

"HUNTED DOWN!"

**THIS WEEK'S AMAZING
SCHOOL STORY, INSIDE.**

EVERY WEDNESDAY.

The **GEM** 2^D

**LIBRARY
of
SCHOOL AND SPORTING STORIES**

No. 831
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CAUGHT BETWEEN TWO FIRES!

There was no alternative for Tom Merry & Co. but to leave the burning bungalow by way of the window. (See the grand school story 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.

WINDING UP THE OLD YEAR!

NOW that December is well upon us several Gemites have announced their intention of "clearing up" things in readiness for the New Year. This "clear up" seems to be pretty general, as far as I can see, and is, in itself, a good notion. Looking back over the past year, we see the mistakes we have made, and register a vow never to repeat them. Between now and New Year's day, hundreds of things will come to light—if we look for them. And it's surprising how much we can gather in from a self-analysis if we take the trouble. One hard-thinking Gemite tells me that he hasn't been as "nice" to his parents as he ought to have been. Well, he's frank about it; and I wish him luck in his resolution to start the New Year on a different footing. Some will say, why doesn't he start now? Quite right! If he can, he ought to start right now! But all of us are not built the same; some of us want time to get our fighting-gear into working order. It isn't sufficient for some of us to tell ourselves that we mustn't do such and such a thing, and then immediately break away from it. Habit plays a strong part in the overthrow of these "bad traits," and habit clamours for "time" to live it down. But this "clearing-up" bizney needn't necessarily take the form of "pulling ourselves to pieces." What about the ambitions for next year? Some of you want to be draughtsmen, engineers, journalists, bank clerks, etc. Well, now's the time to find out the first steps to the attainment of these ambitions. You've got a few weeks to hunt up the necessary information so that by the time January 1st, 1926, comes round, you are ready to launch out. Taking it all round, 1925 has been an eventful year, but 1926 is going to be still more eventful. It's something to look forward to, and I'm as keen to sample 1926 as the youngest amongst you. One thing I can promise you; in this general clearing up, I'm going to overhaul the good old GEM, and if it can possibly be made brighter and better for the New Year, it shall be done. One thing is assured, anyway; it won't slide back on its own tail, for the GEM keeps apace with the general modern tendency to progress.

RAILWAY WINDOWS.

An interesting query reaches me from an observant Gemite, who, apparently, does a fair amount of travelling on the railways. He tells me, from constant observation of the fact that the person sitting nearest the carriage door, facing the engine, usually takes it upon himself to raise and lower the window when the train is entering and leaving a tunnel. "Is there any law on the subject?" he asks me. No, my chum, there is no "law" governing the raising and lowering of a railway carriage window. Why you invariably see the person who is sitting nearest the carriage door and who is facing the engine of the train operating the window when tunnels are in the offing, is because this person is in the best position to "spot" the tunnel. But your query shows that you keep your eyes open, my chum, which is a habit we can't over-cultivate.

NEXT WEEK'S PROGRAMME!

"THE SPOOFER OF THE SCHOOL-HOUSE!"

By Martin Clifford.

This is the title of the next extra-long complete story of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's. Its extra length will necessitate the holding over of the Supplement until the following week, but I know Gemites won't object to that. Don't miss this story, boys!

"A LEADER OF THE LEAGUE."

By Sydney Harler.

There will be another exciting instalment of this splendid yarn of the footer-field in the programme for next Wednesday. Don't fail to read it!

ST. JIM'S JINGLE No. 16.

Our special Rhymester takes Ephraim Taggles, the school porter, for the subject of his next Jingle. And Taggles goes extremely well in verse!

Cheerio, chums,

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YOUR EDITOR.



You Know A Good Joke? Let's Hear it, Chum.

Delicious Tuck Hampers and Money Prizes
Awarded for Interesting Pars.

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

TUCK FOR OXFORD.

A POSER!

Uncle Pat: "You'll shorten your loife by 'arf if ye smoke now." Nephew: "Well, Uncle Pat, you smoked when you were a boy, and you are quite an old man now." Uncle Pat: "Yes, Oi's eighty-four now; but if Oi 'adn't smoked when Oi was a boy Oi might 'ave been a 'undred by now!"—A Tuck-Hamper, filled with delicious Tuck, has been awarded to S. Habley, 9, Pitt Road, Abingdon Road, Oxford.

WEATHERBEATEN!

A number of sportsmen in the North of Scotland, putting up at Jock McGlies' cottage, found their sport much interfered with by rain. Still, fine or wet, the old-fashioned barometer that hung in Jock's front room marked "Set Fair." At last one of the party of sportsmen drew Jock's attention to this fact. "Don't you think," he said, "that there's something the matter with your glass?" "No, sir," answered Jock indignantly. "She's a good glass, and a powerful one. But"—he added reflectively—"she's no' moved by trifles!"—Half-a-crown has been awarded to J. W. Astles, High Street, Sawbry, Peterborough.

GENEROUS!

Two tramps were sitting on the grass, sorting over a bundle of clothes which had been given to them. "Here," said Mike, "these boots are too small for me; you can have them, Tim. They only want soles and heeling and a new pair of uppers; the laces are all right!"—Half-a-crown has been awarded to Mrs. B. M. Hall, 20, Hallsville Road, Canning Town, E.

WELL COATED!

"What on earth are you wearing all those coats for?" asked Mr. Slapdash's neighbour. "Well," answered the man with the brush, "I'm going to paint my barn, and the directions on the can distinctly say, 'For best results put on three coats!'"—Half-a-crown has been awarded to F. Brewer, 195, Wright Road, Salford, Birmingham.

THEN THE HEAD EXPLODED!

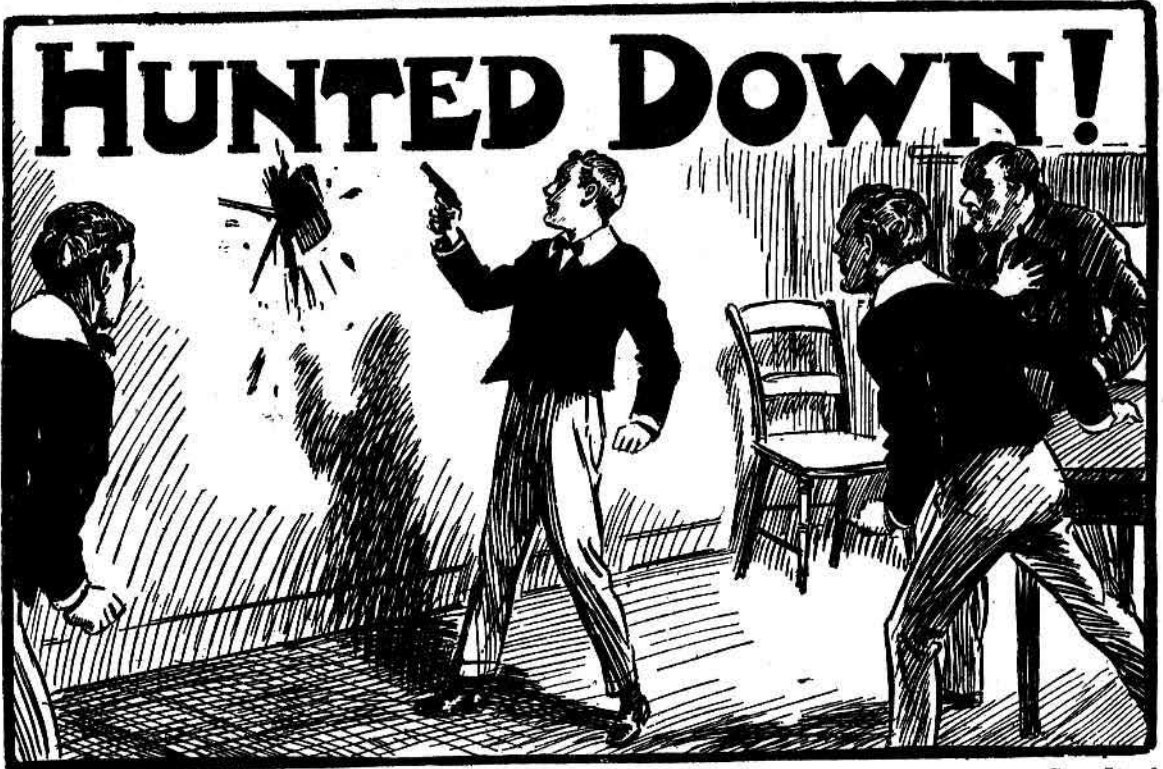
A farmer wished to send his son to a public school, and on interviewing the headmaster, asked him for the school curriculum. The headmaster commenced: "Our school curriculum embraces Latin, French, algebra, arithmetic, trigonometry—" "Ere, 'arf a mo', sir!" interrupted the farmer. "Stuff 'im up with triggerometry—he's the worst shot in the family!"—Half-a-crown has been awarded to Noel R. Shute, 56, Wembury Park Road, Peverell, Plymouth.

TUCK HAMPER COUPON.

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

VENGEANCE! Like Nemesis, with upraised sword ready to strike, the "man in black" searches the countryside to wreak his vengeance upon the man who has done him an injury. But always between his victim and his vengeance are Tom Merry & Co.—schoolboys of St. Jim's!



A Magnificent New Long Complete Story of Tom Merry & Co., at St. Jim's.
By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.

In the Dead of Night!

TOM MERRY sat up in bed in his room at Holly Lodge and yawned.

It was a wild December night.

The wind whistled round the old house, dashing the snowflakes against the window-panes. Branches bent and groaned and creaked; and above the whistle of the wind and the groaning of tormented trees, sounded the hollow boom of the sea in the distance.

From somewhere below came the soft chime of a clock.

One! Two! Three!

"Three o'clock!" murmured Tom Merry. "What a night!"

He drew the blankets round him and shivered.

Never had a warm bed in a comfortable room seemed more attractive; never had the St. Jim's junior felt more disinclined to turn out.

From the adjoining rooms he could hear no sound of movement; his chums, Manners and Lowther, were fast asleep.

For several minutes, Tom Merry sat up in bed hesitating. Outside the wind howled, whirling snowflakes; and bed was warm and comfortable. But the Terrible Three of St. Jim's had planned an expedition for that night, and Tom had undertaken to call his comrades. He made an effort at last, and rolled out of bed.

"Groooh!"

It was cold. Tom Merry bundled on his clothes at record speed.

He did not venture to turn on the light.

Monty Lowther's uncle, Mr. James Lowther, M.P., J.P., was fast asleep at that hour; the whole household was wrapped in slumber. Mr. Lowther would have been greatly astonished, and certainly not pleased, to hear that his nephew, and his nephew's friends, had planned an excursion for the small hours of the winter morning. If Mr. Lowther had awakened and learned what was going on, there was no doubt that that excursion would have been nipped in the bud sharply and ruthlessly. So Tom Merry dressed in the dark, and was careful to make no sound.

Having dressed, he groped to the door of his room, and stepped out into the corridor. Then he opened Manners' door.

From the dark interior of Manners' room came a sound of steady breathing. Manners of the Shell was sleeping the sleep of the just.

Tom Merry stepped in softly and groped his way to Manners' bedside.

"Manners, old man!"

Only the steady breathing of the sleeper answered him.

"Manners!"

Tom Merry groped for Manners' head to give him a shake to wake him. In the dark it was Manners' nose that he captured.

"M-m-m-m! Groogh! Oh!"

Manners awoke suddenly.

"Who—what—is that you, Tom?"

"Yes. Time to turn out," said Tom Merry, in a whisper. "Don't make a row, old chap; Monty's uncle would put the stopper on if he woke up and spotted us, you know."

"I—I say, Tom—"

"Yes."

"It's jolly cold!"

"Don't I know it?" said Tom ruefully. "Can't be helped, old chap. Tumble up!"

"I—I say, I—I think we'd better put it off till to-morrow," murmured Manners. "Come to think of it, it's rather a fatheaded idea to turn out in the middle of the night like this. What do you think?"

Tom Merry chuckled softly.

The same thought had occurred to him before he had turned out. Still, he had turned out; and now it was time for Manners to follow suit.

"Get a move on, old chap," he answered. "We settled it last evening, you know, and it's all cut and dried."

"What's the time?" yawned Manners.

"Three o'clock!"

"Three in the morning? Groogh! I say, Tom, old Mr. Lowther wouldn't exactly like us making expeditions at three in the morning if he knew."

"Well, he won't know."

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"Yes; but is it quite respectful to Monty's uncle?" asked Manners, blinking at the captain of the Shell in the deep gloom. "That's what worries me. Is it really quite respectful, you know. After all, he's our host, and he's a decent-old scout, though a bit crusty. What are you laughing at, you ass?"

"You weren't worrying about that yesterday," said Tom, with a chuckle. "Are you quite sure that you're worrying about Monty's uncle now, or about turning out of bed?"

"Well, you see—"

"I see," assented Tom cheerily. "It's a bit of a twist getting out in the cold. You want a little help. Here goes!"

"Owl! Groogh! Ooooh!" gasped Manners, as the bed clothes were whipped off, leaving him huddling and shivering.

"That better?" asked Tom.

"You silly ass! You silly owl! You silly chump! You silly cuckoo!" Manners did not seem grateful for the assistance rendered.

"Why grouse?" chuckled Tom. "Get into your clobber while I go and call Monty."

"Groooogh!"

Manners of the Shell began to dress in the dark, and Tom left him and went along to Monty Lowther's room.

As before, a sound of deep and regular breathing greeted him as he entered. Monty Lowther was safe in the arms of Morpheus.

Shake!

Ow!

"It's I, Tom!" whispered the captain of the Shell. "Wake up, old man! I've called Manners, and he's dressing!"

Monty Lowther blinked with sleepy eyes at his comrade. Like Manners, he realized that the excursion planned the evening before was rather fatheaded—he had not thought of it then, talking the matter over before a cheery fire; but he thought of it now. Instead of turning out, he hugged his bedclothes.

"Tom, old bean—"

"Hurry up!"

"Suppose my uncle wakes up—"

"He won't!"

"Well, he's a light sleeper," said Lowther. "He might hear us moving about. It might alarm him if he did."

"Then we'll be jolly careful not to let him hear us," said Tom. "We won't put on our boots till we get downstairs."

"This is rather an old house, Tom, and the stairs creak a lot."

"Yes, we shall have to tread lightly," agreed Tom. "I'm waiting for you, Monty."

"Hem! I say, Tom, I've got rather a good idea."

"What's that?"

"It will be a bit difficult, not to say risky, getting across to Hermit's Isle in the dark—"

"Plenty of starlight," said Tom. "The wind has cleared off the clouds. Quite a clear night, only a bit rough."

"But I fancy we should manage it easier in the daytime—"

"Buck up!"

"That cheeky bounder who's been shadowing us may be hanging about at night, on the watch, you know."

"More likely to be hanging about in the daytime," said Tom, with a grin. "You thought so yourself when we arranged this last evening."

"Yes, I know; but I think now—"

"You think you'd rather stay in bed, old chap," said Tom cheerily. "So did Manners, and I helped him out—like that!"

A sudden jerk, and Monty's bedclothes were strewn on the floor.

"Ow! Oh! You thumping clump—"

"Whisper it, old man."

"You babbling, burbling bandersnatch—"

"You'll wake the house, Monty!"

"You frajious, fatheaded chucklebrain—"

"Are you always as polite as that to visitors, old bean?" asked Tom Merry.

"Fathead!"

Monty Lowther turned out.

Bed was neither warm nor comfortable without bedclothes, and there was no help for it. Monty proceeded to dress in the dark.

There was a whisper in the doorway.

"You fellows ready?"

"Nearly!" chuckled Tom. "I had to persuade Monty to turn out."

"Slacker!" said Manners indignantly. "Buck up, Lowther! You're keeping us hanging about, you know!"

"Go and eat coke!" answered Monty Lowther gruffly. "Where's my trousers? How's a fellow to dress in the blessed dark? Where's those dashed bags? Where's those

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blithering socks? Where— Oh, here they are! If you silly owls keep on cackling, you'll wake my uncle or the housekeeper, and then it will be all U P!"

CHAPTER 2.

The Man in Black Again!

"IT'S jolly windy!"

"It's frightfully cold!"

"Why grouse?" asked Tom Merry cheerily.

"Fathead!"

"Ass!"

By a back door the three St. Jim's juniors had left Holly Lodge. They had got out of the house without alarming or awakening anyone; the noise of the winter wind, the groaning trees, the deep, distant boom of the sea, had drowned any sound made by them as they groped their way through the dark interior of Holly Lodge.

Mr. James Lowther, M.P., J.P., was left sleeping soundly, and if he dreamed he assuredly did not dream that his nephew had left the house at three in the morning with Tom Merry and Manners, bound upon an expedition that might very probably turn out to be a dangerous one.

The Terrible Three were not thinking of the danger; but they could not help thinking of the cold and the wind.

Snowflakes fluttered about them, borne by the keen wind from the sea; but the sky was almost clear, and myriads of stars glittered there like points of fire. It was easy enough for the three juniors to see their way, once they were out of the house.

By snowy paths they picked their way through the gardens, and Lowther opened a gate on the lane.

They tramped down the lane together, the fresh-falling flakes hiding their footprints almost as fast as they were made.

As they went they kept their eyes well about them.

It seemed unlikely that anyone who could help it would be abroad at such an hour on such a night. But they would not have been surprised to see the figure of the mysterious man who had watched them—who had shadowed them from school when St. Jim's broke up for the Christmas holidays, who had followed them to Tom Merry's home at Huckleberry Heath, and then to Lowther's home at Holly Lodge, and whom they knew to be lingering in the vicinity. Twice the juniors had handled that mysterious shadower, and rather severely; but they knew that he was still tirelessly on the watch.

If he was watching now—

But no man could watch by day and by night without cessation or rest; and it seemed probable that by this nocturnal excursion they would elude his searching eyes.

But they were very wary as they tramped through the snow, and listened to every sound that came through the moan of the wind.

Wild as the night was, and reluctant as the juniors had been to turn out into it, they felt their spirits rise as they tramped on, invigorated by the keen wind from the sea. After all, it was something of a "lark"—especially if they got through without encountering the persistent shadower.

"It will be all right," said Lowther, with growing confidence. "He was hanging about the road yesterday afternoon—I saw him from my window. But he's safe in bed now, for a cert."

"He's hardly likely to suspect us of turning out at this time of night, anyhow," said Tom cheerily.

"Well, I don't know," said Manners. "He's got it fixed in his mind that we know where the missing man Beaumont is—and, as it happens, he's right, by a queer chance. He will expect us to be in communication with the man. He may tumble to it that we think it safer by night—"

"No sign of him, anyhow," said Tom, stopping and looking about in the starlight with searching eyes.

"We turn off here for the cliffs," said Lowther.

"Come on, then."

The three juniors turned off the lane, to take the dark path that led over the cliffs to the sea-beach.

A shadow moved under a shadowy tree.

"Stop!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"The man of the moor!" ejaculated Lowther.

Tom Merry's eyes gleamed.

