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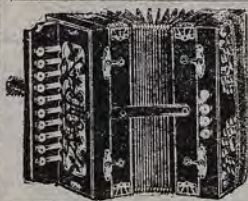
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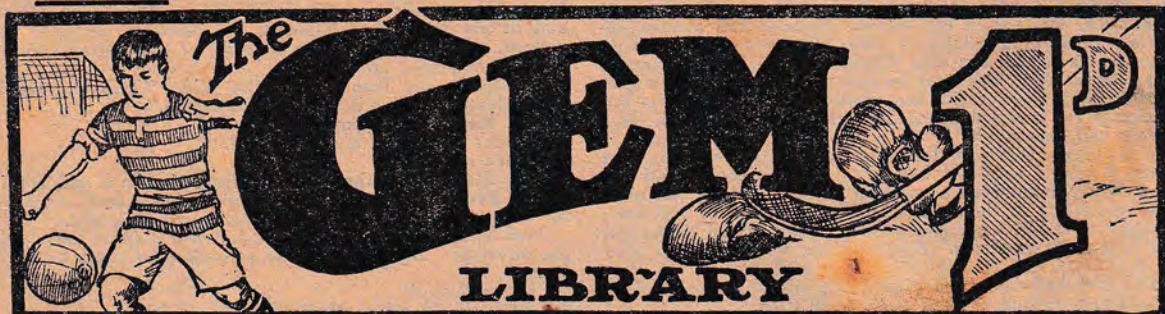
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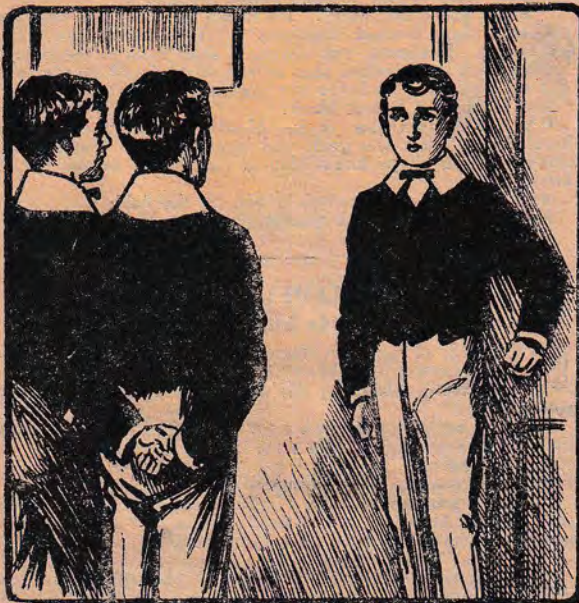
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CHAPTER 1. Called Away.

"GOAL!"
"Goal!"
"Hurrah!"
"Bravo, Tom Merry!"

The crowd round the football ground at St. Jim's cheered themselves hoarse. Even some of the players shouted and clapped their hands.

It was, as Monty Lowther said, a ripping goal. The School House were playing the New House, and Fatty Wynn was keeping goal for the latter. Figgins, the New House junior skipper, relied upon Fatty Wynn as a tower of strength; and the fat Fourth-Former seldom failed to fulfil expectations.

Many times had the School House forwards brought the ball right up to the goal, only to have it kicked or fisted out by Fatty Wynn as fast as they sent it in, and several times Fatty, with a mighty kick, had transferred the play to the School House half.

But Tom Merry had beaten him this time.

Taking a centre from Jack Blake, Tom Merry had made a desperate dash for goal, with the New House players like wolves round him. With two of them fairly upon him, he had risked a desperate kick—his only chance—and the leather, just eluding the tips of Fatty's outstretched fingers, had sailed into the net.

The next instant, Tom Merry was sprawling, cannoned over by the charging backs.

He came down with a mighty thump on the hard earth, and for the moment he was deaf to the cheering, deaf to the loud clapping of hands, and the green earth and blue sky danced and swam about him.

The Fatal Telegram.

A Grand Long, Complete
Tale of TOM MERRY & Co.
at St. Jim's.

BY

MARTIN CLIFFORD.

"Goal!"

"Bravo, Tom Merry!"

"Goal! Hurrah!"

Monty Lowther dashed to his chum and raised him up. Tom Merry looked about him dazedly.

Kerr, the New House back, who had charged him over, bent over him anxiously.

"I say, old man, I hope I didn't hurt you!" he exclaimed. Tom Merry grinned faintly.

"You jolly well did, you boulder," he said; "but it was all fair, and I've got the goal! I'm all right, Kerr, old son."

And he staggered to his feet, between Kerr and Lowther. Monty Lowther supported his chum with a slightly anxious look; but Tom Merry was all right. He stood alone, breathing a little deeply.

He waved his hand to his friends in the crowd as a sign that he was not hurt, and there was a fresh burst of cheering.

Fatty Wynn threw the ball out with a curious expression on his face. He was a demon goalkeeper, and the despair of the opposing forwards. However weak the New House attack might be, however faltering their defence, they were always sure of Fatty Wynn in goal. Whenever New House juniors played School House juniors, Fatty Wynn was always between the sticks for his House. Indeed, many fellows had been heard to say that Fatty Wynn was quite up to playing in senior matches, and that the Sixth might do worse than give him a trial in goal.

Fatty Wynn had been idle most of the game till that shot from Tom Merry. The New House team was outclassing its opponents. Tom Merry's eleven was usually in good form, but just now it was hardly up to its usual strength. Jack Blake, of the Fourth, usually a splendid

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"TOM MERRY & Co."

and

"THE IRON ISLAND."

No. 148 (New Series).

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forward in the side, was out of the team owing to a hurt, and Digby was not playing at half as usual. Herries, the right-back, was not in the eleven. Herries had a most important matter to attend to that afternoon—important to Herries, at least. His dog Towser was sick, and Herries was looking after him, and he had told Tom Merry to give another chap his place for the occasion. And as Herries was evidently too worried about Towser to play up well, Tom Merry had consented.

With Blake, Digby, and Herries gone from the team, Tom Merry's eleven was well below its usual strength, and the New House fellows were quite in form. Hence, the hope that was rising in the breasts of Figgins & Co. of snatching a victory. It could not be denied that the School House got the best of it, as a rule. Figgins & Co. determined to alter all that.

The first half had been played out without a score. The second half wanted yet half an hour to time.

There was plenty of time to alter the score. The players lined up again, and the crowd of juniors round the ground watched them eagerly. There were not only juniors on the scene, either, but a good many seniors who thought the junior match was worth watching. Kildare, the captain of the school, had strolled down to look on, with Darrel and Monteith, of the Sixth. The knowledge that they were playing under the eyes of the captain of St. Jim's nerved the juniors to greater efforts. Kildare had cheered as loudly as any when Tom Merry brought off that difficult goal.

"We'll lick 'em, after all!" said Manners, as the School House fellows lined up again. "We'll lick 'em, Tommy, my son!"

Tom Merry nodded with a cheerful smile.

"Yes, rather," he said; "but they're in ripping form, and Figgins means business. Play up, my sons!"

Figgins did, indeed, mean business. The long-legged chief of the New House juniors was determined to get through. And under his lead, the New House forwards did wonders. Again and again they brought the ball right up to the School House goal, but the defence was sound. But in the last line the School House side missed Herries more than ever. Figgins & Co. were pressing all the time, and whenever the ball was cleared, it was brought back again, and at last a sure shot from Figgins found the corner of the net, giving the goalies no chance at all.

Then the New House fellows in the crowd cheered themselves hoarse.

"Hurrah!"

"Goal!"

"Good old Figgy!"

"Bravo!"

Figgins grinned gleefully. He liked to hear them shouting, and he made no secret of it. The score was level now, and there was a quarter of an hour more to play.

"We've got to get the odd goal," Figgins said to his men, as they went back to the centre.

"We've got to get the odd goal," Tom Merry remarked at the same time.

And both sides determined that they would.

From the blast of the whistle, now, the play was fast and furious. Hard and harder they pressed, and the changes in the scene were kaleidoscopic. Now the New House would be right up to Tom Merry's goal, pelting in the leather, and now the tide would sweep to the other end, and Fatty Wynn would be given plenty of work. But Fatty was equal to it. Fatty Wynn could save where another goalie would have lost, and again and again he tossed out the leather amid the roars of the New House crowd.

"Well saved!"

"Oh, well saved, sir!"

"Bravo, Fatty!"

"No good trying to pass Fatty," said Jack Blake, who was a looker-on that day, limping from a late accidental kick on the ankle. "The blessed bounder nearly fills up the goal with himself, for one thing."

This was an exaggeration; but Fatty Wynn certainly was plump.

"Faith, and we're winning, Blake, my boy," Reilly remarked.

It looked like it.

The School House forwards were pressing hard. The New House had been for some minutes penned in their own area. Kerr had cleared twice, with wonderful kicks, but each time the ball was promptly brought back. It looked as if that attack was to be driven home, and that all depended upon Fatty Wynn.

Just then a lad in uniform pressed his way through the crowd, and stood on the edge of the field, waving a buff-coloured envelope in his hand.

"My hat," ejaculated Blake, "it's the telegraph chap, and he's got a telegram for one of the fellows playing!"

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One of the linesmen ran up to the lad, and spoke to him. Blake did not hear what they said. The ball went into touch, and in the pause that followed, the linesman spoke to the referee, who happened to be Lefevre, of the Fifth. Lefevre nodded, and held up his hand.

"Telegram for Tom Merry," he said. "Will you see it now, Merry, or leave it till after the match."

Tom Merry looked round.

"Better see it, if I may," he said.

"Back up."

Tom Merry took the envelope from the boy, and slit it open. Every eye was upon him, and the footballers, not sorry for the pause after a gruelling game, breathed deeply.

Tom Merry looked at the black-lettered strip he took from the envelope. An expression of astonishment came over his face.

"Great Scott!"

"Bad news?" asked Monty Lowther, quickly.

"No. But—I must get off."

"What?"

"I must go!"

"Go!" gasped half a dozen voices blankly.

"Yes," said Tom Merry. He thrust the telegram into the pocket of his football knickers. "I—I must go! It's important. I'm sorry, you chaps. I shall have to get out."

He looked so distressed that no one could doubt that he was cut up at having to leave the match unfinished.

The footballers looked blank.

"You'll captain the team, Monty," said Tom Merry hurriedly. "Pack the goal, and keep 'em off, I'm awfully sorry. If you chaps knew how it was, you'd excuse me, I know."

And without another word he ran off the field.

He left footballers and spectators staring blankly.

What did it mean?

CHAPTER 2.

No Luck!

FIGGINS, of the New House, looked after the disappearing figure of Tom Merry, and gave a grunt.

"Well, this beats the deck!" he exclaimed. "It's rotten!"

"All the better for us, in a way," remarked French. "We shall beat them hands down now."

Figgins sniffed.

"I don't want to beat a team a man short."

"A vewy pwopah remark, Figgins, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the School House. "A decidedly pwopah remark. It shows the sportsman."

"Oh, rats!" said Figgins.

"Get on the field," said Lefevre. "School House are playing a man short. No need to waste more time. That's what I say. Get on."

"Hold on," said Figgins. "The score's level now."

"Yaas, wathah; but it won't remain so, deah boys."

"I'll bet it won't, with you playing a man short!" growled Figgins. "You won't have an earthly against us."

"Weally, Figgins—"

"We're going to play it out on equal terms, and lick 'em fair and square," said Figgins. "I'm going off."

"What?"

"Bai Jove!"

"I mean it," said Figgins resolutely. "School House have lost their captain, and New House can do the same."

"Oh, rot!" said Fatty Wynn. "We can't win without you, Figgy."

"I know the School House can't win without Tom Merry, and against eleven men," said Figgins. "I'm going off. If we beat 'em, we beat 'em fair and square. This isn't a blessed League match, with the result of a giddy competition hanging on it. It's a friendly match, and we're sportsmen. I'm going off. You'll skipper the team, Kerr."

"But—"

"It's all right. Go ahead and lick them."

And Figgins walked off the field.

There was a buzz of amazement among the crowd.

"What's Figgins going off for?"

"What's the matter?"

"Faith, and ain't they going to finish?"

"Come back, Figgins."

Figgins did not turn back. Jack Blake and Reilly met him as he came off the ground.

"What's the matter, Figgy?" they demanded together.

"Nothing," said Figgins cheerfully.

"What are you coming off for?"

"I'm out of the team."

"What for?"

"Mako things level."

They stared at him blankly.

"Well, you ass!" exclaimed Blake.

Figgins laughed.

"Fair play's a jewel," he said. "Let 'em fight it out, man to man—ten to ten. We shall lick the School House, anyway."

To which Blake and Reilly responded, with one voice:

"Rats!"

Lefevre blew the whistle. The two teams lined up a man short. Monty Lowther was captaining the School House, and Kerr the New House team. There was but little time more to play, and the two teams went at it ding-dong.

"You're an ass, Figgys!" said Jack Blake, giving the New House leader a dig in the ribs, as Figgins pulled his coat about him. "But you're an ass of the right sort."

"Faith, and he is!" said Reilly.

"Rot!" said Figgins.

"Hallo, there they go!"

The New House forwards were away with the ball.

Figgins watched them eagerly.

Figgins had been very chivalrous in leaving only ten men of the New House to face the School House ten, but there were perhaps fellows in his House who would criticise the action in a very hostile spirit if the side lost. Figgins was very keen to see his men win.

And they looked like winning.

As a matter of fact, the School House side already was not up to its usual strength, and Tom Merry was a greater loss to his side than Figgins was to his.

The School House game was wholly defence now.

At the most they were able to keep the ball to midfield, and soon this was over, and they had to mass in to defend their goal.

The fast forwards of the New House kept up a rain of shots.

It seemed certain that sooner or later the ball would find the net, and Figgins looked on with a confident grin, while Blake watched very anxiously.

There was a sudden roar from the crowd.

"Goal!"

The leather was in!

The New House were two up!

Blake grunted.

"Done!" he said.

Figgins chuckled softly.

"What did I tell you?" he demanded.

"Oh, rats!"

The School House side had no chance to equalise. They played up to keep down the margin of winning goals, and that was all they could do. If the game had lasted longer the score would have gone up for the New House.

Lefevre blew the whistle at last.

The teams trooped off the field with the score still at two for the New House, and one for their rivals.

Figgys' eyes were dancing. He clapped Kerr on the back, and punched Fatty Wynn in the ribs ecstatically.

"Good old New House!" he exclaimed. "I knew we should do it."

The School House fellows were glum enough.

They did not like being beaten, and they felt that fortune had been unkind to them.

But for Tom Merry being called away, the New House would never have had that goal, they felt certain; in fact, the School House would probably have scored again. Tom Merry's telegram had done the business for them.

"It's rotten!" said Blake, who felt the disappointment just as keenly as if he had been playing. "It's simply rotten!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I wogard it as wotten, too, deah boy; but it cannot be helped."

Monty Lowther growled.

"What on earth has Tom Merry gone for?"

"Yes, that's the question," said Kangaroo. "What did he want to slope off for just at the ticklish point of the game?"

"Telegram," remarked Digby.

"Oh, blow the telegram!"

"Yaas, wathah! Blow the beastly telegwain!"

"It's rotten!"

"Uttrahly wotten, deah boy!"

"Blessed if Tom Merry oughtn't to be jolly well bumped for it," Manners exclaimed, in an exasperated tone. "I suppose he'll be bolting off in the middle of the Grammar School match next Saturday, too."

"He ought to be turned out of the team," said Gore.

"Oh, you shut up, Gore!" said half a dozen voices at once. The fellows might go for Tom Merry themselves, but they weren't disposed to let the cad of the Shell run him down.

Gore scowled and walked away. Whenever he tried to get in a dig at Tom Merry, it seemed to turn out like this.

"We'll jolly well tell Tom Merry what we think of him when he comes back, anyway," said Clifton Dane.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"When is he coming back, I wonder?"

The fellows were wondering that for some time. Darkness fell, but Tom Merry had not returned. Manners and Lowther, who were Tom Merry's study-mates in the Shell passage, had the tea all ready at the usual time, but Tom Merry did not arrive to partake of it.

After waiting some time, Manners and Lowther had their tea, and they ate in silence. An uneasy feeling was beginning to seize upon them that something might have happened to Tom Merry.

"Where the dickens can he be?" Manners exclaimed at last, as he rose from the study tea-table.

Lowther shook his head.

"Blessed if I can guess."

"He said it wasn't bad news in the telegram; he can't have gone home," Manners went on. "If it had been from his old governess, Miss Fawcett, Tom would have said so."

"I think he would."

"Then where can he be?"

"Give it up."

The chums of the Shell went downstairs. Blake & Co. were standing in the passage with a group of other juniors, all discussing the strange conduct of Tom Merry.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy turned his monocle upon Manners and Lowther as they joined the group.

"Have you heard anythin' of him, deah boys?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"Vewy cuwious that the duffah hasn't turned up yet."

"Can't make it out," said Monty Lowther. "I'm going down to the gate to wait for him."

Manners and Lowther went out into the dusky quadrangle. Half a dozen of the juniors followed them, all in a state of wonderment.

CHAPTER 3.

Tom Merry Declines to Explain.

MONTY LOWTHER looked out into the shadowed high-road that ran in the direction of the village of Rylcombe. In the distance a dim lamp gleamed, but the road was very dark.

Two or three of the juniors strolled back to the House after a time. The evening was cold, and waiting at the gate was not enjoyable.

Monty Lowther and Manners were growing anxious. Blake and the other Fourth-Formers were more inclined to be indignant, as eight o'clock struck, and there was no sign of Tom Merry.

"It's silly," said Jack Blake. "He must be doing this on purpose. It's a jape."

"Bai Jove! It's quite poss."

"Rats!" said Lowther. "It's not a jape."

"What is it, then?"

"Might be an accident."

"Well, it might be."

"Yaas, wathah, deah boys! Accidents will happen, you know, in the best wegulated colls," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy sagely.

"I'll tell you what!" exclaimed Herries suddenly. "I've got a jolly good idea. Let's go and find him."

Blake snorted.

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"How are we to find him, ass?" he said. "We don't know even in what direction he's gone, and we haven't the faintest idea where to look."

"We can follow his trail."

"Rats!"

"I'll put Towser on the track——"

"Towser!"

"Yes, rather—my bulldog Towser. You know what a dab he is at following a trail," said Herries.

"Well, of all the asses——"

"Look here, Blake——"

"Blow Towser! I'm getting fed up with Towser," said Blake crossly.

"You ass!"

"Weally, Hewwies, I agwee with Blake. I decline to have Towsah introduced into the mattah at all," said Arthur Augustus. "That wotten dog has no wespect whatevah for a fellow's twousahs."

"Hallo!" exclaimed Monty Lowther, before Herries could reply. "Here comes somebody."

Footsteps sounded on the road.

The juniors looked out of the gateway eagerly.

A boyish, sturdy form loomed up in the dusk of the evening, under the shadows of the roadside trees.

"Tom Merry!"

Tom Merry came on slowly towards the school. He appeared very fatigued, and his steps were slow and heavy. He started a little as he saw the group of juniors in the school gateway, and nodded.

They stopped him as he came in, and a shower of questions descended upon him at once.

"Where have you been?"

"What's the row?"

"Who was that telegram from?"

"Speak up, duffer!"

"Make a clean breast of it, you ass!"

"Can't!"

Tom Merry uttered the monosyllable quietly, in a tired voice. It was clear that the hero of the Shell had been exerting himself, and the mud on his boots and on his trousers showed that he had been a great deal across country.

The juniors gave a sort of howl.

"Can't!" shouted Blake.

"Bai Jovel Can't!"

"You mean you won't!" said Lowther wrathfully.

Tom Merry looked distressed.

"Own up, you ass!" said Manners.

"Out with it!" roared Lowther.

"Look here, you chaps, I'm tired," said Tom Merry.

"Let's get in and get a rest before you jaw at me."

Lowther and Manners melted at once. There was no doubt that Tom Merry was tired; his voice, his drooping eyes, and his heavy limbs showed that.

"Of course, Tommy!" said Lowther. "Come on! Do leave off worrying him, you Fourth Form duffers. Can't you see he's tired?"

"Well, I like that!" exclaimed Blake, in astonishment.

"It was you——"

"Oh, don't argue!"

"Why, you chump——"

"Come on, Tommy, and don't take any notice of these Fourth Form kids," said Manners loftily.

And Lowther and Manners marched Tom Merry off between them, leaving the Fourth-Formers staring after them in wrath and indignation.

"Well, my only hat!" ejaculated Blake.

"Bai Jove!"

"The cheek of it!"

"We'll jolly well make him own up!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"To go off like that!" said Blake, in a tone of great exasperation. "To go off like—a blessed gun, and never give a word of explanation, after making his House lose a footer match!"

"Howwid!"

"We'll make him own up what it's all about, anyway."

"Yaas, wathah!"

And the exasperated Fourth-Formers followed the chums of the Shell.

Tom Merry entered the School House with his chums, and found fellows anxious to know the history of the mystery, so to speak, at nearly every step.

To all of them he returned the same answer.

He had nothing to say, and he was too tired to talk, anyway.

The Terrible Three went up to their study to get out of the questioning. Monty Lowther glanced back from the landing, and saw Blake & Co. coming upstairs, looking very businesslike and determined.

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"Those blessed Fourth Form bounders are following us!" he exclaimed. "They mean to come to the study."

Tom Merry grinned.

"Let's lock the door," he said.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Terrible Three ran into their study, and Monty Lowther slammed the door, and turned the key in the lock.

The next minute there came a hammering at the outside of the door. The Fourth-Formers had arrived.

Tom Merry sank into an armchair to rest, breathing heavily. Manners and Lowther stood just within the door and grinned.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

"Open this door!" roared Jack Blake, through the keyhole.

"Rats!"

"We'll bust it in!"

"Bust away!"

"You—you Shell bounders! We're going to ask Tom Merry questions!" yelled Digby.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Ask 'em through the keyhole," grinned Lowther.

"Will he answer them, then?"

"Oh, no!"

Bang! Bang!

"Open this door!"

"Go it, my sons! The door's as hard as your own head, and you know how hard it is to get through that!" chuckled Lowther.

There was an answering chuckle from the passage.

"Bai Jove, I wegard that as wathah funny!"

Jack Blake stared frigidly at his elegant chum.

"You ass——"

"Weally, Blake——"

"You frabjous chump——"

"I wefuse to be chawactewised as a fwabjous chump," said Arthur Augustus, with dignity. "I wegard the expwession as oppwobwious."

Blake snorted, and turned to the door again. He delivered a kick on the lower panels that made the door ring, and made him give a gasp of pain himself.

"Will you open this door?" he yelled.

"Not this evening."

"Will you open——"

"Some other evening."

Bang! Kick! Thump! Bang!

The voice of a prefect was heard shouting up the stairs, and the attack on the study door ceased suddenly. Scuttling footsteps were heard as the Fourth-Formers fled.

"They're gone!" chuckled Monty Lowther, turning towards Tom Merry. "It's all right, Tommy—all serene now!"

"How did the match go?" asked Tom Merry.

"New House won."

"Oh!"

