend!

BEN awakened perhaps an hour later. The Mermaid was a spot on the horizon, her smoke just showing to his trained eye.

There was no sign of any other vessel, and, of course, the youngster had no idea of what it had been that had taken the gallant captain and his merry men off so suddenly.

Close to Ben was a very unpleasant-looking mongrel.

At first Ben started back, as he opened his eyes, beneath the raging sun, and stared at the queer brute. He mistook him for a hyena. Then he feared that wolves had invaded this part of the African littoral; but after another moment he realised that it was but a measly, very thin dog, of no country, scant form, no shape, no name, as hungry, and as deserted as himself.

"What cheer, Jack?" said Ben, stumbling to his feet, "and where are you from?"

The dog came closer.

He inspected Ben at the end of his thin nose. He was a queer animal, and after a moment retreated a few steps, and evidently waited for Ben to follow him.

"Well, I might do worse!" murmured Ben, and followed him.

They wandered along the sea shore, and then suddenly, after half a mile of very broken way, the dog, always perhaps a dozen paces in front of the young sailor, turned inland, and Ben saw that

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he was taking a very faint, narrow, beaten path.

"Hallo!" murmured Ben—for he was dizzy, faint, almost foolish with weakness—"what's the game?"

He soon knew.

Across some sandy wastes, dunes of a rough, grassy, wandering nature, then a small ridge of rocks, and at last he saw, half a mile ahead of him, a native village.

No one seemed about, but the dog had little hesitation about him, and within a few minutes Ben Holt was walking into as pesty and evil a native village as it had ever been his lot to behold. Not a soul seemed to be about. A small, naked child, of perhaps eighteen months, sat and played with a few pebbles in the dust; somewhere the thin voice of an angry old woman told the lad that humanity existed, but that was all, until at last Ben's leader and guide came to a standstill before a hut a little more gallant, less awful than the rest.

Then he looked up at Ben once, wagged his bushy tail, gave a slight yelp, and sat down in the dust.

Evidently, although Ben did not realise it at the time, that yelp was a signal, for as Ben looked up and down the village, wondering when he would be seen, and what all this was going to bring forth for him, he started round at the sound of footsteps, and then almost cried aloud as the most amazing sight he had ever seen in his life was placed before his eyes by the mysterious hand of Fate.

A man who once had been white stood before him at the door of the hut.

At least, Ben imagined that he had been white.

The age, the dirt, the awfulness of him was a thing in itself. His beard was exceedingly long, and quite white, his skin was like a parchment that has been put close to a fire for a long time and then dipped into red mud. His eyes, none the less, were of a faded blue, and he wore, by all that was miraculous, a faded monkey jacket upon which were still the buttons of the Royal Navy, the last torn remnants of the gold lace which gives the mark of the executive to the officers of his Majesty's Navy.

He made a sound.

Ben started.

"Are—are you English?" he gasped, moving an inch or two forward, and then pointed to the dog. "I—I followed him from the shore!"

The old man moved a hand. It went to his head, to his heart. He stared, and then closed his eyes. He glanced down at the dog, over in the direction of the sea, and he seemed to be trying to think. Then suddenly he gave a faint, low chuckle, and did his best to smile, though it was rather a sickly effort.

"How do you do?" he said, and held out a hawklike hand.

Ben started. It was just like the sound of a voice from the grave, but it was English, even if a faded, broken, forgotten English, and what was more, the English of a man who had once known how to speak the language.

"How do you do, sir?" said Ben quietly. "I—I have been cast away. I—I am in the Navy."

The man's hand suddenly went to his throat. He drew himself up.

"I—I once was in the Navy," he muttered. "I—I am very glad to see you."

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Sorry we've not got much to offer you." He waved a hand. "Simple folks here, you know. Rum beggars, begad, rum beggars. But come inside and have a drink!"

And then Ben knew that he had once been in the Navy. He followed him into the hut.

It was an incredible place, evil, dirty, a mass of nothing, and full of smoke from a small fire which burned dully in one corner. In a little, as the lad's eyes grew used to the dim light of the place, he was able to make out the utter misery of it, but not before mysterious liquor had been produced from a bowl, and he had been made to drink in quite the grand style. The mongrel had placed itself across the door of the hut, and all was silence still in the village.

"You are quite safe," the strange creature said when in silence they had drunk—"quite safe! I—I—this is my ship, as it were!"

And he gave a mirthless laugh.

Ben looked at him, and then away as though in pain. It seemed awful to think that an officer from the Navy could have come to this, and yet he had heard in his young time of stranger things, and he didn't want his host to feel that he was amazed at anything he saw.

As he looked, his eyes suddenly stopped short. On the wall of the hut, faded with years, torn, stained, and utterly darkened with the smoke of the place, was the photograph of an English girl.

Through the years, the smoke, and the squalor, down through the tragedy, as it were, of a lifetime, she smiled upon the young sailor, and as he gazed upon those smiling eyes, a voice startled him.

"Ah, you've seen it, eh, my friend?" the old man croaked. "And I am glad, because now you will ask me no questions, be surprised at nothing, not even at discovering a British Naval officer here in this pigsty, a pig amongst hogs; you will need no explanation, being a man, an officer, and a gentleman, you will accept all things as easily explained, when"—and he rose, touching the photograph with a hand—"when I merely say that there is the reason!"

Jim looked away. There was a lump in his throat.

"I understand, sir," he said. "And now, if you will pardon me, I'd like something to eat. I'm about all in!"

"My dear lad," said the old man, springing to the door, "of course. It's—it's good to hear English again; and perhaps you'll be able to tell me a bit about that war! I missed that, you know—I missed even that!"

CHAPTER 5.

Over the Side!

"SMITH" had been the name which the mysterious old fellow had given to Ben, and the youngster, with that tact for which his service is justly noted, had accepted the name as all sufficient. It was enough. Why "Smith" was here as the chief of a small, very evil, very fierce, very dirty tribe of North African natives, was not his concern.

And for several days, exhausted by his experiences in the Mermaid, Ben had been forced to remain as "Smith's" guest, with a fever on him, and a good chance of a long illness on him, death possibly, if he moved.

