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"THE HOUR OF ATONEMENT!" A Thrilling Long Complete School Story of St. Jim's By Martin Clifford!

The GEM 2^D

EVERY WEDNESDAY.

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LIBRARY OF

SCHOOL AND SPORTING STORIES



IN THE GRIP OF THE STORM!

Tom Merry & Co. have a very trying time indeed in their new quarters at Stormpoint—a seaside spot that fully justifies its name!

(A thrilling incident from the grand school yarn of St. Jim's inside)



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.—War's alarms ring through the classic corridors of St. Jim's once again. See next Wednesday's trenchant and sensational story, called "Study No. 9 On the Warpath." One ought to be sorry for war, but when St. Jim's gets going at hostilities there is far more reason for congratulation, as in such circumstances matters are dead sure to be brisk and lively. Study No. 9 never does things by halves. The new yarn brings in Gussy and Cardew. Will those readers who write clamouring for "more about Cardew" kindly take note. There are thrilling moments in this story, and there is a very curious misunderstanding. In addition to this splendid feature we shall have a top-line "Boating Number" of the "St. Jim's News." This is where St. Jim's has the pull. Look out also for a rousing cricket story under the title of "Hal Stanton's Boundary." Next week's GEM will be a regular boom issue. Order early, and when you have read it just pass the copy on to a chum, and thus net me a fresh reader.

AN APOLOGY!

To the regret of everybody there has been unavoidable delay over the presentation of those splendid cut-out action photos of cricketers, announced in our Companion Paper, the "Magnet." This grand attraction will appear in the "Magnet" published on August 10th and bearing the date of the 15th. The postponement was occasioned by a mechanical difficulty which cropped up at the eleventh hour.

"THE CRIMSON CLAW!"

By Lester Bidston.

The week after next this stirring mystery romantic serial of dark deeds in China and elsewhere will start its course in the GEM. This story is a nailer. On Wednesday next we have another thrilling instalment of "Dave the Pit Boy."

WORTH SIXPENCE A COPY!

That's what a firm Australian supporter thinks of the GEM. He writes me a splendid letter about the yarns of St. Jim's, and says that he and his chums especially like Cardew and Gussy. As for "Ratty" and Baggy, they are bated with overwhelming ferocity. At my chum's college even the mighty men of the Sixth dote on the cheery old GEM.

THAT AWFUL CRAMP!

Cramp in the calves and thighs is just about as painful an infliction as can be imagined. The leg feels as if all the muscles had been tied in a knot. Even after the spasm of pain has passed there is a miserable, aching, bruised feeling. A correspondent asks me for a remedy. Let him try the following: One raw egg well beaten, half a pint of vinegar, one ounce of spirits of turpentine, a quarter of an ounce of camphor. These must be well beaten up and placed in a tightly corked bottle. Before going to bed pour a little of the concoction into the palm of the hand, and rub into the affected part. There will soon be an improvement.

TALK IN THE OFFICE!

A Bristol reader suffers from sensitiveness. He is made miserable by feeling that his fellow-workers in the office where he earns his living talk about him. Positively I do not see much in that! Was there ever a place yet where fellows did not talk about one another and take a delight in a bit of practical joking? Malicious gossip and aimless tarraddiddle are different. But in my friend's case it is merely that his comrades laugh at his weaknesses. I can tell my merry Bristolian that to be laughed at is one of the signs of popularity. He must buck up, and join in the guffaw. Any odds could be laid that he would hate it if his companions ignored him entirely.

THE CHEERFUL CHINK!

As stated above, the GEM is about to start a tremendous serial in which the yellow-skinned natives of the Celestial Land figure. There will be hints to be gained from this story, and lots of people will be the better for these, since many individuals have the haziest notion of what the Chinese are really like. In some ways they are cleverer than the happy little Japs. The Chinaman is a champion for work; he is keen on agriculture, and the system of education by which he has been brought up is literary and has taught him to think. Even now comparatively little is known of the big cities far up-country in the old Chinese Empire, with its myriads of workers and its busy hives of industry.

A WAIL FROM TOTTON!

A correspondent writes to ask me what he had better do about the knot grass which he started as a hedge to his garden, and which has now invaded the whole place. He says it gets everywhere, and is a regular forest. The only way is to fight it and keep this splendid bamboo-like plant within decent bounds. Knot grass is a magnificent growth, and it will cover up a bare bit of land in next to no time. As a screen or barrier it is second to none. The only thing is that it must be confined to a given place. Otherwise you stand a chance of being crowded out altogether.

YOUR EDITOR.



Tuck Hampers and Money Prizes Awarded for Interesting Paragraphs.

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

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

BRAVO, BRISTOL! HONESTY!

A man and a boy were going along a quiet street together, when the former bent down and picked up a glove that had been dropped. "There's nothing like honesty, my son," he remarked to the boy, as he selected the most prominent place for the glove on some railings near by. A little way farther on a second glove was encountered. "Mightie me," ejaculated the man of honesty, as he picked it up, "if this is no neebour of the first and just ma fit. Hurry back, Jamie, and fetch it!"—A Tuck Hamper, filled with delicious Tuck, has been awarded to P. B. Edmunds, 187, Coldharbour Road, Reedland, Bristol.

A TALL TALE!

American: "Out in America our carrots have to be hauled up by a crane because of their size." Englishman: "Pooh, that's nothing! We grew some carrots once, and we couldn't see their tops. But one day they died." American: "What ever for; overgrowing their strength?" Englishman: "Oh, no! We had a wireless message to say that the rabbits in Australia were nibbling the roots."—Half-a-crown has been awarded to A. Eaton, 16, Clifton Crescent, Peckham, S.E. 15.

IN AN AWFUL STATE!

Two costermongers visited the British Museum, and were looking at the statue of a Roman gladiator. One of his arms was broken off, his left leg ended at the knee, his helmet was battered, and there were several chips on the face of the warrior. Underneath the statue was an inscription: "Victory." "I say, Jack," said one of the costers, "if that there chap won, what must 'a' been the state of the bloke what lost?"—Half-a-crown has been awarded to F. Shaw, 61, Pontypridd Road, Porth, Rhondda, Glamorgan.

TRY AGAIN!

Auctioneer: "Now, gents, for the last time, is this 'ere watch going or not?" Voice from the crowd: "Put it to yer ear, guv'nor; you'll soon find out!"—Half-a-crown has been awarded to Vincent Martin, 9, Rockshire Road, Ferrybank, Waterford, Ireland.

THE LAST POST!

It was in the commercial-room at a hotel, and the gentlemen of the road were boasting one against the other. Presently they got round to the subject of singing. "Ah, now," said one, "talking of singing reminds me of my early triumphs on the concert stage. I had a voice then, and I could always move an audience. I mind the time when I sang 'Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep' in so realistic a manner that several of my audience were attacked with seasickness." "Bah!" said another. "That's nothing. Why, I once sang 'The Last Post' with such fervour that several of my absent-minded friends seated in front licked their programmes and then rushed out to catch it!"—Half-a-crown has been awarded to John Gordon Lindley, 32, Ripon Road, Wallasey, Cheshire.

TUCK HAMPER COUPON.

The GEM LIBRARY.

No attempt will be considered unless accompanied by one of these Coupons.

BRAVO, HARPER! A fierce fight between honesty and dishonesty tortures the soul of Jack Harper, but in the end honesty wins. It is never too late to mend, and with that idea uppermost, the cracksman strikes out for—



THE HOUR OF ATONEMENT!

A Thrilling and Dramatic School Story of the Famous Chums of St. Jim's.

By Martin Clifford.

CHAPTER 1. Just Like Gussy!

"HURRAH!"

The cheer rang out from three hundred throats. A fleet of motor-charabancs, laden with happy schoolboys, drew up outside the St. Jim's summer camp at Stormpoint.

The long rows of tents glistened white and ghostly in the evening dusk. Not far away the sea boomed and roared as it broke upon the rocky shore.

It was an enchanting scene—a sight for tired eyes, as Monty Lowther of the Shell expressed it.

"Well, we've arrived at last!" exclaimed Tom Merry, leaping down from the leading charabanc.

"What a ripping place!" said Harry Manners with enthusiasm.

"Now for a fortnight of bliss, with a capital 'B,'" said Lowther.

Tom Merry laughed.

"I don't know about that," he said. "Lessons are proceeding as usual in camp, worse luck. That rather takes the gilt off the giddy gingerbread."

Certainly the prospect of lessons did not appeal to the St. Jim's juniors just then.

Latin and Greek, and Euclid and Algebra, seemed oddly out of keeping with present surroundings—the pleasant camping-ground, the high chalk cliffs in the near distance, and the wide expanse of blue sea.

However, the Head had impressed upon his scholars the fact that the fortnight in camp was not to be a holiday. "Business as usual" appeared to be the motto of the worthy doctor. He had brought the school to camp because he considered that a change of air and environment would be beneficial to all.

But, as Lowther hastened to point out, lessons in the open air would be much more tolerable than lessons in a stuffy Form-room at St. Jim's. And no doubt they would finish early, so that the fellows would have plenty of time for the delights of cricket, and sea-bathing, and exploring the old smugglers' caves which abounded at that part of the coast.

There was a babel of voices as the charabancs disgorged their passengers. The little seaside place was suddenly transformed from a placidly peaceful spot into a human beehive.

Fellows of all Forms were there—the high-and-mighty prefects of the Sixth, trying to look calm and dignified, but inwardly feeling as excited as Second Form fags. Then there were the Fifth-Formers, and the rival Co.'s—Tom Merry & Co., and Jack Blake & Co., and Figgins & Co., all of whom made no effort to hide their delight.

But Wally D'Arcy and his fellow-fags were responsible for most of the babel. They frisked and frolicked, they cheered and capered like a tribe of youthful savages.

The Head and the masters had travelled down in the same charabanc, and they alighted with more dignity and decorum than their gay-spirited pupils. Dr. Holmes and Mr. Railton were smiling, but Mr. Ratcliff and Mr. Selby were looking as dour and grim-visaged as ever.

"What an appalling din!" exclaimed Mr. Ratcliff, stopping his ears. "Shall I command silence, Dr. Holmes?"

"Not for a few moments, Mr. Ratcliff," replied the Head. "The boys are delighted to find themselves in camp. Their exuberance is natural."

"Quite!" said Mr. Railton.

Mr. Ratcliff frowned.

"Some of them are behaving like young hooligans," he said with a snort. "They appear to think they are no longer under discipline. The smaller boys, especially, are shouting and scampering without restraint."

"Merely an ebullition of animal spirits," said the Head. "The din will subside in a few moments. I will then summon the prefects, and instruct them to allot the boys to their respective tents."

Presently the Head signalled to Kildare of the Sixth, and handed him the school roster.

"Will you see that the boys are shown to their tents, Kildare? You will find the number of each boy's tent placed against his name."

"Very good, sir," said Kildare. And he and his fellow-prefects were soon busily engaged in shepherding the St. Jim's fellows to their tents.

The Terrible Three of the Shell were delighted to find that they were to share the same tents. Originally there were to have been four in that tent—Tom Merry, Manners, Lowther, and Talbot. But Talbot of the Shell had not come to camp. On the morning of breaking-up he had been taken ill, to the dismay of his chums, and he was now in the sanny at St. Jim's.

There were two other unfortunates in the sanny. Curly Gibson and Jameson of the Third were recovering from an attack of mumps.

This meant that Miss Pinch, the matron, and Marie Rivers, the charming school nurse, had to remain behind at St. Jim's to nurse the patients.

Everybody was sorry for the invalids, of course, but it was hoped that they would be fit enough to come on to camp in a day or two.

"What a topping tent!" exclaimed Tom Merry, surveying his new quarters. "It's big enough for half a dozen, really."

"Quite a home away from home," remarked Monty Lowther. "We shall be a happy little family in here. I bag the bed farthest from the entrance. Then I shall dodge the draughts."

"Selfish beggar!" said Tom Merry, laughing. "It doesn't matter about Manners or me catching chills, I suppose?"

"Not a bit," said Lowther. "You've got cast-iron constitutions. But a frail and delicate fellow like me should never sleep in a draught. Why, it would be suicidal!"

"Ass!" growled Manners. "I say, wonder who's got the next tent to ours?"

"Blake & Co., for a cert," said Tom Merry. "Can't you hear Gussy's dulcet voice?"

The Terrible Three paused and listened. From the next tent came the high-pitched voice of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Deah boys, I have made a dweadful discovery!"

"Gussy's discovered an earwig crawling over the tent-boards, I expect," chuckled Lowther.

"If that's the case, he'll refuse to sleep there," said

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Manners. "He'll insist on being given the best bed-room at the Hotel Marina, in Stormpoint."

But it was not an intrusive earwig which Arthur Augustus had discovered. He had made a rather more serious discovery than that, as his next words showed.

"In the feahful wush and huwvy of comin' away fwom St. Jim's, I have left my wallet behind," said Arthur Augustus in distress.

"Anything else, Gussy?" inquired Jack Blake, sarcastically.

"Yaas. My gold tickah!"

"Great pip! Why didn't you leave yourself behind, while you were about it?"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Of all the frabjous dummies!" growled Herries. "Fancy leaving all your worldly wealth behind, and your gold watch into the bargain! Where did you leave them, ass?"

"On the desk in the study," said Arthur Augustus. "I wemembah now. I meant to go an' collect them, but you wouldn't give a fellow a chance. You dwagged me down fwom the dorm, if you wecollect, an' hustled me into the charabanc. An' I was so flustahed an' fluwied that I forgot about the wallet an' the tickah."

"Gussy, you're perfectly priceless!" said Blake. "Just like you, to do a silly-ssed thing like that!"

Arthur Augustus glared at Blake through his monocle.

"The fault is yours, not mine," he said indignantly. "You wushed up to the dorm an' collahed me while I was dwessin', an' thwew me into quite a fluttah. That was how I came to leave my belongin's behind."

"Well, what are you going to do about it, Gussy?" asked Digby.

"I must get the Head's permish to return to St. Jim's for my pwoperty."

"Too late to go back to the school to-night," said Blake. "You'll have to leave it till the morning."

Arthur Augustus nodded. Then he caught sight of three grinning faces framed in the aperture of the tent.

"Good old Gussy!" chortled Monty Lowther. "Quite sure you haven't left yourself behind, and brought a double to the camp by mistake?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus glowered at the Terrible Three.

"You—you gwinnin' gargoyles!" he exclaimed. "Wun away an' pick frowahs!"

"Bow-wow!"

"It is vewy heartless of you to sniggah at a fellow's misfortunes," said Arthur Augustus. "Pewwaps you will discovah that you have left your own money behind."

"No jolly fear!" said Tom Merry, tapping his breast-pocket. "My wallet's here, safe and sound."

"And mine," said Manners.

"I left all my money behind," said Monty Lowther.

"What!" shouted Arthur Augustus, delighted to find that he was not the only one who had done such a foolish thing. "Do you weally mean that, Lowthah? Have you twuly left all your money behind?"

"Every penny," said Monty solemnly. "There were only two. My total finances amounted to tuppence, and I left that behind on the study mantelpiece, for the maid who does the cleaning."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus gave Lowther a wilting look, as he realised that the humorist of the Shell had been pulling his noble leg.

"Weally, Lowthah, I werged you as a cwass ass!" he ejaculated. "You cannot be sewious for two minutes togethah. An' this is a most sewious mattah. Until I can wecovah my wallet I shall be stonay—stwandah without a bean!"

"That's all right, Gussy," said Tom Merry. "You won't need to spend any money to-night. We shall be having supper soon, and then going to roost."

The next moment the handsome face of Kildare of the Sixth appeared at the canvas opening.

"Herries here?" he inquired.

"Yes," said Herries. "What's wanted, Kildare?"

"Did you bring your cornet to camp, by any chance?"

"Rather!"

"Then it will come in useful to announce the meal-times," said the captain of St. Jim's. "Can you sound that call: 'Come to the cookhouse door, boys'?"

"Rather!" said Herries.

"Well, the cooks have prepared the supper in the refreshment marquee," said Kildare, "so you can sound the call as soon as you like."

Herries rummaged among his belongings, and produced his beloved cornet. Then he stepped out of the tent and put the instrument to his lips.

Tom Merry & Co. promptly fled. Herries' cornet was too much for them at close quarters. The noise it made was truly ear-splitting.

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Loudly the call rang out over the St. Jim's camp, and the juniors promptly made tracks for the refreshment marquee.

It was very novel and delightful, sitting down to supper in the spacious marquee, which was lighted by lamps.

The St. Jim's fellows did full justice to the meal, and the marquee echoed with the sound of merry voices.

After supper the Head, his kindly face glowing in the lamplight, read evening prayers; and then the fellows trooped off to their tents, tired but happy.

There were no larks or japes that night. There would be plenty of time for midnight pillow-fights, and raids on rival tents later on. On this first night the fellows were too tired to indulge in such capers.

Presently the prefects passed from tent to tent, seeing lights out. And the St. Jim's Camp was soon slumbering peacefully under the twinkling stars.

CHAPTER 2.

A Startling Discovery!

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY arose with the lark. He was, in fact, a trifle in advance of that energetic bird.

Gussy turned out sharp at daybreak, and started to dress. He had approached the Head overnight for permission to go back to St. Jim's for his money and watch. Dr. Holmes had consented readily enough, and he had mildly rebuked Arthur Augustus for his carelessness in leaving the things behind.

The Swell of St. Jim's yawned as he got into his clothes.

Jack Blake and Herries and Digby were stretched out on the tent-boards, rolled up in their blankets, and sleeping the sleep of healthy youth.

"I'll twy not to disturb them," murmured Arthur Augustus. "Where's the beastly washin'-place, I wondah?"

Gussy managed to slip out of the tent without waking his chums, and after a brief tour of exploration he found the washing-place. Stripping to the waist, he splashed merrily in a brimming bowl, and then towelled himself briskly, feeling wideawake now.

Arthur Augustus returned to the tent to complete his toilet, with the aid of a brush and comb and a hand-mirror. Having brushed his hair, he stepped back to survey the result, and trod heavily on Blake's covered toes.

"Yaroooh!"

A fiendish yell rang through the tent. The unfortunate Blake opened his eyes and shot up like a jack-in-the-box.

"Gussy, you clumsy ass!" he roared. "You've fractured about three of my toes!"

"Awfly sowwy, deah boy—"

"Bless your sorrow!" grunted Blake. "What are you getting up in the middle of the night for?"

"Weally, Blake, it's four o'clock! I'm just goin' to bike to St. Jim's, an' it will be wathah wippin' on the woad, in the cool of the mornin', befoah the sun gets too stwong!"

"B-r-r!" growled Blake. "Better you than me, Gussy! I'm going to sleep again. And if you plant your beetle-crushers on my toes again, I—I'll burst you!"

With that dire threat, Blake rolled over and went to sleep again.

Arthur Augustus, his toilet complete, stepped out of the tent into the glory of the morning. He went along to the marquee in which the bicycles were stored, and found his machine, and wheeled it out of camp. Soon he was speeding along the lane which led to the main road.

It was very pleasant speeding along the highways and byways, which were clear of traffic, save for an occasional milk-cart.

It was a fairly long run to St. Jim's, but Arthur Augustus pedalled away as if for a wager, and he made the journey in record time. The exercise in the keen morning air gave him an appetite, and he conjured up visions of a hearty breakfast at the school.

On reaching the school gates, Arthur Augustus was surprised to find them standing wide open. He frowned as he jumped off his bicycle.

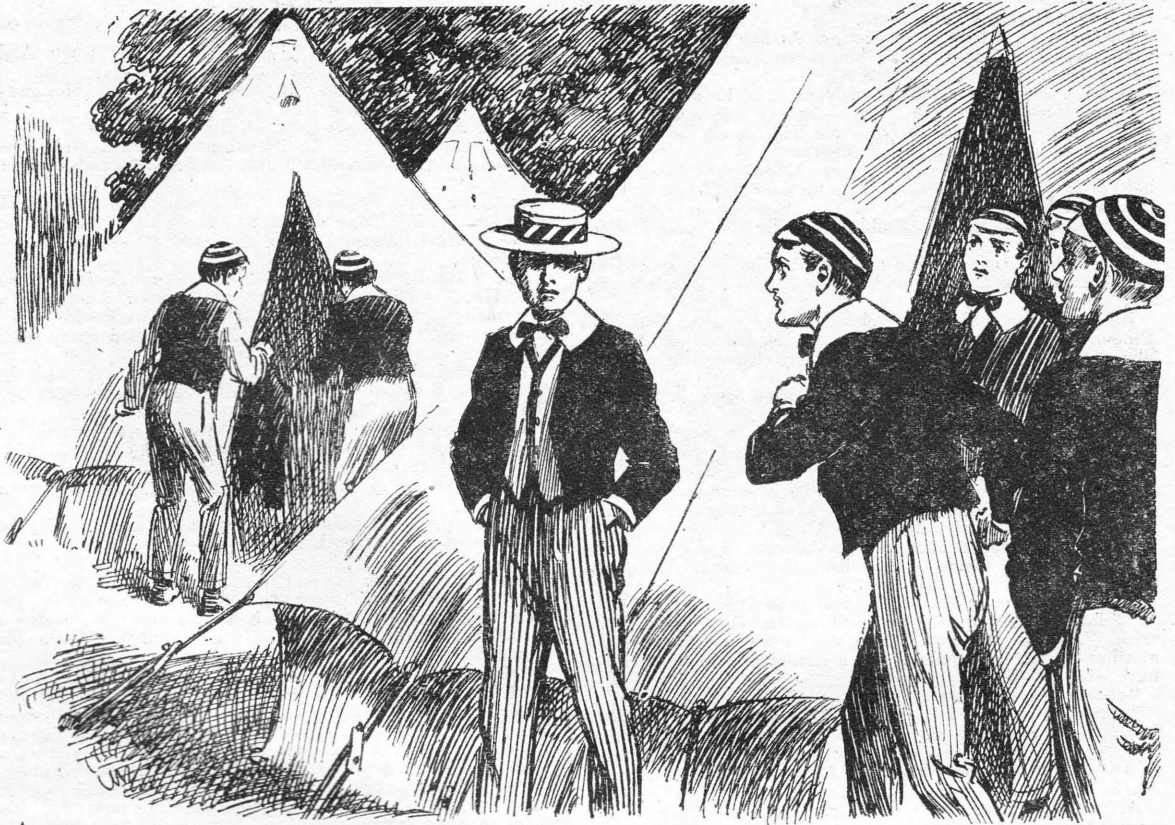
"How vewy carelless of Taggles to leave the gates open all night!" he exclaimed. "It's on open invitation to any burglah to walk in an' help himself!"

