

877
"THE SECRET OF STARK ISLAND!" Great 20-page story of Tom Merry & Co. inside!

EVERY WEDNESDAY.

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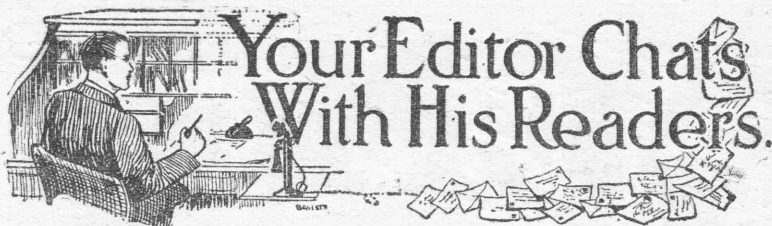
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1924.



TOM MERRY'S PERIL!

The plucky junior captain of St. Jim's misses his footing to go hurtling downwards, missing the jagged rocks below by only a hairsbreadth! (A thrilling incident from the powerful long story of St. Jim's in this issue.)



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.

MY DEAR CHUMS.—Never in its long and brilliant career has the GEM lagged behind in competitions. Now that winter has come to stay, competitions are more wanted than ever. Look out for something very bright indeed in this line in the famous Wednesday story paper. The GEM has a magnificent competition coming. It swoops ahead of anything ever yet offered. The prizes are tip-top. More particulars next week. Just pass the word round. Everybody has got to be in this fresh treat.

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By Martin Clifford.

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CHAPTER 1.

What the Dawn Brought!

TOM MERRY opened his eyes wearily—eyes that were dull and red-rimmed with want of refreshing sleep. As he blinked dazedly about him he wondered dimly why he was not in bed in the Shell dormitory at St. Jim's; and then he remembered that St. Jim's was far away, and that he was seated before a dying fire in the living-room of the lonely bungalow on Stark Island—the rocky, desolate island off the rugged Cornish Coast.

It all came back with a rush then—the wreck of Lord Conway's yacht, the arrival on the island, and the alarming discovery that Captain Pentire, who owned the island, and was to have been their host, had vanished mysteriously, leaving his bungalow in disorder; then had come the long search for him, and finally the wearying search for Lord Conway, Blake, Herries, and Digby, who had gone out for a stroll and never returned.

With a shiver—for the night was cold—Tom Merry stooped, and began to place fresh logs on the dying embers of the fire. He worked gently so as not to disturb Lowther, Manners, and D'Arcy, who were dozing fitfully in their chairs. But one of the logs fell into the hearth with a thud, and the sudden sound brought his chums to wakefulness with a jerk.

Tom Merry could almost have smiled at the blank looks on their faces as they blinked about them in the lamp-lit room.

"Wondering where you are?" asked Tom.

Monty Lowther shivered, and then a faint grin came over his somewhat haggard features.

"I did at first—wondered why I wasn't in the old dorm at St. Jim's," he said, rubbing his eyes. "I—I could almost wish we were there now, Tommy."

"Well, things aren't turning out quite as we expected," said Tom quietly. "When the rest of the fellows heard we were coming on this trip with Lord Conway they were jolly envious. But I fancy they wouldn't envy us much if they could see us now."

"Wathah not, bai Jove!" assented Arthur Augustus D'Arcy in a low, troubled voice. "We nevah dreamed this wotten thing would happen, though. I—I wish we knew wheah poor old Conway and the west are, deah boys."

"I wish we did, too," said Tom with a worried frown. "It was puzzle enough finding Captain Pentire missing from

the bungalow. But where on earth Gussy's brother and Blake, Herries, and Digby have got to beats me."

"Something's happened to them," said Manners gloomily. "They only went out for a stroll, you know. I fancy Lord Conway was anxious to see if there was any sign of McCallam and the other two sailors coming along with the motor-boat."

"And that's just another worry," said Tom gravely. "They started out for the mainland early enough yesterday morning. They should have been back before this. I'm afraid they came to grief in that fog."

Tom's chums nodded dispiritedly. The non-return of the crew of the Conquest, Lord Conway's yacht, was still another worrying factor of the situation. And it was really no wonder Tom Merry & Co. were worried. From the very first disaster seemed to have dogged the expedition.

When Tom Merry & Co. had been given permission to accompany Lord Conway on a cruise to Stark Island, they had hoped it would not prove to be a tame trip. They had longed for excitement and adventure. And they were now getting plenty of both—much more than they had bargained for.

In the first place, when not far from their destination, the propeller-shaft had broken, and, at the mercy of a fierce storm, the Conquest had been driven ashore on a sandbank within sight of Stark Island.

Luckily both passengers and crew had escaped, and had reached Stark Island eventually, safe and sound. And while McCallam, Wilks, and Scott, the crew of the Conquest, had started off in a dinghy for the mainland in order to bring Lord Conway's motor-boat along to haul the Conquest off the dangerous sandbank, Lord Conway and the chums had made for the lonely bungalow.

As Lord Conway's purpose in visiting Stark Island was solely to negotiate for its purchase from Captain Pentire, a very old chum of his, they naturally expected the captain would be at the bungalow awaiting them.

To their amazement they found the bungalow deserted, though the door was wide open and a meal lay half-eaten on the table. Not only that, the state of the place gave little room for doubt that foul play was responsible for the absence of the captain.

But though they had searched the island thoroughly, they had failed to discover the captain, or any clue to the mystery of his disappearance.

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That, however, was unfortunately not all. Late that evening Lord Conway, with Blake, Herries, and Digby, had left the bungalow for a stroll, and had not returned. And, with lantern in hand, Tom Merry and the others had searched for them in vain.

And now, hours later, they were still waiting—waiting for the daylight, when they intended to renew the search.

"We've got to rely upon ourselves alone," went on Tom Merry, after a long silence. "We've got to find Lord Conway and our chums. It's dawn now, and when it's daylight we'll get something to eat, and then we'll start in grim earnest to search the island."

"We've already searched for them twice," said Manners dejectedly.

"I know. That was in the darkness, though. We've got daylight before us now, and we won't give up till we've either found them or discovered what's happened to them."

As he spoke Tom Merry rose stiffly to his feet, and crossed to the door. He opened it and stepped outside into the chilly dawn, and looked about him.

All was silent about him save for the soft murmuring of the tide on the beach. It was still dark, though in the east a pale flush of light in the sky heralded the longed-for dawn. A few stars still glimmered dimly in the heavens. Tom's glance went out over the faintly gleaming sea, and he fancied he could glimpse the vague outlines of the rigging and hull of the Conquest where she lay stranded on the sand-banks some distance out.

Then Tom's glance went across the shadowy beach to the beetling crags and granite cliffs, and he shivered almost unconsciously. In the cold light of dawn Stark Island looked far more eerie and desolate and forbidding than it did even in daylight. High up on a wide ledge, nesting above a deep ravine, with still higher cliffs behind it, stood the ruins of Stark Castle, solitary, like a sentinel on iron-bound cliffs.

For some moments Tom Merry stood, taking in the grim scene, and drawing in deep breaths of the ozone-laden air; and then he was about to turn and go indoors again, when he paused and his heart leaped.

Along the beach, in the distance, approaching from the cliffs themselves, was a light—a twinkling, swaying light that suggested a lantern being carried.

Who was it? Who could be approaching the lonely bungalow at that hour? Not a soul lived on Stark Island but Captain Pentire, its owner. Could it possibly be Lord Conway and their missing chums? Or was it McCallam returning at last? Even as that possibility struck him, Tom dismissed it. The sailors of the Conquest would have landed on the beach, the only known landing-place on the island.

"Quick, you fellows!" called Tom, in a thrilling whisper. "Someone coming here—a light!"

"Bai Jove!"

With gasps of excitement and joy, Lowther, Manners, and D'Arcy rushed to the door.

"Look!" breathed Tom Merry. "Keep back, though! It may not be our friends at all."

"But—but it must be!"

"I don't know," said Tom, peering hard at the approaching light. "There's something rummy going on on this island. We know that. We can't afford to take chances. Remember that Lord Conway didn't take a lantern with him."

"Oh!"

There was a murmur of disappointment.

"Bai Jove! You are quite wight theah, Tom Merry!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy in dismay. "Then who can it be, deah boy? We are miles from the mainland."

"I vote we find out who it is before we show ourselves!" said Tom grimly. "It can't be McCallam and his men, either. They would have landed on the beach here. It looks queer to me."

It looked queer to the others also now, and at Tom Merry's suggestion they hid themselves round the back of the bungalow, and crouched down beneath the shadows of a lean-to shed there. With their hearts thumping with excitement, they waited, their eyes fixed curiously on the flickering lantern rapidly approaching across the hard sands. They could see dim forms in the swaying light—the forms of burly men, and they wondered rather apprehensively who they could be.

CHAPTER 2.

A Queer Business!

"HERE they come!" breathed Tom Merry. "Quiet!"

The crunch of heavy feet on the shingle was audible now, and the swaying lantern cast lights and shadows on the forms of the group of men approaching. The St. Jim's juniors caught glimpses of rough blue jerseys and of heavy sea-boots.

All hopes that the individuals approaching were Lord Conway and their missing chums were gone now.

It was quite possible they were friends, certainly. It was scarcely likely, and Tom Merry & Co. were taking no chances. After the mysterious happenings on the island, they were determined to make quite sure that the strange visitors were friends before showing themselves.

As silent as mice they waited and watched. The unknown nearer, and then quite suddenly the light of the lantern was extinguished. At the same time the crunch of feet on shingle became less noticeable, and they came on stealthily and catlike.

"That settles it!" breathed Tom Merry. "They're up to no good!"

The startled juniors watched breathlessly. Fortunately Tom Merry had extinguished the lamp in the living-room, the window of which faced in the opposite direction from which the unknown men were approaching. Yet, from the stealthy manner in which they came it seemed that they knew the bungalow was occupied.

The juniors could see them plainly now. Three of them were dressed in longshoremen's garb, and the fourth was in ordinary clothes, save for the seaman's boots he wore. He appeared to be the leader, and he was the first to reach the door of the bungalow, which Tom Merry had taken the precaution of closing.

There was a muttered conversation, and then the juniors heard the door opening. The sound of feet in the little hall was heard, and then the mutter of voices died away, and silence reigned as the door closed.

"Phew!" muttered Lowther. "Who the diikens can they be, Tommy?"

"I wish I knew!" said Tom, in a puzzled whisper. "But you remember when we entered the living-room of the bungalow first? We found signs of a struggle there; we also found marks of muddy, heavy boots on the carpet. These are the men who made those marks, I'm certain!"

"Looks like it!" breathed Manners.

"Yaas, wathah!" agreed Arthur Augustus. "What shall we do, deah boys?"

Without answering, Tom Merry stepped softly to the window of the living-room and peered inside. No light showed through the curtains, save for a feeble flicker from the logs on the hearth. Tom Merry felt thankful as he noted that the logs he had placed on the fire had scarcely taken light yet.

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In the deep blackness of the cavern Blake manoeuvred his body into position, and groped blindly for Lord Conway's pocket. With his wrists tied together it was a difficult matter, but he tugged and tore at the cloth until the stitches gave. Then his groping fingers closed on a knife. "I've got it, sir!" he cried eagerly. (See page 8.)

But the room proved to be empty, and Tom, with his chums at his heels, stepped round to the window of the study. A light burned here—the dim rays of a table-lamp which the men had evidently lighted. Three of the men were standing round the table, and as they looked they saw the fourth emerge from one of the bed-rooms. His gruff voice reached them, for the window was slightly open.

"There ain't nobody in there, either," he grunted. "The place is empty. Them we nabbed last night must 'a' been all as landed from the yacht."

The man in plain clothes—a clean-shaven, sharp-featured man with hard, glittering eyes—muttered an oath.

"I wish I were certain of that!" he snapped. "It was just bad luck that those confounded fools happened to be on the cliffs last night and saw us. It scarcely matters now, though. We've got them safe, and we've nothing to fear from them."

"They'll be missed!" growled one of the bearded seafaring men, scowling. "They're young toffs, and they'll be missed. We'll 'ave coastguards and police nosin' round, I'll warn ye, Mr. Snape!"

The man addressed as Snape laughed harshly.

"They'll discover nothing, though!" he said grimly. "They'll never suspect anything wrong. The yacht's lying stranded there, and her boat's timbers are strewn on the beach. They'll think they took to the boat when the yacht was wrecked, and they'll think they're drowned, I tell you. We're safe enough, you fool. I wish I was as certain that they were all who landed, though."

"Must 'ave bin a crew, mister!" muttered another of the bearded seamen.

"That's just it, Penfold!" muttered Snape uneasily. "I tell you, we'll have to keep our eyes skinned for a bit. Anyway, it'll soon be daylight. We'd better get on with the job. We've got something that will open the safe this time, and we'll soon have our hands on those deeds."

"Ay, ay!"

The watching juniors heard nothing more, save for the low mutter of voices now and again. But they saw one of the men take the lamp and place it on the floor close by the safe in the corner. Then the four crouched around the safe, and the rasp of metal against metal came to their ears.

Tom Merry withdrew his face from the window, and eyed his chums in puzzled wonder.

"Well, this beats the band!" he whispered. "What on earth can their game be?"

"Deeds!" murmured Manners. "They spoke of deeds and—"

"But what deeds?" whispered Tom. "I can't think—My hat! Unless they're after the deeds of this island!"

"That's what I was thinking," nodded Manners. "Anyway, it's pretty clear now that these fellows know where Lord Conway and our chums are."

"And Captain Pentire also!" breathed Tom Merry, his eyes gleaming. "My hat! We've stumbled on something this time, you fellows!"

"What can we do?" asked Lowther. "Those brutes are too big a handful for us to tackle."

"I know!" said Tom, setting his jaw grimly. "But we're going to tackle them, for all that!"

"Weally, Mewwy—"

"I don't mean tackle them now," went on Tom. "We'll follow them when they leave here, and we'll find out where they've got our chums. We'll soon find a way of rescuing them."

The juniors fell silent, and stared into the dimly lit room, striving to see clearly what was taking place. They understood now why the bungalow had shown every appearance of having been burgled when they first came. It was clear now that these rascals had broken into the desk and bureau, but had failed to break open the safe. And they had now returned with suitable tools for that purpose.

Amazed and alarmed as the juniors were, they were none the less relieved in mind—relieved that they now knew the worst regarding the missing four. They had feared all sorts of terrible things, and now they knew that Lord Conway, Blake, Herries, and Digby were alive, though prisoners in the hands of these unknown men.

It was alarming knowledge, but it was comforting to some extent, and Tom Merry, at least, had already resolved that they should not remain prisoners long—if he could help it.

Something happened within the room at last. There came a curious clanging sound, and then the juniors saw that the

safe door was wide open, and that Snape was searching almost feverishly within.

He stepped back suddenly, and a furious oath of disappointment reached the juniors' ears.

"Done!" came his voice in a snarl. "By James, it ain't here after all!"

"Sure of that, mister?" muttered Penfold.

"Sure? Can't you see for yourself?" snarled the man savagely. "It isn't here; the confounded deeds must be at his solicitors' after all. What awful luck!"

There followed a silence in the room, and then Snape crashed the safe door to with another oath.

"We'll get 'em yet, though!" he vowed. "We've got Pentire, and we'll thundering well find a way to make him do what we want him to do! Come on, lads, let's get out of this before daylight comes!"

"Look out!" breathed Tom Merry warningly.

The juniors dodged away from the window, and slipped back to the shelter of the shed. Several moments passed, and they saw the dim forms of the mysterious men emerge from the bungalow and tramp away across the beach.

"Now for it!" muttered Tom Merry briskly. "We've got to follow those chaps and see where they hang out. Come on! Go carefully!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

The juniors all realised the necessity of that. To be captured by the men would mean the end of all hopes of rescuing their friends. They were mystified over the whole strange affair, but they felt that the mystery could wait.

Like shadows across the shadowy beach, they stole after the dimly-seen forms ahead, taking advantage of every bit of cover, hatless as they were. It was chilly after the comparative warmth of the bungalow, but they never felt the cold in their excitement.

This time the men had not troubled to light their lantern. In the eerie half-light, their figures appeared grotesque and shapeless to the trackers behind.

As the juniors expected, the trail led to the cliffs, and soon the chums were treading cautiously up a narrow, zig-zag path only the occasional sound of sliding stones from above to guide them.

It was a stiff climb, and more than a little dangerous in the dim light; but they reached the top at last, breathless and panting.

"There they go!" whispered Tom Merry.

"Making for the ruined castle?" breathed Manners.

Up the narrow staircase the juniors had overhauled their quarry quicker than they had intended. The men were scarcely thirty yards ahead, crossing the plateau towards the ghostly ruins of Stark Castle.

"Wait!" muttered Tom Merry. "Let them get ahead a bit more."

The juniors waited a few seconds, and then they went on again. Here there was plenty of cover—huge, shapeless masses of rock affording plenty of cover to the trackers.

With Tom leading the way they flitted from rock to rock, and then quite suddenly Tom realised that he had blundered in allowing their quarry to get too far ahead.

When still some yards from the ruins—or it seemed that—the dim figures ahead vanished abruptly from sight as if swallowed up by the earth.

The juniors watched for some moments, and then Tom Merry gave a grunt of vexation.

"We've lost them!" he muttered. "Come on—sharp!"

Heedless of possible danger now, the juniors darted towards the ruins, fearful of losing their quarry.

"Careful!" warned Tom Merry swiftly. "These ruins are jolly dangerous, you know."

He had suddenly remembered the ravine—the deep, yawning gap in the earth below the ruins that went down in a terrible drop to the eternally-washed waters of the sea.

But Tom's chums had also remembered it, and they gave the slope leading to it a wide berth as they ran across the broken ground.

Tom stopped at last in the shadow of a mass of broken stonework, covered with masses of clambering ivy.

"They vanished somewhere about here," he whispered, glancing about him cautiously. "Stand and listen a sec!"

The juniors stood motionless, listening. In the half-light the ruins presented a strangely eerie appearance, and more than one of them shivered. To their ears sounded the dull thunder of the breakers far below in the gorge, and the whisper of the wind in the ivy-clad stone walls. But that was all.

"Must have gone on through the ruins," said Manners, in a low voice. "Ugh! Let's get out of here!"

"I don't think they did go through," said Tom quietly. "Hasn't it struck you that they must hang out in the ruins somewhere? There's no landing place for a boat anywhere else but on the beach."

"You—you think—"

"I think they have a hiding-place in the ruins somewhere—a secret place of some sort. Lord Conway told us this

place was riddled with caves. It's pretty certain it's underground, anyway!"

"Bai Jove, I believe you are wight, Tom Mewwy," said D'Arcy, blinking glumly at the mass of ruins with the towering cliffs rising behind. "If they passed through the ruins they could not have climbed those cliffs, deah boys!"

"That's certain!" said Tom. "We were asses not to watch them closely. Anyway, we've got to get on their track again. Come on, and stick together!"