It was the shadower again.

Sleepless, tireless, indefatigable, it seemed that the man must be, for there he was; there, wakeful, with tireless eyes, on that wild and windy December night.

He moved out from under the tree, and stood in the path of the three juniors, his tall, broad-shouldered figure looming large in the starlight. The chums of St. Jim's stopped, eyeing him grimly.

He was dressed as they had seen him before—in a dark raincoat and a black bowler hat. It was the "man in black," whom they had encountered before break-up at school on the moor near St. Jim's, and whom they had encountered

many times since, with growing exasperation. His rugged features were set in a dogged, threatening expression now.

"Stop!" he repeated.

"Well, what do you want?" asked Tom Merry savagely.

"Where are you going—at this hour of the night?" asked the man in black quietly.

"Find out!"

The man shrugged his shoulders.

"You have denied knowing anything of the man Beaumont, whom I was seeking when I first saw you, and whom I am seeking now. You lied! Nothing else could bring you out of your beds at this hour—nothing else. You are on your way to him now."

Tom Merry set his teeth.

The man was right—the Terrible Three were on their way to the hiding-place of the absconding solicitor, Beaumont. By sheer chance, they had found the man in hiding at the bungalow on Hermit's Isle; and after long hesitation and debate, they had decided to warn him that his enemy was in the vicinity. But to visit the bungalow on the lonely rock openly was to risk guiding the shadower to the man he sought—the man whose life he sought, as the juniors believed. Hence this nocturnal expedition, which was after all a failure, owing to the sleepless vigilance of the man in black.

The man peered at their faces in the starlight searchingly.

"Listen to me," he said, and his manner was very quiet, with no hint of a threat in it now. "I told you I knew that Beaumont had some connection with St. Jim's, and when I found that you had helped him to escape from me on Wayland Moor, near the school, I knew that you knew something of him—that he was, perhaps, a relation of yours. For that reason I have kept you in sight. I have shadowed you ever since you left your school, certain that sooner or later you would guide me to the man I want. You could as easily shake a bloodhound off the trail as get rid of me before I have found Beaumont. Cannot you guess that the man has wronged me—wronged me so deeply that I shall stop at nothing in dealing with him?"

The man's eyes burned.

"I think that's very likely," answered Tom Merry calmly. "We saw the man on Wayland Moor, and he looked to us like a shifty sort of rotter. I don't know what your quarrel with him may be; but I think it's very likely that he did the wrong—he looked like it. But—"

"You have said that the man is no relative of yours."

"That's so," said Tom. "None of us ever saw him before that night on Wayland Moor, or heard of him, either."

"If that is the case, why should you befriend him, when you admit that you believe him to be in the wrong in his trouble with me?"

"Perhaps as much for your sake as for his," said Tom. "You mean the man mischief; we know you are armed, and that you threatened his life that night on the moor near the school."

"That is not your affair."

"There's a law in the country, if he has wronged you,"



"I see," said Tom Merry. "It is a bit of a twist getting out of bed in the cold. You want a little help. Here goes!" "Ow! Groogh! Ooooch!" gasped Manners, as the bedclothes were whipped off, leaving him huddling and shivering. "That better?" asked Tom. (See chapter 1.)

said Tom Merry. "I know he must have offended against the law, because he dares not call on the police for protection against you. If the law can touch him, then you have only to call upon it—we should not hesitate to tell the police anything we knew of the man, if they wanted him."

"The law could touch him," said the man in black. "The law could send him to a long term of imprisonment if I chose to invoke it."

"Then you are free to do so."

"I choose to deal with the matter myself," said the man in black grimly. "The law would imprison him; but that is not enough."

Tom's eyes flashed.

"You dare to say that—and to ask us to help you find the man! To ask us to help you commit a terrible crime."

"Is it a crime to crush a reptile—to blot out a scoundrel who has lived by trickery and fraud and chicanery?" sneered the man of the moor. "I do not think so. Besides, he is a lawyer himself—he knows every trick and twist and turn of the law; he would go to prison, but he would escape a heavy sentence—and behind the bars he would laugh at me. He has robbed me of my all—robbed the man who trusted him—and he will answer it to me!"

The juniors stood silent.

The man eyed them, searchingly, doggedly, and yet doubtfully. It was evident that he had shadowed the schoolboys, as the only possible clue to the man he sought, and who had vanished from all knowledge. Yet they had told him that they knew nothing of the man; and he had judgment enough to know, on their looks, that their word was good enough.

He scanned their faces, darkly, suspiciously, yet doubtfully.

"You know something of the man," he muttered at last. "If he is no connection of yours—if you had never seen him before that night—how is it that you know anything of him?"

"By pure chance," said Tom Merry. "I can explain

what you call his connection with our school. Mr. Beaumont acted as solicitor, at one time, to a relation of a chap named Cardew, in the Fourth Form at St. Jim's. He used to send Cardew an allowance from his uncle, Lord Lilburn. That is the man's only connection with our school. With us he never had any connection at all."

The man in black scanned his face as if he would read his very soul.

"Then you do not know where he is now?" he asked abruptly. "You look a truthful and honourable lad. Give me your word that you know nothing of him or his present whereabouts."

Tom was silent.

Two days ago he could have given that assurance, and given it freely. But circumstances had changed since then.

By sheer chance—the most unexpected chance—the juniors had learned of Beaumont's hiding-place. A chance visit to the lonely rock in the bay had revealed it.

They had known nothing when the man in black had shadowed them from school. But now they knew.

The man's look grew savagely suspicious again.

"You cannot answer—you cannot give me your word!" he exclaimed.

"Things have changed since the last time we spoke to you," said Tom Merry at last. "We have learned something since, by sheer chance."

"Then you could tell me—"

"Nothing," said Tom quietly. "Nothing to a man who openly declares that he intends to break the law and commit a crime. Call on the police to deal with Mr. Beaumont, and we will speak out at once."

"You will speak out to me!"

"Not a word!"

The man in black groped under his rain-coat. His hand reappeared, and a revolver glimmered in the starlight.

The juniors breathed hard.

They knew that they had to deal with a desperate man—a man originally decent and law-abiding enough, probably, but driven to a desperate frame of mind by cruel wrongs. The man who had wronged him, the shifty solicitor, the cringing fugitive whose terrors had moved their disgust and contempt—was the man they were shielding. But there was no help for it—gladly enough they would have let the law take its course in dealing with the rascally Beaumont; but the wronged man had not chosen to invoke the law. His thoughts were fixed on lawless and desperate vengeance; and even had their lives been at stake, the juniors would have spoken no word to place his enemy in his power.

"You will speak!" The man raised his weapon, and his eyes glinted over the barrel. "Where is Beaumont?"

Tom Merry looked at him steadily.

It was only a threat, and he knew it. The man was desperate, savagely relentless in his pursuit of vengeance upon the man who had wronged him. But he was no common ruffian. The glinting revolver was an idle menace.

"Put that away!" said Tom coolly. "Do you think you can frighten us with that?"

The man in black eyed him angrily, fiercely; but he said no more. He thrust the revolver away again, out of sight, and turned and strode away into the shadows of the trees. His footfalls made no sound in the carpet of snow. In a minute or less he had disappeared.

CHAPTER 3.

The Shadower!

TOM MERRY drew a deep breath.

For some minutes the chums of St. Jim's were silent, after the man in black had gone.

The encounter had startled them. It had dismayed them. They were on their way to the hermit's isle, the lonely rock in the bay, to warn the wretched Beaumont that he was in danger. But the meeting with the shadower had forced a change in their plans. They stood in the lightly-falling snow, silent, looking at one another dubiously. The December night had swallowed up the man in black; but none of the three St. Jim's fellows believed that he was far away.

"Well, this is a go!" said Monty Lowther, at last, breaking the troubled silence. "I suppose we can't keep on?"

Tom Merry shook his head.

"Depend on it, that man still has his eyes on us," he said. "If we go on, he will follow. We want to warn Beaumont of his danger—not to guide this fellow on his track."

"That's so," said Manners. "But—look here, Tom, what about going to the police-station to-morrow? That man, whatever his name is, means mischief—he is armed, and means to use that revolver if he comes on Beaumont. The police ought to be on in this."

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"What's the use?" said Tom. "It's for Beaumont to call in the police, if he thinks he needs protection. We can't interfere. We did speak to Inspector Skeat, before St. Jim's broke up—it was useless. This man means to commit a crime, I can't help thinking; but he has done nothing so far. The police cannot detain him or interfere with him unless Beaumont makes a complaint to them. He must be mad not to do so."

"It's pretty plain why he doesn't," said Lowther. "He's swindled this chap somehow, and the man could send him to chokoey—only he chooses to take the law into his own hands."

"Like his cheek!" said Manners.

"Yes; but that's how it is. We can't interfere," said Lowther. "How could the police take any notice of school-boys telling them that a man's life is in danger, when the man himself doesn't choose to ask for protection?"

"I—I suppose they couldn't," said Manners. "All the same, we know how the matter stands; and we've got to warn Beaumont somehow. But we can't go on to-night—that brute will follow us if we do."

"Let's get back," said Tom.

"Hold on—let's keep on and give him a walk," said Lowther. "If he chooses to shadow us, let's give him some trouble for his pains. He may get fed-up after a time."

"Let's!" agreed Tom.

The Terrible Three moved on again, towards the cliff path. But they did not head for the beach facing the hermit's rock in the bay. So long as there was a possibility of being watched, it was necessary to give the fugitive's hiding-place a wide berth. They turned off on a path over the cliffs, which led by a roundabout way back to the high road.

If the shadower was on their trail, they did not see him during a whole hour that was passed tramping by rough paths among the banks of snow.

Yet they were sure that he was following them.

They had proof of it when they came out into the open road again, and crossed it to take a field-path on the opposite side.

Looking back from the field, they saw a tall figure in the starlight on the road.

"There he is!" said Manners.

"Come on!" said Monty Lowther. "I know all the paths about here, and we'll lead him a jolly dance."

And with smiling faces the Shell fellows of St. Jim's tramped on.

They crossed several fields, tramping through the snow, and turned into a footpath through a deep wood.

For several miles they tramped, and once or twice, as they looked round, they sighted the shadower.

He was tirelessly on their trail, and they wondered whether he guessed that they were leading him on a wild-goose chase. The bare possibility that they were heading, by devious ways, for the hiding-place of the missing solicitor was sufficient to keep him on the trail.

They emerged from the woods on a path that led back to Holly Lodge. The juniors were quite tired by this time, and they were glad to see the roof of the lodge glistening white in the distance.

"Chuck it now, what?" asked Lowther.

"Yes, rather!" said Manners. "I shall be jolly glad of a couple of hours in bed before brekker."

"Same here," said Tom.

And the chums of St. Jim's tramped up the path, and entered the grounds of Holly Lodge by a little gate in the lane. As they went up to the house they looked back, and saw the tall, dark figure of the shadower standing at the gate, staring over it after them.

"He's a sticker!" murmured Lowther. "It looks as if we shan't be able to get word to Beaumont, Tom, without that blighter following us and getting into touch with him, too."

"I've thought of that," said Tom. "I've been thinking it out while we've been tramping. I think we'd better start from here, as we intended, to-morrow, as if we were going on to D'Arcy's place."

"And chuck up the whole thing?" asked Manners doubtfully.

"No. We can let our baggage go on to Eastwood House, and leave the train at the next station from here, and get back from there," said Tom. "I fancy we can dodge the shadower that way. Anyhow, we can try. We can telephone to Gussy that we shall arrive a bit later than arranged."

He knitted his brows.

"We're bound to warn Beaumont," he said. "I don't like the man—it's pretty plain that he's a rascal, but it makes me shiver to think of this man being within a mile of him—likely to butt into his hiding-place at any time. I haven't the slightest doubt that there will be bloodshed if he runs Beaumont down. We've got to prevent that. He believes that Beaumont is in the neighbourhood, and that

lonely rock is just the place he would search for him. Might have done so already if he hadn't been kept too busy watching us. Now let's get in."

The juniors re-entered the house, still silent and sleeping.

They were tired with their long tramp in the snow, and glad enough to get into the blankets again.

Tom Merry, as he laid his head on the pillow, wondered whether the tireless shadower was still out in the wild night, braving the wind and the snow, watching. The man seemed indefatigable, superhuman in his determination. The wind rose higher in the small hours, whistling and roaring round the old house, and the snow fell ever more and more thickly.

But the chums of St. Jim's did not hear it; they slept soundly, tired with their long tramp, and they were still drowsy when they were called in the morning, and they went down to breakfast.

They breakfasted with Mr. Lowther, who little dreamed of the expedition that had taken place in the night.

The M.P. and J.P. was kind and genial, in his rather stiff and crusty way. More than once the juniors had debated whether to tell him of the strange affair, and ask his counsel, but the rather grim old gentleman was not the kind of man to attract confidence, and they felt only too sure that he would pooh-pooh the whole thing, regarding it as an exaggerated fancy.

But Mr. Lowther was kind, in his own crusty way, though it was scarcely a secret that he was relieved that his nephew & Co. were going on to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's place for Christmas.

Mr. Lowther was deeply attached to his nephew Montague, but he was quite out of touch with boyhood, and could scarcely be said to enjoy the society of the nephew to whom he was attached, and to whom he had been a kind friend and a second father. In any time of trouble or stress Monty would have found his crusty old uncle his kindest and staunchest friend, but at other times it was an undoubted fact that Mr. Lowther liked his house better without noisy schoolboys in it.

Possibly because the juniors were leaving that day, Mr. James Lowther unbent considerably, and his grim old face broke into thousands of wrinkles as he actually smiled at them over the breakfast table.

"I shall take you to the station in the car," he remarked. "Your train goes at ten-thirty, I think."

"That's very kind of you, uncle," said Monty.

"My dear boy, I hope you will always find me kind," said Mr. Lowther. "I suppose you will be packing after breakfast?"

"Yes, uncle."

"I have some business matters to attend to in my study, but I will order the car for ten," said the M.P.

And after breakfast he disappeared as usual.

Monty Lowther gave his chums a rather comical look as they went up to pack, after a walk in the snowy gardens.

"We're no end honoured," he said. "Nunky's taking us to the station himself, no end bucked at seeing the last of his nephew. You'd never guess that he was fond of me, would you?"

Tom Merry laughed.

"Well, I know he is; and people have different ways of showing their affection," he said. "I'm glad he's coming, his being with us may keep that confounded shadower at a safe distance."

"Something in that," agreed Manners.

The juniors' packing was soon done, and then Tom Merry



"You will speak!" The man raised his revolver and his eyes glinted over the barrel. "Where is Beaumont?" Tom Merry looked at him steadily. It was only a threat he knew. The man was desperate, but he was no common ruffian. "Put that away," said Tom coolly. "Do you think you can frighten us with that?" (See chapter 2.)

went to the telephone to ring up Arthur Augustus D'Arcy at Eastwood House.

The voice of the swell of St. Jim's came through over the wires.

"That you, Tom Mewwy, deah boy?"

"Yes, old chap."

"Eweyth'in' all wight, what? Comin' along in time for lunch?"

"Something's happened to delay us a bit, Gussy. You won't mind if we butt in a bit later than arranged, will you?"

"Yaas, wathah—I mean not at all, deah boy. Please yourselves," said the ornament of the St. Jim's Fourth cheerily. "Telephone any time for the cah to meet you at the station. Somebody will take the call. Shut up, you ass!"

"What?"

"I was speakin' to Blake, deah boy. The howlin' ass is wuffin' my hair while I am holdin' the telephone."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You fwrightful ass!" came Gussy's voice again, apparently still addressing Blake of the Fourth. "I wegard you as a howlin' chump, Blake. Are you still there, Tom Mewwy?"

"Yes," said Tom, laughing.

"Blake wants to speak to you."

"Hallo, old Shell-fish!" came Jack Blake's cheery voice on the telephone. "We're just going out skating—the ice is a treat. We've got to be on hand, as Gussy is going to show cousin Ethel how to do some figures, and we shall be wanted to save her life."

"You uttah ass, Blake!" Tom Merry heard that voice chime in.

"Take care of yourself, Tommy, and don't be late for dinner, if you're going to cut lunch. Dinner here beats Hall at St. Jim's hollow."

"Right-ho!" said Tom with a chuckle. And he rang off, and went out to join his chums and Mr. Lowther, and the car rolled away from Holly Lodge.

CHAPTER 4.

The Hermit's Isle!

"THERE he is!"

Manners whispered the words. The car had stopped at the station, and Mr. Lowther had stepped down, and the juniors turned out. The bags were carried in, and the juniors were following, when the tall figure of the man in black was sighted. He was lounging by the booking-office, smoking a cigarette. He gave the juniors a glance, and strolled away.

Tom Merry set his lips. But for the presence of Mr. Lowther, he would have been tempted to collar the indefatigable shadower, and bump him in the snow, with the aid of his chums, in the St. Jim's style. But in the presence of the solemn and serious old gentleman, such a proceeding was not to be thought of.

The juniors took their tickets for Easthorpe, and Mr. Lowther accompanied them to the platform. He stood at the door of their carriage till the train started.

But the shadower did not appear on the platform. Tom Merry & Co. kept their eyes open, and they were quite assured that, though he had seen them enter the station, he had not followed them to the platform, and was not in the train.

It seemed that the long shadowing was over at last. The man in black had shadowed them from school, he had watched them at Laurel Villa—Miss Priscilla Fawcett's home—he had followed them on to Holly Lodge. They had fully expected that when they left for Eastwood House, he would be on the trail.

Knowing, as they did, that the man he sought was hidden on the lonely rock within three miles of Holly Lodge, the juniors would not have been displeased, for once, to see the shadower following on—farther and farther from the destined victim of his vengeance.

But it was clear that he was no longer on their trail. They were going, and he was staying.

The whistle shrieked, Mr. Lowther shook hands with the juniors, the carriage door slammed, and the train moved out of the station.

"There he is again!" said Manners. From the carriage windows, the juniors had a glimpse of the tall figure of the man in black. He was sauntering along a lane beside the railway track; and as they looked at him, he glanced at the train, and saw them at the carriage window. A grim, ironical smile flickered over his rugged, bronzed face for a second, and, with a mocking gesture, he lifted his hat in farewell.

The train rushed on, and he vanished from sight behind. "He's done with us," said Lowther.

Tom Merry nodded. His face was very serious. "I'd have been better pleased to see him on the train," he said. "If he followed us as far as Easthorpe, Beaumont would be out of danger. He's staying on, and that shows —"

"He knows jolly well that we went out last night to see Beaumont, though we didn't see him, after all," said Manners. "He knows from that, that the giddy lawyer is somewhere near Holly Lodge."

"That's it," said Tom.

"Anyhow, he's off our track now," said Lowther. "We can drop out at the next station, and walk back to the bay, keeping clear of the village. This time he can't follow us."

"Safe as houses!" said Manners.

"That's so," said Tom. "He's jolly keen, but he hasn't guessed what we intend to do. He thinks we're off for Christmas. I fancy it will be all plain sailing now. We're bound to give Beaumont a warning; but, after that, I shall be jolly glad to be done with both of them."