Arthur Augustus leaned his machine against the outer window-sill of the porter's lodge. As he did so, he happened to glance into the little parlour. A cry of amazement escaped him.

"Bai Jove!"

Instead of being upstairs in bed, as Gussy had imagined, Taggles, the porter, was in his parlour.

Doubtless Taggles would have preferred to be in bed at that hour; but he was unable to leave his parlour, for the simple reason that he was a prisoner there. He was tethered securely to a chair by a coil of stout rope, and a handkerchief was tied round his mouth and fastened at the back of his head, forming an effective gag.



"Talbot was shammin'!" said Racke. "He stayed behind at St. Jim's for the express purpose of lootin' the place. He'll find himself in chokey over this job—and serve him jolly well right!" Tom Merry, his eyes blazing, took a quick stride towards Racke. "You've said quite enough!" he snapped. "More than enough, in fact. And now I'm going to stop your poisonous tongue!" (See page 8.)

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus again. "Some wretched pwaactical jokah has been playin' a pwank on poor old Taggy! I must welease him at once!"

And the Swell of St. Jim's hurried into the lodge. The unfortunate Taggles was indeed in a dreadful plight. A muffled gurgle of relief escaped him when he caught sight of Arthur Augustus.

"Good gwacious, Taggles!" cried that youth. "What evah has happened?"

"M-m-m-m!" said Taggles. He was incapable of being more explicit until the gag was removed.

Arthur Augustus untied the knotted handkerchief, and Taggles, who had grown tired of breathing through his nose, now started to take in great gulps of air with his mouth.

Gussy then severed the porter's bonds, and Taggles stretched his cramped limbs.

"Thank 'Eaven you've come, Master D'Arcy!" he panted at length. "I've 'ad a terrible night, as ever was! Simply awful! For four blessed hours I've been trussed up to this chair like a chicking! That rope 'as been a-crampin' an' a-chafin' of my pore limbs summat crool!"

Arthur Augustus nodded sympathetically.

"Weally, Taggy, I feel dweadfully sowwy for you, deah man!" he said. "I am vewy angew, too, to think that you have been treated like this! I don't mind a pwaactical joke, but this is goin' too fah! Who twussed you up like that?"

"I can't say for certain, Master D'Arcy. The young rascal lowered the light before 'e done it, an' I couldn't get a proper glimpse of his face. But it looked to me like Master Talbot!"

"Talbot!" echoed Arthur Augustus, in amazement. "But that is quite imposs. Talbot would nevah play a pwank of this descupion. An', anyway, he's lym' ill in the sanny at the moment."

Taggles tottered to his feet and stumbled towards the sideboard, on which was a bottle marked "Best Ginger Ale." Originally, the label had been "Best Gin," and Taggles, not wishing to be thought a toper, had added the rest himself in black ink.

For the last four hours the wretched Taggles had sat and gazed at that bottle, without being able to get to it. He now poured himself out a generous libation, and drained the glass at a gulp. Then he turned to Arthur Augustus.

"You say it couldn't 'ave been Master Talbot," he said. "Well, it looked werry much like 'im, to me."

"But—but why should Talbot want to do such a thing?"

"Arsk me another, Master D'Arcy! Wot I says is this 'ere—there's been some pretty goings-hon in the night. I 'eard a car come creepin' up to the gates. Twice I 'eard it. The first time it come was jest before I was set upon by that young rascal. Then it come again, some time later. Do you know, Master D'Arcy, I believe the burglars 'ave been 'ere."

"What!" fairly shouted the swell of St. Jim's, his thoughts turning at once to the wallet and gold watch which he had left on his desk.

"Fact," said Taggles solemnly. "I 'eard the sound of men's voices in the gateway. Besides, my keys was took from me by the young rapscallion wot hattacked me. That all points to burglars, don't it?"

"Gweat Scott!" gasped Arthur Augustus. And he hurried away to investigate.

There was a shock in store for the swell of St. Jim's—a whole series of shocks, in fact.

His first visit was to Study No. 6 in the Fourth Form passage. He got into the building easily enough, the main entrance being unlocked.

The study was in a state of disorder. All the desks had been ransacked, and the looters, having forced open the lids, had pot even troubled to close them again.

Arthur Augustus went to his own desk, to find that everything of value had been taken. Of his wallet and watch there was no sign. They had gone the way of the other things, apparently.

Gussy blinked around the study in amazement.

"The—the feahful wottahs!" he exclaimed. "They've taken evewythin' they could lay their thievin' hands on. I wondah if the othah studies have suffahed in the same way?"

Arthur Augustus passed along the Fourth Form passage opening study doors and glancing within.

In almost every case, the desks had been tampered with. There could be no doubt that Taggles' theory of "burglars" was correct—that the school had been plundered and pillaged in a most thorough manner.

The masters' studies had been visited; and in the Head's THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 912.

study the door of the safe stood ajar—clear evidence that the marauders had been there.

Continuing his tour of inspection, Arthur Augustus found that several valuable books had been removed from the school library.

But the crowning act of larceny was the breaking-into of the strong-room, in which all the valuable trophies had been kept. They were not there now. The room, stripped of all its treasures, had a bare appearance.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus, coming to a halt at last. "What a bombshell for the Head when I tell him what has happened!"

It would, indeed, be a bombshell for Dr. Holmes—and for others besides.

"I wondah," reflected the swell of St. Jim's, "if the fellars in the sanny are awah what has taken place? I will go an' see."

He hurried round to the school sanatorium, to find Miss Pinch, the matron, looking very worried and distraught. She was in the sick-room in which Curly Gibson and Jameson lay, fast asleep.

The good lady gave quite a start when Arthur Augustus stepped into the room.

"Master D'Arcy!" she ejaculated.

"Don't be alarmed, ma'am. I came back f'rom camp, with the Head's permish, to collect my wallet an' watch, which I unfortunately left behind. I find that they have already been collected," concluded Arthur Augustus grimly.

"What do you mean, Master D'Arcy?"

"There has been a burglawy, ma'am, on a colossal scale. The whole place seems to have been wansacked. Have you seen or heard anythin' of the burglahs?"

Miss Pinch shook her head. She looked thunderstruck.

"I have passed a very worried and anxious night," she said. "Not on account of burglars, however. I had quite another reason for anxiety. Miss Rivers and Master Talbot have disappeared."

"Gweat Scott!"

"They left late last night. I did not see them go; and I have been awaiting their return, growing more and more anxious as the hours passed. And now you tell me, Master D'Arcy, that the school has been burgled! This is all very alarming and distressing."

Arthur Augustus said nothing. A sudden fear had gripped him—a fear that he could not put into words.

The school had been plundered by cracksmen; and, coincident with the burglary, Talbot and Marie Rivers had disappeared! The inference was that they had had a hand in the affair.

But no; that was impossible. Arthur Augustus mentally reproached himself for having entertained such thoughts for a moment.

True, both Talbot and Marie had once been active members of a notorious gang of cracksmen; but that was long ago, when they had been forced by Marie's father to lead lives of lawlessness and crime. Once they had broken free from their terrible environment, both Talbot and Marie had kept to the straight path. It was utterly incredible to suppose that they had returned again to the old life—that they had been parties to the plundering of St. Jim's.

And yet—there were certain things which needed explaining, and which made Arthur Augustus feel very uneasy.

Taggles the porter had declared that he believed it was Talbot who had attacked him in his parlour overnight.

Then, again, Talbot was supposed to be ill in bed. Obviously, the illness must have been simulated, or he could not possibly have risen and dressed, and left the building with Marie.

Why had Talbot stayed behind at St. Jim's, feigning illness, whilst his schoolfellows proceeded to camp? And why had he disappeared in the night—the very night that the school had been burgled?

These were questions which Arthur Augustus was unable to answer, and they made him feel very disquieted.

To a fellow who did not know Talbot so well as D'Arcy knew him, it would certainly seem that the "Toff" was in some way connected with the burglary. Certainly, a strong case could have been made out against him.

The matron's voice broke in upon Gussy's uneasy broodings.

"What is to be done, Master D'Arcy? Had not we better telephone to the police?"

"I think I had better huvwwy back to camp, an' lay the facts before Dr. Holmes," said Arthur Augustus. "He will know what action to take. I am wathah afwaid that the burglahs have got well away by this time. It's good-bye to my wallet an' watch, an' a good many othah things besides!"

After further conversation with Miss Pinch, Arthur Augustus—his breakfast forgotten in the stress of more urgent matters—hurried down to the gates, and mounted his machine, and pedalled off at a brisk pace to break the news of the burglary to the school under canvas.

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CHAPTER 3. True to Talbot!

MORNING lessons were in full swing when Arthur Augustus arrived at the camp by the sea.

Under a blazing sun, the St. Jim's fellows sat on the grass with their books.

Each Form was grouped off from the others, and the fellows sat in circles. In the middle of each circle was a deck-chair, in which the Form master sat and conducted his class.

It all looked very pleasant and tranquil, Arthur Augustus thought. Masters and fellows alike were taking things easy. In fact, lessons were being made a delight instead of a drudgery.

The Sixth Form had been left to its own devices. Usually the Head took the seniors, but Arthur Augustus was informed by Kildare that Dr. Holmes was working in his private tent. The swell of St. Jim's hurried away in that direction.

He found the Head seated at a little wicker table busy with his correspondence. The tent was wide open, to admit the fresh air and sunshine.

The Head looked up as Arthur Augustus appeared. And he saw at once that something was wrong.

"Why, D'Arcy," he ejaculated, "what is amiss, my boy? Have you been to the school to recover your money and watch?"

"Yaas, sir. But I have not wecovahed them. They have been stolen duwin' the night."

"Bless my soul!"

The Head was on his feet now, looking quite startled.

"Doctah Holmes, I have some vevy gwave news for you," Arthur Augustus went on. "Not only have my watch an' wallet been stolen, but the whole school has been plundahed!"

"Good gracious!" gasped the Head.

"I huvwwyed back with all speed to tell you the facts, sir. When I awvived at the school this mornin' I found that Taggles, the portah, had been tied to a chair an' gagged. Then I found that my money an' watch were missin', an' that my desk had been wifed. But the mattah did not end there. On investigatin' I found that the cwacksmen had been busy in all the studies—includin' your own, sir. They seem to have taken ewevythin' they could lay their hands on."

The Head looked very grave. He had been looking forward to a quiet time in camp, free from worry and distraction. But Gussy's bombshell had swiftly disillusioned him. Here was something to worry about, with a vengeance! Cracksmen had been busy at St. Jim's, and they seemed to have made a clean sweep of everything of value.

"This is a most serious matter, D'Arcy," said the Head.

"I quite realise that, sir."

"You say that Taggles was overpowered during the night?"

"Yaas, sir. An' his keys were taken f'rom him."

"Did he describe his assailant?"

Arthur Augustus nodded, and a troubled expression came over his face.

"That's just what I can't undahstand, sir," he said. "Taggles said he could almost swear that it was Talbot who attacked him."

"Talbot?" echoed the Head, in amazement. "But Talbot is ill in the sanatorium!"

"He was, sir," corrected Arthur Augustus. "But he is no longer there. Both he an' Miss Mawie have disappeahed."

"Bless my soul!"

The Head looked quite flabbergasted. Sensation was being piled upon sensation.

Taggles attacked and overpowered in his parlour; the school plundered; Talbot and Miss Marie Rivers disappearing. It was an astonishing sequence of events.

"Miss Pinch was in a dweadful way about it, sir," said Arthur Augustus. "She's been waitin' up all night for Talbot an' Miss Mawie to return, but they have not done so. She suggested telephomin' to the police, but I thought it would be better to return to camp at once an' tell you what had happened."

The Head nodded.

"You have acted quite properly, D'Arcy. I must take the matter up at once. First of all, however, I must telephone to Miss Pinch, and obtain corroboration of your remarkable story. Not that I doubt your narrative, my boy. I am afraid it is only too true—too terribly true. But I must get corroboration of your statements before enlisting the aid of a detective."

"Quite so, sir."

"No effort shall be spared to bring the plunderers to book," said Dr. Holmes grimly. "A lot of valuable time has been unavoidably lost since the burglary was committed; and I am afraid the thieves will be far away by now, but they must be tracked down and the valuables recovered, no matter if I have to engage the costliest detective in the land."



"Quick!" panted Harper. But before Marie and Talbot could pass through the open door there was a sudden clicking sound from the porch, and instantly a powerful shaft of light flashed into the faces of the fugitives. Harper and his companions blinked in alarm and dismay at the holder of the electric torch. For it was none other than Jim Dawlish, and he was levelling a revolver at the trio. (See page 13.)

"Yaas, wathah, sir!"
 "I wish you to say nothing about this matter, D'Arcy, to your schoolfellows. I will make a public announcement during the day."

"Vewy well, sir."
 Arthur Augustus strolled away, to report himself to his Form master and join the Fourth-Formers at lessons.

Meanwhile, the Head hurried to the post-office in Storm-point, and put through a call to St. Jim's. He succeeded after some delay in getting into communication with Miss Pinch; and the matron verified the bad tidings which Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had conveyed to camp.

The Head then rang up Scotland Yard and inquired if Mr. John Rivers, the detective, was disengaged.

Fortunately, John Rivers was free, and he agreed to come post-haste to the St. Jim's camp to interview the Head.

When the school had assembled for dinner in the dining marquee the Head broke the news of the burglary at St. Jim's.

Naturally the affair caused a tremendous sensation; but there was nothing in the nature of panic, even among the fellows who had lost valuable belongings in the burglary.

Everybody had great faith in the Head, and they knew that he would leave no stone unturned to get the cracksmen brought to justice and the plunder recovered.

When dinner was over and the St. Jim's fellows trooped out into the sunshine there was a buzz of excited chatter.

"Well, here's a pretty go!" said Tom Merry. "The school looted from top to bottom, and Marie and Talbot gone! And now the Head's going to call in a 'tee to solve the mystery."

"Not much mystery about it that I can see," drawled Aubrey Racke. "The whole thing's as clear as daylight to me."

"What do you mean, Racke?" demanded Tom Merry, facing round upon the cad of the Shell.

Racke laughed unpleasantly.

"Fellows of your feeble intellect," he said, "don't seem capable of puttin' two an' two together. But any fellow with a grain of common sense can see what has happened. The school has been plundered—"

"Well?"
 "An' Talbot an' that minx of a nurse disappeared on the night of the burglary. The inference is obvious. Talbot an' his girl chum deliberately stayed behind at the school for the express purpose of lootin' it."

"Great Scott!"
 Racke's blunt interpretation of the matter left his school-fellows gasping. There were fellows there who were inclined to agree with Racke's conclusions. They remembered what Talbot had been at one time, and what Marie had been, and they were only too ready to believe the worst of them.

But Tom Merry & Co. would have none of it. They flushed with anger at Racke's insinuation.

"Oh, you cad!" cried Tom Merry hotly. "What a rotten, despicable thing to say! Why, you're not fit to lace Talbot's shoes! As for Miss Marie—whom you choose to call a minx—she's one of the straightest girls who ever stepped!"

"Hear, hear!" said Manners and Lowther warmly.
 Racke sneered.

"They've disappeared," he said. "They packed up their traps an' cleared out the same night that the school was plundered. How are you goin' to account for their disappearance?"

"I can't account for it," said Tom Merry. "It's a mystery to me, and to all of us. But Talbot and Marie had no hand in the burglary; I'm quite satisfied of that."

"Some people are easily satisfied," jeered Racke.
 "Dry up, you cad!" growled Manners.

"We all know what Talbot was before he came to St. Jim's," went on Racke, unheeding. "He was a cracksman—a thief among thieves. He's supposed to have reformed an' become quite a paragon of virtue. But did you imagine

for one moment that his reformation would be genuine and permanent? I didn't! The Ethiopian can't change his what's-a-name, or the leopard his thingummybob. What's bred in the bone, you know, is bound to come out. Funny that Talbot should manage to fall ill just before we came away to camp. It was a put-up affair, of course. Talbot was shammin'. He stayed behind at St. Jim's, as I said just now, for the express purpose of lootin' the place. He'll find himself in chokey over this job—an' serve him jolly well right!"

Tom Merry, his eyes blazing, took a quick stride towards Racke.

"You've said quite enough!" he snapped. "More than enough, in fact. And now I'm going to stop your poisonous tongue. Take that, you rotten cad!"

Out shot Tom Merry's fist, straight from the shoulder.

Racke recoiled from a blow in the mouth, and a trickle of crimson oozed from his lip. His eyes glinted savagely, and he clenched his fists and rushed at Tom Merry.

With all his faults—and they were legion—Racke was no coward. He could fight like a tiger on occasion; and he fought fiercely enough now. But he was no match for Tom Merry. Tom countered his blows, and then followed up, driving Racke before him as a whirlwind drives an eddy leaf.

Crash!

Racke reeled back from a smashing blow between the eyes. His foot became entangled in the guy-rope of one of the tents, and he went sprawling. Tom Merry stood over him, waiting for him to rise. But he waited in vain. Racke lay groaning on the grass, with all the fight knocked out of him.

Tom Merry breathed hard.

"I've a jolly good mind to haul you up and make you take another dose!" he said. "But I'll tell you this, Racke. If I hear you say another word to Talbot's detriment, or to Miss Marie's, I'll thrash you within an inch of your life!"

"Ow-ow-ow!" replied Racke.

And Tom Merry, with a final glare at Talbot's traducer, turned on his heel and walked away with his chums.

CHAPTER 4.

The Detective's Task!

THE St. Jim's Camp had a deserted appearance when John Rivers drove up in his car, shortly after three o'clock.

Lessons had been mercifully cut short, as Tom Merry & Co. had hoped, and the St. Jim's fellows had sallied forth to enjoy themselves in various ways. Most of them were either in the sea or on it. Many skiffs and sailing-boats could be seen, dotted here and there on the blue waters.

Those who didn't fancy the delights of boating and bathing had gone for a ramble along the shore, in order to explore the old smugglers' caves.

Only a mere handful of fellows stayed behind in camp; and these were playing cricket in the untented portion of the meadow.

The Head was in his tent, awaiting the arrival of John Rivers. He was looking extremely worried. The burglary of St. Jim's weighed heavily upon his mind. And the disappearance of Talbot and Marie Rivers worried him no less.

Dr. Holmes had been pondering the strange affair for some time; and the more he thought about it, the more worried he became. He looked quite relieved when he saw John Rivers approaching, with his athletic stride.

The Head greeted his visitor cordially.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Rivers! I am indeed glad you have come. Will you step inside, and take a seat? We can then converse in comfort."

John Rivers returned the Head's salutation. He removed his hat and stepped into the tent, and seated himself on a camp-stool. The Head proffered him a box of cigars, and the detective lit up.

"I have sent for you, Mr. Rivers, on a matter of great gravity and urgency," the Head began. "I gave you no details on the telephone, but you will have gathered that something very serious has occurred."

The detective nodded.

"On receipt of your telephone message, I came down at once in my car," he said. "Pray tell me exactly what has happened, doctor! Give me all the facts, no matter whether some of them may seem to be irrelevant. I will soon sort and classify them in my mind."

Quietly the Head told the story of the burglary and of the disappearance of Marie and Talbot. He related how Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had returned to the school that morning, to find Taggles, the porter, gagged and bound in his parlour, and the school ransacked, and Talbot and Marie missing.

John Rivers listened in silence to the Head's recital. He was profoundly impressed by the news, and his jaw was

grimly set as the Head told of the disappearance of Marie and Talbot.

"Why did they remain behind at the school?" inquired the detective, at length.

"Talbot was too ill to come to camp," explained the Head. "As for your daughter, she had to remain behind in order to minister to two Third Form boys who are in the sanatorium, recovering from mumps."

"I see. And who else remained behind?"

"Miss Pinch, the matron, and Taggles, the porter."

"Nobody else?"

"No. I had paid off Harper, my temporary secretary, who has been assisting me with a book which I am writing. I instructed him to proceed to his home, as I should not be requiring him again until we returned from camp."

"Harper?" said the detective quickly. "What was his Christian name?"

"Jack."

"What was he like? Can you give me a description of him?"

"Certainly. He is a good-looking lad of sixteen, and he bears a remarkable resemblance to Talbot. Indeed, but for a difference in the colour of their hair and the disparity in dress, one would scarcely know them apart."

John Rivers frowned.

"That's the fellow!" he muttered, half to himself. Then he added, aloud: "Dr. Holmes, I regret to say that you have been duped and deceived. You have unwittingly harboured a thief and a cracksmen in the school."

"What!" exclaimed the Head incredulously. "You cannot be referring to Harper, Mr. Rivers? I found him a most efficient secretary."

"I did not question his efficiency, doctor. What I said was that he was a thief and a cracksmen. He is, in fact, a member of the notorious gang with which I have frequently been in conflict. I refer to the Dawlish gang."

The Head looked amazed.

"Bless my soul!" he ejaculated. "But—but surely Dawlish and his confederates are now behind prison bars? I understood that they had been sentenced to long terms of penal servitude for housebreaking."

"They are at large again," said the detective. "They successfully applied to the Court of Appeal for a remission of their sentences. Their appeal was based on a technical blunder on the part of the prosecution—a blunder which enabled them to get off very lightly. The Appeal Court reduced their sentences considerably."

"Then you believe, Mr. Rivers, that this burglary was organised and carried out by the Dawlish gang?"

"Exactly!"

"And that Harper was in league with them?"

The detective nodded.

"I will tell you what I conceive to be the real facts of the case," he said. "Harper was sent to the school by Jim Dawlish, as a sort of advance-guard, to pave the way for the great coup. He obtained employment as your secretary—doubtless by means of forged testimonials—and during the stay at the school he made himself familiar with the geography of the place, and ascertained where all the valuables were stored. He kept in touch with Dawlish, and gave him the cue as soon as the school broke up for the summer camp. Then, last night Dawlish and his confederates came on the scene, and were admitted to the school by Harper. Undoubtedly it was Harper who overpowered Taggles in his parlour. In the uncertain light, it was only natural that he should be mistaken for Talbot. Probably he hoped that Talbot would be suspected of the outrage. Do you follow my reasoning, doctor?"

"Yes, yes. But I cannot think that Harper—a boy in whom I reposed the utmost confidence and trust—is such an unmitigated blackguard as you describe him to be. I studied the boy very closely whilst he was with me—I was, in fact, greatly interested in him. Why, he ate at my table, and was treated as a member of my own family! I came to regard him as a boy of engaging personality and of the highest integrity. He was, moreover, a most capable secretary. And now I am asked to believe that Harper was a wolf in sheep's clothing—that his frankness and charm was merely a pose. I am told, in short, that he is a common thief!"