The juniors started their search of the ruins, though they had little hope of discovering anything in the gloom. They had not lost sight of the possibility that the unknown men might still be about—might even know of their presence and be watching them. It was not pleasant to know that at any moment burly forms might pounce upon them from the dark piles of masonry.

But they stuck to their task, stumbling about in the shadowy gloom of the stone-flagged ruins. Above their heads rose the mouldering turrets of the castle, but the stone stairs had long ago crumbled away, and it was useless to think of exploring the ruined chambers above.

They very soon realised the hopelessness of further search, and Tom Merry gave it up at last.

"It's no good—until daylight, at all events," he muttered. "But—but we're not beaten yet. We'll go back now and get some breakfast. It'll be daylight by then, and we'll come back and explore this place in real earnest."

"Wotten!" muttered Arthur Augustus, his aristocratic features pale with anxiety. "If only we had not lost sight of those scoundwels—"

"That can't be helped now," said Tom. "But don't worry about your brother, Gussy. We'll find him all serene, and Blake and the others, too! Let's get back!"

The juniors left the ruins, disappointed and silent. They reached the rim of the cliff, and Tom was about to lead the way down the rugged stairs when he paused and gasped aloud.

His eyes had happened to stray seawards, and what he saw almost took his breath away.

"My hat! Look, you fellows! A boat!" he gasped. "So—so that's it!"

He pointed out over the blue waters, and then Tom's chums saw it—a sailing-boat some distance out. A lugger it was—black-hulled, and with great brown sails casting gigantic shadows on the gleaming sea.

"Get down!" breathed Tom warningly. "Hallo, they're getting the anchor up!"

The juniors dropped flat on the wet turf, and stared at the black craft on the water below. It had obviously been at anchor there when they had climbed the cliff, but they had not noticed it.

It was lighter now, however, and they saw it plainly. They stared at it suspiciously for some seconds, and then suddenly hearing a sound below, Tom's glance went to the foot of the cliffs, and again he gasped—in amazement this time.

From the foot of the cliffs—apparently from the solid rock itself—a small dinghy had emerged. Tom's chums had also heard the faint creak of oars, and were looking down below, too.

"It's those fellows right enough!" snapped Tom, in a thrilling whisper. "It's Penfold and the other two sailors."

"But where's that chap Snape?" muttered Manners.

"I fancy I can guess," said Tom. "Watch!"

The juniors watched breathlessly, taking care to keep their heads low. They saw the dinghy touch the side of the lugger, and they saw the men in her hand up two or three bulky sacks—apparently of great weight—to a dark figure on the lugger. Then Penfold and his companions jumped aboard the bigger boat.

Scarcely a minute later the lugger was moving—her sails bellied out before the wind, and she lumbered slowly seawards with the dinghy tied to her stern.

In silence the juniors watched her until she sailed lumpy round the craggy elbow of rock footing the headland, and then Lowther gave a low whistle.

"Phew! What does that mean, Tommy? I thought I was seeing things when that boat came out of the cliffs."

"It's siple enough," said Tom, his eyes gleaming now. "There's a cavern below us—a cavern into which the sea runs. That boat came out of it. Can't you see? There's a secret way into the cavern below from somewhere in those ruins. That's absolutely certain now."

"Bai Jove!"

"And Snape?" muttered Manners breathlessly.

"He's been left in the caves," said Tom. "And if I'm not mistaken, where he is we'll find Lord Conway and Blake."

"I believe you're right, Tommy," said Manners. "But this looks a rummy business, and no mistake. What could be in those sacks—if they were sacks?"

"Goodness knows!" muttered Tom, his brow wrinkled. "These chaps might be smugglers—it's quite possible, you know. Anyway, we're getting pretty near to solving the



Lord Conway charged upon the unknown mystery men of Stark Island, and his hefty fist sent one of them reeling away, while Blake and Herries flung themselves blindly upon the other man. Crash! In a second a wild and whirling struggle was taking place in the dimly-lit tunnel! (See page 8.)

mystery now. And we're going to solve it. If we can't find a way into the caves from the ruins, we'll try to get into the cavern down this way."

"I shouldn't care to try it this way," said Lowther, looking down the straight drop of the cliff with a shudder. "There isn't foothold for a cat."

"We'll see," said Tom, setting his lips hard. "But first of all we want some brekker. We'll feel better fitted to tackle this business then. It'll be light, also. Come on!"

And Tom led the way down the steep, rocky pathway briskly. He was feeling brighter now, and more hopeful. They now knew what had happened to their friends, and Tom, at least, felt hopeful of finding them. Moreover, he was thankful that Penfold and the other rascals had gone—there would be fewer enemies to fight now! And Tom not only felt hopeful of finding the missing members of the yachting party, but he was hopeful of rescuing them also.

CHAPTER 3. A Bid For Freedom!

IN the rocky cavern, deep in the bowels of Stark Island, Jack Blake stirred uneasily on his bed of dry seaweed.

Around him was pitch blackness—a blackness that seemed to press in upon him like a heavy weight. It was almost unbearable, and had he been alone in the underground cavern, Blake felt that he would have gone mad.

But by his side were Herries and Digby, and Lord Conway, prisoners like himself in that dark and chilly underworld. Like himself they were stirring restlessly, partly to keep themselves warm, partly because their limbs were stiff and aching, their wrists sore and chafed with the cords that bound them.

It seemed hours since they had been brought captives to the cavern—long wearying hours during which they had discussed their predicament time and time again. But for some minutes now they had remained silent—too miserable and wretched to continue the conversation—cheering as it was to hear each other's voices.

Even now Jack Blake could scarcely believe that the whole

amazing adventure was not a dream—an unpleasant dream. And amazing it certainly was.

With Lord Conway the juniors had started out for a late stroll in the starlight, little dreaming of danger then. They had made a tour of the island, and while returning past the castle ruins, they had seen what Tom Merry & Co. had seen hours later—the brown-sailed lugger at anchor in the bay.

The sight of it had aroused Lord Conway's curiosity and suspicions at once. Forgetting that their figures would be seen against the starlit sky on the top of the cliffs, they had watched a boat leave the lugger and pull shorewards—they had watched it vanish, apparently into the solid cliff, with feelings of amazement. Then, eager to discover the meaning of the strange affair, they had waited breathlessly for its reappearance.

But the utterly unexpected had happened, for from behind them, seemingly from the earth itself, the vague forms of four burly men had sprung upon them. And they had realised then—too late—that they had been seen and that the rogues had made their way—obviously from a secret way from the cavern below—to the top of the cliffs, in order to capture them.

And after a brief, fierce fight, they had accomplished their object. After a gallant resistance on the dizzy brink of the cliff the members of the yachting party had been overpowered, and with their eyes covered, had been brought, captives, to this black underworld.

It was Lord Conway who broke the silence at last. For some time now, Blake had heard him moving about and breathing heavily.

"Boys," he said quietly, "I've been trying to get my hands free, but it's no good. We've got to get out of this, though. Can any of you fellows move your hands at all?"

"My hands are pretty loose," said Blake. "But I've tried ages ago to get them free."

"We'll try another dodge, then," muttered Lord Conway. "Blake, I want you to roll over with your back to me, and try to get your hand in my pocket and get my knife out."

Never mind tearing the pocket as long as you get the knife out. I'll manage the rest all right."

"Good wheeze, sir!" breathed Blake.

He rolled over in the deep blackness, and, guided by Lord Conway's voice, he soon manœuvred his body into position, and groped blindly for the pocket.

With his wrists tied together it was a far from simple matter to get one hand in, but he tugged and tore at the cloth, and after a desperate struggle the stitches of the pocket gave, and he was able to thrust one hand in. His groping fingers closed on the knife, and with a gasp of satisfaction he rolled over.

"Got it?" muttered Lord Conway eagerly.

"Yes!" panted Blake.

"Good man! Now try to open it—or let me try. Then you can have a go at my wrists."

"I'll manage it easily," said Blake.

It was a simple matter to open the knife, and Blake very soon had the knife blade out, and then he set to work on the cords round the viscount's wrists.

He worked away carefully, fearful of cutting Lord Conway's wrists, and more than once the sharp blade cut into the flesh—though Blake did not know it. But at last it was done—a sharp tug snapped the last frayed cord, and Blake rolled over again, panting and exhausted with the strain.

"Good man, Blake!" muttered Lord Conway again, his tones thrilling with hope. "Gad! We'll get out of this yet! Now for a light!"

The next moment the other captives were startled as a bright, dazzling beam of white light shot across the gloomy cavern.

"I brought the torch from the yacht—thought it might be useful," said Lord Conway. "Dasheft lucky thing I did, too. Now I'll soon have you chaps loose!"

One by one he cut the cords round the wrists of Blake, Herries, and Digby, and those juniors staggered to their feet stiff and aching, but deeply thankful. They could scarcely believe they were actually free.

"But we're not out of the wood yet, by any means, you fellows," said Lord Conway grimly. "If you're ready we'll make a start."

The juniors were more than ready—they were eager to start despite their tiredness and aching limbs. So Lord Conway led the way out of the cavern, using the light with caution.

"Watch your steps," warned the viscount, as they stumbled after him into the black tunnel, "and move as quietly as possible. Sound carries far down here in these burrows."

"Rather, sir!"

The dank, dripping tunnel wound steadily upwards, at places wide and lofty, but in other places just a mere slit through which they could only just squeeze. For a hundred yards or more they stumbled on, and then quite abruptly Lord Conway stopped.

"Hark! What's that?"

From somewhere ahead of them sounded a dull, muffled, and measured thudding—a sound like the beating of a spade on earth. To the four adventurers standing together in the oppressive darkness it sounded uncanny in the extreme.

"Queer!" breathed Lord Conway. "Quiet now! I fancy we're not far from our kidnapping friends."

He switched off the torch, and they advanced a few paces, feeling their way round a butting shoulder of rock that faced them. Then Lord Conway halted them again with a soft hiss.

He had noticed a splash of dull yellow light shining across the floor of the tunnel, from an opening on their right.

"Wait here, boys!"

Lord Conway left them, and cautiously approached the shaft of light, treading carefully and softly on the rough rocky floor. He reached the corner of the aperture and peered cautiously round it.

It was a cave he found himself looking into—a low, square, passage-like cave, on the floor of which stood a couple of glimmering lanterns. From this branched off two shafts to right and left, supported by props of black timber. But the curious thing about it was that, unlike the tunnel they had been traversing, the cave-like place seemed to have been hewn out of solid rock by the hand of man and not by natural means.

Lord Conway grasped this fact, and then he became aware that two dimly seen figures were working at the far end of the gloomy cavern, though what they were doing he could not quite make out.

"Phew!" breathed the viscount, his eyes gleaming strangely. "By gad! I wonder—"

He watched the dark, moving figures for some seconds, and then he softly crept back to the juniors.

"There are two of the rogues in there," he whispered. "We've got to get past without being seen, boys. Don't stop to look—just sneak past after me. If they spot us, though, we'll have to make a fight of it. Now!"

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He crept forward, and the others followed on tiptoe, their hearts beating fast. A moment later their leader was past, as were Blake and Herries. But as Digby pressed hard on their heels to cross the danger-zone of light he came to sudden grief.

In his eager excitement he stumbled over Herries' heel and went sprawling on his face amid a rattle of loose stones.

"Good gad!"

Lord Conway gasped in alarm as a sudden silence came from the cavern, followed instantly by a hoarse shout of warning.

"Look out! Them blamed kids 'ave got loose!"

There followed the clatter of tools on the rocky floor, the rush of heavy feet, and the light from the aperture was almost blotted out as two burly men emerged. Their savage grip was on the luckless Digby in a trice.

But this time the unknown mystery men of Stark Island were not to have it all their own way.

Lord Conway's hefty fist sent one of the stooping figures reeling away with a lightning jab on his bearded chin, while Blake and Herries flung themselves blindly upon the other man.

Crash!

In a second a wild and whirling struggle was taking place in the dimly lit tunnel. This time the four were not taken by surprise, and sheer desperation caused them to fight tooth and nail.

Lord Conway was easily a match for one of the burly rascals, while Blake, Herries, and Digby flung their weight on the other man.

CHAPTER 4.

In Deadly Peril!

"STICK it out!" panted Lord Conway, attacking his man with renewed energy, fearful that the juniors would be overpowered, which would result in almost certain failure.

Both at school and in the Army D'Arcy's elder brother had been a boxer of no mean repute. But in the confined limits of the tunnel, lit only by flickering lights from the smoking lanterns, and hampered by the other struggling forms, he could make little use of his skill.

Backwards and forwards, now stumbling against the juniors who had their man on the floor, now crashing into the rocky walls, the young viscount and his burly, bearded opponent staggered about, grappling for the mastery.

By sheer luck Lord Conway got his chance at last, however.

A sudden stumble took the man reeling backwards over the struggling forms on the floor, and, releasing his grip, the rascal flung out his arms to save himself.

In a flash Lord Conway saw his chance and took it.

His right shot out like lightning, and his fist connected neatly and with terrific force on the bearded chin.

Smack!

It was a knock-out, clean and sure, and the fellow grunted, and, turning half-round, he went down like a shot rabbit.

"That settles you!" panted the young viscount. "Now for our other friend!"

But Blake & Co. had little need of aid. They had their man down, and Blake was banging the raving rascal's head on the rocky floor in an attempt to persuade him to surrender.

"Good kids!" gasped Lord Conway, almost laughing at the scene. "Here, I'll soon fix him up!"

He took from his pocket several lengths of cord—the same cord they themselves had been trussed up with some minutes before.

"I fancied it might be useful," he said grimly. "And it's going to be."

Blake and his chums twisted the man's arms behind his back, and the viscount deftly tied his gnarled wrists together. This done, he turned his attention to his own man, who was just beginning to come round. And by the time he did come fully round he found himself a helpless prisoner.

"Drag the beauties in here, boys," said Lord Conway briskly. "We'll leave them the lanterns—more than they did for us, though. Quick! Before the other men come along!"

"Yes, rather!"

Heedless of the savage imprecations and threats from the rascals, the juniors hauled them into the inner cavern, and left them there. A glance round had shown Lord Conway that the two branching shafts were but cul-de-sacs, and a moment later they were back in the main tunnel, tramping towards what they hoped was escape.

But almost immediately after leaving the spot unexpected difficulties presented themselves. Lord Conway came to a dismayed halt as he found himself facing a wedge of rock with two tunnels branching off to right and left.

"This is awkward," he said. "We don't want to lose

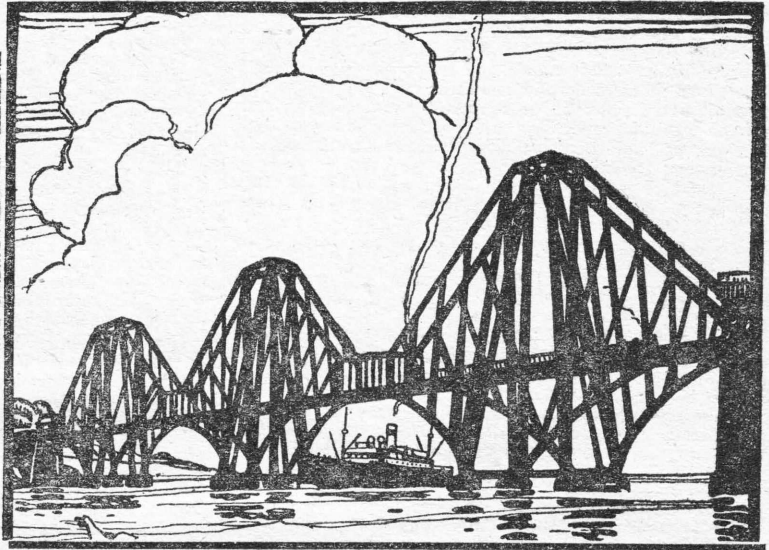
(Continued on page 10.)

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"This is awkward," he said. "We don't want to lose ourselves in this cave. We'll take the bigger one, I think."

There was nothing else for it but to make a blind choice, for on the rocky floor, running with water for the most part, there was no sign of footprints that would have told them which tunnel had been recently in use.

With the dancing light of the torch lighting up the gloomy, darksome alley ahead, they pressed on; and though they passed several other branching tunnels, the viscount avoided them, keeping to the main one.

"We should be near the steps by this," muttered Lord Conway at last. "I hope to goodness—Hullo!"

He broke off to flash the light on the floor. It showed up clearly on a patch of mud the imprints of several hobnailed boots—and of several boots much smaller.

"Those are the footprints we made coming last night," said Lord Conway in a tone of utter relief. "We've struck the right way, after all. The steps can't be much farther."

The juniors cheered up wonderfully at that. The horrible underworld of damp and smells and blackness was getting on their nerves badly—the romance and adventure of it all had long ago given place to despair and misery. They longed for the open air and freedom. Moreover, they were aching and weary from want of proper sleep and from constant stooping, whilst every part of their bodies was bruised from contact with the jagged rocks.

They could almost have cheered aloud when the dancing light suddenly fell upon old, worn steps, slimy and moss-grown.

"Where the thump can we be?" muttered Herries, as they started to mount them.

"Under the ruined castle, if I'm not mistaken," was Lord Conway's eager reply. "Stick it just a bit longer, youngsters!"

But the juniors needed no injunction to do that, tired and leg-weary as they were. Freedom was almost in sight, and they could hardly be restrained from running up the steps.

The night before, blindfolded as they had been, those same steps had seemed endless, but now they were at the top almost before they knew it, and the light from the torch was shining on a great oaken door, massive and studded with rusty nails.

The juniors could almost have cheered with delight. Lord Conway, however, spoke a word of warning.

"We don't know where those other rogues are," he said grimly. "They entered this cave, of course, by boat through that cavern beneath the cliffs, and I expect they departed that way, as they weren't with the other two. We can't afford to take risks, though."

Lord Conway himself did not believe there was much danger; he believed the seafaring men had gone back to the lugger riding in the bay. He spoke the warning just to be on the safe side.

But even as he spoke it the warning was justified in a startling manner.

There sounded a sudden, dull noise from beyond the oaken door, and the next moment it swung open, revealing the dim forms of four men, framed in the doorway with the dim light of dawn behind them.

Lord Conway muttered a deep exclamation of dismay. With the open air before them, and with escape almost in sight at last, the sight of their enemies just then was a staggering blow.

"Back!" he gasped. "Get back. It's useless hoping to get the best of those ruffians."

Too late he switched off his torch, for even as he did so from above came a bellowing roar:

"Look out, lads! By James! We're just in time, men! Fasten that darned door, Penfold!"

The bellowing voice echoed and re-echoed hollowly in the dark cavity, and instantly Lord Conway switched on the light again and sent its rays downwards.

"Run for it," he hissed; "and make for the first tunnel branching off!"

Blake led the way, and, with Lord Conway bringing up the rear, they charged pell-mell down the broken stairway of stone.

The young viscount did not mean the party to be captured again. He still had a hope that if they could succeed in giving their enemies the slip they would find a way out of the labyrinth of tunnels.