"We went to pieces after you left," said Manners. "Like your cheek to go in the middle of a game, I think. But I suppose it was something awfully important."

Tom Merry nodded.

"You're not going to confide it to all those Fourth Form kids, I suppose?"

"No, I can't."

"It's a secret?"

"Well, yes."

"Good!" said Monty Lowther. "We'll help you keep it. Now we're here comfy by ourselves you can tell us."

"Yes, rather!" said Manners.

Tom Merry coloured uncomfortably.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but——"

"But what?" demanded the chums of the Shell together.

"But I can't tell you anything."

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CHAPTER 4.

The Secret.

THERE was a deep silence in the study.

Manners and Lowther stared steadily at Tom Merry.

The hero of the Shell met their combined gaze for some seconds, and then his glance dropped, and his eyes sank to the floor.

He coloured with embarrassment; but the lines of his mouth were very firm and did not falter.

The silence lasted a full minute. Wrath was gathering in the faces of Lowther and Manners; discomfort and distress in Tom Merry's.

Monty Lowther broke the silence at last.

"You can't tell us anything?" he exclaimed.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"Not the Fourth Form kids, mind you," said Lowther; "but the chums of your own study—chaps who never have secrets from you—in fact, us?"

Tom Merry's colour deepened.

"I'm sorry, Monty, old man. But—but it's impossible."

"Are you going to show us the telegram?"

"No, Monty."

"Are you going to tell us anything about the matter at all?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"It's a secret."

"I've already offered to help you keep the giddy secret," said Monty Lowther.

Tom Merry smiled faintly.

"That's no good, Lowther. I can't tell you—I can't really. If I could I would, honour bright."

"Not much good our staying here, Manners, as far as I can see," Monty Lowther remarked abruptly. "We may as well leave Tom Merry the whole study to keep his giddy secret in."

"Certainly!" said Manners.

Tom Merry rose quickly from his chair.

"Look here, you fellows, don't be cads!" he exclaimed.

"You can see that I'm worried about it, can't you?"

"What's worrying you?"

"The—the affair, you know."

"The affair that took you away from the school this afternoon and made you throw away a House match?" asked Lowther.

"Ye-es."

"And you can't tell us what it is?"

"No-o."

Monty Lowther went towards the door. Then he came back again, and stood in front of Tom Merry, looking at him steadily.

"Tom, old man," he said quietly, "what's the matter?"

Tom Merry flushed.

"Nothing, Monty."

"You're not in any trouble?"

"I? Oh, no!"

"Somebody you know is?"

Tom Merry was silent.

"Now, look here, Tommy, I'm not an inquisitive chap. You know I never go around prying into secrets. There's nothing about me like Mellish or Levison, I hope. But don't you think we're entitled to an explanation? You went off, and lost us the match, and the whole House will want to know the reason. It's only to be expected, Tom. You can't expect them to take it without a word."

"I can't help it."

"You don't mean to give any explanation?"

"I can't."

"Not to us—your own chums?"

"I can't, Monty."

Monty Lowther was silent for some moments. He looked at Manners, but Manners had no suggestion to offer; he only gave a grunt which might have meant anything or nothing.

"Very well," said Lowther, at last, "I won't ask you any more questions, Tommy. The rest of the House will, I expect."

Tom Merry's face brightened.

"Hang the rest of the House, Monty, so long as you two don't mind! Goodness knows I'd tell you if I could; but—but the secret's not mine. I know I could trust you; but—but a word might get outside. Besides, I've promised."

"You're speaking as if something serious were the matter, Tom."

"I don't mean exactly that."

"Well, let it drop," said Monty Lowther. "Look here, you're tired, and you must be hungry. We waited tea for you a jolly long time, but as you didn't come in we had it. We'll get you some more."

"You're jolly good, old chap!"

"Oh, rats!"

Lowther stirred up the fire, and placed the kettle upon the glowing coals. Manners made toast and buttered it.

Tom Merry dropped into the armchair again and sat, moody and pensive, gazing into the fire.

His chums gazed at him several times, but did not speak. They had asked him questions, and he did not wish to answer them. The matter was finished with, so far as they were concerned.

The tea and the toast were soon ready, with boiled eggs and bloater-paste to garnish the meal. Tom Merry ate heartily. He was hungry, and the secret he was keeping, whatever it was, evidently had no effect in diminishing his healthy appetite.

He had finished his tea, mostly in silence, when a tap came at the door.

"Oh, go away!" shouted Lowther.

"Eh? What's that?" came back in the voice of Figgins.

"Oh, is it you, Figgins?"

Lowther unlocked the door, and threw it open.

Figgins, of the New House, grinned cheerfully into the study.

"I heard that Tom Merry had come in," he remarked. "I thought I'd run over and see him, and ask him what he left in the middle of the match for?"

Lowther gave a grunt. He knew in advance how Figgins's question was likely to be answered.

"Anything wrong, Tom Merry?" Figgins asked.

"No, thanks," said Tom Merry uncomfortably.

"What did you bolt off like that for?"

"I had a telegram."

Figgins grinned.

"Yes, I know that," he said; "I saw it. I mean, what was it all about? Not a secret, is it?" added Figgins, a new thought striking him.

"Well, yes, in a way it is," said Tom Merry, turning very red.

Figgins stared at him in astonishment for a moment, and then ejaculated "Oh!" in a very expressive tone. Then he nodded to the chums of the Shell and walked away, whistling. He left an uncomfortable silence behind in Tom Merry's study.

CHAPTER 5.

Ruin!

"THIS won't do, deah boys."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy made this statement. He was standing on the hearthrug in Study No. 6, with his back to the fire, and his hands in his trousers pockets—laying down the law.

Blake, Herries, and Digby were at the table, and were supposed to be doing their prep.—so was D'Arcy, for that matter—but they hadn't begun yet.

Blake was nibbling the handle of his pen. Digby was drumming on the table with his knuckles. Herries was staring at D'Arcy.

"It won't do!" repeated the swell of St. Jim's.

"Eh?" said Blake absently.

"I wepeat, Blake, that it won't do."

"What won't do?"

"This wot of Tom Mewwy's."

"Oh, Tom Merry!" said Blake, rousing himself from his gloomy abstraction. "That's just what I was thinking about, as a matter of fact."

"Same here," said Digby.

"And here," added Herries. "I was just trying to think if Towser would be of any use in the matter."

D'Arcy gave Herries a most expressive glance through his monocle, and then resumed:

"Listen, deah boys! There is somethin' the mattah with our fwient Tom Mewwy—somethin' wathah sewious."

"Go hon!" said Blake. "As the whole school has known that for twenty-four hours, Gussy, you can't expect us to jump."

"Pway don't be an ass, Blake! That was only a wemark to begin with—"

"Oh, a sort of preliminary canter!" suggested Digby.

"I wish you wouldn't intewwupt me. It thwows me into a fluttah. What I mean to say is, that if Tom Mewwy is in twouble, we've got to back him up, like—like anythin'."

"Hear, hear!"

"Vewy good, deah boys. Of course, Tom Mewwy is a Shell chap, and the Shell are mostly swankin' boundahs, who do not understand the pwopah posish, of the Fourth Form in this school. But if Tom Mewwy is in twouble, I suggest ovahlookin' that, and standing by him like—like—"

"Like Britons!" said Digby.

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"Yaas, wathah; like Bwtons! We'll stick to the old chap like—like—"

"Glue?"

"Weally, Dig—"

"Well, sealing-wax, then!"

"I wufuse to take notice of wemarks made in a fwirolous spiwit. Now, deah boys, Tom Mewwy has been goin' about lookin' like a chief mourner at a funewal evah since he had that beastly telewgam."

"And lost us the House match," remarked Herries.

"Nevah mind the House match now, Hewwies. Bothah the House match! If Tom Mewwy is in twouble even footah will have to take a back seat."

"Yes, rather," said Blake. "We'll forgive him the House match, but—"

"To wesume—"

"Is this a lecture, Gussy, or a penny reading?"

"To wesume," said Arthur Augustus, without heeding that question. "I wegarid it as our dutay to look into the mattah. Tom Mewwy may be a Shell boundah, but there's no denyin' that he's decent all thwough, and we all like him, and if he's in twouble we're going to get him out of it somehow."

"Hear, hear!"

"I wufuse to allow him to wemain in twouble, in fact," said D'Arcy. "When I know the facts, I shall bwing my bwain powah to bear upon the mattah, and all will be—"

"Calm and bright," said Digby.

"Weally, you ass—"

"Gussy's idea is all right!" exclaimed Jack Blake, rising from the table. "Look here, you chaps, I feel worried about Tom Merry. Something serious has happened, there's no doubt about that, and he won't say a word about what it is. I think all his friends ought to insist upon his explainin', so that they can help him."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I'm blessed if I can stick at prep.," said Blake. "Let's risk a row in the morning, and chuck it."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"And let's go and look for Tom Merry."

"I was about to suggest it, deah boy."

The four chums, somewhat relieved at having made up their minds to something, quitted Study No. 6. Gore and Mellish were in the passage, and they were talking, with grinning faces. Blake grunted at the sight of them.

"Hallo! Here's somebody in bad luck, or these rotters wouldn't be looking so pleased!" he exclaimed. "What's the news Mellish?"

The cad of the Fourth grinned.

"Haven't you heard?" he asked.

"No. Somebody going to be sacked or flogged?" asked Blake sarcastically. "It must be something of the sort for you to be enjoying it like this."

Mellish sneered.

"It's about Tom Merry," he said.

"Oh, Tom Merry!"

"Yes," said Gore. "Of course, we don't know it for a fact. It's a rumour that got around. But, considering what Tom Merry's been looking like ever since he got that telewgam—"

"Why, it looks as if it were true, that's all," finished Mellish.

"Exactly."

"But what is it?" demanded Blake.

"Yaas, wathah! What's the news, deah boys?"

"About Tom Merry."

"Well, what about him?" shouted Blake. "If you don't trot it out pretty soon, Mellish, you'll get a thick ear!"

Mellish smiled unpleasantly.

"Oh, there's not much in it!" he said. "Only the fellows are saying Tom Merry is ruined."

"Ruined!" exclaimed the four chums at once.

"That's it."

"Bai Jove!"

"What rot!" exclaimed Blake angrily. "How could he be ruined?"

"Well, that's what they say."

"Where did you chaps hear it?"

"Levison told me."

"Where's Levison?" demanded Blake abruptly.

"In the common-room, I believe."

"Did he say how he knew?"

"He said he'd heard it."

"Oh! Come on, you chaps!" said Blake. And he turned off towards the common-room, instead of going to Tom Merry's study.

Levison was in the junior common-room, and there was a buzz of talk going on among the fellows there. Blake walked straight up to Ernest Levison.

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"What's this you've been saying about Tom Merry?" he exclaimed.

Levison looked at him sneeringly.

"I? Nothing."

"You said he was ruined."

"I said I'd heard so."

"Very well," said Blake; "and where did you hear it? I want to get hold of the chap who started the yarn, and bump him."

Levison moved back a pace; but the chums of the Fourth were round him, and he could not get away. He laughed a little uneasily.

"Come on," said Blake. "Who told you?"

"I forget."

"Oh, you forget, do you?" said Blake grimly.

"Weally, Levison, I am extremely sowwy to doubt anybody's word, you know, but I cannot believe that statement," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy emphatically.

"You can do as you choose about that," said Levison, turning away.

But he was swung back again in a moment. Herries's muscular grip was upon him. He glared at Herries, but the burly Fourth-Former was not scared.

"You'll stay here, and speak up," said Herries. "My belief is that you invented the yarn yourself, as one up against Tom Merry. I know you're a rotter. Towser took a dislike to you the first time he saw you."

"Look here—"

"Where did you get the yarn from?" asked Blake. "I may as well mention that, if you don't contrive to remember, we shall bump you—hard."

"Look here, I got it from no one."

"Then you made it up?"

"No, I didn't. It's true."

"Even if it's true, how did you learn it? I'm jolly certain that Tom Merry never made any confidences to you."

"Faith, and ye're right!" said Reilly, of the Fourth.

"Sure, Levison may have found it out by listening at a door. It's his way."

"Bai Jove! I wegarid that as extremely poss."

"I did not."

"How did you learn it, then?" demanded Blake relentlessly.

"Hang you!" said Levison. "I've seen the telewgam!"

CHAPTER 6.

What Levison Knew.

THERE was a sudden silence.

Most of the fellows in the common-room were listening to the altercation, and they heard what Levison said.

The telewgam!

All of them remembered, of course, that Tom Merry had received a sudden telewgam which called him away from the House match the previous afternoon.

That telewgam, and that mysterious departure, and where he had been, the hero of the Shell had declined to explain, even to his closest chums.

It had not occurred to anybody to look for the telewgam. There were few fellows in the School House who would have gratified their curiosity by looking at another fellow's private correspondence. Mellish might have done so, if he had thought of it, and if he had had the courage to risk it. Levison, evidently, had thought of it, and had risked it.

"The telewgam!" repeated Blake.

"Yes."

"Bai Jove! The telewgam! I nevah thought of that. You mean, that Tom Mewwy showed you the telewgam, Levison?" said D'Arcy.

Levison was silent.

It had not occurred to Arthur Augustus that Levison had spied upon the hero of the Shell, and read his telewgam without permission; but it occurred to the other fellows quickly enough.

"Did Tom Merry show you his telewgam?" asked Blake sternly.

"No," said Levison sullenly.

"Then how do you know what was on it?"

"I've seen it."

"You've spied, you mean?"

Levison shrugged his shoulders.

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"I didn't see why we shouldn't know the facts. Tom Merry has been making a heap of mystery about it."

"So you found the telegram?"

"He put it in the pocket of his football bags. He never thought of taking it out again, I suppose. I found it there."

"You looked in his clothes when he wasn't wearing them to find the telegram?"

"Yes."

"And read it without asking permission."

"Oh, rats! Yes."

"Bai Jove!"

"Well, of all the mean cads," said Blake, "I think you take the biscuit, Levison."

"Blessed if he doesn't prance off with the whole biscuit factory," growled Digby.

"Gwreat Scott! Of all the mean wottahs—"

"You were anxious enough to hear what was on the telegram, anyway," said Levison, with a sneer.

"We wanted to get at the starfer of the yarn," said Blake sternly, "and we've got him now."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"A fellow who would spy into another fellow's correspondence would tell lies about it afterwards."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Faith, and ye're right!"

"So Levison is most likely lying," said Blake. "Anyway, lying or not, he's going to be jolly well bumped for spying."

"Look here—"

"Collar him!"

Levison made a desperate rush to escape.

But a dozen pairs of hands fastened upon him, and he was dragged back, struggling and kicking furiously.

"Ow!" roared Kangaroo, of the Shell, as he received a kick on the shin, and began to hop. "Ow! Yow! Squash him!"

And Levison was promptly squashed. He rolled on the floor, with six or seven juniors rolling over him.

"Bai Jove!" gasped D'Arcy. "If the fellow had any decency, he wouldn't wesisit at all; he would be wathah glad to be bumped, as a warnin' not to be so wotten next time."

"Collar him!"

"Bump him!"

"Bump the cad!"

Levison was dragged to his feet.

Still struggling, he was bumped upon the hard floor once, twice, thrice.

Then, rumpled and ruffled and very dusty, he was allowed to go.

Arthur Augustus pointed to the door.

"Go, you uthah wottah!" he exclaimed. "I wegard you with feahful contempt."

"Hang you!" muttered Levison. "I—"

"Get out!" roared the juniors.

There was a threatening movement towards Levison again, and he got out. He left the common-room, and passed Tom Merry in the passage, giving the hero of the Shell a bitter look that surprised him.

There was a buzz in the common-room after Levison had left it.

The news, however Levison had obtained, was generally believed by the juniors of the School House.

It accounted for the hitherto inexplicable conduct of Tom Merry, which had puzzled all his friends.

Blake held the opposite view, but the general impression was that Levison had told the truth, and that he had read the telegram announcing Tom Merry's ruin.

"But it's all rot!" said Blake obstinately. "How can Tom Merry be ruined? We know old Miss Fawcett is his guardian, and she's awfully rich."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Then he has an uncle, a general in India, who's rolling in money, so I've heard, anyway," Kangaroo remarked.

"An old chap with lakhs and lakhs of rupees."

"Quite wight."

Monty Lowther and Manners had been present at the scene, but had taken no active part in it. They had seemed almost stunned by the information Levison gave. Lowther now spoke for the first time.

"I hope there's nothing in it," he said.

"There can't be," said Manners uneasily. "I should think Tom Merry would have told us."

"Oh, he might be keeping it dark!" sneered Crooke, of the Shell. "You see, he'll have to leave here if he can't pay his fees, and he'd naturally keep that secret as long as possible."

"Wats!"

"That's my opinion," said Crooke angrily.

"Blow your opinion, deah boy!"

"Oh, it's true, I'm afraid," said Hancock. "You see, Tom Merry must have some weight on his mind, the way he's been looking. Then he had a telegram this morning, and a letter this afternoon."

"Well, chaps have had telegrams and letters before."

"I know that, but—"

"You are a duffah, deah boy."

"Yes. I don't believe a word of it," said Blake determinedly. "Besides, didn't Tom Merry say it wasn't bad news when he received the telegram yesterday?"

"He said it wasn't exactly bad news," said Lowther thoughtfully.

"Well, being ruined would be exactly bad news, I suppose."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Perhaps it wasn't certain," Clifton Dane suggested. "He may have doubted it until he had some confirmation, you know."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"By George! And perhaps that's why he's not telling us till he knows."

"Extremely pwob., deah boy. In any case," said D'Arcy, "if Tom Merry's ruined, he'll always have some twusty chums to stand by him, you know."

"Hear, hear!"

"In fact, I should uthahly wefuse to let him be ruined, so long as I have a shot in the lockah."

"Same here!"

"Yes, rather!"

"Oh, we shall all stick to him like—like glue," said Digby. "But I jolly well hope it isn't so bad as that."

"Yaas, wathah! But—"

"Oh, stuff!" said Crooke. "It's plain enough, I think. Tom Merry's ruined."

As Crooke spoke, Tom Merry stepped into the common-room. He heard the words, and stopped short. There was a breathless hush. Tom Merry had heard Crooke say that he was ruined, and surely the truth must come to light now.

Tom Merry stood still for a moment, his face going red and white. Then he walked directly up to the Shell fellow.

"What did you say, Crooke?" he asked quietly.

Crooke gave him a look of defiance.

"I said—I believed the rumour that you are ruined," he said.

"Who told you?"

"Everybody knows it."

Tom Merry glanced at Blake.

"Levison has been spying into your telegram," said Blake, in explanation. "He says he read in it that you are ruined, Tommy. But, of course, we know it's a lie."

Tom Merry smiled in a constrained way.

"It's not a lie, Blake," he said.

"What!"

"It's true!"

CHAPTER 7. Ruined!

"TRUE!"
"Bai Jove!"
"Tom!"

"Tom, old fellow!"

Tom Merry's friends were round him at once. Even the fellows there who did not like him—they were few in number—were silent. The strain in his face told how hard Tom Merry was tasked to keep his emotions in control.

Ruined!

The word was a terrible one, though the juniors hardly realised to the full what it meant.

Ruined!

It seemed scarcely possible. Tom Merry had always seemed to his friends a fellow specially favoured by fortune, a spoiled darling nursed in the lap of the gods.

He had always had money, he had always had good health and good looks, he had always had good luck and true friends.

Life had seemed a primrose path opening before the hero of the Shell.

Ruined!

It was as though black thunderclouds had blotted out the sunshine of a fair and calm summer's day.

"Tom! Ruined! Good heavens!" muttered Monty Lowther.

"Tom! It can't be so bad as that."

"Bai Jove!" That was all that D'Arcy could think to say. His looks showed how deeply sympathetic he was, but all he could think of saying was "Bai Jove!" and he said it several times.

Tom Merry nodded.

"It's true," he said.

"Ruined!" repeated Blake. "But—but how?"

"I'll tell you," said Tom Merry. "I intended to tell my own chums first, and let the other fellows know it later. I came here for Manners and Lowther. But you may as well all know now. It won't be a secret much longer."

"Go ahead, Tommy!"

"That wire I had yesterday in the footer match," said

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Tom Merry, "was the first I had heard of it—that anything was wrong. Here it is. You can read it out, Monty, if the fellows care to hear it."

If they cared to hear! The whole room was silent, and the juniors were pressing forward in an eager ring to hear.

The telegram was brief.

"My darling Tommy! We are ruined, quite ruined."

That was all. There was no signature.

"You see, it's handed in at Huckleberry Heath, where my old governess's house is," said Tom Merry quietly. "That and the way it begins would naturally make me think it was from my governess and guardian, Miss Fawcett. But as it was not signed, I suspected—hoped, at least—that it was a jape played on me by somebody. There are fellows at Huckleberry Heath I've had rows with, you know."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I couldn't say anything. I hoped it was a jape, and—and I had another suspicion I needn't mention," said Tom Merry, colouring a little. "Well, I left the footer match, and went to the village to wire an inquiry. I didn't want to alarm Miss Fawcett by telegraphing to Laurel Villa, in case it should be a hoax. If it had turned out to be one, I should never have mentioned the matter to her."

"Then whom did you wire to?" asked Lowther.

"To Mr. Dodds, the curate of Huckleberry Heath. You remember the chaps who came here to play cricket once. You fellows met him at Laurel Villa, too."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I sent him a wire to ask him to inquire for me, and let me know," said Tom Merry. "I waited at the post-office, and tramped round the lanes, while I was waiting for his answer. That's what kept me out so long."

"And—"

"And he replied. He had been to Laurel Villa to inquire for me, and he found that Miss Fawcett was too ill to see him. But as she was too ill to see him, he concluded that she could not have sent me the wire, as Hannah, her maid, knew nothing about it. But he said he would inquire at the local post-office, and let me know."

"And he did?"

"I had a letter from him this morning," said Tom Merry. "A man was away from the post-office, and when Mr. Dodds found him there was some difficulty in getting the information, but he learned that Miss Fawcett had sent a telegram to me—she had been to the post-office and sent it—so that was settled."

"And then you knew that you were ruined?"

"Well, no. I thought there might be some mistake yet." Tom Merry coloured again; there was evidently more in his mind than he chose to utter before so many fellows. "But I've had a letter to-day that settles it. All my money's gone, and my uncle—"

"His voice faltered.

"Your uncle in India?" asked Blake.

"Yes, General Merry. He was on active service on the Afghan frontier, and he's disappeared. The Afghans have taken him."

"Oh!"

"He's a prisoner, or dead—nobody knows," said Tom Merry, his lip trembling. "Goodness knows if I shall ever see him again. It was the news of that that made them come down on my poor old governess. Well, I'm done. All my money's gone, and I expect I shall have to leave St. Jim's."

The juniors stared at him blankly.

"Leave St. Jim's?"

"Great Scott!"

"You—you can't! You sha'n't!"

The juniors looked at one another, and at the pale face of Tom Merry. Leave St. Jim's! What would St. Jim's be like without Tom Merry?

"Anyway, I'm going home for a time," said Tom Merry. "Whether I come back or not will depend on circumstances. Of course, you may be jolly sure that I shall come back if I can."