"Not a common thief," corrected John Rivers, with a slight smile. "A very uncommon type of criminal—refined, likeable, and extremely clever. I know something of the boy's history, Dr. Holmes, and I do not condemn him too harshly. Circumstances rather than choice have made him what he is. He was wrongfully expelled from St. Clive's a year ago, and was disinherited by his father in consequence. Thrown upon the world, and unable to obtain honest employment because of his expulsion, he fell an easy prey to the wiles of Jim Dawlish, who found him drifting on the London streets. One can find excuses for Harper, thief and rogue though he undoubtedly is."

The Head's face hardened.

"If you are right, Mr. Rivers, and that boy has basely betrayed my trust, his conduct is quite inexcusable. I hope you may be mistaken with regard to him; but I am beginning to fear that what you say is only too true. Harper has behaved abominably! I am deeply disappointed in him—bitterly disillusioned. Revelations of this sort, Mr. Rivers, tend to shake one's faith in human nature. I thought the boy loyal and honourable. It is a great shock to me to learn that he is nothing of the sort. But let us dismiss Harper from our conversation. What of Talbot and your daughter Marie? How do you account for their disappearance?"

"I have not the slightest doubt," said the detective, "that they were kidnapped."

"Good gracious!"

"In my opinion they were betrayed by a trick into the hands of Dawlish," said John Rivers. "I need not mention the name of their betrayer; we have spoken of him already. Dawlish has doubtless decoyed Marie and Talbot to the gang's headquarters—wherever they may be—and he is holding them prisoners." "But why should Dawlish do that?" asked the Head in perplexity.

"In order that they may be suspected of the burglary. Their disappearance on the same night that the school was plundered makes it appear that they had a hand in the affair. Of course, you and I know better; but many unthinking persons would jump to the conclusion that Marie and Talbot committed the burglary."

"That is so," agreed Dr. Holmes.

The detective rose.

"I have a formidable task ahead of me, doctor," he said. "Certainly I will take up the case. It is incumbent upon me to do so, in my daughter's interests, as well as in yours. But I won't pretend that it will be a simple matter to lay Dawlish & Co. by the heels, and to recover the plunder. Dawlish, as you know, is a most shifty and elusive scoundrel. He changes his hiding-places as frequently as another man changes his collar."

"But you should be able to trace him through the stolen property. He will have disposed of it—"

"Not he! Dawlish is too cunning for that. He will not dispose of it until the hue-and-cry for him is over. Even then I don't think he will attempt to dispose of it in this country. He will take it abroad in his own good time. But before that can happen I hope to have located the gang."

"I sincerely wish you success in your enterprise, Mr. Rivers!" said the Head, as he shook hands. "I shall have no peace of mind until your search is brought to a successful issue."

"Nor I," said the detective. "I shall prosecute my search with unceasing vigilance. I cannot bear the thought of my daughter being in the hands of that scoundrel Dawlish. I hardly dare to think about it. Good-bye, Dr. Holmes. I will keep you posted with all developments."

And John Rivers stepped out of the Head's tent, and strode away towards his car. His face was very stern and resolute as he took his seat at the wheel. Then he drove off down the lane, his objective being St. Jim's, where he intended to question Taggles, the porter, and to gather all the clues he could, before setting off in search of Jim Dawlish & Co., plunderers and kidnappers.

CHAPTER 5.

In the Hands of the Cracksmen!

"TOFF, I am sick of this!"

Marie Rivers sighed wearily, as she glanced around the dingy basement in which she and Talbot were imprisoned, helpless in the hands of Jim Dawlish, the leader of the cracksmen.

Talbot sighed also.

"You are no more sick of it than I am, Marie," he said.

"How long have we been in this hole? A couple of days, but it seems a couple of decades. I never knew the time could crawl so slowly. If it wasn't for your company, Marie, I think I should go mad!"

"I certainly should, if I were here alone," said the girl.

Time had passed on leaden wings. Slowly, indeed, the hours had dragged by, with nothing save meals, and a brief spell of exercise each day in the walled-in yard of the house, to relieve the dreary monotony.

It seemed a very long time ago, to Marie and Talbot, that they had been betrayed into the hands of the cracksmen by Jack Harper, the boy secretary at St. Jim's. They had thought about that incident a good deal; they had discussed it many times, here in their prison, with deep bitterness in their hearts towards Harper.

Talbot had suspected the fellow from the first. He had felt all along that Harper was at St. Jim's with some ulterior motive—that the secretary's job was merely a means to an end, the end being the looting of the school by Jim Dawlish's gang, of which Harper was a member.

But Marie had never had the slightest suspicion of Harper. She had regarded him as a thoroughly manly, honourable young fellow—as straight as a die. She had, in fact, struck up quite a friendship with him. For once in a way the intuition of her sex had failed her. She had been utterly mistaken about Harper—utterly deceived by him, even as the Head, and Tom Merry & Co., and the rest of the St. Jim's fellows had been deceived.

Marie had quarrelled with Talbot about Harper. She had taken up the cudgels on behalf of the Head's secretary, and had stoutly championed him. But Talbot had distrusted the fellow, and declared he was up to no good.

Time had proved Talbot right and Marie wrong.

On that eventful night, following the migration of the St. Jim's fellows to their camp by the sea, Harper had admitted Jim Dawlish to the school, and had basely betrayed Marie and Talbot into his hands. He had then assisted Dawlish in his nefarious task of plundering the school.

Marie and Talbot had been conveyed by car, in the darkness of the night, to the gang's headquarters—a lonely house on the barren shore.

The house was aptly named the Retreat. It stood in solitary isolation on a part of the coast that was seldom or never explored by holiday-makers.

Dawlish had obtained the house for next to nothing. The agent had practically made him a present of it.

There were two reasons why the Retreat was not a desirable residence. Firstly, it had the unsavoury reputation of being haunted; and secondly, it stood perilously near to the encroaching sea.

Some years before there had been other houses in the vicinity, but these had been washed away long since, and only the foundation-stones remained to mark where they had once stood.



Miss PRISCILLA FAWCETT.

Tom Merry's old governess. A most remarkable woman for her age. Her one object in life is the care and attention of her "darling Tommy." Always brings something "nice" for the junior captain when she visits the school—mostly consisting of pills, patent medicines, and embrocations. She has some unusual ways and some old-fashioned ideas, but she is admired and respected by all the decent fellows in the school.

The Retreat was a doomed house. Sooner or later it would go the way of the others. But this didn't worry Jim Dawlish. He had merely taken the place as his temporary headquarters. He did not propose to live there for ever.

The proceeds of the St. Jim's burglary were stored in the house, and down in the dingy basement were the two prisoners, fretting and fuming in their enforced captivity.

Marie and Talbot possessed stout hearts and plenty of courage. But it was impossible for them to be cheerful in present circumstances. Just as constant dripping wears away a stone, so their continued imprisonment, with no chance of escape, gradually crushed their spirit.

They were well fed; they had no grievance on that score. But what did food matter, when fresh air and sunlight and freedom were denied them?

They were visited daily by Dawlish, and they writhed under the sneers of that precious scoundrel. He declared that he would keep them prisoners until such time as the plunder had been successfully disposed of. But that time would not be yet.

They were visited, too, by Jack Harper, their betrayer. It was Harper's duty, on occasions, to bring them their meals.

No word had passed between them. Harper had been afraid to meet Marie's reproachful glance.

Marie, for her part, had said nothing to her false friend, but her look was more eloquent than any words could have been.

Seated on the crude bench, in the half-light of the basement, Marie and Talbot exchanged despairing glances.

"If only we had some means of letting the fellows know where we are!" said Talbot. "But there's no earthly chance of getting in touch with them. We're being watched all day long. There's been a guard outside the door from the moment we came here. Every word we say is overheard," he added, as a low chuckle sounded from the other side of the door.

Marie nodded.

"It's hopeless, Toff, quite hopeless!" she said. "I expect my father has been informed, by this time, of our disappearance, and he will be on the track of the gang. But Dawlish will have been very careful to leave no clues behind at St. Jim's. And father will never find us here, except by a miracle."

"Miracles don't happen nowadays," said Talbot glumly.

They fell silent for a time.

"If only these rotters weren't armed," said Talbot, at length, "I'd tackle them, and make a fight for it. But what's the use? If we give Dawlish any trouble, he'll make things a thousand times worse for us. I wouldn't put it past him to starve us, or ill-treat us, if we got his back up. He's villain enough for anything."

The door opened, and Dawlish himself appeared in the basement. He was smiling, as if amused, but there was a glint in his eye.

"They say that listeners never hear any good of themselves," he began. "An' what you've just been sayin' about me, Toff, was hardly flatterin'."

"It was true enough," growled Talbot.

Dawlish nodded.

"You're right there. If either, or both of you, gave me any trouble, I should come down heavy. Your privileges of exercise an' good food would be stopped, an' I'd make you realise the true meannin' of sufferin' an' privation."

"You brute!" muttered Marie.

"I've been nice an' kind to you so far," went on Dawlish, unheeding. "Mind you don't give me cause to act otherwise. By nature an' temperament I'm a gentle, benevolent soul, but once anythin' happens to get my back up it's another story."

Talbot glared at his captor.

"How much longer are we to stay in this hole?" he demanded.

"You'll stay here just as long as I choose," was the cool reply. "It doesn't suit my book to release you yet. I must dispose of the loot first, an' I mean to take my time about that. I shouldn't dream of lettin' you go—for your own sakes."

"For our own sakes?" echoed Talbot in wonder. "What do you mean?"

Dawlish laughed harshly.

"If I were to release you now," he said, "you'd find yourselves in a prison cell by nightfall."

"What nonsense!" said Marie.

"Nonsense, is it? I can assure you, my pretty minx, that I'm speakin' facts. I've just paid a visit to the St. Jim's camp—suitably disguised, of course—in order to find out what the fellows think about the burglary."

"And what do they think?" snapped Talbot.

"Why, that you two were the giddy burglars! What else should they think? You stayed behind at the school when the others went to camp, an' the very next night the place was plundered, an' you disappeared. Everybody—masters and kids—believes that you have gone back to your bad old ways, an' returned to a life of crime. Some awfully bitter things were bein' said about you."

"Liar!" flashed Talbot. "I don't believe a word you say. You wouldn't dare to visit the St. Jim's camp, not even in disguise. This is a faked-up story."

Dawlish shrugged his shoulders.

"I've simply stated the facts, an' if you don't choose to believe me, so be it," he said.

The prisoners were silent. Dawlish eyed them grimly.

"Look here!" he went on, after a pause. "Why don't you realise your position? You're at the mercy of circumstances—an' of me. If I give you your freedom you'll be promptly arrested in connection with the burglary. You've got a choice of two prisons—the official prison, an' your unofficial one here. I'll show you how you can escape both. By throwin' in your lot with me, an' agreein' to join the gang. That's your way out. If you've a spark of common sense, you'll take it."

Dawlish eyed the prisoners eagerly now.

This was not the first time he had tried to persuade them to join his coterie of cracksmen. On previous occasions they had scornfully refused; but Dawlish hoped that on this occasion they would make a surrender to circumstances. He had tried to persuade them that if they were released it would mean prison; if they were not released, it would still mean prison; and that to join the gang was their only way of escape from the present intolerable conditions.

Nothing would have pleased Dawlish more than to have Marie and Talbot in alliance with him. Marie, being a girl, could carry out burglaries and larcenies without exciting the same suspicion that a man would excite. As for Talbot, he had at one time been the most accomplished cracksmen in the four kingdoms. It had been said of him that he had the touch of a magician for a safe. Talbot would have been a tremendous asset to Dawlish just then. The present members of his gang—with the exception of Jack Harper—were brawny rather than brainy, and clumsy rather than clever. And Harper had not been giving satisfaction of late. He had seemed restless and unsettled. He had actually asked Dawlish to release him from the gang; and Dawlish had a fear that he would wake up one morning to find Harper missing.

"Well," said the cracksmen, his eager glance still upon the prisoners, "you've heard my proposal. What have you got to say? Prison life is mighty unpleasant, no matter whether it's in a proper prison, or a beastly dungeon like this. Your one way of escape is to join the gang; an' I promise you that life will be well worth livin', if you do that. You shall have a share in the proceeds of our latest haul; an' I've already marked down several country houses for plunderin' in the near future. An' when we're not engaged in crackin' cribs, we live like fightin'-cocks. You'll have unlimited funds at your disposal; you, Marie, will lack nothin' in the way of dresses an' finery."

"Stop!" Talbot's voice was husky with rage. "Do you think you can tempt us for one moment by that sort of talk, you rotter? Do you think that we put money, and fine clothes, and fat living, before honour? Why, I'd rather die than go back to the old life; and I'm sure Marie would."

"I would, indeed!" said the girl.

Dawlish scowled angrily at the prisoners. He was furious and baffled. He could not understand why they had yet again refused to throw in their lot with him. He had held out glittering inducements; he had pointed out the alternative—continued imprisonment here, or imprisonment in an official prison—yet he could not turn their feet from the path of honour. Threats and persuasions were alike futile. Marie and Talbot were firmly reconciled to a life of honesty and uprightness. Neither the prospect of pleasures, nor the fear of penalties, could induce them to forsake that life.

"Fools!" said Dawlish angrily. "Blind fools! I've offered you a way of escape, and all you can do is to prattle this pious nonsense about honour! Do you want to stay here for weeks an' weeks? Do you want to be driven nearly mad with the monotony of it? Evidently you do, or you would jump at my offer."

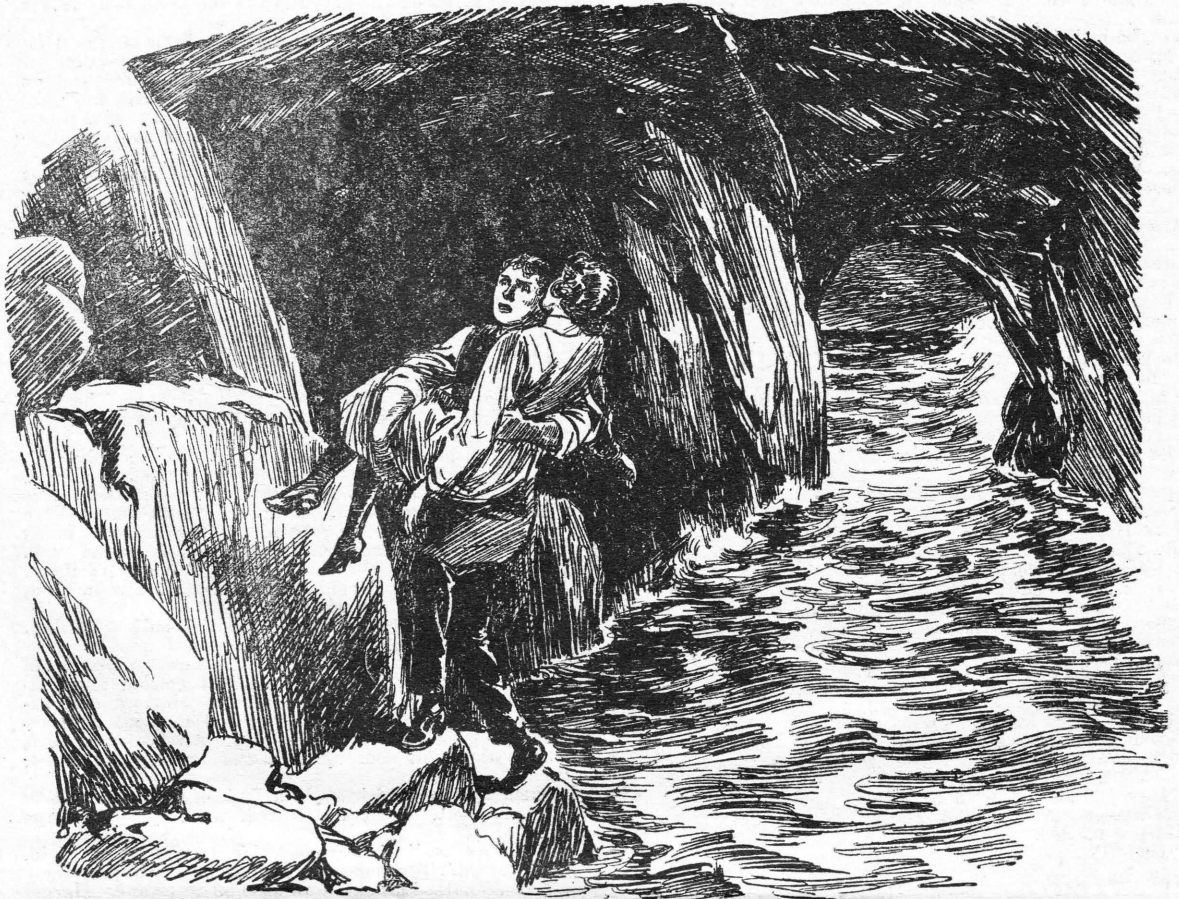
Marie and Talbot sat silent.

"Very well," said Dawlish grimly. "You've given me your answer, an' I shall take it as final. I sha'n't ask you

ANSWERS

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Realising the seriousness of the situation, Harper exerted all his strength and staggered with the half-conscious form of Marie Rivers to the back of the cave. It seemed that he would fail—that he would collapse under his burden, but he stuck grimly to his task, and at last, with a supreme effort, he raised the girl into the niche. "Wedge yourself in, Marie!" he panted. "Wedge yourself well in!" (See page 19.)

again to join the gang. The request will have to come from you next time."

Talbot laughed scornfully.

"That will never happen!" he said.

"Eh? Don't be too sure, Toff. When you're weakened with privation an' imprisonment, you'll be ready to sacrifice these silly scruples about honour."

"Never!"

Talbot's voice rang through the basement.

"Never's a long day," said Dawlish, as he turned to go.

"We will wait an' see."

He strode to the door, and it slammed behind him, leaving Marie and Talbot alone together.

CHAPTER 6.

Harper's Better Self!

JACK HARPER, the boy member of the Dawlish gang, was keeping guard over the prisoners. He was sitting at the foot of the steps which led down to the basement; and there was a very thoughtful expression on his face.

Harper had overheard the conversation between Jim Dawlish and the prisoners. He had listened to the threats and persuasions of Dawlish, on the one hand, and the scornful retorts of the prisoners, on the other. And Harper could not help being greatly impressed by the pluck and defiance which Marie and Talbot had shown.

"They flatly refuse to go back to the old life," muttered Harper. "Dawlish dangled some tempting baits in front of them—money, and fine clothes, and all the rest of it. But they weren't taking any. They've decided to stick it out, and stay where they are, rather than join the gang. And I must say I admire them for it. I'd like to tell them so, too, but—but we're not on speaking terms."

Jack Harper found plenty of time for reflection as he sat there, at the foot of the stairs, frowning into the gloom. And his reflections were far from pleasant.

He hated himself for the part he had played at St. Jim's. He had been an impostor—a snake in the grass. He had wormed his way into the good graces of the kindly old Head, and all the time he had been plotting to rob him. He had

professed friendship with Miss Marie—he had, in fact, taken her out on several occasions. And then, Judas-like, he had betrayed her into the hands of Jim Dawlish.

"What a worm I am!" muttered Harper, as the full realisation of his conduct came home to him. "I'm not fit to live! Being a crook is bad enough, but being a beastly traitor is ten times worse. Whatever must Marie think of me? She'll never speak to me again, after this; and I can't blame her. Why, I didn't look her in the face, after the way I've treated her."

Harper lapsed into silence for a few moments. Then he broke out again, with mutterings of self-reproach.

"Oh, how I hate myself! I wish to Heaven I had never seen Dawlish! Why did Fate bring us together? Why couldn't I have starved on the London streets, before he had a chance to get me into his clutches? I hate him! But he's got me completely under his thumb, and he knows it. Here am I, serving him like a miserable slave—doing everything he tells me to do, just like an automaton. I don't seem to have a will of my own. Why, if I had the stuff of a real man in me, I shouldn't stay under Dawlish's thumb a moment longer. I should help the prisoners to escape, and escape myself into the bargain."

Escape! The word started a new train of thought in Harper's mind.

He longed for his freedom just as ardently as Marie and Talbot longed for theirs. He was sick of his present surroundings—sick of the sordid life of a cracksmen. He had liked it well enough at first. On being unjustly expelled from St. Clive's, Harper had felt so intensely bitter about it that he had been prepared to break any law, to sink to any depth.

And this was the depth to which he had sunk! He had outraged every canon of decency; he had been a cad, a rank outsider. He despised himself just as heartily as he was despised by others. Better, far better, to have starved on the streets after his expulsion, than to have sunk so low as this.

The darkness enshrouded him as he sat at his post. There was an oil-lamp hanging on the wall, but he did not trouble to get to his feet and light it. He sat quite still, staring into

the darkness, whilst a medley of thoughts surged through his brain.

Yes, he had sunk low—very low. It seemed that there was no lower depth of degradation to which he could sink.

But, having sunk, why should he not rise again? Why continue to live the present life, in vilest servitude to Jim Dawlish? Why not try and make amends for his outrageous conduct? Men had risen, before now, on stepping-stones of their dead selves to higher things. Might not Harper rise also. Why should he remain that which he had been? Where would such a way of life lead him? Inevitably to prison—and ruin.

Already Harper had experienced a brief spell of prison life. He had been concerned in the Christmas burglary at Eastwood House, and he had expiated that offence in gaol. His sentence had been short—three months in the second division had been his portion; but he had been given clearly to understand that it would be a case of penal servitude next time.

Jack Harper resolved, here and now, that there would be no "next time." He must pull himself together, and play the man. He must definitely break with the Dawlish gang, and go out into the world to earn an honest living. And if he failed—if there was no honest living to be got—then he would go under, and not whine at his fate. He would at least have the satisfaction of having made an effort; he would at least have freed himself from the shackles of a criminal career.

Jack Harper's face was set and resolute. He had already made a half-hearted attempt to sever with the gang, by asking Dawlish to release him. He would not consult Dawlish this time. He would take the law into his own hands, and go. And he would also assist Marie and Talbot to make their escape. By so doing, he would be making atonement, in some measure, for his past treachery.

Somewhere in the house a clock chimed.

"Nine!" murmured Harper. "Time to fetch the prisoners' supper."

He rose to his feet and groped his way up the stairs.

A subdued light was flickering from a gas-jet in the hall, and a man was lounging there. It was Pat Donovan, the right-hand man of Jim Dawlish.

"Hallo!" said Donovan as Harper appeared. "Goin' to fetch the prisoners' supper, what?"

Harper nodded.

"Then I'll pop downstairs an' keep guard while you're gettin' the grub."

"Where's Dawlish?" inquired Harper in careless tones.

"Gone out on a job. He won't be back till the small hours of the mornin', I don't suppose. But I'm not goin' to wait up for him, an' neither is Peters. We're goin' to turn in soon. You'll be on night guard, of course?"

"Of course," said Harper.