But he had not bargained for the rascals' knowledge of that underground world.

Hastily the rascals took up lanterns and lit them, and then they came charging in pursuit, shouting abuse and threats as they did so.

"This way, kids!" gasped Lord Conway.

He was the first to reach the first black tunnel-mouth leading off from the main passage, and, with Blake and the others at his heels, he went stumbling and lurching down it.

The dull ring and clatter of heavy feet died away behind them for a moment, but it commenced almost at once again,

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showing that their pursuers had entered the branch tunnel they were in.

It was disappointing knowledge to Lord Conway. He had hoped the men would go blundering past, believing they had gone straight along the tunnel.

There was nothing else for it but to go ahead now. Yet almost at once Lord Conway had a feeling that they had blundered. The passage was narrow and rougher than the others, and it ran steeply downwards.

But that was not all. The air, as they stumbled and slid on, became more and more dank and offensive. The rocky roof rose and sank, making the going terribly dangerous, while the odour of stagnant water was stifling.

They stumbled on, for the rumble and clatter of their pursuers' feet was drawing closer, and the tunnel reverberated with shouts—shouts that seemed to Lord Conway almost of warning.

But he ignored them. The passage was going downwards, and he felt certain that it must lead to the sea-washed cavern beneath the cliffs.

They burrowed on doggedly, and presently the sounds of pursuit died away to their unutterable relief. Panting, gasping, and coughing, Lord Conway called a brief halt.

"Phew! What a riff!" Blake gasped. "I say, I shall be thundering glad to get out of this, sir! Is it safe to go back now?"

"We'll risk running into their hands again if we do," muttered Lord Conway doubtfully. "I shall be glad to get out of this, though, too. We'll go on a bit. Let's hope it will be fresher farther on."

Still hopeful that the passage would lead to the cavern, or at least to daylight and fresh air, Lord Conway led the way on again. They came to another tunnel branching off, but they stuck to what they believed was the main one, for the air seemed to have become not quite so foul.

It went downwards steeper than before, and then suddenly it narrowed to a mere slit, while the roof sloped down also, making the tunnel into a mere burrow.

"Phew!" gasped Herries. "Have we got to squeeze through that?"

"There's nothing else for it, unless we go back, I'm afraid," was the viscount's answer. "I don't like the look of it, and—Phew! That's bad air again. Here, you fellows stay here and I'll explore it."

Lord Conway went down on hands and knees and squirmed into the burrow. Blake stooped and peered through the aperture. He heard, as from afar, Lord Conway's voice:

"Keep back, boys! Phew! It's beastly here! I'm coming—don't come—back! Gas! Gad—"

His voice weakened, and then it seemed to be choked off abruptly. Blake saw his dim form droop, and there followed a dull thud, and then silence.

"Good heavens!" gasped Blake. "What—"

A sudden waft of horribly foul air struck Blake as he crouched aghast, and then he understood.

"Gas!" he panted. "It's foul gas! Good heavens! Quick!"

Without stopping to think of his own danger, Blake forced himself through the burrow. After him came Herries and Digby, and they were inside almost before they had quite grasped the terrible truth.

"Back, you idiots!" choked Blake. "I'll—see—to—"

Swaying drunkenly, he stooped and clawed in the blackness on the floor. His senses were reeling and his head swam dizzily. Through the murk Herries and Digby saw him lurch forward and go down like a log, with a throttled gasp of terror.

Herries, his own brain dizzy, snatched his handkerchief out and swiftly wrapped it round his mouth. Never was a situation more desperate, but Herries kept his head.

"See to Blake, Dig!" he choked.

He fumbled blindly in the blackness, and his hand closed on something. It moved in his grasp, and then a whisper—a choking whisper sounded.

"I—I'm all right, kids! Get back! I'll—I'll look to Blake."

It was Lord Conway's feeble voice, and it brought relief to the chums. Luckily they were within a yard of the burrow, and at that moment a strong draught from somewhere seemed to clear the air a little.

"I've got him—go, will you? Get through the hole and pull him through."

It was scarcely a whisper, but Herries and Digby heard it. Almost fainting themselves, they wormed their way through—it was no time for argument.

Digby was the last through, and turning he grasped Blake's clothing as Lord Conway blindly thrust his unconscious form roughly through. Together Herries and he dragged Blake clear, and a moment later Lord Conway wormed after him, only to collapse, gasping and coughing, on the rocky floor.

Herries and Digby also collapsed, gasping and wheezing desperately in the purer air. Lord Conway was the first to rise drunkenly to his feet.

"We must get him away from this—sharp!" he gasped desperately. "A few yards—that's all."

Through their dazed senses Herries and Digby heard the appeal, and they staggered up and grasped Blake's feet while Lord Conway took his shoulders, and they tottered away into the blackness—away from that still blacker maw of dark terror.

A dozen yards or more they went, and then they lowered Blake's unconscious form to the ground. Here the air was bad enough, but it was better than the foul gasses of that hole they had left.

Lord Conway took the torch from his pocket, and a light flashed out.

"Luckyly I stuck to it when I went down," panted the viscount. "I put it in my pocket when I went to lift Blake. Ah, good!"

As the light blazed full into Blake's ashen face the St. Jim's junior opened his eyes, and they flickered blindly in the light.

"Thank Heaven!" breathed Lord Conway. "We're well out of that ghastly place. We'll soon have him round now, kids!"

Blake was breathing now, heavily, with choking gasps; and the colour was returning to his cheeks. He did not move, though, and stooping, Lord Conway lifted him up in his arms, though he seemed scarcely able to stand himself.

"That settles it!" snapped Lord Conway. "We'll have to go back now, and chance being captured again. Take the torch and lead on, Herries."

There seemed nothing else for it, and with Herries leading, the party pushed on, rising steadily upwards now. Blake was moving now in the viscount's arms, but not until a hundred yards or more had been covered did D'Arcy's brother put him down.

Blake stood swaying for a moment in Lord Conway's grasp.

"My hat!" he gasped weakly. "That was awful, you chaps—I fairly got my lungs full of it! What—"

"It was a gas-filled depression," was the grim answer. "We must risk no more of that. Capture or no capture, we must find higher ground than this. Can you walk, Blake?"

"Yes, sir, I'll try!" muttered Blake.

"Then come along!"

With his chums lending a helping hand, Blake staggered after Lord Conway. After that terribly narrow escape, Lord Conway meant to take no further risks with his charges, and he stuck to the tunnel they had come by, not venturing to explore strange ones.

They emerged at last into the main tunnel, and as they did so a light flashed almost in their faces, and a savage voice shouted:

"Got you! Collar the young fools, Penfold and the rest of you!"

"Ay, ay!"

It was only what Lord Conway had feared, and he realised with a sickening feeling of despair, that resistance in their present state was hopeless and blind folly.

"It's no good, boys!" he muttered. "We're done! Give in!"

"You'd better!" snarled the clean-shaven man—Snake. He raised the lantern he carried and flashed it into their white faces. "You fools!" he went on. "Didn't you hear us yelling warnings after you? I suppose you went smack into the foul gas?"

Lord Conway nodded; he felt too sick to answer.

"You're thundering lucky to come back alive, then," snapped Snake. "Perhaps you'll think twice before trying

to get away again. But I'll see you don't get the chance after this, hang you!"

"I suppose you're the leader of these scoundrels," retorted Lord Conway. "I want to know what this business means? How dare you make prisoners of us? You'll suffer for this!"

"You can talk like that when you get free!" sneered Snake. "It's your own faults that you're here, I might tell you. If you hadn't been nosing around last night we should have left you alone!"

"I believe you brutes have got Captain Pentire," said Lord Conway, through his teeth. "I don't know what game you are playing, but I warn you—"

"You can save your breath," said the leader of the rascals curtly. "Are you going to come along quietly, or is it to be another rough house? I warn you that I've something in my pocket this time that will soon persuade you to come quietly. Are you going to surrender, or not?"

Lord Conway soon assured him as to that. With Blake scarcely able to stand, and himself and the other two in little better plight, he had no choice in the matter; and the next moment they were tramping dejectedly back to the caves, guarded by the seafaring men and Snake. Five minutes later they were back, bound hand and foot this time, in their former prison. There they were left to deep blackness again, and their own bitter reflections.

Their attempt at escape had failed—failed dismally—and they wondered how the amazing affair was going to end. They knew it was unlikely they would be allowed another chance, and their only hope now lay in their friends left behind at the bungalow on the beach—Tom Merry & Co.

CHAPTER 5.

On the Trail!

"WELL, what now, Tommy?"

Monty Lowther asked the question rather glumly as the four St. Jim's juniors came out of the bungalow on to the pebbly beach of Stark Island in the early morning.

The cold, grey light of dawn had now given place to bright sunlight, and the wintry sun glittered on the blue sea, dispersing the mists of night.

Thankful that the long night of watching and waiting was over at last, the juniors stood in the sunlight and drew in deep breaths of the keen, salt-laden air. All of them were still pale from the strain and anxiety of the last few eventful hours, but a hearty breakfast had given them energy and hope, and they felt fit now to renew the search.

Tom Merry, who was gazing thoughtfully over the dancing waters of the bay, set his lips.

"We're going to find Gussy's brother and the others, Monty," he said grimly. "Everything's in our favour now. We've got the daylight, and we know where to look. We know now that they've been kidnapped by those rascals, and we know they're prisoners somewhere in the heart of those cliffs. We're going to rescue them, and the sooner we start the better. Come on!"

"Yaas, wathah!" agreed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Shall we start at the wun's deah boy?"

Tom nodded.

"We know there's an entrance by the cave where the boat went in," he said. "But—but we haven't a boat, so we'll ignore that unless the other way fails us. That queer lugger's gone, and I fancy it won't return in the daylight."

"Thundering good job, too!"

THE CAMERA FIEND.



HARRY MANNERS.

A member of Study No. 10 in the Shell Form and a staunch chum of Tom Merry and Monty Lowther. Manners' one great hobby is photography, although he does not let it stand in the way of games. At football he is a great asset to his side as a forward, and as regards his cricket abilities he can wield the bat with the best. He is clever at pianoforte and has performed before the public, receiving great ovations. Known to all as a member of the "Terrible Three" and a popular favourite, Manners is also credited with being a hard worker in the class-room.

"Yes, it's another thing in our favour," said Tom. "We're not up against so much with those brutes out of the way. We'd better go carefully for all that. May be more of them about still."

"Quite likely," agreed Manners. "It's a queer business altogether, you chaps. My hat! Wonder what they're thinking about us at St. Jim's? We should have been back this morning, you know."

"Phew! Goodness knows! They'll think we came to grief in the storm, I suppose," muttered Tom. "It's jolly worrying about McCallam and the crew, too! If they'd reached the mainland they should have been back long before this!"

"Yaas, wathah! It's wotten, bai Jove!" said D'Arcy, in a tone of deep dejection. "If only we knew that old Con and the west were safe—"

"They're safe enough, we're pretty sure of that now," said Tom confidently. "Don't worry, Gussy; we're alive and kicking, and we're going to let those kidnapping merchants know it before long. Anyway, come on!"

Eager to get to work, Tom led the way at a brisk trot across the beach towards the towering cliffs. Tom Merry kept a keen look about him as they went, for he knew there was every possibility of enemies lurking in the vicinity still.

It was a stiff, risky climb up the treacherous rocky pathway, and the juniors wondered how they had ever managed to do the journey up and down in the deep gloom, hours before, without coming to grief.

Panting and breathless, they reached the top at last in safety, and started off along the cliff edge, intending to make straight for the ruins.

They had scarcely set foot on the rocky plateau, however, when Tom suddenly stopped with a startled cry of amazement, and pointed downwards.

"Look!" he ejaculated. "Great pip! In the water, there—just below those rocks!"

"Bai Jove!"

"A swimmer, by jingo!"

It was a swimmer; they could make out his shoulders now, and his arms, moving in a curious, lethargic manner. It was a man, and he was swimming feebly—scarcely moving through the choppy waves.

"Not one of our party," muttered Tom Merry, staring downwards at the distant swimmer. "My hat! He looks done to the world!"

"Making to get round the headland," breathed Lowther. "He'll never do it!"

It was obvious that the unknown swimmer below had realised that fact, also, for even as Lowther spoke he changed his direction, striking out now for a pile of rocky islets just showing about the surface of the shining, foam-flecked water fifty yards out.

"He'll not do that, either," muttered Tom in alarm. "He's about done, poor beggar!"

The juniors flung themselves down on the springy sward of the cliff top, and watched, their gaze fixed with alarm on the labouring form below. The man was obviously spent and exhausted, and it seemed an impossibility that he should reach the safety of the black rocks.

Yet Tom Merry proved to be wrong. As if sheer desperation had imbued the swimmer with sudden fresh energy, he spurted a little, and fought his way on, buffeted hither and thither by the incoming breakers.

"He's done it—oh, good man!" gasped Tom Merry. "Jingo! He's done it!"

"Bai Jove!"

The man below vanished for an instant in the boil of the surf ringing the rocks, and then they saw his half-dressed form clinging on to the rocks, the waves washing almost completely over him as he hung there.

"He's about whacked, though!" muttered Tom Merry in alarm. "Can he hold on? I doubt it! We'll have to do something—"

"Who the dickens can he be—one of those rascals—"

"That doesn't

matter!" snapped Tom. "Friend or foe, we've got to do something. He's only holding on by the skin of his teeth. Those waves—"

"If only we had a boat—"

"No time to get a boat, in any case—no time to get down to the beach and swim round, either," said Tom, setting his teeth hard. "Gussy, you're the best sprinter; cut down to the bungalow for a rope—there's one in that lean-to shed at the back. Quick!"

"Weally— Bai Jove, all wight!"

Arthur Augustus started to speak, but realising that speedy action was necessary, he wheeled and dashed for the top of the rugged stairway to the beach.

"You chaps will have to lower me down when the rope comes," muttered Tom, staring at the form clinging desperately to the foam-fringed rocks below. "It's a tidy distance, but— My hat! That fellow's fairly whacked; there's no time even for the rope."

Tom jumped to his feet, grim resolution in his face. His chums eyed him in great alarm.

"You—you're not going down?" gasped Lowther.

Tom nodded, and glanced hastily over the dizzy brink of ocean. And then, before his startled chums could attempt to prevent him, he had lowered himself over the edge on to a ledge a few feet below—a ledge that scarcely seemed wide enough to allow foothold for a cat.

It was a foolhardy attempt—a mad effort, as Tom well knew. But the sight of the almost helpless man below, clinging on frantically with the waves washing over him was too much for Tom. It was impossible for him to stay and watch the poor fellow drown before his eyes without attempting something—however desperate and hopeless.

"Come back, Tom, you fool!" cried Manners, in an agony of fright. "You'll never do it—you'll be smashed to atoms! Come back!"

He ran desperately forward, but Tom was already lowering himself, clinging on with toes and fingers. From up above, the descent appeared to be as steep as the side of a house, and with less foothold. But now Tom was finding innumerable cracks and crannies, and he felt he could manage it if only the luck held, and he could keep a steady head.

None the less it was a terribly dangerous climb, and more than once, as treacherous tufts and crumbling stone gave way, his heart flew to his mouth, and his courage momentarily failed him.

But he stuck it grimly—desperately. Once or twice he allowed himself to look downwards at the half-seen form clinging like a limpet to the rocks far out, but the sight of the thrash of foam snarling below almost turned him giddy each time, and he had to hold on and keep still to recover his nerve again.

He was thirty feet from the white-capped breakers now. But it was the worst stretch of all—smooth and straight, save for an occasional tuft of coarse grass.

Tom Merry held his breath and glanced down. For a couple of yards there was not a crack or cranny—nothing for finger or foot to grip. But then came a hardy bush of scrub-thorn, growing in the narrow ledge, and Tom was just wondering whether he dare drop down to it when from above came a sudden cry of warning—sharp and amazed.

Tom heard it and glanced upwards; he could see nothing but a jutting ledge of rock above his head. Then his glance went seawards, and he understood.

Seemingly from the cliff-face below him a small boat had suddenly thrust itself, manned by two burly men. It danced out on the blue waters, and shot straight for the rocky islet to which the unknown swimmer still feebly clung.

Tom Merry watched with staring eyes. He saw the boat, pulled by one of the blue-jerseyed men, slow down within a yard or two of the swinging figure, and then even as the other sailor stood up in the bows, the man in the water relaxed his grip, and slid away from the rock.

In a flash the boat was turned, and, leaning over the gunwale, the boatman in the bows reached over and grabbed at the struggling man. His grasp closed on his upraised arm, and held.

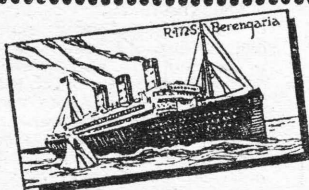
The next instant the other sailor left his oars and jumped to his companion's aid. Together they hauled the dripping, half-conscious form into the boat. Then the boat turned a second later and came speeding towards the cliff again.

"My hat!" panted Tom Merry.

He understood now—or believed he did. He remembered suddenly that they had stopped at the very spot immediately above where the dinghy had emerged from the cliff face that morning at dawn. It was clear that the swimmer had also come from that mysterious cavern, and suddenly the incident had a new meaning for the junior.

Was the unknown swimmer attempting to escape from the sea-washed cavern? And were these seamen in chase of him?

It certainly looked like it. But Tom had little time for



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"Excuse me," said Figgins excitedly, "but aren't you fellows from the Conquest—Lord Conway's private yacht?" "That's so, sir," answered the elder of the three men. "Why?" "My hat! Then—then where are the others—where's the yacht and Lord Conway and his friends?" stammered Figgins. "Well, young gentlemen, the Conquest's wrecked—" "Wrecked?" Figgins & Co. drew back in alarm. (See page 18.)

reflection on that score just then. His own danger—the danger of being seen by the men in the boat dawned in upon him suddenly, and he gasped.

Clinging to the face of the cliff as he was, it would almost be impossible for them to fail to see him as they came back.

Nor did they fail! There sounded a sudden hoarse shout from the boat, and in that same instant disaster of another kind overtook Tom Merry.

The amazing incident had caused him to forget where he was—that he was clinging desperately by fingers and toes to the sheer face of the cliff with a thirty-foot drop below him.

In a trice the thing had happened. One foot suddenly slipped from the frail grip it had on a projecting ledge, and the sudden jerk caused his other foot to slip also, whilst his fingers were torn from their precarious hold.

There came a cry of horror from above, and then, all in an instant he was gone, madly digging and clawing with hands and feet as he swished downwards.

His clutching hands gripped the bush of scrub-thorn, and checked his progress for an instant—but only an instant. For that instant he swung, vainly clawing for a firmer hold, and then the bush tore clean away, roots and all, and he dropped clean as a plummet!

CHAPTER 6.

The Sea-washed Cavern!

"GOOD heavens!"

Up on the cliff Tom's chums had witnessed the disaster with staring eyes and palsied lips.

