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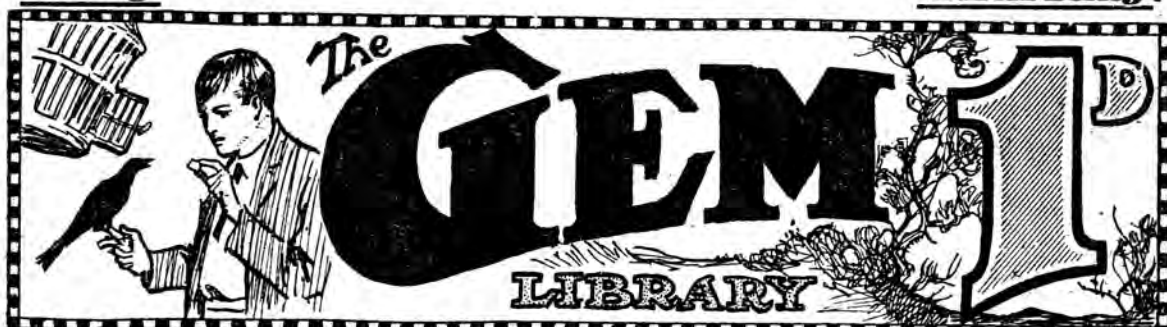
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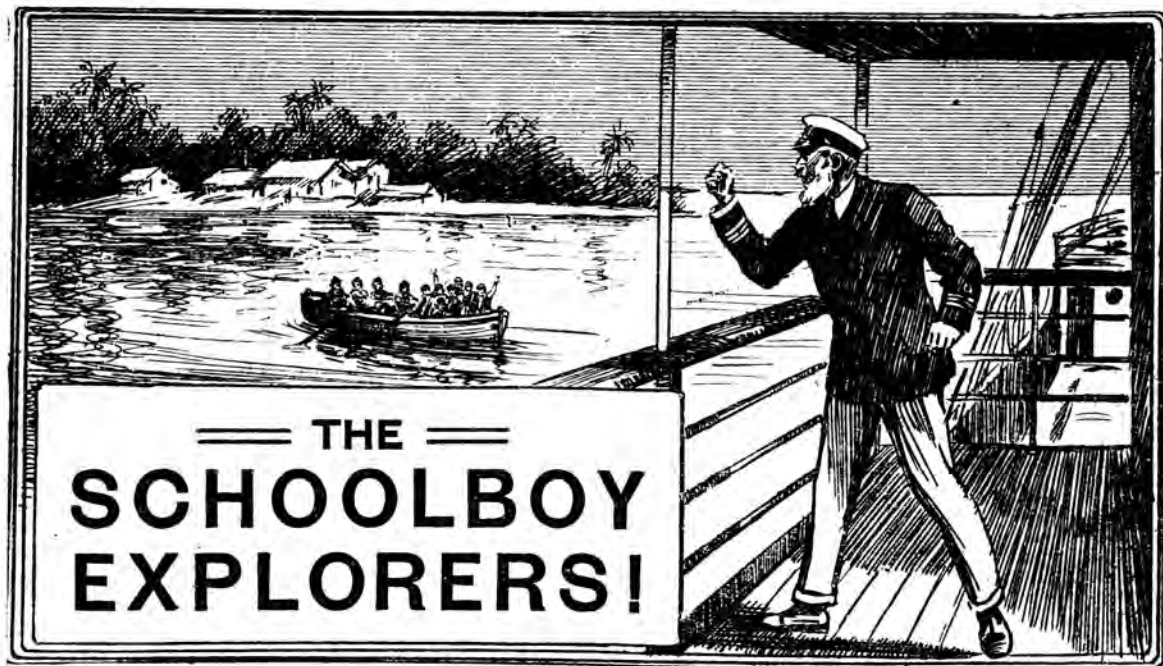
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THE SCHOOLBOY EXPLORERS!

A Splendid, New, Long, Complete tale of TOM MERRY & Co. of St. Jim's.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.