And he passed on to the kitchen, where Peters, who was a capable cook, had prepared supper.

Peters turned a flushed face from the stove as Harper entered.

"Meat-pie's on the menu, to-night, kid," he said. "Does it smell good?"

"Rather!" said Harper.

"There's none for the prisoners, though," explained Peters. "Jim is awfully ratty with them, for some reason or other. He says they're to have bread-an'-cheese. Here it is, on the tray."

"Short commons, eh?" said Harper.

"Yes—an' serve 'em right!" growled Peters. "You'd better stay an' have your own supper first. Pat's keepin' guard, I take it?"

Harper nodded. He sat down at the table, and Peters dumped a piled-up plate in front of him. He made a hurried meal of meat-pie and baked potatoes, and he wished it was possible to smuggle some of that tasty fare down to the prisoners. Certainly Marie and Talbot would have appreciated it better than bread-and-cheese. But Dawlish had expressly ordered short commons, and Peters would see that the order was enforced.

Having finished his meal, Harper bade Peters good-night, and carried the tray downstairs.

"Supper ready up above?" asked Donovan, who had lighted the lamp on the wall, and was hovering at the foot of the stairs, smoking his pipe.

"Yes," said Harper. "I've had mine, and yours has been kept hot."

"Good!" said Donovan, with a yawn. "I feel as if I could eat an ox. You won't be seein' me again to-night, kid, so good-night!"

"Good-night, Pat!"

Donovan mounted the stairs, and Jack Harper passed on with the tray, and stepped into the basement.

Marie and Talbot were seated on the wooden bench—practically the only article of furniture in the place. A guttering candle stood in the middle of the stone floor, and

its light flickered on the pale faces of the prisoners. It was a weird scene.

Harper paused before setting the tray down on the floor. Talbot and Marie expected him to put it down, and take his departure without a word, as he invariably did. But on this occasion Harper deliberately dallied. His face was flushed, and he was obviously wanting to say something. The prisoners, eyeing him coldly, gave him no encouragement.

Presently Harper found his voice. He set down the tray and stepped closed to Marie and Talbot.

"I want to speak to you," he said in a low tone. "I—I confess I hadn't the courage to speak to you before. I know what you must think of me—you think I'm everything that's vile."

"We do," said Talbot curtly.

"Well, I can't blame you for thinking that, in the light of what's happened," said Harper. "I've been an awful rotter; but let that pass. I'm anxious to help you now—honestly I am. Will you let me?"

Talbot's lip curled scornfully.

"A fat lot of help we're likely to get from you," he said. "You've betrayed us once, and you'd betray us again."

Harper winced.

"There will be no question of betrayal this time," he said, speaking earnestly. "You want to escape; and so do I. Do you think I like this sort of life? Why, I'm sick to the very soul of it. I've been thinking things over, and—believe me or not, as you like—I've made up my mind to break with Dawlish. From to-night I shall cease to be his slave. I mean to clear out. I'm through with this sort of thing. I'm going to put it all behind me and start afresh. But, first of all, I want to help you to escape."

Talbot said nothing; but Marie looked keenly at Harper. "Do you mean that, Harper?" she asked quietly.

"Every word of it, Marie. You will soon see that I am in earnest. We've a splendid chance of getting away to-night, all of us. Dawlish is out on a job, and isn't expected back till the early morning; and Peters and Donovan are going to turn in after supper. All I need to do is to unbolt the front door upstairs, and we step out to our freedom!"

Freedom! The word brought a flush of hope to the faces of the prisoners. Their hearts beat more quickly at the thought of it.

Was Harper really in earnest? He seemed to be. And, anyway, as Marie confided to Talbot in a whisper, there would be no harm in making an attempt to escape. Harper might be playing them false, as he had done before; but there was a chance that he was being sincere now. They would put him to the proof; they would soon find whether his intentions were genuine or not.

"We'll leave it till midnight," said Harper in an undertone. "Then I'll make sure that everything is quiet upstairs, and we'll get away. You needn't distrust me any longer. I'm just as anxious for my own freedom as you are for yours. Will you be ready to come at midnight?"

Talbot and Marie exchanged glances. Then they turned to Harper.

"Yes," they said together.

"All serene," said Harper. "You'll find I won't fail you."

And he withdrew, leaving the prisoners to their frugal supper, and to their thoughts—glorious thoughts of approaching freedom.

CHAPTER 7.

A Drama in Darkness!

MIDNIGHT!

Marie and Talbot rose expectantly to their feet as the hour struck.

They were quite prepared for their flight; they were feverishly impatient to be gone.

It was dark in the basement now, the candle having burnt itself out long since.

No sound could be heard in the house, save the muffled chiming of the clock upstairs; but from the near distance came a deep, regular boom—the boom of the sea.

Would Harper fail them? That was the question which the prisoners asked themselves, as they stood there in the darkness, waiting.

Had Harper been merely teasing and taunting them, with his talk of escape? Had he raised their hopes, only to shatter them again by failing to turn up as promised?

These questions were soon answered.

There was a creaking sound, and the door was stealthily opened.

"That you, Harper?" breathed Talbot.

"Yes," came the muttered reply. "Are you ready? The coast is clear, and Donovan and Peters are sleeping like logs."

"What about the dog?" asked Talbot, remembering that Jim Dawlish kept a ferocious bulldog on the premises.

"Chained up in the yard," said Harper. "Come along!"



"This 'ere storm will mean a tidy few wrecks along the coast," remarked one of the boatmen. "It's a wonder we ain't been wanted as it is!" "You are wanted—now!" The man's arm was suddenly clutched, and he turned to find a drenched, bedraggled, and bareheaded schoolboy at his elbow. It was Talbot. In a few breathless sentences the St. Jim's junior told of the peril of Marie Rivers and Harper, who were imprisoned in the flooded cave. (See page 19.)

They groped their way out of the basement in the darkness. Harper did not deem it prudent to strike a match. He led the way up the stone staircase, with Talbot and Marie close behind.

"Oh, Toff," whispered the girl, "to think that in another moment we shall be free! It seems too good to be true!"

"Careful!" murmured Talbot as Marie stumbled on the stairs.

The darkness was almost opaque. The presence of Harper, leading the way, could be sensed rather than seen.

They reached the top of the stairs, paused a moment to listen, and then tiptoed their way through the hall.

Harper had unbolted the front door in readiness. All he had to do now was to lift the latch, and pull the front door back. Cautiously he did this, and a gust of wind from the sea rushed into the hall.

Outside it was dark as pitch. Black clouds hung heavily in the sky; the breakers boomed and crashed upon the rocky shore.

"Quick!" panted Harper, holding the door open for Marie and Talbot to pass through.

But before they could do so there was a sudden clicking sound from the porch, and instantly a powerful shaft of light flashed into the faces of the fugitives.

Harper and his companions stood rooted to the spot, blinking in alarm and dismay at the holder of the electric torch. It was Jim Dawlish! Evidently the leader of the cracksmen had returned long before he had intended.

It was a tense moment.

Harper's first impulse, on recovering from the shock, was to dash past Dawlish, and call to the other two to follow. And then, for the first time, he noticed that Dawlish was levelling a revolver at the trio.

"So!" said Dawlish grimly. "This is the game, is it, Master Harper? This is how you serve your employer—by playin' the traitor? Takin' advantage of my absence, you

plotted to release the prisoners. Come, it's no use denyin' it!"

"I haven't denied it," said Harper in a low tone.

"Then you admit you were playin' me false?"

"Yes—if you put it that way."

There was a pause.

"I'd made up my mind to bolt," said Harper, at length. "I asked you once to release me from the gang, but you wouldn't hear of it. You talked me round, and persuaded me to think better of it. I decided I wouldn't consult you this time; I'd simply clear out."

"An' let the prisoners escape into the bargain?"

"Yes."

Dawlish frowned.

"You treacherous young hound! After all I've done for you, this is how you treat me!"

"All you've done for me," retorted Harper, "is to make a criminal of me—to chain me, body and soul, to this rotten sort of life. Don't pretend I ought to be grateful to you."

Dawlish stepped into the doorway. His burly form seemed to fill it. The revolver was cocked straight at Harper, who stood his ground without flinching.

"I took you off the streets!" snarled Dawlish. "I found you wanderin' in London, after you were sacked from school. You were stranded—absolutely down an' out. Your people disowned you. You'd have gone under, as sure as fate, if I hadn't come along. I helped you, I trained you in this profession, I paid you well for your services. An' this is how you repay me—with cunning' an' treachery!"

Harper said nothing. He stood quite still, eyeing Dawlish steadily, contemptuously.

"From to-night," said the cracksmen, "you cease to be a member of the gang. But you needn't think I'm goin' to give you your freedom. You're my prisoner now, an'

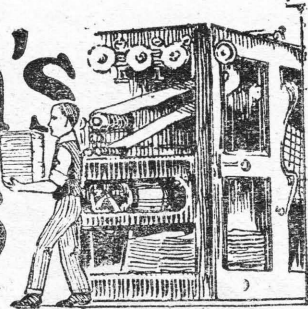
(Continued on page 16.)



TOM MERRY



The St. Jim's News



EDITORIAL!

By Tom Merry.

THIS special "Fishing" Edition of the "St. Jim's News" is being published partly for the sake of providing as much variety as possible and partly in view of the fact that there may be a certain number of keen fishermen among readers of the GEM to whom it will specially appeal.

If there are any such, I hope they will not take Monty Lowther's remarks at all seriously, as I can assure you all that they are written in a spirit of pure frivolity. Monty being the sort of chap who would jest about any subject, whatever might be his private and personal opinion about it.

There is very little interest taken in fishing at St. Jim's. It's true that some very fine fish have been caught in the Rhyl from time to time, and it is quite possible that there are even finer ones swimming about there at this very moment, which might be caught by anyone possessing the time, tackle, and sufficient skill to do it. But I'm afraid that these requirements are rather lacking here. The river doesn't receive much attention except in the summer, and then most of the fellows are satisfied to make use of the surface for the purpose of swimming or boating, without bothering what exists further down.

I don't mind confessing that, for my part, I don't really know one end of a fishing-rod from the other; and as for knowing what kind of bait to use for various sorts of fish, and which part of the river is the best for fishing in, I'm a hopeless duffer, I'm afraid.

Both Mr. Lathom and Mr. Linton are anglers, and often spend an afternoon with rod and line, but I'm blown if I can tell you whether they ever catch anything. I suppose they must do, or else they wouldn't keep on with it.

The fags do a bit of fishing now and then, but in this, as in other matters, they have their own methods. Their tackle consists of a net on the end of a piece of bamboo and a glass jam-jar, and with the aid of this paraphernalia they stalk the savage stickle-back to his lair and come back with their jars full of these finny monsters, which they endeavour to rear up in a state of captivity on a mixed diet of ants'-eggs, breadcrumbs, and watercress.

Another of their stunts is to get a jarful of tadpoles, and watch them gradually grow into frogs, which escape from their temporary home in the jars and turn up in all sorts of unexpected places.

Gussy has even discovered young frogs in his toppers before now, though I must say I very much doubt whether they found their way there of their own accord. I dare say young Wally could have explained just how they got there if he'd chosen to do so.

Tom Merry

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A QUIET AFTERNOON.

By Dick Redfern.

ABOUT half a mile up the river from St. Jim's there's a big meadow, and just here the Rhyl is very shallow near to the bank and full of reeds. Messrs. Linton and Lathom used to go there pretty often with their rods, but whether they ever caught any fish or not I can't say.

I said they "used to go there," which is literally the truth, because they don't go now, and there is a very good reason for their stopping away. About a couple of months ago they suddenly took a violent dislike to the place, and I can't say that I blame them, either.

It was a half, and they'd arranged to go fishing together; so off they trooped soon after dinner with their tackle and campstools and the rest of their complicated outfits. They decided to go to the meadow, as it was quite the nearest and most convenient available spot, and they'd secured permission to use the bank for fishing purposes any time they cared to do so.

Having arrived, they put their rods together, baited their hooks, and settled down to a quiet hour or so. It was a sultry afternoon, and it wasn't long before both of them were nodding drowsily; and nothing occurring to make them sit up and take notice, they were soon comfortably asleep.

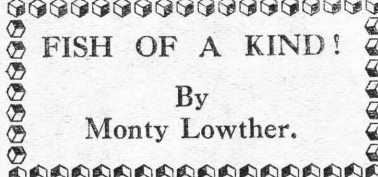
About a quarter of an hour afterwards Mr. Lathom awoke suddenly to find himself floundering about among the reeds in two feet of water, with a hazy notion that he had been flung there by some very violent shock, the exact nature of which was totally unknown to him. A second or so later there was the sound of a heavy thud from the direction of the bank, followed by a muffled yell, and Mr. Linton came crashing through the reeds to join him. The method of Mr. Linton's arrival suggested that he had not come of his own accord, and his colleague quickly learned that such was indeed the case. Mr. Linton, like Mr. Lathom, had been struck violently from the rear and precipitated into the river. The question was—who had been guilty of such an unprovoked and cowardly attack?

The two aggrieved and indignant gentlemen stood up and gazed over the tops of the reeds towards the bank, prepared to deal in suitable fashion—verbally, at least—with the unknown miscreant. But what they intended to say was not in the least what they actually did say.

"D-d-d-dear me!" stuttered Mr. Lathom.
"B-b-bless my s-s-soul!" stammered Mr. Linton.

And there they both stood, up to the knees in water, staring in amazement at the billy-goat that was commencing to make a meal of the canvas portion of Mr. Linton's campstool. And when they attempted to come out of the river, too, that goat rushed down the bank to meet them.

What they would have done if we hadn't come along soon after in a boat, and taken them in, I really don't know. All I do know is that they haven't been to that spot again since, good as the fishing may be.



FISH OF A KIND!

By Monty Lowther.

WHAT I don't know about fishing would easily fill every volume of the "Encyclopedia Britannica," printed in small type, but I'm going to have the merry dickens of a job trying to fill this column up with what I do know. As a matter of fact, I don't want to know anything about fishing. I once heard a man describe the sport—if it can be called a sport—as "a piece of string on a stick, with a worm at one end and a fool at the other"; and, as I'm not at all anxious to be classed as either of those, I leave fishing-rods severely alone.

Besides, I don't like fishermen. They're too dangerous to be allowed at large. I was once listening to an angler telling a story about a fish he'd hooked, and had been dragging to land, when the line broke and it fell back into the water again. He said we might guess how big the fish was from the fact that when it hit the water it made such a splash that he was drenched through from head to foot. The worst of it was that he wasn't satisfied with letting us guess, but he stretched out his arms to show us, and one of his fists caught me a clump under the ear. So you can understand why I maintain that fishermen are dangerous animals to have about the place. There ought to be a law suppressing people who go about biffing other people on the ear like that out of pure carelessness.

And, besides, he was a fibber. If the thing he nearly caught was anything like as big as he said it was, it couldn't have been a fish at all. It must have been a young submarine that had escaped from a naval dockyard.

One thing I do know about fish, and that is that they are to be found in schools. I don't know exactly what schools they go to, but there are none at St. Jim's anyway. (And the first cheeky young blighter whom I hear murmuring "What about Shell fish?" is due to get it exactly where the chicken got the chopper, only more so.)

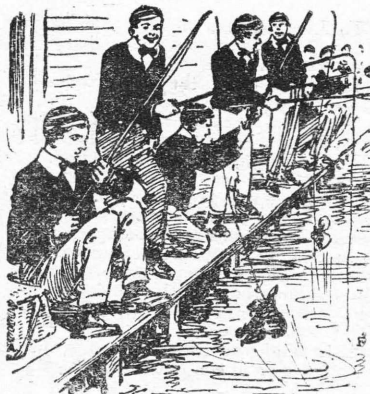
There is certainly a Fish at Greyfriars, of course, but I think he's the one and only specimen unless you count Bunter as a porpoise, in which case we should have to confess to a grampus in Baggy Trimble. (By the way, I think a grampus does really happen to be a fish, doesn't it? I'm not certain, but we will count it as one for the sake of this article, at any rate.)

I don't know what fish learn in their schools, unless it is how to avoid being had on a piece of string, in which case I should imagine the great majority pass their examinations with the highest honours, judging from the experience of all the fishermen I've met.

"BOATING"

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NEXT WEEK!



The FISHING MATCH.

By Clifton Dane.

AS a general rule, there isn't much fishing done among the fellows at St. Jim's; but it's an old saying that there is an exception to every rule, and a few weeks ago there was quite a craze for the gentle art of luring tiddlers out of their natural element on the end of a piece of string.

It was Tompkins who set the ball rolling. It isn't often that Tompkins of the Fourth comes into any kind of prominence, and as for his setting a fashion for the rest of the fellows to follow—well, I should have thought that he would have been quite as likely to set up a new record for the mile—which only goes to show that you never can tell what is possible or otherwise in this world.

Tompkins is one of those stray, spare-part sort of individuals who more or less mikes about on his own in all sorts of odd ways. He takes no part in organised games such as cricket and footer, except when he is compelled to attend compulsory practice on Little Side, on which occasions it's only fair to say that he certainly does his best. He's no slacker, for all his lack of interest in athletics; but, unfortunately for poor old Tompkins, even his best is a very poor show, and his services are of no use whatever to any of the School, House, or Form teams. So Tompkins is left in peace to spend his leisure in his own fashion.

He finds plenty of occupation for his spare time, though. He goes out on half-holidays bug-hunting with a butterfly-net, or else collecting bits of trees and choice specimens of the flowers that bloom in the spring, trala-la, for his botanical collection, and he sometimes varies this exciting life by going fishing.

Tompkins is very fond of fishing. He knows a lot about it, too. He knows how to tie a piece of gut to a silk line so that it can't come undone, and how to put the bait on the hook, and what kind of bait to use according to the time of the year and the condition of the water and the kind of fish he's fishing for.

But, unfortunately for Tompkins, much as he knows about it, the fish seem to know even more.

But last week he had a stroke of quite unexpected luck, and actually caught a fish. And it was something like a fish, too. It was about eighteen inches long, and weighed—well, I don't know exactly what it did weigh. Tompkins wanted to have it stuffed, but Mulvaney had other ideas about it. Mulvaney shares a study with Tompkins, and pretty well rules the roost. There was a time when Tompkins was induced by Gussy to stand up for himself, but since then he's gradually been slipping back into the old style of deferring to Mulvaney.

So when Mulvaney said that the fish was to be cooked for tea, Tompkins only made a half-hearted protest, and then agreed. Lots of the fellows had heard about the fish, and they came along to have a look at it; and when it became generally known that Mulvaney was bullying Tompkins into cooking it when he really wanted to have it stuffed and put into a glass case, some of them took Tompkins' part, and told Mulvaney that he ought to be jolly well ashamed of himself. That bucked Tompkins up a bit, and he told Mulvaney that it was his fish, anyway, and he should do what he thumping well liked with it, and if Mulvaney wanted a fish tea he could go out and catch one for himself.

That line of argument didn't appeal to Mulvaney, and he promptly proceeded to deal

with Tompkins in a manner suitable to the occasion, but Tompkins for once was not so easily dealt with. Memories of the time when he had successfully stood his ground against Mulvaney came to him, and though he secretly doubted his ability to repeat those successes, he met Mulvaney's rush unflinchingly. His study-mate's fist caught him on the chest and sent him spinning, but half the Fourth were standing at the door egging him on, and for very shame Tompkins couldn't give in, as he might otherwise have done. He scrambled to his feet, dodged out of the way, and looked round for something that might prove helpful to him in the encounter. The nearest thing to his hand was the fish, still lying on the table; so, as Mulvaney came towards him again; he picked this up by the tail and swung it round his head.

It caught Mulvaney under the jaw with a juicy slish that sent him staggering to the other side of the study, amid the cheers of the delighted spectators, and when he pulled himself together and made another attempt to get to close quarters Tompkins repeated the dose, twice.

By this time the fish was beginning to be a little the worse for wear, and it was certainly rather past being either eaten or stuffed; so Tompkins decided that he might as well make a good job of it while he was about it, and sailed into Mulvaney at the rate of about nineteen slishes to the minute.

He was still going it when somebody shouted "Cave!" from the end of the passage, and the crowd had just time to disperse before Lathom came rustling up. He made straight for Tompkins' study, and poor old Tompkins turned round with the fish in his hand, just as he'd been slishing Mulvaney with it, and saw Lathom standing in the doorway. He was too confused to see that Lathom was smiling and not frowning, and the only thing he could think of doing was getting the fish out of sight, so he slipped it behind him and tried to push it up the back of his jacket.

It never occurred to him that it might be the fish that Lathom had come about, but that's just what it was. He's no end keen on fishing is old Lathom, and he'd heard about the wonderful fish that Tompkins had caught—which just shows how quickly things get about among the school sometimes, even as far as the masters—and he'd come to see if there was really any truth in the yarn. Being a fisherman himself, I suppose he knows how much value to attach to stories about outsizes in fish, but for once the yarn was true enough, and Lathom was delighted. You see, years ago he hooked a big fish himself in the Rhyll, but it got away again, and he'd never been certain that he'd convinced anybody in the masters' Common-room that the fish was as big as he'd described it as being, or even that fish as big could possibly exist in the Rhyll at all.

But Tompkins' capture, although it had no bearing on the size of the fish that Lathom had hooked and lost, at least proved that such big fish really did exist in the river, and added plausibility to his story of the funny monster that had broken the tackle and resisted capture.

Anyway, Lathom borrowed it from Tompkins to show in the masters' Common-room, greatly to the relief of Mulvaney, who had had far more than enough of that fish. And the next day Lathom posted a notice up on the board announcing that, in order to encourage the fellows to take an interest in the noble art of tiddler-diddling, he would give a prize of a brand-new cricket-bat to the fellow who caught the biggest and finest fish during the next fortnight.

You can bet that set the fellows going. Everybody wanted that bat, and the prospect of getting it simply by tying a worm on the end of a piece of string and throwing it into the Rhyll and yanking out an overgrown stickleback seemed like money for jam.

Fellows went about begging and borrowing and even manufacturing fishing-tackle, and at any old hour of the day between rising-bell and dorm-bell, exclusive of class hours, fellows could be seen sitting on the banks of the river watching a piece of cork bobbing about on the surface of the water. It was as much as a chap's life was worth to try to take out a boat. The disturbance of the water frightened the fish away, according to Tompkins, who was the most sought after fellow in the Lower School, everybody seeking his advice on the subject of angling, and accepting his judgments without question.

Fellows learned no end of tips about fishing, but somehow or other it didn't seem to do any of them much good as far as actually catching anything was concerned. They sat on the bank and fished up old tin cans and boots and busted kettles and things like that, and one day Blake had a terrific struggle with what ought to have been a whale, and turned out to be an old motor-tyre.