"Bai Jove!"

"W-w-when are you going?"

"I must go to-night."

"Have you seen the Head?"

"Yes."

"Then he knows it all?"

"I've told him everything."

"M-m-my hat, it's—it's rotten!" said Blake, and there was a suspicious shake in his voice. "Tom Merry, old son, I—I don't know what to say."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I've got a suggestion to make," said Herries, in his slow, practical way. "I think some tea in the study would buck Tom Merry up before he starts."

Tom Merry smiled faintly.

"Quite right," he said. "I haven't eaten anything since

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I had that letter. I'd like to have a talk with you chaps, too, before I go."

"We'll have tea in Study No. 6," exclaimed Blake eagerly. "A ripping feed, and then we'll all come with you to Huckleberry Heath."

"Hear, hear!"

Tom Merry shook his head sadly.

"Thanks, old man, but it won't do. You couldn't help me there. My governess is ill, and the place will be full of trouble. I shall have to stand it. I'll let you chaps know how I get on."

"Quite wight, pewwaps, as fah as Blake is concerned," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy slowly; "but in a case like this, Tom Mewwy, what you wequial to have with you is a fellah of tact and judgment, you know. I weally think I had bettah come."

"Thanks, Gussy, but no."

"I weally think, undah the cires—"

"Come on, Gussy; let's get the grub in!" exclaimed Blake, dragging his elegant chum away by the arm.

"Weally, Blake—"

"Come on!"

"I was speakin' to Tom Mewwy—"

"Never mind; come on!"

And Blake rushed D'Arcy off. Herries and Digby hurried away to Study No. 6 to get the fire blazing and prepare for tea. Tom Merry, Manners, and Monty Lowther followed them more slowly. The other fellows held back. They were mostly friends of Tom Merry's, but his own chums were with him now, and he wanted to talk to them, and the other fellows respected the more intimate claims of Manners and Lowther.

"I—I couldn't say it before all the fellows, you know," said Tom Merry, in a low voice. "But—but I had another reason for keeping the secret—a stronger one."

"I thought you had, Tommy."

"When I found that Miss Priscilla had really sent me a telegram—and one so incoherent—and was very ill, too, I—I was afraid that it wasn't a hoax, or true either, but—but—" Tom Merry paused, and flushed. "Well, you know that Miss Fawcett is old, and—and I feared that some shock might have set her brain wandering, you know. It might happen. The thing seemed too fearful and unexpected to be true, and it might have been a hallucination, you know. I wouldn't say a word, you see, until it was quite confirmed one way or another, and if it had turned out to be a mere hallucination of Miss Fawcett's I should never have spoken about it at all."

"I quite understand, old chap," said Manners, pressing his arm. "You must excuse us for having asked you questions; it was only because we wanted to help you."

"I know that, old chap."

The Terrible Three turned their steps towards Study No. 6, and arrived there just as Jack Blake and D'Arcy came rushing in with their arms full of parcels.

CHAPTER 8.

The Last Feed.

JACK BLAKE slammed down a heap of bags and parcels on the table in Study No. 6. Digby already had the kettle boiling, and had warmed the teapot ready for brewing the tea. Herries was making mountains of toast.

The chums of Study No. 6 had only one idea in their minds. Tom Merry was in trouble, and there seemed to be no way of helping him out, but at least they could stand him one last big feed before he left the old school—perhaps for ever.

That was a practical way of showing their sympathy, at all events. And money had been clubbed up quickly, and expended in a really imposing array of eatables. If Tom Merry had eaten a tenth part of what was provided for him he would certainly have needed to go to a hospital rather than to Laurel Villa.

The fragrant scent of the tea filled the study.

A fat face looked in at the door, and there was an appreciative sniff. The chums looked round, and saw Fatty Wynn of the New House.

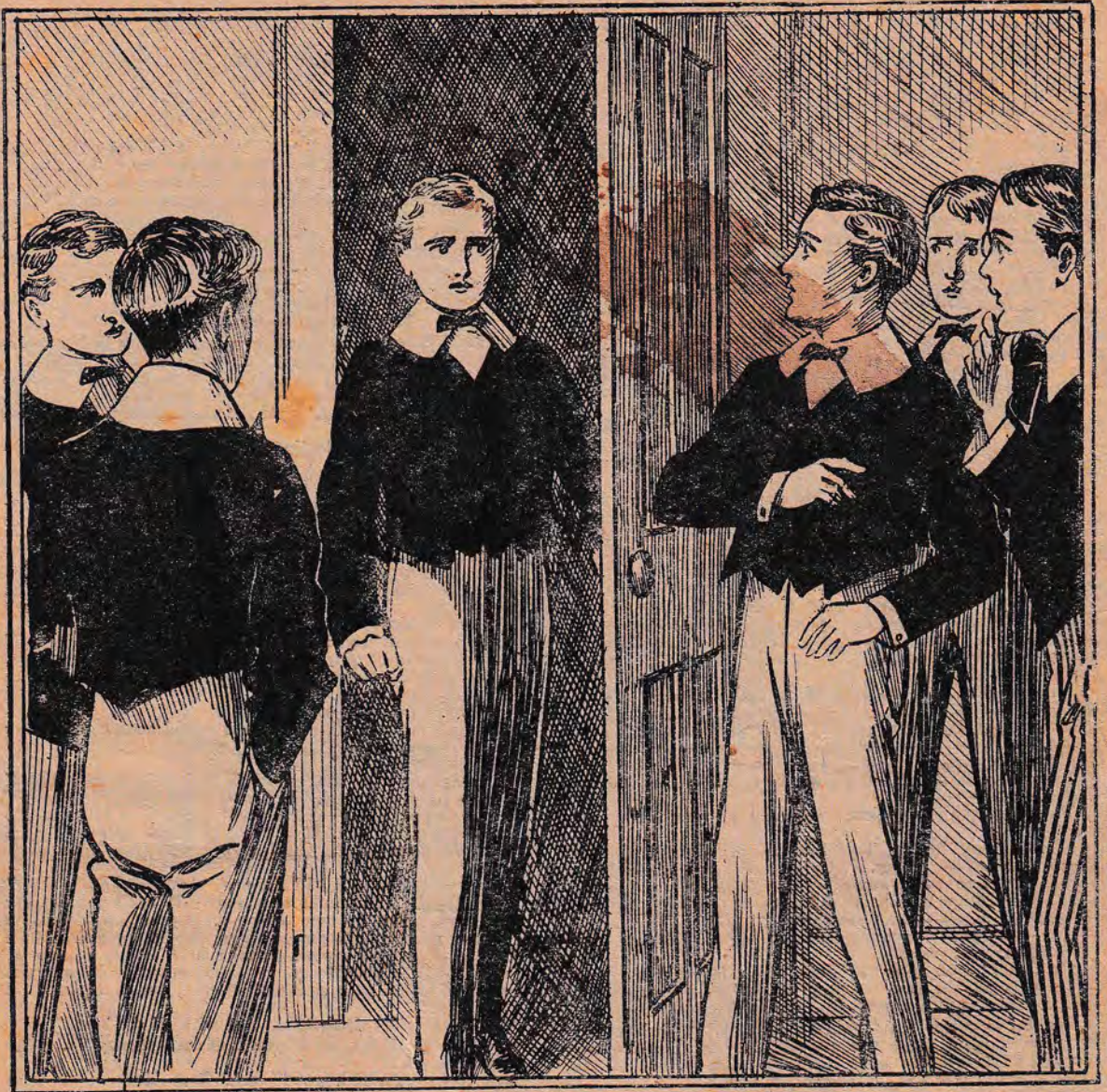
"Hallo, Fatty!" exclaimed Blake. "Did you scent the feed from across the quad?"

Fatty Wynn glared with indignation.

"No, I didn't!" he exclaimed. "I didn't know there was a feed. I came over because of a silly yarn I've just heard about Tom Merry. Figgy and Kerr are here."

ANSWERS

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"It's plain enough," said Crooke, "Tom Merry's ruined." As Crooke spoke, Tom Merry stepped into the common room. "What did you say, Crooke?" he asked quietly. (See page 7.)

"Yes, here we are," said Figgins, introducing his lengthy person into the study. "I'm glad the news isn't true."
 "Yes, rather!" said Kerr. "I suppose if it were true that you wouldn't be keeping it up in this way. Come on, Fatty: let's get off. We didn't really come for tea."

"Hold on!" said Blake. "What have you heard?"
 "That Tom Merry's ruined—lost all his tin," said Figgins.
 "Of course, we don't believe a word of it. It's one of Mellish's lies."

"It's true," said Tom Merry.

"What!"

"Mellish has told the truth this time," said Blake.
 "Wonders will never cease, you know."

"By George!" said Figgins.

"True!" repeated Fatty Wynn. "Are you really done in, Tom Merry?"

"I'm afraid so."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm leaving St. Jim's this evening by the seven-thirty," Tom Merry explained. "The chaps are giving me a feed before I start. That's all. I hope you fellows will stay. I don't know if I shall be coming back, and it may be the last feed we shall have together."

"Oh, rotten!" said Figgins dismally.

"Yes, rather!" remarked Fatty Wynn. "I think each chap should make it a point, under the circumstances, to eat as much as possible, as it may be the last feed."

"Bai Jove!"

"Sit down, you chaps, where you can find room," said Blake cordially. "Tea's quite ready, and there's plenty."

"Yaas, wathah!"

The juniors clustered round the table. Fatty Wynn immediately proceeded to live up to his words, and ate as much as possible. Some of the juniors did not feel much like eating. Tom Merry, for once, had little appetite. But his chums reminded him that he had a long journey before him, and forced him to eat. And a good meal certainly bucked him up, and his face grew more coloured again, and his eyes brighter.

"You can tell us as much as you like about it, or as little," Figgins remarked. "We're not curious, but, of course, we take an interest in the matter."

Tom Merry concisely explained.

"We're jolly sorry," said Figgins. "But, look here—you must come back! If you can't raise the fees, we'll all club together and stand them amongst us."

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"Yaas, wathah!"

"Hear, hear!"

Tom Merry shook his head.

"Thanks awfully," he said. "I knew you'd do it, but I couldn't have it, you know. If I've got no money, I shall have to look for something to do."

"Something to do?"

"Yes. I shall have to earn my living, you know."

"Bai Jove!"

Blake silently refilled Tom Merry's teacup. The juniors were silent. To most of the boys in England that question—to earn one's living—comes as a matter of course. But it had not presented itself to Tom Merry before. To earn his living—to make a way in the world for himself with his own hands—that, indeed, was a task that might well make the lad pause. Tom Merry was a splendid footballer, a fine cricketer; he was the head of his Form in classics; he could speak French almost as well as English, and had a good knowledge of German. He could row, and box, and cycle, and swim, and run with anybody. He could construe Latin in a way that delighted his Form-master, and had made "swots" of the senior Forms envy him. But when it came to earning his living—to finding a place in the world for himself, and extracting his daily bread from a hard world, or perishing from want of it—Tom Merry was less fitted for the battle of life than the merest bootblack in the city streets.

Binks, the page of the School House, had lately come into a fortune, and many of the fellows at St. Jim's had grinned at the way he spent his money. Binks had certainly made a duffer of himself. But it occurred to the fellows that Binks looked no more idiotic, suddenly becoming rich, than they would look if they suddenly became poor.

"Bai Jove!" said D'Arcy again, breaking the long silence at last. "That's—that's awful, you know! Fancy any chap havin' to earn his livin', you know! It must be feahful! Lots of chaps do it, though."

Tom Merry smiled.

"I rather think the majority of chaps have to do it," he remarked.

"Yaas, I suppose so, when you come to think of it," said D'Arcy slowly and thoughtfully. "I envy them, you know. They must be awfully clever."

"I hope I shall be awfully clever, then," said Tom Merry.

"I shall have to do it."

"You'll always have friends to stand by you, Tommy," said Lowther.

"I know that, Monty, but—but not to help me live in idleness," said Tom Merry. "I shall keep myself somehow. I'm not afraid to work, anyway. If a chap isn't willing to turn to and work when the time comes, it seems to me that he's not fit to live at all. I shall do it."

"But—but you simply must come back to St. Jim's."

Tom Merry was silent.

"Hold on!" said Kerr quietly. "The fees for the rest of this term will be paid, anyway, as fees here are paid in advance. You're all right till Christmas, Tommy."

"Yes, I'd forgotten that," said Tom Merry. "Christmas is jolly close, though. Still, you may be sure that I shall come back and finish out the term if I can." He looked at his watch. "I'm afraid I shall have to move soon."

"Have some more tea," said Herries.

"I think I've finished, thanks."

"Oh, one more cup."

"Very well."

"And some more ham," said Blake.

"And a little cold chicken, deah boy," said D'Arcy persuasively.

"And you must really have a tart," added Manners.

"And some cake."

"And some of these ripping grapes."

Tom Merry laughed, a laugh that sounded like his old laugh again. His face had quite the old look for a moment.

"My dear chaps, you'll make me ill! I can't eat any more—I can't really."

"Bettah have this wing, deah boy."

"No, thanks."

"The ham, then."

"Oh, no!"

"Twy the pie?"

"No."

"The cake, Tom Mewwy—I can recommend the cake."

"No."

"The gwapes."

"Thanks, no."

"Oh, vewy well! Pway shut up, Dig. I have remarked more than once that it is bad form to keep on pwessin' a guest," said Arthur Augustus severely.

Digby stared.

"Well, of all the cheek!" he began. "It was you, all the time!"

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"Weally, Dig—"

"You ass—"

"I wufuse to be called an ass!"

Tom Merry rose.

"I shall have to buzz off now, you chaps. I can't lose that train—it catches the express at Wayland Junction."

The other fellows rose, too.

"Oh, we're all coming," said Blake. "I'll cut off and get a pass from Kildare, while you're getting your coat on."

"I shall have to go and say good-bye to the Head."

"I'll have the pass ready by the time you come back."

"Good!"

And Tom Merry left Study No. 6, and made his way to the Head's study.

CHAPTER 9.

Tom Merry Leaves St. Jim's.

D R. HOLMES was standing before the fire in his study, with a decidedly troubled expression upon his kindly face. He was thinking about Tom Merry, when the hero of the Shell tapped at the door of the study.

"Come in, my dear boy," said the Head kindly. "You are going?"

"Yes, sir. I'm just starting for the station. I—I came to say good-bye, sir, in case I do not return."

The Head's troubled look intensified.

"Come, Merry, you must not speak like that!" he exclaimed. "I hope that the matter will not prove so serious as all that."

"You have seen Mr. Dodds's last letter, sir."

"Yes; and it certainly looks very bad, Merry. You must go home, certainly; your presence means everything to Miss Fawcett now."

"I know it, sir."

"But you will come back, Merry. Listen to me. If matters prove to be quite as bad as you fear, you will always have a friend in your old head-master. You shall return to St. Jim's at my expense."

Tom Merry's eyes were moist.

"You are very, very kind, sir. I would accept your offer willingly, only—only—"

"Only what, Merry?"

"If things come to the worst, sir, I shall have to work. I shall have to earn money. If I have to do that, the sooner I start, the better. And—and I could not live in idleness and be kept by anybody, sir. I feel that if I have no money, it is my duty to work. But I shall always remember your kindness, sir."

"Well, well, I hope it will not prove to be so bad as that," said the Head. "It would be a shame to spoil your career here, Merry. You are one of the most promising pupils in the school, and I had hopes of seeing you in the Sixth Form in time to come, and captain of the school, before you leave. However matters go, Merry, you must come back here and see me, and let me take counsel with you, and give you what advice I can."

"I shall certainly do that, sir, and with all my heart."

"And now, Merry, have you sufficient money for your immediate needs?"

"Oh, yes, sir, thank you!" said Tom Merry. "I have nearly a pound, and I shall have something left over my railway-ticket. I really don't want any money, sir."

"If you do, let me know at once, Merry. And now good-bye, my dear boy, and good fortune!"

And Dr. Holmes shook hands with Tom Merry, and the hero of the Shell left the study.

There was a lump in Tom Merry's throat as he went down the passage. Everyone was so kind at the old school now that he was leaving, perhaps for ever, he felt that he loved the old place more than he had ever realised.

Manners and Lowther were waiting for him in the passage.

They took him upstairs to help him on with his things for the journey. Manners had, in his thoughtful way, already packed a bag for him, with all the things he would be likely to want.

"If I don't come back, you'll look after my things," Tom Merry said. "But—but I expect I shall pay a visit here in any case, and we'll hope for the best."

"I wish we were going with you," muttered Lowther.

"I wish you were, Monty, old chap."

Tom Merry had his coat on, and took the bag in his hand. They went downstairs, and looked in the hall for the other fellows.

But Blake & Co. were not to be seen for the moment. Jack Blake had called the chums into a class-room.

"Look here," he exclaimed, "I've just thought if Tom Merry's done in, as it looks, he'll be short of tin."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Well, we'll make a collection," said Blake. "Every chap can hand out all he has, on a special occasion like this."

CHAPTER 10.

Good-Bye.

DOWN the shadowed lane the juniors of St. Jim's tramped, towards the village of Rycombe. Lowther was carrying Tom Merry's bag, and Manners his travelling-rug. Figgins bore the lunch-basket. There had been an early fall of snow, and it powdered white under the feet of the juniors as they tramped along.

Tom Merry looked back from the corner of the lane. There was a glimmer of stars on the old tower of St. Jim's, now gleaming up against the sky in its cloak of snow.

Tom Merry looked at it with dim eyes. What was to happen before he would see that old tower again? What would be his position then? Would he, indeed, ever behold it again?

He tramped on in silence.

The juniors talked little.

The sadness of the parting, and of the uncertain prospects of their chum, weighed heavily upon their spirits.

The lights of the village had come into sight, when there was a sound of tramping feet in the lane, and a crowd of dim figures loomed up.

There was a yell from the darkness.

"St. Jim's bounders!"

Blake gave a shout.

"Grammarians cads!"

"Rush them!" yelled a voice.

It was Gordon Gay's.

"Hold on!" shouted Blake. "Pax!"

"Rats!"

"Pax, I say! It's pax! Don't be an ass, Gay! We're catching a train, and it's jolly important."

Gordon Gay, the chief of the Grammar School juniors, came peering through the gloom towards them.

He uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Why, there's the whole blessed family of you!" he exclaimed.

The Grammarians chuckled. There were six of them with Gordon Gay—the two Woottons, Frank Monk, Lane, Car-boy, and Tadpole. But the odds would have been heavily against them if they had charged.

"Weally, Gay, considewin' what has happened, I wegard any bweach of the peace on your part as bein' in the worst of taste," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, turning his monocle upon the leader of the Grammarians.

Gordon Gay stared at him.

"Eh? What's happened?" he asked.

"Weally, you know—"

"Gay doesn't know what's happened," said Tom Merry.

"Bai Jove, you know, I nevah thought of that!"

"Why, what is it?" asked Gordon Gay quickly. "I hope there's nothing wrong, you fellows."

"I'm catching a train," said Tom Merry.

"Anything wrong at home?"

"Well, yes."

"Miss Fawcett ill?"

"Yes."

"I'm awfully sorry," said Gordon Gay.

"Yes, rather!" exclaimed Monk.

"Dear me," said Tadpole, "it's very sad. I hope it is not serious, Tom Merry."

"I hope not. But that's not all. You may as well know the lot," said Tom abruptly. "I don't suppose I'm coming back to St. Jim's, and I'm glad to see you chaps, to say good-bye to you."

"Not coming back!" echoed Gordon Gay.

"I fear not."

"What's happened?"

"Oh, bad luck in some ways!"

"I understand," said Gay quietly. "I'm awfully sorry. Can we come to the station and see you off, Tom Merry?"

"Do, if you can stay out."

"Oh, we don't mind lines for once!"

"Certainly not," said Tadpole. "And it's too dark for me to go on with the splendid picture I was painting of the sack of Rome by the Goths. If Mr. Adams is down on me for staying out, I shall argue the point with him."

"Cheese it, Taddy, and get a move on!"

"Really, Gay—"

"Rats!"

The juniors marched on to the station. Although a few minutes before the Grammarians had nearly charged the Saints, they mingled on perfectly good terms now. There never was any real ill-feeling between them. They arrived at the station, and found themselves five minutes in advance of the train.

The whole body of them went upon the platform. Fatty Wynn went through his pockets for pennies, and attacked the automatic sweet-machine.

The clink clank of the automatic-machine kept up like an

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By

ROBERT W. COMRADE.

"Pewwaps he won't take it."

"Oh, we'll make him take it!"

"Good!" said Herries.

And the juniors fumbled in their pockets. They were only too glad to subscribe their spare cash for Tom Merry's benefit, and they would have given the boots off their feet if that would have done their chum any good.

Jack Blake produced a half-sovereign, a recent tip from his uncle. Figgins and Kerr found nearly five shillings each. Odd shillings were contributed by Fatty Wynn and Herries and Digby. Arthur Augustus had a few coppers and a brand-new five-pound note, a tip from his governor. He placed it in Blake's cap without hesitation. Jack gave a little whistle.

"Oh, that's too strong, Gussy!"

"Wats, deah boy!"

"When I said all we had, I didn't mean up to fivers," Blake explained.

D'Arcy adjusted his eyeglass, and looked round at the juniors.

"If you fellows wegard a largah contwibution than yours as anythin' appwoachin' swank, I am willin' to withdwaw that fivah," he remarked. "But I am offewin' it in the spiwit of friensdship, and I would much wathah leave it there."

Blake gave him a smack on the back.

"And you shall leave it there, then, Gussy."

"You are sure you do not considah it swank?"

"Yes, ass."

"Vewy good. But stay a moment, Blake, deah boy. I should pwefer not to be called an ass, you know."

"Well, duffer, then."

"Weally, Blake—"

But Blake was not listening. He was tying the cash up in a handkerchief, and he wrapped the handkerchief in paper, and then he went to look for Tom Merry. Fatty Wynn hurried after him.

"Look here, Blake, we'd better get Tom Merry something to eat in the train," he exclaimed. "He's bound to get hungry before he gets to Huckleberry Heath, and we don't want him to spend his tin at the railway buffets; and, besides, you know what railway grub is like."

"Good egg, Fatty."

"I'll get it ready in a jiffy."

And Fatty Wynn rushed off to Study No. 6.

The other juniors joined the Terrible Three in the hall. Blake did not present Tom Merry with the subscription at once. He did not mean to run any risk of its being refused.

"All ready?" asked Monty Lowther.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Fatty's not here," said Kerr. "Oh, here he is! Hurry up, Fatty!"

"Here you are!" panted Fatty Wynn, rushing up with a lunch-basket in his hand that seemed heavy, from the way he carried it. "Here you are, Tom Merry, old man."

"What's that?"

"Grub for the train."

"Trust Fatty to think of that!" grinned Manners.

"Well, it's jolly important, I suppose," said Fatty Wynn. "I know how jolly hungry I get in this winter weather. I've had quite an appetite lately."

"Only lately?"

"Look here, Lowther—"

"That's a nobby little basket—"

"Yes, I found it in the study, Figgy. I think it's Gussy's."