It had all happened in one fleeting moment, and the next brought the sound of a distant splash to their ears.

They saw nothing more of the plucky junior. A jutting

wedge of rock hid from their view the foam-flecked base of the iron-bound cliff.

Yet that splash—terrible as it sounded to them—told them that his hurtling body had cleared the jagged rocks they knew were below, and that he had dropped into deep water.

After that first ejaculation of horror from Manners not a sound came from the juniors for some horrible seconds as they leaned perilously over the gulf, straining for a glimpse of what had happened to their plucky chum.

They saw the boat speed for the spot where they knew Tom must have dropped, and then that, too, vanished from their sight, and they saw nothing more.

Whitefaced and trembling, the juniors crouched together on the cliff top, waiting for sign or sound from below.

But the boat did not reappear—the sound of oars in rowlocks had died away, and the only sound that reached them was the snarling of the breakers, and the eerie squealing of a stray seagull.

Lowther was the first to turn away, and he eyed his chum with haggard eyes.

"Those men!" he panted huskily. "Do—do you think they'd try to save him, Harry?"

Harry Manners nodded slowly.

"It—it looked as if they meant to," he said, in a low voice. "But—but—"

He could not trust himself to finish the sentence, but his chum knew what he meant to say. Even if the rascals did do their best, was it of any avail? It seemed impossible to hope that their chum could have escaped a terrible death.

If his hurtling body had missed the cruel rocks at the base of the cliff there were sunken rocks further out—the white, seething lines of foam that dotted the blue water told them that.

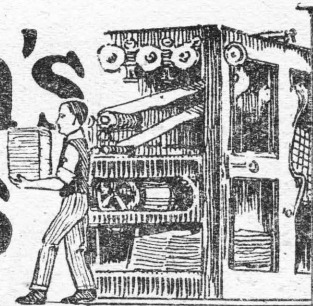
But they had heard the splash of his fall—faint as it had been

(Continued on page 16.)

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No 877.



The St. Jim's News



EDITORIAL.

By R. R. Cardew.

FOR this week, and this week only, old beans, I address you from the dizzy heights of the editorial chair.

It's the first time I've ever occupied the position, and I don't mind informing you that I hope it's going to be the last. It's a dashed uncomfortable position, for one thing.

Every available seat in the study has been taken up except the editorial chair, which has been allotted to me. And I think it is about the most uncomfortable seat they could have offered me. Anyway, I suppose I've got to put up with it, whether I like it or not.

You see, the editorial chair happens to be a coal-scuttle, and it has a brass handle in a most inconvenient position.

Of course, I'm only an interloper in the study. I had an idea, when Tom Merry invited me to No. 10, that I was going to be a guest, but as soon as I saw the pew they'd reserved for me I realised that I was being regarded as an interloper.

Tom Merry and the other members of his household sit at the table here, scratching away with their pens on sheets of nice white impot paper. Except, of course, when they're scratching on their heads, thinking out fresh lies—I should have said, of course, facts—with which to engage you.

If only you could just cast your eyes upon them you would scream. Talk about sweated labour! Why, it isn't in it!

There they sit, writing up the sad and harrowing story of their misspent lives.

Trustworthy Thomas, who was kind to earwigs, and lived to have his whiskers combed by his loving great-grandchildren.

Mirthful Monty, who kept ancient jokes from dying of old age, and had a chestnut-tree planted in his honour.

Pasty Manners, who loved his kind teachers and was permitted to photograph the Head playing hop-scotch.

Fortunately, I am not to be called upon for anything of the kind, as I am sure that the story of Reckless Ralph, who loved horses and was kind to bookmakers, and who was trampled to death by caterpillars while taking his grandfather's dinner to the hayfield, would be quite out of place among this uplifting literature.

They're still scratching away, with the exception of Thomas, who is pounding away on the editorial typewriter. I might say, they wouldn't trust me with that. I had been looking forward to using it, and was quite hurt when I discovered that I wasn't to be allowed to. I have no doubt the typewriter would have been even more hurt had I written this editorial upon it—or tried to do so.

I can only add that, in my opinion, this issue of the "News" is one of the most interesting that has ever been published up to now. I hope that you will read it and enjoy it, because I certainly sha'n't take the trouble to, and it would be a pity if all this hard work on the part of my colleagues was destined to blush unseen, so to speak. But if you're idiots enough to read this editorial piffle, you'll read anything.

R. R. CARDEW.

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WHY "TERRIBLE"?

By Monty Lowther.



I'M quite sure that everybody who is anybody has heard of the Terrible Three. I mean to say, a fellow's education can't be said to be really complete until he knows all there is to know about the three bright lads of the Shell at St. Jim's.

I've often been asked how we gained the name of the Terrible Three. Once, I remember, Grundy said that it was an idiotic name, anyway, because he couldn't see anything terrible about us except our blessed cheek. Well, by the time we'd finished with Grundy he'd got cause for reconsidering his opinion. Not that Grundy's opinion's worth anything, of course, but he has to be kept in his place—kept there and pressed down, so to speak.

Well, dealing with people like Grundy is one of the ways in which we've earned our name. Ask Figgins & Co. what they know about it. And when they've told you—which perhaps they will and perhaps they won't do—trof over and have a few words with Gordon Gay and the Grammar School freaks.

It's never occurred to them to wonder how we've got the name. They could give you a dozen good reasons for our having it.

The ordinary sort of jape is all right in its way, but when you're out to give somebody the giddy kybosh, you want something startling, something with plenty of biff and pep. Now, that's where we excel. That's the direction in which our frightfulness comes out really good and strong.

We've gone, unobserved, into the heart of the enemy's stronghold, either the New House or the Grammar School, as the case may have been, lived things up for a while, and escaped under their very noses. That's the sort of thing that really puts the breeze up the other side—they never know where you're going to break out next, and they live in a constant state of uneasiness. And that's half the battle. Once you've got the enemy rattled, they're easy meat.

Twice in one week the three of us got into the Grammar School, ragged half a dozen studies, and got away with it. The first time we left no clues, and the Gram-marians were puzzled to death trying to find out who'd done the damage. It never occurred to them for a minute that we were responsible, because they didn't give us credit for the nerve necessary for such a jape, so they began to suspect one another.

The second time we did it we left placards in the studies with loving messages thereon. We felt we were entitled to the credit, if not to any thanks. We didn't expect thanks, of course, this being a notoriously ungrateful world.

But I think you'll agree that exploits of that kind do give us the right to the title of the Terrible Three.

TOM MERRY.

By Harry Manners.

I HAVEN'T space for a full biography of our chief, the famous leader of Study No. 10 in the Shell corridor, but I'm going to do the best I can.

Of course, it's pretty well known that Tom's schooldays first commenced at Clavering, where Mr. Railton, now Housemaster of the School House at St. Jim's, was headmaster.

I well remember Tom's coming to Clavering, though Tommy himself never likes to be reminded about it. Well, if I were in his place I don't think I should. You see, Tom's an orphan, and his guardian, Miss Priscilla Fawcett, who lives at Huckleberry Heath, has had charge of him ever since he was quite a tiny kid. She's quite a dear old soul, and Tom thinks the world of her, but it must be confessed that some of her notions are decidedly quaint, to say the least of it.

When he appeared at Clavering he was a sight for gods and little fishes. Though he was about fifteen years old, he was dressed like a kid of five, in a little sailor suit, with white socks, and a little hat with elastic under the chin. Monty and I were the first Clavering fellows to see him, and we nearly expired on the spot. Of course, we guyed him like fun—well, who wouldn't have done—but we had a rude awakening. He took us on, one at a time, gave Monty the biggest pasting he'd ever had, and mopped me up in the bargain.

Anyhow, that little experience caused us to look on Tom Merry with very different eyes—black ones, in fact, for a few days—and he hadn't been long at Clavering before he'd established himself leader of the junior school, with Monty and I as henchmen.

Then came trouble—for Clavering in general, not us especially. The discovery was made that the ground upon which the school stood was a rich coalfield, and the shark who held a mortgage on the place foreclosed, and the school put up the shutters. Mr. Railton secured an appointment as under-master at St. Jim's, and a lot of Clavering chaps were transferred here by their people. Tom Merry, Monty, and I were among the number, and we had a short vacation before coming.

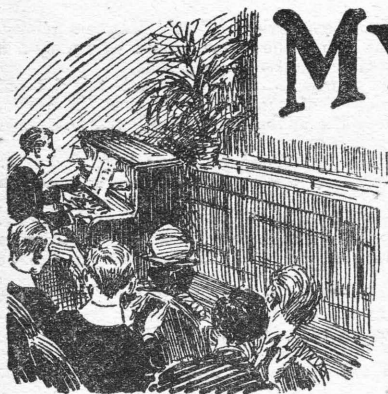
Of course, Tom Merry arrived in company with Miss Priscilla Fawcett, and he even wore the same hat that had caused so much trouble when he first came to Clavering. We did not laugh, though; we had learned a lesson from the last affair.

In those days Jack Blake was leader of the Lower School, though he was only in the Fourth. The Shell didn't count much then. But when Tom Merry joined their ranks things began to happen. One of the first jobs he tackled was that of putting the New House in their place, which Blake had been endeavouring to do for some time, but without much success. Tom managed the job so well that a large section of the fellows began to get the idea he'd make a better skipper than Blake, who naturally wasn't going to give place without a struggle.

It was a long struggle, and a fierce one; but Tommy came out on top, and he's on top still, and likely to remain so. Good luck to him!

MY CHUMS!

By Tom Merry.



IT is certainly very pleasant to be free, for once, from the obligation of writing my weekly editorial, but the necessity for turning out a full-page article in place of it rather takes the gilt off the gingerbread. However, I won't complain, for, at any rate, it's a change, and a change is popularly supposed to be as good as a rest. Let's hope I find it so, anyway.

As Cardew has probably informed you in his editorial—at least, I hope he has—this Special "Terrible Three" Edition is being published in response to numerous requests on the part of my readers. I want to make this quite clear, because otherwise some of you might think there was an element of "swank" in our pushing ourselves into the limelight in this fashion.

Well, now that we're before you, what do you particularly want to know about us? I'm sure I can't think of much to tell you that would be of any great interest. So far as I can see, we're three very ordinary chaps with nothing at all remarkable about us. I'll give you a few details about Manners and Lowther if you'd like to hear them.

Manners, as you are probably all well aware, is an enthusiastic amateur photographer, and a very fine pianist. I can't claim to know much about music myself, having no gifts in that direction, though I'm very fond of it, so I'm not able to judge exactly how good he is; but Kerr, who really is something of a critic, has given him very high praise. Manners' taste is in the direction of classical music—Brahms, Greig, Chopin, Beethoven, and Schumann, and so on—which are a bit above the heads of most of us. He simply refuses to play popular melodies, so that he doesn't attract much of a crowd when he sits down to the piano in the music-room. Fellows pass by and hear him playing, and that's about all there is to it, though Julian and Talbot occasionally drift in quietly, and Kerr has been seen standing listening at the open window—the safest place for a New House chap. It would be wise for him to venture inside, that's certain.

Manners is a quiet sort of chap, a steady worker, though not especially brilliant, and he occupies a good place in the Form. He never makes use of a crib in any circumstances, and does his prep in a conscientious manner—which is considerably more than can be said of a large proportion of the Shell.

His father and mother are both living, and he has a minor in the Third—who often-times causes him a good deal of anxiety, because young Reggie is apt to kick over the traces now and then. And Manners never shirks his responsibilities as an elder brother. That, of course, is characteristic of Manners.

He's a good, all-round, useful man in a cricket or footer eleven, steady and reliable. In fact, he's sometimes a trifle too steady—he's apt to miss chances through being over-cautions. At footer, for instance, he is the very reverse of a selfish player—too much so, in fact, for he sometimes parts with the ball when he might do more good with it himself. He's happiest when he's making openings for other members of the team, and has no ambitions in the way of shining as a goal-getter. In fact, he has no love for the limelight at any time. At cricket he has a sure pair of hands in the field, and can be trusted to keep up his wicket while his partner gets the runs, though he has it in him to play an almost brilliant game if the occasion demands it.

He is a fair boxer, and can make a decent show with a single-stick, but he's inclined to be a trifle slow, especially in attack. He keeps a good guard, and fights rather on the defensive. He never works for a knock-out, even in a tournament, preferring to get the decision on points. It isn't in him, I honestly believe, to knock a fellow out in a contest. (I say nothing about what he might be capable of, and has, indeed, proved himself to be capable of, in a fight proper.) I've seen him drop his hands when he'd got the other fellow groggy and only needed to follow up his advantage to give the coup de grace. A silly thing to do, really, of course, but I don't know that I think the worse of him for being that kind of idiot.

He's a good gymnast, an oarsman who's always well worth his place in the junior eight, and no mean swimmer.

And as a staunch, loyal chum his equal would be hard to find throughout St. Jim's.

Monty Lowther is a very different type of fellow. He's just as lively and hail-fellow-well-met as Manners is quiet and reserved. He's an incurable practical joker and an outrageous and shameless punster. He takes life as a huge joke, and can see the humorous side of every situation, however serious it appears to the rest of us.

He is, like Manners, a clever pianist, but his taste in music runs in the direction of rag-time and jazz. Manners calls it "cinema music," and doesn't trouble to hide his contempt for it, which worries Lowther not one whit.

There's no doubt, however, that the great majority of the fellows prefer Lowther's playing to that of Manners. When Monty sits down to the piano there is an immediate rush to the music-room, and he is soon surrounded by a crowd humming away merrily and tapping things in time to the music. At concerts he is always in great demand as an accompanist, and not the least of his virtues in this direction is his ability for what is generally known as vamping. It doesn't matter whether a fellow brings his music along or not. Monty is prepared to tackle the job with or without what he calls "the dots."

If the copy is there, he'll play from it. If it isn't there, you needn't worry. Simply open your mouth and start off, and you'll find Monty's with you. If you commence in one key and change to another half-way through the song, Monty will follow you. If you forget the words, he'll bang out the tune loudly enough to cover you till you've thought out where you are and struggled back to where you ought to be. And if you make a complete mess of it and break down, he'll finish it for you himself.

His great passion is the cinema. He goes over to Wayland once a week at least, to the Grand Picture House, and he's got the names of all the screen stars at his fingertips, and can pick them out from photographs as easily as though he knew them all personally. He has great ambitions of becoming a screen comedian some day, though whether this ambition will ever be realised remains to be seen.

He's a good cricketer and a first-class forward on his day. The trouble is that he's more temperamental than Manners, and inclined to be very much off form on occasion. He's a daring batsman, nothing of a bowler, and very good behind the wicket. His play at footer has more of dash and nerve than that of Manners, and he takes rather reckless chances at times.

He's a much better swimmer than Manners—indeed, I should say he is among the first four in the junior school—and he pulls a useful blade in a boat.

As a boxer he's inclined to be a trifle reckless and slapdash. When he's in a contest he's obviously out to finish the affair in the first few rounds, and if he doesn't manage to do that the odds are that the other chap's coming out on top. But he's swift, sure, and hard in his hitting.

He handles a foil well, the lightning exchanges of a fencing bout being very much to his taste.

When he's engaged in games or contests of any kind he gives no favours and expects none. If you'd got him groggy in the ring, for instance, and didn't follow up your advantage, he'd be mortally offended.

—He's rather a good tennis player, or so I understand. I don't play that game much myself, but Cardew, who's something of a whale at it, speaks highly of him. I know they've played together a good bit at various times.

And I can say exactly the same about him as I said about Manners with regard to his being an ideal chum.

I might add a few words about Monty's piano-playing. In fact, it's a little yarn in its way.

One afternoon we went down into Wayland to spend a few hours. Unfortunately, that was about all we could spend. We'd got just over three bob between us, and the question was, how could we spend it to the best advantage? There was a jolly good picture on at the Grand—we had Monty's word for its excellence—and there were some nice-looking cakes in the window of the Cosy Corner Cafe.

Well, it was obvious that we'd got to go without something, the state of the exchequer being what it was. The cinema without tea, or tea without the cinema. It wasn't a very inviting prospect, look at it as you would, and, not being able to decide, we tossed up. The cinema won; so we went in, paid our shilling apiece, and settled down to make the most of our three bobs' worth.

The thought of going back to St. Jim's without tea weighed rather heavily on our minds, and took some of the attention that we ought to have been devoting to the screen. The big feature picture hadn't commenced when we went in, and as we sat there watching a news gazette, there seemed to be something depressing about the place. I couldn't decide what was wrong, and concluded it was our state of mind—the prospect of no tea. But when the lights came up for a few moments before the feature picture commenced, the manager came through a small door at the bottom of the theatre and apologised for the fact that there was no music. He explained that the pianist had sent a message saying he was ill and couldn't attend.

Then we realised that it was the absence of the music that had made the place so quiet and depressing. The manager went on to say that if any member of the audience was capable of taking the place of the absent musician, and cared to do so, he would be more than willing to arrange satisfactory terms.

That was our chance—or, rather, it was the chance of either Monty or Manners. Both of them are accomplished pianists, but there was no doubt as to whose job it was. Manners' style of playing would have been most unsuited to the requirements of the cinema. So Monty got up, walked down to the end of the aisle, spoke to the manager, who nodded with obvious delight, and sat down to the piano.

A number of the audience clapped him when he commenced to play, and I don't believe that piano was silent for a single moment during the whole of the next two hours.

Anyhow, when the relief pianist turned up we cleared, and when we got outside we waited for Monty, who'd gone to the manager's office.

When he rejoined us he exhibited a tensing note, and at that moment I fully realised what the Egyptians must have felt like when Joseph's storehouses were opened during the lean years.

Ten whole boblets! Did we waste any time getting to the Cosy Corner Cafe? Well, would you have done? Then don't ask silly questions!

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they had heard it. They could only hope that the best had happened—that he had dropped into deep water, and that the seamen in the boat had been quick enough to aid him as he rose to the surface.

A sudden idea came to Lowther, and he darted along the cliff towards the sweep of the headland. Manners grasped what his intention was, and he ran after him, both their hearts beating fast with hope and dread.

Lowther stopped at last. From here they could see the cliff face sheer to the base where the breakers boomed and snarled on the rocks.

The clear view of the spot revealed little, however. The boat had vanished, and nothing but the black, jagged rocks and restless waters met their eager gaze.

Then Manners noticed something—a black, arched break in the line of foam at the foot of the cliffs.

"It's the cavern!" he said, pointing it out to his chum. "They've saved him, and taken him inside—they must have done. Even rascals as they are would never be so callous as to clear off so soon without making an effort to find him, or save him."

"I believe that, too," said Lowther hoarsely.

They watched for another few moments, and then they tramped silently back to their former stand. The faces of both juniors were white and hard, and they felt sick at heart. They believed that what Manners had suggested had actually happened—they forced themselves to believe it.

"I wish to goodness we knew for certain, though," groaned Lowther miserably, as they stopped at last. "It's pretty awful even in that case, though. He must be in a bad way if they did haul him out, and wet through—this weather without hope of a change."