Trimble was one of the hopefuls, naturally, and one evening when about a score of the fellows were fishing from the landing-stage of the boathouse he came up, and was very mysterious about some new kind of bait he said he'd got. Nobody takes any notice of Trimble at any time, but he was very careful to see that nobody watched him putting his line into the water. He hadn't been sitting there more than a couple of minutes before he yelled "A bite—a bite!" and started yanking his line in. When his hook came out of the water, blowed if there wasn't a



The fish caught Mulvaney under the jaw with a juicy splash.

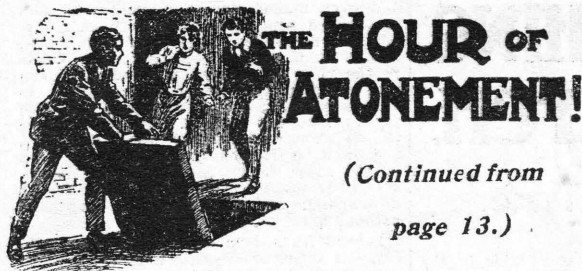
fish on it, and quite a decent-sized fish, too. Nothing like as big as Tompkins' had been, but there wasn't a fellow present who wouldn't have given a deal to have caught one as big.

They all came crowding round to see it as Baggy drew it in, and, though none of us know much about fishing, we couldn't help thinking that there was something dashed queer about that fish. For one thing, it was quite dead, and I didn't think that fish died as quickly as that when they were taken out of the water.

But it wasn't till Blake began to chuckle, and asked Baggy what kind of bait he used, to catch salt-water fish in a river that we began to tumble to the swindle. The blessed thing was a herring.

We'd all left our rods lying on the landing-stage, and while we were all fooling about with Baggy's herring, somebody got a real genuine bite. It was Herries, to be precise, and he lugged his line out of the water as fast as he could. There was something on the line all right, and, what's more, it was jolly well alive; but when Herries got it out he discovered it was a blessed eel.

At the end of the fortnight the only fish that had been caught, with the exception of Herries' eel and Baggy's herring was the original fish that had been bagged by Tompkins, and although that had been caught before the competition had commenced, after all it had been because of that that there had been any competition at all, so Lathom gave the bat to Tompkins, who had about as much use for it as a baldheaded man has for a pair of hairbrushes.



THE HOUR OF ATONEMENT!

(Continued from
page 13.)

"You're goin' to be shut up with this precious pair." And Dawlish nodded his head towards Marie and Talbot.

"Down to the basement, the three of you!" he rapped out.

The trio had no option but to obey. Jim Dawlish was in no mood to be trifled with. If defied or resisted, he would not scruple to use the revolver. The man had been drinking; his flushed face and thick voice showed that.

With despair in their hearts, Marie and Talbot made their way back to their prison. Harper followed, and Dawlish brought up the rear. As he went, he gave a shout, which awakened his confederates, Donovan and Peters. Their drowsy voices from above-stairs demanded to know what was the matter.

"Come down, one of you!" bellowed Dawlish. "There's a fresh guard wanted."

It was Donovan who presently appeared, half-dressed and heavy-eyed. Dawlish explained the situation to him, and ordered him to mount guard over the prisoners.

In the darkness of the basement, Marie and Talbot flung themselves down, disappointed and despondent. They had been within an ace of securing their freedom, only to be balked by the unexpected return of Dawlish. And now they were back again in this dingy place, which they had hoped to quit for ever. And Harper, who had tried to help them, was also a prisoner.

"Our luck's clean out, Marie!" muttered Talbot. "There seems to be a perverse fate fighting against us."

Marie did not answer. She was sobbing quietly in the darkness. It was the first real sign of weakness the girl had shown during the whole period of her captivity.

A hand fell upon Marie's shoulder, and a low chuckle sounded close beside her.

Marie shook the hand away indignantly.

"Harper! How dare you laugh at me!"

"My dear girl," said Harper softly, "I was not laughing at you. I was laughing at my thoughts. They happen to be quite pleasant ones."

"Great Scott!" gasped Talbot. "If you can extract any pleasure out of our present plight, Harper, you're a marvel!"

Harper chuckled again.

"Come close, and listen," he whispered. "We're not beaten yet. There are other exits from this house, as well as the front door. I happen to know more about the place than you do—more, even, than Dawlish does. I managed to get hold of a book called 'Haunted Houses,' and there's a whole chapter dealing with this place. It was used as a smugglers' retreat a century or so ago. Contraband stuff used to be stored at one time in this very basement."

"My hat!" muttered Talbot.

"What's more," went on Harper, still talking in a whisper, "there's an underground passage which runs from this basement to the smugglers' caves on the coast. Dawlish doesn't know of its existence, but I do. And I know where the entrance to the giddy tunnel is."

"Where?" asked Talbot quickly. "We've tapped all the walls, in the faint hope of finding a secret panel."

"The entrance is in the floor, not the wall," replied Harper. "One of these stone slabs lifts right up, and there's an iron ladder leading down into the underground passage. We've only to find the slab, and prise it up—and there we are!"

The hopes of Marie and Talbot rose anew. Harper's words heartened them considerably. A few moments before the outlook had been black and hopeless; now it was bright again. Marie hastily dried her eyes, and Talbot rose to his feet, his eyes agleam with excitement.

"I'm going to explore," whispered Harper, dropping on to his hands and knees.

And Talbot promptly followed suit.

The floor of the basement covered a wide area, and the searchers were handicapped by the darkness. Harper had an electric-torch in his pocket, but he dared not use it, lest the gleam should be seen by Donovan through the chinks of the door.

It was Talbot who discovered the movable slab. His hands, groping over the clammy stone floor, presently came into contact with a small iron ring. This he seized, and

gave an upward tug. To his immense delight, the stone slab began to rise.

"Found it?"

Harper's voice came faintly through the darkness.

"Yes!" was the breathless reply.

"Oh, good! Let me give you a hand, Talbot."

The stone was of great weight, but when Talbot had raised it a few inches, Harper got his hands underneath it, and the rest was easy.

Silently, cautiously, they lifted the great slab out of its place, and a musty odour came up to them from below.

Talbot and Harper peered down into the aperture.

Dark as it was in the basement, it was darker still down in the subterranean passage. The blackness seemed to be solid and tangible. Talbot shuddered slightly; and then he realised that through that impenetrable blackness lay the way to freedom.

Harper lowered his arm through the opening, and groped for the iron ladder. He found it, and communicated his discovery to Talbot.

"You go first," he murmured. "I'll help Marie down."

"What about replacing the stone?" asked Talbot.

"I think we shall manage that, all right. Go along! There's no time to lose. Donovan might come in at any moment."

Talbot lowered himself through the gaping aperture, until he found a foothold on one of the iron rungs of the ladder. Then he went down into the darkness. Step by step he descended, and he was vastly relieved when his feet eventually came into contact with the solid floor of the subterranean passage. It had seemed to him, at first, that he was descending into a bottomless abyss.

"All serene?" asked Harper, from above.

"Yes."

"Splendid! You next, Marie."

Willingly enough, the girl allowed Harper to assist her in her descent. And presently she found herself beside Talbot in the tunnel.

Harper came last. He went down a few steps, and then attempted to replace the stone slab; but the task was beyond him.

"You'll have to give me a hand, Talbot," he muttered. "There's hardly room for both of us on this beastly ladder, but we must try and get the slab back somehow."

Talbot joined Harper on the ladder, and by a prodigious effort, they presently contrived to work the stone slab back into its place.

"Phew!" panted Harper. "It wanted a giddy Samson on that job! But we managed it, thank goodness. Let's have some light on the situation."

So saying, he drew his electric-torch from his pocket and switched it on. Marie and Talbot blinked in the blinding ray of light.

"Now we're well on the road to freedom!" said Harper cheerfully. "We've outwitted Dawlish, after all. Wasn't it a stroke of luck that I should have come across that book on haunted houses?"

"It was, indeed!" said Marie. "Ugh! Isn't it horrible and clammy down here?"

"It's not a pleasant sort of place, by any means," agreed Talbot. "Reminds me of the vaults at St. Jim's."

"Come along!" said Harper briskly. "We're not going to linger all night in this benighted place. We must follow the tunnel to its giddy termination, and pray that it isn't blocked up at the far end."

"That would be too terrible!" said Marie, with a shiver. Harper led the way with his electric-torch. They were obliged to proceed in single file, for the tunnel was extremely narrow.

They were lighter of heart now. Harper, especially, showed the same spirit of buoyant cheerfulness which had made him so popular at St. Jim's.

But their anxieties were not over. If, as Harper had hinted, there was an obstruction at the far end of the tunnel, their toil and trouble would have been in vain.

A century had elapsed since that subterranean passage had been used by the smugglers. During that long interval of time anything might have happened.

On they went, walking quickly, eagerly, with Harper's light eating into the Stygian darkness ahead of them.

Presently a familiar sound came to their ears. It was the roaring of the sea.

"I've a feeling in my bones," said Harper, glancing over his shoulder at his companions, "that we shall come out smiling at the other end. There won't be any beastly obstruction, and if there is—why, we'll move heaven and earth to shift it!"

"Rather!" said Talbot.

The tunnel seemed interminable. The trio were obliged to slacken their pace, and they gasped and spluttered in the fetid air. They had an intense longing to inhale the pure, fresh air that awaited them when they should emerge at the other end.

"How much farther?" panted Talbot. "Shall we never come to the end of this beastly tunnel?"

He was answered by a glad cry from Harper.

"I can see the end already. If I'm not mistaken, we shall find ourselves in one of the old smugglers' caves in a jiffy."

Certainly the air was getting purer, and they pressed on, whipping up their flagging energies.

Louder and louder grew the roar of the sea. Gradually the air became less contaminated. And a moment later the three fugitives came to their journey's end, and sank, exhausted, on to the sandy floor of a cave.

"At last!" panted Talbot. "We're free at last, Marie!"

And Marie's lips moved in brief thanksgiving.

CHAPTER 8.

Trapped by the Tide!

"W E'D better be moving," said Harper.

They had rested for half an hour in the cave; and now, refreshed and revived by the salt breeze from the sea, the trio rose to their feet.

Harper was much fresher than his companions, for Marie and Talbot had enjoyed scarcely a wink of sleep since they had fallen into the hands of Jim Dawlish.

Harper, too, had been fortified by a good supper, whereas the other two had been restricted to bread-and-cheese.

"Where are we going to make for?" inquired Talbot.

"The St. Jim's camp, of course," said Harper. "It's about seven miles from here, I believe—in a westerly direction. We shall have to go along the shore; it's impossible to climb the cliffs. They are practically sheer all the way between here and Stormpoint."

"What a surprise for the St. Jim's fellows when we turn up at the camp!" exclaimed Marie.

"And won't they be jolly surprised when they hear of our adventures!" said Talbot.

"Of course, I sha'n't come with you to the camp," said Harper. "I daren't in the circumstances. I should be promptly arrested in connection with the burglary at St. Jim's."

"But you've chucked all that, and you've chucked the Dawlish gang," said Talbot.

"True. But that doesn't alter the fact that I had a hand in plundering the school," said Harper.

"The Head will pardon you when he hears that you've finished with the old life. Most likely he'll be willing to take you on again as his secretary."

Harper shook his head.

"I couldn't face Dr. Holmes after all that's happened," he said.

"But what shall you do?" asked Marie.

"Put up for the night, or what's left of it, at the Jolly Sailor, in Stormpoint. To-morrow I shall go to London and hunt around for a job. Dawlish declared that if ever I deserted the gang I should starve! I'll chance that. Dash it all, I'm no muscins, and there ought to be room for me somewhere! And if there's no job going begging, then I must go begging myself!" added Harper, with a smile.

But Harper's gaiety was assumed rather than real. It was a mask to hide the anxiety for the future that preyed upon his mind. He knew only too well that jobs were not as plentiful as blackberries in these days. Many a fellow, just as capable, just as competent as he, had fallen by the wayside, in the weary and futile quest for employment.

But the die was cast now. Jack Harper had taken the plunge, and he must brave the consequences of his action. Come what may, he would never regret having severed his connection with that arch-scoundrel, Jim Dawlish.

The immediate problem was to get to Stormpoint, and this would be no easy matter, for the going was rough and precarious. There was no proper path along the shore. Slippery rocks and boulders obstructed the progress of the walkers. And occasionally they slipped and stumbled upon the slimy fungus that seemed to be scattered everywhere.

On their right hand, as they went, rose the towering cliffs, tall and sheer and frowning. And on their left was the dark and angry sea, its breakers booming a solemn warning that it was going to be angrier yet. The old scribe had said that "the waves of the sea are mighty, and rage horribly." Certainly this was true of them now.

Conversation languished as the trio pressed on through the darkness. The fierce wind caught their breath and buffeted their faces.

Jack Harper forged ahead, flashing his torch at intervals, to light a particularly difficult obstacle.

Talbot struggled along in the rear with Marie. The girl had taken his arm, and was walking mechanically, looking straight ahead of her. She dared not look at those frowning cliffs on the one hand or that turbulent sea on the other.

Progress became more and more difficult, more and more exhausting.

Three miles the little party had come, and it must have taken them a couple of hours.

They strained their eyes ahead, vainly seeking the light of Stormpoint. The little fishing town was far distant yet.

Even Harper, whose energy had seemed tireless, became exhausted at length. He stopped and clung to a large boulder, and turned to his companions as they came struggling up.

"We can't do any more now," he panted. "We must rest."

Talbot nodded.

"I'm whacked!" he admitted. "So is Marie."

The girl stumped even as Talbot spoke, and a cry of pain escaped her as she twisted her ankle against a large stone.

"You are hurt, Marie?" Talbot was all anxiety.

"Yes. My ankle. It's nothing much," came the panning reply. "But I—I can't go on."

Harper flashed his light towards the cliffs.

"We're in luck's way," he said. "There's a cave over here. Looks a fairly cosy one, too. We must make it our dug-out until daylight. It's hopeless to think of getting to Stormpoint to-night."

Between them Harper and Talbot assisted Marie into the cave. A curious cave this, wide at the mouth, but narrowing considerably inside.

Right at the back of the cave, high up, was a peculiar niche, formed like an armchair, with a piece of rock jutting out at either side.

Utterly weary, the trio threw themselves down on the floor of the cave. They did not relish the prospect of remaining there until daybreak, for it was cold and damp and cheerless, and water dripped from the roof of the cave on to their heads.

But to go on was a physical impossibility. They were completely "whacked" after their tortuous walk along that rocky shore.

"A grim adventure this," said Harper, after a long spell of silence.

"And it's going to be grimmer yet," remarked Talbot, his face very grave.

"What do you mean, Toff?" asked Marie. "We are safe enough here."

"I wish I could think so. But when Harper flashed his torch a minute ago I saw something that rather startled me. Lend me the torch, Harper."

Harper passed over the torch, and Talbot flashed it upon the high niche at the back of the cave.

"You see that niche?" he said. "Just below it there's a water-mark. That means—"

"What does it mean?" asked Marie quickly.

"It means that the water comes into this cave at full tide," answered Talbot quietly, "and rises as high as that niche."

"And the tide's coming in now!" said Harper.

The trio exchanged grim glances in the light of the electric-torch.

Talbot had drawn attention to the danger of their present situation, and there could be no doubt that Talbot was right. When the tide was full the cave would fill, or, at any rate, the water would come in to such an extent that it would rise above their heads.

They were trapped by the tide!

The armchair niche, high up at the back of the cave, would only accommodate one person. A closer inspection of it made this apparent.

Marie wrung her hands helplessly.

"What is to be done?" she said, glancing from one to the other of her companions.

"There's only one thing to be done," said Talbot. "One of us must go for help. There's a lifeboat at Stormpoint, I believe—a steam lifeboat. One of us must go and fetch it!"

"But you can't. You are both dead beat. Besides, whoever went would be cut off by the tide."

"Not if we hurried," said Talbot. "It will be some time before the tide floods this cave. Anyway, it's our only chance. It would be madness for the three of us to stay here and do nothing. Do you agree, Harper?"

Harper nodded. He wanted very much to volunteer to go and fetch the lifeboat; but he hesitated to make the offer. It might seem as if he was intent on saving his own skin and leaving the other two to their fate.

Talbot glanced at the high niche at the back of the cave.

"You'll be safe, Marie, at all events," he said. "If the worst comes to the worst, and the water comes rushing into the cave, you can be hoisted up into that niche, and you'll be high and dry above the water-mark. Thank Heaven for that, anyway! Now, the question is"—Talbot turned to Jack Harper—"which of us is going for help?"

There was an awkward pause.

"I'm fresher than you," said Harper, at length. "I'd like to go, but I don't like the thought of leaving you two here. I'll give you first choice, Talbot. Do you want to go?"

"The fairest plan," said Talbot, "will be to toss for it. Whoever wins the toss is to go."

"Agreed!" said Harper.

Talbot took a coin from his pocket, and by the light of Harper's electric-torch, he spun it.

"Heads!" said Harper, as the coin gyrated in the air. There was a bending of heads as the coin fell. Then Talbot and Harper straightened themselves and looked at each other.

"It was tails," said Talbot. "I'm to go!"

"But, Toff, you'll never reach Stormpoint!" protested Marie. "You're not fit to make the attempt. Why, you can scarcely walk!" she added, aghast, as Talbot staggered to the mouth of the cave.

"I'll get to Stormpoint somehow, if I have to crawl on all fours over the rocks," said Talbot, turning his head. "It's going to be a race against the tide, I know; but I somehow think I shall be given strength to do it. Au revoir, Marie! Look after her, Harper, and if the cave gets flooded before I'm back—"

Talbot nodded towards the niche. And Harper understood. "Rely on me," he said. "Good luck to you, Talbot!"

Talbot was gone. He was out upon the rocky shore, with the tumult of the tempest in his ears. Glancing to the right of him he saw the cliffs towering upwards into the night. Glancing to the left of him he saw the sea, foaming and seething as if lashed by a thousand furies. Then he bethought himself of those he had left behind in the cave—those whose very lives depended upon his swiftness of action—and Talbot clenched his hands, and gave spur to his weary limbs, and hurried away on his mission.

CHAPTER 9.

The Toll of the Sea!

JACK HARPER looked out upon the tempest, and his face blanched a little.

He wondered how Talbot was faring, out in the elements—wondered if he could possibly get to Stormpoint in time. And he felt a sickening apprehension that Talbot was running a losing race against the tide. Had the fellow been fit and fresh, the task would have been fairly easy; but Harper remembered the state Talbot was in after his imprisonment and his subsequent adventures. It seemed only too probable that the plucky junior would collapse during his journey.

Again Harper looked upon the sea, with a face that was grey with anxiety. But when he turned back into the cave he was smiling.

"I must play the man," he reflected. "It will never do to let Marie see that I've given up hope. I must try and keep her spirits up somehow. I must force myself to be cheerful."

He took off his jacket and placed it about the girl's shoulders. Marie's teeth were chattering, partly with cold, partly with fear. Not fear for herself, but for Talbot.

"No, no!" protested Marie, as Harper thrust the coat upon her. "You mustn't do that. You'll get a dreadful chill!"

Harper smiled rather grimly. He had an inward conviction that something far worse than a mere chill awaited him.

"That's all right, Marie," he said. "I'm quite warm—all of a tingle, in fact. And if I get chilly, why, I'll hop around and bring the jolly old circulation back."

Marie glanced at her companion in wonder.

"You seem quite cheerful," she said, in astonishment.

"Eh? Of course I'm cheerful! Why should I be otherwise? Old Talbot is well on the way to Stormpoint by this time. He'll beat that rotten old tide quite easily—why, it's only just begun crawling in! And as soon as he gets to Stormpoint, it'll be the work of a minute to call out the lifeboatmen. They'll be here in a brace of shakes!"

"I wish I could think so," said Marie. "But the Toff was exhausted when he started out. I wish he hadn't gone!"

"What! Then we should have been in a fine old mess," said Harper. "Somebody simply had to go!"

"I—I suppose so," admitted Marie. "But I can't help feeling worried about the Toff. If he should be overtaken by the tide—"

"Now, look here," said Harper, laying his hand on the girl's shoulder, "you've not got to worry. What's the use of worrying, anyway? Wasn't it old Shakespeare who said that our doubts are traitors? He was quite right. I know it's not going to be a picnic, hanging about in here; but we'll chatter away to each other and make the time pass quickly."

Harper hoped that his cheerfulness—assumed though it was—would prove infectious. And perhaps it would have done, had not Marie happened to notice something at that moment.

"Look!" she said, peering through the gloom of the cave. "I can see the water coming in!"

"Nonsense!"

"Flash your light on, then, and see for yourself."

"Battery's run out," said Harper, lying glibly.

"I tell you the water is coming in!" said Marie, unable to conceal her alarm.

"It's only the spray from the sea," said Harper.

But Marie was unconvinced. And presently Harper could no longer keep up his hollow pretence that nothing was amiss, for the water oozed and trickled around and about them, and they were compelled to rise to their feet.

"I was right, you see!" said Marie.

"Yes; but this cave's going to take a jolly long time to fill," said Harper. "The sand will absorb most of the water. I don't suppose it will be full tide till daybreak, and we shall be well out of this by then."

"Perhaps."

"There's no 'perhaps' about it, my dear girl. I've every confidence in old Talbot. He's nearly half-way to Stormpoint by now. The lifeboat will be here before the water's risen a couple of feet."

But even as Harper spoke, the water came rushing into the cave in a way that belied his confident assurance. At first it had crawled in tiny rivulets; now it came in a swirling stream. Soon the feet of the fugitives were splashing in it.

It was only a matter of time—and not a very lengthy period of time, either—before the water would rise and engulf them.

Harper waded to the mouth of the cave, and peered out. He saw that it would now be impossible to walk along the shore, for the water was dashing and splashing against the foot of the cliffs.

For a moment—but only for a moment—Harper's courage failed him. He quickly pulled himself together, and another quotation from Shakespeare flashed into his mind.

"Cowards die many times before their deaths:
The valiant never taste of death but once."

He returned to Marie's side.

"This beastly tide seems determined to give us a foot-bath," he said. "It's rather cold, and not a bit comfortable. For that reason, I think you ought to let me hoist you up into the niche, Marie. Then you can sit high and dry, and laugh at this bit of a splash!"

Harper made a movement to grasp the girl and lift her. But Marie sprang back.

"No!" she said firmly. "I refuse to let you lift me. I know why you want to do it. What's the use of keeping up this pretence? We are doomed, and you know it! And you want to save my life at the expense of your own. Do you think I'm going to sit up there and watch you drown?"

Harper laughed aloud.