Missing.

"WHAT'S become of Tom Merry?"

"Blessed if I know!"

"Where can he be?"

"And the others, too—Figgins, and Blake, and Gussy?"

"What on earth can have happened?"

Fellows at St. Jim's were asking one another the questions with anxious faces. Nine juniors were missing from the school—nine fellows belonging to the Shell and Fourth Form. Where were they?

They had first been missed at evening call-over. It was known that Tom Merry & Co. had had permission to take the day off from lessons—although the reason was not generally known. They had gone out for the day, upon a picnic as it was supposed. But they had not returned at dark, and they were marked down absent at calling-over.

It was bedtime now, and wild conjectures were rife.

Where was Tom Merry?

Mr. Railton, the Housemaster of the School House, was seen to look very anxious. Most of the missing juniors belonged to his house. If they did not return by bedtime, he would have to go to the Head about it. And then, if Tom

Merry & Co. could not give a very good explanation of their staying out, there would be trouble in store for them when they once more turned up at St. Jim's.

Kildare of the Sixth, the captain of St. Jim's, saw the Shell off to bed. The captain of the school had a cloud upon his brow. He was anxious, too, about the missing juniors. Kangaroo, of the Shell, ventured upon a question.

"Heard anything of Tom Merry and the rest, Kildare?"

The captain shook his head.

"No."

"Do you know where they went?"

"No."

"Does anybody?" asked Clifton Dang.

"Not that I know of."

"Something must have happened."

"I suppose so."

And Kildare turned the light out in the Shell dormitory, and retired, looking very worried. Tom Merry & Co. afforded considerable trouble to prefects and masters, but the thought that some misfortune had happened to them distressed all.

Kildare looked in at the Fourth-Form dormitory. The Fourth-Formers, instead of going to sleep, were talking

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excitedly. Blake and Digby and D'Arcy, among the missing juniors, belonged to that dormitory.

"Not so much noise, kids," said the captain of St. Jim's. "I guess we're worried about the chaps who haven't come back," said Lumley-Lumley. "Have you heard any news?"

"None."

"Faith, and we ought to be allowed to stay up and see if they come in," suggested Reilly.

"Stuff! Go to sleep!"

And Kildare closed the door.

He went slowly downstairs. He was as much puzzled as anybody by the amazing disappearance of Tom Merry & Co. He tapped at the door of Mr. Railton's study, and entered. The Housemaster of the School House looked at him gravely.

"No news, sir?"

"None at all."

"It's amazing," said Kildare. "I can't think what has become of them. An accident could not happen which would prevent all of them from communicating with the school. And they can't possibly have run away. That's inconceivable."

Mr. Railton shook his head.

"Quite!" he replied. "I hear from Mr. Ratcliff, of the New House, that three of his boys have not returned—Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn. It appears that they went out this morning with the others, having permission from the Head to make a holiday of the day. It is extraordinary that none of them have returned—extraordinary. I have here a list of the missing boys, to take to the Head."

Kildare glanced at the list. It contained nine names, the first six belonging to the School House, the rest to the New House at St. Jim's.

"Merry, Lowther, Manners, of the Shell; Blake, Digby, D'Arcy, Figgins, Kerr, Wynn, of the Fourth."

"Those boys are generally together when they are not logging one another, sir," the captain of St. Jim's remarked. "They have got into some serious mischief this time, I suppose."

The Housemaster nodded.

"It appears so."

Mr. Railton left the study, and made his way to the Head's house. Dr. Holmes was in the drawing-room with Mrs. Holmes when the Housemaster found him. The concerned expression upon Mr. Railton's face caught the doctor's eye at once.

"What is the matter, Mr. Railton?" he asked.

Mrs. Holmes quietly quitted the room. Mr. Railton showed the list of names to the Head.

"These juniors are missing, sir. They did not answer to their names at calling-over, and they have not returned since."

The Head glanced at the paper, and his face became pale.

"They have not returned?"

"No, sir."

"Has nothing been heard from them?"