Manners nodded hopelessly.

"In any case it's pretty bad, now those brutes have got him, too," he said. "They weren't the same chaps we saw last night, either. I—I say, it's just struck me. Supposing that chap who was swimming was Captain Pentire?"

"I was wondering that, too," breathed Lowther. "If it was—Hallo, here's Gussy back!"

At that moment Arthur Augustus came scudding up to them, breathless and panting, a coiled-up rope in his arms. He stared at the white faces of his chums in keen anxiety.

"Bai Jove! What—"

With sudden fear the Fourth-Former peered over the edge of the cliff, and as he scanned the sea and empty cliff-face, his own features went ashen.

"Bai Jove!" he gasped in deep distress. "Tom Mewwy, you—you can't mean he's—"

He seemed too afraid to finish, and the next moment Lowther was telling him the news.

"It's almost certain those fellows saved him," he finished hopefully. Then as his eyes fell on the coil of hemp rope, his eyes gleamed suddenly, and he went on savagely almost. "But we're going to find out that, you fellows. If poor old Tom could get down there without a rope, I'm jolly sure we can with one."

"You—you mean—"

"I mean we're going down there—that's what I mean," snapped Lowther doggedly. "Where Tommy goes we go. If you fellows aren't feeling game for it, I'm going alone."

"I'm game enough," said Manners quietly. "But I don't quite see what we can do. If we had a boat—"

"We haven't, though," said Lowther bluntly. "But we can swim, if it comes to swimming. It may not mean that, I'm hoping we'll find a ledge or something—a way of getting in that cavern without having to swim. It's worth trying, and I'm going to try for one."

"I'm game, then," said Manners. "Let's hope the rope will be long enough, anyway."

"I don't quite see how we're goin' to manage it," added Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "But, bai Jove, I'm with you, deah boys! How uttably w'etched!"

If anything, the tender-hearted Arthur Augustus was more upset than Tom's own chums, and his face showed keen distress as he helped Manners and Lowther to make the rope secure to a huge boulder some yards from the cliff edge.

"There's one thing we musn't forget," warned Manners suddenly. "It's more than likely those men saw us from the boat."

"Bai Jove, I nevah thought of that!"

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"We'd better keep our eyes skinned," said Manners grimly. "If we fell into their hands the game would be up with a vengeance—no hope of rescue for anyone then."

It was still another worry to disturb them, but it did not cause them to abandon their project for all that. Manners, though he did not fear the adventure, scarcely liked it, as it seemed to him a hopeless one.

It was he, however, who insisted on going first, and after the rope had been carefully tested, he slipped over the edge of the chasm.

"I'll shout up when I reach the bottom," he said grimly. "If the rope isn't long enough I'll get hooked on somewhere and climb down, and hang on to the rocks until you fellows come."

With that he started the perilous journey down. It was not a light task by any means as he very soon discovered. Gripping the rope by hands and twisted legs he lowered himself. The rope cut cruelly into his hands and every now and again he lost control and swung dizzily, like a pendulum, over the gulf.

The wind caught him again and again, and crashed him against the sharp cliff; but at last he reached the spot where Tom Merry had lost grip earlier on.

He knew the spot at once, for where the scrub-thorn had been torn away a gaping hole was left.

Manners stared at it, and stopped his downward progress. In any case there was but a yard or so of rope left. But it was not the rope that caused him to stop.

"Phew!" he panted, his knees resting on the narrow ledge. "This looks interesting."

He released one hand from the rope, and stooping, crawled half into the hole in the cliff wall—a hole that had obviously been hidden by the scrub-thorn Tom Merry had torn away when he fell. Then his eyes gleamed strangely, and he withdrew his body again, and shouted excitedly upwards.

"You fellows, listen! I've found something—an entrance to the cavern, I think. Can you hear me?"

His chums above were out of his sight, but he heard an answering yell in the affirmative.

"Then come down. I'm all serene. You'll see the hole. I'm crawling in—you chaps come after me."

"Right!"

The answer, thrilling with excitement, came down to Manners, and he released his grasp on the rope, and wormed his way into the narrow, tunnel-like aperture.

It led him for some six feet into the cliff, and then quite abruptly Manners gave a gasp. The tunnel seemed to have ended in a great yawning chasm—a great hollowed-out space in the cliff that echoed and re-echoed to the hollow boom of waters.

At first only blackness met the junior's gaze, and then he became aware of a curious, greenish half-light down below him and he understood.

He was in a great lofty cavern, and below him was glimmering water lit up by a curious half-light from some unseen natural window in the cliff face. It was the secret cave—the sea-washed cavern into which their enemies had undoubtedly vanished.

A sound behind him reached the amazed junior's ears—a sudden scratching and scuffling. Then he heard D'Arcy's voice:

"Bai Jove, Mannahs, deah boy, wheah are you?"

"Oh, good man!" gasped Manners. "Crawl in, Gussy, and let Lowther come. There's a sort of ledge or something here. Have you a match?"

"I've somethin' bettah, deah boy—a torch!"

"Oh, ripping!"

He reached behind him, and as Arthur Augustus came delving through the tunnel, he handed in an electric torch Arthur Augustus had evidently had the foresight to bring. Manners flashed it instantly before him, and the light revealed, sure enough, a path-like ledge running round to the left, and on a level with the tunnel.

"Oh, good!" breathed Manners.

Whether it would eventually lead them down below he did not know—he hoped so. He moved forward a little until he was over the yawning pit, to allow Arthur Augustus to join him.

"Heah is Lowthah!" muttered Arthur Augustus, a moment later, and again there sounded a scuffling in the tunnel, and this time it was D'Arcy's turn to make way for Monty Lowther.

Manners could have laughed at their exclamations of amazement as they realised where they were.

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "We are weally on the wight twack at last. This is the vewy cavern, deah boys."

"It's a marvellous place," breathed Lowther, peering down at the swirling green pool below. "But, my hat! How the thunder are we going to get down there?"

"This path must lead somewhere," said Manners quietly.

He shone the white beam from the torch along the narrow ledge they were crouching on. Sure enough, it led

downwards in a wide spiral encircling the whole of the wide cavern.

"Jove!" breathed Lowther. "I bet this is an old smugglers' cave, and I bet this hole was used as a spyhole."

"Bai Jove! That's it!"

It was more than likely that Lowther was right, but the juniors did not spend much time discussing smugglers or the reason for the hole. They had not forgotten what they were there for, and the next moment Manners was leading the way downwards.

It was a slippery, risky climb; in many places the rocky ledge was broken away, and the chums had to jump and trust to luck. But the nerve-wracking journey was accomplished at last, and they reached the cavern floor with gasps of relief.

They found themselves with but a few feet of slippery, weed-covered rock between themselves and the swirling whirlpool of water, pouring in through the narrow arched opening in the cliff face.

Manners gave a whistle as he noted how narrow it actually was.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed, shouting to make himself heard above the hollow boom of waters. "It wouldn't do to get trapped in here, you fellows. Look!"

He indicated a line of weed high up the cavern wall—the high water mark of the tide. It showed clearly even in the queer, greenish half-light.

"We could climb up that pathway if we did," said Lowther. "Anyhow, our job is to go on. Better keep our eyes skinned, though."

"Hallo! There's the boat!" exclaimed Manners, pointing to a black object bobbing on the swirling waters a few yards away.

"And here's the mouth of a tunnel if I'm not mistaken," added Manners suddenly.

He flashed the light of the torch into a black orifice in the cavern wall. The light flickered on the glistening walls, and revealed a rocky floor, slimy and leading steeply upwards.

"Come on!"

With hearts thudding with excitement the three adventurers plunged into the tunnel, slipping and sliding on the slippery surface of the floor. To Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, at least, it was a nightmarish journey, for water dripped upon them from above, and their clothes were soon covered with slime and limy droppings.

"Bai Jove! This is awful, deah boys!" groaned the swell of the Fourth. "My clobber is already ruined, but this wretched stuff is the limit, bai Jove! Ugh!"

"Don't grouse!" grunted Lowther. "Blow your blessed clobber! Hallo! This looks like checkmate!"

Quite suddenly they had come up against a door—a massive affair, black with age, and with rusted nails protruding. There appeared to be no handle—no means of opening it.

Monty Lowther flung his shoulder against it with all his force. It did not move the fraction of an inch.

"Done, by jingo!" panted Lowther. "Now, all together, you fellows!"

Black and ancient as the door undoubtedly was, they had little hope of forcing it. Yet they tried again and again.

"No good!" growled Manners, as they halted, breathless and panting at last. "We're fairly bunkered for the present. Those rogues are taking no chances."

"What now?" asked Lowther.

"Goodness knows! Unless—"

"Well?"

Manners hesitated, frowning thoughtfully.

"It's no good blinking facts," he said. "Even if we did get through that door, we'd not stand much chance against those burly ruffians."

"We don't funk—"

"It's not a case of funking—it's a case of common sense!" snapped Manners, who was much more sober-minded than the impetuous Lowther. "We ought not to risk failure by tackling a job like this on our own."

"Weally, Mannahs—"

"We can't afford to risk getting captured and mucking up everything," went on Manners doggedly. "Look here. The boat's in the cavern there. I vote we take it, and try to get to the mainland for help. It's just what Tommy would do, I know."

"But—but Tommy and the others—"

"We can help them better by being outside and free," said Manners grimly. "If we get captured, it's all up. I tell you—"

"Hark!"

To Lowther's quick ears had come a faint sound from beyond the door. It sounded again, and then even as the startled juniors stood in alarmed indecision, the door facing them swung open with a low rumbling sound, and the sudden glare of a lantern flashed in their faces.

There followed a bellowing roar, and even as it echoed

through the tunnel, Manners glimpsed the burly forms of three men.

"Run for it," he yelled. "Back to the cavern—the boat!"

Even Lowther saw the wisdom of flight then. He knew that to tackle three burly men was utterly beyond hope of success for them. The question of what to do next was settled for them with a vengeance.

Like lightning, Manners turned and bolted, and in a flash Lowther and D'Arcy were hard on his heels. The blaze from Manners' torch flooded the passage, and they stampeded down it, slipping and sliding and heedless of knocks and bruises.

Quite suddenly they emerged into the booming roar of the sea-washed cavern, and then amazed, they stopped, up to knees in water.

Even in the short time since they had left the place, the incoming tide had obliterated the arched opening of daylight in the cliff face. Only a faint, greenish sheen in the swirling waters showed where the opening had been.

Escape by boat was hopeless—they were too late!

But the alarmed juniors did not stay to mourn the disappointing fact. From behind sounded above the rush of waters the clatter of heavy boots and a savage bellowing from their pursuers, and Manners gave a yell.

"Up the path! Back to the rope!"

With a rush they splashed through the water, and somehow Manners found the ledge, and they went up it recklessly. They were soon high above the swirling water, and Manners gave a sudden gasp of relief.

"It's all right!" he panted, glancing downwards. "The brutes aren't following us!"

It was true enough. The men down below were making no effort to follow. But the juniors did not slow their reckless pace for all that. They reached the tunnel, and as Manners crawled through and looked for the rope, he understood why.

The rope was gone! Unless they could scale the frowning cliff—and Manners shuddered at the thought—they were trapped!

CHAPTER 7.

Off to Greyfriars!

"ALL ready, you fellows?"

George Figgins, of the New House at St. Jim's, came up to the gates with Fatty Wynn and Kerr, his two chums. There was a group of fellows standing at the gates—fellows from both the School House and the New House, and they had, like Figgins & Co., coats and caps on, and they carried bags.

"All serene!" answered Levison of the Fourth. "I fancy we're the lot—no, where's Kildare?"

"Spotted him standing chatting to Railton in the hall!" exclaimed Talbot of the Shell. "Jove! I wonder if any news has come through yet?"

Levison shook his head glumly.

"We should have jolly soon heard if any had," he said quietly. "It's rotten! The Head's beginning to get the wind up, too."

"I don't wonder," said Talbot quietly. "There was a fearful gale in the Channel the night they started. It must have caught them fairly. It's pretty worrying that no news of any sort has come through. They should have been back last night or this morning, remember."

The other juniors nodded, their faces overcast.

It was the third morning since Tom Merry & Co. had left St. Jim's on their fateful yachting trip, and that afternoon the St. Jim's Junior Football Team were booked to play Greyfriars. And in the absence of Tom Merry & Co. a team—of sorts—had been raked together under the leadership of George Figgins of the New House. They were now waiting at the gates for Kildare, who was to take charge of the party.

As a rule footer teams from St. Jim's left in cheery, holiday spirits, laughing and cheering and hopeful of victory.

It was a strangely subdued and dejected team that waited at the gates for Kildare now, however. Indeed, all St. Jim's were subdued and dejected that sunny winter's morning. As Talbot had said, the yachting party should have been back by now—or, at all events, news of them should have been to hand had all been well. It was strange, and worrying. It was more than significant in view of the gale that had raged in the Channel that night. All St. Jim's were waiting anxiously for news, with growing anxiety as the hours passed.

"I almost wish we'd scratched the fixture," said Figgins gloomily, after a silence. "I'm blessed if I feel like playing footer, and in any case, we're in for a record licking."

"We couldn't very well scratch," said Clive grimly. "It wouldn't do to let those Greyfriars chaps think we couldn't

take a second team together strong enough to meet them. And we're not licked yet."

"Here's Kildare!" exclaimed Redfern.

Kildare came hurrying up to the gates. He nodded to the juniors, his usual genial features grave.

"All ready?" he said briefly. "Off we go, then. We'll miss that train if we don't buck up."

"Right, Kildare!"

"Any news yet?" asked Levison.

The skipper of St. Jim's knew what he meant, and he shook his head.

"None," he said. "There's hope yet, though. They may have had a breakdown during the trip back. No good worrying yet. Sharp's the word!"

The crowd of footballers turned and swung out into the Rylcombe Lane en route for the station and Greyfriars. They had had an early dinner, and as the rest of the school were in the dining-hall there was nobody to see them off.

At Rylcombe Station they just caught the local train, and at Wayland Junction they all but missed the connection as Fatty Wynn was suddenly discovered to be missing. He was found, however, in the buffet, gorging cakes and tarts, and his irate chums rushed him, protesting, to the train in the nick of time. Wynn was the best junior goalie at St. Jim's, and they would not have left him behind for worlds.

It was a long journey to the Kentish school, and the juniors usually enlivened it with fun and larking. But on this occasion time dragged heavily. None of the footballers felt like jollity, and all were thankful when the long run ended and the express ran into the Courtfield Junction.

To their relief the local train for Friardale was waiting at the platform opposite, and the footballers tumbled out and boarded the local with a rushing scramble. It was not until Figgins and Kerr had squeezed themselves into a seat that Figgins suddenly missed Fatty Wynn again.

"Great pip!" he snorted. "That burbling dummy—"

Without finishing, the leader of the New House juniors popped his head out of the window. He saw no sign of the hungry Fatty on the platform. At that moment Kildare looked out of the next carriage.

"Wynn in there, Kildare?" gasped Figgins.

"No. Why, isn't the young ass in with you?"

Figgins did not answer, but, with a snorting command to Kerr, he sprang out of the carriage and made a mad rush for the buffet. Kerr leaped out after him.

Sure enough, they found the exasperating fat youth seated before the counter devouring his way through a plate of jam-tarts as though his life depended upon it.

The juniors knew that argument was hopeless with their fat chum, and they did not attempt it.

"Take his arm!" snapped Figgins.

"Here, you asses—What—"

Fatty Wynn's mumbling protest ended as his chums grasped his arms and rushed him on to the platform. But even as they reached it the engine whistle sounded and they knew it was too late.

The train was in the local bay some distance up the platform, and as they rushed frantically up the tail end of the guard's van drew away from them. From two of the carriage windows higher up the train showed a mass of heads and waving arms. Then the train vanished round a bend ahead.

Figgins & Co. stopped, with feelings too deep for words.

"You—you chumpheaded dummy!"

"You—you guzzling gormandizer!"

"Look here, you fellows—"

"Oh, bump the fat ass!" snorted Kerr wrathfully.

"No time for that!" snapped Figgins. "There's not another train for an hour, I believe. We'll have to foot it to Greyfriars. Oh, you footling chump, Fatty!"

"No good blaming me," mumbled Fatty Wynn indignantly. "I was jolly hungry, you know, after that long train journey. You fellows know I can't play footer on an empty stomach."

"B-r-r-r!"

In deep wrath George Figgins led the way off the platform. They gave up their outward tickets, and tramped out into Courtfield High Street.

"Come on!" grunted Figgins. "We'll just get there before the kick-off—unless this hopeless dummy starts his tricks, again."

"We'll watch that!" vowed Kerr.

They started off for Greyfriars, keeping a wary eye on Fatty Wynn as they went through the market town. But though he looked longingly into the windows of various pastrycooks, Fatty made no effort to give further trouble.

It was not a long walk to Friardale, but, as it happened, the three St. Jim's juniors were not fated to see either Friardale or Greyfriars that afternoon.

They were not far out from Courtfield when three figures

emerged from the Pegg road on to the Friardale road. They were three men—obviously seafaring men—and Figgins could not help noticing something strange about them. Two wore pilot jackets over blue overalls, and the third had wide blue serge trousers and a blue jersey with a name printed across it in white letters. All three were bare-headed, and, though their clothes were dishevelled, they were plainly a cut above the ordinary.

"Who the thump are these merchants?" cried Figgins.

"Look like shipwrecked mariners," grinned Fatty Wynn.

"They're off a gentleman's yacht, by the look of them,"

muttered Figgins, staring rather rudely at the three men as they came up. "Jove, I've seen them before somewhere!

Great pip! I say, look at the name on that chap's jersey!"

"The Conquest!" breathed Kerr. "My hat!"

Figgins' eye gleamed suddenly. In a flash he remembered where he had seen the faces of the three sailors before. It was in a photograph on the mantelpiece in Study No. 6 at St. Jim's—a photograph of Lord Conway's yacht.

Figgins stopped and stared at the men. He could scarcely believe his own eyes. But there was no doubting it, amazing as it seemed. The name on the sailor's jersey was positive proof that these lost-looking men were members of Lord Conway's crew.

Without a word he ran across the road and confronted the surprised men, who halted.

"Excuse me," he began excitedly. "but aren't you chaps from the Conquest—Lord Conway's private yacht?"

The elder of the three men—who was none other than McCallam—nodded, eyeing the juniors curiously.

"That's so, sir," he said. "Why—"

"My hat! Then—then where are the others—where's the yacht and Lord Conway and his friends?" stammered Figgins. Then, as he noted the looks on the faces of the men, he went on in explanation: "We're from St. Jim's—chums of Lord Conway's brother and his friends. Everyone's wondering what's happened to them."

"Oh," said McCallam, nodding. "I see, sir! Well, young gentlemen, the Conquest's wrecked—"

"Wrecked?"

"Yes, sir! She went aground on a sandbank off Stark Island in the gale the other night. Nothing to worry about, though, young gentlemen. Lord Conway and his friends are safe on the island."