"Drown?" he ejaculated. "What the dickens has drowning got to do with it? You are overwrought, Marie, that's what it is. All sorts of foolish fancies are coming into your head. There's no question of drowning. But you can't go on standing ankle-deep in water. That's absurd!"

It was knee-deep by this time. Presently it would be waist-deep.

Harper had not dreamed that the water would pour into the cave at such a rate.

This seemed to be an exceptional sort of tide. It was coming in with a force and fullness unknown to Harper's experience. He knew that in another hour, at the most, it would reach the high-water mark. He must insist upon helping Marie to the comparative safety of the armchair niche.

"Now, look here, Marie—" he began persuasively.

"It's no use; you're not going to lift me!" said Marie, warding him off. "If it's to be a case of drowning, then we'll drown together!"

"Marie, you are hysterical—"

"I am not. I mean what I say. Don't touch me! For goodness' sake don't look at me like that. I'm not afraid to die. Death doesn't end all. It's only the beginning of a new life."

Harper stared at the girl in amazement. Even the extreme peril of their situation was forgotten for the moment.

"Do—do you really believe that, Marie?" he asked.

"Yes. Don't you?"

Harper was silent.

"Don't be afraid to say straight out what you think," said Marie. "There's no sense in not being frank with each other—now."

"Well," said Harper, "I'll tell you what I think. When we die we're dead as doornails. We've only got one life, and when we lose it—well, that's the end. It's all tommyrot to suppose that we shall go on living for ever and ever. Some of us wouldn't care to!" added Harper, remembering the black record of his past.

"But we have souls as well as bodies," Marie reminded him.

"I don't admit it. Has anybody ever seen a soul—ever weighed a soul, or felt a soul, or analysed or dissected a soul? Of course not; for the simple reason that the soul doesn't exist. But I can see that I'm shocking you. It was silly of us to switch on to this subject. After all, we know

nothing; we can hardly express our inmost thoughts. We can only speculate what becomes of us when we die; and I made up my mind long ago that death was the end of everything. What a gruesome thing to talk about when we ought to be looking out for the lifeboat!"

"It won't come," said Marie quietly. "The Toff will never have got there."

"Marie, you're a hopeless pessimist!" said Harper, with a smile—a smile that cost him a great effort, for his own hopes were at zero now.

The water was rising swiftly, surely. There was nothing to check its deadly inrush—no means of stopping or staying it. Now it was above their ankles; now it was up to their knees. And still it rose higher and higher, numbing them with the coldness of it, chilling them through and through.

Marie, her face very white, leaned against the wall of the cave. She seemed to be on the verge of fainting.

Harper went towards her, knowing that she would be too weak to resist him now. He himself was almost at the end of his tether. He doubted if he would be able to hold out much longer. He must lift Marie to safety while the strength remained in him.

His arms were about her, and he half-dragged, half-carried her to the back of the cave. Then, exerting all his strength, he lifted the girl's half-conscious form. His arms grew taut beneath the strain; the veins of his wrists stood out like whipcord. It seemed that he would fail—that he would collapse under his burden; but he stuck grimly to his task, and at last, with a supreme effort, he pushed the girl into the niche.

"Wedge yourself in, Marie!" he panted. "Wedge yourself well in!"

The girl had just sufficient of consciousness to obey. Instinctively she did so, like a small child doing as it was told. In her stupor she had forgotten her refusal to let Harper save her life.

The boy was nearly waist-deep in water now. He realised that the end had come. That supreme test of strength had brought him to utter exhaustion.

Yet no fear overcame him—only a sense of wonderful calm. He gazed up at Marie, made certain she was safe, and then called to her in the old cheery way that had gained him so much popularity at St. Jim's.

"Good-bye, Marie! I'm going! Good-bye!"

He stumbled even as he spoke. Sapped of his strength he could no longer stand at bay against the water which poured relentlessly into the cave.

He fell face downward and the waters engulfed him.

CHAPTER 10.

To the Rescue!

TALBOT was safe!

It had been a near thing with him. He had run a stern race against that deadly tide, and he had beaten it at the finish; though for the last half-mile he had ploughed his way through rapidly rising water which had threatened to sweep him off his feet.

Exhausted, drenched, and leg-weary, Talbot came at last to Stormpoint.

He expected to find the little town slumbering through the storm, but there were signs of activity on the front.

Tide and tempest had wrought great havoc.

The little wooden jetty had been blown to splinters, which were being tossed hither and thither on the waters—playthings of the angry sea.

The residents on the front had been startled out of their slumbers by the shattering of glass. They woke to find their windows broken by the gale. But they were still more startled to find that the tide, instead of observing its appointed limits, had come surging over the sands and right up to their doors.

The old sea wall was down; the breakwaters had been powerless to check the onrush of the advancing tide.

Several boats which had been lying on the sands had been swept out to sea; and Talbot found the place in a panic.

He wondered how the St. Jim's camp had fared only a short distance away. It was quite on the cards that it had been swamped out. But he could not go and investigate. Another matter of far greater urgency demanded his prompt action.

Talbot staggered up to a group of men, which included a coastguard and a number of boatmen.

"Worst storm for fifteen years," the coastguard was saying. "It started blowin' up dirty at nightfall, an' I knew we were goin' to get it good an' proper."

"I reckon there will be a tidy few wrecks along the coast," remarked one of the boatmen. "It's a wonder we ain't been wanted."

"You are wanted—now!"

The man's arm was suddenly clutched, and he turned, to find a drenched, bedraggled, and bareheaded schoolboy at his elbow.

"Wot the dooce—" he began. "Where did you spring from, youngster?"

In a few breathless sentences Talbot told of his race with the tide, and of the peril of Marie and Harper, who were waiting for help in the cave.

Fortunately, the captain of the lifeboat was among Talbot's audience. He at once gave orders for the boat to be launched and manned.

"Can you describe the cave where your friends are, kid?" he asked.

Talbot did so. The cave was easy to describe because of the peculiar niche at the back of it.

"We know it well," said the lifeboatman, "and we'll put out at once. But I'm thinking we shall be too late."

"Oh!"

The man's words wrung a despairing cry from Talbot.

Too late!

Had his desperate race against the tide been in vain? Had he struggled all that way against wind and water to obtain help only to be mocked by those galling words, "Too late"?

The junior was utterly distraught. He rocked on his feet, and would have collapsed had not the coastguard stretched out a supporting arm.

"Brace up, my lad," he said kindly. "The lifeboatmen will do their best. An' anyway, the girl ought to be safe enough if the lad who was with her had the sense—an' the pluck—to hoist her up into the niche. That niche has been the means of savin' a good many lives before now."

Talbot looked round. He saw that he was alone with the coastguard. The others had hurried away to launch the lifeboat.

"I—I'm going with the boat!" he muttered.

"Nunno! You're not fit to face any more exertion to-night," said the coastguard. "Why, you can hardly stand! Just you come along to my cottage, an' the missus will give you a hot brew of cocoa, an' put you in warm blankets an' make you comfortable."

Talbot recoiled from the thought of being made comfortable in the coastguard's cottage.

What did his own personal comfort matter at that moment when Marie and Harper were facing death in the cave—when, for all he knew, they might already have fallen victims to the tide?

But Talbot was too weak to resist the coastguard. In any case, he was too late to go with the lifeboat. It could already be seen churning its way through the foam.

Talbot suffered himself to be led away to the little white-walled cottage where the coastguard lived. Willing hands ministered to him when he got inside. A fire was lighted in the kitchen and his sodden clothes were placed in front of it to dry, whilst he sat wrapped in warm blankets in the armchair. He was then made to swallow a large cup of steaming cocoa. After that, the exhausted junior seemed scarcely to realise what was happening. The coastguard's wife, a buxom, rosy-cheeked woman, was talking to him, but her voice sounded strange and far-away.

Talbot sank into semi-consciousness.

When he came to his brain was clear again. He felt as warm as toast, and this feeling imparted a glow of bodily comfort. But his anxiety of mind was almost unendurable.

He looked around him, and saw that he was alone in the little kitchen. From the adjoining room came a murmur of voices.

Talbot called out, and after a brief interval the coastguard's wife came in to him.

"Ah, that's better!" she said, delighted to see Talbot awake and alert. "I thought you was going to be ill."

"My friends—" began Talbot impatiently.

"The girl is safe. They found her in the nick of time. She's in the next room."

"Thank Heaven!" muttered Talbot fervently. "And what of Jack Harper, the fellow who was with her?"

The woman's face grew grave.

"There was no trace of him," she answered quietly. "I—I'm afraid he must have lost his life. You see, there was only room for one in that niche at the back of the cave. It seems that he hoisted the girl into it, and wedged her safe, and then—"

There was no need for the woman to describe how Harper had died. Talbot could visualise the scene only too clearly—the rush of water into the cave, the gradual rising of it, the hopeless position of Harper, and the inevitable end.

Whatever Harper's life had been, howsoever chequered his brief career, he had shown that he could meet death like a man. Nothing in his life became him like the leaving of it.

Perhaps it was better so. Perhaps it was providential. Had Harper survived, what would the future have held in store for him? A hopeless quest for honest employment, a bitter struggle against poverty and privation. And maybe his courage would have failed him, and he would have drifted back into a life of crime.

Yes, perhaps it was better so.

Marie was alive and safe. That was great news, flooding

Talbot's heart with relief. He asked if he might see her, but his request met with a kindly yet firm refusal. He must not see her that night, the girl was too much overwrought. Doubtless her mind was dwelling upon the heroism of Harper. Doubtless his cry of farewell, which she had faintly heard, as in a dream, kept recurring to her, impinging itself upon her memory.

"Good-bye, Marie! I'm going! Good-bye!"

But kindly sleep came to her at last, and to Talbot also. And when they awoke, with the sun shining brilliantly and the storm overpast, they were able to discuss quietly and calmly the momentous happenings of the night.

Of Jack Harper they spoke but little. There were some things too sacred for speech.

But neither Marie nor Talbot would ever forget.

CHAPTER 11.

The Flight of Jim Dawlish!

"**B**AI Jove! What an excitin' night, deah boys!"

Thus Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

Certainly it had been an exciting night for the St. Jim's fellows in their camp by the sea.

The gale had burst upon the camp with the force and fury of a cyclone. Tents and marquees had been blown down, and some of them had actually been lifted in the air and hurled for a considerable distance.

It had been a rude awakening for the Head, the masters, and the fellows.

In the case of Jack Blake & Co., their tent had been blown down on top of them, and they had been buried under a press of canvas.

Tom Merry's tent had suffered a similar fate, and there had been a casualty, the tent-pole having caught Manners a crack on the head when it collapsed. In the morning Manners exhibited to the gaze of his schoolfellows a bump the size of a pigeon's egg, and he seemed to be quite proud of it.

There had been no serious casualties, but it had been a sleepless night for the majority of the fellows. They had been busily engaged in re-erecting their tents, only to have them blown down again.

Then the tide had come in, the tide which had wrought so much havoc. It spent itself when it reached the St. Jim's camp, but it contrived to give the meadow a liberal soaking.

The Head, growing rather alarmed, had tried to get accommodation for the school at the Hotel Marina, in Storm-point. But he had not succeeded. The hotel was full up with holiday-makers, and there was not a bed-room to be had. So St. Jim's had been compelled to remain under canvas, and endure the discomforts as best they could.

Now, in the strong morning sunshine, the tents were rapidly drying, and the pools and puddles which lay in the meadow were being swiftly absorbed.

Jack Blake & Co. were sunning themselves outside their tent, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was glancing with a frown at his crumpled suit.

"My togs have been uttably wuined by the beastly wain!" he remarked. "I look like a twamp!"

"What's the odds?" said Blake. "You can't expect to look like a blessed tailor's dummy when you're in camp."

"Weally, Blake! I believe in lookin' spick an' span on cwevy possible occasion."

Herries laughed.

"If Gussy was all alone on a desert island he'd be just as fussy as ever about his appearance," he said. "He'd make sure that his bags had a perfect crease, and that his necktie was just so. And then he'd strut around the island and show himself off to all the monkeys and parrots and things."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus frowned at the humorous Herries through his monocle.

"If it wasn't for the fact that I'm feelin' wathah depressed this mornin', I would administah a feahful thwashin'!" he said.

"What are you feeling depressed about, Gussy?" asked Digby. "Your crumpled suit?"

"Not exactly, deah boy, though that is, of course, a vevy distwessin' calamity. What I am most depressed about is the continued absence of old Talbot an' Miss Mawie. I hoped we should have some news of them by now. But one day follows another, an' there is no news of any sort."

"Mr. Rivers is on the track," said Herries. "If Talbot and Marie have been kidnapped by the Dawlish gang, as seems likely, Mr. Rivers will soon ferret them out. He's a jolly clever 'tec."

"And Jim Dawlish is a jolly elusive rogue," said Blake. "He's as slippery as a blessed eel. Strikes me Mr. Rivers will have all his work cut out to track down the gang."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "Poor old

Talbot! I can't get him out of my thoughts. An' Miss Mawie, too. I'm gettin' moah an' moah wowwied about them as the days go by. I am sewiously beginnin' to wondah if we shall evah see them again."

Arthur Augustus was not the only person who worried and wondered.

Tom Merry & Co. missed Talbot sorely. Life had not been the same since his disappearance. Talbot had come to be immensely popular with his schoolfellows, and his absence made a big gap. Life in camp was not nearly so enjoyable, without Talbot, as it would have been with him.

But the suspense and anxiety of Talbot's chums were not destined to last much longer.

Towards midday the rumour was flashed through the camp that Talbot and Marie had returned.

The news had been broadcast by Baggy Trimble, and it was not believed at first; but presently Tom Merry & Co. realised the joyful truth.

Talbot was indeed back, and Marie with him.

Tom Merry rushed up to his old chum, and seized Talbot's hand, and wrung it with boyish affection. Tom could not speak; but there were tears in his eyes. There were tears in Talbot's too, and he smiled happily through them.

"Oh, it's good to be back!" he said. "There was a time—and not so very long ago, either—when I wondered if I should ever see you fellows again."

Miss Marie received quite as cordial a welcome as Talbot; and it seemed that the fellows would never let her go. But presently she and Talbot were able to cleave a pathway through the crowd, and they made their way to the Head's marquee.

The astonishment and delight of Dr. Holmes at the return of the wanderers may be better imagined than described. Talbot and Marie might have been his son and daughter, by the way he greeted them.

"Bless my soul!" he repeated, for the sixth time. "This is indeed a happy surprise! Marie, my dear girl—Talbot, my dear boy—I had begun to despair of ever seeing you again. Pray sit down and tell me all that has transpired."

Talbot was the spokesman, and he had scarcely plunged into his narrative when Toby the page appeared at the marquee entrance, to announce John Rivers.

"My father!" cried Marie delightedly.

Happy was the reunion between father and daughter; and great the surprise of the detective to find Marie and Talbot at the camp, safe and sound.

"I have been searching for you with unceasing vigilance, night and day," said John Rivers. "I have combed all the likely haunts of Jim Dawlish; I have hunted far and wide. And finally, my inquiries brought me back to this part of the world. I have been able to ascertain that the Dawlish gang has its headquarters only a few miles away from this camp."

"I can tell you exactly where the house is," said Talbot.

(Continued on page 25.)

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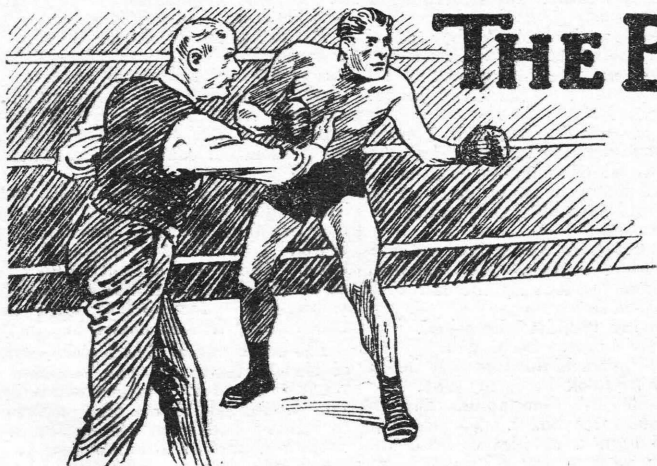
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Lickings were nothing to the diminutive Tommy Blair, who was fully determined to show his father that he could fight—and win!



THE BATTLING MIDGET!

by
Edgar Sayers.



A Rattling Fine Tale of the Ring.

CHAPTER 1.

Never say die!

TOMMY BLAIR felt as though ten million bees were buzzing inside and ached right to the back of his head; his chin was numbed his neck. Very mistily, he could see the ropes of the ring quiver above his head, and beyond the grimy linen that swathed them, he glimpsed Punch Kemp dancing on his toes, waiting for him to get up and be knocked down again.

Somewhere close at hand, the timekeeper was bawling the count:

"Four—five—six—"

All round the ring raucous voices were belowing wild encouragement to the prancing Punch; he was popular in the big boxing-hall, while no one knew the lad on the floor.

"Seven—eight—nine—"

Tommy squirmed on to his knees, pushing himself under the ropes and into the ring. With an effort, he got to his feet a split second before the timekeeper was about to count him out. On the instant, Punch Kemp rushed at him, driving him up against one of the padded posts and pounding him there.

Tommy was nearly a stone lighter than Kemp, and he was a full half a head shorter; this was the fifth round, and he had already taken a hiding which would have made bigger and better boxers quit cold.

He shook his head under the hail of blows that his opponent rained on him, then pulled himself together, and the crowd yelled like mad when they saw that he was fighting back.

"Soek him, Midget!"

"Good on th' little 'un!"

"Paste 'im, Midget!"

Tommy slogged for Punch's jaw, and got home a beauty that sent the bigger fellow staggering—all Tommy's seven stone was behind the drive, and he followed it with a snapping left hook that tipped Kemp sideways. His right came in, once again to the jaw, and the crowd let up another roar as Kemp's feet slipped from under him and he hit the canvas with a crash.

"Jack th' Giant Killer!" someone bawled from the gallery.

"Do it again, Midget!"

Kemp was up almost as soon as he had touched the floor; and he came at Tommy in a fighting fury. The young-

ster was all but done, and in that last rally he had squandered his reserve of strength. Tommy was very slight of build, although he was quick and wiry; he hadn't the massy shoulders and bulging thews of Punch Kemp.

But his heart was in the fight, because winning it meant a lot to him. He loved the game, and unless he could prove that he had ability, he was due to work behind a stuffy grocer's counter from the next Monday onwards. That was why he stood up to Kemp's devastating blows, covering cannily, fending his man off until the gong burred for the end of the round.

"Want to pack up?" asked a burly official second, three times the Midget's size, as he jabbed a cold sponge down Tommy's spine.

"No!" the lad gasped. "No fear!"

"You've got some pluck, then!" the second growled. "Earnin' your money all right!"

The gong went for the sixth and last round. Tommy had got over the punch to the jaw that had put him down; he touched Kemp's gloves in a formal handshake, and then his bigger opponent came at him like a tiger.

Kemp wanted to win by a knock-out, and the crowd wanted to see their favourite do it. They hadn't much sympathy with Tommy, despite the odds against which he fought.

"Soek him, Punch!"

"Put him down, boy!"

Right across the ring Kemp drove the Midget, with Tommy slipping blows, ducking, side-stepping, and blocking with a speed and slickness that ought to have roused the crowd to enthusiasm if they had eyes to see his natural cleverness. Kemp fought him round the ring, with Tommy giving as good as he got for half the round, then his lack of strength and stamina began to tell, and he slowed.

Again Punch panned him in a corner, and again he smashed in stunning blows that beat Tommy's guard down and jarred him through to the spine. Once Tommy ripped a left hook to Kemp's jaw, but he paid dearly for it. Punch's right came round in a countering swing that slammed to the side of Tommy's head; he wilted, slumped back against the post, then slid to the floor with the bees buzzing in his head again. The

referee waved wildly for Kemp to stand back, while the timekeeper began to count. He got to "Six!" when Tommy clawed himself upright with the aid of the post, snatched a deep breath, and then rushed desperately at his man.

Kemp side-stepped him neatly, bent at the waist, then flogged his fierce right in again, and once more he sent Tommy to the boards.

The youngster felt the rasp of canvas on his back and shoulders, caught the reek of resin in his swollen nostrils, then twisted and again began to get up.

"Plucky kid! You ain't beat yet!"

"Give 'im one for that, Midget!"

"Stand off, Punch! Let 'im get up!"

Dimly, Tommy could hear the count sounding. He remembered that it was the last round, and all his battling instinct made him want to see the fight through. He wasn't beaten; he couldn't be beaten, he told himself, and he forced his shaking legs to function, lifting himself off the floor to take more punishment.

Kemp went for him mercilessly. He smashed him back to the post, he hit him here, there, and everywhere; but he couldn't break the stout heart of the little fighter. The crowd was cheering as much for Tommy's grit as for Kemp's fighting display, when yet another vicious right put the youngster to the canvas.

The ring seemed to be whirling around him as he tried to get up. He could see Punch Kemp crouched, waiting to rush him and put in a real finisher to show the crowd that he had really won. Tommy saw him coming as he staggered upright; he flung himself sideways and Kemp's fierce blow missed his jaw by inches.

And then came the final gong!

Kemp jumped triumphantly to his corner, leaving Tommy standing, dazed and helpless, in the centre of the ring. Dimly he realised that the fight was over and that he had lost!

He saw the referee pointing to Kemp, then his knees sagged under him, and only the strong arm of one of his burly seconds saved him from collapsing where he stood.

Cold water and ammonia helped to bring him round in his corner, but he was still shaky when he climbed out of THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 912.

the ring and the crowd yelled in response to somebody's demand for "One for the loser!"

That cheer didn't do Tommy much good. He had lost the fight! He had never won one yet! Already he could imagine himself weighing out tea and selling cheese over the counter of Wiggins' grocer's shop.

He staggered down the gangway to the dressing-room. It was a big room, and was used by all the minor competitors. As he entered the door he could hear Punch Kemp telling a group of admirers how he had won.

Tommy moved to a corner where his street clothes were piled and began despondently to dress. He felt a little sick; one eye appeared to be stuffed up with something soft and painful, his nose was swelling, and his under-lip was split and sore.

Somehow he dressed himself. There would most certainly be a row when he got home, and his father saw that he had been fighting. Half an hour ago, Tommy had had a mental picture of returning home with the winner's end of the small purse, and showing his father that he really could fight.

That would have altered things a lot; but it wouldn't convince his father that he was a born battler if he went home with his face punched out of shape and his eyes all swollen.

His father had even forbidden him to put gloves on. Once the old chap had all but been light-weight champion of England; but now he was a cripple through an injury he had received in the ring. He had said that he was going to get Tommy a job that would keep him in comfort all his life; he wasn't going to have the lad strive for a career in the ring and finish up a broken old wreck like himself.