"Yes, rather!"

When the train stopped at the next station, the Terrible Three alighted. Their baggage had been booked for Easthorpe, and was going on in the train. After seeing Beaumont, the juniors intended to catch a later train for Easthorpe, where they would pick up their baggage and go on to Eastwood House. They little imagined, at that moment, what was to happen that frosty day.

They left the station, and started on a long walk across country.

In a short time they came in sight of the sea, rolling, grey and rough, in foaming billows, after the wild wind of the night before.

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They followed the shore, lonely and desolate, powdered with snow, till they reached the bay, where the Hermit's Isle rose from the grey waters, lonely and barren, with no sign of life about it, save a few screaming seagulls.

Hidden by the rough rocks, as they knew, the lonely bungalow stood there, miles from any other human habitation. And in the bungalow was hidden the absconding solicitor, Beaumont—hidden in fear and trembling in the solitary hiding-place he had contrived for a refuge before his flight. It was not from the police that the defaulter was hiding, but from the man he had wronged and robbed, who had taken vengeance into his own lawless hands. His hiding-place would not have served him long, had the man in black chosen to invoke the law, and leave Beaumont to its tender mercies. Tom Merry & Co. would have had no hesitation in giving the necessary information for the arrest of a fugitive swindler. But unless a charge was brought against the man, the police did not want him, and obviously the man in black intended to bring no charge. He had taken the law into his own hands, and in that high-handed proceeding, it was the duty of the St. Jim's juniors to defeat him, if they could. It was certain now, in the mind of the shadower, that the man he sought was hidden somewhere within a radius of Holly Lodge, and sooner or later his indefatigable search would unearth the miserable refugee of the bungalow, and then— Before that could happen, the wretched fugitive, warned of his danger, would be in flight again, if all went well. Once he was safe from personal violence, Tom Merry & Co. could gladly wash their hands of the affair; the man in black could please himself whether he invoked the law or not to deal with the swindler.

"Here we are!" said Lowther, at last.

The juniors stopped on the lonely beach, opposite the isle—lonely, desolate as the shore of some desert island, on that rough, winter day. Lonely and barren, the little isle scarcely more than a jutting rock, rose from the surging sea. A few leafless branches could be seen over the rocks, swaying and groaning in the wind.

"Tide's up," said Monty; "we shall have to wait. It's going down—looks like an hour to wait!"

"Can't be helped," said Tom Merry.

"Keep in cover, in case that cheery old shadower is nosing about," suggested Manners.

"You bet!" The juniors sat down to rest in cover of a high rock, watching the sea. The tide, surging between the beach and the rocky islet, was sinking, but it was slow, and seemed slower to the watching juniors. Until the tide was down, it was impossible to reach the isle, which was only an island at high-water. Surging and splashing and foaming, the sea receded more and more.

Tom Merry rose at last.

"Let's start," he said. "We shall have to risk getting our feet wet. The sooner we get away, the better."

"Come on, then," said Lowther.

The juniors tramped down the shingly beach, and out on the rough stretch of sand and rock and shingle that lay between them and the Hermit's Isle. They tramped among sharp rocks, and deep pools of water, and masses of tangled seaweed. Twice or thrice a surge of the sea covered their path with foaming water, and they were soaked to the knees. But they were through at last, and clambering up the rocks on the farther side.

The wind whistled sharply about their ears, as they clambered over steep rocks. Salt sea-spray almost rained on them.

Beyond the rough rocks lay the stretch of stony earth, scarce a hundred yards in extent, which formed the isle—more sand and rock than earth, but growing patches of sparse grass and weeds, and a few stunted trees stripped bare by the gales.

In the midst of the ragged, unkempt garden, thick with dead weeds and shrubs, caked with snow, stood the low building, the timber bungalow of two rooms, on the site where once a hermit's cell had stood in ancient days. As a summer holiday resort, for fishing and boating and swimming, the bungalow was not unattractive, lonely and wild as the place was, but in winter it was grim and forbidding. It was difficult to believe that any man, of his own choice, would dwell there in the wild December days and stormy nights, with the gales shrieking over the roof, and the sea thundering round; cut off half the time by the roaring tide that closed round the isle from all intercourse with other human beings. And it was not by choice that the wretched Beaumont lived there, the juniors knew that; it was fear that had driven him to such a wild abode—fear of lawless vengeance from the man he had wronged, fear of the police if the man in black should, at last, resort to the law.

It was said of old that the way of the transgressor is hard, and certainly it was hard enough for the wretched man who had betrayed his trust, and was driven to wild and terrifying solitude to save his worthless skin.

The juniors tramped over the shingly, muddy, snowy earth, through the open gateway of the crazy fence that surrounded the little building. Snow was thick on the rocky islet—the bungalow roof was a sheet of it, white and velvety under the steely sky; snow was banked and stacked round the building, and on the seaward side the wind had banked it higher and higher, over the shutters of the back windows. The front of the house, with its little wooden porch, faced the land.

About the house there was no sign of life, save a thin column of smoke that rose from the chimney.

The windows were shuttered, the door closed; there was no sound, no movement. But for the smoke rising from the chimney the juniors might have fancied that their previous visit had scared the wretched refugee into flight, and that the place was totally deserted, as it always had been in winter-time. But the rising smoke told of a fire within; even had the wretched man feared to give such a hint of human presence there, he could not have lived without fire in that bitter, searching cold.

Knock!
The sound rang with many hollow echoes through the building.

Knock, knock, knock!
But there came no answer from the lonely bungalow.

CHAPTER 5.

The Man In Hiding!

KNOCK, knock, knock!
Tom Merry had knocked with his knuckles at first; but now he picked up a fragment of rock, and used it. Loud and sharp the knocking on the door rang through the house.

There was no sound, save the echoing of the knocking; no movement in the bungalow.

It was certain that the man, if he was there, must hear;



St Jim's Jingles!



No. 15 MR. HORACE RATCLIFF.

HE stalks abroad in cap and gown,
His countenance is thund'ry;
He wears a fierce, forbidding frown
Which startles all and sundry.
When Horace Ratcliff's on the prow,
An ashplant tightly gripping,
Few stop to meet his angry scowl—
To safety they go skipping!

No sterner tyrant walked the earth
Since the fierce days of Nero:
No connoisseur of human worth
Could hail him as a hero.
The New House fellows like him not,
And Figgins, Kerr, and "Fatty,"
Continually bemoan their lot:
They've no respect for Ratty!

In those "unhappy far-off days"
Of which the poet prattles,
Ratty, perhaps, had childish ways,
And played with hoops and rattles.
But, if he ever was a youth,
(And many fellows doubt it),
Old Ratty has, to tell the truth,
Forgotten all about it!



MR. RATCLIFF.
Master of the New House.

What makes him so severe and stern?
That is a puzzling question:
Perhaps he often gets a turn
Of painful indigestion!
Perhaps a pessimist is he,
Who pines in sad seclusion,
And sees in life no fun or glee,
But sadness and delusion.

He lacks the kindly human touch
Of Railton and of Lathom;
Boys do not interest him much,
Their ways he cannot fathom.
To spare the rod and spoil the child,
Is *not* his resolution;
In fact, when Mr. Ratcliff's wild,
He does great execution!

Tyrant! I bid you now adieu!
There's nothing to your credit;
I've nothing good to say of you,
Or gladly I'd have said it!
To rule by kindness, not by fear,
Should be your fixed intention;
And when you read what's written
here
You'll doom me to detention!

NEXT WEEK:—EPHRAIM TAGGLES THE PORTER AT ST. JIM'S.

"He's there!" said Tom Merry, with a gesture towards the smoke that rose from the chimney, and was swept away by the wind as fast as it rose.

Manners shivered.
"What a place to live in! All right for a jolly party in the summer, but alone, in the winter— Grooogh!"
"Safe, I suppose, and that's all he thinks of," said Tom.
"But it's not safe with that man prowling round the coast. He could see the smoke from the beach if he looked this way."

Lowther nodded.
"Strangers in this district don't even know there's a bungalow on this rock," he said. "But anyone spotting the smoke would guess that there was a house of some sort here, and if that chap in black spotted it he might think it out that it was a likely spot for a man hiding away."

"I should think it pretty certain, in the long run," said Tom. "But if Beaumont has any sense, he will clear. Anyhow, all we can do is to warn him. Here we are!"

They stopped in the little crazy porch, and Tom Merry knocked at the door

the knocking could have been heard to the farthest extent of the little islet.

Knock, knock!
Tom Merry grew impatient.

The chums of St. Jim's had no time to waste; they had a long walk before them when they left the island, and in any case they must arrive late at Eastwood House. Tom Merry tried the door, but, as he expected, it was fastened within. He knocked again, more loudly and impatiently.

But no sign of life came from the house.

"He's afraid to open the door," muttered Lowther. "The wretched funk would think at once that it was his enemy who had found him out. Ten to one he's crouching in there in a blue funk!"

"Better call to him!" said Manners.

"Shout, then, all together," said Tom. "He's bound to hear us! I'm getting fed-up with this!"

And the chums of St. Jim's shouted in unison:

"Mr. Beaumont!"

Their voices rang over the little islet.

Certainly, the man in the bungalow heard them. But he made no reply; not a sound or a movement.

"Mr. Beaumont!" shouted Tom Merry again. "Answer us if you are there! We are friends—at least, we are not enemies!"

"You've seen us before, old bean!" roared Lowther. "We're the chaps who helped you get away on Wayland Moor weeks ago."

"Let us in, can't you?" bawled Manners. "Or come to a window and let us speak to you! We don't want to come in."

There was a sound of shuffling feet at last.

Probably the boyish voices reassured the wretched occupant of the bungalow; it was in a very different voice that the man in black would have hailed him.

The door did not open. But a little sliding panel in the door, which the juniors had not noticed hitherto, slid back, leaving an orifice about two inches square, at the height of a man's face. Evidently that little spy-hole had been contrived by the occupant of the bungalow. A glittering eye was seen at it, and its wild glitter startled the juniors. Its bright and savage glance took them in as they stood in the porch.

"That you, Mr. Beaumont?" asked Tom Merry quietly. From the first meeting he had felt a repugnance towards the man, and his repugnance was stronger now than ever.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Tom Merry. I am a schoolboy of St. Jim's. If you look at me, you may remember my face, though you saw it before only by the light of a lamp on a dark night on Wayland Moor."

The glittering eye scanned him.

Only the man's eye could be seen by the juniors, and the effect of it was strange and eerie, glittering through the spy-hole in the door.

"I—I think I remember. You—you are friends, then?" muttered the voice of the unseen occupant of the bungalow.

"At least, we have come here to give you a friendly warning," said Tom. "You remember us now?"

"Yes, yes. Are you alone here?"

"Yes."

"Did—did anyone follow you coming here?"

"No."

"You are sure?"

"As sure as we can be," said Tom. "We took jolly good care not to be followed here, Mr. Beaumont."

Still the door did not open, and the watchful eye glittered at the juniors. There was fear in it, and a shifty cunning, and it reminded the juniors of the gleaming eye of a snake.

"Was it you who came here a couple of days ago?" asked the shaking, muttering voice within.

"Yes," said Tom. "We saw you then, and that was how we knew you were here, Beaumont. We had not the faintest idea that there was anyone on the isle; and we were astonished to see you. You ran into the house so quickly that we had no chance to speak. But, thinking it over afterwards, we thought we ought to come and give you a warning."

"Of—of what?"

"The man who was after you on Wayland Moor that night, he is after you here—he is somewhere on shore now, not more than a couple of miles away—"

There was a cry in the bungalow, like the cry of a hunted animal in distress.

It touched the hearts of the St. Jim's juniors, in spite of the scorn and contempt they could not help feeling for the man's terror.

"He—he is here?"

"Only a few miles away, at any rate," said Tom.

"You are sure—the same man?"

"We've spoken with him," said Tom. "It's the man who was hunting you on Wayland Moor when we helped you get clear—the man in black."

"You are sure—sure that it was Jocelyn—Paul Jocelyn?"

"I don't know the man's name. But it is the man of the moor, and he is—*is* hunting for you. If he should find you here, you know best what will happen," said Tom Merry. "We came to warn you."

Beaumont gave a groan.

There was a sound of drawing bolts and rattling chain, and the door was opened.

"Come in!" breathed a husky voice in the dusky passage within. "Quick, quick! How do you know that the scoundrel may not be watching? You may be seen—quick!"

"We've told you all we came to say," said Tom reluctantly. "You know best what to do now—cut and run, I should think!"

"And perhaps fall into his hands as soon as I leave my shelter?" groaned Beaumont.

Tom Merry did not answer that. Certainly there was a risk that the fleeing fugitive might run fairly into the arms

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of the shadower. But to remain in the bungalow was to be run to earth sooner or later.

"Come in—come in!" breathed the wretched man. "I trust you—I trust you! Help me now, and I will reward you—I will reward you richly! But come in—come in quickly, that I may shut the door. Quick! Quick!"

The man's terror was pitiable to witness.

Reluctant as the juniors were to enter the house, or to have any further dealings with a man whom they more than suspected of dishonesty and foul play, they could scarcely refuse. They stepped into the dusky passage, and Beaumont hurriedly shut the door and replaced bolts and chain.

He made them a sign to follow, and they followed him into the room that was used as a kitchen. A dim light penetrated through the shutters at the windows; the lamp was unlighted; but a glowing fire in the stove diffused warmth and a ruddy firelight. The juniors were glad enough to draw near the fire; outside, the bitter December wind had bitten them hard.

The man made them a sign to be silent. He listened with bent head, like a hunted animal. But no sound came except the wail of the winter wind and the booming of the waves upon the rocks.

"Be seated—be seated," said Beaumont at last, in quick, nervous tones. "Warm yourselves—you must be cold!" There was a touch of polite hospitality in his manner, strangely out of keeping with his trembling terror. In his prosperous days probably he had been a very different man—portly and a little pompous, probably, in some comfortable suburban home. Now he was shrunken and thin and meagre, his face almost as ghastly as a skull, his watchful, gleaming eyes deeply sunken and overhung by grey brows.

"But—" muttered Tom uneasily. He was deeply reluctant to linger under the roof of an absconding swindler. He pitied the man, he could not help that, while he despised him; but he could not forget what he was.

"Be seated—be seated," muttered Beaumont. "You must tell me all about—about that man; that villain Jocelyn! I must know how I stand! It may be by chance that he is in this neighbourhood. He may know nothing of me. For mercy's sake tell me all frankly. I am in danger of my life—of my very life! I tell you, that man means murder."

"It is because we think so that we are here," said Tom.

He glanced at his chums. They were anxious to get away and to get to their train for Eastwood House. But compassion for the wretched man overcame other feelings, even their repugnance of him. Whatever he had done—and it was obvious that he had done deep wrong—no man had a right to hunt him down like a wild beast in a law-abiding country.

He drew chairs to the fire, and the juniors sat down.

"After all, we can get a later train," said Manners.

Beaumont did not sit down; he seemed unable to keep still. His manner reminded the juniors of that of a wild animal in a cage.

"Tell me—tell me all!" he muttered, eyeing the St. Jim's juniors eagerly. "He may not know—he may not suspect—and you will not betray me. You are friends—friends. I am deeply grateful. On my word of honour I am deeply grateful, my young friends!"

Tom Merry told him, curtly enough, of the juniors' dealings with the man in black—Paul Jocelyn—as the solicitor called him. Beaumont listened attentively, asking a question now and then, with the sharpness of a lawyer, showing that his terrors had not deprived him of his professional cunning. His look, when Tom Merry concluded, was not pleasant.

"Then it was you—you who have brought me into danger," he said bitterly. "But for Jocelyn's fancy that you knew something of me, he would not have followed you into this district at all—he would not now be searching about here for me—"

"That is hardly our fault," said Tom curtly, "and he would never have had such a fancy, but for the fact that we helped you on Wayland Moor. If we had not helped you then to escape, he would have had you, so it comes to the same thing."

"Yes—yes; I am not ungrateful," muttered Beaumont, with a return of his sycophantic manner. "I assure you, my young friend, that I am grateful—grateful indeed; you have acted kindly, generously, in coming to warn me."

Tom Merry concealed his disgust as well as he could. He was quite well aware of how much gratitude that cunning, shifty, cowardly nature was capable of feeling.

He rose from his chair.

"We've told you all of it now, Mr. Beaumont," he said. "If we can help you further—" He spoke with reluctance, but he felt that it was up to the St. Jim's fellows to help the man to get clear if they could.

"What can I do?" muttered Beaumont. "What—what can I do?"

"The law will protect you from violence," said Tom. "Place yourself under the protection of the police."



A glittering eye was seen at the spyhole in the door, and its wild glitter startled Tom Merry & Co. "Who are you?" came the voice. "My name is Tom Merry—I am a schoolboy of St. Jim's. And we have come to give you a warning!" (See chapter 5.)

Beaumont shook his head without replying. "Let me speak plainly, Mr. Beaumont," said Tom quietly. "You have done something that places you in Jocelyn's power. If you escape him by going to the police, he can charge you with something—fraud, I suppose? Is that it?"

Beaumont did not answer.

"If that is it, you'd better make up your mind to face it," said Tom. "It may be serious, but it's better than being shot down like a dog—and that is what the man in black intends, I am convinced of it!"

Beaumont shuddered.

"We will help you get to the nearest village, where you can claim police protection," said Tom. "Sooner or later that man will find you here. Even if you escape, he is like a bloodhound on your trail. He will never give you up, that's as plain as daylight. Can't you see that it's the only thing to be done?"

The wretched man was still silent.

But it seemed to the juniors that he was trying to think it out—trying to decide whether to yield himself to the law he had broken, to escape the vengeance of the man he had wronged. He moved about the kitchen, his lips writhing, as if he were murmuring to himself. Then suddenly he gave a convulsive bound, and every vestige of colour fled from his ghastly face.

"What—what was that?"

"I heard nothing," said Tom.

"A footstep—"

"It was the wind," said Manners.

"It was a footstep!" Beaumont trembled as if with the palsy. "A footstep—he has followed you here—"

"Impossible!" said Tom. "It is absolutely certain that he never followed us here, Mr. Beaumont. He—"

Tom broke off.

Knock!

It was a loud, sharp knock at the door, and rang and echoed through the lonely bungalow like thunder to the startled ears within.

CHAPTER 6.

Hunted Down!

TOM MERRY & CO. exchanged startled glances. Beaumont leaned with both hands on the kitchen table, shaking from head to foot. His terror was pitiable to witness. Obviously he had no doubt that it was his relentless enemy who had run him down at last—run him to earth in his lonely, sea-girt refuge.

Yet the juniors were absolutely assured that the man in black had not followed them; that he had been thrown right off their trail. They had left him behind when they had taken the train, that was certain; and it was by devious paths that they had reached the Hermit's Isle afterwards. Had the man the scent of a bloodhound for his prey?

The knock at the door was repeated.