But slowly the old fellow brought him round, and after three or four days Ben was able to get out again, and make friends, if he wished to do so, with the village.

A queer lot of pirates he found them,

as evil, as dirty, as bloodthirsty a lot of ruffians as he had ever set eyes upon, and "Smith" admitted, when over a smoke, the youngster put it to him that his tribe lived mostly by preying upon their neighbours.

"And now and again a wreck comes along!" said the old man, his eyes glinting. "They are perfect fiends then! There is a mysterious craft off the shore not far from here now. Can't understand what she is doing here. Dropped anchor about a mile off the shore last night, and still here this morning. Nasty shore, too, if it comes on to blow."

Ben had jumped to his feet, and in a minute or so he was regaling "Smith" for the first time with a whole story of what had happened to him.

"Smith" heard the story until the bitter end, and then an oath left his lips.

"We'll teach the swab to treat the Navy like that!" he muttered.

"Eh?"

"To-night, my friend," the old fellow said, "I shall take a boarding party on board the Mermaid, and as an officer in his Majesty's Navy, I shall be proud to hand the ship and her prisoners over to you!"

Ben gave a gasp.

"I say," he cried, "do you think these hearties of yours could be trusted to do a little job like that?"

"Smith" actually smiled, a rather ghostly affair, but there it was, the remnants of what had been a good, hearty laugh, before a woman had broken his heart.

"Little job like this!" he cried. "My dear boy, if there is a chance of them coming back with a few bottles of Scotch whisky, a knife or two, not to mention a few decent suits of clothes, they would board a battle cruiser, and be none the worse for it! They shall do it!"

The rest of the day was spent in making their plans.

With "Smith" Ben visited a spot from which the mysterious ship could be observed, and he had no difficulty whatsoever in recognising her again as the Mermaid.

And it was evident that diving operations were already in progress.

"Wait till this evening, Mr. Harvey!" he muttered, and went back to the village.

Their plan was simple. It was nothing more or less than surprise. After all, Ben had had a glimpse of the Mermaid. He had seen the filthy decks, he had watched the hands trying to lower a boat, and he realised that she was indeed a ship without a captain. There was little enough discipline upon her, as in the olden days of piracy there had ever been little discipline, and he hoped that by midnight they would be able to approach close to her without being observed.

Once on board it would be a matter of quick justice.

He did his best to impress upon "Smith" the fact that they were, after all, Englishmen, and that the savages under their charge, if not their control, should not be permitted to slit too many dago throats!

But here "Smith" seemed to slip back into the savagery from which Ben's companionship had, for a day or two, at any rate, almost lifted him.

"Oh, let's have a good rough house of it while we can," he said.

Ben's blood ran cold, and the rest of the day he spent doing his best to impress upon everyone concerned that the reward of handing over the ship's company to British justice would be far, far greater than the satisfaction of slitting dago throats.



With a scream of rage, Harvey jumped forward, and slashed at Ben with the cutlass. Ben flung his revolver as wildly as he could into the fellow's face—but it only held him up for an instant.

He wasn't, as a matter of fact, very sure of what he said himself; but he knew that a British Naval or Military officer, who in these glorious days, does anything by which to uphold the honour of his country, and thereby offends some dirty dago, will eventually be asked to explain the temerity of his actions, and will, in all probability, be brought heavily to book for so offending!

It was fortunately a very dark night, and when "Smith," Ben, and a few dozen terrible-looking natives made their way down to the shore there was not a sign of the Mermaid. That she was out there they knew, but no light showed her position.

Native craft were shoved into the water, and a few minutes later they were softly paddling into the night, the two boats, at Ben's suggestion, joined together so that they should reach the steamer at the same time.

It took them some little time to find her in the night, but at last she suddenly loomed up on their quarter, and Ben took them cleverly alongside.

And here he admired "Smith." The old fellow had his rascals well under hand.

There was not a sound from the ship. She was as silent as a tomb. A gangway ran invitingly down to the sea, and, with a muttered word, Ben went up this first.

The deck was empty. Going forward, he bolted the companionway leading down into the crew's quarter. Someone actually moved on the bridge. The lad stood silent and still. Then he went back and gave a low whistle.

With five seconds, fury in all its worst was let loose on the deck of the Mermaid.

With the crew locked below it was difficult for the remaining members of the ship's company to put up much of a fight, but the very factor which had

so far helped Ben and his merry men operated now against them.

In the darkness—and this was the one thing which the lad had forgotten—they were unable to see what they were doing, and could scarcely distinguish between friend and foe.

And then suddenly Captain Harvey emerged, roaring, on the deck. The battle was almost over, and it was clear that the fellow had been drinking. He made an amazing sight as he lurched forward, a lantern in one hand, and a great cutlass, come goodness knows down from what age, in the other. There was blood over one eye, and he was strangely dressed in gaudily-marked pyjamas.

He roared challenge to the world, and then suddenly caught sight of Ben.

"Oh, oh!" he roared. "So it's you, my young cock-sparrow, come back to settle accounts! I'll show you!"

With a scream of wild rage, he jumped forward and slashed at the lad.

Ben's ammunition had just given out, and he flung his revolver as wildly as he could into the fellow's face. It scarcely held him up for an instant, and a moment later Ben was hard put to in his endeavour to escape from that swinging weapon.

It was a weird and wonderful fight. The one man now fighting that ring of savages, with Ben skipping out of the way, yelling to him to surrender, telling him to have sense!

But Harvey was beyond sense now. The love and lust of blood was in him, and he meant to kill before he was finished.

And then suddenly Ben slipped, and Harvey was on him with a scream of delight. The cutlass flashed in the dull light of the night, and the lanterns

(Continued on page 26.)

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Another Fine Complete Story of Adventure on the River Thames.
By **ROLAND SPENCER.**

CHAPTER 1.

The Wreck on Shivering Sands!

DEMURRAGE, or retention of barge fees, were the subject of much talk on the Estuary Belle when she was under-way one day, bound for Sandwich, round the Foreland. Ned Derry, known in the London river as River-wise Ned, and his two mates, Tony Parr and Long Jim Cartwright, had reason to wax hot on the subject. The Belle was bowling along merrily past Canvey Island, with a sight of blue water ahead. A strong, south-westerly wind was booming in her partly-brailed mainsail.