"Nothing, sir."

"I did not expect them to return early," said the Head slowly. "I am not surprised at their having missed calling over, Mr. Railton; but they should certainly have returned by now, unless—unless something terrible has happened."

"You gave them a day's holiday, sir. Probably you know where they went."

"Yes, I know; but—" The Head hesitated. "As they have not returned, Mr. Railton, I will acquaint you with the matter. You remember that Sir Richard Standish, one of the governors of the school, visited me yesterday, and left after lunch to-day. He was attacked by some footpads near St. Jim's, who wished to deprive him of a packet containing valuable papers. This packet he wished to send to a certain vessel at Southampton, and he thought of the idea of sending it by Tom Merry, believing that the ruffians who wished to rob him would never suspect a schoolboy."

Mr. Railton nodded gravely.

"I agreed to Sir Richard's proposition, and gave Tom Merry and his friends the day's holiday," said the Head. "I cannot understand why they have not returned, however. It was distinctly understood that they were to return for calling-over, and they had ample time. I—I cannot help fearing now that those Spanish ruffians who attacked Sir Richard may somehow have got on the track, and—and—"

"Good heavens, sir! That they may have attacked the boys—"

"I—I fear so."

Mr. Railton was pale now.

"It was a terrible danger for the boys to run, sir," he said.

"It was Sir Richard's plan, and—and it certainly seemed reasonable that the Spaniards would never suspect junior schoolboys of carrying a valuable packet, which he dared not trust to the post," said Dr. Holmes. "I wish now that I

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had never consented. If harm has happened to the boys, I shall never forgive myself."

"Surely we must make inquiries at once, sir. I will drive over to Wayland, and wire to Southampton, if you will give me the name of the captain and of the steamer that the boys were sent to. That will be the quickest way of learning whether the boys ever arrived at their destination or not."

"Thank you very much!"

Mr. Railton hurried away.

The Head paced the room in great agitation. He had yielded to the persuasions of the baronet. He had allowed Tom Merry & Co. to be sent upon that dangerous mission. Sir Richard had persuaded him that there was not a shadow of danger. But now—

As ten o'clock rolled out from the old school-tower, the Head shuddered. What might have happened? Why had not the boys returned? Where were Tom Merry and Co.?

While the Head paced the room with wrinkled brow, Mr. Railton was mounted upon his bicycle, and was riding at breakneck speed along the dark lanes to Wayland.

CHAPTER 2

A Surprise for St. Jim's.

MIDNIGHT!

St. Jim's was buried in silence and slumber.

Many of the fellows, seniors as well as juniors, had remained awake to listen for the return of Tom Merry & Co.

But Tom Merry & Co. did not return.

One by one the listeners and watchers dropped off to sleep. Dr. Holmes had retired to his study, and the light burning in the window, and gleaming out over the dark quadrangle, showed that he was sleepless.

But some of the juniors were still awake. In the Fourth-form dormitory in the School House, Herries and Lumley-Lumley, both of them great friends of Blake & Co., did not think of sleep. They spoke to one another, as they sat up in bed, in the darkness, in the long watches of the night.

Midnight tolled out from the clock tower.

"Twelve!" said Herries, as the last stroke died away.

"I guess something's happened," said Jerrold Lumley-Lumley.

"And I might have been with them!" said Herries, for about the twentieth time. "Tom Merry asked me to join the party, but I couldn't go, because Towser was ill. I'd fed him on some of Dig's sausages, you know, and they were German ones. I couldn't leave Towser. Poor old Dig! I wonder where he is now."

"Hark!"

Lumley-Lumley started.

His keen ears had caught a sound of a distant ring.

"My hat! That's the porter's bell!" he exclaimed.

"I didn't hear it!"

"I did. There it is again. They'll have to ring pretty hard to wake up Taggles," said Lumley-Lumley. "It's Mr. Railton come back, or else—"

"Blake and Tom Merry and the rest."

"I guess so."

"I'm going to see," said Herries, slipping out of bed, and bundling into his trousers.