"Oh, thank goodness!"

"Good news!"

"They're stranded, though," went on McCallam. "And we're just going to start off for Seacalm for the motor-boat. I suppose you young gents don't know what time there's a train for Southampton?"

Figgins shook his head. He was still looking puzzled, though immensely relieved.

"No, I'm afraid I don't," he said. "But, I say, how on earth did you get here—in this place? Tell us all about it!"

Though plainly anxious to be going on his way, the engineer told the juniors about the stranding of the Conquest, and how they had started out for the mainland in the dinghy.

"We'd scarcely left the island when the fog came on—thick as a blanket," he said. "We'd no compass, and we rowed about, I should think, for hours, until we were hopelessly lost. We stopped rowing then, as the tide and current had us fairly and took us into the Channel—right in the track of shipping. Anyway, to cut it short, we got in the way of a Thames sea-going barge and she cut the dinghy in two."

"Phew!"

"Luckily she wasn't going fast, and the crew were pretty lively. They picked us up, and we spent twelve solid hours between blankets below decks."

"But how the thump—"

"How we got here's simple enough," smiled McCallam.

"We knew there was no hope of reaching the Thames till to-morrow, so we persuaded her skipper to drop us off here; at least, he dropped us on to a fishing-boat a few miles out, and we were landed at Pegg yonder."

"Oh!"

The juniors understood now. Thrilling as the sailors' adventures had been, the explanation of their being in that place was simple enough—it was no miracle, after all.

"Well, my hat!" breathed Figgins. He paused a moment and then he went on, his eyes glistening strangely. "And—you're going back to rescue them now?"

McCallam nodded.

"Yes, sir. We're just off to Seacalm, where his lordship's motor-boat's lying. We shall want her to get the Conquest afloat. It'll be a good run to Stark Island, but she's a speedy craft, and we should be there before dawn. We must be off now, young gentlemen."

"Half a minute!" breathed Figgins. An idea had entered his mind—an idea that almost took his breath away. He gave his chums a mischievous grin, and turned again to McCallam. "You're making for Stark Island now?" he asked, his voice trembling with excitement.

"Yes. But excuse me, young—"

"Then," said Figgins grimly, "we're coming with you."

"My hat!"



Manners' heart leaped at the sound of an approaching motor craft. Was it someone coming to the rescue? In sheer joy he gave a hoarse yell, and then realising his voice would never carry he remembered his pocket torch and wrenched it out of his pocket with trembling fingers. The next moment a flash of white light stabbed the darkness outside. After a brief wait an answering light was waved from the oncoming motor-boat. (See page 21.)

"But, sir—"

"We're coming!" snapped Figgins eagerly. "Look here, we'll make it right with Lord Conway. He's a jolly good sort. He'll be glad to see us."

"Figgins, you mad ass!"

Kerr and Fatty Wynn were eyeing their chum aghast. "But we can't—it's madness!" ejaculated Kerr. "And the match—"

"Blow the match!"

"But the Head!"

"Blow the Head!" said Figgins recklessly. "It's the chance of a lifetime, you asses! Our schoolfellows are in danger—stranded on a giddy island. They may be in danger—held prisoners by pirates or smugglers for all we know," grinned Figgins, little dreaming how near he was getting to the truth. "We're going to be gallant fellows and rush to their rescue. The Head can't sack us for being brave, gallant rescuers, can he?"

"You silly ass—"

"Anyway," went on Figgy doggedly. "We're going. It's worth a blessed flogging to get a ripping outing like this, and we've got a ripping excuse. We can easily rake up the fare between us. I've a couple of quid, anyway."

"But—but I'm afraid Lord Conway—" began McCallam feebly.

"That's all right," said Figgins confidently. "I tell you I'll take full responsibility. Lord Conway's a brick, and he won't mind, I'm absolutely certain."

"But the Head will—" began Kerr, obviously weakening.

"Rot! We can stand a row, anyway. In any case, he'll be so jolly relieved to know all's well with the others that he'll forgive us—if he tumbles to the game. Anyway, we're jolly well going. Come on!"

"But look here, young gentlemen!" McCallam, half grinning, made a last effort. "It won't be a picnic in a sea-going motor-boat, my lads—"

"Rot! We'll risk getting sea-sick!"

And the cheery Figgins took McCallam by the arm and started off back towards Courtfield. McCallam gave a chuckle.

"Very well, young gentlemen," he said grimly. "I hope you won't regret it, though."

A moment later they were hurrying towards Courtfield Junction together—Figgins jubilant, the three sailors rather grim, and Figgins' chums not a little scared, but grinning for all that. Figgins' idea had fairly swept them off their balance, as it were, but they were beginning to like the idea now. After all, it would be a lark; and, after all, the Head could scarcely sack them. He might even praise them for their keen regard for the safety of Tom Merry & Co. With footer forgotten now, the little party made for the station. There they discovered they had fifteen minutes to wait, and the cheery Figgins utilised the time by ringing up Greyfriars and giving them a message for Kildare of St. Jim's—a message that made the captain of St. Jim's jump when he eventually received it. It was to the effect that Lord Conway's yachting-party were safe and sound on Stark Island, but that they were stranded there, and that Figgins, Wynn, and Kerr were on their way to their rescue.

This duty accomplished, Figgins cheerily boarded the Southampton express with his chums and the crew of the Conquest, and very soon they were speeding for Seacalm and Stark Island.

CHAPTER 8.

Gleams of Hope!

"TIDE'S well out now, you fellows. I think we'd better risk it!"

As he spoke Harry Manners leaned well out over the ledge of rock and pointed downwards.

It was some hours since the three juniors had discovered

that the rope they had hoped to escape by had gone, and the juniors were still on the ledge—the narrow path that led to the short tunnel in the cliff face. They had been hours of acute discomfort and weariness for the luckless juniors. The ledge was but a foot wide at most, and they were almost fainting with the weariness of their cramped position.

But they had been forced to stick it—or to go down to the cavern below and surrender. Their first intention had been to climb up the cliff by the way Tom Merry had climbed down. But a brief examination showed them the hopelessness of such an attempt. From the tunnel to some six feet above their heads the cliff face ran up smooth and straight as a table top. There was scarcely foothold for a fly. Even had Tom Merry not fallen he could never have climbed down that six feet or more of smooth rock.

The discovery disposed of all hopes of escape that way. Their only hope lay in waiting until the tide sank in the cavern below, and uncovered the arched opening. But the juniors had to admit that their chances of escaping with the boat were very slim indeed. It was scarcely likely that their enemies would allow them to do that.

But they had waited hopefully, for all that. If they were captured it could not be helped. It was impossible to stay indefinitely on the rocky ledge above the yawning cavern. It was fairly clear to them that the men were relying upon hunger and thirst and fatigue to drive them down.

They had seen nothing whatever of the men for some considerable time—a fact which puzzled the juniors. They could scarcely believe they would be so careless as to leave the boat unguarded with the tide going out.

And now, on the swirling water below was a patch of daylight reflected, and Manners decided that the time had come to risk all.

"The sooner we go the better," muttered Manners, his face strained and white. "Those brutes know we couldn't get out with the tide in. They may be on the watch as the tide goes out, though."

"Yaas, wathah!" agreed Arthur Augustus, in a low voice. "I am with you, Mannahs, deah boy! Anythin' is bettah than this tewwible waitin', bai Jove!"

"Come on! Let's start, then!" muttered Lowther. "It's a case of into the lions' den, I suppose."

All three juniors had that feeling, but there was no help for it, and the next moment, after rubbing some life into their cramped and aching limbs, they started the desperate venture.

Manners led the way, moving slowly and cautiously, for they dare not use the torch—their only hope of success being in getting down unheard and unseen.

It was a terribly dangerous, nerve-wracking ordeal, for the slightest slip would have precipitated them into the swirling whirlpool below. But the light became better as they went lower, and at last Manners set foot on the wet, streaming floor, and the others joined him.

At once Manners groaned as his eyes went out to the arched opening through which the tide was flowing out. From above it had seemed large enough, but now he saw that the boat could never get through. They were too early yet.

He pointed this out to the others, and they nodded dumbly. Manners then pointed to the black mouth of the tunnel, and a moment later they were following him cautiously towards it.

Manners reached it, and peered into the black maw. No light or sign of danger met his gaze.

"All serene!" shouted the junior above the clamour of the water. "My hat! We'll do it yet! Let's get the boat ready!"

He moved out to where the boat rocked and twisted on the disturbed water. What appeared to be a rope was stretched from the thwarts to a ring in the rocky wall. On grasping this to pull the boat in, Manners discovered it was a strong chain, and on pulling the boat in he understood with a thrill of dismay why the men had not bothered to guard the boat.

Round the thwart the iron chain was twisted, and it was secured by a heavy padlock. To make sure, Manners jumped into the boat and tried it. The padlock was locked. Their only remaining hope was gone.

Manners jumped ashore again, and reported the dismaying discovery to his chums. They were almost sick with disappointment.

What to do now was a problem. A wild idea of attempting to swim out of the cave came to Manners, but a quick examination of the swirling whirlpool, telling of undercurrents and currents, showed him that such an attempt would be sheer suicide.

"Better get back?" asked Lowther, after a dismal silence. Manners shook his head after a moment's thought.

"We'll stay down here—hide!" he shouted. "A chance may turn up if we wait. Here, let's go and see if the door's still fast."

The sudden thought brought a gleam of hope to Manners, THE GEM LIBRARY.—No 377.

and, without waiting for a reply, he started towards the tunnel mouth.

He never reached it, however. He was a couple of yards from it when a flicker of light on the rocky tunnel wall warned him, and he pulled up with a cry of warning. The flicker was followed by the glare of a lantern, and the next instant vague, shadowy forms loomed behind it, and a hoarse voice shouted:

"Here the young limbs are! Got ye, my lads!"

He spoke too soon where Manners was concerned, for that junior turned on his heel abruptly.

"Run for it, chaps!" he yelled. "Back to the ledge!"

For the second time that day the three stamped for the pathway, but this time they were not so lucky. As he wheeled to bolt, Arthur Augustus slipped on the wet rock and went down heavily.

Lowther noticed the accident, and he stopped and hesitated. His indecision was fatal, for in a flash both the juniors were struggling in the enemies' grasp.

Manners was twenty yards up the spiral ledge before he realised his chums were not following, and, looking back, he saw the reason with a thrill of dismay.

He stopped as if to return to their aid, and as he did so Lowther's voice sounded above the booming echoes.

"Don't stop, Manners! Get clear, for goodness' sake! Never mind us!"

In a flash it dawned in on the junior that Lowther's advice was sound. It was sheer folly to return. The three of them could never hope to overcome three burly rascals. It was impossible for him to aid his chums now, and, small as his chance was, there was still a chance whilst he was free.

As he stood there the third man began to scramble up the pathway towards him. It settled the matter for Manners, and he turned and went on recklessly.

The man came after him, however, shouting threats and warnings. Manners stopped suddenly and set his teeth. The thought of a struggle on that narrow ledge made him shudder. Yet he was determined not to be taken.

He stooped suddenly and snatched up a loose lump of rock, heavy and jagged.

"Stop, you brute!" he shouted. "Come another step, and you'll get this. I mean it!"

The man stopped. Even in the gloom he could see the dangerous gleam in the junior's eyes, and he hesitated a moment, and then gave vent to an oath.

"You young fool!" he cried gruffly. "Come down! Ye may as well give in! There's no way outer this for ye. Ye'll starve up there. We don't mean to harm ye. Be sensible now, kid!"

"Get back!" snapped Manners. "I'm not going to be taken yet!"

"As ye likes!" was the careless answer. "You'll come down sharp enough when ye begins to get hungry and thirsty, young 'un."

With that the bearded man turned and went down. He joined his companions, who had already rendered the hapless D'Arcy and Lowther helpless. Against grown men their struggles, plucky as they were, had availed them little.

With a sinking heart, Manners watched. He saw his chums led into the tunnel, and then the light vanished. Slowly Manners went on until he reached the narrow ledge. He twisted himself round and lay flat in it, looking down into the well of the gigantic cavern.

He realised that he was alone now—alone against the whole gang. He felt that the only hope of rescue for his comrades lay in himself alone. He had given up wondering what the whole amazing business meant. He lay and pondered the problem of his position almost hopelessly.

He was free, but what could he do? He was trapped on that precarious perch without food or water. The rascal's words had reminded him that he was already famished—ravenously hungry. It was hours since he had eaten, and he knew that night could not be far away. Moreover he was almost fainting from fatigue. The loss of sleep the night before—the strain of the last few hours, were telling upon him terribly.

Yet, as he pondered over the position, he fancied there was still a chance of escape for him. He remembered the lugger the night before—that a boat had entered the cavern from it.

Would it come to-night? He hoped that it would. If it did it was unlikely they would take the trouble to chain that up also. He determined to go down when night came and hide among the rocks in the cavern until the boat did come. Meanwhile, the only thing he could do was to wait.

So Manners waited, with chin on his cupped arms, watching the glimmering water, which was all he could see of the cavern.

But he did not watch for long. He had intended to keep watch and ward until night came, but he had not counted upon his exhaustion and weariness, nor the lulling effects of the ceaseless boom and wash of the waters below.

For what seemed an endless age he stuck it, and then his

head fell forward on his arms, his tired eyes closed, and despite his heroic intention he slept.

He awoke at last, cold and stiff in every joint. How long he had slept he had no idea. He opened his eyes to deep blackness, and it was some moments before he remembered where he was. When he did he groaned, and, raising himself on his elbows, he peered over the edge of the chasm.

The booming from below sounded thunderous in his ears, and he realised that the tide was coming in again. With a gasp of alarm he twisted himself in the short burrow and glanced out seawards.

It was night—a night like the previous one—clear and starlit. Out in the bay the glimmering water reflected the stars like specks of silver.

"Phew!" breathed Manners, his teeth chattering. "I must have been asleep hours. My hat!"

He suddenly remembered the lugger, and his quick glance took in the bay. It was empty! He was about to draw back, remembering his intention to go down and hide in the cavern below, when his eyes caught sight of something far out to sea—a speck of light.

He watched it, thinking of the lugger, but even as he watched it the light grew bigger, and he knew it could be no sailing vessel. He could see two twinkling lights now—the port and starboard lights. He knew then that the boat—whatever it was—was making for the island, and at a terrific speed also.

Then quite abruptly his ear caught a new sound—the measured beat of engines, the unmistakable cough of a motor craft.

Manners' heart leaped and his pulses began to throb. Was it McCallam and his men? Who else could it be? In sheer joy Manners gave a hoarse yell, and then, realising his voice would never carry, he remembered the torch in his pocket, and wrenched it out with trembling fingers. The next moment a flash of white light stabbed the darkness outside.

He waved the torch frantically, and after a brief wait an answering light was waved from the oncoming motor-boat. The junior could see it now—a long, low, sea-going craft. In the cockpit he discerned several dim figures.

Then a new idea came to Manners. As a scout he knew the Morse code by heart, and the next moment he was sending a message out into the darkness in vivid flashes of light—a message he hoped desperately that McCallam and his men would understand.

CHAPTER 9.

Rescue At Last!

"MY hat! That's Morse!" ejaculated George Figgins. Manners had been quite right—happily. The motor-craft was the Alice, Lord Conway's racing motor-boat. In the cockpit, cowering down behind the wind-screen, muffled up, with ruddy, glowing faces, were Figgins, Fatty Wynn, and Kerr. McCallam was leaning over the hooded prow, Scott was at the engines, and Wilks had the tiller.

Figgins & Co. were enjoying themselves up to the hilt. Contrary to McCallam's grim warning they had not been sea-sick during that trip. The sea was like a mill-pond luckily, and they had come through with flying colours. McCallam had driven her at top speed almost, and the juniors had gloried in the mad rush through the air and water, their faces glowing, their skin tingling with the sharp sting of flying spindrift.

They were almost sorry when the iron-bound cliffs of Stark Island had come into sight at last, and Wilks had announced that they had reached their destination.

Then as they raced towards the island that mysterious flashing light had become visible. They had answered it with a storm-lantern, and then had followed the dots and flashes, and Figgins had ejaculated: "My hat! That's Morse!"

There was no doubt about it, and, for the benefit of all and sundry Figgins spelled out the message.

"H-e-l-p! C-a-n y-o-u g-e-t c-l-o-s-e-r?"

"That's queer!" grunted McCallam as Figgins finished. "Well, it's pretty deep round here; we'll see what that fellow wants. Send her in a bit, Joe!"

Wilks brought the craft round a little, and she headed straight for the stab of light, now burning steadily against the face of the cliff. The motor-boat slowed down and her engines stopped. McCallam made a cup of his hands and bawled through it:

"What's wrong there? Who are you?"

There came an answering shout, faintly but clearly. Figgins felt he could recognise the voice.

"I'm Manners, one of Lord Conway's yachting party. I'm alone here, trapped in a hole! Can you hear me?"

"Yes! What's the matter, old top?"

It was Figgins who bawled the answer. And he chuckled, as there came no reply for some moments. Apparently Manners had recognised his voice, and was overcome with

amazement. But an answer did come at last—in a delighted yell.

"Is that Figgins?"

"Yes, old nut! What's wrong?"

"I'm trapped up here—can't get up or down!" came the answer, again in a trembling yell. "For Heaven's sake, listen! Lord Conway and the others are prisoners in a cave in the cliffs. There's an entrance just below where I'm standing! Can you get in with that boat?"

"Great pip!"

"My hat!"

"By James!" ejaculated McCallam. "Is the fellow mad?"

"It's true!" cried Figgins in alarm. "It must be right what he says. Manners isn't the chap to talk out of his hat! Oh, great pip!"

McCallam's jaw set hard. There was something in Manners' appealing voice that told him it was no false claim, amazing as it sounded.

With a sudden movement he switched on an electric lamp in the bow of the boat. The powerful ray flashed over the water and settled on the arched opening in the cliff.

The engineer studied it for a moment, and then he cupped his hands again and yelled up to the dim figure they could now see clinging to the cliff face.

"Any depth of water inside?"

"I think it's pretty deep!" shouted back Manners.

"There's a boat inside now! Be quick! It's urgent! If you can't get in, race round to the beach and get up to the top of the cliff above me, and lower a rope!"

"She doesn't take much water," said Wilks. "I think she'll just about squeeze in."

"Risk it!" said Figgins eagerly. "I tell you Manners means what he says. For goodness' sake, risk it!"

McCallam nodded, though his face was grim. He knew it was a risk in more ways than one. But he was convinced now, and he jumped to the engine and took charge himself. Then he nodded to Wilks.

The slender craft began to move forward gently, the dazzling beam of white light showing up every detail of the water surrounding the cavern mouth.

Nearer and nearer it crept to the arched opening. The prow of the boat passed under, and the arched whale-back scraped the rocky archway of the opening.

But it scraped through, and as the boat sailed gently into the lofty cavern, now lit up vividly by the powerful beam of light, the occupants of the motor-boat gasped with amazement.