"Holstfeld's a beast, Ned," said Tony Parr. "What did his solicitor say in the letter? I was asleep when you told Long Jim."

"Merely that demurrage for the three days' delay in unloading by Holstfeld would not be paid because we were late in delivering," growled Ned. "It's only three pounds, but quite enough for us to lose. We can't help it if we become overdue on account of no wind; but when a man keeps a barge idle at his wharf he's got to pay."

"How do we stand legally?" asked Long Jim.

"I could get it by going to law, and I threatened Holstfeld to do so. But the trouble and risk aren't worth it. We'll drop it, and we'll not do any jobs for Holstfeld in future."

Ned and his mates never remained gloomy for long, and they were enjoying real yachting weather this day. Also, they were now smelling blue water, and they had a fair wind.

They took it in turns at the wheel, and, with wind and tide in their favour, in another two hours the Nore light-vessel was astern of the barge's heaving transom. Ned and Long Jim were below for a little "caulk," as they called it, meaning sleep, before their tricks at the helm. But suddenly the wind dropped.

The suddenness of the drop brought Ned out of the cabin like a shot.

"Gosh, Tony, that was sudden, wasn't it?"

"It were, don't you, skipper?" replied Tony intelligently from his position at the wheel. "Just as we were about to point down for Four Fathoms Channel. Not a breath of wind now. Evening, too. Going to risk that shoal-water passage now?"

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"We'll see what happens before I decide. I don't like these sudden drops in the wind. If it comes again from the nor'ard we'll keep to the ship channels. It is coming from the north—and strong, too. There's a barge has luffed to it! And brail'd up, by Jupiter! There's a particularly weighty wind coming down. Hi, Jim, on deck, my pippin! Coax her round to point north, Tony. I'll brail up the mains'l and stand by the tops'l halyard. You can't play daring brave man tricks when you're aboard a flat-bottomed barge."

The wind came in ominous sighing gusts, out of the north-east. The evening sun clouded over, and as Long Jim, blinking, tumbled out on deck, a mighty squall swept over the barge, knocking Jim breathless, having caught him with his mouth open. Ned was shouting, Tony was shouting, the wind was shouting, and the barge's sails were lashing like fiends on a leash.

Pandemonium reigned for five minutes, but at last, with a half-lowered topsail and brail'd mainsail, the foresail jerking and booming, the barge was sailing safely, and Ned was skipping aft.

"Keep her close, Tony," yelled the young barge skipper, as he shortened in the mizzen sheet. "We'll keep out of the Cant this night. We mustn't ease her till we have passed Shivering Sand bell-buoy."

"Ay, ay!" shouted Tony. "Close hauled it is. Good job it has come while we still have an offing from the land."

Storming and plunging like a mad thing, with the last of the spring tide ebb to draw them to windward, the Estuary Belle soaked bravely down Ooze Deep. Barges, like cows in a bog, were here and there. Steamers, outward bound, were plugging hard against the nasty sea that had risen, and a frightened yacht scurried off down the wind for shelter under the Essex shore.

The Belle was snugged down for a dirty night, and Long Jim took the wheel. River-wise Ned sat down on the cabin skylight, with a chart and a hurricane-lantern, and directed Jim in the difficult business of night sailing amongst the treacherous sandbanks of the Thames Estuary. Tony had turned in for his watch below.

The barge swung round Shivering Sands buoy, and then Ned suddenly stamped with his heel on the deck, and Tony stumbled up in a brace of shakes.

"Sorry to disturb your sweet slumbers, but get a grip on the sounding-pole, Tony, after raising the leeboard. I want not less than seven feet of water. Luff sharp if Tony shouts out less than seven, Jim."

"Ay, ay!" replied Jim.

The heavy leeboard was raised by its winch, and Tony, up forward, started plunging the sounding-pole overside.

"No bottom," was his first report. Then:

"Twelve feet!"

"Ten feet!"

The water was rapidly shoaling. It was a tense moment. Ned was trying to cut off a corner by scraping over a sand-bank. They were now sheltered by a bank to the north, so the water was fairly smooth.

"Seven feet!" Each prod of the pole had its accompanying report of the depth. Tony drew the pole up for another prod when the barge struck something with a quivering crash. The wheel spun round, and, with a warning cry, Tony let go the foresail halliard, while Ned was thrown off the skylight on to the deck.

"Wreck on the lee bow. Just showing above water."

"It's not marked on the chart!" shouted Ned, as he leapt to his feet and assisted at the helm. "Crumbs, hope we're not stove in. Are we entangled at the head, Tony?"

"No. We've blown clear now the fores'l's off her."

"Good lad! Then let go the anchor while we're still in shallow water. We'll take the bottom here and have a survey before we get into deep water again."

The anchor went over, and the barge, with a booming of canvas, swung head to wind, and the sails were quickly stowed. Then Ned ran forward and lowered himself into the fo'c'sle. He reappeared, with a whoop of delight.

"Nothing hurt much!" he cried. "Not making any water at the stem. Gee, what a smash, though! We'll have to stop here till daylight. It'll be dead low water in an hour."

"Where are we, Ned?" asked Tony.

"We shall ground on a bank of the Shivering Sands. It's quicksand, most of it, so don't go jumping overboard when the water's gone for a just-after-dark scamper!"

"That's a favourite diversion of ours, but we're not such prize clumps as to do

it on quicksands, old sport. What about that wreck?"

"We'll have a look at that, too, when the water goes down. For the present let's clear away the fore deck and get some warps ready. We may have to kedge out of this, you know."

A little later Ned lowered himself over the side of the stranded barge into the boat, and called to the others to follow. By rowing and poling warily into the teeth of the wind they approached the wreck, which they could see looming ahead of them now.

The Belle had not had a riding light run up because she was aground. The sidelights had been blown out, too, so the barge was lost to view in the darkness. Ned was never without his pocket-compass, however, so they would find their way back easily enough.