But the fight game was the only thing in which Tommy was interested. Despite the fact that he had never won a fight, he was still sure that he could do well if he got the chance. The truth was that he was under-sized and under-developed. With proper training and treatment, he might fill out and be as good as the best. As things were, however, it was only his natural courage and battling instinct which sent him time after time into the ring, to collect a good hiding and the loser's end of the purse.

He left the hall with nine shillings in his pocket, and feeling as though his heart was in his boots. He walked towards home, and it took him ten minutes to make up his mind to open the front door and enter the house.

Then he walked to where his father was sitting in front of the fire reading a paper, and waited for the storm to burst.

CHAPTER 2.

Tommy's Resolve!

TOMMY BLAIR'S father was a short, broad-shouldered man, and on his square features he carried the marks of his years of battling in the ring. His left ear was twisted and distorted—a "cauliflower"—and his nose was small and flat. For all that, his was a good-natured face, and good humour showed there as he lowered his paper and smiled at his son.

But that smile died and his expression changed to one of stark amazement as he stared at Tommy, who remained standing just inside the doorway. The old chap lifted a thick stick which lay on the floor beside him, and

he used it to push himself and his chair round to face the lad squarely. Obviously Tommy's father was something of a cripple.

"Fightin' again, eh?" he asked grimly. "You've had a good hidin', by th' looks on it. An' if ye hadn't I'd ha' given ye one! What have ye got to say about it?"

"Nothing, dad," answered Tommy quietly. "I got a chance to go substitute down at Champions' Hall, an' I took it. I know I could do well in the ring if I could get plenty of practice, an'—"

He broke off as his father made a gesture with his stick. He remained silent a moment, looking the lad over from head to eels.

"How many rounds?" he asked.

"Six—two minutes each, dad."

"An' you got a hidin' like that in six rounds, eh? Look here, my boy, I've told ye time an' time again that ye ain't cut out for a boxer. Ye ain't big enough to fight a bladder o' lard, an' the sooner ye get any o' them ideas out o' your head the better!"

"But I know I could—"

"Ye don't know anything, my lad! Now, look at me"—and the old chap patted his lamed leg. "I'm a wreck, and if I'd gone to be a tailor, like my dad wanted, I'd 'a' been well off now, instead of a poor old wreck, what ain't no use to anybody. All I've got out o' th' game is a bashed face and a gammy leg. I've told ye this before, an' I'm tellin' ye once again, so ye might as well—"

"But, dad! I know I could make good at it if I got the chance, an' if you trained me, and—"

"Ye've come home with a hidin' about once a week for the past six months," the old pug exclaimed. "If that hasn't taught ye that ye can't fight, I don't know what—"

"But if I could prove that I can?" asked Tommy. "Would you—"

"Yes; but you can't prove it," his father answered. "Ye ain't got it in you. Anyway, you start down at Wiggins' shop on Monday mornin' at eight o'clock sharp. P'raps that'll keep ye out o' mischief!"

Tommy tried to argue, but it wasn't any good. Once again his father told him how he wouldn't have been a down-and-out old invalid if he had not taken to the ring; yet, back of all that he said there was just the faintest ring of insincerity.

Tommy's father knew that he would have given everything he had to have seen his son following in his own footsteps, punching a career out of the ring. He believed that it was the finest game in the world, but he wouldn't let Tommy think he thought that.

"I'm puttin' you in the grocery business," he said finally. "You'll learn somethin' there that'll mean a job for life at a decent wage. No more hidin's for nine bob a time. An' now let's have a look at you an' see what we can do to put you right."

For the next half-hour the old pug went over his son's muscles with gentle, massaging fingers. He tended his hurts and his bruises, put cold compresses on the swellings; and he worked like a man who loved what he was doing. Time and time again Tommy's father had done this job for others during his own career in the ring, and it wakened memories as he eased the consequences of Tommy's "hiding."

They finished up sitting side by side, with the old pug delving into his experiences, altogether forgetful of what he had been saying a little time before.

Tommy sat listening to the stories of old fights, of battles well and truly won, of old-time champions, whose feats it was his own ambition to emulate.

His father never realised that in those reminiscences he was only further strengthening Tommy's resolute purpose to make the fight game his career. When the lad turned in that night he was determined, somehow, to show his father that he could fight—and win!

It was on the Saturday night that he had fought Punch Kemp. On the Monday morning, at eight o'clock, he presented himself at Wiggins' grocery store. There was absolutely no chance of avoiding it; his father had made the arrangements for him to work there, and Tommy had no choice but to go.

The show was a dismal place, reeking of cheese, tea-scents, and the smell of sugar bags. Mr. Wiggins was a dried-up, thin-faced man, who looked as though he had spent all his life in the deepest depths of absolute misery.

"If that's what a grocer looks like," thought Tommy, "the sooner I quit this game the better."

"Glad you've come!" Mr. Wiggins greeted him. "You can start sweepin' out the shop; an' don't raise a dust all over the place. After that you can stack them shutters up, then clean them scales. Then ye can swab down th' counters; an' while ye've got some 'ot water you might as well give the windows a rub down outside. After that I want them bins filled—the sacks is down in th' cellar—an' mind you don't spill nothin'. When you've done that you—"

"How much a week do I get for all this?" Tommy cut in.

"Seven-an'-sixpence, to start," answered Mr. Wiggins. "You'll be learnin' th' business, mind you. An' it's a generous wage, considerin'."

Tommy was inclined to the opinion that a hiding a week at nine shillings a time was rather more lucrative, but he said nothing, and started work.

One hour of Mr. Wiggins' society found the lad fed absolutely to the teeth. Tommy could do nothing right for him, and just as fast as he finished one task the grocer found him another. Somehow he got through the morning, and he went home to his dinner feeling twice as despondent as he had after Punch Kemp had finished with him.

His father was out, and Tommy ate his dinner on his own, then returned to slavery once more.

"Be'ind the counter, you, this afternoon," Mr. Wiggins said. "I want you to 'elp me weigh out some sugar. You watch me serve the customers, an' you'll soon learn 'ow to do it."

Still Tommy could do nothing right for him. Ere half an hour had gone the lad felt that nothing would satisfy him more than half a dozen three-minute rounds with Mr. Wiggins in the yard at the back of the shop. That, however, was a desire that it was impossible to gratify, and the thought of being penned in that shop day after day made him certain that life, with Mr. Wiggins as his boss, wouldn't be worth living.

By mid-afternoon he felt like walking out of the place and telling Mr. Wiggins to keep his seven-and-sixpence a week; and he got the chance to do it a little later.

Mr. Wiggins was weighing out cheese. He cut it with a strip of wire attached to a hook behind the marble slab. He weighed half a pound of cheese for the customer, then whipped the cheese behind the slab, and, with a deftness that was born of long practice, slid the

wire across one side of it and nicked a half-inch-thick slice from the customer's half-pound.

Tommy blinked in amazement. He saw it happen twice, then he asked Mr. Wiggins why he did it.

"Ah-ha! That's one of the tricks of the trade," the grocer told him with a laugh. "There's a lot o' little tricks like that, my boy. You'll learn 'em all in time, if you 'ave patience."

"Oh, I will, will I?" asked Tommy. "A trick of the trade, is it? It looked more like plain stealing to me!"

"When you've 'ad a bit more experience you can—"

"If that's the kind of experience I'm goin' to get I don't want it!" Tommy exclaimed.

And then all his dislike of the grocery shop, and of Mr. Wiggins, flared up. For two minutes he told the grocer precisely what he thought of him, what he thought of his shop, and what he thought of his "tricks of the trade."

"Why, you little whipper-snapper!" gasped the grocer, his thin face suffusing from rage. "I'll give you a—"

And he made a grab at the lad.

Tommy ducked away from the man's thin, clutching fingers, and as he moved, his hand came into contact with a seven-pounds bag of best household flour. He lifted it as Wiggins rushed at him again; an instant later, and the bag burst upon the bald patch at the top of the grocer's head, and the floury contents smothered him from head to foot.

"That'll square the cheese!" gasped Tommy, and with the words he vaulted the counter, leaped across the shop, and dived out into the street.

He covered nearly a quarter of a mile before he slowed to a walk. Remembrance of what old Wiggins had looked like with the flour bag bursting on his head, kept him chuckling for some time, and then he remembered what he had done.

He'd turned in the job that his father had got for him. What was he going to do now? Tommy thought it over as he walked along. Not once since the night of the Punch Kemp fight had he faltered in his resolve to try and make good in the ring, and, after a time, he thought that he could see a chance of helping himself on.

It was unlikely that his father would discover that he had left the grocery shop until the end of the week. Tommy wondered what would happen then, because he knew that his father had been at some pains to get him the job.

But if, between now and the end of the week, he could by some means prove that he wasn't such a dud in the ring, it might be that his father would change his opinion. After all, he had as good as said that he would come to Tommy's way of thinking if the lad could prove himself.

Automatically, Tommy's footsteps carried him to the nearest boxing hall—the Dome. He had tried there several times for a fight—he might as well try once more. He believed that he could make good if only he got the chance; Tommy didn't realise that his midget physique was all against him, however courageous his heart might be.

The Dome was a big building, the front plastered with coloured pictures of boxers in action, and with placards announcing coming contests. Monday evening always found something going on, and Tommy knew that his father hadn't missed a Monday programme at the Dome since as far back as the lad could remember. The management gave him a free seat for old times' sake.

There was a narrow passage at the side of the building which led to the box

office and the manager's sanctum. The manager was a man named Milligan, and on the placards he announced himself also as the "sole match-maker." Tommy knew that he was the fellow whom he wanted to see.

There was a number of men hanging about the entrance to the office; most of them looked like pugilists, and Tommy's lack of brawn and inches showed up more than ever as he approached them. Against the doorpost a huge nigger leaned. He was a mighty specimen, standing a full six feet three, with arms like tree-trunks, and with shoulders as broad as a bullock's.

As Tommy slipped towards the doorway, the nigger eased himself off the post, and bent his great head.

"Whadya want?" he inquired.

"Mister Milligan," answered Tom, and his voice was like the pipe of a moorhen against the nigger's great bass.

The big fellow lowered a ham-like hand and gripped Tommy somewhere in the middle of his back. The lad felt himself lifted from the ground, and the

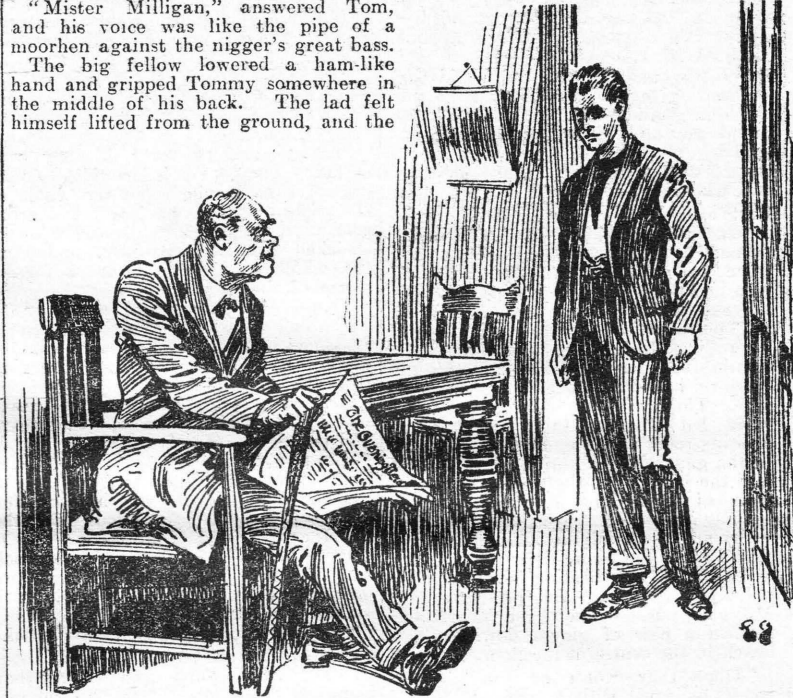
"A fight, eh?" grunted Mr. Milligan. "An' what d'you think you could fight? We don't grow boxers small enough for little 'uns like you."

"I'm a bantam weight," began Tommy. "I've had—"

"More like a fag-paper weight!" exclaimed the manager, and his observation was greeted with a roar of laughter.

"I've fought Billy West an' Joey Clarke, an' Dick Bells, an' Punch Kemp!" Tommy exclaimed, when the laughter died; but he didn't add that he had taken a hiding from all of them. "My father's Dan Blair, an' I can fight pretty near as good as he could, if you'll give me the chance."

"I tell you we haven't got anybody small enough, son!" answered the



Mr. Blair turned round and faced his son squarely. "Been fightin' again, eh?" he said grimly. "And you've had a good hidin' by th' looks on it. Why you ain't big enough to fight a bladder of lard—an' th' sooner ye get this boxin' idea out of your head, th' better!" (See page 22.)

men around laughed as he struggled in the big nigger's mighty grip.

An instant later, and the man swung him round, stepped inside the office, and plunked Tommy to the floor in front of a table behind which sat Mr. Milligan.

"One shrimp t' see yo, sah!" he said.

manager, and he was smiling still. "Go away an' fight some pudding—grow a bit, an'—"

"I don't want one my own size!" Tommy broke in. "I know I'm small, but I'll fight anybody if you'll give me the chance. I know I—"

"You'd fight Buck Hogan if I offered you th' fight, eh?" asked the manager.

Tommy wasn't acquainted with Buck Hogan, but he answered quickly:

"Course I would—I'll fight anybody!" And there was an earnestness in his tone which was not the cause of the yell of laughter from the men behind.

"You don't know who Buck Hogan is, do you?" asked Mr. Milligan.

"No; but I'll fight him if he's as big as an elephant!" answered Tommy.

There was another roar of laughter, and the manager bent forward, a queer gleam in his dark eyes.

"All right—you come here at half-past eight to-night!" he said. "You shall fight Buck Hogan, since you're such a born scrapper. You can have a three rounds contest, an' I'll pay you five shillings for every round you last!"

"That'll suit me!" Tommy told him. THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 912.

CHAPTER 3.

Winning His Laurels!

MR. MILLIGAN set down a pen and leaned back in his chair. He was a big, fat man, with dark, twinkling eyes that had more than a gleam of humour in them. He looked over the top of the table at Tommy, then glanced up at the nigger and grinned.

"Wonder you didn't break him in half," he said, then glanced at the lad. "Well?" he inquired. "Want me?"

"Yes; I've come to see if you'll give me a fight," Tommy answered, and he tried to keep his voice steady, conscious of the crowd of grinning pugilists who packed the doorway behind him. It wasn't often that a midget walked in there, asking for a scrap.

wondering why everybody all laughed. "But what do I get if I win?"

"If you—?" And Mr. Milligan burst into a shriek of laughter that continued for half a minute. "If you win," he said at last, as he wiped his eyes. "I'll give you five—no, ten pounds—an' you'll have earned it! You bet you will!"

Tommy left then, and a chorus of laughter followed him out into the street. He wondered what the dickens they found so funny in the fact that he had been matched to fight Buck Hogan—it made him feel cheap and foolish, somehow. But he forgot all that in the fact that he had once more gained a chance to show what he could do.

He went home to tea in the ordinary way, and discovered that his father had heard nothing about the affray with Mr. Wiggins. Tommy didn't say anything—that could come out later, after he'd beaten Buck Hogan and—

But why had Mr. Milligan said that he would give him ten pounds if he won the fight? And why was it only a three rounds contest?

There was something strange about the business, but he would let that worry him when he got into the ring.

At a little before half-past eight he presented himself at the side door of the Dome. A doorkeeper let him through when he gave his name, and a man who had been lounging against the wall stepped forward.

"You're a star performer to-night, Blair!" he said. "We've got a special dressin'-room for you. You come on just afore th' interval. 'Bout twenty minutes' time. This way."

He led Tommy to a very small dressing-room at the end of the corridor, lit the gas, and left him there to change into the boxing kit that he had brought with him. In the bare little room Tommy changed, then massaged his limbs and loosened his muscles in preparation for the fight.

His heart was beating a little more quickly than usual, and presently Mr. Milligan pushed open the door, and pitched a pair of gloves down on the bench in the centre of the floor.

"Hope they won't be too big for you!" he said, with a grin. "They're th' smallest we've got. Let's put 'em on for you!"

While the manager was adjusting the gloves, Tommy heard a tremendous yell

go up from the seats around the Dome arena.

"That's the finish—you're on next!" Mr. Milligan said. "Feelin' nervous?"

"No. Got that ten pounds?" asked Tommy.

The manager stared at him.

"D'you mean to say you haven't found out who Buck Hogan is?" he asked, in amazement.

Tommy shook his head.

"That accounts for you turning up!" the manager exclaimed. "Come on, you're for it! Make as good a show as you can."

And he was chucking as he led the lad down the corridor, pushed open a door, and thrust him out into a gangway that led down to the ring.

The M.C. was alone in the arena, announcing the fight. Tommy caught some of his words as he walked towards the ring.

"Special three-rounds comedy exhibition contest between the fire-eating midget, Tom Blair, and the well-known Buck Hogan."

Just at that moment Tommy was climbing the steps into the ring. As he ducked beneath the ropes the whole of the packed house burst into a concerted roar of laughter. Catcalls and whistles shrieked from one balcony, and then the whole was changed to a terrific storm of cheering.

Tommy had moved to a corner to which one of the Dome grinning seconds beckoned him, and as he seated himself, he saw his opponent entering the ring from the opposite side.

At first Tommy saw only a broad, black back heaving through the ropes, and then Buck Hogan stretched himself upright in all the glory of his magnificent six feet three inches. Buck Hogan was the mighty negro who had whisked Tommy through the door of the manager's office that afternoon.

It was then that the lad understood why everyone had laughed. They were making a joke of him. Why, Buck Hogan could kill him with one single punch of his mighty fists if he wanted.

But there wasn't time to think about it. The M.C. announced them, then signalled "All ready!" to the referee. And just at that moment Tommy's father clambered up at the side of the ring.

"Come out of it, lad! I'm not goin' to see 'em make a fool of ye!"

The Dome stewards grabbed at him, and Tommy jumped from his stool and ran forward.

"That's just what they're not goin' to do!" he exclaimed, and his eyes were blazing. "I'm goin' to show 'em a thing or two. You leave me alone!"

His father hadn't much choice, for at that moment the gong went and Buck Hogan came out of his corner.

The nigger looked about five times as big as Tommy as he shook hands; and the moment that their gloves had parted Tommy jumped in and planted a couple of stinging hooks, one on either side of the negro's heavy face.

Hogan pawed at him with his big fists, but Tommy ducked away, jumped in again, and drove a swinging right to one of the negro's thickened ears; and he was dancing out of reach ere the man could even make a heavy swipe at him.

During the two minutes that that first round lasted, Tommy made Buck Hogan look like a clumsy, slow, aged elephant. He darted about him like a will-o'-the-wisp, and his swift punches darted with all the venom of mosquito stings in at the big fellow's body and face.

Hogan was enormously strong, but he

had all the slowness of great strength. He couldn't hit Tommy. The lad was a thousand times too quick for him. Hogan had entered into the spirit of the joke when he first came into the ring. It was his intention to paw Tommy from side to side of the arena, and show the crowd just how strong he was.

But it was Tommy who was pawing Hogan about the ring, and when the first round ended the crowd vented a joyous yell of laughter at the negro's discomfiture.

The second round was the same, with Tommy shooting about his man and rousing the nigger's temper with his lightning punches.

Hogan tried to hit him now. If he had hit him just once it would have meant the finish of the fight for Tommy. Probably the finish of everything else, too. But Hogan did not hit him, hard though he tried.

The nigger went to his corner at the end of the round with his nose dripping crimson and one eye showing signs of impact with Tommy's gloves.

And Tommy's father was sitting at the ringside with his eyes wide open; and so were a number of other people. They knew that Hogan was as slow as a carthorse, but it was a mighty long time since they had seen anyone quite so quick with his feet and with his hands as Midget Tommy Blair.

"Knock him out, Midget!" roared the crowd, as the gong went for the third round.

"Eat him up, little 'un!"

"Give 'im best, darkey, 'fore 'e knocks you out o' th' ring!"

The crowd was screaming with mirth as the pair went to meet for the last round. But that mirth died as Hogan got home one of his now fierce blows. It just caught the top of Tommy's head, and it bowled him over and over across the floor of the ring, until he brought up with a bump against one of the padded posts.

For a moment there was dead silence. No one had wanted to see the nigger hit the lad. They watched anxiously; even the timekeeper forgot to count. Then Tommy stirred, sat up, shook his head, and grinned.

The timekeeper began to count.

"Make him pay for that, Midget!"

"Give him what for, little 'un!"

Tommy came off the floor with a rush, broke through Hogan's guard, and for the rest of the round he hit the nigger how and where he liked. He drove him to the ropes under a shower of swift blows, darting round him like a minnow round a whale.

Hogan straightened up and tried to rush him. But Tommy side-stepped agilely, whipped up his left, and jumped as he slammed his fist to the nigger's iron jaw. It caught Hogan in the middle of his rush, just when he was badly balanced. The negro staggered in his stride, stumbled, and then went down with a crash.

"Two—four—six—eight—ten! He's out!" someone bawled through the uproar. "The little 'un wins! Good on you, young 'un!"

"Lay down to 'im, Buck! He's got you beat!"

From somewhere up above a handful of pennies came showering down through the air, then landed on the nigger's woolly pate. And that ended the fight, for those first coppers were followed by a perfect rain of coins, and as they came rattling down the gong strummed for the end of the round.

Tommy ducked to his corner, shielding his head from the rain of money. It

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was a little way the Dome patrons had of showing their appreciation of a good fight, and it didn't need the referee to point to Tommy to show that he had won.

The Midget slid down the steps outside the ring, full into the arms of his father.

"Good on you, son!" the old pug exclaimed. "I take back all I said, an'—"

"Take this as well, an' look after it for him!" came Mr. Milligan's voice, and from his wallet he extracted two five-pound notes, and pushed them into the old pug's hand. "I promised him these if he won, and he has won all right!"

There wasn't much doubt about it from the way the coins were dropping into the ring, and the crowd cheered wildly as Tommy and his father followed Mr. Milligan up the gangway.

The door at the end closed behind them, and then the manager turned to Tommy.

"You're good, lad!" he exclaimed. "That was a fast fight. I could make something of you." He turned to Tommy's father. "S'pose you wouldn't like me to take him in hand—eh? I'll have him trained, get him filled out a bit, an' he'll be light-weight champion before he's through. What d'you say?"

"You mean it?" asked the old pug.