A hand was heard groping over the door, trying the handle, pushing at the panels. But the bolts held fast.

"It can't be that rotter," breathed Manners. "He can't have shadowed us here—he can't know we are here. It's some chance visitor to the place, nosing about."

"Possibly!" muttered Tom Merry.

Monty Lowther shook his head. He did not think so; and in their hearts his chums agreed with him.

What chance visitor was likely to tramp across the stretch of shingle and rock, swept by the surge of the sea, drenched with freezing spray, on that windy day in December? Even

with the tide at its lowest, the ford was swept by the surge when the wind blew hard, and the spray came down like rain. And what chance visitor was likely to knock at the bungalow door, and then grope over the door and push and press, with the evident intention of forcing an entrance if he could?

The door creaked as the groping hands pressed upon it from without. The juniors, listening in breathless silence, heard a louder, sharper creak, and they knew that a powerful shoulder was being driven against the outside of the door, in an effort to drive it in. It was no chance visitor who was making that attempt.

Beaumont lifted his eyes to the juniors; his face was colourless.

"It is he!" His voice was scarcely audible. "It is he—Paul Jocelyn! I am a dead man!"

The door creaked and groaned. But the wood was strong. The bungalow had been stoutly built to stand against the winter gales. The silent juniors heard a deep breath without, in the porch, as the man ceased his efforts.

Footfalls—faint but easily followed by a straining ear—prowled round the bungalow.

Groping hands felt over the shutters of the windows; but they were fastened by iron bolts within. The back door at the opposite end of the little passage that ran through the house, was tried, and it was heard to groan under the pressure of a powerful shoulder. But iron bars held it fast.

Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther stood still, their hearts beating thickly.

It was a strange, eerie situation. It was as if some wild, fierce beast prowled round the little building, seeking entrance; like a famished wolf at the wigwam of an Indian hunter.

The sounds ceased at last.

For some minutes there was silence, and then footfalls came to the front door again, and there was a loud knock.

"I am a dead man!" muttered Beaumont, and he sank weakly into a chair, his ghastly face bowed into his hands on the table.

Then he raised his head and gave the St. Jim's juniors a haggard look.

"Help me! Stand by me! You will not see a man murdered?"

Tom Merry compressed his lips.

"Not while we can raise a hand to prevent it," he said.

"We're landed in this now," said Manners, in a low voice. "It's the man in black right enough—Jocelyn, as that poor wretch calls him."

"He can't know that Beaumont is here," said Tom. "He knew he was in the vicinity—at least, he felt certain of it. That was why he stayed behind when we took the train. He let us go, intending to beat the whole neighbourhood for Beaumont's hiding-place. You remember, the other day we saw him staring out towards this rock. Very likely he thought of it then as a possible place. He has crossed over now the tide is out, and, finding this bungalow here—"

It was plain enough.

The man in black was searching the lonely rock for a possible trace of his enemy. He knocked at the door of the bungalow to see the occupant, and as the door was not opened, his suspicions strengthened. So far that was all—he was acting on suspicion, not upon certainty. He suspected that the man he sought was in the lonely bungalow.

"Hark!" whispered Lowther.

The knocking at the door had ceased. A deep, powerful voice called out, high above the wail of the wind:

"Ho, there! Who is in this house?"

No further doubt was possible, for it was the well-known voice of the man in black—the man-hunter of Wayland Moor.

"Who is here? You can hear my voice, whoever you are. Answer me before I beat in your door."

The juniors made no answer, and only a low moan of terror came from Beaumont.

There was a pause. Evidently the man in black was almost certain of his suspicions now; yet hesitated to break in the door, lest he should be, after all, mistaken.

But the pause was brief. His voice was heard again, shouting savagely:

"Beaumont! Are you there, you dog?"

The man leaning on the kitchen table shuddered.

"Beaumont, you are there! I've run you to earth at last, you old fox! Have you your plunder with you, you scoundrel? Say your prayers. You have seen your last sunrise. Answer me, you dog!"

The wretched man only moaned.

"You will not open the door!" The man in black laughed harshly, a savage and hideous laugh. "A fragment of rock will soon beat it in."

His footsteps were heard trampling on the shingly path.

Tom Merry breathed hard.

A fragment of jagged rock in the powerful hands of the

man-hunter would soon beat in the bungalow door. And then—

Beaumont staggered to his feet. His trembling hand groped in his pocket, and came out with a silver flask in it. He drank deeply from the flask, and a faint flush of colour came into his pallid cheeks. Something like firmness, for the moment, appeared in his manner.

He crossed to an open portmanteau in a corner of the room, groped in the interior of it, and drew out a revolver. He examined the firearm with burning eyes, and then tottered into the passage, and stood within the bolted door, close to the little spy-hole through which he had watched the juniors half an hour ago.

Heavy footsteps sounded outside, grinding on shingle. The man in black was returning, with a heavy lump of rock in his hands. Beaumont slid back the little panel, and thrust the revolver through the opening.

"Stop!" panted Tom Merry.

He sprang into the passage towards the hunted man, with outstretched hand. But he was too late.

Bang!

There was a sudden yell without—a yell of pain and surprise. Then there was a crash of a falling rock, as it fell from the hands of the man in black. The juniors listened tensely; but they did not hear the sound they dreaded—that of a falling body. They heard panting breath—a muttered curse—and then receding footsteps.

The man in black was gone—for the moment, at least, he was gone.

CHAPTER 7.

In Direst Peril!

BEAUMONT stood in the passage, the smoking pistol in his hand. But his brief courage was gone; he staggered against the wall, limp and scared. The revolver dropped from his hand with a clatter.

Tom Merry picked it up.

The man's haggard eyes were upon him.

"He was hit!" muttered Beaumont. "He was hit!"

Tom opened his lips to speak, but closed them again. After all, how could he condemn the man for what he had done, or tried to do, when the avenger without was openly and lawlessly seeking his life. Once the door was beaten in, Beaumont was, as he had said, a dead man. He was entitled to fight for his life. By every law, a man assailed by murderous violence was entitled to use a deadly weapon in self-defence.

"He was hit!" repeated Beaumont, with trembling lips.

"Good heavens!" breathed Manners. "How is this going to end?"

The situation was terrible enough for the St. Jim's juniors. The man in black sought no quarrel with them, it was true, and would not willingly have harmed them; but they could not desert the wretched solicitor and leave him to his fate. Neither, as they could guess, would the man in black have allowed them now to pass freely from the isle; for their first proceeding would have been to bring the police to the spot.

Even Beaumont, much as he dreaded the law he had broken, would have been glad to see the blue uniforms, now that his enemy was fairly at his throat; now that the last hope of escape was gone. But until he had settled with his enemy, it was certain that Paul Jocelyn would not allow the juniors to leave. Whether they liked it or not, their lot was now thrown in with that of the hunted absconder.

And if they stood between the lawless avenger and his prey—and assuredly they meant to do so—what then? The grim realisation forced itself into their minds that their lives were in danger, as well as Beaumont's—that it was within the bounds of possibility that they would never leave that lonely rock alive.

But the sense of danger did not have the same effect upon them as upon the wretched fugitive. Their faces grew grim at the thought, and their courage rose to meet it.

Crack!

It was the report of a pistol without.

A bullet spattered on the door, chipping the wood. But the wood was thick, and the bullet glanced off without penetrating.

Beaumont started convulsively.

Crack, crack!

Twice again the revolver rang, and the bullets chipped the door. Then the man in black was heard shouting again.

"Will you come out, Rufus Beaumont? Will you open the door and face the man you robbed? Or shall I riddle your house?"

Crack, crack, crack!

The man loosed off the revolver as soon as he had finished speaking, and the bullets crashed on the window-shutters. One of them came through into the kitchen, and there was a clatter of breaking glass. Broken glass and a flattened bullet dropped to the floor.

"I say, this is getting pretty thick!" muttered Lowther. "The man's a dashed lunatic, I think! We'd better let him know we're here, Tom."

"I think so," assented Tom Merry. "If he's got any sense, he may understand that he can't deal with four, though he could with one."

"That's so," said Manners. Crash!

It was the impact of a heavy rock on the back door at the end of the passage that separated the two rooms of the bungalow.

Tom Merry ran along the passage.

Beumont's revolver was in his hand, though Tom certainly did not intend to use it if he could help it. But at any cost the savage avenger had to be kept from breaking into the bungalow.

Crash!

The back door was barred, and did not give. But the terrific crash of the jagged rock split into the dusky passage.

"Stop that!" shouted Tom Merry.

Through the split in the heavy wood he could see the man now, the heavy rock raised in his powerful hands.

In sheer astonishment the man in the dark raincoat paused as the new and unexpected voice fell on his ears.

He threw down the rock.

"Who is that?" he exclaimed.

"You've seen me before," said Tom. "Tom Merry, of St. Jim's."

The man was evidently astounded. It was plain that he had never dreamed that the St. Jim's juniors were anywhere near at hand after having seen them leave by train that morning.

"You here!" he exclaimed.

"All three of us!" said Tom.

"What does this mean? What are you doing here?" exclaimed Jocelyn.

He pressed his face to the split in the door, peering into the interior of the bungalow.

"Have I made a mistake?" he panted. "Is not Beaumont here? Why then did you not open the door?"

But he did not wait for an answer.

He understood almost in a flash.

"You did not fire; it was Beaumont that fired on me. He is here—this is his hiding-place—the place you were seeking last night when I watched you. You were tricking me when you left by train this morning. I understand! The scoundrel is here!"

"Mr. Beaumont is here," said Tom steadily. "And we are here, to stand by him and defend him if you attempt to do him harm."

"Fool! What is he to you?"

"Nothing!"

"Mind your own business, then!" exclaimed Jocelyn savagely. "Dare to stand between me and that thief and swindler and you will run the risk of sharing his fate!"

"If he is a thief and swindler, call on the police to deal with him," said Tom Merry. "So long as you seek his life we are bound to do everything we can to save him."

"Fool!"

A quavering voice from Beaumont came from behind Tom Merry.

"Shoot him down! Shoot him down while you have the chance!"

"Shut up!" growled Manners.

Tom Merry did not heed the wretched man. He was not likely to fire on the face that was pressed to the split in the door. But for the man's murderous intentions, the juniors' sympathies would have been with him, not with the shrinking wretch in the bungalow. But they were forced to stand by the man whom they despised from the bottom of their hearts. They could not see murder done.

"Listen to me!" said the man in black, after a long pause. "I seek no quarrel with you. You are free to go in peace—after I have dealt with that scoundrel! Listen!



Crack! It was the ring of Jocelyn's revolver thrust in at the spyhole in the door. "Good heavens!" breathed Manners. He had felt the wind of the bullet as it passed. (See Chapter 9.)

That man is—or was—a solicitor. All that I had was in his keeping, and he robbed me of my all while I was away on active service. I came back from Mesopotamia, to find myself almost a beggar; and he fled. Even now I am assured—I am certain—that he has in his possession a large amount of what he has robbed me of; he did not flee empty-handed. He spent my money, and the money of others—wasted it right and left in reckless speculation. But he did not flee a beggar, as he left me. Either with him now or in some hiding-place he has thousands of pounds that do not belong to him. You are trying to defend a thief with the stolen goods in his hands. I tell you this—that you may step out in time and wash your hands of that villain and his affairs. I do not wish to harm you; I shall be sorry to harm you. But that man is my game, and a dozen lives shall not stand between me and vengeance!"

The juniors listened in silence.

There were the accents of truth in the savage, ringing voice of the man in black; and, besides, they knew that only some deep and terrible wrong could have driven such a man to such a course. The loathing they felt for the shrinking, trembling wretch behind them intensified as they listened.

But the situation was not changed. They had suspected something of the sort; and now that they knew the facts it made no difference. Thief and swindler as he was, they could not stand idly by while the man was murdered.

"You hear me?" panted the man in black.

"I hear you," said Tom.

"You believe me?"

"I believe you."

"Then go your way in peace, and leave me to deal with Rufus Beaumont."

"If he has done what you say—and I do not doubt it—call in the police."

The man in black gave a scoffing laugh.

"I have already answered that! The police will not serve my turn. His life is what I want!"

"That settles it!" said Tom Merry. "Call in the police, and he shall be handed over; we will see that he does not escape them. But we shall risk our lives to prevent a crime."

"Fool!"

(Continued on page 16.)

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THE St. Jim's News




SPORTING GOSSIP!

By
Monty Lowther.

ONE of my correspondents has sent me what he considers to be the finest historical footer eleven the world could produce. Here it is:

Goalkeeper.

WELLINGTON—impossible to "beat" him.

Backs.

OLIVER CROMWELL—a great "Protector,"
HENRY VIII.—A "stout" Defender.

Half-backs.

DICK TURPIN—expert at "holding up."
COOK (the explorer)—would see that the
Forwards were "well fed."
NELSON—would command Victory.

Forwards.

COLONEL CODY—a great man "on the
wing."
JOHN BUNYAN—for making "Progress."
COLUMBUS—sailed straight for his goal.
WILLIAM TELL—a rattling good shot.
GEORGE STEPHENSON—goes like a Rocket.

An excellent eleven! I am glad to see my correspondent does not include King Charles I., who would undoubtedly "lose his head." I'm not sure that I should choose Columbus as leader of the attack, for he was too fond of "tripping." However, on the whole, the above eleven would take some whacking.

A very interesting footer match was played last Wednesday at St. Jim's between teams representing the staffs of the "St. Jim's News" and the "Greyfriars Herald." The duties and cares of editorial work were thrown to the winds for one afternoon, at any rate, and twenty-two juvenile journalists chased the bounding leather. It was a thrilling game. Penfold, the Greyfriars post, put his side ahead in the first minute, and Tom Merry brought the scores level on the stroke of half-time. It was a battle royal in the second half. Editor Harry Wharton got a grand goal for the "Greyfriars Herald," who chug grimly to their lead. Just before the finish, however, Talbot headed through for the "St. Jim's News," and a fine game ended with honours easy. After the match there was a handsome repast at the tuckshop, and the rival journalists parted the best of friends.

I have been chatting to some of the St. Jim's fellows on the subject of their favourite winter sports. The majority, of course, place footer first, but there are a few striking exceptions. Baggy Trimple says he is very fond of mountaineering, and would love to climb "Mont Blancange"! Arthur Augustus D'Arcy considers that

tobogganing is ripping good fun, but "it wumples an' wains a fellow's twousahs, bai Jove!" Jack Blake told me that his favourite sport was paper-chasing, especially when the paper happened to be the GEM or the "Magnet." George Alfred Grundy tells me he has invented a new game, called "Sockit." It's a variation of footer, but you punch the ball all the time instead of kicking it. Footer played with clenched fists ought to be a sight worth seeing! Finally, D'Arcy minor frankly confessed to me that his favourite winter sport was mud-larking!

DECEMBER



By
Ralph Reckness Cardew

No cheery sun at rising-bell,
No pleasure in its gloomy knell;
No jumping out like Grandpa Kruschen,
No nimble, active constitution,
No lively lark, no cheery caper,
No sight save fog and mist and vapour;
No jokes from any jolly paper—
DECEMBER!

No tea in Hall that's really hot,
No brekker (Trimple's scoffed the lot!);
No cheery faces in the Furn,
No earthly way of keeping warm;
No beaming smile from Mr. Latham,
No Euclid problems you can fathom;
No state but "blues" (each fellow bath-
en)—
DECEMBER!

No footer match (the fog's too thick),
No tuckshop feeds (you can't get tick);
No country tramps (confound the weather),
No biking down the lanes together;
No paper-chase, cross-country run,
No shining of the jolly sun;
No lights, no feeds, no feats of fun—
DECEMBER!

No fire (the chimney's choked with soot),
No blaze to warm your frozen foot;
No cakes and pastries in the cupboard,
No fate save that of Mother Hubbard;
No roasting chestnuts at the grate,
No buttered muffins on a plate;
No books to read (all out of date!)—
DECEMBER!

No fishing in the sluggish Rhyll,
No catching anything but chill;
No warmth—for every prospect freezes,
No sounds save wheezes, barks, and sneezes;
No long, delightful hours of leisure,
No merry hunts for hidden treasure,
No joy, no jollity, no pleasure—
DECEMBER!

(Our readers must not take Ralph Reckness too seriously. These gloomy verses were written when he was suffering from an attack of 'flu!—Ed.)

EDITORIAL!

By
Tom Merry.



WINTER sports! What visions they conjure up of thrilling tussles on muddy footer fields, of snow-fighting, and tobogganing, and exciting paper-chases!

Not for those weaklings are winter sports, but only for those sturdy sons of Britain who have plenty of stamina, and who can last the pace.

There is a famous school song which deals with the delights of winter sports. The chorus goes something like this:

"October! October!
March for the grave and sober.
The suns of May for the schoolgirls' play,
But give to the boys October!"

Hear, hear! If ever there was a strenuous month of open-air sport—a month in which you have to be tuned up to a high state of physical fitness—that month is October. There's a keen nip in the air which makes you feel that it's good to be alive.

Well, October has come and gone, and November, the month of fogs and fireworks, is carrying on the good work. Winter sports are in full swing at St. Jim's. Everybody seems to be smitten with football fever. Even the spectacled Skimpole, who usually spends all his leisure in studying the learned works of Professor Balmeyrumpet, has deigned to put in an appearance on the footer ground. Poor old Skimmy! He'll never make a Steve Bloomer or a Buchan, I'm afraid.

Now that the cold weather has set in, we are hoping that Rylcombe Ponds will become frozen over, so that we can go a-skating. Most of the fellows have got their skates all ready. Baggy Trimple is one of the exceptions. The only sort of skates that Baggy goes in for are those which are fried at fish-shops! Skating is not a favourite pastime of Trimple's, for, unless the ice is as thick as a brick wall, it refuses to bear Baggy's weight. And the only ices which Baggy likes making a hole in are the strawberry and vanilla ones which Dame Taggies serves in summer-time!

Tobogganing is one of the grandest of winter sports, but we have very little time for it, and this glorious pastime usually has to stand over until the Christmas holidays.

Cross-country running and paper-chasing are also very popular at this time of the year. I can think of nothing more delightful than to come in, tired but happy, from a gruelling paper-chase and sit down to a sumptuous spread in the study.

One of the best ways of fighting the 'flu is to take part in vigorous and healthy winter sports. It's the fellow who coddles himself who usually falls an easy victim to the 'flu germ. The athletic fellow remains a stranger to the school sanny. "Play footer and keep fit!" should ever be the schoolboy's slogan.

Tom Merry



THRILLING MOMENTS in SPORT!

Described by Our Contributors.



TOM MERRY:

My most thrilling moment in sport was the last minute of our last match with Greyfriars. The scores were level—two goals apiece—and both teams were straining every effort to get the winning goal. Gussy ran the ball down on the wing, and sent me a perfect pass. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the referee looking at his watch, and I knew it was a case of "now or never"! A Greyfriars back came barging into me, and I went sprawling in the mud. But before he could clear the ball, I shot out my right leg, striking the ball with all my force. Being still on the ground, I couldn't see what happened; but the mighty roar which went up informed me that the ball had whizzed into the net, and that the winning goal had been scored! Certainly that was the most thrilling moment of a thrilling match. Was my goal a fluke? Well, perhaps so; but that doesn't detract from the thrill of scoring it!