"It's a motor-boat, chums!" cried Ned, when they had got alongside. "A big one, too. Been wrecked for donkey's years and covered with sand. These sands are shifting, you know, and the winds we had at fullest spring tides must have washed the sand away from the wreck, and so made the boat visible. She hasn't been in view for the last four years. I can answer for that. Scraping over that sand is an old dodge of my old skipper. I thought the bottom seemed funny as Tony shouted out the soundings."

The chums laid hands on the time-blackened coaming of the motor-boat and peered in. The well was full of sand, but the craft had not suffered much damage round about her topsides, except where the Belle had crumpled her a short while ago.

"We'll remember this, lads," said Ned. "Salvage, you know. The spring tides are done, so the boat'll be always covered with water for the next week or so, especially with these no'therly winds, which will keep the tides high. We'll come back next spring tides, make a trip of it and dig out—"

"Hist! Down!"

Long Jim dragged Tony and Ned down into the barge-boat. Then, their talk having stopped, they heard the distinct throb of a motor out to windward and the monotonous chant of a man's voice calling out soundings as the boat proceeded. The engine was throttled down to 'slow,' and the boat drew near. The chums could see it gleaming ghostly white in the blackness now.

"Someone scenting salvage," whispered Ned. "Why we're hiding I'm blest if I know."

"Listen!"

From the motor-boat the sound of another voice came scurrying down on the wind.

"Water's shoalin' rapidly. This is about where I saw the wreck, sir. Uncovered for the first time for years. Better light the lantern. Safe enough? Pshaw! Of course it's safe. Light up."

CHAPTER 2.

Another Brush with Holstfeld!

THE chums watched over the top of the wreck. Why should the men be chary about showing a light? Was it some dark work they were on? The question settled the indecision of the chums as to whether to remain hidden or not. They kept low.

At last the glimmer of the lantern showed in the blackness. Ned gave a gasp, and crouched low with his chums.

"What's wrong?" asked Tony.

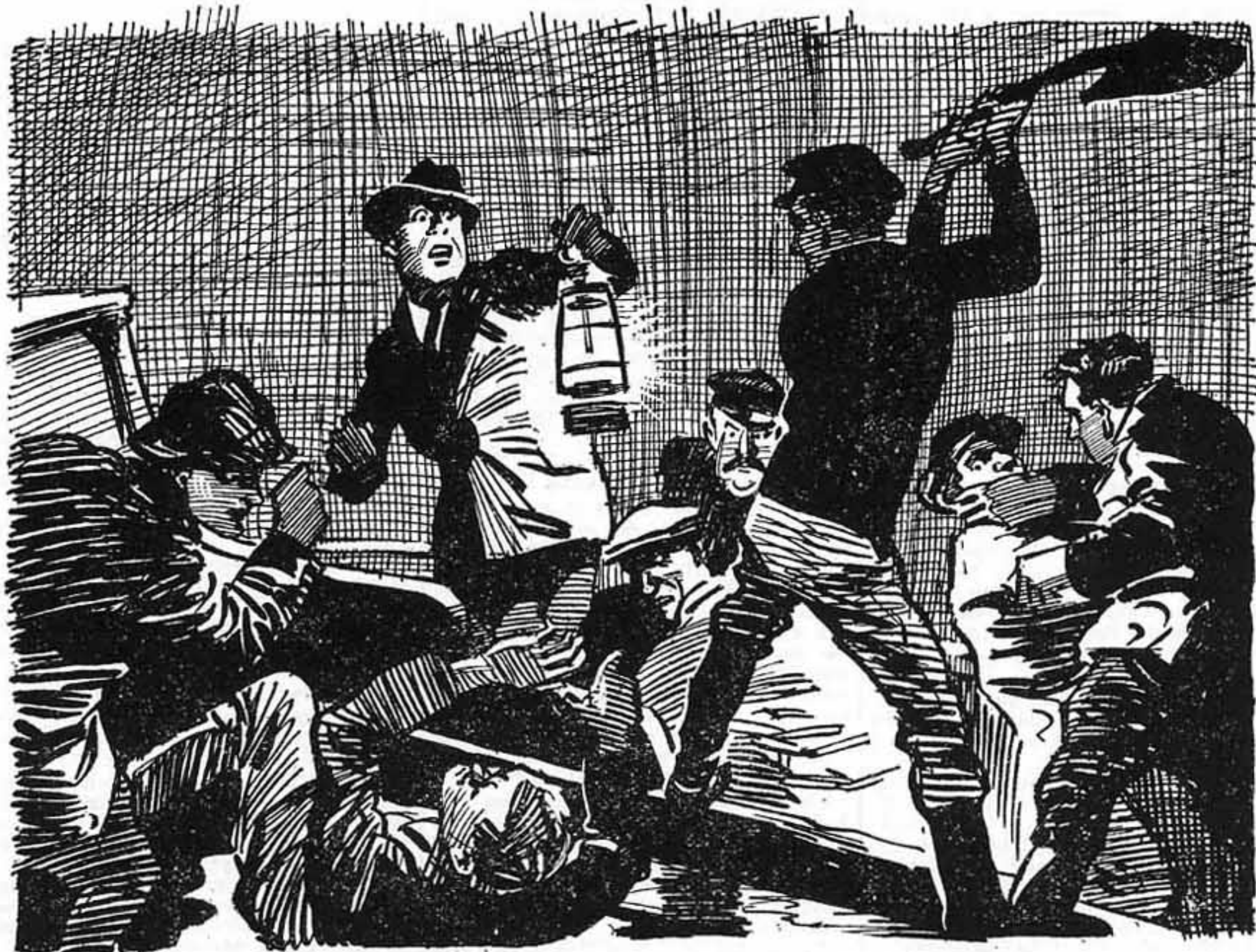
"Holstfeld! Saw the flicker of the light on his ugly, heavy features. What's a rich wharfinger doing salvaging a rotten carcass of a motor-boat worth, perhaps, ten pounds? Why don't they come by daylight? We'll see this through, chums!"

River-wise Ned had no sooner finished whispering than a shout sounded from the motor-boat.