"I guess I am, too."

The two juniors, half-dressed, and shivering in the cold, stole out of the dormitory, and reached the head of the big staircase. They looked down. All was dark and silent below, but as they looked, the electric light in the hall was switched on, and the Head came to the door. He, too, had evidently heard the ringing at the gates of St. Jim's. He opened the great door, and looked out into the darkness of the old quad. The light behind him streamed out, and threw a gigantic shadow before him into the quadrangle.

The bell did not ring again, so it was evident that the gate had been opened. Taggles, the porter, had turned out to open it. Footsteps sounded in the quad, and the gravel crunched under swift feet.

A form came into view, blinking into the radius of light from the School House door. The two juniors, peering over the banisters, saw a lad come up the steps, and hand an envelope to Dr. Holmes. Then he disappeared again.

Herries grunted with disappointment.

"It's not the kids come back!" he muttered.

"But it's a message for the Head," murmured Lumley-Lumley. "I guess it's something to do with Tom Merry & Co. being out."

"Let's ask the Head," said a third voice.

The juniors started. They had not known that anybody was behind them on the stairs.

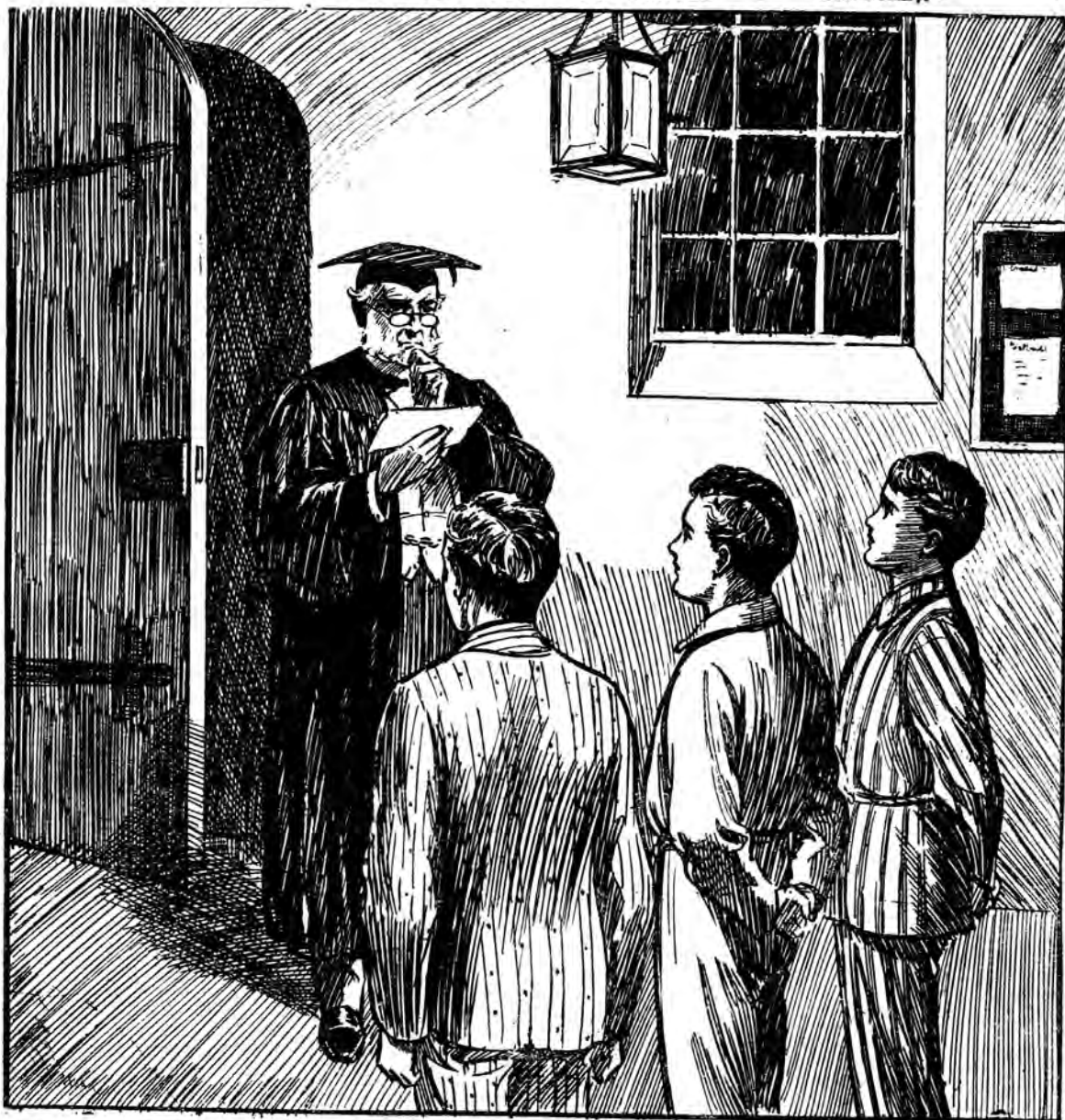
It was Kangaroo of the Shell.