"Yaas, wathah! I am vewy glad to contwibute it towards the comfort of Tom Mewwy. I wish I could do more than that."

"Don't let Fatty carry the basket," said Lowther. "It will be empty by the time we get to the station."

"You ass—"

"I'll carry it," said Figgins. "Prevention is better than cure." And he lifted the basket out of the fat Fourth-Former's hand.

Fatty Wynn snorted.

"Well, let's get off, or we shall lose that train," said Kerr.

"We're ready."

As Tom Merry stood in the hall, with his coat and cap on, fellows came crowding round on all sides, to shake hands with him and wish him well. Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, had given the pass willingly for Tom Merry's chums to go down to the station with him, and he came out to shake hands. So did Darrel, and Rushden, and Lefevre, of the Fifth, and Monteith, the head prefect of the New House, and so did crowds of juniors. Half the School House marched down to the gates with Tom Merry, and there Mr. Railton shook hands with him, and wished him good fortune. When at last he left the gates, and tramped into the lane, Tom Merry's eyes were wet with tears.

Next
Thursday:

"TOM MERRY'S FIX,"

By MARTIN
CLIFFORD, and

"THE IRON ISLAND."

By
ROBERT W. COMRADE.

accompaniment to the talk of the juniors as they waited for the train, Fatty Wynn stuffing packet after packet into the small space left unoccupied in the lunch-basket.

The train came in.

Tom Merry stepped into a carriage, and his rug and the lunch-basket were handed in, and D'Arcy stepped in to arrange his property for him. Blake pressed a little packet into Tom Merry's hand.

"What is it?" asked Tom Merry.

"A little present from the lot of us," said Blake. "Open it when you're gone. Now, Gussy, jump out, if you're not going, too."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Jump out, you ass! The train's starting!"

"I wefuse to be called an ass—"

"Will you jump out?" roared Blake.

"I wefuse—"

"Stand back, there!"

"Gussy—"

"Good-bye, Tom Merry!"

"Good luck, old chap!"

D'Arcy pressed Tom Merry's hand, and made a flying leap from the carriage. He cannoned into Blake, and sent him flying. Blake rolled on the platform among the legs of the juniors, and brought down Manners and Gordon Gay. The guard rushed up and slammed the door.

"Good-bye, Tom!"

Tom Merry leaned from the window and waved his hand.

"Good-bye, good-bye!" he cried.

The juniors waved their caps after him. Blake sat upon the platform, gasping and waving, and D'Arcy groped for his eyeglass with one hand, and waved the other. The train rushed on out of the station, bearing Tom Merry into the darkness of the winter night.

CHAPTER 11.

Tom Merry's Home-Coming.

ALONE!

The train rushed and rattled on. Outside the windows of the carriage in which Tom Merry sat was black darkness, broken only by the glimmer of snow-flakes as they whirled against the panes.

Tom Merry had the carriage to himself. He was glad of it, but it made him feel his sudden solitude the more.

He looked out of the window.

Rylcombe had vanished behind into the misty night. He remained at the window, looking out. Darkness had swallowed up the old familiar scenes. He knew every foot of ground along that line, but he saw nothing now but dim spectres of trees and whirling flakes.

He sank back into his seat. He was alone.

His heart was heavy. When would he see his chums again? What awaited him at his old home?

Gloomy thoughts passed through the mind of the lad, whose life had hitherto been one long success, whose troubles had been only temporary, only heavy enough to throw into brighter relief his more numerous days of good fortune and happiness.

What was his future to be?

And that was not all. It was not only of himself that he thought. He might be going forth into the world, to face life in grim earnest, but he was yet a schoolboy. He could not help thinking of the school he was leaving—of how the junior team would get on under a new skipper, and what sort of a team the Saints would put into the field against the Grammar School at the next footer match.

He thought, too, of his old governess, his guardian and loving friend, Miss Priscilla Fawcett, struck down into sickness by the blow that had fallen upon her.

Of the details of the matter he knew little; only what his kind friend Mr. Dodds had been able to gather and tell him in his letter.

But it was clear that he was ruined.

It was clear that Miss Fawcett had been the prey of unscrupulous men; that she had foolishly invested her money and her ward's in an enterprise that had failed utterly.

The whole was swept away.

Half a dozen smug, satisfied, silk-hatted City men had added thousands to their already swollen fortunes. Miss Fawcett and a score of others had been ruined. And with Miss Fawcett, her ward.

Tom Merry's money—how much there was he did not know—but he knew it had all been absolutely in Miss Fawcett's hands.

In her younger days, Miss Fawcett had had a keen business instinct; and she had had the advice, too, of her brother Frank—Uncle Frank, as the St. Jim's juniors had called him.

Tom Merry's father—long since dead—had trusted everything to her.

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But now she was old, and her brother was abroad, and no longer able to advise her.

Uncle Frank's whereabouts were not even known. He was an old globe-trotter, and sometimes disappeared for years at a time, and would turn up unexpectedly from Kamschatka or the Cannibal Islands without an hour's notice.

It was clear that the old lady had been induced by some plausible scoundrel to invest her money in some rotten concern—some scoundrel, whose rascality was carried on under the forms of law, and who could not be touched.

And now all was gone.

Not a thought of reproach was in Tom Merry's mind. Well he knew that if Miss Fawcett had tried to increase her store it was for his sake—that it was in the hope of leaving her darling rich that she had lost everything.

Reproach, repining, would have been of little avail.

The thing was done.

What remained was to save as much as possible from the wreck, and to face the future with a brave heart.

Tom Merry had received much from fortune. It was time now to take his courage in both hands, to face the world, and to take care of the kind old soul who had always taken care of him.

And that he would do. He would prove that, in fair weather or foul, he was the same Tom Merry; that he was no fair-weather sailor who could not face a storm.

He changed trains at Wayland Junction, and then the western express carried him on at a greater speed through the winter night.

To his hurried and troubled thoughts, the rush and whirr of the express kept company.

Faster and faster the train sped through the night, but it seemed slow to Tom Merry's eager mind.

He was anxious to know the worst.

Lights appeared and vanished again and again, and the time passed slowly, but it passed. And at last the train drew up in the station for Huckleberry Heath.

Tom Merry gladly jumped out of the carriage.

He decided to walk to Huckleberry Heath, and a few minutes later he was striding through the wind and the dark, with his bag in his hand.

It was necessary to save money now, and even the price of the ticket on the local line from the junction was worth considering.

A clink from his pocket, as he walked, warned him that he had forgotten Blake's parting gift; and he hastily took it from his pocket, and opened it in the light of a lamp in the lane.

A lump rose in his throat as he saw the odd collection of coins wrapped up in Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's banknote.

He thrust the packet back into his coat, and strode on. Had ever a fellow such friends as his? he thought. What should he repine for, when Heaven's mercy had left him that true friendship, that gift greater than the greatest store of gold, and far above rubies?

He strode on with a lighter heart.

He entered the village of Huckleberry Heath, and then his pace slackened a little, and he reflected.

Should he visit Mr. Dodds first, or go straight to Laurel Villa? Mr. Dodds might be able to tell him something more, and to advise him; but—

But he was anxious to see Miss Fawcett. During the journey it had been borne more and more upon his mind how much his coming would mean to her. She had not asked him to come. Since that first hysterical telegram, which had called him away from the House match, he had not had a line from her. But he knew how the sight of him would gladden her heart.

He strode on directly to Laurel Villa.

He passed through the old High Street.

The few shops there were mostly closed, and the houses blinded. But there were a few passers in the street, who knew him and greeted him.

They greeted him kindly, and with a note of compassion in their voices that told him all was known. Doubtless the misfortunes of Miss Fawcett were the talk of the village, where anything of interest seldom happened.

He reached the gate of Laurel Villa.

As he went up the garden path, he saw that the whole house was in darkness, save for a glimmering light from one window, which he knew to be that of his old governess's room.

He knocked at the door.

It was not opened.

He knocked and rang again, gently, for fear of disturbing Miss Fawcett if she should be asleep, and then the door was quietly opened.

From the dark hall came the glimmer of a candle. He made out the face of Hannah in the gloom.

"Master Tom!" exclaimed the old servant.

lips, and he would have said "Skuse me." "I am ready." "You don't." "I am strong with some difficulty to the work." Mr. Hobbs, "You'd better." "I have been." "And 'elp." "I should be." "And clear." "Miss Fawcett." "I shall be." "And—another." Mr. Hobbs, "work." "Oh, dear." "And some." "Oh!" "You see, I." "Oh! I'm." "Miss Fawcett." "ward a chair into it." "Ere, Ma." "behind the scene." "A stout, red." "Pore soul." "at once." "Miss Fawcett." "faintly. She." "She comes." "Party who suppose." "Poor soul." "Mrs. Hobbs." "and the old lady." "Oh, dear." "You'll be at the door." "Oh, dear." "Mrs. Hobbs." "her a gratef." "Thank you are! It would you." "Mrs. Hobbs." "You ain't looking for." "I have heard." "I am com." "darling boy." "Which I than you are." "Oh, I could." "Well, I care to com." "Thank you But if you th." "Tain't r kindly." "Oh, dear." "Mrs. Hobbs." "You'll be a Jim." "she s." "Mr. Hobbs." "Which th." "Can't be." "And I'm." "You'll h." "Mr. Hobbs." "Well, I say so, Mar once." "Just as v." "She return." "Mr. 'Obb." "said. "Whe." "In Rose explained M Fawcett." "Oh," sai the gossip si "I've 'eard." "I have be I am determ situation tha glad to hear

Next Thursday;

Tom Merry stepped into the hall. There was snow upon his shoulders and upon his cap. His face was pale and excited, and Hannah's face was pale as she looked at him. A sudden dread smote to Tom Merry's heart. He grasped Hannah's arm.

"Hannah!" he muttered thickly. "How is she—how is Miss Fawcett?"

CHAPTER 12.

Home Again.

"GOODNESS gracious, Master Tom—"

Tom Merry's grasp tightened upon the old servant's arm.

"Hannah! How is she? Not worse?"

"No."

Tom Merry drew a deep, deep breath of relief.

"I—I was frightened, for a moment," he muttered. "I thought that—". He did not finish. "Is she awake now, Hannah?"

"Yes, Master Tom."

"And no worse—you are sure?"

"Only worrying, Master Tom."

"About the—what has happened?"

"About you."

Tom Merry closed the door. In the shadowy hall, the glimmering candle flickered upon two pale faces.

"About me, Hannah?" said the boy. "Why?"

"Because—because she thinks she has ruined you, the poor soul," said Hannah, with tears in her eyes. "Master Tom, before I take you up to her, you'll promise me—"

"What, Hannah?"

"Not to—to—"

"Well?"

"Not to reproach her, Master Tom," said Hannah, laying her hand on Tom Merry's shoulder. "She has lost all your money, Master Tom, but—but it was the doing of wicked men. She meant all for the best. And—and you won't say—"

Tom Merry coloured.

"You surely don't think I should say anything to add to her trouble, Hannah," he said reproachfully. "I'm not likely to, I hope."

"That's right, my dear Master Tom," said Hannah. "I—I knew how you'd take it. I was sure you would be my own noble boy."

The old servant, with her eyes wet with tears, led the way up the stairs.

Tom Merry followed her in silence.

The changed aspect of the old house struck him with a chill.

Laurel Villa had never been a pretentious place; but there had always been an air of homely plenty and comfort about it. Many a happy holiday had Tom Merry spent there with his chums from St. Jim's.

It was changed now.

The chill of the house struck through his thick winter coat, and the darkness was everywhere. There was no sound from the many rooms; no light below stairs. The servants, evidently, were gone—everyone excepting Hannah, who would not be likely to leave her old mistress—more her friend than her mistress.

The house was deserted save for Miss Priscilla and Hannah. Tom Merry understood that at once.

"But why are you all in the dark, Hannah?" he asked, as they paused for a moment on the landing, the old servant breathing hard after climbing the stairs.

"There is no money, Master Tom."

"Is it so bad as that?"

"Miss Fawcett says it is all gone. She will not be able to pay the gas bill, she fears, and since—since it happened, she has not allowed a burner to be lighted in the house. There is only one candle in her bed-room."

Tom Merry felt a choking sensation.

It was so like his old governess, to be ruthlessly cheated herself, and yet in the poverty it had brought her to, to preserve unimpaired the strict honesty that had always characterised her own dealings.

"And the other maids, Hannah—"

"All gone, Master Tom. Miss Fawcett paid them up and sent them away at once. There was nothing to feed them on without going into debt."

"But the tradespeople—surely—"

"They would have trusted Miss Fawcett with anything. Yes, but she would not allow it. Because there would be no money to pay."

Tom Merry asked no more.

He followed Hannah to Miss Fawcett's room.

He left his snowy overcoat and cap outside, and then

entered. Hannah entered first to prepare Miss Fawcett for his coming.

The room was dimly lighted with a single candle. A low fire burned in the wide, old-fashioned grate. Miss Fawcett, wrapped in shawls, was sitting in her deep arm-chair by the fire. Two or three bottles with labels, on a little table near her, gave the room the aspect of a sick-room.

The old lady half rose as Tom Merry came in.

Her face was white, her eyes had dark rings under them, and her old hands were trembling.

She tried to speak, but for the moment no words would come, only a low, hoarse murmur.

Tom Merry ran to her at once.

"Dear!" he said, as he put his arms round the fragile old form, and hugged her. "I'm here, dear."

"Tom!" whispered Miss Priscilla.

"It's all right, dear."

"We're ruined, Tom!"

"I know."

"I've lost all your money that was left in my hands by your dead father—"

"Never mind that now."

"Tom! My darling boy! Can you forgive me?"

"Nonsense!" said Tom Merry, kissing her. "Don't bother about it, dear. Buck up and get well. Suppose I had lost you, dear, instead of the rotten money? What should I have done then?"

Miss Priscilla could not reply. The tears were running thickly down her pale old cheeks.

CHAPTER 13.

To Let.

TOM MERRY stayed up to a late hour that night talking to his old governess. Miss Priscilla had much to tell him, and he listened to it all kindly and patiently, and spoke only words of comfort. It was easy to see that what weighed most upon Miss Fawcett's mind was the thought that she had ruined her darling boy, while intending to benefit him. Tom Merry was penitential—there was no disguising that. But Tom's kind affection was so evidently unchanged by what had happened, that Miss Priscilla could not fail to take comfort. She soon found herself trying to point out to Tom Merry how serious the situation really was. Tom Merry understood it only too well; but he kept up an unalterable cheerfulness.

"It is all gone, Tommy darling—all gone!" Miss Fawcett said, more than once. "I—I am afraid you will have to leave school, my dear."

"I've thought of that," said Tom. "After all, it's time I did something."

"My dear boy! But your education—"

"I've heard people say that work is an education," said Tom Merry, smiling. "After all, life can't be all fun and footer, dear."

"I—I don't know how the accounts are exactly," said Miss Fawcett, pressing her hand to her forehead. "I—I have got confused, somehow. We'll go over them together in the morning, Tommy."

"Yes, indeed."

"There is a bill of sale on the furniture," said Miss Fawcett. "That will all be taken. But the house is my property, and we shall be able to let it. Then perhaps we can live in some small cottage on the rent, Tommy."

"Yes, perhaps," said Tom Merry cheerfully.

"My darling boy," wailed Miss Priscilla, "I don't care, so long as you forgive me, but—but to see you in poverty—"

"Oh, never mind that!" said Tom. "I can face that, dear. I suppose a chap who has any pluck can face that."

"And it was all so plausible!" said Miss Fawcett, a little incoherently. "The company was paying eight per cent., you know, and Mr. Crooke simply laughed when I remarked that the investment might not be safe."

Tom Merry started.

"Mr. Crooke?"

"Yes, dear, the famous financier."

"He was in it, was he?"

"Yes; though I understand that he has not lost any money. He sold out all his shares before the smash came. It was very fortunate for him, Tom, and I am glad he did not suffer as I have done."

Tom Merry gritted his teeth.

He was not surprised to hear that the name of Crooke was connected with the concern that had ruined Miss Fawcett—and a dozen others. He remembered Crooke of the Shell, at St. Jim's. Crooke, of the Shell, was a son of the great financier. Crooke had lately been bragging about a great sum that his father had made—a sum that turned the already rich magnate into a millionaire. Tom Merry understood now where the money had come from. Miss Fawcett's

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little fortune and his own had gone to swell the bloated opulence of the City cormorant.

It was useless to say anything of it to Miss Fawcett. She could hardly realise yet that she had been wickedly cheated. "And my brother Frank used to say that a railway was a safe investment," Miss Fawcett said sadly.

"He didn't mean a South American railway," said Tom Merry, with a faint smile. "I wish you had asked Mr. Dodds's advice."

"Oh, Mr. Dodds is such a very young man, and he would not have been known," said Miss Fawcett.

"He would have known that Crooke & Co. were a set of rascals," Tom Merry thought to himself. But he did not say so. What was the use?

What had happened had to be accepted, and it was useless to think of how it had come about, and how it might have been avoided.

It was late when Tom Merry went to bed that night, and when he went he did not sleep.

He lay and heard the hour of midnight toll out from Huckleberry village, and after that the deep stroke of one. Then a fitful slumber came to him.

He slept then till morning.

He was awakened by Hannah, as the first pale rays of the winter sun came in through the windows.

He sat up in bed and shivered.

"There's a fire in the breakfast-room, and I'm getting your breakfast, Master Tom," said Hannah, "and perhaps you will be able to persuade Miss Fawcett to eat something. She is coming down this morning because you have come home."

"I'll be down in a jiffy," said Tom Merry.

He was soon down. There was a bright fire blazing in the breakfast-room, and a cheering scent of bacon and tea. Miss Fawcett was already down.

The old lady was dressed in her oldest clothes, and Tom had already learned from Hannah that she had set aside all her more expensive possessions to be sold to meet her liabilities.

"How are you feeling this morning, my darling?" Miss Priscilla asked anxiously.

"Ripping!" said Tom Merry.

"You are not suffering from your long journey?"

"Not a bit."

"You are sure you did not get your feet wet last night?"

Tom Merry smiled.

"No, dear."

"We are going over the accounts this morning," said Miss Priscilla. "Mr. Dodds has promised to come in and help."

"Good!"

"I hope you are hungry, darling."

"Famished!" said Tom.

And he ate a good breakfast, and induced Miss Fawcett to do the same. The old lady was already looking much more bright and cheerful.

Mr. Dodds arrived soon after breakfast, and shook hands very warmly with Tom Merry. He was an old friend of Tom's. They plunged into business that morning, hindered rather than assisted by Miss Fawcett's aid.

The old lady seemed to be still in a somewhat dazed mental state from the blow that had fallen upon her, and excepting in the household accounts, her ideas of business were very hazy.

Miss Fawcett's lawyer came in later in the morning, and lent his assistance. Miss Fawcett's latest investments had been made without his approval, but the old gentleman refrained from pressing that point now.

It was a weary and a dreary day to Tom Merry.

The weather was crisp and snowy, and under other circumstances he would have longed to be out of doors, breathing in the keen winter air.

Now he was too busy, with papers and figures and thickening worries, to think of anything of the sort.

Bills were piling in at Huckleberry Heath.

Everyone to whom any money was due seemed to have taken the alarm, and to be determined that, whoever lost, he would not be the one. Every post brought a demand, and during the day knocking and ringing were almost continual.

Tom Merry, in spite of his worries, slept soundly that night. He was tired out, and could hardly keep his eyes open when he went to bed.

Two or three days more passed in the same way.

Matters were getting into order, and what emerged clearest from the confusion was the fact that when the liabilities were all met, there would be little or nothing left.

Laurel Villa would remain, and that was all. It would remain without furniture in it, and without a five-pound note in cash.

That was how matters stood, and that was what Tom Merry had to face.

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He faced it bravely.

"We must leave—quickly," said Miss Fawcett. "The furniture will be taken away. We shall have to let the house, Tommy darling."

"That's right!" said Tom.

"And we can take a little cottage in the village, I think," Miss Fawcett remarked. "There we can stay till the house is let, Tommy, and then I shall get a situation."

Tom Merry jumped.

"You get a situation!" he exclaimed.

"Yes," said Miss Fawcett bravely. "You know, I was poor in my young days, Tommy, and I was glad to take a post as governess. I shall be able to get another, I hope, and earn enough for both of us."

"Do you think I would let you keep me, you stupid dear?" said Tom Merry.

"But your education must be continued, Tommy."

"I shall leave St. Jim's."

"But—"

"And I shall get employment of some sort," said Tom Merry steadily. "It's no good blinking the facts, dear. Even if anybody were willing to keep me, I couldn't sponge on anybody."

Miss Fawcett looked very distressed.

"Oh, Tommy, and it is all my fault!"

"That's all over, dear," said Tom Merry. "No good thinking of the past. Let's keep our minds on the future."

And a day later they moved out of Laurel Villa, and the house was left empty—To Let.

CHAPTER 14.

Binks Looks In.

TOM MERRY had been in communication with his chums all the time he was up to the eyes in work at Laurel Villa. The fellows at St. Jim's had written to him, and he had replied briefly enough, having no time for more than a few lines. But they had been kept posted as to his position, and their hopes of seeing him back amongst them were growing fainter.

Tom Merry had had a sympathetic letter, too, from Cousin Ethel, who had also written to Miss Fawcett. The girl's sympathy was deep and sincere, and her letter was a comfort to Tom Merry.

More than one offer of a home, a home where all would be kindness and consideration, had been made to Miss Fawcett, and to Tom Merry too.

But the offers had not been accepted.

Miss Fawcett had a pride as strong as her ward's, and neither of them was disposed to eat the bread of idleness.

Indeed, in her reduced circumstances, the old lady was inclined to look upon any offer of friendship as charity disguised, and she would not accept any invitation even to pass a week or a few days with any of her friends.

Tom Merry felt much the same.

D'Arcy's father, Lord Eastwood, had heard from his son about Tom Merry's misfortune. He had promptly written to offer to pay Tom Merry's fees at St. Jim's, to continue him there. But Tom Merry felt that it was impossible to accept the offer, kind and generous as it was.

Kind as it was, it was charity, and the bread of charity was worse than starvation. No! To begin that would be to run the very great risk of growing to depend upon others, of looking to kindness and pity for his daily bread; and the thought of growing into an idler and a sponger made Tom Merry shudder. It was a wise old maxim that said, "Resist the beginnings."

He was poor now, and he meant to accept the fact manfully.

Blake's last gift he had not refused. It would have been ungracious to do so. But he had made it quite clear that no more was to be sent. He could not take money from his chums.

The cottage to which Miss Fawcett had removed was at a considerable distance from Huckleberry Heath.

The old lady had a natural desire not to live too near her former acquaintances, now that she was reduced to poverty.

It was a tiny place, with a kitchen and a parlour, and three bed-rooms—one for the faithful Hannah, who refused to leave her mistress.

Both Tom Merry and his old guardian urged upon Hannah the advisability of looking out for herself.

"You know, my dear child," said Miss Fawcett—Hannah was forty-five, but Miss Fawcett still regarded her as a child—"you know, I cannot pay you any more wages."

"I don't want any wages, mum," said Hannah.