"There she is! Thowt I wasn't mistaken in the spot. Saw her just like that last low water, when I passed in the James and Henry. Lucky as it was we saw her, guv'nor, or someone 'ud 'a' bin salvin' instead o' reportin' to you. Come on, engineer! We'll 'ave this 'ere craft alongside the wreck. Got them spades handy? Spring tides are well past now, and the flood's settin' in, so we'll have to be quick. Wi' these no'therly winds that there wreck won't be uncovered again for over a week. There'll be a foot o' water over her next dead low tide, p'r'aps."

"We'll get what we want to-night," sounded the ponderous voice of Holstfeld. "Then those can salve who will." Then, suddenly rising to his feet: "Who in thunder is that?"

The chums had been seen, and instantly, at a word from the thick, loose, snarling lips of Holstfeld, the men attacked with swinging spades. The skipper and mates of the Belle were quite surprised at the men's action; but they, too, leapt forward to meet the attack,



With one leap, Ned was on the other coaming of the deck, and with his spade audibly swishing through the cutting wind, he crashed the blade into the swinging hurricane lamp one of the raiders held.

having no choice in the matter, and the parties clashed.

Two spades went flying, and Ned got hold of one of these. With one leap he was on the other coaming of the wreck, and, his spade audibly swishing through the cutting wind, he crashed the blade into the swinging hurricane-lantern one man held.

Holstfeld gasped and grunted with rage, and exclaimed with surprise. He had recognised Ned.

"That cub!" the lads heard him mutter.

Darkness and confusion reigned. Ned, with his two mates, one on either side of him, fought desperately with their fists. But they were no match for the five or six men in the motor-boat. Ned dropped back, and Tony and Jim closed in, rightly judging that their quick-witted skipper had an idea to work out.

All this time the chums were in the wreck, and the newcomers had been pressed back into the motor-boat. The latter were laying about them with their spades, and Ned feared for his chums' skulls if he were not quick.

"Here's chancing quicksands!" he muttered, as he gingerly slipped into the water in the lee of the wreck. To his great relief the sand was hard and unyielding.

Splashing round astern of the wreck, the sand at that part now covered by the incoming tide, Ned crept up to the stern of the new arrival. No rope had been made fast, as he had noticed, and the boat was floating in about four feet of water.

Putting his shoulder on to the transom of the white boat, Ned gave a sudden heave.

"Look out!" yelled one of the men. "We're moving ahead."

"And yet further ahead," mumbled Ned, giving another hefty push.

The white boat's bow yielded to the pressure of the wind, now jutting out ahead of the wreck, as it was. Two men leapt aboard the wreck as the motor-boat was heaved clear by Ned and whisked away to leeward by the wind, the men left aboard of her raving like madmen. Tony and Jim were closing with the two men who had got aboard the wreck.

"The engine!" howled Holstfeld. "Crank up, you fool! It's only three boys. One is that insolent young bargee who threatened to sue me for demurrage. I saw his grinning face when he lashed out at the lantern."

Ned sprang back into the wreck, and very soon the two men who had rashly left the white motor-boat were overcome.

The motor-boat was now out of sight, but not so very far away as the throb of the engine indicated. After half an hour's search she came into view.

"They're heading straight for here!" cried Ned. "This is where we slip. They'll save these johnnies, so we can get back to the Belle now, chums."

The lads dropped down the wind in the barge-boat, and were soon aboard the barge. They stepped warily, for fear of an ambush by a couple or so of men actually on the barge; but no one, evidently, had boarded her.

The sounds of the motor-boat, rescuing those on the now almost-covered wreck, came down to the ears of the chums.

They raised the topsail of the Belle, drew out the sheet, tripped anchor, and, now being water-borne by the rising tide, round they swung, silently, into the deep water of the channel the other side of the place where they had grounded.

"The secret of Shivering Sands is safe for another week, lads," said Ned as he forced the helm up. "The tide was sluicing over the coamings of the wreck

as we left, and the next few tides won't go down so far as to-night's did. The Belle's sliding along without lights now, so they'll never find us to-night. We'll light up in Prince's Channel, where our lights will be a pair among dozens. Golly! What an adventure!"

"They're on some dark game," said Tony wisely, after about half an hour's silence. "If not, why did they attack us?"

"Yes, why?" put in Ned. "It's not salvage, from what we heard. We'll jolly well find out next spring tides, if the wreck isn't silted up with sand again by then. Now, get the sidelights out, and go and have a sleep, you two. There's Tongue Light Vessel ahead, so I can get round the Foreland with my eyes shut now."

CHAPTER 3.

The Belle Off Her Course!

"HAIL smi-hiling morn, smi-hiling morn, smi-hiling morn!"

With a long-drawn-out howl like a dog in pain, the sweet tones of Long Jim's voice floated on the crisp morning air, waking up Ned Derry at the wheel. Jim had just crawled out of the cabin like Diogenes out of his tub.

"Stow that horrible row, Caruso," said Ned. "So you're awake at last—eh?"

"Yes, O skipper mine, I'm awake," yawned Long Jim, stretching his arms—"or nearly. Where are we now, Columbus?"

"Long Sand to starboard. Half-way through Fisherman's Gateway. We've footed it since leaving Sandwich. Get your lazy fists on this old wheel, Jim; I want a snooze."

The morn was smiling and fair, as Long Jim had intimated on coming on deck. It was about half an hour after dawn, and the rosy flush astern of them had not yet died out of the sky. They seemed to have the sea practically to themselves. A lazy barge on the port-side dipped in the slight swell and rumbled her canvas, and a sluggish old Tyne collier belched her black smoke into the clean air out to the westward. She was distant.

Ned went below, putting a canvas bucket over the cherubic countenance of Tony Parr as he slept in his bunk on the starboard side of the cabin. Tony woke with a yell, and Ned, all standing, sighed off contentedly into the land of dreams.

Ned always slept "all standing"—that is, with his clothes on—when the barge was at sea. And it was as well he did this smiling morn; for a bump and a series of shouts above brought him out of the land of dreams and the cabin companionway like a shot from a gun.

The barge to port had edged in close, and a boarding-party had sprung aboard the Belle. Tony Parr and Long Jim were lashing out right heartily round the wheel, and Ned attacked the boarders in the rear. There was a scrap the chums remembered ever afterwards. Indeed, Long Jim has a chip from his left ear to bear evidence of it to this day.