"I do," returned Mr. Milligan. "We'll soon build him up and make him stronger. Talk about quickness an'— I've never seen anythin' like it."

"What d'you say, Tommy?" asked the old pug.

The Midget said nothing for a moment, then he answered slowly:

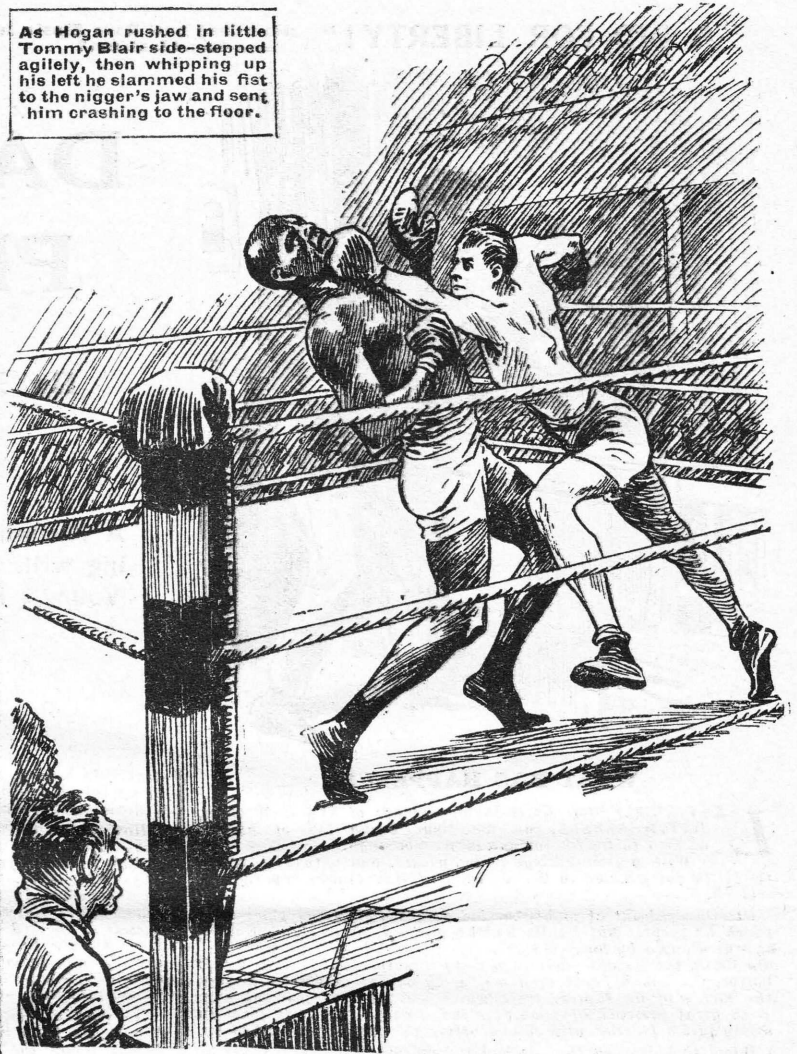
"I chucked a bag of flour over Mr. Wiggins this afternoon, an' turned his job in. So if Mr. Milligan will—"

And an hour later the three were signing a contract which set Tommy Blair's feet on the first rung of the ladder of boxing fame.

THE END.

(You must not miss "Hal Stanton's Boundary!" a thrilling and unusual cricketing story next week.)

As Hogan rushed in little Tommy Blair side-stepped agilely, then whipping up his left he slammed his fist to the nigger's jaw and sent him crashing to the floor.



THE HOUR OF ATONEMENT!

(Continued from page 20.)

"It's on the coast, seven miles east of Stormpoint. The Retreat—that's the name of it. Thanks to Jack Harper, we managed to make our escape last night."

"Harper?" interrupted the Head, with a frown. "Is it possible, Talbot, that you are indebted for your escape to that utterly base and unworthy lad?"

"Yes, sir," said Talbot quietly. "Base and unworthy he might have been; but all that is past now. He severed his connection with the gang, and defied Dawlish, and bled us to escape."

"Bless my soul! And where is Harper now?"

Where? Ask of the blue waters, upon which the sunlight danced—those waters which, but a few hours before, had raged and roared in the fury of the tempest.

"Jack Harper is dead," said Marie, her voice calm and steady. "He gave his life to save my own. Whatever his life may have been, he played up splendidly at the finish."

A silence followed Marie's words. Both the Head and John Rivers were strongly moved.

Presently, Talbot plunged anew into the story of their adventures. It was a thrilling story, rendered all the more impressive by Talbot's simple, unaffected way of telling it.

John Rivers left the camp shortly afterwards. He enlisted the aid of a couple of police-officers, and together they made their way to the Retreat, with the object of capturing the gang and recovering the plunder.

There was a surprise in store for them when they arrived at the lonely house.

Standing, as it did, in close proximity to the sea, the house had suffered severely under the lashings and buffetings of the storm. The windows were broken; the chimney-stack had collapsed; and a great deal of masonry had come crashing down.

A water-mark was visible nearly half-way up the front wall of the house. John Rivers shuddered slightly as he noticed it. Had Talbot and Marie remained prisoners in the basement, they would assuredly have been entrapped by the water, and drowned.

Jim Dawlish and his confederates had fled in, panic from the place. They had not lingered to retrieve the plunder. It seemed that they had cleared out with precipitate haste, fearing that the house would be doomed.

Fortunately, their car-tracks were plainly visible, and John Rivers lost no time in following them up. He had high hopes of rounding up the gang by nightfall.

Meanwhile, the police-officers had been instructed to return the stolen property to the St. Jim's Camp, where it was sorted out and restored to its rightful owners.

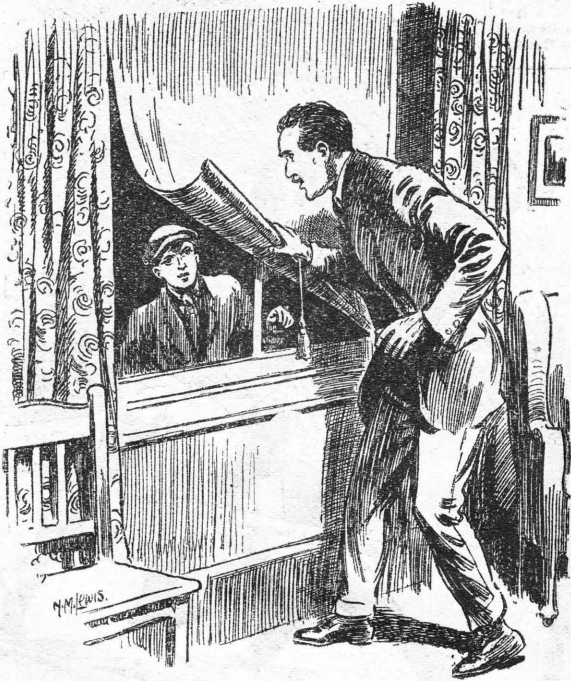
The cloud which had hung over the camp had lifted now. Talbot and Marie were back again with their friends; and they were little the worse for their terrible experiences. They seldom discussed Jack Harper; but at night, in the silence of the sleep-time, their thoughts frequently turned to the fellow who had acquitted himself so nobly in the Hour of Atonement.

THE END.

(There will be another Splendid Long Complete story of Tom Merry & Co., the chums of St. Jim's, entitled: "Study No. 9 on the Warpath!" included in next Wednesday's special programme of stories.)

"A BID FOR LIBERTY!"

How long can Dave Steele, now a hunted fugitive, hope to retain his new-found freedom?

**DAVE, THE
PIT-BOY!**By **MAX HAMILTON.**

A Thrilling Story of the Coal-Mines, dealing with the Exciting Adventures of the Young Hero of Wrexborough Pit—**DAVID STEELE.**

WHAT HAS HAPPENED.

LEAVING the little North-country village of Thorpe Western, **DAVID STEELE**, an ambitious young lad of fifteen, decided to try his fortune in Wrexborough. With a few shillings in his pocket, and with a tramp of thirty to forty miles to his destination, the sturdy country lad sets off.

Utterly tired out at night, the lad sought a sheltered place, into which he crept. But hardly had he dropped off to slumber when he was aroused by hurried movements near at hand. He was alert almost on the instant, and, on making investigations, found, to his horror, the bound figure of a man lying on the permanent-way at the mercy of an express train which was at that moment due. With great presence of mind, the lad dragged the inert form to safety just a fraction of a second before the great train rushed by.

David then learned that he had rescued Mr. Scott, the owner of the Wrexborough coal-mines. David was offered a job in the mine, and gratefully accepted.

Later, by a strange coincidence, Steele gets wise to another plot to capture Scott. But he was unable to warn the mine-owner, for he is caught spying and made prisoner.

He effects an escape, however, and finds that Scott has been chained to a wall in one of the disused pits by his brother George, who has made an unavailing attempt to extort money from the wealthy mine-owner.

David brings a supply of food to the prisoner.

Meanwhile, George Scott, having so far failed in his rascally mission, usurps his brother's place and brings his dastardly ven-

geance to bear upon the miners. Wrexborough is soon in a state of uproar, and George Scott's life is in jeopardy when Dave makes a dramatic appearance in defence of his enemy.

Having escaped the power of the rioters, the crafty Scott turns again upon Dave, and takes from the lad's pocket a written confession he had signed a short time before. Then, leaving Dave a prisoner, he flees. The pitboy gains his freedom, but loses his way on the moor. In the dead of night he hears a cry of pain, and, following the direction from whence it came, he finds himself outside a disused house, from which someone had just made a hurried exit. Pushing open the door, David enters, to find a long, curved knife lying on the stone steps. He picks it up, but, too dazed to think clearly, and feeling utterly exhausted, he seeks repose in a heap of hay, the knife still clasped tightly in his hand.

A sound of voices suddenly arouses him, however, and, to his horror, he finds himself surrounded by a posse of police, who, having found the body of George Scott on the premises, accuse Dave of the murder.

Steele is placed in the dock at Wrexborough Gaol, and so black does the prosecuting counsel make the case against him that he is found guilty, and sentenced to death. The jury urge a strong recommendation to mercy.

Two days later Dave is on the train bound for Portland when he notices that the handcuff by which he is secured to the warder is not properly fastened. Dave's brain works swiftly, and no sooner does the train enter the next tunnel when he makes a leap from the carriage door and escapes along the track under cover of darkness until he arrives at the end of the tunnel.

(Now read on.)

Hunted by the Police!

ENCOURAGED by this determination, Dave walked on briskly for a time until his aching leg again brought him to a halt.

"I'd better sit down and rest it," he reflected. "It's no good tiring myself out. While this fog lasts I'm as safe in one place as another, and I may want all my speed by-and-by. I wonder where I am exactly? It's impossible to tell. I know I must be somewhere between Roxley and Wrexborough, and that's about all. Another thing I know, too, and that is that I'm jolly hungry. Wish I could guess when I'll have my next meal. I shall feel like eating my boots soon!"

It must have been about two o'clock in the afternoon when suddenly the fog lifted and rolled away, the sun shining down from a clear sky.

David looked around him as the mist faded, and instantly recognised his surroundings. He had wandered some distance from the railway line; but he could see the dip that marked the cutting through which it ran; and to the eastward rested the cloud of smoky haze that always hung above the valley in which Wrexborough was situated. Not far off was the crest of a low hill, and upon this the wreath of mist lay longest; but finally it melted away before the sun, and left the hilltop bare.

And as it became visible, David started, and a tremor ran through him, for clearly outlined against the sky was the motionless figure of a man on horseback. Even at that distance the lad could see that he was a mounted policeman.

The boy dared scarcely breathe. With his eyes almost starting out of his head, he gazed at the still figure, expecting each moment that the policeman would set his horse in motion and gallop towards him. In terror lest his movement should betray him to those watching eyes, he crawled cautiously behind a furze bush, and from its shelter peered round at his enemy.

Presently the figure on horseback was joined by a couple more on foot, and the three stood together, clearly seen against the sky.

David looked round. To run was an impossibility, and would have revealed him instantly to his pursuers. Yet to stay in his present exposed position was only to await capture.

A few yards away from him the ground gave a sudden slope, and the miniature hill thus formed was dotted with furze and bramble bushes, which at the bottom of it formed a thick clump. This clump was the best hiding-place available—the only one, at least, that he could reach without crossing a stretch of open ground.

Silently, and with snake-like movement, he began to slide from bush to bush down the slope, stopping every now and then to make sure that he was not observed and pursued. His heart sank yet more as a faint hallo reached his ears from another direction; and raising his head as much as he dared, he saw other figures moving about in the distance. Evidently he was pretty well surrounded.

Nevertheless he managed to reach the clump of bushes undiscovered, and—not without inflicting plenty of scratches on face and hands—to crawl into the thickest part of it, where he lay, scarcely daring to breathe.

The bushes were thick enough to conceal him from any ordinary passer-by; but what chance was there, he reflected, that the police would allow such an obvious place of concealment to go unsearched?

Now and again the silence was broken by the sound of shouts—sometimes nearer, sometimes farther off—and once David could hear the thud of a horse's hoofs ringing plainly through the still air. The suspense was agony. He could not tell how near the searchers were, and sometimes he hoped that they were moving away—a hope that was dispelled a few minutes later by again hearing their voices. Once or twice when a twig cracked he imagined it was a footstep, and covered down, expecting to see a face staring in at him between the branches, and to hear the shout of triumph that would hail his discovery.

And at last he actually did hear footsteps—footsteps, and the noise made by someone who was brushing through the dry bushes above him and descending the slope. There was no doubt about it this time.

It seemed to the fugitive to have reached just the other side of the clump of bushes amidst which he was crouching. There was a moment's pause, and then he heard the twigs and dry leaves crack and rustle as the searchers thrust them aside in trying to peer between them.

"It's all over," thought David, with a dull sensation of despair. "Another moment and he'll see me—and I shall be done for!"

Breathlessly he waited, in horrible anticipation of a shout and the grip of a hand upon his shoulder. His enemy was still hidden from him by the screen of furze, but he was evidently energetically pushing his way through it.

And then suddenly between the low branches he saw a pair of bright eyes fixed upon him!

He was discovered!

He gave a gasp, and would have sprung to his feet in a last mad attempt to escape, when to his astonishment a familiar voice exclaimed sharply:

"Hush, Dave; don't move! It's me—Micky."

"Micky?" cried David.

"Yes, Micky. I had a feeling you might be hiding here, Dave, and I've crept up to the bushes quiet like, so as to have a look before the others got here. Don't 'ee stir—I'm coming through."

And with a crash and a scramble Micky forced his way to David's side.

"Won't they hear you?" David asked anxiously.

Micky shook his head.

"There's no one within half a mile yet, but they will be

here, Dave, and before long They're spread out over the place in a line, poking into every bush as they go along."

David groaned.

"Then it's all up wit' me," he said bitterly. "How soon will they be here, do you think?"

"'Nother ten minutes," Micky returned. "And then he burst out: 'I'd give anything for you to get away, Dave, and so would every man in Wrexborough. They all say that you've been a good plucked one.'"

David smiled faintly.

"Thanks, Micky," he said, pressing the small boy's hand. "But you mustn't be found talking to me when the police come up. It might get you into trouble. You'd better go away, and leave me to take my chance."

But Micky's face had suddenly begun to work with excitement, and, seizing David's arm, he exclaimed:

"Dave, could you get into my clothes?"

"Your clothes, Micky?"

"Yes," the smaller boy went on eagerly, "I believe you could. They're a sight too big for me owing to their being dad's old ones cut down. Here, try!" And he tore off his coat. "Put it on!"

But David shook his head.

"If you mean you want me to change clothes with you, Micky," he said, "thank you very much, but I won't. They wouldn't be taken in by the trick for a minute. It wouldn't help me, and you would be punished for it."

But Micky was pulling off his trousers now.

"Garn!" he replied cheerfully. "I've got a better plan than that, Dave Steele. I'm not going to be locked up by the coppers—not me! But if I don't take the coppers in beautiful in the next ten minutes, my name ain't Micky Jones. Only, be quick, and off with them togs o' yours. Quick, I say!" he repeated impatiently, as David still hesitated. "I can hear 'em calling to each other quite close now!"

David still hesitated.

"You're sure you won't get into trouble, Micky?" he asked once more.

"Dead certain! Hurry up!"

David delayed no longer. Micky's excitement had infected him with hope. He tore off the arrow-marked garments. Instantly Micky seized them and tucked them under his arm.

"Now then," he directed, "you'd better not try and get into my togs till it's all over. Just you lie still and listen. It'll be a lark, I tell you!" And he chuckled audibly. "When I've got the coppers out of the way, you can make off. And if you're hungry there's a bit o' bread an' cheese in my jacket-pocket."

David gripped the speaker's hand.

"How can I ever repay you, Micky?" he muttered huskily.

"Garn!" was Micky's rejoinder. "And now to see the fun."

Still holding the convict suit under his arm, he began to creep out of the bushes. What he was about to do David had not the least idea. Crouching down in his hiding-place, he watched him breathlessly.

Cautiously Micky protruded his head from the prickly screen of furze and bramble. There was no one in sight, so he crawled out into the open. Anxious as he was, David could scarcely help laughing at the figure he presented, clad in the very scantiest of garments.

But Micky was evidently too much bent upon the success of his design to notice anything. First he flung down the convict's coat and breeches in a conspicuous position, then he seated himself upon the ground a short distance from them, and then he listened.

David listened, too, from the hiding-place he had scrambled into. The voices of the searchers were close at hand now; he could distinguish their very words, and it seemed probable

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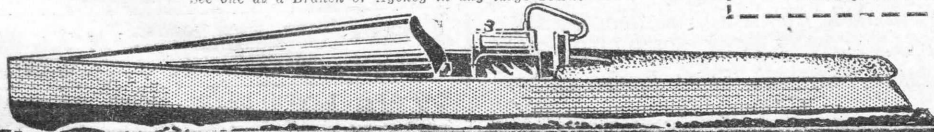
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that in another instant they would appear on the crest of the slope.

What was Micky about to do?

The question was soon answered. As the helmet of the first policeman came in sight Micky's face was suddenly contorted. He screwed up his eyes, he opened his mouth to its fullest extent, and then he burst into a tremendous howl.

The noise brought the searchers hurrying to the spot, and they gazed in amazement at the sight of a small boy, minus coat and trousers, seated on the frosty grass, and apparently plunged in the very deepest grief.

"Hallo! Who's the kid, and what's the matter with him?" "Why, it's the little chap that was hanging about with us just now!"

"What have you done with your clothes, sonny?"

Such were some of the exclamations that David heard from his place of concealment—exclamations to which Micky seemed to pay no heed whatever, for he continued to howl in the same loud and melancholy tone.

Suddenly one of the policemen gave a shout.

"Look here!" he cried, pouncing upon David's discarded clothes, and then lifting them high in the air for general inspection.

There was a chorus of exclamations, and then David heard one man say excitedly:

"Don't you see? He's stripped the kid of his togs, and gone off in them!"

David's heart leaped. He saw Micky's plan clearly now. Never before had he given the boy credit for so much sharpness.

"That's the second time he's done me a good turn," he said to himself, remembering how Micky had turned out the lamp on the night of his persecution by Skirling and his gang. "Well, if I do get away, I won't forget it."

Meanwhile, his pursuers were besieging Micky with questions.

"He's gone off in your coat and trousers, you say?"

"Yes! took 'em from me," returned Micky, gulping down a realistic sob. "Made me take 'em off, or said 'e'd kill me. Left 'is own things be'nd!"

"Yes, yes; we can see that. But how long ago was it?"

"Don't know," whined Micky.

"Can't be long," broke in another voice. "This boy was standing close to me not half an hour ago."

"Which way did he go?"

Micky wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, and then, giving a gigantic sniff, pointed towards the railway-line.

"Long there," he said. "'E went creepin' in and out among them bushes, an' then in between them two little hills. That's as far as I could see him."

"After him!" cried the inspector, who had been putting the questions to Micky.

"You'll fetch me my clothes back?" said the latter imploringly.

"Yes, we'll fetch your clothes back, my little man," returned the inspector. "Meanwhile, you'd better cut along to that farmhouse over by the high-road, and ask the people there to lend you something to go home in."

He was off almost before the words were out of his mouth—

off, and all his men with him, leaving Micky grinning at the success of his scheme. So well had he played his part that no suspicion entered the minds of the searchers that they were being deceived. Spreading out fan-wise, they hurried on to the railway-line in happy ignorance of the fact that they had been actually standing within a few feet of their prey.

As soon as the police were out of hearing—though not out of sight—Micky executed a caper.

"Hear me take 'em in?" he cried exultantly. "Hear me howl!"

"I should think I did," returned David, from the midst of the bushes. "Micky, I never thought you was such an awful liar!"

"Can you get into my clothes?" Micky inquired anxiously. "Yes," David replied, cautiously protruding his head from his hiding-place. "They aren't such a bad fit as you'd think, considering the difference in the size of us."

"That's all right. Then, as soon as they're right out of sight, you'd better make a bolt, in case they come back this way."

"Right you are!" answered David, his mouth full of the bread and cheese which he had just extracted from the pocket of Micky's coat. "Micky, you've saved my life with this grub; I was right down starving. Look here, it's no good your stopping here any longer, and you'll catch cold if you do. You'd better take that chap's advice, and go and ask those people if they can't give you something to wear."

Micky nodded. Now that the excitement was over, he was beginning to feel cold.

"I think I will," he said, his teeth chattering, as David emerged from the bushes and cast a quick, cautious glance in the direction in which the police had vanished.

But there was not so much as the top of a helmet to be seen. His pursuers, in their eagerness to follow up a false scent, had by this time almost arrived at the railway-track.

Side by side the two boys mounted the little slope above the bushes. The top of the farmhouse for which Micky was bound was visible about a mile away.

"Good-bye, Dave!" the younger lad said.

David gripped his hand, and then the two separated.

Two or three days later, weary and footsore, the young miner reached the outskirts of Leeds. Day was just breaking, and the workers in factories began to pass him on their way to daily toil.

The sight of a coffee-stall in a side-street reminded the boy that it was time for breakfast. He had a steaming cup of coffee, accompanied by a thick slice of bread-and-butter, and felt all the better for the meal.

By this time the town was waking up. David wandered aimlessly about until his attention was arrested by the shouting of a newsboy who was hawking his wares on the kerb.

"Eee y'are! 'Yorkshire Post!' 'Orrible colliery disaster! Wrexborough mine flooded! Sixty men entombed! Colliery disaster! 'Yorkshire Post!' Wrexborough pit flooded!"

(How does David receive this terrible news of the pit disaster? How many friends of his lie entombed in the bowels of the earth? Be sure you read next Wednesday's splendid long instalment of this powerful serial.)



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