"But you cannot work for nothing."

"I can, mum."

"But really, Hannah, we—we are so poor, and so short of money, that you will not have enough to eat."

"I have some money of my own, mum," said Hannah.

"My dear child—"



"Good-bye, good-bye!" cried Tom Merry leaning out from the window and waving his hand. The juniors waved their caps as the train bearing Tom Merry rushed into the darkness of the winter night. (See page 12.)

"And I can spend my own money how I please, mum," said Hannah steadily. "I sha'n't be a burden on you, mum. Don't send me away, mum. Besides, Master Tom will want somebody to look after him when you're ill, mum."

That last argument prevailed more than any other with Miss Priscilla; so Hannah remained. Probably she would have refused to go, however, under any circumstances.

Tom Merry had promised to return to St. Jim's to see the Head once more, even if he was not able to return to his old place in the school.

This promise he intended, of course, to keep; but he was in no hurry to do so. He wanted, if he could, to get Laurel Villa let, so that there would be a steady income, however small, to support Miss Fawcett while he looked out for himself.

But Laurel Villa did not seem likely to let soon. It was not a favourable season for attempting to let a house in the country, and Tom, of course, had little money for advertisements.

Meanwhile, Miss Fawcett was also thinking of employment. Unknown to Tom, she scanned the papers every day in search of a suitable post.

The idea of the frail old lady going to work made Tom Merry feel inclined to laugh and cry at the same time; but

the idea had firmly taken possession of the mind of Miss Priscilla.

Some days after the cottage had been taken, Tom Merry was startled, just as his frugal dinner was finished, by a loud toot-toot of a motor-horn.

The cottage lay back from the road at a considerable distance from Huckleberry Heath, and it was seldom that a motor-car passed that way, so the sound was startling. Still more surprising was it when the toot-toot halted opposite the cottage door.

Tom Merry glanced out of the little window.

A big, somewhat gaudily-decorated car was standing in the road, and a diminutive but somewhat stout figure in a fur coat and a motor-cap was descending. The chauffeur kept his place.

Tom Merry thought there was something familiar about the figure, as it came up the garden path.

"A visitor," said Miss Fawcett, from within.

"Looks like it, dear," said Tom Merry.

"Who is it?"

"I don't know yet. Why, yes. My only hat! It's Binks!"

"Binks!"

"Yes; the boot chap in the School House at St. Jim's, you know, I told you he had become a giddy millionaire."
 "I trust not giddy," said Miss Fawcett. "I hope that he will remain steady, in spite of his wealth, Tommy darling."
 Tom Merry laughed.
 "Oh, he's steady enough. Binks is as good as gold. I expect he'll come to St. Jim's as a pupil; the Head has consented."

Binks raised his motor-cap.

He blushed and grinned at Tom Merry.

The one-time page at the School House at St. Jim's was in very high feather indeed. His clothes were of the most expensive kind, and they were well cut, for while he had stayed a few days at St. Jim's, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had taken him to a tailor and superintended his outfit.

Under D'Arcy's eyes there was certain to be good material and a good cut; and, so far as Binks's tubby figure could be well dressed, he was well dressed.

The gorgeous fur-collared coat was not of D'Arcy's choosing, and in that Binks had let himself go a little.

"Good-afternoon, Master Merry!" he exclaimed.

Tom Merry held out his hand.

Binks, after a little hesitation, took it in his own, and gave it a hard shake.

"Not Master Merry now, Binks, old man," said Tom cheerfully. "I'm leaving St. Jim's."

Binks looked dismayed.

"Leaving St. Jim's, Master Merry?"

"Yes; I shall have to."

"Lummy!" said Binks.

"Come in, old man. This is Binks, dear."

Miss Fawcett had seen Binks, in his "boots" day, on duty in the School House. There was just a little stateliness in Miss Fawcett's manner as she greeted the new millionaire. It was only a hint of it.

"I am very glad to see you, Binks," she said. "Won't you sit down?"

Binks fumbled his motor-cap in his hands.

"Thank you kindly, ma'am," he said.

Tom Merry pushed him into a chair.

"There you are, old chap."

"Thank you, Master Merry." Binks looked at Miss Fawcett. "Master Merry is still Master Merry to me, ma'am, poor or rich."

"A very proper remark," said Miss Priscilla.

"Why, stuff!" said Tom Merry. "Why, Binks is rolling in money, and I'm looking for a job at a pound a week."

"Money ain't everything," said Binks. "I've found that hout."

"No," said Tom, with a smile. "Kind hearts are more than coronets."

"They is," said Binks.

"And you've got a good heart, Binks, old son," said Tom Merry. "You've heard about my bad luck, and that's why you've come?"

"Yes, Master Merry."

"Well, I knew you'd be sorry, Binky."

"I ham sorry," said Binks, adding recklessly to his aspirates to lend emphasis to his statement. "I ham hawfully sorry, Master Merry."

"Thanks!"

"But that ain't all," said Binks.

"No?"

"I want to 'elp you, Master Merry," said Binks eagerly.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"Sorry, Binks, old man, but it can't be did."

"But—"

"You're awfully kind, Binks, and I'm really grateful, but it can't be managed," said Tom Merry.

"You know, I've got 'eaps and 'eaps of money!" said Binks.

"Yes, I know."

"I ain't allowed to spend it all, but I can 'andle thousands," said Binks. "I want you to let me 'and you some, Master Merry, just to 'elp you out."

"Thanks, old son, but it won't do. I couldn't take it."

"But as a loan," said Binks.

"I could never pay it."

"I shouldn't press you, Master Merry."

"I know you wouldn't, Binks. You want to give me money and call it a loan," said Tom Merry smiling. "If I were going to take a gift, I'd call it a gift. But I can't take anything."

Binks's face fell.

"You mean you couldn't, because I ain't one of your friends?" he asked. "You'd take it from Master Lowther or Blake?"

Tom Merry shook his head again.

"I wouldn't take it from anybody, Binks. I'd as soon take it from you as from one of the fellows at St. Jim's."

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Binks brightened up again.

"Would you, really, Master Merry?"

"Of course I would."

"But I'm a-rollin' in spondulies!" said Binks. "It seems a shame that I can't 'elp you, Master Merry, when you're down on your luck. Many's the time you've been kind to me."

"My darling boy is kind to everyone," said Miss Fawcett, with a fond look at Tom. "I'm sure we're both very grateful to you, Binks."

"And you won't let me 'elp you."

"We cannot."

"I dare say I ain't put it very tactful," said Binks, rising to his feet. "I dare say I ain't put it the right way. But you know what I mean, Master Merry, and I ain't never going to forget 'ow kind you was to me. I'm always going to be your friend if you'll let me be."

"I'll be jolly glad to let you, Binks."

Binks shook hands again, and with Miss Fawcett this time, and returned slowly to the motor-car.

The zip-zap of the car sounded over the snowy countryside as the car buzzed on its way.

CHAPTER 15.

Looking for Work.

"YOU are Mr.—er—Hobbs?"

Mr. Hobbs, the butcher, of Heath End, a village some four or five miles from Huckleberry, was standing in his shop when the query was addressed to him.

A little old lady in black, looking very frail and delicate, had just come in, and the wet state of her shoes and skirt showed that she had been walking through muddy streets and slushy lanes.

Mr. Hobbs, as it happened, was in a reverie, and did not hear the low voice of the little old lady. He was debating in his mind whether he should skin a certain sheep himself, or leave the task to his man Bob.

The little old lady repeated her question.

"I believe you are—Mr. Hobbs?"

Then Mr. Hobbs turned round.

"Yes, marm," he said. "Good-morning, marm! What can I do for you this morning, marm?"

"Nothing, thank you."

"We've got prime beef this morning, marm."

"Thank you—"

"Or perhaps you want a really lovely cut of mutton?" Mr. Hobbs suggested, taking up a formidable-looking knife.

"No, thank you."

The Heath End butcher looked surprised.

"Then may I ax what you want, marm?" he asked, regarding his visitor with some curiosity.

"I—I want to see you on business, please."

"Ho!" said Mr. Hobbs.

He immediately regarded the old lady as something new in the bill-collecting line. But Mr. Hobbs was a solvent tradesman, and owed no man what he could not pay; and he had the good fortune of being able to look even collectors of accounts and rate-collectors calmly in the face.

"Wot is it?" he asked.

"In the—the 'Heath End News'—"

"My ad. is paid for in that," said Mr. Hobbs—"paid for in advance, marm. You go back to Mr. Wilson, and tell 'im 'e's made a mistake, marm."

"You do not quite understand. I have seen the advertisement—"

"It was put there for folks to see, marm," said Mr. Hobbs, with humour. "But it's paid for—paid for in advance, marm, and you can tell Mr. Wilson so, with my compliments."

"The advertisement—"

"Which it ain't been answered yet, either; and don't look like being," said Mr. Hobbs. "I had better put it in the 'Huckleberry Sentinel,' after all."

"But—"

"I advertises," said Mr. Hobbs, "for a strong woman to 'elp in the 'ousework, to 'elp in the shop, and to take cash in the desk. I ain't 'ad any answer."

"I—I—I have come to answer the advertisement," faltered the old lady.

Mr. Hobbs jumped.

"You?" he ejaculated.

"Yes, if you please."

Mr. Hobbs looked at her.

She was old and small and frail, and looked as if she had strength enough to dust china if the task were not a long one. Mr. Hobbs almost laughed aloud at the thought of her working in his establishment. But Mr. Hobbs was a polite man. He saw the earnest face, the anxious trembling of the

lips, and he really wished he had some nice light job which would have suited the old lady.

"Skuse me, ma'am," he said; "it ain't a job for you."

"I am really very strong."

"You don't look it."

"I am stronger than I look," said Miss Priscilla Fawcett, with some dignity. "I have no doubt that I should be equal to the work."

Mr. Hobbs tried not to grin.

"You'd 'ave to tackle the 'ousework," he said.

"I have been accustomed to housekeeping, sir."

"And 'elp in the shop."

"I should be perfectly willing."

"And clean up the slaughter-house."

Miss Fawcett shuddered, but did not otherwise flinch.

"I shall be willing to do so, Mr. Hobbs."

"And—and lend a 'and in cuttin' up the carkisses," said Mr. Hobbs, piling on a little to discourage the applicant for work.

"Oh, dear!"

"And sometimes go round with the cart."

"Oh!"

"You see, the job won't do for you," said Mr. Hobbs.

"Oh! I'm afraid not."

Miss Fawcett looked so weak that Mr. Hobbs pushed forward a chair for her to sit down on. Miss Fawcett sank into it.

"Ere, Maria!" called out Mr. Hobbs to his better half behind the scenes. "Ere, Maria! 'Ere's a lady fainting!"

A stout, red-faced dame emerged into the shop.

"Pore soul!" she observed, taking charge of Miss Fawcett at once. "What's the matter with her, Jim?"

Miss Fawcett's eyes were closed, and she was breathing faintly. She had, indeed, lost consciousness for the moment.

"She come arter the job," said Mr. Hobbs, with a grin. "Party who have seen better times, and looking for work, I suppose."

"Poor soul!"

Mrs. Hobbs helped Miss Fawcett into her little parlour, and the old lady opened her eyes and looked round wildly.

"Oh, dear! Where am I?"

"You'll be all right, marm," said Mr. Hobbs, looking in at the door. "My Maria is making you a cup of tea."

"Oh, dear—oh, dear!"

Mrs. Hobbs brought the cup of tea, and Miss Fawcett gave her a grateful look as she sipped it.

"Thank you so much," she murmured. "How kind you are! It would have been such a pleasure to me to work for you."

Mrs. Hobbs smiled.

"You ain't fit for that, marm," she said. "Wot are you looking for work for, marm?"

"I have had some misfortunes," explained Miss Fawcett. "I am compelled to look for work now, to support my darling boy and myself."

"Which I rather think the boy must be more fit for work than you are, marm," said Mr. Hobbs bluntly.

"Oh, I could not allow Tommy to take on rough work."

"Well, I'm wanting a boy," said Mr. Hobbs. "If he cares to come 'ere, I'll give him a chance, and chance it."

"Thank you so much, but I could not allow Tommy—But if you think I could possibly do the work myself—"

"Tain't no use thinking of it, marm," said Mr. Hobbs kindly.

"Oh, dear!"

Mrs. Hobbs drew her husband aside into the shop.

"You'll 'ave to take the poor soul 'ome in your trap, Jim," she said.

Mr. Hobbs looked serious.

"Which the trap is wanted for the round," he said.

"Can't be helped, Jim."

"And I'm wanted in the shop."

"You'll have to manage it."

Mr. Hobbs grinned ruefully.

"Well, I know I shall have to, sooner or later, if you say so, Maria," he said. "So I may as well say yes at once."

"Just as well, Jim," said Mrs. Hobbs placidly.

She returned to the parlour.

"Mr. 'Obbs is going to take you home in his trap," she said. "Where did you say you lived, marm?"

"In Rose Cottage, near the lower end of the village," explained Miss Fawcett. "My name is Fawcett—Priscilla Fawcett."

"Oh," said Mrs. Hobbs, who was quite conversant with the gossip six or seven miles up and down the main road. "I've 'eard of you, marm."

"I have been very unfortunate," said Miss Fawcett, "but I am determined to support myself. If you hear of a situation that you think might suit me, I should be very glad to hear of it."

"Which I will let you know," said Mrs. Hobbs. "Jim is going to take you 'ome in his trap, when you're ready. Will you 'ave another cup of tea?"

Miss Fawcett rose.

"No, thank you. How kind you are!"

Mr. Hobbs drove away with Miss Fawcett in the trap. The old lady was very silent, and she shivered as the icy December wind blew through her thin shawl. Her feet were wet and cold, and her hands were trembling. Had she attempted to walk home to Rose Cottage, she would certainly have fallen by the wayside.

Tom Merry had been over to see Mr. Dodds that morning. He had returned to find his old governess gone, and even Hannah did not know where she was gone. Miss Fawcett had slipped out mysteriously while Hannah was occupied making the beds.

Tom was in the garden, looking out into the road, wondering anxiously what had become of Miss Fawcett, when the trap drove up.

He uttered an exclamation, and ran out to meet her.

"Dear! Where have you been? How cold you look!"

He helped her to alight.

"So that's the boy, is it?" said Mr. Hobbs. "Well, he's a likely lad, and I'd give him a trial, marm, and chance it."

"Thank you, sir," said Tom Merry respectfully.

He helped Miss Fawcett into the cottage, and Mr. Hobbs drove away. Miss Priscilla was seized with a fit of trembling.

"Where have you been?" cried Tom Merry.

"My darling! I have been looking for work."

"Oh, dear!" gasped Tom Merry.

"I—I was not strong enough for the place," faltered Miss Fawcett, "and the butcher kindly gave me a lift home in his trap. It was exceedingly kind of him."

Tom Merry felt inclined to laugh and to cry at once.

Hannah came running in.

"You are all wet!" she exclaimed. "You will catch cold. You have caught it already! You must go to bed at once!"

"My dear child—"

"Off to bed at once!" said Hannah determinedly. And she had her way, and off to bed Miss Priscilla Fawcett went.

CHAPTER 16.

Dark Days.

MISS FAWCETT did not soon leave the bed to which Hannah had hurried her. She had caught a chill during her visit to the butcher's in Heath End, and that, added to what she had already suffered, was more than sufficient to lay her up. She remained in bed, and before the day was out Tom Merry knew that his old governess was seriously ill.

Tom Merry had no money in the house but the parting gift of Jack Blake, pressed into his hand at the station at Rylcombe. That he had not yet touched, but that he had no resource but to use now.

A doctor had to be sent for, and the medical gentleman immediately proceeded to give orders for necessaries for Miss Fawcett. Those necessaries used up the greater part of the fiver that Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had added to Blake's collection.

Tom Merry was bitterly anxious.

He knew how much Miss Fawcett must have suffered, mentally, for weeks, if not months, before the crash came, before she sent him that hysterical telegram to St. Jim's—the fatal telegram which had marked the end of his happy days at the old school.

He knew that since her ruin she had been almost starving herself to effect economy, and all his remonstrances had been useless. Little economies that made but a very slight difference to their means, were quite enough to affect the health of an already delicate old lady.

Now the malady which had been lying in wait for her, as it were, had swooped down upon her, and she was lying a helpless victim to it.

At times she was feverish and lost her knowledge of faces, and did not know Tom Merry when he was standing by her bedside.

She talked of happenings of her early youth, and called Tom Merry Frank, as if he had been her brother, and her brother a boy again.

Yet all the time she was the same kind and gentle soul, and never at one moment did a word of complaint pass her lips.

Mr. Dodds came over several times on his bicycle from Huckleberry Heath to visit them, but he was the only visitor they had.

The curate could do little.

He was poor himself, but he would willingly have helped

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out of what little he had, but Tom Merry would accept nothing while there was, as he said, a shot in the locker.

If his money were all gone, and Miss Fawcett needed what he could not give, then he would accept even charity; indeed, he would have begged on the public highway if it had been necessary for the safety of his old nurse.

But it had not come to that yet.

He did not let his chums at St. Jim's know in what bitter need he was.

They could not have helped him; and he had a natural desire to avoid worrying his friends with his troubles.

As he sat in the little room below the sick room, or tramped in the desolate wintry garden, passing weary hours, Tom Merry wondered sometimes what his friends were doing, and how they were getting on at St. Jim's.

It seemed strange to think of life at the old school going on just the same without him; of the fellows turning up in the Form-room at the usual time, of little Mr. Lathom coming blinking down the passage, and Mr. Linton blowing his nose with a loud blast, in his usual way, as he came into the Shell class-room.

What were the fellows doing? Had they beaten the Grammar School in the footer match?

A letter from Blake enlightened him about that.

"Dear old son," ran the letter. "We haven't heard from you for some days, and we're getting anxious about you. How are you getting on? We've postponed the footer match with Gordon Gay's team, so as to play it when you're back at St. Jim's, if possible. Gay was quite willing; and, in fact, the Grammarian bounders are as anxious about you as we are.

"Write and tell us how things are going. Gussy says if you are short of tin, he's had a fiver from his governor, and isn't going to break into it. He's keeping it in case you want it, and as he won't spend it, he says you may as well have it. I think so, too. Gussy is a good sort, though an awful ass. Good-bye, old chap! JACK BLAKE."

There was a footnote, in the unmistakable handwriting of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Quite wight, excepting about being an ass. Blake is the ass."

Tom Merry smiled over the letter.

It brought back to his mind the chums of St. Jim's, the jolly times in the old studies, the genial fellowship of the junior Form-rooms.

All that was never to be for him again!

He thrust the letter back into his pocket as the doctor drove up.

The medical man looked very grave when he descended from Miss Priscilla's room.

Tom Merry caught his breath, as he fixed his anxious eyes upon the doctor's face.

"Worse?" he breathed.

The doctor nodded.

"I'm afraid so, my lad."

"But not—not—not—" Tom Merry could hardly articulate the word. "But not—in danger, sir?"

"We must hope for the best."

"But—but—" stammered Tom Merry.

"You must bear up, my lad," said the doctor kindly. "It is not the worst, by any means."

He went out. Tom Merry did not move. The doctor's natty little figure was assuming strange proportions in his eyes, through the blinding mist of tears that was filling them.

CHAPTER 17.

Out of Danger.

"TOM!"

Tom Merry started.

A girlish figure and a bright face, framed in furs, appeared in the doorway, and Tom Merry stared at it in amazement. The tears that had been blinding his eyes were running down his cheeks now.

"Ethel!"

Cousin Ethel came in quickly.

"Yes, Tom!"

"Cousin Ethel! You here!"

The girl looked at him.

She had never seen tears upon Tom Merry's face before, and the sight of them there startled and alarmed her.

"Tom!" she breathed quickly, catching at his arm.

"Tom! There is no bad news! Miss Fawcett—"

"The doctor's just been!"

"Yes, I saw him. What is it, Tom?"

"He says danger!"

Tom Merry groaned out the word.

"Oh!" cried Ethel.

"I—I— Don't look at me; I know I'm a fool!" said THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 148.

Tom Merry, dashing away his tears with the back of his hand. "I—I can't help it, Ethel. She—she was so kind and so good and—and now— Oh, and I can't help her!"

His voice broke in a sob.

Ethel's eyes were moist.

"Tom! You must be brave!"

"I—I can't, Ethel! I can stand anything else. But—but if it should be— Oh, Ethel!"

"It will not be so bad as that, Tom! It cannot be!"

He sank into a chair, his face buried in his hands.

The girl bent over him as he sobbed, and her arm was round his neck.

"Tom! You must have courage! Don't—don't cry; I can't bear to see it."

Tom Merry choked back a sob between his teeth.

"I won't, Ethel. You think me a coward—"

"I don't, Tom. Oh, Tom, it cannot be so bad. Tom, I've come down to look after Miss Fawcett. I heard from Mr. Dods that she was ill, and I came at once."

"You are a good girl, Ethel, but—"

"But what, Tom? Don't say that you don't want me," said Ethel, with a tremulous smile.

"Oh, Ethel! But—but we've got no money," said Tom desperately. "You don't want to freeze and starve with us—"

She put a little hand over his mouth.

"You mustn't speak like that, Tom. While Miss Fawcett is in need, at least, you must allow your friends to help you."

"Oh, Ethel!"

"My uncle knows I am here, and he has given me plenty of money," said Ethel, trying to smile. "I am going to keep house for Miss Fawcett, Tom, and I shall not allow you to interfere with me."

"I don't want to interfere," said Tom Merry dismally. "You're a good girl, Ethel. I'd go down on my knees to anybody in the street to save her. You know I would."

Hannah came downstairs. She was surprised and delighted at the sight of Ethel.

"I'll take you up at once, miss," she said. "The sight of you will do her good. Come this way, miss."

And Ethel followed her into the sick-room.

Tom Merry tramped about aimlessly below, waiting till Miss Priscilla should ask, and should be fit, to see him.

He saw her a little later.

Her old face was very white and pinched, and there was a look in it that Tom Merry had not noticed there before—a look that made his heart stand still.

Was it possible? Was he, to crown all his misfortunes, to lose this loving heart—to part from his oldest and kindest friend—for ever? No, not for ever, for to the Christian at least there is a firm faith in another meeting, in a better and brighter world than this.

But that now was not in his mind; he thought only of the pale, worn face, of the thin, cold hand, and an unspeakable terror gripped him by the heart.

Was it to be? Could Fate be so cruel?

Ethel pressed his hand.

"Be brave!" she whispered.

The days that followed were never forgotten by Tom Merry. Always they stood out as black and terrible in his memory.

The weather was cold, and bitter winds lashed round the cottage and made the doors and windows rattle. Snow piled up in the garden and on the roof, and every morning Tom Merry had to wield his spade to cut a path to the gate.

In the sick-room a battle was being waged with grim death—life against death, the old battle of Ormuzd and Ahriman.

There never was a more devoted nurse than Ethel. She seemed to anticipate the wants of the invalid, and her eyes seemed never to close. Her fair face grew paler, and her eyes heavy, but she never faltered. When the crisis came it found Ethel steady and calm, ready to sacrifice herself to the end. Tom Merry thought she was like an angel in the house, and indeed she was.