"Too much cheek!" murmured Herries.

"Rats! We're as anxious as he is."

"We're supposed to be in bed—"

"I guess I'm going to ask," said Lumley-Lumley.



"Boys, cried the Head sternly, "what are you doing out of bed?" "We—we heard the bell, sir," said Lumley-Lumley. "We're anxious about the chaps who are missing, sir. Would you mind telling us if you've got any news of them, sir?" (See Chapter ii.)

The Head had read the message. He stood with the paper in his hand, in deep and painful thought. He started as the three half-dressed juniors came down the stairs. His glance was bent sternly upon them.

"Boys, what are you doing out of bed?"

"We—we heard the bell, sir," said Lumley-Lumley. "We're anxious about the chaps who are missing, sir. Would you mind telling us if you've got any news of them, sir?"

The doctor's face softened.

"Certainly, my lads!" he said. "You may read the message."

He handed the paper to Lumley-Lumley, and the three juniors read it together. It was written in pencil, in Mr. Railton's well-known hand, and its contents surprised the juniors, who had known nothing of Tom Merry's expedition to Southampton.

"Have learnt by telegraph that the Opossum sailed from Southampton yesterday afternoon. Nothing apparently known of juniors. Have caught night express to Southampton, and will wire again from there."

"H. RAILTON."

"Tom Merry and his friends had gone to Southampton," the Head explained. "What can have delayed their return

is inconceivable to me. I have no doubt that Mr. Railton will be able to explain when he returns. He has gone to the seaport to make inquiries, as you see."

"Thank you, sir!"

The juniors, much puzzled and mystified, retired to bed.

"They may have got lost in Southampton," Herries remarked thoughtfully, as he turned in. "If so, I could find them easily enough."

"How?" asked Lumley-Lumley.

"With Towser. My dog Towser could follow anybody's tracks," said Herries confidently. "I should only have to show him a boot or something belonging to Tom Merry, and he'd track him down like a bloodhound."

Lumley-Lumley granted, but made no other reply.

The two juniors remained awake, while the long, heavy hours passed. The dawn was creeping in at the dormitory windows when they fell asleep, and then they slept soundly. But from the window of Dr. Holmes's study the light still gleamed out into the quadrangle. The Head of St. Jim's did not sleep.

The morning had fully dawned when a telegram arrived at last. The Head opened it eagerly. It fluttered from his hand to the floor, when he had read it, and Dr. Holmes staggered in his amazement.

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and

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For this is how it ran:

"Have discovered that Tom Merry and others sailed in the Opossum for Africa yesterday. RAILTON."

"Good heavens!" cried the Head.

He threw himself into his chair. The news was more astounding than any story of an accident could have been. It brought relief, for it showed that the missing juniors were safe. But—

Mr. Railton returned at last. The boys of St. Jim's were at morning lessons—thinking, however, far more of the missing juniors than of their lessons—when the School House-master came in, tired, dusty, haggard from want of sleep. Mr. Railton went straight to the Head's study. Dr. Holmes was there, sitting in his armchair, dozing at intervals before the fire, worn out by his long vigil. He started up as the Housemaster came in.