BAGGY TRIMBLE:

I had my biggest thrill when I was mountaineering in Switzerland during the vack.

Mountaineering is grand sport, but it requires grate curridge and daring. No use a weekling like Tom Merry going in for it! Well, I'd just reached the highest peek of the Matterhorn, or Mount Everest—I forget which—and was starting to come down again, when the rope snapped! Would I be hurled into the abiss ten million feet below? Would my frail form be recovered by St. Bernard dogs next morning? Was I dashed to deth and destruckshun? Well, not quite, or I shouldn't be "telling the tale" now! I rolled down the steep mountain-side for about half a mile or so, and then I managed to clutch hold of some roots. I hung on grimly, eggspecting that at any moment an avalanche would come down and berry me. I was reskewed eventually by my guides, and I was jolly thankful to come through that desprit ordeal alive, I can tell you! But that thrilling moment has merely wetted my appyтите for further adventures; and when the Christmas vack comes, I intend to take a trip to the Equator, in order to climb the North Pole!

HERBERT SKIMPOLE:

My most thrilling moment in sport occurred when I was taking part in the St. Jim's Ludo Championship. Shaking the dice-box with great vigour, I threw a "six" ten times in succession, and wiped up the board with my opponent. The excitement of that thrilling moment nearly brought about my demise from heart failure!

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY:

One of the most thwillin'—an' uncomfortable—moments that I eeval experienced, deah boys, was duwin' a toboggan wace on Wayland Downs. I was whizzin' down at hweakneck speed, an' I felt suah that I should be the winnah, when suddenly the beastly toboggan turned a complete somah-sault, an' I was pitched headfirst into a snowdrift! If Jack Blake an' Hewvies hadn't wushed to my wesuee, I should have been buwied, bai Jove! I much gewget that I was weavin' my best clobbah at the time, an' it was uttably wuined. Howevah, I had two dozen bwand-new suits in my wardwobe at St. Jim's, so I suppose I ought not to gwumble!

The Cross Country Championships!



Described in "Racy" Fashion by our Tame Humorist—**PATRICK REILLY.**



THE Derby is an important event in its way, and so are the other classic races, like the St. Leger and the Cesarewitch. But these are merely side-shows by comparison with the annual cross-country race at St. Jim's.

I am writing these notes on the morning of the great race, and I propose to discuss the chances of some of the candidates.

The race is run on Shanks' ponies, and the course is from St. Jim's to Wayland, across the fields, and then back to the school by a detour.

Betting on the race is strictly prohibited, though I understand that Knox of the Sixth has had a little "flutter." He is confident that Flying Figgy, the favourite, will prove the winner. Another "animal" that is fancied is Kangaroo.

Wagering in jam-tarts instead of cash is quite permissible, and the starting prices are as follows:

Evans Flying Figgy; 2 to 1 agst Merry Tom; 3 to 1 agst The Toff; 5 to 1 agst Racing Reddy; 5 to 1 agst Kangaroo; 7 to 1 agst Elegant Gus; 100 to 1 agst Scorching Skimmy; 1,000 to 1 agst Baggy Boy.

Having been present at all the preliminary canters, I have been able to size up the chances of the candidates pretty accurately. The New House stable has two representatives in the field—Flying Figgy and Racing Reddy. The former is certainly in great trim. He covers the ground at terrific speed, and has a fine leg action. He clears stiles, ditches, and other obstacles as if they didn't exist, and I should not be a bit surprised to see him romp home an easy winner. Flying Figgy is a real live candidate, and a dead cert!

The School House stable pins its faith to Merry Tom, and they will not hear of his being beaten. Undoubtedly this noble creature has a fine turn of speed. What is more, he will stay every inch of the course. I anticipate that he will be a thorn in the side of Flying Figgy without, however, being quite able to win.

Shrewd judges of horseflesh tell me that The Toff holds a great chance. This thoroughbred has been well trained for the event, and will be a danger to the best. He won a nursery handicap when he was three years old; and, although he is now fifteen—which is pretty old for a racer—he will be well up with the leaders at the finish. My belief is that The Toff will finish in the first three.

Racing Reddy and Kangaroo are genuine candidates. The former is the stable companion of Flying Figgy, and will probably make the pace for him. Some critics say he will make the pace too hot for him—and win! I cannot subscribe to this view, however.

Kangaroo was trained in Australia. As his name suggests, he is a fine jumper, and goes gamely at the stiffest hurdles. He has been running well in his trials, and is bound to put up a good show.

Elegant Gus has the finest pedigree of any animal in the race. He is by Vere de Vere out of Beau Brummel. It is said that class always tells in a race of this description, but there is a doubt about the stamina of this illustrious creature. It is doubtful whether he will be able to stay the course, which is a very severe one. So I'm not putting any jam-tarts on Elegant Gus.

Should he win, it will furnish a great surprise, bai Jove! Yaas, watah!

The two outsiders, Scorching Skimmy and Baggy Boy, do not stand out earthily. The former will run in "blinkers"—in other words, spectacles. I anticipate that he will turn up his toes when he comes to the first jump. As for Baggy Boy, this beast is far too fat and out of condition for such a strenuous race. The odds laid against him are 1,000 to 1, and if they were a 1,000,000 to 1 I should not support such a clumsy and corpulent candidate.

To sum up, I anticipate that the race will be won by Flying Figgy, and that Merry Tom and The Toff will make him go all the way.

STOP PRESS NEWS.

BIG RACE RESULT (Official).

THE TOFF (3-1)	1
MERRY TOM (2-1)	2
FLYING FIGGY (evens)	3

On settling down Flying Figgy took the lead from The Toff and Merry Tom, and appeared to be going strongly. Baggy Boy was compelled to retire from the race owing to overfeeding, and Scorching Skimmy was left at the post. On nearing home Flying Figgy still led, but was overhauled in clever fashion by The Toff and Merry Tom, the former getting the better of a desperate finish by a yard. Three yards between second and third. Winner trained by Kildare.



(Continued
from page
13.)

The man in black stepped back from the door. He drew his hand across his cheek, and Tom Merry saw there the mark where Beaumont's bullet had grazed. Jocelyn stooped and lifted the heavy rock again.

"Stop!" said Tom Merry quietly. "I tell you we are bound to stand by this man if you seek his life. If you touch this door again I shall shoot!"

"Do you think I fear a schoolboy?"

"I have had some practice," said Tom, "and I shall pull the trigger if you make any attempt to break in this door. You leave me no choice."

Jocelyn did not heed.

He strode at the door, with the rock upraised in his hands. Tom Merry's eyes glinted.

"For the last time!" he exclaimed.

Crash!

The jagged rock crashed on the door, and it creaked and groaned, and the split in the wood widened. A few more such crashes, and the door would have been in fragments and the way open.

Tom Merry put the muzzle of the revolver to the crack in the door.

Bang!

It was easy enough to take aim; the man exposed himself with utter recklessness. Tom Merry, with a steady hand, fired at his left arm. There was a loud cry from the man in black, and the rock crashed to the ground. He staggered back, clasping his left arm with his right hand, panting.

Tom Merry's face was white.

"Your own fault!" he said. "For your own sake, for our sakes, stop—stop before more harm is done!"

Jocelyn made no reply. The blood was running down his sleeve over his left hand, dripping in crimson spots on the snow. Heedless of the wound, he stooped over the rock to lift it again. But his left arm was helpless; it seemed to crumple as he tried to use it, and a groan of pain was forced from his lips.

With one hand he could not move the heavy rock. He rose again, and Tom saw that the rugged, bronzed face was white.

Then, with deep relief, the St. Jim's junior saw the man turn and stride away, and the tall figure vanished into the dusk of the falling December night.

CHAPTER 8.

Night in the Bungalow!

"HARK to the wind!"

It was a wild night.

No light burned in the lonely bungalow; only the fire, fed with wood and coal through the night, glowed red in the kitchen stove.

The roaring tide was wild round the lonely rock, transformed into an island again by the incoming sea.

Black as ink the clouds loomed in the midnight sky over the rock and the foaming sea and the stretches of desolate beach.

In the little bed-room of the bungalow Rufus Beaumont was stretched on the camp-bed, sleeping by fits and starts, often starting up and listening with a ghastly face to the wild wind and the boom of the sea—hearing in every sound the footsteps of his foe.

Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther had camped in the kitchen for the night—for how long they could not guess.

Their lot was thrown in now with that of the hidden man of the bungalow. They could not desert him, even if they had wished; and they did not think of doing so. Now that the tide was roaring in, it was impossible to reach the mainland, even had not the man in black been there to interpose. There was no choice but to camp in the wind-swept bungalow.

They had found the place well stocked with food and drink of various kinds, with fuel in large quantities, with blankets and other useful things; it was clear that Beaumont had provided the bungalow with all necessaries long

ago, in order to avoid communication with the dwellings of men, when the time came to hide himself from all eyes. Doubtless he had long known, perhaps for years, that the time must come for flight some day, as he sank deeper and deeper into speculation of the funds committed to his care, and saw it more and more impossible to extricate himself. And all his measures had been taken long in advance.

The juniors guessed that he had bought this lonely bungalow long ago, under some other name; and it was most probable that it was intended in the first place as a refuge from police pursuit. Beaumont could not have foreseen that one of his clients, robbed and desperate, would turn upon him with a fierce thirst for personal vengeance. Indeed, such a thought, had it entered his mind, would probably have deterred him from crime, for the man was evidently a faltering coward, with courage only for trickery and cunning chicane.

The three juniors camped in blankets, after a supper before the fire; they had not even asked Beaumont whether they should stay—it was not a matter that needed discussion.

But it was easy for them to see how glad the wretched man was of human society; how relieved he was not to be left alone on the wild rock with the man who had sworn his death.

But it was not easy for Tom Merry & Co. to sleep.

The man in black was tied to the islet, as they were, by the encircling tide; but had it not been so he would not have gone; they were certain that he would not have gone. Like a bloodhound he was on the trail; and like a bloodhound he would never fail. He was there—somewhere in the black darkness he was lurking and watching, watching—with sleepless, tireless eyes; wounded as he was, still watchful and relentless.

And it was heavy upon Tom Merry's mind that he had hurt the man—savage and lawless as he was. He had disabled Jocelyn's arm—to save life, to save the man himself from terrible crime. But it was a black recollection in his mind, and it intensified his loathing for the trembling wretch in the adjoining room.

Louder and wilder the wind blew, and the bungalow seemed to rock in the wild gusts. Sometimes it seemed to the juniors that the little building would be torn bodily away by the fierce gale.

"Hark to it! If the place goes—" murmured Manners.

"It's stood here a good many years," said Monty Lowther. "I was a little kid when it was built by some speculator to sell to summer visitors. And there have been plenty of gales on this coast since."

That was comforting knowledge; for it really seemed, when the full force of the wild sea-wind struck the bungalow, that it must be torn asunder.

"I wonder where that fellow is now?" said Lowther, after a long pause. "If he's out in this—"

"He must be made of iron!" said Manners.

"Poor beggar! After years on active service, to come home and find himself robbed by that—that cringing worm—"

"No wonder he's lost his head," said Manners. "I suppose really he's just a bit potty on that one point."

"That's it—what they call an obsession, or a fixed idea," said Tom Merry. "I suppose he's worth about a thousand of that miserable wretch we're trying to protect. But—we're bound to do as we're doing."

"No doubt about that."

"And to-morrow's Christmas Eve," said Lowther, after another pause. "I wonder what Gussy will think of our not turning up?"

"Goodness knows!" said Manners.

"He won't be alarmed, anyhow," said Tom, after some thought. "I told him we were coming later, and did not specify the time. He will think we've had to put it off."

"And my uncle will think we're safe at Eastwood House," said Monty. "So nobody's likely to search for us."

"No. We've got to get through this somehow on our own. Let's try to get some sleep!" said Tom.

"And if he comes—" Lowther was alluding to the man in black.

"We shall hear him," said Tom. "But he's hurt—he cannot sling big rocks at the door as he was doing before. Goodness knows how sorry I was to hurt him, but—"

"It couldn't be helped, old chap," said Manners softly. "You did right—don't worry."

"Better for him, too," said Lowther. "He's been wronged by that sneaking funk in the next room; but if he had his way, and shot the man, he would be hanged for it, as much as if Beaumont had been a saint. We may be saving his life as well as this wretched lawyer's."

"That's so," said Tom.

The juniors tried to sleep.

Their ears had become so accustomed to the roar of the wind, the boom of the sea, that they hardly noticed the din by this time. It was the strangeness of the situation,

the danger of the night, the thought of the lurking enemy, that kept them wakeful.

But they slept at last.

There was no need to keep watch; every window and door was secure, and for additional security they had barricaded the doors with some heavy articles of furniture; the foe without could not have burst in upon them without awakening them. And it was certain, too, that Beaumont would sleep lightly, if he slept at all, and that at the first sign of danger he would make his terrified voice heard.

The night passed without alarm.

Grey dawn came over the sea, and the desolate shore; the dawn of Christmas Eve.

The tired juniors slept on; it was not till ten in the morning that Tom Merry opened his eyes and jumped up. Beaumont was already up, and was roaming through the house restlessly, like a hunted animal.

From a chink in the shutters, Tom Merry surveyed the scene before the bungalow.

A watery sun glimmered through rainy clouds; the snow had been swept away by the wind, and a light sleet was falling. Spray could be seen dashing high over the great rocks that circled the island; the cliffs of the mainland were unseen, swallowed up in mist.

Tom started as he observed a moving figure on the rocks at a little distance.

It was the man in black.

He was regarding the bungalow from a distance, with a haggard face, his look black and bitter. His left arm hung in a sling, helpless; his right hand was in the pocket of his raincoat, now a limp and muddy rag. Doubtless he had camped for the night in some cave or crevice of the rocks, and it had told on him. But there was no sign of slackening of the bitter determination in his haggard face.

As Tom watched him, his right hand came out of his coat, and a revolver gleamed in the watery sunlight.

Crack!

A bullet struck the wooden shutter only a couple of feet from the spot where Tom's eye was at the chink. It was as if the man in black had divined that he was being watched.

Tom Merry sprang back.

The bullet had penetrated the shutter; there was a shower of broken glass. Manners and Lowther sprang towards their chum.

"Tom!"

"It's all right," said Tom quietly, though he caught his breath.

"So he's there!"

"Yes—and utterly reckless," said Tom. "He did not care whom that bullet might have hit. But——"

"Hark!"

Jocelyn's voice was heard shouting.

"Are you there, Beaumont? Are you awake, you dog?"

Crack!

Another bullet struck the shutter of the other window, and there was a terrified whimper from Beaumont.

Then the tall figure turned, and the man in black strode away—baffled, but relentless; barred from his prey, but waiting, watching, implacable.

CHAPTER 9.

A Wild Christmas Eve!

"CHRISTMAS EVE!" said Manners, with a shiver. The dreary day was wearing on.

How was it to end—how was this terrible situation to end? Tom Merry and his comrades asked themselves that question, without being able to find an answer.

They were prisoners in the lonely bungalow. A dozen times during the day they sighted the tall figure of the man in black; five or six times bullets, recklessly fired, crashed on the window shutters.

But no attack was made.

The disabling of the man's arm prevented that. With one hand he could not hope to beat in the door; and it was fairly certain, too, that the pain of his wound, and exposure on the wind-swept isle, had sapped his giant strength. He was no longer so formidable as he had been. But for the fact that he was in possession of a deadly weapon, the juniors would have been tempted to sally out of the bungalow and make an attempt to secure him. But it was certain that he would shoot if he was attacked, and it was futile to think of a desperate affray in which bloodshed was unavoidable. Tom Merry & Co. had to be content with holding the fort; only hoping that the desperate man would keep his distance.

But how long was it to last—how could it end?

They thought of Eastwood House—of the merry Christmas party there; of D'Arcy, and cousin Ethel, and Doris Levison—of Blake & Co.; and Wally of the Third. How little that

merry party dreamed of the position of the Shell fellows, of the terrible dangers that surrounded them. Yet even had the way been open, the three juniors knew that they could not have deserted the shrinking wretch they had taken under their protection.

The wind fell at noon; a light sleet was still falling, but the day was calm. In the afternoon they watched from chinks in the shutters, without seeing a sign of the man in black.

Had he left the rock?

Was he gone?

It was impossible to tell. He had come there to search for his enemy—it was very doubtful whether he had brought food with him; and without food he could not live. It was likely enough that he would return to the mainland for necessaries—when the tide was down. But the juniors could not risk it—it was only too probable that he was lying in wait, watching the bungalow from some nook of the rocks, ready to fire if the door was opened. The juniors themselves would have risked it; rather than have remained imprisoned in the bungalow. But at the bare suggestion of unbarring the door, Beaumont shrieked aloud in fear.

"No, no no!"

"He may be gone," said Tom Merry. "If he is gone, he will return, I know. But there may be a chance of getting clear."

"No, no no!"

"It may be our only chance," said Tom.

"Go if you will!" said Beaumont hoarsely. "I dare not—I dare not! Go and leave me."

But that the juniors could not do.

Again and again they looked from the chinks in the shutters. The watery sun was low down in misty clouds when the dark figure of the avenger was seen again.

"He was not gone, then," said Manners.

"If he was, he has come back," said Tom.

He watched the man, who was staring at the house from a short distance.

The haggard face seemed a little less haggard; the arm in the sling, he could see, was bandaged. He was assured that Jocelyn had indeed left the isle, during the time that he had been invisible to the watchers of the bungalow; to have his hurt attended by skilled hands, to obtain what he needed for camping on the isle. Tom Merry was sure of it now; but the knowledge came too late to be of service.

The darkness thickened over the lonely rock, night—the night of the eve of Christmas—was falling, calm but black and almost starless. The swell was going down on the sea; the boom of the heaving waters was fainter. The watching figure of the man in black disappeared in the gloom; but the juniors felt that he was still there, wrapped in darkness, his burning eyes fixed upon the walls that sheltered his enemy.

The juniors supped by the fire in the kitchen. Beaumont did not join them—he kept chiefly in the other room, and they were glad enough to be relieved of his immediate company. The wretched man ate his food in snatches, roaming about the house like a frightened animal, whimpering and twittering at a sound, a mere bundle of ragged nerves by this time. Many times he gave the St. Jim's juniors evil looks; and yet he was obviously glad that they were there; terrified by the mere thought that they might leave him to his danger, while quite incapable of comprehending why they were standing by him, a stranger in distress. They knew that he was utterly thankless and ungrateful; that he would never have hesitated to sacrifice them if by doing so he could have saved his worthless skin; they more than suspected that even while they were protecting him, there was stolen money in his keeping, money that belonged to the desperate man lurking outside in the darkness of the night. They could not look at the cringing wretch without loathing. And yet they were bound to stand by him, to save him, if they could, from lawless vengeance.