The boarders were desperate men, and hadn't come aboard the barge to be driven off again. One of them had a knife, but the others contented themselves with stevedores' batons, used for banging slipknot ropes taut round packages.

"Lick into 'em, Ned!" shouted Long Jim. "The brutes are trying to capture the Belle!"

Ned needed no stronger encouragement than that. The Belle was the darling of his heart, and to ill-use her was

to become the greatest enemy of River-wise Ned, her skipper and owner.

Six men against three youths is long odds; so, after ten minutes' gasping and slogging, the chums, glaring angrily at their captors, were secured and thrown into the fo'c'sle.

"Nah, mates, that cosy little creek in the Swale, and we're all sereno," said the leader of the boarders.

The chums, bound and helpless in the fo'c'sle, felt the barge slew round under the hands of her captors.

"Pointing south!" growled Ned. "It's a gang of Holstfeld's, for a cert. There's something on that wrecked motor-boat Holstfeld must have to himself. Wonder what they'll try to do with us?"

"I should say they intend to keep the barge in a creek off the Swale," said Jim. "Heard what that lantern-jawed waster of a leader said?"

"Ay, ay! But what about us? They won't leave us aboard the Belle, you can bet your best Sunday hat. My guess is that we're safe to be imprisoned till the next spring tides, when Holstfeld will have what he wants from the wreck. Then we shall be released. That's how the fools work it out."

"That's what'll happen, Ned, for sure," said Tony.

Ned grunted disgustedly. "I said that's how the fools work it out, you chump! What they intend to do and what they will do are two very different things, Tony, me lad. Nothing will alter my plans of going out to investigate that wrecked motor-boat myself."

"Stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage," chanted Long Jim ironically.

"You're feeling poetical this morning, Jim," said Ned severely. "I'm surprised at you. First smiling morns, waking me up at the wheel, and now iron bars, etc. With this fresh easterly breeze which is ruffling the pearly depths of the sea, as the novelist said, and rumbling in the picturesque warm brown of our canvas, we'll be in the Swale by midday. Well, things are going to happen quick."

"Things have happened quick already. It's rotten luck!"

"It's worse than that, chum," replied Ned. "But buck up! Luck never deserted me for long when trouble is being wafted towards us with the breeze. I'd back my luck in a hurricane from the nor'ard, with the barge wallowing in the Woolpack, the Kentish cliffs dead in our lee! We'll get clear, you see if we don't!"

"Got an idea already?" asked Tony Parr sweetly.

"Yes; that you two must be the biggest chumps in creation for not spotting the other barge's game an' out-manceuvring them, light as we are and half-loaded as they are. I've half a mind to disrate you!"

"Oh, dry up, Ned, and go to sleep! Those beggars above have done all the disrating wanted this morning. Go to sleep!"

"That's just what I am going to do, because, me lads, we'll all have to be up bright and refreshed, ready for the revolution, in a few hours' time. At present we can do nothing!"

"Oh, sleep, it is a gentle thing, beloved from pole to pole!" burst out Long Jim as Ned closed his eyes. "Look at the Ancient Mariner, Tony!"

But Ned really was asleep, and the other two, having all had a pretty hard time since leaving Sandwich, were soon in the arms of Murphy—as Tony termed it—themselves.



"Hands up as we approach!" called out the coastguard officer. The men on the wreck raised their hands above their heads as the police boat, the coastguards with their rifles at the ready, drew near. "All right, gov'nor! We give in!"

CHAPTER 4.

The Wildfowler's Hut!

WHEN the chums woke, the Belle was being poled up a narrow creek, running from south to north, as Ned noted by reference to his pocket compass.

"If we've come to the Swale, this creek's in the Isle of Sheppey, chums!" whispered Ned. "They'll yank us out in a minute, and take us to our iron bars or stone walls, whichever Long Jim chooses to think it will be. There's a place in the only suitable creek in the Swale I know of where, with the mast lowered, the Belle can lie in perfect comfort and seclusion. It's a fine thing, knowing where we are, anyway!"

True to Ned's prophecy, the chums were soon dragged up on deck. They saw immediately that Ned was right. They were in Windmill Creek. But they hadn't much time to blink round admiring the landscape, for they were knocked overside into the barge boat, and rowed rapidly up the creek.

The tide was at full, so Ned judged it to be about eleven o'clock. In another two days' time the tide would be at springs again, that is, they would then go down to their lowest level, and the wreck on the Shivering Sands would once more be get-at-able.

The chums' legs were freed of their bonds when at the head of the creek, and, striking to the eastward, the lads were made to force their way through the tall marsh reeds in front of a guard of four men. At last a lonely wildfowler's hut came to view, and the chums were bundled inside, their legs tied up again, and the door slammed

and locked. The men walked straight away.

"Gee whiz!" said Ned. "It's old Marquesas Mike's hut. Those blithering clowns outside little know that old Mad Mike and I are the best of pals. What about my luck now—eh?"

"If you know Mike, whoever he may be, well enough to get him to let us free, laddie, I'll admit that your luck's all it should be!" retorted Long Jim.

"Mad Mike's a harmless old fruit, who wouldn't do no one no harm, to use his own words. A treble negative makes a strong negative, so old Mike really means it. Listen, chums! Roll nearer, for shouting makes me hoarse, and marshland reeds have ears. I've clipped 'em off with a stick, many a time. Marquesas Mike's an old sailor, and knows me well. He is being swindled into thinking he is detaining nasty, bad people for the good of the world, I'd lay my last cent. Soon's he sees me, in my present weak state of health, too, he'll cut us all free, and after I've told the dear old scatter-brain the true yarn, he'll help us to dodge clear. Got me?"

"M'yes; if Mike's to be our only gaoler!"

"No matter if he isn't, so long as I can get a word with him. He's a cunning old bird, when he thinks he's doing good, and he knows these marshes of Sheppey like your big bare, awkward feet know the jutting pieces on the Belle's foredeck. Have courage, my children. Trust your Uncle Ned! 'Vast talking now. Someone's coming swish-swish through the marsh grass!"