"Mr. Railton! That news—it cannot be correct!"

"It is correct, sir," said Mr. Railton quietly. "I have made every inquiry. I have talked with the boatman who rowed the boys out to the steamer, and he recognised them at once by my description—nine juniors in Etons, one of them wearing an eyeglass. There is no possibility of a mistake. I have learned, too, that the steamer was prepared for sea immediately after they reached it, the captain coming ashore for a short time, and ordering a quantity of clothing suitable for a tropical climate, and in boys' sizes."

The Head sank limply into his chair.

"Then it is true."

"Quite true, sir."

"But—but what can it mean? It is a comfort to know that the boys are safe. But—but what can have possessed them to play this mad prank? And the captain of the Opossum—he is a trusted agent of Sir Richard Standish—what can have induced him to take the boys away?"

Mr. Railton shook his head.

"I cannot even surmise, sir. Perhaps it would be better to send Sir Richard a wire; he may be able to explain. It is all past my comprehension."

St. Jim's was soon in possession of the truth. It was impossible to allow the fellows to remain in anxiety; all sorts of dark conjectures had been formed, and it was a relief to the whole school to know that Tom Merry & Co., at all events, were alive and well. But St. Jim's was not likely to see them again for some time; they were bound for the West Coast of Africa. It was amazing, but it was true. While the other fellows at St. Jim's were grinding away at Latin in the Form-rooms that morning, Tom Merry & Co. were on the high seas, sailing as fast as a swift steamer could take them for tropical lands and sunny southern waters.

CHAPTER 3.

Bound for Africa.

TOM MERRY sat up in the deep cane deck-chair, under the awning, and yawned. It was not a yawn of boredom—it was a yawn of lazy contentment.

Tom Merry was having a good time. So were the others. They were all on deck now, under the awnings in the blazing tropical sun, and all of them looked very brown and very well.

Their departure from England in the Opossum steamer had been a surprise to Tom Merry & Co. But there was the letter of Sir Richard Standish, one of the governors of St. Jim's, authorising Captain Crane to take them when he sailed. The skipper had obeyed it without hesitation. And Tom Merry & Co. were en route for Darkest Africa. And they enjoyed it.

Tom Merry and his chums had seen foreign lands before—but Africa! Africa, the mysterious, the far-away, exercised a spell upon their imaginations. They could hardly believe in their good luck at first when they found themselves treading the deck of the swift steamer, under suns that daily grew more blazing, speeding southward, ever southward. But they got used to the idea at last, and they looked forward eagerly to their arrival upon the West Coast. A run ashore, amid tropical forests and jungles and mangrove swamps—it simply dazzled them. As for fever, malaria, poisonous serpents, cannibals, and other amenities of African existence, they did not give them a thought. Fatty Wynn of the Fourth, indeed, declared that a chap need never be afraid of catching anything so long as he kept himself well in health by frequent and solid meals.

Fatty Wynn was dozing now in a hammock. Most of the juniors were in deck chairs. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was polishing his eyeglass. Figgins was looking out for a sight of land. The steamer was churning on across the Gulf of Guinea. Ahead of the vessel lay the German Cameroons and the French Congo—on the port side, and northward, the Gold Coast and the Slave Coast.

"Warm, isn't it?" remarked Tom Merry.

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"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of St. Jim's. "I wegard it as extremely warm. Undah the cirs."

"Better to be under the awning than under the cirs," yawned Monty Lowther, the humorist of the Shell Form at St. Jim's.

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"The blessed wind is as hot as the blessed sun," said Jack Blake. "It burns your blessed face instead of cooling it. The wind here is a swindle."

"Yaas, wathah! Undah the cirs."