They ate their supper almost in silence, thinking of the strange and terrible Christmas Day that was before them—so different from what they had anticipated. How was this to end? The situation could not last indefinitely; but how was it to end? Manners had surmised that the shooting might be heard on the mainland, and might draw attention; but Tom Merry shook his head. In the wild winter days the beach was deserted; and in the sea-winds the report of a revolver would not carry far. Even if the shooting was heard, would it not be supposed to be some sportsman shooting sea-fowl—who was likely to guess that a tragedy was being enacted on the lonely rock, amid the surges of the wintry sea?

Knock!

The hour was late; and the sudden knocking at the door made the juniors start and spring to their feet.

"He's here!" muttered Lowther.

Knock!

The juniors ran into the passage. The revolver was in Tom Merry's hand; his face was set. If it was a murderous

attack again, he was ready to defend the door as he had already defended it.

"Are you there, boy?" came the voice of Paul Jocelyn. The wind was still low; the night calm and almost silent, save for the hollow murmur of the sea. The man's voice rang loud and clear.

"I am here!" answered Tom Merry.

"For the last time, I offer to let you go—you and your friends. You shall pass in safety."

"If we leave Mr. Beaumont, you mean?"

"Yes."

"We cannot desert him."

"He is nothing to you, as you have told me. Will you risk—and lose—your lives for that skulking swindler?"

"If necessary, yes," answered Tom Merry quietly. "We shall do our duty; whatever the danger."

"That is enough! I am warning you for the last time. If the door is not opened, I shall fire the bungalow."

"What?"

"Oh, my hat!" muttered Lowther.

"I have brought the materials with me—I have all that is necessary here," went on the voice of the man in black. "I would willingly spare you—I have no quarrel with you; I even respect you for what you have done for that dastardly wretch. But I shall stop at nothing—and if you do not go you will share his fate. Your answer?"

The chums of St. Jim's looked at one another. They did not falter. From the darkness behind them came the pitiful whimpering of the hunted man.

"Your answer?" repeated the man without.

"We shall not go!" said Tom Merry.

"Then your fate will be upon your own heads!"

They heard the man's footsteps grind on the shingly path as he wept.

"Now for it!" muttered Lowther.

Tom Merry drew a deep breath.

"He means it!" he said. "He means every word! But—"

"The bungalow's built of wood!" muttered Manners.

"But it is fairly drenched with snow and sleet—it will not burn easily," said Tom. "We shall see."

They waited.

In the black darkness without they could hear movements. Something heavy rolled against the door.

Beaumont's whimpering voice came to their ears:

"Shoot—shoot, while you have a chance!" He groped along the dark passage to the juniors. "Give me the pistol—it is mine! Give it me!"

Tom Merry hesitated.

"Give it me, you fool!" exclaimed Beaumont shrilly.

They could hear the man piling something against the door—doubtless torn branches of the wintry trees, uprooted shrubs. But everything on the rocky isle was drenched and sodden; the pile was little likely to burn—unless— He had said that he had the materials that were necessary. What had he brought back with him from the mainland?

Beaumont wrenched the revolver from Tom Merry's hand. The captain of the St. Jim's Shell did not resist; after all, the wretched man had a right to fight for his life. With a hand that shook and trembled Beaumont placed the revolver to the spy-hole in the door, and fired again and again, till the firearm was empty.

But it was useless. But for the man's whimpering terror, he would have known that it was useless. The random bullets whizzed away in the darkness; only a mocking, scoffing laugh from the man in black answered.

Beaumont, trembling, dropped the empty revolver.

Crack!

It was the ring of Jocelyn's revolver, thrust in at the spy-hole in the door. Beaumont, with a yell of fear, bolted into the bed-room like a rabbit into a burrow. Tom Merry hurriedly closed the sliding panel.

"Good heavens!" breathed Manners. He had felt the wind of the bullet as it passed.

Tom Merry picked up the revolver. He had already sorted out a box of cartridges, and by the glow of the fire in the kitchen he reloaded the weapon.

Outside, the man in black was still stacking torn branches and brambles against the door.

A penetrating smell came to the juniors within. Through crack and cranny it penetrated, and they knew it at once.

"Petrol!" muttered Lowther.

Wet wood and brambles would not burn of themselves. But drenched with petrol, they would burn. And it was with that inflammable fluid that the desperate man was drenching them!

A sudden flare of flames shot up into the blackness of the night. Through the chinks in the shutters it shone luridly into the bungalow. It showed the St. Jim's juniors one another's pale and startled faces. In an instant the fire was roaring at the door.

"That does it!" breathed Manners.

Tom Merry stepped to the bed-room door.

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"Mr. Beaumont!"

He called to the terrified man crouching there in the darkness.

"Mr. Beaumont! The door will soon be down—we cannot stop it! If the house catches, we are lost. But it is wet—it may not catch. But the door will go! This way!"

Only a frightened whimper answered him.

"Do you hear me?" exclaimed Tom Merry impatiently.

"This way, I tell you! We shall bar the door of the kitchen, and keep him out if we can. Can't you understand?"

A shivering figure emerged from the dark bed-room, ran like a rabbit across the passage, and vanished into the kitchen. The three juniors followed him in.

The roar of the fire was like thunder now. The stack of wood, drenched with petrol, burned fiercely. The door, upon which petrol had been dashed in streams, caught fire and burned in patches. It was obvious that the door would go. The juniors could only hope that the house would not catch in its turn. There was still snow on the roof, snow in every crevice. Rain and snow and sleet had drenched the lonely bungalow; the whole place reeked with damp. There was a chance yet that the fire would burn itself out without spreading over the house. Only where the petrol had been thrown was it likely to burn; and it was certain that the supply of petrol was limited—the man could not have carried many gallons of it to the rock. That was all the prisoners of the bungalow had to hope for as they listened to the savage roaring of the flames.

The kitchen door was closed, locked, and bolted. The table was dragged to it, and several boxes and other articles to barricade it. That was all that Tom Merry & Co. could do.

Then they waited, listening to the roar of the flames, till a terrific crash and a roar of flames in the passage told them that the door had fallen in.

CHAPTER 10.

The Vanished Guests!

JACK BLAKE, of the St. Jim's Fourth, smacked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy on the shoulder—a hefty smack.

"Wow!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus, with a jump.

The swell of St. Jim's had been in deep thought when Blake's salute suddenly woke him up, as it were.

"Give it a name!" said Blake.

"Weally, Blake—"

"Tell us all about it!" said Herries encouragingly.

"I can guess!" said Robert Arthur Digby solemnly.

"Young Wally's dog, Pongo, has got at Gussy's best topper. Hence these tears."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy turned his eyeglass upon his three chums reproachfully. Blake & Co. were in cheery mood; they were enjoying the Christmas vacation under the hospitable roof of Lord Eastwood, Gussy's noble pater. Even Wally of the Third and his dog, Pongo, did not detract very much from their enjoyment. Arthur Augustus also was in a cheery frame of mind, as a rule, but just at present his aristocratic brow wore a worried look.

Hence Blake's demand that he should give it a name. If Gussy was worried, his cheery chums were prepared to take a fair share of the worry on their own chummy shoulders.

"Whack it out!" pursued Blake. "If there's some deep and dreadful disaster, such as the ruination of a top-hat or the total and irreparable loss of a pair of silk socks, tell your old pals, and we'll help you to bear it. We'll all blub together if that will do any good."

"Weally, you ass—"

"If it's something absolutely awful, such as the spoiling of the crease in your Sunday bags, we'll all weep briny tears, ad lib!" offered Blake. "I can't say fairer than that."

And Jack Blake took out his handkerchief, as if to be in readiness.

"You uttah ass—"

"Boo-hoo!"

"Bai Jove! What are you makin' that feahful wow for, Blake?"

Blake wiped his eyes.

"Weeping, old chap. I'm so sorry—boo-hoo!—so cut-up over Pongo worrying your silk hat—boo-hoo!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Herries and Dig, greatly tickled by the expression on Gussy's noble face.

"If you cannot be serious, Blake—"

"Sober as a judge, old man. Look here, if Pongo's really had your silk topper, we're going to stand by you like real pals. We'll club together and buy you a second-hand one, and we don't care if it costs two shillings—or even three!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked Herries and Dig.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy breathed hard and deep. But



"Seize that man!" shouted the inspector. For an instant the man in black stood like a wild beast at bay, and then he turned and dashed away into the darkness. (See chapter 11.)

he remembered that it was Christmas-time, and that these thoughtless and frivolous youngsters were his guests. So he suppressed his indignation and smiled.

"Pway don't be an ass, Blake! I know it's askin' a lot—"

"Eh?"

"Twy to be sensible for a few minutes, old fellow," said Arthur Augustus. "The change will do you good."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Herries and Dig. It was the expression on Blake's face that tickled them now.

"The fact is, I am wathah wowwied," said Arthur Augustus. "It is Chwistmas Eve, you know—"

"It generally is the day before Christmas," remarked Dig.

"Weally, Dig—"

"I've known it happen before," said Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies—"

Blake put away his pocket-handkerchief.

"Is that all the trouble?" he asked. "What's the matter with Christmas Eve? It's rather a jolly old date."

"Yaas; but Tom Mewwy—"

"Oh, Tom Merry!" said Blake. "Isn't he coming after all?"

"I weally do not know, Blake. That is why I am wathah wowwied. I suppose those fellows haven't had an accident. But it is wathah wemarkable that they have neithah awwided, nor appwised me of their intention of not comin'."

"Bad manners," said Blake, shaking his head. "What can you expect of the Shell? Next term at St. Jim's we'll teach them better manners."

"Pway be sewious, Blake. It has occurred to me that some accident may have happened. There are lots of accidents on the wailways in the winter."

"We should have heard of it," said Blake. "That's all right."

"But it is vevy odd, you know. They were comin' heah yestahday mornin' fwom Holly Lodge—"

"But Tom Merry telephoned that he would come along later than arranged," said Herries.

"Yaas, wathah! But I pwesumed fwom what he said that he meant latah in the same day, you know, and I was pwepared for them to come yestahday some time or othah. My patah is wathah surprised that they have not turned up yet, or let us know. If there has not been any accident, they are not tweatin' me vevy well; so I am sure there must have been an accident of some sort."

Blake reflected for a moment, and then shook his head.

"That's not it," he said. "We were bound to hear of a railway accident. Bosh!"

"But, you see, I don't know now, whethah they are comin' along to-day, or whethah they will be heah to-morrow," said D'Arcy. "Tom Mewwy was to wun awcross to Lauwel Villa this aftahnoon, to fetch his old governess, Miss Pwisillah Fawcett. Nothin' has been said to the contwawy. Isn't it vevy wemarkable?"

"Well, come to think of it, it is," said Blake. "Blessed if I can understand it, Gussy. It isn't like Tom Merry to play the ox in this style. There hasn't been any railway accident; but something must have happened. They may have caught colds. Just like those Shell duffers to go skating and tumble into the water and catch colds."

"But then old Mr. Lowthah would let us know."

"Well, it's jolly queer," assented Blake. "But there's the giddy telephone—you can ring up Holly Lodge and ask."

"Yaas, wathah! That was what I was thinkin' of," said Arthur Augustus. "I weally cannot be left in doubt like this, you know. I have been expectin' evewy minute to heah somethin' fwom them, and I have heard nothin'. I weally cannot suspect Tom Mewwy of bweakin' an engagement without lettin' a fellow know—and yet, as you say, an accident seems vevy impwobable. Perhaps I had bettah wing up Holly Lodge, and then—"

"Then you will know whether to feel offended or not,"

suggested Blake. "Nothing like setting your mind at rest."
"Wats!"

Arthur Augustus walked away to the telephone, his chums accompanying him. Blake & Co., as a matter of fact, had found plenty to occupy their minds at Eastwood House, and had given very little thought to the non-arrival of the Terrible Three. But now that D'Arcy mentioned it, they realised that it was very odd, and they were curious to know the explanation. So they stood round Gussy while he telephoned.

The swell of St. Jim's was some little time getting through to Holly Lodge. But he heard the somewhat crusty tones of Mr. James Lowther, M.P., J.P., at last.

"Sowwy to disturb you, sir," said Arthur Augustus politely. "Is that Mr. Lowthah speakin'?"

"Yes."

"Good-affahnoon, Mr. Lowthah. I twust you are well."

"Kindly tell me what is wanted."

"D'Arcy speakin' f'rom Eastwood House."

"Yes, yes. What is it? I am rather busy."

"Yaas, sir, no doubt you are vewy busy, and I am weally sowwy to intewwupt you," said the swell of St. Jim's, while Blake & Co. grinned at one another. "I have no doubt, sir, that a Membah of Parliament has plenty to occupy his time, even in the Chwistmas vacation, and—"

"Will you please come to the point?"

"Oh! Yaas! I wang you up, sir, to speak to Lowthah—"

"Do you mean my nephew Montague?"

"Yaas, of course."

"I fail to understand you," said Mr. Lowther. "Is not my nephew now at Eastwood House, with his friends Merry and Manners?"

"What?"

Arthur Augustus almost dropped the receiver in astonishment.

"You perplex me very much," said the M.P., J.P. "My nephew left here by the ten-thirty train yesterday morning, with his friends, to come to you. I saw them off at the station. Do you seriously mean to tell me that they have not arrived at Eastwood House?"

"Bai Jove! No! I have seen nothin' of them, and heard nothin'."

"Upon my word!"

"You are suah they started for heah, Mr. Lowthah?"

"Quite certain, as I saw them in the train. I have never doubted for a moment that they arrived at your house."

"Weally, sir, you alarm me. Somethin' must have happened. A railway accident—"

"What?"

"There has been no railway accident, or I should have heard of it. I am utterly perplexed," said Mr. Lowther.

"They left in the ten-thirty train yesterday morning; their luggage was booked for Easthorpe, and must have arrived there. Yet you say you have not seen them."

"No, sir. And I was vewy much surprisid, and was beginnin' to be alarmed—"

"It is extraordinary. I am glad you telephoned," said Mr. Lowther. "I shall make instant inquiries."

The M.P. rang off.

Arthur Augustus turned to his comrades. All the Fourth-Formers were looking very grave now. Blake & Co. had caught some of Mr. Lowther's words; and D'Arcy's half of the conversation had been enough to apprise them how matters stood. Blake whistled softly.

"What on earth's become of them?" he said.

"Goodness knows! They started f'rom Holly Lodge more than thirty-six houahs ago," said D'Arcy. "They seem to have vanished in twansit. I will wing up the station heah. Mr. Lowthah says that their luggage was booked for Easthorpe."

D'Arcy proceeded to ring up the stationmaster at Easthorpe.

He was not long in learning that the baggage of the Terrible Three had arrived at the local station, and was waiting there to be called for.

"Better tell your pater about it," said Blake. "Their baggage has come along—and they haven't! Where on earth can they have got to? There's been no accident—they must have got out of the train of their own accord. But where and why?"

"It's extwaordinary."

Arthur Augustus hurried away to acquaint his noble pater with the surprising news from Holly Lodge. During that afternoon the telephone was busy both at Holly Lodge and Eastwood House. It was late in the evening when it was learned from Mr. Lowther that his inquiries had had some result—he had discovered that the three juniors had left the train at the next station after entering it—they had been seen to walk out of the station, but nothing was known of them afterwards.

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"Well, this beats the band!" said Jack Blake, when he heard it. "They started to come here—and stopped at the next station. So they didn't mean to come along at all; they're still somewhere within a few miles of Holly Lodge all the time, and nowhere in this part of the country. What the merry thump can they mean by it?"

"Somethin' must have happened," said D'Arcy.

"But what?"

"Goodness knows! Mr. Lowthah seems feaffully alarmed, and he is havin' a search made for them. Of course, they couldn't have intended to stay in the neighbourhood of Holly Lodge without lettin' me know, or without lettin' Mr. Lowthah know. Goodness knows why they left the twain at all; but it is quite plain that somethin' happened to them aftah they left it—some accident!"

"But what?" said Dig.

"Goodness knows, but it must be somethin' sewions. Mr. Lowthah is havin' the whole countwyside searched—he says he has called in the local police. They may have tumbled ova the cliffs, or somethin'. Weally, deah boys, we look like havin' a wathah anxious time this Chwistmas!" said Arthur Augustus dismally. "Poor old Tom Mewwy! Oh, deah! What about sittin' up to-night and waitin' for somethin' to come through on the phone?"

"Yes, rather!"

It was an anxious Christmas Eve to D'Arcy and his friends. Through long hours of anxiety they waited, and waited for the ring of the telephone-bell.

CHAPTER 11.

Burnt Out!

TOM MERRY & CO. listened to the roar of the flames, their faces pale and set, their hearts throbbing, their nerves tense.

Beaumont had sunk on a chair, dropping, huddled, in the last stage of unmanly terror and collapse. The juniors did not heed him. The wretched man was incapable of lifting a hand in his own defence; only the St. Jim's juniors stood between him and the man he had wronged. Through the roar of the flames, they heard the voice of Paul Jocelyn shouting, but they could not distinguish the words.

The man in black was there, waiting, watching, while the devouring fire opened a way for him. The heat in the little bungalow was growing terrible. The door was down, burning to mere embers; the stack of brushwood and branches, drenched with petrol, flamed and roared, and the flames and smoke poured through the little passage, licking the barricaded door behind which the three St. Jim's juniors stood.

Would the bungalow catch fire?

Smoke filled the kitchen, smoke and heat and the strong smell of petrol. The perspiration ran down the faces of the juniors.

Tom Merry crossed to the window, and looked out through a chink in the thick wooden shutters.

The blackness of the night was broken by the ruddy blaze of the fire; the soaring flames danced against the darkness of the sky. In the ruddy light, the figure of the man in black was easily discerned, standing at a little distance, motionless, watching, implacable. Rocks and stunted trees stood out in startling distinctness against the flaming light.

The roar of the fire sounded deeper and more threatening.

A new thought came into Tom Merry's mind, as he stared out into the ruddy glow before the bungalow. He turned back to his chums.

"This will be seen from the mainland," he said. "This fire will be seen for miles and miles. It may be seen from the windows of Holly Lodge, Mony."

Lowther nodded.

"It will be seen," said Manners. "It's bound to attract attention. But—"

"But it will only be supposed that the bungalow has caught fire," said Lowther. "They will suppose that some tramp was camping here, and set the place on fire by carelessness. Nobody knows that there was anyone living at the bungalow."

"Nobody's likely to come here," said Manners. "Not much good thinking of that, Tom."

"I—I suppose not," said Tom. The brief hope died in his breast. "Not at this hour of the night, on Christmas Eve, too. To-morrow, perhaps—"

"To-morrow will be too late," said Manners grimly. "However this ends, it will end before to-morrow."

There was a moan from the wretched Beaumont.

"The police may come!" he muttered. "Oh, if the police would come! If they would only come! Better the hand-cuffs—better the prison cell! If the police would only come!"