Someone was. It was Mike, the wildfowler, ex-sailor, known in his

shellback days as Marquesas Mike. A terrible experience in an open boat at sea had turned poor old Mike's brain; but nobody worried about the mad old man, a recluse in the middle of the marsh as he was. He was as harmless as a lamb.

The key grated in the lock of the shack, and a white-bearded old face peered into the shack.

"Oho, me bullies!" said Mike. "So ye thought ye could ruin that pore, dear old gentleman within the nex' day or two, did ye? Well, ye'll be safe here, me hearties! Safe it is!"

"Someone's been pitching you a yarn—" began Tony Parr; but the old man's beard waggled, and a knotted, bony hand was held above his head.

"'Vast lyin', me hearty! They told me as you'd say summat like that. Mike may be mad, but he can still be useful, my quiverin' bullies! I'll feed ye, though! Mike never let man or beast starve near 'im yet, whiles 'e had grub hissen!"

"Mike, you old reprobate, do you know that one of your prisoners is River-wise Ned? You've promised those nasty, untruthful men who chipped half of my chum's ear off only this morning, to keep me a prisoner for the good of mankind! They were telling you horrid stories, Mike. Come and let me free!"

River-wise Ned grinned up at the white-bearded old man. Mike had fallen back in alarm. The old sailor was clutching convulsively at the rough table of the shack, and his jaw dropped.

"Ned, me bully-boy! River-wise

Ned wot drops old Mike an 'amper at Christmas, wot was me pupil in wildfowlin' on'y a short year or two back! But they said as my prisoners was a parcel o' young skunks tryin' to ruin—"

"I know all about that, Mike, but you know now that it's the other way about," said Ned. "They're going to do the bad deed, and they tried to fool you and make you help them. But Mike isn't so easily fooled if I know anything of him."

"By thunder, me bully-boy, you're right!" croaked Mike, whipping out his knife and falling on his knees.

With three masterful slashes he had Ned free, and Ned soon freed his chums.

"Now then, Mike!" the young bargee cried. "Cunning must meet cunning, you know. Anyone else watching us besides you?"

"Ay, to be sure, bully-boy! There's three men in the barge. I'm to feed ye an' keep ye locked up. They're to watch the hut, an', if you down me, to get ye again. And it was my young Ned as they meant all the time. Well, 'ere's a pretty shemozzle now!"

"Not at all," replied Ned. "You just go outside, and when you see that they're all below in the cabin on the barge, tell us, and we'll go over. We know how to bottle them up!"

This was soon done, and after Ned had slammed over the sliding hatch of the cabin companionway—the only exit—and secured it, he turned to his half-dazed pals.

"What about my luck now?" he asked. "I told you that things would happen quickly. We've won the revolution without firing a shot, thanks to dear old Marquesas. Mike here."

Mike was dotting on Ned, but the young skipper of the Belle was all action.

"Quick," he said, "to the coastguards at Warden Point! It was because of them we were imprisoned in Mike's shack instead of the barge. Always nosing about suspicious-looking boats on the saltings, the coastguards are. Splendid fellows, all the same. Mike comes with us, or he'd be murdered if those villains got away, or if any of the others were to come back to see how things are going."

The chums and Mike arrived at the coastguard cottages at Warden Point, Sheppey, after three hours' travelling. There Ned told his story. Three burly coastguards were sent over to the Belle, on Windmill Creek saltings, to take charge there, and telephone messages were sent to stations up and down the coast.

That night a black, long, lean police motor-boat arrived at Warden Point, with five coastguards in it. This boat

was moored out of the way of curious people for the next day.

The three men in the cabin of the Belle had been arrested for assault on Ned and his pals, and the chums made their charge. Then coastguards and young bargees waited impatiently for darkness and the dash out to Shivering Sands to catch Holstfeld and his gang interfering with a wreck without the consent of the Receiver of Wrecks for the district. All, however, anticipated a far more exciting discovery than merely that.

CHAPTER 5.

The Fall of Holstfeld!

AT last the hour for the passage of the police boat, manned by armed coastguards, arrived. Ned, Jim, and Tony went with the boat to pilot it to the exact spot.

Cleaving the calm water cleanly, the powerful little boat thrummed northwards across Four Fathoms Channel, down Ooze Deep, and out to Shivering Sands buoy. They arrived just in time to see the white motor-boat hitching up alongside the wreck, and the men clambering aboard with spades. Straight for the party swept the police boat.

"Hands up, all of you!" ordered the coastguard officer commanding the police boat, as a vicious flash of flame and the report of a revolver came from the white boat, a bullet ploughing through the gunwale of the police boat. "Surrender, in the name of the King, or take the consequences."

There was some muttering and certain angry shouts from the people on the wreck. They were quarrelling amongst themselves. No doubt some were for surrender and others for fight.

"All right, gov'nor!" at last came over the water. "We give in."

"Then hands up as we approach."

The men on the wreck raised their hands as the police boat, coastguards with their rifles at the ready, drew near.

"Get into your motor-boat," ordered the officer, "and hold off from the wreck. Drop your anchor alongside here."

A guard was placed over the white boat, and the rest of the coastguards prepared to go over to the wreck, Ned and his pals with them. The chums saw the face of Holstfeld as they passed the white boat. It looked ghastly.

Working lustily, the coastguards had the cabin almost cleared of sand as the incoming tide began its lappity-lap against the sides of the wreck.

All loose articles disclosed in the cabin were taken aboard the police boat, and then, the tide now pouring in over the wreck's coamings again, the motor-boats set off back to Warden Point for investi-

gation of the things salvaged from the wreck.

The prisoners were locked up in a room of the cottage the coastguards used as a store, and the articles from the wreck were spread out on a table.

There was a liquid compass, certain rotted articles of clothing, old rusty revolvers of German make, a pair of field-glasses, navigating instruments such as used by coasters, and a metal chart case.

The last-named was opened, after a deal of smashing at the rust-encrusted lids at the ends, for it, no doubt, would contain any papers and charts, with, perhaps, a log of the ill-fated motor-boat.

The officer found a roll of charts in the case. They were streaked with red rust, but still readable. He unrolled them on the table, and then cried out in excitement.