What he would have done without her he did not know.

If Miss Fawcett survived that illness, he knew that it would be owing to the kind care of Cousin Ethel.

And it was not only Miss Fawcett that Ethel cared for. She looked after Tom Merry, too; and indeed the lad required someone's care, for in his fear and anxiety for his old nurse, he forgot himself utterly.

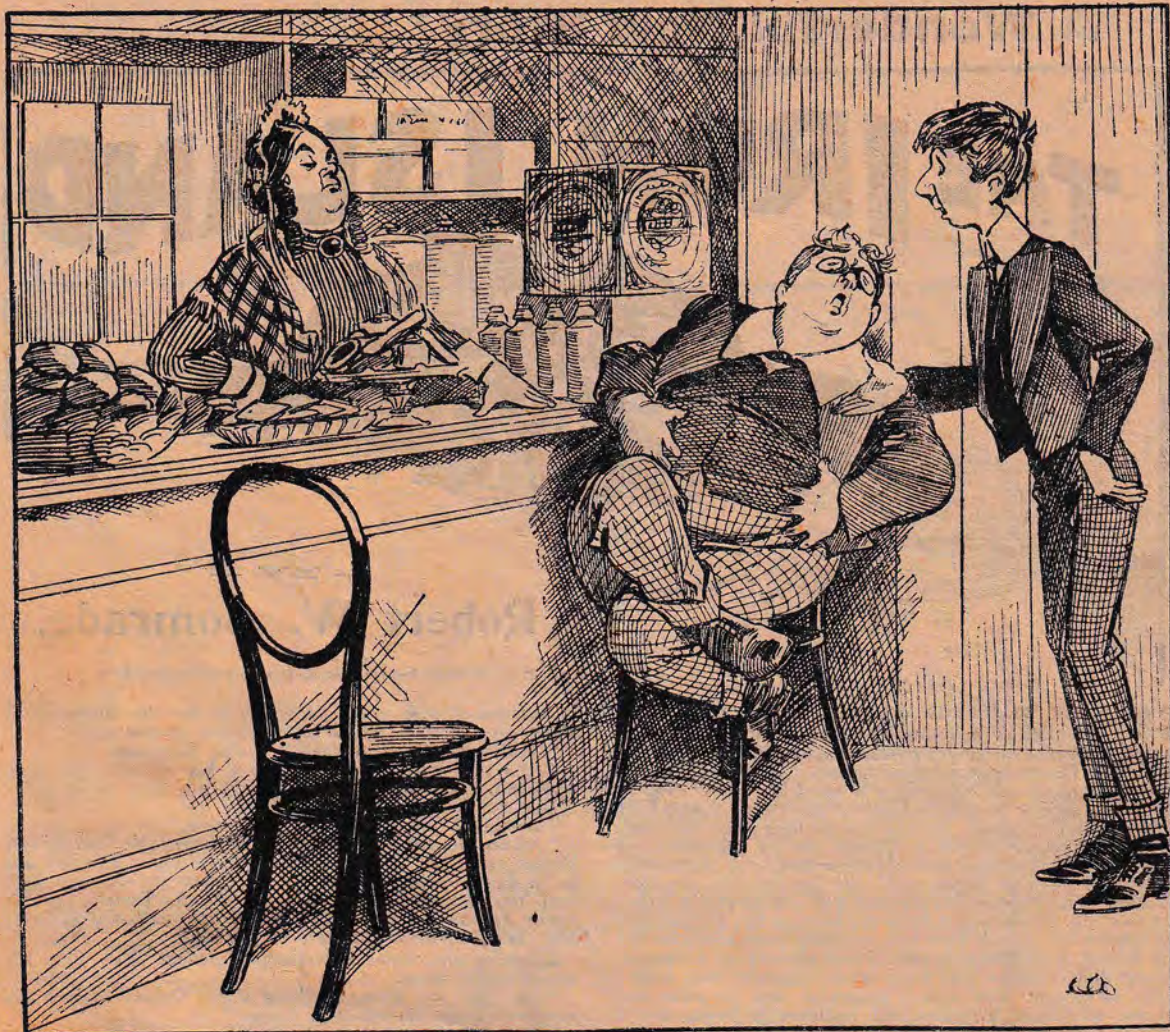
When Miss Fawcett was sleeping, Ethel and Tom would sometimes take a walk for exercise in the snowy lanes, or under the leafless, sighing trees, never, however, being absent long from the cottage.

They were dark and terrible days.

How Tom Merry lived through the week he hardly knew. It was still more wonderful how Cousin Ethel bore it all, and remained so calm, so patient, and so kind.

But the good turn came at last.

Miss Priscilla was out of danger, and her recovery was



"Bunter has been overcome by weakness from hunger, Mrs. Mimble," explained Alonzo Todd, hurriedly. "Kindly hand over some substantial comestible, my dear madam!" "Master Bunter can have all that he can pay for," said Mrs. Mimble sourly. (An amusing picture illustrating the long, complete tale of the juniors of Greyfriars, entitled "Bunter's Bust-up," and contained in the grand Xmas Double Number of the "Magnet" Library. Now on sale.

only a matter of time now; and when Ethel brought him the news, Tom Merry almost broke down.

"Heaven bless you, Ethel," he faltered—"Heaven bless you! You've done it! Heaven bless you!"

And Ethel's voice was too shaky for her to reply.

In a few days more Miss Priscilla was well enough to come downstairs into the tiny parlour. And then a new thought came to Tom Merry.

"I suppose you'll be leaving us now?" he exclaimed, with such dismay in his face that Ethel smiled.

"Not yet," she said; "not till Miss Fawcett is quite well enough to be moved."

"To be moved!" repeated Tom Merry.

"I am going to take Miss Fawcett away with me, Tom. She wants care, and I am going to give it to her. I have persuaded her to agree."

"Heaven bless you, Ethel. I—I can stand things if she's all right," said Tom, in a shaking voice.

"I know, Tom. And—and I wish you would accept my uncle's offer to return to St. Jim's," said Ethel.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"I can't, Ethel. I can't sponse even on a kind friend. I must work."

"But what work will you find?"

"I shall find some. Mr. Hobbs, the butcher, has offered me a job. I should be a cad to turn up my nose at it, in my present circumstances," said Tom Merry. "But I hope to find something more advantageous to do, of course. When Miss Priscilla goes, I shall go and stay with Mr. Dodds for a day or two, I think. I hear that he is already

in negotiation with a tenant for Laurel Villa, and when that's settled, I shall get a job of some sort."

"I—I suppose you are right, Tom," said Ethel slowly.

And now there were some happy days at the little cottage before Miss Fawcett left.

The old lady had consented at last to be taken to Lord Eastwood's house, until further arrangements should be made.

Then the day of parting came.

Lord Eastwood's motor-car came for Cousin Ethel and Miss Priscilla and Hannah, and they were packed warmly into it, and Tom Merry stood by the car to say good-bye. He was to go to the rectory at Huckleberry Heath when his friends were gone. For a few days, and then—then the world was before him.

The motor buzzed. Tom Merry stood cap in hand as it rolled away. His eyes were on the car till it turned a corner and vanished.

Tom Merry glanced back at the dark, silent cottage. Then he looked after the car again—his friends were gone. With a heavy heart he stepped out, and tramped away in the direction of Huckleberry Heath.

But his face grew brighter, his step grew firmer, as he walked on. After all, the worst trial of all had been spared him. He was young, he was strong, he was brave; he had courage to face the world. And Tom Merry's shoulders came erect, and he held up his head, looking all the world fearlessly in the face. THE END.

(Another splendid story of Tom Merry & Co. next Thursday, entitled "Tom Merry's Fix," by Martin Clifford. Order your copy of the "Gem" in advance. Price One Penny.)

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 148.

Next Thursday:

"TOM MERRY'S FIX,"

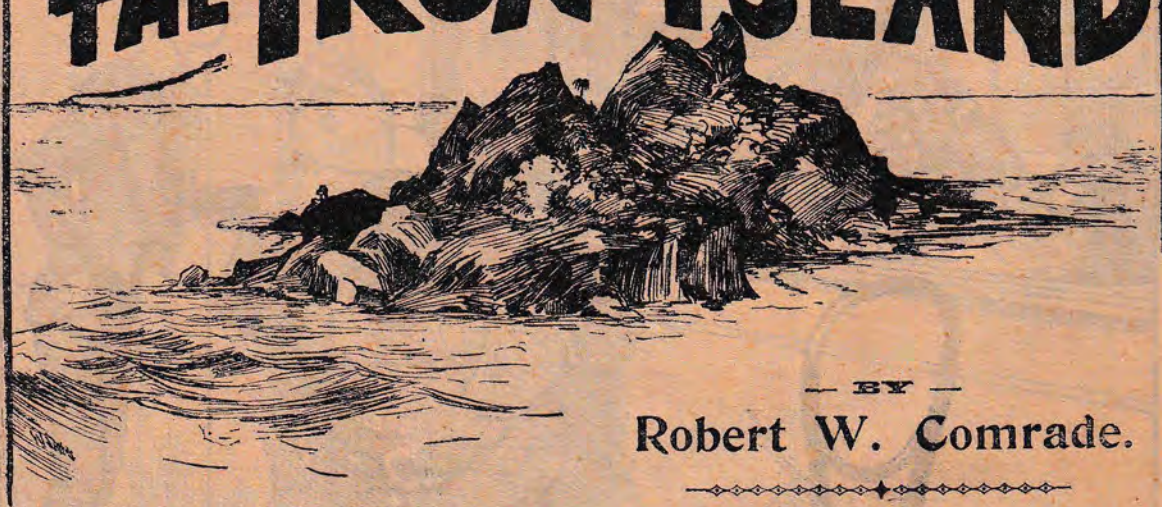
By MARTIN CLIFFORD, and

"THE IRON ISLAND,"

By ROBERT W. COMRADE.

A Wonderful New Story!

THE IRON ISLAND



— BY —

Robert W. Comrade.

THE FIRST CHAPTERS BRIEFLY RE-WITTEN.

Philip Graydon is a young Englishman, who has been marooned for the last eight years on an uncharted island in the Pacific Ocean by a criminal society called the Brotherhood of Iron, of which Graydon is an ex-member. He is astounded one day to meet a fashionably-dressed young lady on the island of which he had for so long been the only occupant. The new-comer is Dolores de las Mercedes, an actress, who has caused serious disturbances in France by adopting the title of Queen of France for the sake of advertisement. The French Government had considered it necessary that she should retire from civilisation for a time, and had landed her, with a tent and complete equipment, on the Iron Island, little knowing that it had already an occupant. Dolores and Graydon put their heads together, and evolve a plan of escape. The plan is successful, and Graydon and Dolores, as Frank Kingston and Kathleen O'Brien, arrive safely in London, where they each engage suites of rooms at the Hotel Cyril. The identity of Frank Kingston, who is ostensibly a young man who has made his fortune in the goldfields, is quite unsuspected by the Brotherhood, and with the help of Fraser, an ex-member of the Brotherhood, Kingston prepares to open his campaign against the formidable society.

Detective-inspector Caine, one of the Inner Councillors, is the first marked down for degradation. As Kingston gives Fraser his instructions, the latter waxes enthusiastic.

"Are you really going for the Brotherhood, sir?" he exclaims.

"Tooth and nail, Fraser—to the bitter end!" replies Kingston solemnly.

(Now go on with the story.)

Fraser Brings Information.

"It is quite feasible, Dolores. At first sight it would seem rather too tall for this man Crawford to be a traitor as well as Fraser."

"It certainly seems unbelievable."

"Yet it is not at all improbable. Fraser himself is dead against the organisation, and Crawford being a friend, it is only natural he should be influenced."

They were both sitting in Kingston's study on the following morning. Dolores had crossed over after breakfast, and he had told her everything.

"It is past ten already," she said.

"And Fraser has this very moment arrived," Kingston replied coolly.

"Why, how do you know?"

"I heard his footstep in the corridor. It was faint, I admit, but I shall be surprised if— Ah! I thought so! Come in!"

Fraser had knocked, and now opened the door. He didn't waste a moment, but started his story right away.

"I've seen him, sir," he commenced, "and he's completely

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in agreement with you. He wants to see the Brotherhood killed, sir—he wants to see it completely broken up!"

"That's something, anyhow," smiled Kingston.

"And he's got to take part in a big robbery this very night, sir. Him an' two other fellows are goin' to do it."

Kingston bent forward.

"To-night," he said sharply. "Where?"

"At Sir Donald Penrose's place in Surrey, sir," exclaimed Fraser eagerly. "I've got it all from him. They've got to be down in the village there at eleven o'clock, and wait until the servants retire. You see, sir, Sir Donald and his family are away for a week, and there's only the servants left. It's been arranged for a long while."

Kingston and Dolores exchanged glances. The time for action was at hand.

"And did you learn anything about Caine?" asked the former—"Detective-inspector Caine?"

"Yes, sir. The robbery will be discovered in the morning, an' it is reckoned he will be called upon to go down and investigate at about ten o'clock to-morrow morning."

"It is certain he will go?"

"Oh, yes, sir; quite certain. You see, he has to cover up the tracks," replied Fraser, a dark scowl crossing his features. "Hang him, he's one of the worst of the lot! With that lying tongue of his he's convicted dozens of innocent men, just so's to get his own chaps off."

"That would, of course, be his game," said Dolores. "But tell me, Fraser, can we absolutely rely on this information?"

"Absolutely, miss! Crawford's to be one of the three himself. I'll tell you all the particulars."

And Fraser related the plans in a more minute manner, telling all the details, times, etc. When he had finished Kingston rubbed his hands quietly together. He could foresee his own plans working to perfection. Detective-inspector Caine would trip at last. With such information as this the matter would be simple. Notwithstanding this, however, Kingston knew that if he was to succeed he would have to do his work thoroughly. To be slovenly and careless would assuredly mean disaster.

"You've done well, Fraser—very well, indeed," he said. "And you say Crawford is of our way of thinking?"

"Yes, sir. He's an engineer by trade, an' is certain he could make more money at that honestly than he is doing now dishonestly. But he didn't like not knowing who you were, sir. He wouldn't tell me anything at first. I had to talk him over."

"He'll know in good time," said Kingston. "We can't take him into our confidence until we know more about him. When he has proved himself straightforward, then, perhaps, we can talk about letting him know who I am. Just suppose, for an instant, that he was playing some deep game—was, in reality, heart and soul with the enemy—I should be exposed to the Inner Council immediately."

"But he's not with the Brotherhood, sir. I know that."

"Let's hope you're right, Fraser. It certainly seems like it. Of course, the Brotherhood will think that one of their existing members has turned traitor, but it will be utterly impossible for them to say whom."

"Where will these three burglars take the spoils?" asked Dolores suddenly. "Will they hand them straight over to the Inner Council?"

"Not until to-morrow night, miss. Then a superintendent—he's the next highest to a councillor—will come round and collect."

"Really, it's quite a business!" she exclaimed. "But to-morrow night, you say? Where will the stolen goods be until then?"

"Oh, either Crawford'll keep them or one of the others—most likely one of the others, miss."

"Thank you, Fraser! That's all we wished to know."

The valet withdrew, and for a moment there was silence. Dolores sat watching Kingston's face expectantly. She had tried to look upon him as an ordinary man many times, but always found it impossible. The vision of him as he had been on the island was always floating before her eyes—with his long, curly hair and thick beard.

He would always seem like that to her—he was the same in all but appearance. And although they had never been formally introduced, they were great friends now. Their feelings towards one another were merely those of friendship and companionship—such as might exist between two men.

"Things are shaping well, Dolores," he said, after a moment. "This Crawford is a valuable acquisition. He has given the very information I wanted. I've got Caine now—got him properly, if things work out well."

"But I don't see—" began Dolores.

"I will tell you," he said. "The main idea is this: I want to get Caine both degraded at the Yard and degraded at the Brotherhood. I want him to be thought a traitor in the sense that he's allowing himself to be bribed."

"But how will you manage it?" she queried.

"It's really very simple," he replied. "A certain amount will have to be left to chance, but I think it will come off all right."

He rapidly told her of his plan, and she listened attentively until he had finished. Then she nodded her head approvingly.

"It's a splendid plan, Mr. Kingston," she declared; "and the joke of it is that the expenses will be paid out of their own money. By the way, didn't you tell me that you had a fortune of your own?"

"I had," replied Kingston, "but on arrival in London I found that the excellent Brotherhood have—in a very ingenious manner I cannot go into now—appropriated the whole lot."

"And how much were you worth? You never told me. You don't mind these personal questions, do you?"

"Mind them?" he laughed. "Fancy asking that, Dolores! But my fortune? Well, it amounted to about two hundred thousand pounds, I think."

"As much as that. Is it gone irretrievably? Can't you possibly reclaim it?"

"I am dead, as Philip Graydon, so that would be impossible. Besides, I should have no object in doing so. I hold five times the amount belonging to the Brotherhood, and have simply deducted my own fortune from it. The rest I shall use against them until they are wiped out. What is left will, of course, go to charity."

"And that thirteen thousand pounds in notes you had from that poor man who was flung on the island?" she asked.

"I have already given thirteen thousand pounds out of my own fortune to the London hospitals, so my mind is easy on that point. But all this is beside the matter at present in hand. There is work to do, and calculations to make. Inspector Caine is one of the Council's most valuable men. If he's put out of hand it will be a good first step."

"It will indeed!" she cried, rising to her feet. "We can't stop the robbery at Sir Donald Penrose's, because if we did our plans with regard to Caine would be useless. Nevertheless, I suppose you will see that Sir Donald's valuables are returned—"

"Before they're returned," he replied. "they have to be procured. For a few hours I shall have to simply wait."

The Box of Gold.

Detective-inspector Caine knocked the ashes from his pipe and proceeded to refill it. He had just finished his breakfast, and sat before the fire, comfortably reviewing his position.

"It's a fine institution, this Brotherhood," he thought. "I'm making at least twenty times as much money out of them as I am drawing in salary. And there's no risk—not the slightest suspicion of risk."

He laughed softly, and lay back in his chair. He was a tall, erect man, with sharp, clever features. There was no

doubt about his cleverness. He was, without exception, the most valuable member of the Brotherhood.

He knew it, too, and almost any sum he asked for had been instantly supplied to him. Lord Mount-Fannell realised that if the Brotherhood lost him arrests would be taking place every month.

As it was, at every big robbery Caine invariably made a strong case out against a perfectly innocent man. Either that, or he failed to trace the culprits altogether. At the Yard he was looked upon as a very capable officer.

Once, a year or two before, there had been a suspicion of something underhand about him, but, as nothing could be proved, no notice was taken.

"Nearly ten o'clock," he muttered, glancing at his watch. "Well, I suppose I shall have to be getting along. There's nothing particularly urgent on to-day, so if I'm a bit late—"

Whirr-r-r-r-r!

The telephone bells on the instrument against the wall rang sharply, and Caine crossed over to it. He unhooked the receiver, and placed it to his ear.

"Hallo!" he called.

"Is that you, Caine?" came a sharp voice over the wires.

"Yes, sir. Is it anything important?"

"Come to the Yard immediately," said the voice urgently. "Sir Donald Penrose's house in Surrey has been entered during the night, and six thousand pounds worth of valuables stolen."

"And I am to go down to investigate, sir?"

"At once, Caine!"

"Very good, sir. I'll get to the Yard as soon as possible."

"It's urgent; so hurry as fast as you can."

The detective hung up the receiver, and rubbed his hands together. He was smiling quite pleasantly.

"So it came off successfully," he muttered. "Good! Six thousand pounds, eh! A fine haul, and if I succeed in pulling a red herring over the track there'll be a goodly proportion of that for myself."

He busied himself about the room, preparing to depart. The superintendent was an impatient man, and if Caine was late there would be trouble. The latter knew all the particulars of the robbery, but had been a little uncertain with regard to the date.

Then, just as he was about to depart, there came a sharp knock at the door downstairs. It was a boarding-house, but Caine listened intently.

"I wonder if that is anything for me?" he muttered. "Whatever it is the caller appears to be somewhat impatient."

He opened his door and walked out on to the landing. As nobody seemed to be about, he quickly descended the stairs and opened the door. A District messenger-boy stood on the steps.

"Inspector Caine, sir?" he inquired.

"That's my name, my lad," replied the detective. "Is that parcel for me?"

"Yes, sir. Mind, it's heavy!"

Caine took the parcel, and then nearly dropped it. It was not very large, but extremely weighty. Evidently it contained some metal or other.

A minute or two later he set it down on his table, and looked at the clock undecidedly. Should he wait until he came back or open it now? He had promised to be at the Yard—

"Hang it, there's no such hurry as that!" he muttered. "I may not be back for several days, and I'm really curious about this parcel. What on earth can it possibly be? Who can have sent it?"

He glanced at the label. It was typewritten, and simply bore Caine's name and address. He cut through the string and removed the wrappings, revealing a plain wooden box.

"Curious!" he thought.

With a knife he forced up the lid, then started back, pale and open-eyed. He was staring at the contents of the box in amazement—in stupefied wonder.

"Good heavens!" he muttered.

The box, ordinary enough outside, was very different in the interior. Packed closely and tightly, so that clinking was obviated, were hundreds of sovereigns—bright yellow gold. It is scarcely surprising that the detective was lost in amazement. He forgot all about his urgent journey in the interests of the Brotherhood. The arrival of this parcel was really most singular.

"I can't understand it," he muttered. "It certainly does not come from the Brotherhood. Oh, perhaps it is merely counterfeit!"

He laughed, and he thought this was the solution, and pulled a number of sovereigns out of the box. No! they certainly seemed genuine enough. They were the right weight—

He had a testing machine in his cupboard, and quickly he

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submitted several sovereigns to the proof. But they stood the test easily enough—they were genuine gold, that was plain.

"But who on earth," muttered Caine, staring at the box in bewilderment—"where on earth have they come from? It's an unheard of—there's something peculiar about this—"

He broke off, having just caught sight of a piece of paper near the edge of the box. He pounced on it, and brought it to light. It was just a plain slip with a few words typewritten in the centre:

"This box contains £1,000. Inspector Caine must be at the Castle Hotel at 11 o'clock precisely, when he will learn what his work is re Penrose affair. Should he fail to turn up the consequences will be serious."

Under this a peculiar mark had been drawn—the sign of the Brotherhood of Iron! The box had come from a member. Caine stood staring at the note in amazement. He was to go to the Castle Hotel—about three hundred yards distant.

A rule of the Brotherhood was that any member on receiving a note from a fellow-member, should immediately tear the sign off and burn it. Caine, thinking busily all the time, did so now, then placed the typewritten slip in the box again.

"I can't understand it!" he muttered perplexedly. "Who—who can the sender of this be? A thousand pounds—eh? It's worth having, anyhow, and I absolutely must go and see him—"

He paused blankly, having just thought of his urgent appointment at Scotland Yard. He simply couldn't let it slide; besides, there were the interests of the Brotherhood to be considered. It was imperative that he should be the detective sent to investigate it. If he failed to turn up it would be serious.

"What shall I do?" he muttered in perplexity. "Confound it! Why didn't the money come before? Then I could have gone!"