That was the one hope of the hunted man now. Now

that he was run to earth, almost at the mercy of the lawless avenger, that was the only hope left to him, to find himself safe in the safety of a prison!

"The fire's going down!" muttered Tom, at last.

The roar was dying away.

The heat was still terrible; the smell of burning, and the smoke, suffocating; the crackling of burning wood incessant. But the fire was dying away; the building had not caught. Drenched with the winter rains and the heavy sea-spray, damp throughout from the foundation to the roof, it resisted the fire; where the petrol had splashed it burned fiercely, but as the inflammable oil was exhausted, the fire died down. Thick, poisonous smoke filled the house, and the juniors found it difficult to breathe. But they knew that the house had not caught fire, and that every minute now made their danger less.

Tom Merry looked from the chink again.

He saw the tall figure of the man in black striding towards the entrance. The door was down; only a mass of charred, crackling, smoking wood barred his way. But the thick, dense smoke drove the man back, and he retreated again.

He had to wait.

The smoke cleared off at last. The dark, winter sky reappeared, with stars glinting in the black heavens.

Heavy footsteps tramped among the ashes and embers.

"He's coming!" breathed Manners.

The listening juniors heard the man in black within the bungalow now. They heard his heavy footsteps stride along the smoky passage, and then turn into the bed-room on the other side. There he did not find what he sought, and he came to the kitchen door.

Knock!

"You are there, then!" came the deep voice of the man in black.

"We are here!" said Tom Merry steadily.

"Will you let me in now?"

"No!"

"Save me!" breathed Beaumont tremulously. "For the love of Heaven, save me from him!"

The juniors did not heed.

"It will not take me long to hack through these flimsy walls," said the deep voice outside the door. "Even with one hand—and I have an axe here! How long will this wall of matchwood stand under my blows?"

Crash!

The interior walls of the bungalow were of matchwood, little able to stand against a vigorous attack. Unheeding the barricaded door, the man in black struck at the flimsy partition, and at the first blow, the edge of the axe appeared through the wood.

"Take warning!" called out Tom Merry, in a clear, steady voice. "I am armed, as you know! I shall shoot as soon as I see you!"

Crash!

The man struck again, and a gash was torn in the flimsy matchwood. Tom Merry set his teeth.

It was neck or nothing now, and he did not hesitate.

As the axe-head was withdrawn, Tom placed the muzzle of the revolver to the split in the matchboard and pulled the trigger.

The report of the revolver was deafening in the confined space of the little bungalow kitchen.

The bullet whizzed across the passage, and there was a startled cry from Paul Jocelyn. It had gone very close.

"So that is your game!" he exclaimed.

"You have forced me to this!" answered Tom Merry. "I shall fire at you as soon as you make an opening, and the fault will be yours."

"Listen to me! I have another can of petrol here," said the man in black hoarsely. "If you drive me to burn you out, blame yourselves! For the last time, let me in, and I will let you go in peace—all but that dastard, whose death I have sworn!"

"I have already answered that!"

"Take your chance, then!" said Jocelyn savagely.

The axe did not strike again. It was clear to the man in black that Tom Merry was in deadly earnest, that as soon as an opening was made in the matchwood, he would be shot down.

The juniors heard him tramp away over the smoking embers at the doorway, but in a few minutes he returned. There was a sound of splashing, as the can of petrol streamed over the matchwood wall and the kitchen door. It was the end, and the St. Jim's juniors knew it. Against this attack they had no defence. Still, they did not falter.

The voice of the man in black shouted again:

"For the last time, before I apply the match."

"For the last time, think of what you are doing," said Tom Merry, and his voice was steady. "You will be a murderer—worse than this wretch whom you are hunting."

A fierce imprecation was the only answer. There was little doubt that the sense of wrong, and long brooding over

lawless vengeance, had unbiassed the man's mind, and Tom Merry realised it. The man was scarcely sane now.

The heavy footsteps strode away.

A lighted match was flung into the passage from without, and it was followed by an instant roar of flame.

The passage through the bungalow was a sea of fire, roaring in the draught through the building.

The matchwood wall, drenched with petrol, caught almost like tinder.

"That's the finish!" panted Lowther.

The room was almost like a furnace now. Door and walls were burning, and the fire came through the flimsy wood. Tongues of flame shot out, licking the air, shooting towards the panting juniors, as if eager to devour them. From the walls the flames were spreading to the wooden ceiling under the ridged roof. From the burning door they spread to the barricade within.

Tom Merry sprang to the window.

To stay longer in the bungalow was to be burned to death. In a few minutes more the flames would have been round them, touching them. Already they were scorched and blackened.

Tom Merry tore the window open, and dragged at the fastenings of the shutters.

"Help me, you fellows!" he panted. "We've got to chance it now!"

Manners and Lowther ran to his aid. The rusty iron fastenings of the shutters were difficult to move; they had not been stirred from their places since Beaumont had first secured them long ago. The three juniors dragged at them desperately. Beaumont staggered to his feet with a scared cry.

"Will you desert me? Will you let him in to murder me?"

"Do you want to burn to death?" shouted Tom Merry.

"If you have an atom of courage in you, help us to get out, and help us tackle him as soon as we're out!"

Beaumont only whimpered in response.

The shutters were hurled open at last, and the cool wind, fresh and keen, fanned the faces of the panting juniors.

"Follow me!" gasped Tom Merry.

He rolled headlong out of the window. In the light of the fire he saw the tall figure of the man in black darting towards the window. He more than half-expected a shot. But the man did not fire. His weapon was in his hand, but he did not use it.

"Not you!" Tom Merry heard him say, as he rolled out on the wet grass under the window.

Manners and Lowther scrambled out after him.

The juniors sprang to their feet.

Paul Jocelyn waved them aside. His eyes were on the open window with a wolfish stare, his weapon was raised.

"At last!" he said.

A white face appeared for a second through the smoke at the window, and the man in black fired. But the wretched Beaumont had already backed away, braving the fire rather than the man he had wronged. The smoke hid him again, the bullet missed by a foot or more.

The next second Tom Merry & Co. were springing on the man in black. In his eagerness for vengeance on the wretched lawyer he seemed to have forgotten the juniors for a moment. They collared him recklessly, and he went with a crash to the ground.

The revolver rang again, the bullet flew at random as they struggled. Tom Merry had grasped the man's sinewy wrist, and with a fierce twist forced him to drop the revolver. But Jocelyn was struggling like a madman; in his fierce excitement he seemed to have the strength of two or three men, and the juniors, clinging to him, were dragged and tossed about like dogs holding on to a stag. They knew that they could not hold him long, but they struggled with all their strength.

A limp figure dropped from the window. The fire had driven out Beaumont at last. Scorched, blackened, his clothes burning in patches, the wretched man leaped from the window and dropped half-fainting into the grass. Utterly nerveless and overcome with terror, he lay there, panting, quivering, moaning, while the desperate struggle went on on which his very life depended.

The man in black broke loose and leaped up.

He glared round for his weapon.

Tom Merry staggered to his feet. A fierce blow sent him reeling. But as he fell there was a shout, he heard a rush of footsteps. He sat up dizzily in the wet grass.

"The police! Thank Heaven!"

It was amazing, but he was too spent and dizzy to feel amazed. He could only feel thankful.

Three or four uniformed figures were speeding to the spot. After them, more slowly, came Mr. Lowther and two or three other men. Paul Jocelyn was groping in the grass for his revolver when the hand of a police-inspector grasped at his shoulder.

With a cry of rage the man in black leaped away.
"Seize that man!" shouted the inspector.

For an instant the man in black stood like a wild beast at bay as the constables rushed at him. They were between him and his prey. He was unarmed now. At the last moment he had been robbed of his savage vengeance. For an instant he stood, and then he turned and dashed away into the darkness.

The constables rushed after him, but they came back without him. In the darkness of the December night the man in black had escaped them, and he was gone. And Tom Merry, when he knew that Paul Jocelyn had made good his escape, hardly knew whether he was sorry or glad.

CHAPTER 12.

At Last!

"YOU are safe?"

That was Mr. Lowther's first question. He did not heed the flight of the man in black, or of the pursuit of the constables. Monty Lowther was gasping exhausted in the grass. His uncle's hand drew him to his feet. Lowther leaned on the old gentleman, panting for breath.

"Safe! Yes," he gasped.

"We're all serene, and Mr. Beaumont, too," said Manners breathlessly. "Thank goodness you came in time!"

"Yes, rather!" said Tom Merry. "Though I can't understand how you got here, sir, or why you came. Have we been missed?"

Mr. Lowther knitted his brows. Now that he had found his nephew and his friends safe his anxiety had passed, and he was once again the calm, self-contained M.P., J.P.

"Missed?" he repeated. "Did you think you would not be missed? Your friend D'Arcy telephoned from Eastwood House that you had not arrived there, and you can imagine my alarm. I learned that you had left the train—that was all I could learn—and I feared some terrible accident. For twelve hours this whole countryside has been searched for you. There are fifty searchers at work at this moment."

"Oh!" gasped Tom.

Lowther pressed his uncle's arm. He knew the anxious affection, hidden under a grim manner, that had prompted that hasty and extensive search for the missing juniors.

"I hardly think that anyone would have thought of searching on this lonely rock," went on Mr. Lowther. "But a fire was seen here—it was seen for miles inland. It came into my mind that for some reason you might have visited the isle, and been cut off by the tide, or by some accident, and it was not surprising that careless schoolboys should set a wooden building on fire."

The Terrible Three exchanged a rather comical look.

"As there was no clue to where you were, and something was evidently going on on this island, we came in this direction," said Mr. Lowther. "The tide was partly in, but we secured a boat and crossed by the shortest channel. As we landed we heard the sound of firing. I thank Heaven I have found you safe. I was utterly astounded at what I saw going on here. You must explain yourselves. What does this mad adventure mean?"

Mr. Lowther's face was stern now.

Tom Merry & Co. explained together, the old gentleman listening in growing wonder and amazement. The police-inspector was standing by, taking notes of what the juniors said. They stood in a group in the ruddy light of the burning bungalow, now burning low and gutted to the cellars.

"Beaumont! You said the man's name was Beaumont?" the inspector asked, when the juniors had told their story.

"Yes," said Tom. "There is the man."

Beaumont was still huddled in the grass, utterly spent by his terrors, seeming incapable of further movement.

The inspector bent over him.

"Rufus Beaumont?" he asked.

Only a groan answered him.

"This is a stroke of luck," Mr. Lowther, sir," said the inspector with satisfaction. "You have found your nephew, sir, and I have found a man who has been wanted by the police for the past week. I recognise him now by his description—it is Rufus Beaumont, the absconding solicitor. Stand up, my man!" There was a clink of metal, Beaumont shivered as the handcuffs fastened on his wrists, but he did not speak. He leaned heavily on the inspector's strong arm.

"He is wanted?" said Tom Merry. "We never knew that. That unfortunate man, Jocelyn, could have charged him, but he did not—"

"But there were others," smiled the inspector. "The man had been missing for weeks before a charge was made, then several of his clients came forward, and the police took the matter in hand. He has embezzled thousands of pounds, and committed half a dozen forgeries in the process; at least, that is the charge, and I fancy it will be brought home to him easily enough. You are a prisoner, Rufus Beaumont, charged with forgery, embezzlement, and misappropriation of funds, and I warn you that anything you say may be taken down in writing to be used in evidence against you."

But the wretched man said nothing.

He sat silent and overcome when he was lifted into the boat, and the lonely rock, with the still smoking ruins of the bungalow, was left behind.

Glad enough were Tom Merry & Co. to see the last of him, and to get back to the sheltering roof of Holly Lodge. They were tired out, but Tom's first step was to take down the telephone receiver and ring up Eastwood House. The well-known voice of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy came back.

"That you, Gussy?" asked Tom cheerily.

"Bai Jove! Is that Tom Mewwy?"

"Little me."

"Then you are all right?" asked Arthur Augustus, greatly relieved. "Blake, old man, that Shell boundah is all right."

Tom Merry laughed.

"We've had an awful time, Gussy, and it wasn't our fault we couldn't come on as arranged."

"I am suah of that, deah boy. Miss Pwisicillah Fawcett is heah now, and I shall be no end glad to tell her you are all wight."

"Good!" said Tom. "We'll explain when we see you. Gussy. We're knocked out now, and going to bed. If you still want us for Christmas—"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Then we'll come along in the morning."

"Bwavo!"

And the next day the Terrible Three arrived, after all, at Eastwood House, and joined their friends there, and had the pleasure—which at one time they had given up expecting—of eating their Christmas dinner under Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's hospitable roof. And a dozen times, at least, that day they had to relate over again the thrilling story of that wild Christmas tide.

THE END.

(Look out for next week's rattling fine story of Tom Merry & Co., entitled "THE SPOOFER OF THE SCHOOL-HOUSE!" by Martin Clifford. Your favourite author scores another great triumph in this splendid school yarn.)

A FEAST OF FUN!

This Week's Special
CHRISTMAS NUMBER

Of Our Grand Companion Paper

THE "MAGNET"

**NOW ON
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ARRESTED FOR NOTHING!

To be charged with and arrested for something he hasn't done is a bit of a shock for Dick Hastie, but when the evidence of his "guilt" comes up like an impassable brick wall everything appears hopeless. The world seems to hold little justice for the name of Hastie, and yet, one day, he is to be hailed as—



A LEADER OF THE LEAGUE!

By SYDNEY HORLER.

A Magnificent New Story of League Football, describing a plucky youth's up-hill fight against overwhelming odds.

A Wonderful Goal!

AS he dashed into his stride, the ball snug at his toes, Dick felt his blood on fire. This was the first real chance he had had during the game, and he determined to make the most of it. Moreover, he would do it on his own, for he felt sure that any pass he might give to one of his colleagues would be merely squandered. Such had been the aloof attitude of the rest of the Albion players that he had every justification for forming this opinion.

The crowd cheered, for the speed of this recruit was almost bewildering. They saw the Midchester right-half rush at the winger furiously. It was a wicked tackle, and any referee in the country who knew his business would have awarded a free kick for dangerous play. But this particular official knew the temper of Wilkinson, the player in question, and faked his obvious duty. Instead of pulling the game up he allowed play to proceed.

It looked any odds on Dick being relentlessly felled, but during the previous day he had not shut his eyes to the methods practised by this particular opponent. To be forewarned is to be forearmed, and Hastie told himself previously that when the man tackled him he could expect dirty tactics.

So he left nothing to chance, feinting to go one way, but swerving

violently to the other side. This was a trick that he had practised assiduously whilst playing for the London Bohemians.

In spite of his care, however, he stumbled desperately forward.

"Now then! Keep that leg up, Wilkinson!"

The manners of a football crowd are rather amusing. The ire of the Albion supporters was roused to boiling pitch by the intended trip of the Midchester United right-half. Similar tactics by many of the home players had been rewarded with smiles, but now Wilkinson, who was no worse an offender than some of the Springdale men, was bitterly hooted.

It was not Wilkinson's fault, however, that Hastie did not lose possession. In spite of his stumble, Dick did not fall to the ground. His body balance was so perfect that he was able, within the space of three yards, to right himself, and when the crowd looked again there the ball was still snug at his toes. He sped on faster than ever, the

hysterical yells of the crowd ringing in his ears. They stimulated, but did not confound him. Before him now loomed the Midchester United right-back, Sheriff.

This defender was no reckless tackler; he did not believe in blind rushing, but preferred for a man to come up to him. Then he pushed his solid weight against him with ruthless power, also his elbow—if he could work it in without the referee seeing.

Again Hastie had formed a previous plan of campaign. A football bully is often a coward in a testing time. Suddenly Sheriff could be seen to flinch. The reason was plain. Hastie was shunting as though he intended to drive the ball hard against the body of the back.

Whilst Sheriff remained hesitant the forward got his toe under the ball, and, raising it a little, he lifted it gently over the back's head. Then, dashing

THE OPENING CHAPTERS.

DICK HASTIE, a young fellow of twenty, and a born footballer, playing for the Bohemians, a clever amateur side, is approached by

J. B. TOVEY, a football "scout" on the look-out for fresh talent, who declares that if Dick will join the famous swifts he will make an International of him within two years. Dick, however, has to turn the tempting offer down, for

ROBERT HASTIE, his father, suddenly disappears, leaving behind him a host of clamouring creditors.

DAVID MARTIN, a cloth manufacturer and an ex-footballer, who has known Hastie for some time, is anxious to help the lad, as also is

JAMES BURN, a "lice-rite" reporter on the "Springdale Gazette."

Despite evidence to the contrary, Dick believes in his father's innocence, and promises the angry creditors that he will pay back every penny entrusted to his father.

With only a few shillings in his pocket, Dick sets out to find work, but he is viewed with suspicion everywhere he goes. Having pledged himself to remain in Springdale, he seeks a job with the notorious Springdale Albion, a football club renowned for its shady reputation; but **BENJAMIN TRAVERS**, the Albion's managing-director, happens to be one of Dick's father's creditors, and he turns the lad down.

Later, Hastie is interviewed by Burn, who comes to Springdale in the hope of restoring the good name of Springdale footer, and the story Dick unfolds makes good "copy" for the "Gazette." Burn's scathing article causes no little discussion, and two days later, to Dick's great surprise, he receives a letter from Travers offering him a month's trial with the Albion. Hastie accepts the invitation; but, in spite of his anxiety to acquit himself well in his first match, which is against Midchester, he is "starved" by his team-mates. During the match, however, the Albion's outside-left gets badly clobbered, and is carried off the field. At a critical moment, Dick takes up the vacated position, and, trapping the ball neatly, amid an accompanying burst of applause from the crowd, he races for goal.

(Now read on.)

forward with even more remarkable speed, he regained possession and bore down on the Midchester United goalkeeper.

What followed was like a scene from a bad dream. All that Dick was conscious of was the goalkeeper rushing upon him. He kicked instinctively at the ball—and then came a blackness, in which he could remember nothing more.

He awoke with a start. For a time he could not realise what had actually happened, but slowly enlightenment came; he was lying stretched out by the side of the running-track encircling the playing-pitch, and "Andy" Anderson, the trainer of the club, was bending over him, dropping cold water from a sponge on his face.

"That's better, boy!" he heard Anderson say.

The rough hands of the trainer commenced to massage his face. The sponge was passed over his forehead, and then he was able to breathe great gulps of life-giving air.

"What happened?" Dick asked, looking up.

"Happened? Why, that dirty rotter biffed you over just as you were going to score. As rotten a foul as I've ever seen! We got a penalty for it, but what good was that? Andrews shot over the bar! How d'you feel now, boy? Gosh, they've scored!" cried Anderson.

Dick was now able to see the Midchester players returning from the home goalmouth shaking hands hysterically with each other. They had drawn first blood, and scored the opening goal. Above him he could also see the scowling faces of the home supporters as they bitterly digested this unpalatable fact.

His own duty was plain. He must return to the field. Although racked with pain, he could not be absent any longer.

"Mr. Anderson," he said, "I'm going back."

"But do you feel all right, boy? Are you fit?"