The engine was silent now, and all on board breathed deeply with relief as Wilks edged the gently rocking craft against the dinghy. He caught the gunwale of the boat, and a moment later the two boats were alongside. A moment later, also, the anchor of the motor-boat was over the side and Wilks had made the rope secure.

"She'll ride safely enough now. I've given her plenty of rope to allow for the tide!" he shouted.

"Right!"

McCallam jumped into the dinghy and started to pull on the chain. The two boats moved gently to the water's edge, and one by one the crew and boys jumped out. As they did so there was a scraping of feet on rock, and Manners, his face haggard in the dazzling light, dropped on to the rocky floor and ran to the group.

He had scarcely believed his own ears when he had heard Figgins' voice, and he scarcely believed his eyes now. He was dumbfounded.

But it was the time for action now, and not for questions. Those could wait. Before anyone could ask, he was explaining the position in terse, eager tones.

The rescue-party fairly blinked at him open-mouthed.

"Well, my hat!" ejaculated Figgins when he paused at last.

That was all he could say. But McCallam's homely face was hard.

"You say those scoundrels are through there now?" he muttered, pointing to the black tunnel-mouth.

"Yes. I've been dreading they'd turn up before you got inside. But come on—"

"Half a minute, sir!"

McCallam sprang into the dinghy, after dragging it in again, and from thence into the motor-craft. When he jumped ashore again he had a crowbar in his hand, and his pockets bristled with hefty spanners.

He shared these out to Wilks, Scott, and the juniors, and a moment later the little party were treading the sloping ascent to the old door. They reached it. As Manners had expected, it was closed.

But not for long did it remain closed. McCallam inserted the end of the bar in the crack of the black door, and after some minutes' strenuous prising, something snapped on the inside and the door swung open.

The party passed through, and with the electric torch

lighting up the blackness ahead, they tramped on into the murky underworld.

McCallam, who had taken charge of operations now, called a halt suddenly, with warning, upraised hand. Across the passage ahead of them was a warm beam of light. To their ears came a curious, measured thudding.

Thud, thud, thud!

With McCallam leading, they crept forward, the light of the torch extinguished now. They reached the opening whence the lantern-light proceeded, and McCallam peered cautiously round.

He found himself looking upon a scene almost similar to that which Lord Conway and his fellow-captives had looked upon when attempting to escape.

In the cave three men were working in the dim light. The ping of metal and the stroke of tools was heard clearly. McCallam did not stay to watch just exactly what they were doing. He whispered over his shoulder to Wilks behind, and then he went into action like a whirlwind.

And after him went Wilks and Scott, with Figgins & Co. well on their heels. But the aid of the juniors was scarcely wanted. Taken completely by surprise, the rascals were down amid a chorus of yells before they could raise a hand.

Their own neck-scarves were brought into use, and with these and some lengths of rope found handy, the fuming rogues were trussed up with sailorman-like smartness.

Leaving them in darkness, the rescue-party took up the lanterns and moved on. A sudden idea struck Figgins, and he raised his voice in a loud hail.

"Merry—Blake—where are you?"

The answer came almost at once—faint, but distinct. And it was in Jack Blake's voice.

"Here! This way! Hurrah!"

"Wescue, bai Jove! This way, deah boys!"

There was no mistaking that voice, at all events. With a rush, Figgins & Co. took the lead now. Along the narrow, winding tunnel they pushed on, heedless of bumps and bruises. They emerged at last into a cave—the cave Lord Conway and Blake & Co. had escaped from—only to be brought back captives again.

They stared at the sight revealed by the torch. On beds of dried seaweed were six forms stretched out—bound and helpless. They were Lord Conway, Blake, Herries, Digby, D'Arcy, and Lowther.

"My hat!" gasped Figgins.

The captives and the rescue-party blinked at each other. Though they had believed Manners, the rescue-party were astonished at finding it only too true. It was soon obvious why the captive juniors were blinking in dumbfounded astonishment, however.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated D'Arcy at last. "It—it's Figgy!"

"Great pip!"

Overjoyed as they were, the juniors could only blink at Figgins & Co.

"Little us!" chuckled George Figgins. "Here, we'll soon have you loose, my cherubs!"

"But where's Tom Merry?" demanded Manners as the captives were freed. "Why—"

"He's safe in another cave, I think," said Lord Conway. "We must find him without delay. There is no time for explanations now. That rascal Snape may arrive at any moment, and he is armed. We must free Merry, and then we can make plans to settle the rest of this villainous gang."

The released captives soon restored the circulation to their cramped limbs, and then a start was made. It was Figgins who found a narrow fissure in the rocky wall of the tunnel as they returned the way they had come, and as they sent a ringing shout echoing down it there came a faint, answering call.

"That's Tom Merry's voice!" cried Lowther eagerly.

"Oh, good!"

One by one they passed through the slit in the wall—an opening they had passed without seeing before. To their surprise, it led out into a tunnel wider than the one they had left.

For a hundred yards it wound upwards, and suddenly the tunnel ended in a massive door, like the one in the other tunnel. But this time they were on the right side of it, and in a moment McCallam had wrenched back a rusty bolt, and as the door swung open they found themselves in another cave.

It was small, and filled with a comforting warmth from an oilstove set in the centre of the rocky floor. But the rescue-party had no eyes for the cave or its furniture. For they found themselves face to face with Tom Merry, and behind Tom Merry was a tall, military-looking man with a somewhat haggard face.

"Good gad! Conway!"

"Pentire, my dear fellow!"

The two old chums shook hands warmly, and hid their excitement and delight as befitted their age and station. But not so Tom Merry & Co. and the rest of the St. Jim's

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juniors. They fairly mobbed Tom Merry, and it was some moments before the hubbub subsided. But explanations had been exchanged at last, and a general move was made out of the cave. Lord Conway had reminded them that the night's work was not over yet.

But as the party reached the cave where the bound rascals lay, Captain Pentire called a halt and walked up to the spot where the men had been at work. He examined the heap of scattered rock, and, stooping suddenly, he picked up something and returned to where Lord Conway stood.

"You've asked me what the meaning of this mystery is, and I've told you I did not know," he said, his eyes gleaming strangely. "But I did not believe smuggling was the secret. I had a vague suspicion—a suspicion I now know to be correct. Look at that, Conway!"

He handed to the viscount a small indented mass. It was heavy. Lord Conway all but dropped it. He looked at it curiously.

"An ore of some kind—tin, I suppose."

"Tin!" said Captain Pentire, laughing excitedly. "That is silver, not tin! Now do you fathom the mystery? Don't you see? These rascals have somehow made this discovery. They have apparently been mining this stuff for months. Good gad! It's amazing! And I never suspected even when that rascal Snape offered to purchase the island for a ridiculously small sum. I refused, of course, and he has been doing his utmost since to get it by other less gentle methods."

"Great pip!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Now," went on the captain grimly, "you will understand why those rascals tried to get the deeds. They vowed to make me sign papers—papers handing over the island to them. They took me unawares the night I was expecting you and brought me here. I managed to escape by swimming this morning, but they got me again—and also my young friend here," he added, nodding to Tom Merry. "We've only just finished drying our clothes, by the way."

"So—so that's the secret!" ejaculated Lord Conway. "A silver mine, by Jove!"

"Yes," nodded the captain, glancing at the wall of the tunnel in which the men had been working. "And, unless I'm much mistaken, this island is worth a fortune. However, I think it is about the time our friend Snape usually arrives, and the sooner we get down to the cavern to greet him, the better. I fancy he won't give much trouble, though."

Captain Pentire was right there. The rascally scheming Snape gave little trouble. He was not allowed to give much trouble. The brown-sailed lugger crept into the bay, and the dinghy crept into the sea-washed cavern and into a hornets' nest. He was taken utterly by surprise, and before he could raise a hand he was a prisoner as were his accomplices in the dinghy. Then the motor-boat crept out and made a dart for the lugger. There was only one man left on the lumbering craft, and he offered no resistance when he saw what he was "up against," and soon all the gang was accounted for. And leaving them trussed up safely to await the arrival of the police on the morrow, the motor-boat, with its triumphant load, started for the bungalow on the beach.

There a fire was soon blazing cheerfully, and the party—rescued and rescuers—sat down where they could to a meal that Manners and Fatty Wynn, at least, did justice to. It was a jolly meal, and when it was over the party slept—also where they could—until morning dawned on Stark Island.

Tom Merry & Co. did not see any reason why they should not spend another day on Stark Island, but Lord Conway did—in their disgust. He packed them aboard the motor-boat and took them across to the mainland early the next morning. And when the juniors boarded the train at Tregenna en route for St. Jim's, Lord Conway went with them. And it was just as well for Figgins & Co. that he did. For when after hearing the amazing story of their adventures from Lord Conway, the Head turned to the quaking Figgins & Co. for an explanation, it was Lord Conway who explained, and it was owing to his pleading that Figgins & Co. escaped with nothing worse than a severe wiggling.

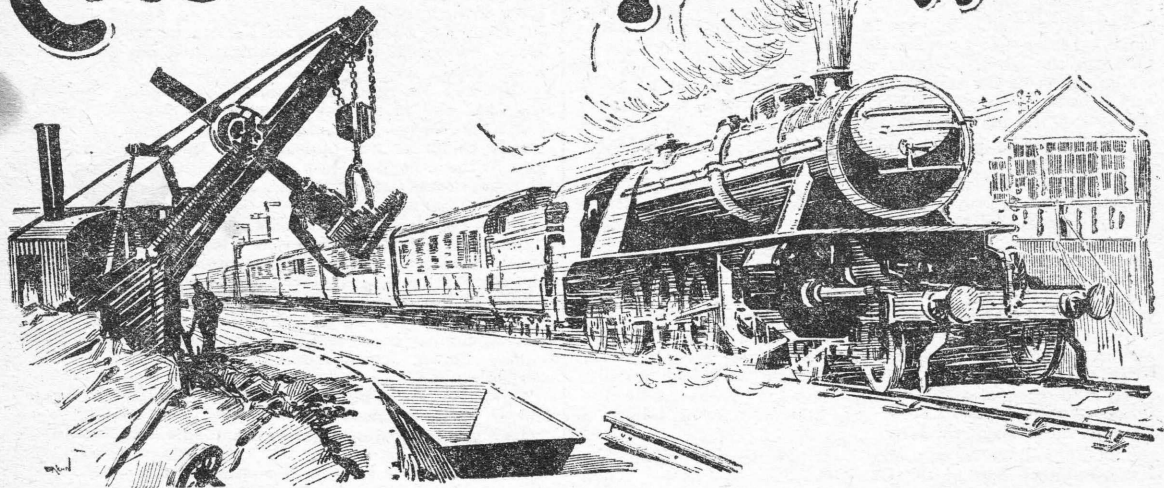
A few days later the juniors heard the rest of the story by letter—how the rascally Snape and his men had been handed over to the police, and how the "find" of silver ore on Stark Island had been proved by experts to be a find indeed. And later still they learned that Captain Pentire had successfully obtained a "grant" from the government to work it, and that the necessity for selling the island he loved was gone for ever. It was good news to the chums of St. Jim's, and justified them in patting themselves on the back for the part they had played in solving the Secret of Stark Island.

THE END.

(Another magnificent yarn of popular Tom Merry & Co. next week, chums, entitled: "SAVED IN SECRET!" by Martin Clifford. Don't miss it on any account!)

Jimmy Speed and Sam Blundell stop at nothing to evade the clutches of the angry Carnboroughites!

CHUMS OF THE IRON WAY!



A Thrilling Yarn of Exciting Adventure on the Railroad.
By ROLAND SPENCER and FRANCIS WARWICK.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED.

JIMMY SPEED, a plucky and cheery young newsboy of Blackhampton.

SIR RICHARD GRANT, chief director of the Great Scottish and Central Railway, who has in his employ nearly all the male population of Blackhampton.

JOHN LANGRISH—whose heavy and determined features, square-set jaw, and steely eyes earn for him the title of "Granite" Langrish—chief director of the Great Electric Northern, and a rival of Sir Richard Grant.

HAROLD SOPER, a foreman shunter on the G.S.C., and an unscrupulous rascal, working in the pay of John Langrish, and

SAM BLUNDELL, a fireman on the G.S.C., and as true as steel.

It was a lucky day for the cheery young newsboy, Jimmy Speed, when, at great risk to himself, he rescued Sir Richard Grant from being crushed beneath the wheels of a monster goods-train engine, for it meant the realisation of his long-cherished ambition—to get a job in the great workshops of the G.S.C. To hear the clanging and the shouting, and to see the great steel locomotives towering around him, sent a thrill through Jimmy Speed.

But he is soon up against it when he meets Soper, who, in the pay of Granite Langrish, is endeavouring to poison his fellow-workers against the G.S.C.

He finds a friend, however, in Sam Blundell, a fireman. Then, anxious to learn more, he shadows Soper, who, together with Cridland, another confederate of Langrish's, have met in the lonely ruins of Black Hill to discuss further villainous plans. A thrilling fight follows, Speed miraculously escaping from the hands of the villainous Cridland. Suspecting further villainy next night, Sir Richard Grant, together with some detectives, and Jimmy Speed, crouch in a ditch waiting. An attempt is made to wreck a train. Speed and Blundell are captured in the scrap, and taken by Langrish's men to Black Hill ruins, where they discover a plot to collapse the tunnel. The two chums effect an escape, but before help arrives Cridland carries out his vile scheme. The great disaster casts a still deeper shadow over the great railway town, and the newspaper talk makes bitter reading for Blackhampton.

The following Saturday Carnborough meet Blackhampton on the football-ground. A fierce tussle takes place, but the bitter blood of the Carnboroughites soon comes to the surface. A fight follows, and inch by inch the staunch Blackhamptonians are forced back dangerously near to the live rails of the Great Electric Northern!

(Now read on.)

A Desperate Plan!

THE situation was indeed desperate. Jim, with Bob Williams on his right, and Sam and the burly engine-driver to the left, fought with deadly purpose to prevent the pressure from forcing him and his comrades on to the live conductor rails of the Great Electric Northern Railway.

"If you touch the live rails you're dead men!" Sam's voice rang out, and the defenders redoubled their efforts to stand their ground. They were still on the broken-down hoardings, but the gleaming rails were very near—terrifyingly near!

With loud shouts, the attackers pressed on, the foremost hitting out with brutal purpose. But Sam and the engine-driver were worth half a dozen defenders, and the attackers began to respect those flashing fists.

But the gallant little knot of men were powerless to stand their ground. Back, back they went, the thin boarding beneath their feet cracking ominously, occasionally a foot going through at a rotten part. Back towards the rails, and then—what? A sudden break away and dash for freedom between the rails? For to continue fighting on the railroad would be certain death for all.

Jim saw Soper and Webber to the right, talking to four men, ruffians of the worst type, big and strong and brutal-looking. Soper was looking in their direction, and pointing, evidently giving the men some instructions. Sam saw the group, too, and his lips tightened. Jim and he exchanged meaning glances. The same thought had come to each. The

only two witnesses of the tunnel crime to be silenced for ever! Was this a ghastly frame-up by Soper? Was it to bring this about that Soper had contrived to get near Sam and Jim as spectators at the great football match?

Whatever the motive, the Blackhamptonians were up against it solid! Sam glanced swiftly round him, saw the edge of the broken-down hoarding close by, and the gleaming deadly rails beyond. Then he whipped out his orders.

"Blackhampton men, jump clear on to the track! Run for it, but don't touch the rails!"

Two or three men acted on the order at once. They sprang off the wrecked hoarding on to the sleepers, turned and raced off between the rails.

"Follow! Follow!" roared Sam, as he and his right-hand man redoubled their efforts, in fighting a rear-guard action to enable as many as possible of the others to get clear.

One after another the Blackhampton men broke away, and fled.

"You now, Jim—and young Williams!" panted Sam.

"All together!" cried Jim. "Now!"

Jim and Bob, both leaping together, sent a man flying back towards the howling attackers. The momentary check in the assault enabled Sam and his companion to leap clear, and with shouts of triumph they were all on the railroad, speeding along the sleepers as fast as they dare go, for running was awkward, and a trip would mean death!

A few Carnborough men followed, but most of the shouting mob stopped on the broken-down hoarding, yelling and shaking their fists at the fugitives. The Blackhampton people made the best of their chance. They ran swiftly, but a sudden cry from Jim and a pointed finger made all look off

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to the left. There, running towards the line to intercept them, were the four ruffians who had been speaking to Soper a short while ago.

"To the bank!" gasped Sam. "Mustn't clash on the railroad! It means another fight—"

"Tryin' to delay us so's the rest o' the hounds can come up!" grunted the burly driver. "Well, 'ere's for shoulder to shoulder again, mates!"

The party made its way to the side of the track, more slowly, for stepping across those deadly rails required care. Once on the bank, pursuers who were scrambling along the cindery sides of the railroad redoubled their shouts and yells, and pressed on more swiftly. Then Sam and the engine-driver met the first rush of the hooligans.

"Taint' kid's play, mate!" growled the engine-driver. "Hit hard!"

Sam needed not the bidding. He lashed out with all the force he could muster, and one of the hooligans went back with a groan, falling to the ground like a sick ox. The engine-driver's great fists, terrible in their force, even if they lacked precision, flew through the air like the sails of a windmill, and another of the hooligans bit the cindery ground, and rolled senseless down the bank to bring up against the signal wires at the bottom.

Jim and Bob dodged the smashing fists of another of their enemies, then, seeing their opportunity, they made a break for it. For others of the maddened crowd were now drawing near, and Sam and his companion could easily settle the other two hooligans. They did, and were soon following close on the heels of the boys.

The hunted party was now down to the four—Sam, the burly engine-driver of the G. S. C., Jim, and Bob. When the men caught up with the two boys, the engine-driver made a break diagonally across the line, shouting to his companions to follow. Bob Williams at once set off in that direction, but Sam motioned to Jim to keep straight on.

Bob and the driver, hopping nimbly across the deadly gleaming rails, suddenly realised they were not being followed by their comrades. They halted for a second, a trifle perplexed. Then they saw that the crowd seemed intent on Sam and Jim, and their own chance of rejoining their companions was now lost. So, the man grunting with chagrin, they continued on their own course, and were soon in an alley-way leading down through rows of small dwelling-houses.

"The 'ounds seem dead nuts on them two!" said the man. "Else why didn't some of them follow us?"

"My opinion is they were being egged on against those particular two," replied Bob Williams. "Anyway, we're safe enough. Let's run along that road parallel with the railway. Then we can go out over the iron bridge. 'Wishn't quite dark yet, and we'll perhaps see them. Then we can help, if possible—"

"Or if needed. That's the ticket, youngster. Come on!"

The pair set off at a swift pace, and soon arrived at the iron bridge. This was merely a footbridge over a deep cutting, and a number of people had halted in the middle of it. They were staring down on the line, and Bob and his companion followed the direction of their gaze.