He paced up and down for a while, knowing all the time that he would be late at headquarters. Yet what was he to do? As the money had come from the Brotherhood itself, he could do nothing but answer the summons, whatever the consequences. There was no getting out of it.

"Besides," he muttered, "it says in the note that it is in reference to the Penrose affair. Something must have cropped up; something important, which I must learn before I travel down to the scene of the robbery. It's confoundedly unfortunate, though; the superintendent will expect me, and I shall fail to turn up!"

Never a suspicion of any trick entered Caine's head. He knew the message had come from a fellow-member, and therefore it must be genuine. There was no doubt about it at all. But where had it come from, and who? Time was flying—there wasn't a minute to lose either way. What should he do?

"It will be simple enough to make an excuse to the superintendent," he thought. "I'm not an ordinary constable. If I see the sender of this box at eleven, I can probably be at the Yard by half-past—an hour late. There will still be ample time to journey down to Sir Donald Penrose's."

He picked the box of sovereigns up, and placed it in his cupboard, locking the door after him.

"The matter simply can't be ignored. Yes, I'll go to the Castle. Scotland Yard can wait!"

Caine little thought of the consequences which would follow his action. He donned his hat and descended the stairs. The morning was cold, and a cutting wind assailed him as he opened the hall door. He buttoned his overcoat and walked briskly down the street, his mind full of the mysterious parcel. He certainly didn't like ignoring the summons from headquarters, but the situation was really exasperating, for it was equally impossible to ignore the summons to the Castle Hotel.

Hardly had he turned his back on the house, when another figure hurried up from the opposite direction—it was Mr. Milverton, the well-known barrister, and the latest member of the Inner Council. He had come to tell Caine to depart for Surrey immediately.

Milverton was a most peculiar man. Although only a new member, he made it his business to keep a sharp eye on his fellow councillors. In this way he had often shadowed a colleague merely for the curiosity of seeing where he was going.

He saw Caine now, and it struck him that the detective seemed different to his usual self. In addition to that, he knew that Caine should have been at Scotland Yard. He had come fully expecting him to be out; yet here he was hurrying down the road in a contrary direction to that which he would take to reach the police headquarters.

"There's something fishy about this," Milverton muttered. "Caine ought to be on the way to the scene of the robbery now. I know he got a 'phone message from the Yard—the

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superintendent himself told me that Caine was to investigate. So why is he acting in this manner? I mean to follow him."

Caine, thinking only of his strange errand, hurried round the corner into a main street—the district was Brixton—and crossed the road to the Castle Hotel. His shadow behind was entirely taken aback by this, and shook his head as Caine disappeared inside.

"There's something going on we know nothing about," Milverton declared. "Caine isn't all he pretends to be. When he ought to be hot-foot on the way to Sir Donald Penrose's, he is lounging in public-houses! This is a serious matter; it looks to me as if Caine has been bribed to keep away. If he had the Brotherhood's interests at heart he'd be acting differently to this. Ah, an idea!"

He turned abruptly and made his way back to Caine's lodgings. As he was known there, the landlady admitted him immediately, saying that Caine was out. Milverton decided to wait. The instant he was alone in the study—the detective had a magnificent suite of rooms—he searched about quickly for a letter—a letter which might possibly incriminate Caine. But he drew blank.

"He burnt it, I suppose," thought Milverton. "He'd be clever enough to leave nothing—Ah, the cupboard!"

He pulled the knob, but the door held firm.

"Locked!" he muttered.

He fumbled in his pocket and produced a bundle of keys. At the third attempt the door swung open. The wooden box lay on a shelf, and at first Milverton took no notice of it. Then, as he moved it to glance behind, something chinked inside.

Milverton lifted the box out, being as surprised as Caine had been at the weight, and laid it on the table. He raised the lid, saw the glittering sovereigns, and uttered a cry of amazement. In a moment he controlled himself, however, and a stern, hard, expression entered his eyes.

"The traitor," he muttered between his teeth—"the base traitor! He's accepted this money for keeping away from the scene of the robbery! I don't know who is bribing him like this, but it is evidently somebody with a lot of money—and also somebody who knows the Brotherhood. It might be a member of the Inner Council. There are twenty-five of us, and it would be a difficult matter to say who is the traitor."

He saw the note, picked it up, and read it. But now there was no mark to show whom it had come from, and the words it contained only confirmed his suspicions. He opened his handbag and quietly emptied the thousand pounds into it, placing the empty box back in the cupboard. Locking the door again, he took a last glance round, then left, a terribly stern expression on his face; he was a new member, but he was a powerful one, and Caine should pay to the uttermost for his treachery.

Walking rapidly down the street, he glanced back just before reaching the corner, and saw the detective come hurrying back along the pavement.

"He's waited till another man's been sent!" muttered Milverton, "and will now presumably rush to Scotland Yard with an excuse. Possibly he will go down to Surrey—just for the sake of appearance—for he knows that the other man will have had time to gather any threads together there might have been left."

But Milverton was wrong. Detective-inspector Caine had the interests of the Brotherhood at heart as much as anybody. That was the cream of Kingston's plan—for the box of gold had, of course, come from him. Caine would be thought by his fellow-members to be neglecting his duty for the sake of bribes; whereas anything in the nature of a bribe would have infuriated him greatly.

Kingston had got him, though—Caine was as good as ruined.

At Sir Donald Penrose's.

Detective-inspector Caine entered the house and hurried upstairs. He was angry and puzzled. It was well past eleven when he left the hotel, yet he had received no sign; nothing to show that he had been seen.

"It must be a trick!" he muttered furiously. "Confound it, everything is upset! Mount-Fannell will have something to say to me at the next meeting, I expect. Well, he'll agree with me when I tell him the circumstances."

He poked the fire savagely, then unlocked the cupboard door. He had good reason to feel worried, for he knew he would get into trouble at the Yard for ignoring the summons. The box was still on the shelf, and he lifted it up.

Naturally supposing it to be heavy, he exerted himself considerably, with the result that the box flew into the air. Caine was too surprised for a moment to realise what it meant. Then, as the box fell to the floor and displayed its emptiness, his face turned pale.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, aghast. "The money is gone!"



"Inspector Caine, sir?" inquired the messenger boy. "Parcel for you, sir. Mind, sir, it's very heavy!"
(See page 21).

Frenziedly he searched the cupboard for that which he knew was not there—it relieved him to do so. The note was gone in addition, and nothing remained but the empty box. Caine flopped into a chair limply.

"Gad!" he muttered. "What a fool I was to take any heed of the blessed note! Look what I've done for myself! Although I had neglected one thing, there was always the £1,000 as compensation. But now that's gone—well, I've done myself a lot of harm, and no good whatever!"

"I'm a fool! What I ought to do is to get to the Yard as soon as possible. But where the gold has vanished to is a mystery. What was the sense of such an action? What foolery has somebody been up to?"

He rammed his hat on, and was just about to hurry out, when a card lying on his desk caught his eye. He picked it up, then started.

"Milverton!" he exclaimed. "He has been here! Great Scott! That's where the money's gone! Milverton's taken it! Confound his impudence! Why can't he mind his own affairs?"

"He came here, found the gold, and took it, even though he had to burgle the cupboard! I can see why he did so; he thinks the money is a bribe, and means to have the matter out; took it, I suppose, as proof of my guilt. I shall soon be

able to put matters straight. At present, however, there is this robbery to investigate. I shall have to do something desperate to get the other man out of the way, for they're sure to have sent one down."

He hurried out, chartered the first taxi he came across, and was whirled through the streets to Scotland Yard.

"Ah, Caine!" exclaimed the superintendent coldly, as he appeared. "What is the meaning of this, please? You promised to be here over an hour ago."

"I'm sorry, but I was delayed owing to a slight accident—"

"Are you sure, Caine?"

"Sure, sir? I don't think I understand—"

"Nor I," replied the other. "About twenty minutes after you answered my telephone call one of our men saw you enter a public-house near your own address. Is that what you call an accident?"

"I—I—" stammered Caine. "Really, sir, I suppose I can do as I like—"

"In your spare time certainly, but not when I am here expecting you every minute. You will hear more of this matter, Caine. I'm sorry it should have happened, because you have always been so punctual before."

"Am I to go down to Surrey and investigate?"

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Next Thursday:

"TOM MERRY'S FIX,"

By MARTIN CLIFFORD, and

"THE IRON ISLAND,"

By ROBERT W. COMRADE.

"I grew tired of waiting, and sent Richards. You seem to forget that the matter is most urgent. He will see that everything is conducted as it should be."

Caine felt rather alarmed. He knew Inspector Richards to be a most capable officer, and one who had a knack of finding out things—little things—which an ordinary inspector would miss. And it was those very little things which would probably mean the undoing of the culprits; and all because Caine went on the fool's errand to the Castle Hotel.

He also knew that if the three common-members did get arrested, he would be brought to book himself for not having done his work. He was in an unenviable position—all on account of that £1,000.

"I shall have to do something," he muttered, as he sat down in his own office. "Richards will have to be sent back; anything to get him out of the way. Knowing that I should be sent down to investigate, the men might have been careless and left traces. Something must be done!"

He sat staring before him agitatedly. He was desperate. Not once since he had been in the Force had he failed to keep his word, and now he had been found out in a deliberate lie.

"The only thing is to go down and see how far Richards has got. I shall have to invent some excuse whereby I can get rid of him. I may be called to account for it afterwards, but, after all, I am not a common sergeant. And I must do my duty towards the Brotherhood."

Caine was true enough to the Brotherhood; he was a most ardent member, and any mention of traitorous behaviour set his back up. Kingston knew this; thus the detective's punishment would be all the greater—he would be punished for treachery he had never perpetrated.

As quickly as possible he travelled to Waterloo, just caught a train, and alighted impatient and anxious at Guildford. The residence of Sir Donald Penrose was three miles out, and Caine, as he sat in a trap, felt he would have given pounds for the use of a motor-car.

At last he arrived, and the first man he saw was Inspector Richards. The latter came towards him curiously.

"Sorry I've taken the job out of your hands, Caine," he said. "You were a long time, though. I've only just got to the real work."

Caine felt relieved.

"I was delayed," he said shortly. "It's all right now, though, Richards. I'm going to start work right away. I suppose you'll take the next train back?"

Inspector Richards looked blank.

"Back?" he exclaimed. "Why, I haven't started work yet. What on earth do you mean, Caine?"

"I mean," replied the other, "that this was my job, and that I have come down here to take charge and investigate."

"And myself?" asked Richards.

"Well, I should advise you to return to London. There'll be plenty of work there. I saw the superintendent before leaving, and he was sorry I hadn't turned up quite on time. However, no harm's done, so if you'll just give me your notes I'll be getting on."

Inspector Richards naturally took it for granted that Caine had been sent down by his superior, so immediately—though with bad grace—gave place to his colleague. Had he had any suspicion that Caine had done this thing on his own initiative, he would not have given in so readily.

Caine's heart beat a little faster as he saw the other drive off. He fully realised what he had done, and it caused him to feel uneasy every now and again. But what other move could he have made? He was between two fires; he must either be false to the Brotherhood and desert them, or get into hot water at Scotland Yard.

And Caine, ever loyal to the Brotherhood, chose the latter, hoping to be able to find some excuse to offer the superintendent when he returned to London.

Kingston Takes a Hand.

"Mr. Kingston's called, miss. Shall I show him in?"

"Yes, Louise, please do," replied Dolores, laying her magazine aside. She was sitting on a settee near the fire, and looked up expectantly.

The next moment Frank Kingston lounged in, careless, and wearing a most affected smile on his lips. Dolores didn't see that, however. She only saw his manliness and strength; his terrific will-power made her own seem feeble and weak. But, whatever his accomplishments, whatever his strength, she had never heard him boast.

"Oh, I'm so glad you've come!" she cried, springing up and meeting him with outstretched hand.

"I knew you would be anxious to hear how I got on," he drawled. "I should have been round sooner, only I stopped to have a chat with the owners of the Coronet. She is an English ship, you know, and I have bought her."

"You have bought the Coronet?" cried Dolores.

"You appear surprised."

"I am surprised."

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He seated himself near her couch.

"Not when I tell you it is for use against the Brotherhood," he murmured. "You will realise that a serviceable, sea-going yacht will be immensely useful to me in my present work."

"For instance you can pretend to be on a long cruise, while in reality you are in London, disguised," she said. "That would be very useful."

"There are many other ways in which I can make use of it," he drawled. "I have retained the services of Captain Morrison, and most of the other officers. But all this is trivial; I came to tell you of my scheme."

"How did it work?" she asked eagerly.

"Well, I shouldn't be far wrong if I said beautifully; for it really was beautiful the way in which our friend Caine walked into the trap—so obvious a trap, too. That thousand pounds tickled Caine's fancy, I imagine."

He laughed softly, but Dolores tapped her foot with impatience.

"But tell me how you managed it," she said.

"To tell the truth, I didn't manage it; it managed itself. The whole thing was partly a matter of chance. If the plan had miscarried in any way, then I should have had to conceive another ruse. But it didn't miscarry—not a bit of it."

He rose, and stood with his back to the fire.

"I knew that Milverton was paying Caine a visit at about the time he did, so arranged accordingly. That fact was about the only one I did know; all the rest was a matter of careful calculation and deduction. Now, listen carefully."

She settled herself more comfortably.

"Last night I made certain judicious inquiries of the constable on duty at one of the departments at Scotland Yard. I went in to presumably inquire about a lost watch, and, coming out, chatted with the policeman for a few minutes. I learnt two facts—viz., that the superintendent always arrived at ten, and that Caine, unless special work was on, invariably turned up at eleven-thirty. He is on duty in the evening as well."

"But I can't quite see—" began Dolores.

"You will in one moment. It was now merely a matter of reckoning. Caine lives at Brixton; he would presumably start for headquarters about eleven. The superintendent arrives at the Yard about ten. Now we travel for a moment to Guildford. The robbery would be discovered first thing, and as there is no telephone in Sir Donald's house, a groom would have to ride to Guildford. By the time that was accomplished, and all facts told, the message to London would hardly arrive before a quarter to ten."

Dolores smiled.

"I'm beginning to see how you worked it out. You said it was chance. But I don't call it chance, Mr. Kingston; it was clever calculation."

"Call it what you like," he drawled. "Well, having got so far, I arranged for a district messenger to deliver the box at precisely a quarter past ten. I reckoned that the superintendent would phone Caine immediately he heard of the robbery; thus the box of gold would be delivered just before Caine started for Scotland Yard."

"Suppose the telephone message had come early, and Caine had left before ten?"

"In that case, the messenger-boy was to bring the package back, having received orders to deliver it into no one else's hands but Caine's. If, on the other hand, the gold was delivered before the message came, I reckoned that Caine wouldn't start for the Castle Hotel until about five to eleven, and the summons was bound to come before that."

"You were prepared either way," she cried; "and anyhow, when looked at in this light, it seems very clever to me how you arrived at the final conclusion."

"Oh, it was simple. As I expected, Caine jumped at the bait, and took it in, hook and all. He's caught easily, Dolores, and very soon will be nicely landed."

"But how do you know all these other facts?" she inquired. "How do you know Milverton went to the inspector's house?"

"I set Fraser to watch. He was disguised, of course, and having been a crackman himself, he fully understands the art of shadowing. I hardly expected Milverton to appropriate the money, but he's caught, too. He thinks Caine has been accepting bribes—must think so."

"I'm so glad to know you have started, Mr. Kingston," she said. "But I have done nothing. I haven't had a hand in the game whatever."

"No," he replied, "there was no opportunity. I myself have done very little. There is one thing, however, which must be done."

"What is that?"

"We have accomplished our object with regard to Caine, but the fact remains that Sir Donald Penrose's valuables are still in the Brotherhood's hands. I am going to make it my task to recover them."

"But think of the risk!" she cried.

"I have thought of it," he smiled, "and should call myself a weak-nerved coward if I hesitated a moment. The way I shall do it is practically devoid of risk. You may guess I shouldn't jeopardise my own position."

"Yes; I ought to know by now that when you do a thing you do it thoroughly," replied Dolores. "But how do you intend to set to work? Can I help you in any way?"

"I'm afraid the business is more suited to Fraser," replied Kingston. "I have already planned it with him. As soon as it is over I shall come straight home, and let you know how we fared."

"And what is your plan?"

"Like the other, it is simplicity itself," he replied; and briefly outlined his method of procedure. If the Penrose diamonds were to be recovered, drastic measures were necessary. Before the night was out they would be in the hands of the Inner Council, so there was no time for elaborate plans. Kingston's quickly conceived scheme promised to succeed, and there was not the least spice of danger in it. Even if it failed, he could never be discovered. For Kingston, although ready and willing to take big risks, did not believe in entering a lion's cage to do a thing that could be accomplished every bit as well outside.

The mist rolled over the road in a thick swirl. It was not fog, but a damp, clinging vapour. Two figures, one dressed in rags, and the other in sailor's garb, stood close against a wall, talking unconcernedly.

Otherwise, the street was deserted. Now and again somebody would hurry along, with no more than a passing glance at the two men against the wall. The time was close on ten, and in that district, at that time of night, there was practically no traffic, either pedestrian or vehicular.

"About his time now, Fraser," murmured the man attired as a sailor. "You are certain he comes this way?"

"Positive, sir," replied the ragged individual, producing a cigarette-end, and proceeding to light it; one could never be certain who was watching. "The super—as he's always called—is dressed like a street organ-grinder. He's an Italian, and if he was about all day long he'd never be suspected. Of course, when his round's over he comes out dressed as his ordinary self—a gentleman. He's got a house in the West End, I believe, sir."

"Yes, Fraser; I think I remember all about it. Now you know what you have to do when he comes. Ah, who's that?"

He peered down the street through the mist. A slouching figure had just come into view. Fraser turned quickly.

"It's him, sir!" he muttered. "We must—"

"We must show no sign of hurry, Fraser. This job has to be done thoroughly. Now, come on!"

They walked slowly round the corner, shutting the other figure out of sight. Kingston made a rapid mental calculation, and glanced at his companion.

"Now," he muttered.

Fraser, who had been apparently talking unconcernedly, suddenly spun round, and grabbed the watch-chain which hung from Kingston's outside pocket. Before the latter could recover, Fraser was off. All this pantomime was merely to safeguard themselves in the unlikely event of other eyes being centred on the spot.

Exactly as had been anticipated, Fraser dashed round the corner, and collided full tilt with the super. He was only a small man, and went flying. A bag which had been grasped in his hand lay on the ground unheeded.

"Hang you!" snarled Fraser. "I ain't going to be taken!"

He struggled violently with the Italian, who had had no time to collect his wits together. Over they went, rolling from one side of the pavement to the other, Fraser doing all in his power to keep his victim beneath him. The Italian struggled violently, cursing all the time, but he was helpless. Then, before Fraser could do anything further, he felt a hand laid on his shoulder, and he was dragged to his feet.

"Now, then, you thiev' rat!" roared the "sailor." "Gimme that watch! I'll teach you to— Ah!"

Acting on instructions Fraser spun round, and landed a terrific punch on Kingston's ribs. Over went the latter while Fraser bolted again. In all this confusion, the Italian had risen to his feet, half dazed, and recovered his bag.

"Sorry, mate!" gasped Kingston. "It weren't my fault 'e went fer you. Ang 'im! 'E's pinched me blessed tucker!"

Before the Brotherhood's Superintendent could reply, Kingston was off, running clumsily after the fast-disappearing Fraser. But he was smiling inwardly. The trick had succeeded really well. The Italian had no suspicion that his bag had been tampered with, and Sir Donald Penrose's diamonds were snugly ensconced in Frank Kingston's inner pocket.

The Degradation of Detective-Inspector Caine.

Lord Mount Fannell's house in Grosvenor Square was ablaze with light, as usual. But to-night another of those card-parties so frequently held was to take place. Already most of the guests had arrived.

One of them, a tall, erect man, with keen eyes, wore to-night an expression of absolute misery and sullenness, intermixed with anger. It was not Detective-Inspector Caine, but merely Detective Caine, of the C.I.D., New Scotland Yard. He had paid dearly for his foolish actions of the same morning.

The lie he had told his superior had been against him, but when he deliberately ordered another man of his own rank back to London, so that he could conduct an investigation, he had at first wilfully disregarded, it was going beyond a mere reprimand, and no excuse he made altered the case.

Therefore, Caine was degraded to an ordinary detective—he who was—or, rather, had been—the most valuable member of the Brotherhood of Iron; who had big ambitions of rising even higher during the coming year! It was a bitter pill to swallow—terribly bitter. And all on account of that box of gold—that thousand pounds he had only once seen! He knew where it was now, and guessed that the special meeting of the Council was on account of it.

But somebody—somebody unknown, yet a member of the Brotherhood—had sent the money for the express purpose of making him act in the way he had done. For Caine had degraded himself. Kingston, with remarkable foresight, had planned everything so that all the blame could fall on no one else's shoulders but Caine's.

But would the Inner Council believe his story? Would they believe for a minute that he had no knowledge as to where the box of gold came from? It was hardly possible. No, everything pointed to Caine's treachery.

As usual, the card-party, consisting of twenty-five persons—some titled, some in Government offices, others in the Army and Navy, still others important business men—made their way down the well-lighted staircase to the cellar. Having crowded into the strong-room, the door was re-locked, and Lord Mount-Fannell gave the signal to the doorkeeper on the other side.

Gradually the whole back of the strong-room swung away, and the Inner Council proceeded along the well-decorated passage. At the little gate, a few yards further along, sat the little wizened doorkeeper.

All but Lord Mount-Fannell paused there, and murmured the password and number. After that, it was only a few minutes before they were all seated in the Council Chamber. Lord Mount-Fannell, the Chief, took the place at the head of the table, and looked round him.

Most of his companions were smoking, and seemed a little curious. They did not know the reason of this unexpected meeting. It was only just by chance that they were all in London. Two of them had delayed business for the sake of attending, while the arrangements of several others were knocked on the head.

"I am sorry, gentlemen," began the Chief, "at having to call you together so abruptly, without any warning. I am glad we are all here, for there are important matters to discuss to-night, very important matters."

"Why," exclaimed Sir Robert Gissing, the well-known banker, "I understood the affairs of the Brotherhood were in about as good a way as they could be."

"It is not that about which I am going to speak," replied his lordship. "I still think we are doing better business than ever. The last time we met we discussed the disappearance of Don Sebastian—"

"I never thought that man would turn out traitor," declared the naval officer. "Yet there is overwhelming evidence of his falseness to the Brotherhood."

"The evidence is conclusive, gentlemen—conclusive. Don Sebastian was last seen in London about two months past, and, as you know, nothing has been heard of him. Both the Spaniard and the gold—a million pounds—have vanished."

"It is a great pity," said Milverton. "That money would have come in useful. Still, what must be must be, I suppose. Graydon is dead, anyhow, and there is now no reason for visiting the Iron Island."

"None whatever. In future, any surplus gold we have shall be kept down here!" exclaimed the Chief. "But we are getting away from the point. We discussed this last month, so surely there is no necessity to have it all over again?"

"Of course not."