"Oh, I'm fit enough!" replied Dick, and whilst the trainer looked anxiously at him, he rose to his feet and hobbled uncertainly towards the referee to inform him that he had returned to play.

In spite of the heroic attempt that Dick had made to score, his return to the playing-pitch made no difference to the avowed policy of his comrades. He was still ignored. It was as though they were determined that he should be pushed out of the game. No further chance came his way before the half-time whistle blew, and during the interval between his return to the field and his escape to the dressing-room, he had all he could do to remain upright, for he was still racked with pain.

The few minutes' breathing space during the interval did

him a world of good, however. Anderson devoted himself particularly to the injured young forward—a fact which did not escape notice from the other players of the side—and by the time the second half started Dick was practically himself again. His partner, Wilson, returned to play in this half, but remained practically a passenger. Thus the left wing of the Albion became a very spent force, for when Dick did get the ball every one of his passes to the winger went astray because of Wilson's inability to take the ball in his stride.

"Get off the field, Wilson!" yelled the crowd. They had seen the winger play the old soldier before; and, in any case, the outside-left's tendency to be unfit was well known in the town.

These jeers did anything but placate the winger. He endeavoured to get his own back on his partner, and several times when the ball went into touch he glared at Dick Hastie in a manner that meant to convey his opinion of him as a player.

But the crowd, who had taken the new recruit to their hearts after that fine burst of his, would have none of it. Instead of criticising Hastie, they continued to tell Wilson their real opinion of him. Eventually, the scowling winger, receiving a heavy charge from Sheriff, went down once more in a heap, and was carried off the field. Dick was sorry to see the man go, for Wilson's own sake, but he could not bemoan his loss of a partner, because that partner had never once throughout the match been of the slightest use to him. In this half, as before the interval, what chances came his way he had to make himself.

Time was speeding, and the home side was still a goal down. The attitude of the visitors became slightly presumptuous. What they had they meant to hold—that was their attitude.

Wilkinson, their right-half, showed that he had not recovered from the beating which the home inside-left had given to him just before Hastie was injured. A player who nurses a grievance is always dangerous; and, seeking for revenge, Wilkinson deliberately ankle-tapped Hastie after the latter had dispossessed him of the ball.

"Chuck him off! You dirty dog!" yelled the crowd in frenzy; but the referee—who had already shown himself to be a weak official—merely awarded Springdale a free-kick. Once again he made a mistake. What he ought to have done was to call the two teams together, and give them a straight talk. Then he should have warned everyone that the next man who fouled would be sent to the dressing-room.

The free-kick was wasted, but from the throw-in Dick once more secured the ball. And once again he was deliberately fouled.

"Hit him! Get your own back, Hastie!" yelled the crowd.

The temptation was strong, certainly, but instead of facing the glaring Wilkinson, Dick turned his back and walked away.

The next minute he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Funking him, are you?" blazed Burleigh.

Dick looked at the distorted face of his enemy.

"No, I'm not funking him, Burleigh," he replied; "but if I can't play clean football I won't play at all!"

Burleigh seemed so startled that for a moment he was unable to reply. Then, with a muttered exclamation, he turned away.

This latest foul by Wilkinson had roused the crowd to such a pitch of excitement that the referee was not allowed to let the game proceed until he had called all the players together for a general caution. He then gave the warning that the next man who offended would be sent off the field. Whilst this may have been unwelcome news to some, it was very glad tidings to Dick Hastie. Now, at last, he might be allowed to play a decent game.

The pace of the game increased. There was now only fifteen minutes to go, and, in answer to the exhorting cries of their supporters, the Albion players desperately strove to get the equalising goal. But raid after raid was beaten off with comparative ease, until Andrews, the home inside-right, snapping up a pass from the right-half, cut through and reached the penalty area. Here he was remorselessly grassed; and, whilst there was some element of doubt about the tackle, the referee ended all argument by pointing at once to the whitewashed spot.



"Funking him, are you?" blazed Burleigh. Dick looked at the distorted face of his enemy. "No, I'm not funking him," he replied. "But if I can't play clean football I won't play at all!" (See this page.)



By the side of the team manager was a burly constable. The latter looked suspiciously a Dick. "Constable," said Meadows dramatically, "I order you to arrest that man!" (See this page.)

"Penalty!" yelled the delighted crowd. Now was a chance to get that equalising goal!

Scarcely afraid to look, they watched the inside-right place the ball to his liking on the spot hitch up his knickers, take a swerving run, and, whilst the whole world seemed to go mad, the ball could be seen shaking the netting at the back of the goal!

"Goal!"

With the scores equal the pace became, if anything, faster. Midchester and Springdale were old foes in league warfare, and this match had been looked forward to by both sides as an occasion to settle many old scores. Yet minute after minute ticked off, and still no further goal came.

Then came a cry.

"Hastie! Come on Hastie!"

It was the crowd shouting to the one forward they thought capable of achieving their heart's desire. From all round the enclosure the exhortation came:

"Hastie! Come on, Hastie!"

The cry sent the blood into Dick's face, whilst a thrill passed through his body. He forgot everything but his desire to give the crowd the satisfaction they demanded. If only he could get another chance!

By what seemed a miracle, the chance came when the referee was already consulting his watch. Two minutes to go! Was there time? Snapping up a long return by the home right-back, Dick brought the ball under control, and sprang into an electrifying dribble. Although the pace had been a cracker all through the second half, the speed he showed was as astonishing to the United defenders as it was to the mesmerised crowd.

As before, he determined to make this a one-man job; he neither expected nor asked for help. Tricking the shadowing Wilkinson neatly, he forged ahead.

The United left-back came plunging, whilst Sherriff remained in reserve; but the forward rounded him with intricate footwork. Without slackening speed, he raced straight up to the stolid Sherriff, swerved violently to pass him, and then, when still eighteen yards from the goal, shot with all the power of his right foot.

Millburn, the Midchester goalkeeper, swore afterwards that he was unsuspected, but that was a paltry excuse, for if he had told the truth he would have said he never saw the ball once it left Hastie's boot, although he had the clearest of views.

The pace of the shot had beaten him. Before he could fling out a hand, the ball was in the back of the net.

The wonder of the thing so astonished the crowd that, for a moment, they almost forgot to cheer; but the referee's final shrilling was completely drowned in the roars of applause that went up as the official pointed to the dressing-room to denote the conclusion of the game.

A Vile Conspiracy!

DICK HASTIE was a happy youth that night. The memory of the crowd's cheers, of the beaming faces that greeted him as he passed through to the dressing-room after the conclusion of the game with Midchester United, was with him still as he sat down to tea at his humble lodgings. He had made good, and now he felt he could defy whatever the future had in store. Nothing could rob him of the joy of that wonderful goal.

He had barely finished his tea when his landlady, entering, gave him a note. He opened it wonderingly, and read:

"You are wanted on the ground immediately—JOSHUA MEADOWS."

Without wasting any time considering what might be the meaning of this message, Dick hurriedly finished his meal, snatched up his hat and coat, and left the house. A tramway car deposited him, twenty minutes later, at the gates of the ground on which he had made football history that afternoon. The old gatekeeper was just about to lock up, but seeing a recognised Albion player, he allowed Dick to pass through.

Dusk was falling, and a spirit of desolation hung over the great enclosure. Going first of all to the manager's office, Dick knocked on the door, but was not surprised when he failed to get an answer as the place was in darkness. Then, thinking that Meadows must be in the dressing-rooms, he walked hurriedly round to the back of the grand-stand, and passed in through the main door.

Here again, however, nothing but silence and desolation greeted him. The dressing-room was deserted. Switching on the light, he took a good look round the place in order to see if any message had been left for him. No, nothing. What could be the meaning of that note signed by Meadows? He wished he had kept it now, but, unfortunately, in the excitement of the moment, he had torn the piece of paper in two, and had thrown both portions on the fire.

How long he was in the dressing-room he could not tell; but he was just about to leave, feeling that someone had made a very big fool of him, when he heard steps approaching. This must be Meadows. He went to the door.

Sure enough it was Meadows, but by the side of the team manager was a burly constable.

The latter looked at Dick suspiciously.

"Constable," said Meadows dramatically, "I order you to arrest that man!"

For a moment Dick could scarcely realise that this horrible scene was real. When he did—when he came to the conclusion that he had been trapped somehow by a foul conspiracy—he rushed forward.

His progress towards Meadows was stopped by the burly constable, who growled more or less good-naturedly:

"Now then, if you're a sensible lad you won't make things worse than they are already."

Dick controlled himself with a superhuman effort.

"I demand an explanation!" he said. "On what charge do you dare to order me to be arrested, Mr. Meadows?"

Joshua Meadows sneered.

"On as rotten a charge as there is," he replied; "that of sacking money from the pockets of your fellow-players!"

Dick recoiled.

"You accuse me of stealing, you bound!" he stormed. "Why, the thing is preposterous! You must be mad! No," he added quickly, "you aren't mad; you've planned this! You and Benjamin Travers have worked all this out between you!"

The flabby face of the team manager went pale. For a moment it was obvious he had lost control of his nerve. If a shrewd detective, instead of this commonplace police-constable, had been present, no arrest, it is safe to say, would have been made. But recovering himself, Meadows became more vociferous in his demand:

"Constable, I have already told you to arrest this man on a charge of theft! Do your duty, or I will report you to your superiors!"

The constable drew himself up with dignity.

"You needn't get 'eated, Mr. Meadows," he said. And then to Dick: "Now then, young fellow, if you've got any sense you'll come along quietly!"

Dick hesitated for a moment. Should he surrender to this foul accusation without a fight? Then common sense came.

"All right, you needn't be afraid that I shall make any fuss, officer," he said. "I'm going to probe this thing right through to the bottom, and when I do, it will be the worse for you, Mr. Meadows!"

Without another word he stepped to the side of the constable.

Before the officer could leave the room another man stepped out of the darkness into the light. It was Benjamin Travers, his heavy face lit up with a glowing smile of satisfaction.

"I see you've caught your thief, then, Meadows," he said. "I congratulate you, but like father like son, you know. If you will engage the son of a gaolbird you must expect trouble. Perhaps you had better search him on the spot, officer," he added, turning to the constable.

How Dick held himself in whilst the heavy, fumbling fingers went through his pockets he did not know. But the ordeal was over at last.

Over, yes; but it brought a fresh terror; in the right hand of the constable were two one-pound notes and a ten-shilling note. Benjamin Travers turned to his team manager.

"Are these the notes you marked, Meadows?" he asked, whilst Dick Hastie felt a sense of horror creeping over him.

Meadows took the notes and examined them.

"Yes, these are they. This one was taken from Burleigh's coat, this one from Wilson's waistcoat, and this ten-shilling note from an old waistcoat that Tunney had hanging up in the dressing-room. Not satisfied with this afternoon's haul of fifty bob, he came back to-night to get some more, I suppose! Old Grindley, at the gate, let him through, thinking he had forgotten something—"

"You liar!" shouted Dick. "I came back because you sent me a note."

Joshua Meadows assumed an attitude of cynical disbelief: "I sent you a note! I've never written a line to you in my life, and I certainly didn't send you a note to-night!"

"Well, someone did," declared Dick. "It was signed by you, anyway."

Benjamin Travers cut in.

"Do you happen to have the note on you?" he inquired.

"No-o. I burnt it."

Meadows burst into a forced laugh.

"You did, eh? You burnt it! That's a likely story, isn't it? You will believe me, I hope, Mr. Travers, when I say that as far as I am concerned this story of a note is sheer invention."

"Of course I'll believe you, Meadows; and as for you," the chairman added, turning to the accused; "I am more sorry than I can say to find a young fellow just starting out on what might have been a successful football career, wilfully ruining his chances in the despicable way you have done. Take him away, officer. Meadows will be down at the station in a moment and will prefer the charge."

Something inside Dick snapped at that moment. Already he realised that he had stumbled into a trap from which there could be no escape. If only he had kept that note; and yet even if he had kept it, Meadows, he supposed, would have sworn that the writing was not his. The fact that mattered, the thing that remained, was that the evil forces marshalled against him had put a snare for his feet, and that he had fallen into it.

He felt that he had come to the end of his endurance. Regardless of the representative of the law, whose hand was already upon his arm, he sprang with lightning speed at Meadows, caught the team manager by his thick throat, and shook him as a terrier shakes a rat until the man's breath came in short, quick gasps, and his face assumed a purple hue. Then, and only then, with the constable and Benjamin Travers each holding on to a shoulder, he flung Meadows across the room with such force that the man crashed to the floor like a sack of coal.

"Now, officer, I'm ready," said Dick harshly, "and I promise to go with you quietly."

By the side of the burly police-constable, he passed through the crowded streets barely conscious of what he was doing. The sense of impotence he had threatened to drive him mad, but he knew that never before in his life had he had such need of a cool head and steadfast caution.

The policeman standing at the entrance to the police-office stared curiously at the couple as they passed into the big room. Like the sergeant in charge that evening, he was able to recognise in P.-c. Childers' prisoner, the brilliant forward of Springdale Albion.

The sergeant in charge looked up from his reading.

"What's this, Childers?" he asked.

"Mr. Joshua Meadows, manager of the Albion Club, will be here presently, sergeant, and will be able to tell you all about it," was the reply.

It was not until a quarter of an hour had passed, however, that Meadows entered the room. By his side was Benjamin Travers.

"Good-evening, Mr. Meadows!" said the sergeant.

The team manager of Springdale Albion contented himself by nodding his head.

"What's the trouble to-night?" went on the sergeant.

Meadows looked at Travers, and it was the latter who told the tale.

"Sorry as I am to say it, sergeant, it is my painful duty to give this youth, whose name is Richard Hastie, into custody on a charge of stealing moneys from his fellow players. When arrested to-night, he, moreover, made a violent and entirely unprovoked assault upon Mr. Meadows, whom he erroneously considers to be an enemy instead of a friend. I say this because it was with considerable reluctance that Mr. Meadows came to me at the conclusion of the match this afternoon and said that various members of the team had missed money, and that suspicion rested in a very strong measure upon this lad, who has recently joined our playing staff. Briefly, the facts are as follows: Three players of ours complained of having money taken from their street clothes this afternoon, and when searched, the prisoner was discovered to have the notes in question upon his person."

The sergeant stared at the speaker.

"How do you know they were the same notes?" he inquired.

"I will tell you, sergeant," replied the chairman quickly. "Ever since Hastie has been hanging around the club—he's been pestering our life out to give him a trial for some days—there's been an epidemic of dressing-room thefts. In order to catch the thief, we instructed certain players to display



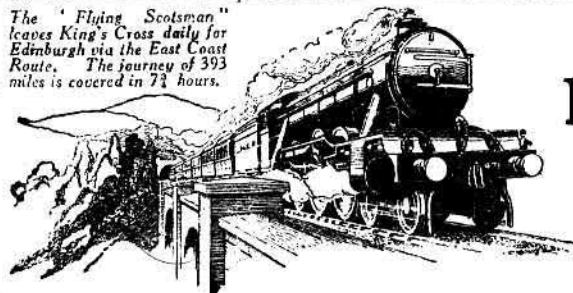
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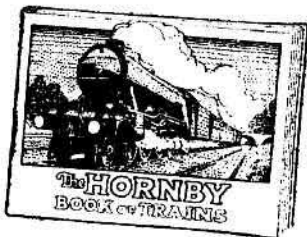
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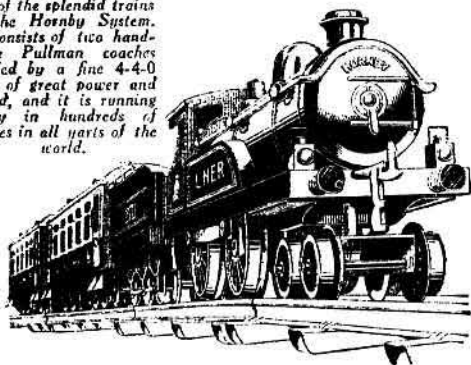
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money, which had previously been marked in a distinctive way, in the dressing-room before placing it somewhat ostentatiously in their clothes. We shall be able to prove that the accused was in the dressing-room at the time this plan was followed; and, to conclude, the notes of which the police-constable took charge, have a distinctive mark."

In answer, the sergeant took the notes from the police-constable and examined them carefully.

"Yes," he agreed; "there is a mark certainly on each of these notes. What have you to say, my lad? This is not a very pleasant thing to be accused of, you know—robbing your comrades."

"I have nothing to say at the moment," replied Dick; "except that every word that this man"—looking at Benjamin Travers—"has told you, is a deliberate lie!"

"Nevertheless, you must be taken into custody," replied the sergeant. "Have you any friends in the town? Have you anyone who would be willing to go bail for you?"

Benjamin Travers stepped forward.

"As the prosecutor, sergeant, I shall object to any bail being allowed to-night. This is a very serious charge, and I view it gravely. Should anyone be foolish enough to go bail for the accused, I have not the slightest doubt but what he would take advantage of it to flee from justice."

"You must allow me to know my own duty best, Mr. Travers," said the sergeant. "If suitable bail is forthcoming for the prisoner, I shall have to grant him his liberty until Monday morning, when he will be charged before the local magistrates."

"Well, I've warned you," concluded Travers. And, with Meadows, he then left the room.

Directly he was alone with the police-officer, Dick said: "I want you to be good enough, sergeant, to send someone for Mr. David Martin. He is my employer, and I have no doubt, will stand bail for me."

"Certainly," came the reply; "but while Mr. Martin is being fetched you must go down below."

Down below proved to be a detention cell—a small, horrible, stone-flagged place which made Dick shiver at the very sight of it. Within half an hour, however, the ruddy face of the man who had proved such a friend to him could be seen on the other side of the door.

(Young Dick Hastie is in a pretty tight corner, but he possesses a staunch friend in David Martin. And Dave comes up to the scratch in an unexpected fashion next week. Mind you read this instalment, chums.)

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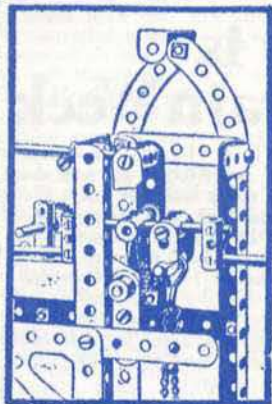
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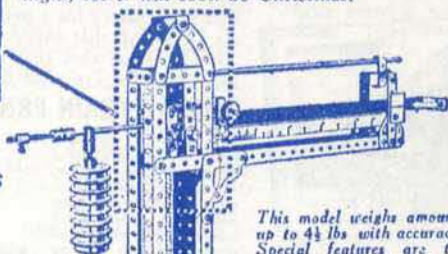
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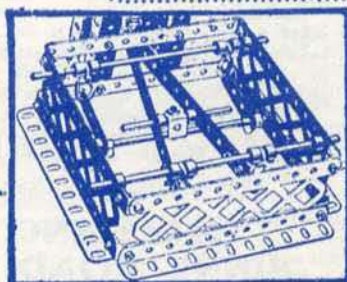


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