"There they are!" cried Bob Williams. "Look, they've scrambled up the bank! See, three of those hooligans who cut us off are close behind them. More following below. What's their game?"

Sam and Jim, in their grim dash for freedom, had arrived at the mouth of a short tunnel. The tunnel was cut in the almost sheer face of a hill, a deep cutting leading up to it. New work, facing the ground about the tunnel mouth with brickwork, had been in progress. Between the iron bridge and the tunnel-mouth stood a huge crane, the jib left stretched out over the railroad, and the cable, for some reason, left hooked up to some staging above the tunnel entrance, where work had recently been in progress.

Sam and Jim could be seen in the twilight straining every muscle to scramble up the rubbly bank to gain the staging.

"They're going to defend the staging!" gasped Bob

Williams. "Two could hold it against an army of unarmed men. But the hooligans in the crowd will throw stones—"

"They're trapped!" muttered the big man. "An' we can't help them, lad: Why didn't they follow me?"

Suddenly there was a crash above, and Bob Williams and his companion looked up swiftly. Another crash sounded, and the pair saw that the distant and home signals for a down train had fallen.

"Good job they're clear of the track, anyway," muttered Bob. "For that train will come rushin' out of the tunnel in a minute."

Sam and Jim had now gained the staging. Sam stood at the near end of it, and prepared to meet the attack of the foremost ruffian. Jim ran along the temporary erection towards where it was approachable up the other bank. He gained the other end just as Sam hurled the foremost of the attackers away from him, the man to go rolling and sliding down the bank.

Darkness was falling rapidly now, but Bob and his companion and the scores of people who had already gathered on the iron bridge could see well enough. They saw Jim tug at the crane cable, which curved upwards diagonally towards the pulley of the crane arm or jib. They saw the boy shout to Sam, point to the signals which showed the next block clear for the coming train, and then Sam, who had crashed another ruffian down, came running towards where Jim was crouching.

"What's the blinkin' game now?" muttered the engine-driver, as he watched with tense features.

Sam was seen to crouch down and measure something with his eye.

"By jingo, he's judging the swing of the crane cable when released!" cried Bob Williams, involuntarily gripping the big man's arm. "What—what's their idea?"

"And here comes the train. Can 'ear it distinctly now!"

"There's another chap climbing up to the staging!" cried someone near. "By gum, he's got a footing! That chap in the middle isn't taking any notice. They've got 'em now, whatever the row is—"

"They're mad! It's a disgrace to Carnborough! Haven't you heard? That riot out at the Rovers' ground? Wonder scores weren't killed on the conducting-rails! I saw the hoarding go down, but I got away quick. That business out there is the tail-end of the riot. Two Blackhampton chaps, them being chased, I s'pose. What's their game, I wonder?"

"Ye won't wonder for long. They're done this time an' all! There's three o' the hooligans runnin' along the stagin' at them—"

"An' they're grippin' the crane-hook, both o' them!"

"Here comes the train!"

"Gosh, they're caught!"

Bob Williams gasped as he saw one of the hooligans clutch at Sam's shoulders. What was going to happen now?

Suddenly Sam and Jim shot forward from the staging, swinging down and out with ever-increasing speed at the end of the crane cable. Their rush through the air was terrific, rivaling that of the rushing locomotive below—a huge yellow electric motor, a Great Electric Northern express bound for the north.

Bob Williams caught his breath in that stirring instant.

"See the idea?" he muttered. "They're chancing their arm. Swinging down over the line, same direction as the train. Same rate, too. They'll drop off, and take their chance of boarding the express. Poor fools—"

"They've done it!"

"They'll be whisked off! That speed—"

"No, they won't! Like falling from a still point to still ground. Their rush through the air by the crane cable—"

"Great Jupiter, what a swing!"

"They've got a grip of a coach-roof, anyway. Fingers in the ventilator windows!"

The Mystery Train!

THE crowd surged over to look the other side of the bridge as the mighty yellow train whirred and roared beneath them. One glimpse of the daring adventurers they had, lying flat on a coach roof, clinging on like grim death. Then the train was too far off in the gloom for more to be seen, and the people turned towards the staging again.

There fresh excitement awaited them. Police were scrambling up the bank towards the staging, and the hooligans were dropping off at either end, one after another, and making a bid for freedom. One or two were locked in a desperate embrace with the men in blue, so that policemen and ruffians went rolling down the slope, yelling and punching at each other frantically.

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But Sam and Jim were well away, miles clear by this time. Their position, however, was precarious. With their bodies crushed against the ventilator windows of the tops of the Great Electric Northern coaches, and their fingers gripping hard through the open ventilators, it seemed as if they had jumped out of the frying-pan into the fire.

The terrific rush through the air was demoralising, for the train at that moment was doing eighty miles an hour, the motor-man having put his control over well to take advantage of the straight piece of line which they had entered on leaving the straggling suburbs of Carnborough behind.

Sam and Jim did not know where they were. They could not look round, for it seemed as if a hurricane were pinning them to the roof of the coach. To raise the head, they felt, would mean loss of breath and loss of hold. All they could do was make themselves as small as possible, and tuck into the corner formed by the ventilator windows and the cambered roof of the coach.

Bridge and tunnel arches passed by with a clatter and a roar. It was a nightmare for the chums, for the G.E.N. locomotives and coaches had been built to maximum size, and there was room for them in the tunnels, and no more. But they could not cling on like that for ever, and Sam longed for the train to slow down, so that he and Jim could see about getting into a better position.

At last the opportunity came. The terrific rush of air seemed to lessen, and soon the jerking of the coaches told the adventurous pair that the train was taking a curve. It was now or never!

Sam raised his head, and his lungs filled out suddenly with the rush of air. But the young fireman was able to keep his head up, and he glanced round.

Dark country stretched out to the right. A few twinkling lights here and there denoted a homestead or hamlet, and in the weak moonlight the trees could be seen—copses dotted about a level landscape. Where they were, Sam had no idea, for he and Jim had lost all idea of time as they crouched desperately on the coach-roof.

Sam peered ahead. He could see no bridge, so he squirmed round and gripped Jim's shoulder with one hand while he kept his grip of the ventilator with the other. Jim looked up at Sam's touch.

Blundell shouted out some words, but Jim shook his head. He had not heard. Then Sam jerked his head backwards, and Jim realised that Sam was intimating that the time had come for them to get into a more secure position. So the boy worked his way backwards, and Sam followed.

Near the end of the coach the ventilator windows were closed. Jim gasped when his groping hand made the discovery. But Sam was backing into him, so, holding his breath, Jim made the attempt to pass the last few yards without any grip.

That was the most terrible moment of their thrilling experience! Would the train swerve? Would speed suddenly increase? The acceleration of the electric locomotives was a byword. It was taking a great risk, for the slightest alteration in the movement of the train would have whisked Jim off the roof, to be dashed to death on the hard railroad, even if he were not killed by electric shock on the live rails.

At last, to Jim's unbounded relief, he felt his foot in space. He was at the end of the coach. The boy groped over the ventilator tops and wriggled backwards. Soon he had a grip on the corridor connection, and had slid down beside it, in comparative calm now, with his hands gripping the handrail on the back of the coach.

Sam was soon beside him, and here the chums could talk.

"Great Jupiter, that was awful, Sam!"

"Gosh, awful's not the word for it, chum! I thought we were done! It was a fool trick for us to do, anyway. But it worked, so, as it happens, it's all right!"

"The train's gathering speed again, Sam. Jingo, if this is a non-stop express, we're here till Edinburgh—"

"Oh, rats! It's bound to stop at Newcastle! All of them do, you know!"

"Crumbs, that'll be far enough! I'm nearly frozen already!"

"We must get into a carriage, chum."



"Here, sorry to hustle you, waiter," said Sam Blundell, "but slip out of that natty little tunic and those trousers, quick I'm going to do your job—or at least get through to those lighted carriages and see what's what!"

"Yes; and then have some frantic old lady pressing the alarm-signal button!"

"That reminds me. Look here, Jim! Didn't it strike you as funny that none of the carriages has a light?"

"Gee-whiz! I didn't think of that! What's it mean?"

"Dunno! But you can bet there are no passengers in unlighted coaches. There's no sign of a glim in this coach, so we'll be safe to enter. I'll see if I can wriggle round. We're doing eighty again, if an inch, but we've got hand-grips now!"

Sam gingerly clawed his way round the corner of the coach, feeling with his foot for the footboard. The wind smote him like a thousand maddened fiends, and blew his coat open and his tie free. He had lost his cap long ago. His trousers were flattened against his legs in front and fluttered frantically behind. He could scarcely breathe. But he stuck to his guns and crept steadily on.

Jim, grinning faintly, kept close in the lee of Sam, and soon stopped and gripped hard as Sam opened a door and disappeared, the wind then striking Jim with its fullest fury.

Jim, however, was soon beside Sam, and the door was closed. Crouching there in the dark corridor, the chums glanced quickly up and down, overawed. It seemed like a railway-coach of the dead, rushing northward at eighty miles an hour! There was no sound save the clatter and whir of the wheels, the usual creaks and rattling under bridges and the noise of the couplings and the wheels as the train roared over points.

Obviously, they had not been observed. There seemed no one to observe them. Even a sleeping-car would have lights. And there would be an attendant or a passenger up and dressed somewhere, for sure.

"Crumbs, what's it mean?" breathed Jim hoarsely. "An express running with empty coaches! Are we going daft, or what?"

"It's a blitherin' mystery," returned Sam softly. "Makes you feel creepy like. I feel half funky about going into one of the compartments. Anything might have happened. Suppose—"

"There must have been passengers when she started."

"That's what I mean. Well, we've got to solve the blessed mystery, anyway. Come on, chum, into this first compartment. Slide the door gently, mind. I expect it's only that the lights have gone wrong or something, and all the passengers sleeping or dozing."

Cautiously, Sam stood near the compartment door as Jim softly slid it back. Then a startled exclamation escaped Sam's lips, and he made a half-step forward.

"The compartment's empty!"

Jim peered in, his eyes wide with wonder. Dimly he could make out the luxuriously upholstered interior of the G.E.N. railway compartment. The interior was beautifully clean. There was no baggage on the racks, no huddled form in a corner, sleeping on the long journey. The tassels from the blinds quivered and oscillated with the movement of the train. Otherwise, there was no movement.

"Great Cæsar!"

"It doesn't seem natural."

"Let's look into the next compartment."

The same sight met their eyes in the next compartment, and the chums grew more and more alarmed. What did this mean? Something fishy was afoot, surely! After examining four more compartments, the chums ran about, poking their heads into doorways here and there, but never a sign of life could they find.

They passed into the next coach forward, and the same experience greeted them. It seemed a train of the dead, a spectre train, rushing northward at highest speed! As Sam and Jim hurried here and there along the corridors, peering into dark corners and swaying with the movement of the train as they walked forward or rearward, it seemed to them as if they were intruding on the supernatural. That they were on a train in which they would have had no right to be travelling, even as ordinary passengers, they had no doubt. And they felt that here was some great mystery which would bear investigation.

Sam opened a window of a door opening to the night. The strap slipped out of his hand, and the window went down with a bang. The sound was intensified by the utter stillness, other than the usual sounds of motion, and the chums held their breath. If there were people anywhere in that coach, they would show up now for sure. But no one came, and Sam and Jim looked at each other with awe.

"Gosh, I shouldn't be surprised to see ghosts walking along the corridors, Sam," breathed Jim solemnly. "It all seems ghostly, this deserted train. And yet it's licking along at a terrific pace!"

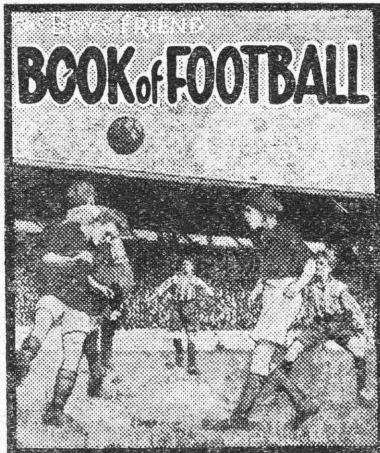
"Ghosts be hanged!" replied Sam hoarsely, with a hollow laugh. "Shut up, you young ass! I want to look along the length of the train. Keep a good look-out along the corridors."

Jimmy laughed softly.

"What do you expect me to see in the corridors, Sam?"

he asked. "Now say you haven't got the wind up!"

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Sam promptly put his head out of the window then drew it in again with a swift exclamation.

"Say, Jim!" he cried excitedly, all the awe having gone out of his voice. "There's a couple of lighted coaches up near the front. Look!"

Jimmy peered out and saw the dark outline of the long train curving away forward. Two of the coaches near the front were blazing with lights. The boy gasped with satisfaction. There was something which would tell them a little, for sure—perhaps a solution to the mystery of the empty coaches.

It was refreshing, that breath of air and the keen wind blowing on his face. The green lights of the signals could be seen ahead, the

occasional blaze of a signal cabin, and, as he watched, the dim dreariness of a country station, came and went as an instantaneous blur. Great blue sheets of flame and millions of flying sparks, blue and glittering, shot out from under the whirring wheels of the electric express. The superbly sprung coaches swayed easily and with slow dignity as the wonderful train raced through the darkness.

"See the name of that place, Jim?" asked Sam, who was leaning on Jim's shoulder, watching the countryside flying past.

"No!" replied Jim. "I saw the board, but though I twisted my neck round suddenly, we streaked past too quick to read the word. Crumbs, Sam, aren't we travelling!"

"We are, kid. Well, what about this giddy mystery. Let's push forward along the corridors as fast as we can towards those lighted coaches. We'll see something worth seeing there, unless I'm mistaken."

Sam and Jim, on their way along the corridors, occasionally looked out of a window to see how near they were to the illuminated coaches. At last they found themselves in the foremost of the darkened coaches. There the pair suddenly flattened themselves against the side of the corridor near the connection with the first lighted one, for the connecting door had opened, and a big man wearing the natty white tunic of a G.E.N. waiter came through. Over his arm hung a towel, and he held a cake of soap in his hand.

He was whistling softly, but, on seeing Sam and Jim the whistling ceased and the soap fell to the floor. The fellow's eyes were startled, and he turned to dive back into the lighted compartment. But Sam was quicker. He had his strong, grimy fingers round the man's throat, and, without hurting the waiter, held him at his mercy.

"Not a sound!" hissed Sam. "Keep quiet and you'll be all right. Back along here!"

His gentle persuasion had the desired effect. The frightened waiter kept silent, and allowed himself to be taken into a dark compartment. Here Sam shut the door and released the man.

"What's the giddy mystery on this train?" he demanded roughly.

"Mystery? Who're you? Spies, I s'pose," replied the waiter, with more spirit than Sam and Jim expected. "This is a special train, directors of the line travelling to Edinburgh. That's all."

"Why are they travelling to Edinburgh?"

"How should I know?"

"All the same, you do. Special trains aren't made up of empty, dark coaches. What's the mystery, I say?"

"Find out!"

"And that I intend to do! It's too blamed funny, this sort of spectre train travelling north at such a deuce of a non-stop lick. Look here, Jim, I've got an idea. If we let this chap go we'll be hunted high and low along the length of this train. He was going to wash his hands, so he'll be expected back soon. If he don't turn up someone'll come out to see why—"

"Well, it's got to be one or the other, chum!"

"We can take a sporting chance, anyway, Jim. Look here, I'm going to change togs with this chap, go and have a good wash and brush up, and, while you take him a couple of dark coaches down and look after him I'm going to do his job—or at least get through those lighted coaches and see what's what!"

"Gee whiz, Sam, that's a bold plan!"

"Well, would it be best to let this chap go or wait till he's missed?"

"M'yes, considering the cires, I fancy your plan is best. You'd better look sharp, then!"

"That I will. Here, you, sorry to hustle, but slip out of that natty little tunic and those trousers, quick. Shoes, too, for my Saturday afternoon brogues would give the show away. Glad you're a big chap, for I'm no dwarf—"

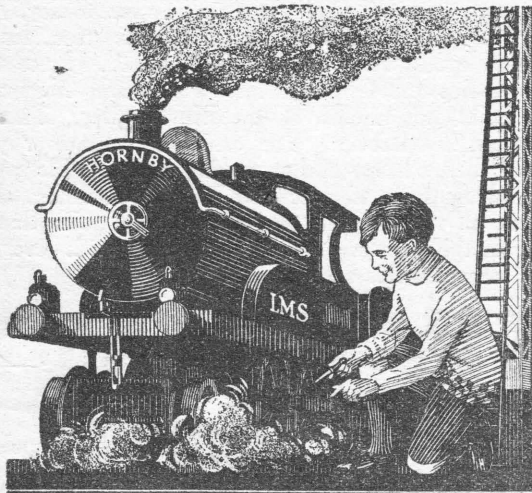
"Pity you can't change your hands, Sam," grinned Jim.

"M'yes, you cheeky young bouncer; but you can't shovel coal and have drawing-room hands, too. Come on, man, slip out of those duds."

The waiter did not relish the business, but he could hardly help himself, for, though he was big, he was not strong, and was decidedly out of training and in rather a flabby condition. He was like a child in the hands of hefty Sam Blundell. So, Jim grinning more broadly than ever, Sam was dressed as a G.E.N. waiter, and, while Jim marshalled the real waiter, who had had his wrists secured, further down the dark train, Sam had a wash and brush up and prepared to enter the lighted portion of the train.

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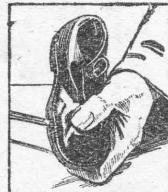
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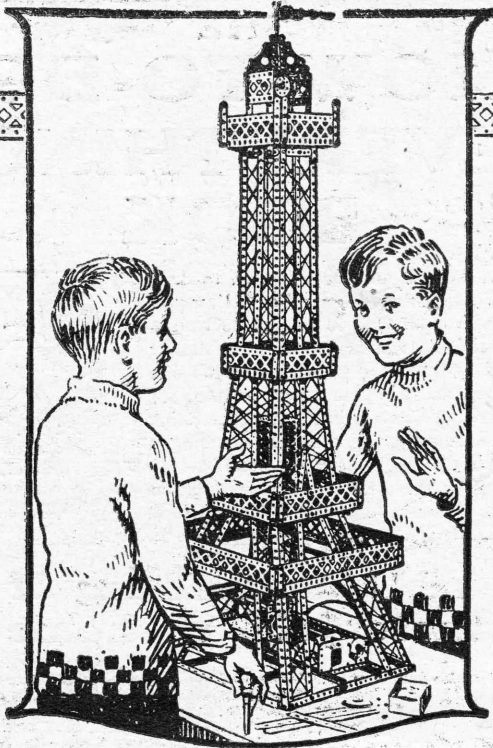
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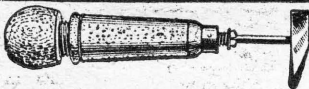
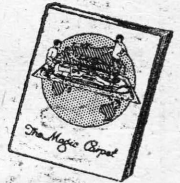
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