There were notes in German all round the borders of the charts, and dotted lines showing lighter routes for a German landing on the north bank of the River Blackwater. In the lower corner the marked chart was signed:

"HECTOR HOLSTFELD,
"18th June, 1915."

"By heavens, the charts of a German spy in England, probably en route for Germany when the motor-boat was sunk. Who in thunder is Hector Holstfeld?"

"I think you'll find him lying on the floor of the next room," said Ned, feeling just a trifle sick. "He looks dazed and completely knocked out. He's a wharfinger of London."

"Ay, making money out of the country he did his best to betray! My Lords of the Admiralty will be interested in all this."

The Admiralty were. Holstfeld had to leave the country. He had carried on during the war as a naturalised Englishman, and had actually engaged himself in war work, entertaining wounded sailors and what not. Also, he had spent great pains preparing those charts for Germany, for the wharfinger had a very sound and special knowledge of the banks and channels of the Thames estuary.

River-wise Ned and his mates were praised for their smart work, and old Edgar Brunt, Ned's old skipper and one-time owner of the Belle, on hearing the yarn from Ned's own lips, slapped his thigh and chuckled:

"Well, Ned, my boy, I reckon Holstfeld won't swindle any more barge owners out o' their demurrage pay—leastwise, this side o' the Rhine! What 'e does over there don't matter. It's what 'e did here that we worry about."

THE END.

(Another exciting river yarn next week, boys: "THE SHARA PEARLS." Make a point of reading every line of it.)

THE SHIP WITHOUT A CAPTAIN!

(Continued from page 21.)

which had been brought on to the scene. Ben uttered a prayer, and then a shot rang out.

"I'm sorry, 'Smith,'" Ben said quietly. "What can I do for you, sir? You are the only one, you and Harvey, the only ones to go under!"

"Smith" smiled a wan smile as he lay
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on the deck half an hour later. A shot had finished him.

"Nothing, my dear boy, except to get me ashore, and when I am finished you—you might find the old flag, the one I showed you, and, with my belongings, put me under the ground, and say nothing about me—nothing!"

"Right!" Ben said huskily. "I'll do everything, and—and there is no message to take home from you?"

The old fellow sighed.

"You—you may perhaps come across my real name amongst my belongings," he told the lad. "If you do, just tell them at the Admiralty that I was glad that is all."

And it was all. A day later Ben was the one mourner at that strange funeral, and a few weeks later he had handed over the Mermaid, and had made a report upon his strange adventure.

The result for Ben Holt?

Well, he caught it good and hearty for having no more sense than to drink with a stranger in Naples. That is a way they have in the Navy.

THE END.

(Look out for one of Elmer K. Arter's screamingly funny yarns next week, entitled "BILLY BUILDS A BOAT." You will vote it great.)

"MY READERS' OWN CORNER"

(Concluded from page 16.)

DERIVING BENEFIT!

A Yorkshire woman had been told by the school doctor that it was necessary for her daughter to wear spectacles, otherwise she would be losing her sight. On the school-master calling at the child's house a few weeks later, he asked the mother how it was the child was not wearing spectacles, and received the following reply: "Well, you see, sir, I cannot get her to wear them during the day, so I put them on her when she is asleep!"—Half-a-crown has been awarded to Edward Gudgeon, 5, Granby Avenue, Headingley, Leeds.

TIT FOR TAT!

Dean Swift being about to take a ride, called for his boots, but his servant brought them uncleaned. "Why have you not cleaned them?" the dean asked the man. "I thought it was useless to clean them, as they would soon get dirty again," was the answer. Later on the servant came and asked the dean for the key of the cupboard. "What do you want it for?" the dean asked. "I wish to get my breakfast," the servant told him. "What is the use of having breakfast?" the dean retorted. "You will be hungry again in a few hours hence."—Half-a-crown has been awarded to Miss Lillian Leat, 91, Talfourd Road, Peckham, S.E. 15.

WHY DIDN'T HE?

Jimmy giggled when the teacher said that a Roman swam the Tiber three times before breakfast. "You do not doubt that a trained swimmer could do it, do you?" said teacher. "No," said Jimmy; "but I wondered why he did not make it four to get back to his clothes again."—Half-a-crown has been awarded to R. Wood, 48, Hampstead Road, Wallasey, Cheshire.

THE WRONG WAY ROUND.

The Tourist: "Can you tell me, my boy, how far it is to Kirkcaldy?" Little Scotch boy: "Well, if ye gang on straight it's about twenty-five thousand miles; but if ye turn back, ye're there in five minutes."—Half-a-crown has been awarded to G. Stamp, 99, Wakefield Road, Lightcliffe, nr. Halifax, Yorks.

NOT VERY STRONG.

Two men were talking during their dinner-hour. "Did you hear of the death of Jim Harding, Harry?" "No," said Bert. "How did it happen?" "Well, he was working near a brick wall when it collapsed, and twenty-five hundred-weight of bricks fell on him—yes, right on his chest." "Poor Jim," said Bert, "he always did have a weak chest."—Half-a-crown has been awarded to J. Tagg, 129, Norman Road, Leytonstone.

A ROMANCE OF COLOUR.

"Funny things happened in my village last week," said the chatty man. "What happened?" asked the listener. "Well, Black, a white man, and White, a black man, thought a fellow named Brown was green. They tried to sell Brown a white horse, but Brown was well read, and deceived them both; in fact, he got all their money, and now Black and White are blue!"—Half-a-crown has been awarded to Colin Booth, c.o., Freeman's Limited, High Street, Wendover, Bucks.

AND HE DID!

A gentleman was riding along a country lane when he came to a cross-road. Being uncertain which way to take to reach his destination, he asked a boy who lay on a bank near by. The boy raised his feet and pointed it in the direction the gentleman should take. "You lazy young scamp!" cried the gentleman. "If you can show me a lazier trick than that I will give you half-a-crown." The boy took him at his word, and, rolling on his side, said: "Put it in me trousers-pocket then, guv'nor."—Half-a-crown has been awarded to George Hemming, 132, Methuen Road, Eastney, Portsmouth.

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