"Then I will speak about the other matters. A month or two back a man named Fraser turned against us, and bolted with the Walkley diamonds. He got as far as Rio, in South America, where he was discovered, and treated as all traitors are treated."

"Murdered?" put in Milverton pleasantly.

"No, not murdered, Mr. Milverton, but punished. Don Sebastian cabled to say that it was all over, and that he

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was following himself with the Walkley diamonds. He never arrived, but three weeks back I received information—this was from a private source—from, in fact, Walkley himself—that the diamonds had been returned to him."

"Returned?" said the others.

"I said so. They have been returned without a word or a line to say who had sent them. Now, you must admit it seems very, very peculiar. Don Sebastian had the diamonds. Why on earth should he send them back?"

"Perhaps," suggested a councillor—"perhaps he is in London to-day, in a different personality, and sent the diamonds back merely because he thought he might be traced if he got rid of them any other way. He had the bullion, anyhow, and that was enough to satisfy his needs, I should say!"

"Your suggestion is very reasonable," replied Lord Mount-Fannell. "And it seems to be the only solution of the mystery. We may count on Don Sebastian as a very clever man. He has eluded all trace, and a man who can escape the thousand eyes of the Brotherhood is smart—extremely smart!"

"And the other matters?"

"Well, the next point is this. Yesterday, three of our men performed the little business at Penrose's—another diamond affair. They did remarkably well, and got clear away with £6,000 worth. Well, the superintendent for the southern district collected them to-night, not more than an hour ago. He brought them to the outer office at the back, and I happened to be there myself. I will just show them to you."

Lord Mount-Fannell dived his hand into his pocket, and laid on the table a pile of glittering diamonds. The others made one or two remarks, and looked at them closely.

"Look nice, don't they, gentlemen?" asked his lordship. "But you will be rather surprised to hear that they are rather good paste affairs."

"Paste!"

"Precisely! It seems as if Sir Donald has spoofed us," replied the Chief. "They could not possibly have been substituted by one of our members."

Lord Mount-Fannell would have been surprised had he known how the exchange really had occurred. But he had heard nothing about the thieving loafer and the enraged sailor. Still more would he have been amazed had he been aware that the real diamonds were even at that moment in Frank Kingston's pocket in the Hotel Cyril.

"The other matter," resumed his lordship, "is still more important. Mr. Milverton, kindly produce the box of gold!"

The Chief's voice had suddenly become terribly stern. He glanced swiftly at Caine, and saw he had turned pale and agitated. This emotion was unfortunate, for his lordship evidently took it as a sign of guilt.

Milverton placed the box on the table, while the other councillors looked on interestedly.

"Detective Caine, kindly stand up!" said Lord Mount-Fannell quietly.

All eyes were turned on Caine, who looked wildly about him for a moment, then scrambled to his feet.

"I—I—let me explain!" he said hoarsely. "I know nothing—"

"Silence, please!" interrupted the Chief. "You have absolutely nothing to say, Caine—absolutely nothing! Gentlemen, it is my painful duty to inform you that one of our most trusted members—one of our most valuable members—has been guilty of treachery!"

"It's a lie!" shouted Caine frenziedly. He was half mad. He was absolutely innocent! He was as true to the Brotherhood as anybody! Yet he had been degraded at Scotland Yard, and now the Chief was accusing him of treachery!

The subtlety of Kingston's plot could be seen now—not by Caine, however. No, he had not the slightest idea as to who his enemy was.

"Again I must ask you to be silent," said Lord Mount-Fannell. "You see, gentlemen, Mr. Milverton paid Caine a visit at exactly the very moment, and saw—actually saw—him enter a public-house, when he ought to have been on the way to Guildford. He went into that public-house to see somebody. A search of his rooms resulted in Mr. Milverton finding this box, containing a thousand pounds—a bribe."

"The traitor!"

"Good heavens!" cried Caine. "Will you listen—"

"In a moment. Gentlemen, the reward of traitors is death; but Caine is not a traitor. I don't think he would sell the Brotherhood. He has merely been accepting bribes to keep away from the scenes of robberies. More than once lately he has been absent when he was most urgently needed."

"It was coincidence!" cried Caine wildly. "I swear I am innocent. I know no more of the box than you yourselves. I am the victim of a plot. Let me explain!"

He did explain, and the councillors shook their heads grimly. The story was absolutely too absurd to listen to; it sounded a palpable lie, as Kingston had intended it should. Caine finished, breathless and glaring; but the set faces around him told him only too plainly that he was looked upon as a liar—a traitor—a sneak. His degradation was almost complete.

"But the gold came from a member of the Brotherhood!" he cried excitedly. "There was the private mark upon it!"

"Is there such a mark upon the letter you found, Mr. Milverton?" inquired his lordship.

"Of course not, Chief," replied the barrister. "We all know Caine is not telling the truth. I am surprised at him for making such a statement."

"But I cut the sign off!" declared Caine. "It is the rule of the Brotherhood to do so, and I only conformed to it!"

"It is no good, Caine!"

"You don't believe me!" Caine cried. "You think I am lying."

"We know you are lying," said the Chief sternly. "We simply cannot look the facts in the face without being convinced of your guilt. You have not a leg to stand on. You have nothing to tell, but a most absurd invention. Enough of it. You have been lying even at Scotland Yard. You are degraded to a common detective—"

"All through that cursed thousand pounds!" cried Caine, nearly sobbing with mortification and anger.

"Your crime is a serious one, Caine—a very serious one, and there is but one sentence I can pass on you."

"And what is that?" Caine demanded hoarsely.

"Since you are degraded at Scotland Yard, it would be most fitting that you should be degraded here. We simply couldn't have an ordinary detective in the Council."

"You mean—" shouted Caine wildly.

"I mean that you are from henceforward degraded to the rank of common member," said Lord Mount-Fannell coldly. "You are not fit for our company! Go, and thank Heaven you have not met with a harder fate!"

"A common member! You don't mean it! You—"

"I have passed sentence!" exclaimed the chief. "Your days of triumph are ended. Go!"

And Caine sat down, too utterly dazed to realise that he was ruined—both here and at Scotland Yard. Frank Kingston had set out to degrade him but two days previously.

What chance was there for the others?

NEXT WEEK!

Another phase in the history of Frank Kingston's combat with the Brotherhood of Iron will be set forth in our next issue. Again a member of the Inner Council is marked down for degradation; and how Frank Kingston, with the help of Dolores, accomplishes his purpose, will prove thrilling and wonderful reading.

Concluding Chapters of this Great Sea Story.

In the Service of the King.

By LIEUTENANT LEFEVRE.

Oswald Liberates the Slaves.

"Are there any orders, sir?" said Maxwell. "Do you wish us to stay on board?"

Captain Garvin shook his head.

"No; I think you had better go back to the frigate." He turned to Oswald with a smile. "I shall not forget the services you have rendered me to-day, Smith," he said quietly, holding out his hand.

Oswald took his captain's hand in silence.

"I am thinking of the poor wretches down below," he said, after a pause.

"And so am I, and I scarcely know what to do for the best. To liberate them will mean that we shall have to fight for our lives, and we shall probably have to kill many of them before we can get clear of the brig. On the other hand, I cannot condemn them to awful starvation in that place."

Oswald and Maxwell shuddered.

"It would be better to scuttle the ship, sir, and send them to the bottom," said Maxwell.

"I fear I see no other course," said Captain Garvin.

Oswald's face went white.

"To scuttle the ship? To drown them like rats?" he cried, in horror. "For Heaven's sake, sir, give them some chance for life! Liberate them; leave them to work the vessel themselves. Let them at least die out here in the fresh air and the sunshine."

"Heaven knows I would give them the chance if I could only see my way to do so!" said Captain Garvin, with feeling. "But I tell you, Smith, the moment those hatches are knocked off those poor wretches will spring on to deck and attack everything in their way. They have no reason; they are lower now than the beasts of the forest. They cannot distinguish between friend and foe. I remember once, when I was a midshipman on the *Hector*"—the captain paused, and shuddered—"we had taken a slaver—such another craft as this, but without the resistance that we have met here to-day. After the engagement the second lieutenant and a handful of men went on board the slaver and knocked off the hatches to liberate the slaves. Our frigate lay alongside, and from her deck I saw the awful scene that took place. I saw the slaves come leaping out of the hold, the men—huge, gaunt creatures, hollow-cheeked—reeking of the plague, and with madness in their eyes. They sprang at the throats of the unprepared who had rescued them. They attacked them with teeth and nails. No resistance availed. They seemed to be beyond feeling the wounds which our poor fellows were forced to inflict with their cutlasses in order to protect themselves, and from the deck of the frigate it was impossible to fire upon the blacks, for our own men were so mingled in that awful crowd that we should have shot them down, too. In a few moments it was over; not one of our men remained alive. Then our captain gave the order, and we poured a deadly hail of bullets on to the deck. We shot the slaves down, for we knew that their existence would be a menace to all who sailed the seas."

The two boys stood silently listening to the captain.

"But in time their reason would have returned to them, sir," said Oswald.

"I thought so, too; but I think we fired on them that day mainly to avenge the deaths of our comrades. And as it was with them, so would it be with us now. If we knocked off the hatches they would attack us at once. Yet,

if I could see one chance for them, I would give it them willingly. Heaven knows, I have no love for taking human life!"

"There is a chance for them, sir," said Oswald quietly, "if you will give it to them."

"And what is that?" asked the captain, looking at him keenly.

"I will stay behind and knock off the hatches, and take the risk," said Oswald.

During the pause that followed the howls from below deck rose to their ears—howls that seemed to come from the throats of maddened beasts rather than of men.

"No," said the captain quietly, "I cannot consent to your risking your life—not risking it, I should say throwing it away. I could not keep the frigate alongside, for I must consider the safety of every individual member of my crew. Thus your retreat would be cut off, and you would be entirely at the mercy of these wretches."

"I have a plan, sir, that would give me a chance for escape," said Oswald.

He explained his plan, while Captain Garvin and Maxwell listened attentively. It was simple, and, as Oswald had said, it gave him a chance for escape.

"So be it, then," the captain said, at last. "But, remember, Smith, I do not order you to do this—far rather I would prefer you not to—but since you are willing to take the risk, and it is no slight one, it shall be as you wish."

Captain Garvin now gave the order for all on board the brig to return at once to the frigate, and he himself, accompanied by Maxwell and Oswald, returned to his own ship.

"Make your own preparations," he said to Oswald. "I shall put the frigate about half a cable-length away. That will be far enough to prevent any chance of them springing on board us, and, at the same time, it will give you the opportunity to do your work. Only, remember you must not lose a moment of time. I cannot control the wind and weather, and if the wind rises it will force the frigate away from the brig."

"I shall lose no time, sir," said Oswald.

Old Fid now appeared with a large coil of thin but very strong rope, one end of which Oswald secured about his waist; then, gripping a heavy axe in his right hand, he dropped back on to the deck of the brig.

The grappelling-irons which had held the two vessels together were now cast off, and as the frigate slowly moved away from the side of the brig the men slowly paid out the rope, to the end of which Oswald was secured.

Oswald, meanwhile, had approached the hatch, and stood waiting, with his eyes fixed on Captain Garvin.

"Now!" shouted the captain.

And before the echo of the word had died away, Oswald struck the first blow at the strong woodwork.

It was hard work, for the hatch had been battened down securely; and as the white chips flew, the perspiration started out from his forehead and into his eyes.

Now and again, for a moment, he turned, anxious, to look at the frigate, which was slowly but surely drawing away from the brig's side. In

few minutes either of those who held the end of the rope on the frigate must leave go, or he would be dragged from the deck of the brig.

But the work was nearly done. He put all his strength into one heavy blow that shattered the woodwork. Then, as the battered hatch was thrust aside, he fell back, sickened and overpowered by the horrible stench that rose in the air.

At the same instant a dozen pairs of skinny, black arms thrust the debris aside. Recovering himself with an effort, Oswald turned to fly; but as he did so, a huge, gaunt negro leaped out of the hold on to the deck, followed the next instant by another.

For a moment the creature stood blinking in the sunlight; then, seeing Oswald's flying figure, he sprang after him uttering a howl like that of a wild beast.

How Do You Do?

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HOW DO YOU LIKE . . .

"THE IRON ISLAND?"

The Editor.

Quick as Oswald was, the negro was quicker, and ere Oswald could reach the bulwarks the crazy wretch was on him.

And now from the hold poured out a crowd of frantic creatures, who were screaming and uttering wolfish howls.

A moment more, and they would assist their comrade, and between them tear the boy who had rescued them to pieces. Oswald saw his danger.

The grip of the creature, who was more beast than man, was on his throat. Thin and attenuated though the wretch's limbs were, they were yet possessed of immense strength.

In vain Oswald struggled to be free. He was choking. For an instant everything seemed to swim in a mist of blood before his eyes, and his ears rang with the unearthly cries of the liberated slaves.

For one instant the desire for life put fresh strength into him. With a desperate effort he flung his adversary off; then, putting all his strength into the blow, he brought the heavy axe down on the negro's head. He heard the fearful thud of the blow; and then, with a cry of horror and terror, he leaped on to the bulwarks and sprang into the sea, escaping by a hairsbreadth the hands outstretched to clutch him.

From the deck of the frigate his every movement had been followed with breathless attention, and the moment he sprang from the brig's side the men began to haul in the rope hand-over-hand.

Well for Oswald that he had to depend on the rope now, for as he struck the water his senses left him. But the quick passage through the cool water revived him, and he recovered consciousness before he reached the deck of the Cynthia.

As he staggered on to deck, with the salt water dripping from him, a rousing cheer went up from the crew, which was repeated again as Captain Garvin came up, and laid his hand on Oswald's drenched shoulder.

"You did well, my lad!" said the captain kindly. "But it was a narrow shave, though, as I feared it would be. I was right, you see, after all. Poor wretches! They cannot distinguish between friend and foe!"

And now once more the eyes of the crew of the Cynthia were turned towards the deck of the brig, on which a strange scene was being enacted. Already there were more than a hundred forms upon the deck. For the most part, they were rushing frantically and aimlessly backwards and forwards, while from the open hatchway poor creatures who had scarcely the strength to crawl emerged to take one last look upon the blessed sunlight before closing their eyes for ever.

Every moment the distance between the brig and the frigate was widening, but they could still hear the frenzied shouts of the poor, witless creatures, who could not seem to understand the fact that they were free.

The Esmeralda of Havre—The Two Schooners.

The brig and her strange crew had dropped out of sight, and the crew of the Cynthia had gone back to their duties.

Down in the cockpit the ship's surgeon and his assistants had been busy for hours past tending those who had suffered during the engagement. Friend and foe alike had received the same careful attention, for to a Briton a wounded foe is as sacred as a wounded friend.

On the quarter-deck Captain Garvin, with Mr. Lancing and Oswald, stood.

"You have behaved with conspicuous bravery to-day, Smith," the captain said kindly. "I shall not forget it. And I shall not be surprised if you make your next voyage with an epaulette on your shoulder."

Mr. Lancing smiled quietly, as one who has realised what he has always anticipated.

"Meanwhile, Smith, I shall promote you to do the duty from which I have relieved Mr. Briggs. During the remainder of the cruise you shall act as second-lieutenant of this frigate."

"I shall do my best, sir," said Oswald, simply. "And better than that no man can do," said the captain heartily.

There was not a trace of envy in the congratulations of Maxwell and Garvin when Oswald told them.

Only Garvin said, laughing:

"You all stand a better chance on board the Cynthia than I do, because the skipper is my uncle. I shall ask to be exchanged into another ship next voyage, I think. It doesn't give a fellow a chance when he sails under a relation. The relation always keeps him down."

"I don't think even a relation will be able to keep you down for long," Oswald said warmly.

Between himself and young Garvin a very warm regard had sprung up since the night of their quarrel.

Captain Garvin had decided to steer his course in a north-easterly direction, imagining, not without reason, that the pirates would probably make towards the coast of Hayti, or, farthest east, to Porto Rico.

It was an hour after sunrise that the look-out man signalled a sail in sight.

The sail proved to be a large three-masted merchant vessel, with all sail set.

From the quarter-deck of the Cynthia the skipper and Mr. Lancing stood watching the strange craft.

"Something wrong there," muttered Mr. Lancing.

The strange sail yawed, and fell away, and was then brought up again.

"She's got a lubberly crew, and a lubberly captain, too, I should say," said the captain.

"I don't see either," said Mr. Lancing, who had been examining the vessel through his glass. "I can't see a soul on deck."

"What do you make her out to be?" asked Captain Garvin.

"A Frenchman, I should say, sir."

Just then the merchantman yawed again.

"There is certainly something wrong with her," said the captain, with conviction.

In half an hour's time they were within hailing distance of the merchantman, and Captain Garvin hailed her from the deck of the Cynthia.

There was no response to his hail, nor was there a sign of any living being to be seen on the vessel's deck.

"Fire a gun across her bows!" ordered the captain.

It was done, without effect.

"This is a matter that wants looking into. Will you take the longboat, Mr. Lancing, and go on board?"

The longboat was lowered, and Mr. Lancing, accompanied by Oswald and a crew of twelve, embarked in her and pulled over to the side of the merchantman. They could see now that the vessel had been left to take care of herself. There was no guiding hand upon the wheel; there was not a soul to be seen, nor a sound to be heard except the lapping of the waves against her side, as she rolled heavily and helplessly from side to side.

Leaving a couple of men in the boat, Mr. Lancing and the others clambered up on to the deck, and there a sight burst upon them that held them all rooted to the spot in horror for a moment.

The deck was literally covered with dead bodies of the crew of the ill-fated vessel. Many were hacked and brutally mangled; many had their skulls crushed in; some had died by lead; but of them all the breath of life did not linger in one body.

"The pirates!" muttered Oswald.

There was little doubt as to who were responsible for the deed, for down below the vessel had been ransacked from stem to stern. Cases had been broken open in her hold, and their contents lay scattered about. In the captain's cabin the dead body of a man was discovered seated in his chair, with his face resting on the table, with a knife-handle protruding from between his shoulder-blades.

When the first horror of it had worn off, Mr. Lancing made a thorough and exhaustive search of the vessel, which proved to be the Esmeralda, of Havre.

Presently Mr. Lancing stepped to the side.

"Go back on board the frigate, and desire the doctor to accompany you back here," he said. "Tell the captain that we have found the whole of the ship's company murdered."

Oswald glanced at Mr. Lancing in some surprise.

"I am afraid the doctor can do but little good here, sir," he said.

"No, the poor fellows are well past all aid. That is not the reason why I wish his presence," said Mr. Lancing.

In half an hour the boat was back again under the Esmeralda's counter, and the surgeon came on board.

"Pretty work—pretty work!" he muttered. He went from one corpse to another. "You might have spared me this sight, Lancing. I can do no good here," he said, coming back to the lieutenant.

"I knew you could be of no assistance. I only sent to ask you to come so that you would be able to give me your opinion."

"My opinion?" cried the doctor. "Well, my opinion is that they have been murdered."

"I know," said Mr. Lancing quietly. "But what I want to know is, how long have they been dead?"

"I think they cannot have been dead for very long. The bodies appear to be very fresh. There is nothing objectionable in the atmosphere."

"Quite right," said the doctor. "These poor fellows looked their last upon this world about sunset last night, I should say."

(This splendid serial story will be concluded shortly.)

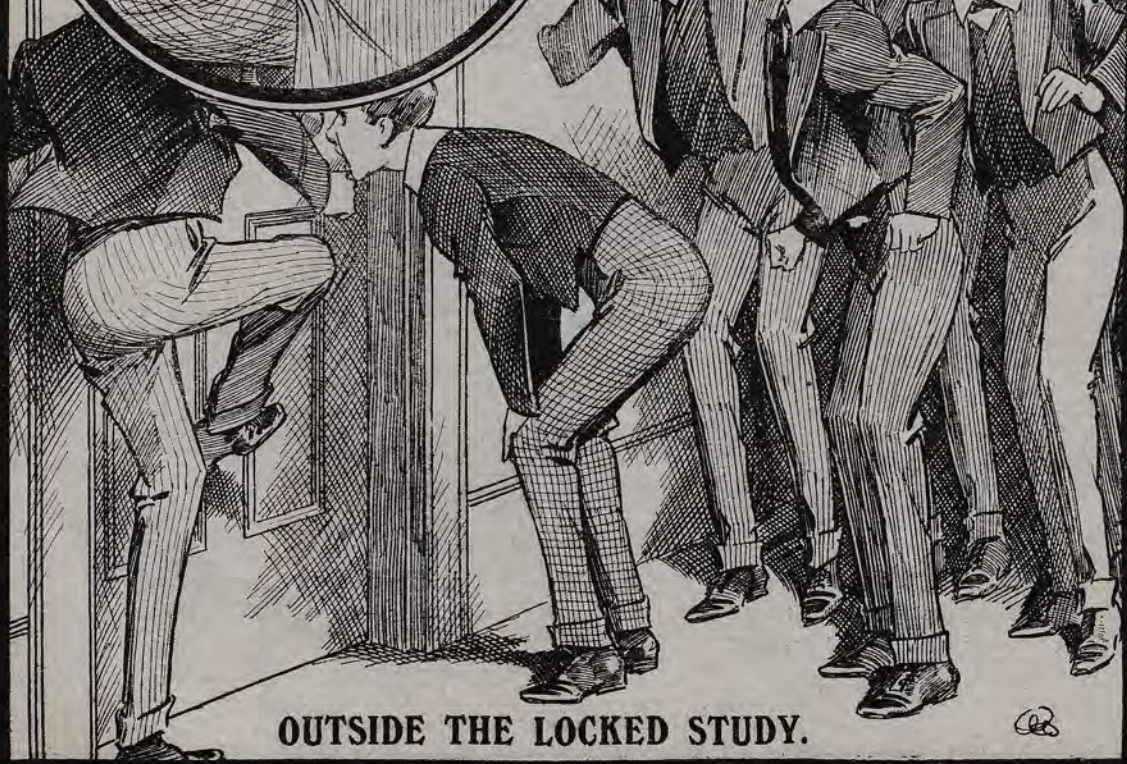
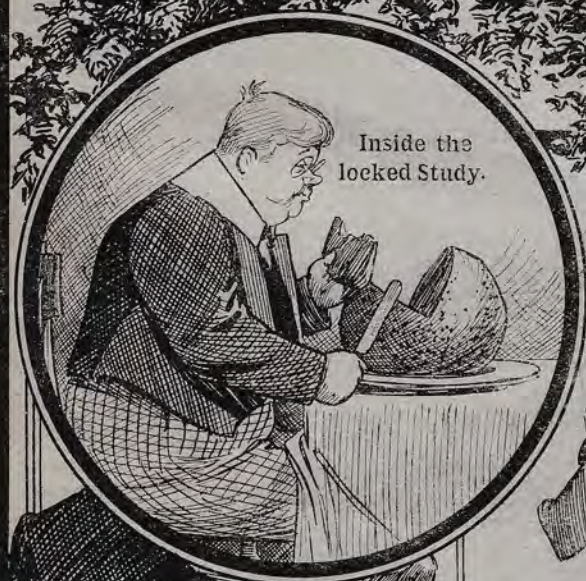
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