"We shall be in to-day," Manners remarked. "I've got my camera ready. Wasn't it jolly lucky I brought my camera with me when we left St. Jim's, you fellows? We hadn't the faintest idea that we were booked for a voyage to Africa, and I might have come without my camera."

"You are intewwuptin' me, Mannahs—"

"Go hon! I expect I shall get some splendid photographs of swamps and tropical forests," Manners said, with great satisfaction. "I may be able to snap a lion—"

"He may be able to snap you," suggested Monty Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yaas, wathah! I shall wefuse to allow Mannahs to go out photogwaphin' lions," said D'Arcy. "The wisk is too gweat. I wegard all you fellows as bein' undah my care, while we are away from the coll."

"Fathead!"

"Weally, Mannahs—"

"I shall photograph a cannibal, too, if I can, and a fetch man—ju-ju priest, you know," said Manners. "I've read about them, and they have human bones hung on their necks for ornaments—"

"Ow!"

"Make a splendid addition to my album, anyway." "And perhaps your bones will make a splendid addition to his necklace!" grinned Monty Lowther. "I can foresee that we shall have to keep a chain on you."

"Yaas, wathah! I shall wefuse to allow Mannahs to go out of my sight. Undah the cirs."

"I expect Sir Richard's agent will keep a pretty sharp eye on all of us," said Kerr, the practical. "Mr. Hudson will have us all in charge, and he will see that we don't photograph lions and cannibals at close quarters."

"Yes, rather!" said Lowther. "Manners is a St. Jim's chap now, and there's no need for him to become an eaten chap."

"An Eton chap!" said Manners. "Who's thinking of becoming an Eton chap?"

"Eton—eaten!" explained Lowther. "If you're a chap eaten by cannibals, you become an eaten chap, don't you?"

"I suppose so, but—"

"And you're a St. Jim's chap now, not an Eton chap—see?"

"Is it a pun?" asked Manners.

"Yes, you ass, it's a pun!" said Lowther, rather snappishly. "Lot of good it is being humorous with a blessed chump like you. That's a jolly good pun."

"I'll take your word for it," said Manners. "I don't see it myself, but I dare say it's all right, as you say so. Speaking of my camera—"

"You ass—"

"Speaking of my camera—"

"I say," said Fatty Wynn, sitting up in his hammock. "Are you fellows getting hungry?"

"Wats! No. Undah the cirs."

"Well, I am," said the fat Fourth-Former. "It's nearly an hour since I had anything to eat. Look here, you know what I've told you—it's no good risking your health in a dangerous climate like this. A fellow can't expect to stand an

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unhealthy climate unless he keeps his strength up with good, square meals. The only way to keep yourself going for the day is to lay a good, solid foundation."

"Wats!"

"I'm going down to look for some tuck!" said Fatty Wynn. "I think you're an ass, D'Arcy. You don't eat enough for a grasshopper! Gimme a hand out of this hammock!"

"I wefuse to be called an ass!"

"Well, gimme a hand," said Fatty Wynn, putting a fat leg out of the hammock. "I never can get in and out of these things. They're comfy enough when you get in, but they're clumsy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Figgins. "You're clumsy, you mean!"

"I don't mean anything of the sort! Gimme a hand, some of you, and don't stand there cackling like a lot of sheep!" growled Fatty Wynn.

"I've never heard sheep cackle!" grinned Digby.

"Oh, don't jaw! Gimme a fist!"

"I will assist you with pleasuah, Wynn, although the weathah is weally too hot for much exertion, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus. "Undah the cires.—"

"Oh, blow the cires., you ass! Gimme a hand!"

"Weally, Wynn—"

"Buck up."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gave Fatty Wynn a hand to help him from the hammock. Monty Lowther gave the hammock a gentle bump on the other side, and Fatty Wynn shot out head first upon the swell of St. Jim's. He threw his arms round D'Arcy's neck to save himself, and they rolled together on the deck in a most loving embrace.

"Groo!"

"Ow! Bai Jove! Wow!"

The juniors roared. In spite of the hot weather, they all jumped up and roared. The seamen on the deck of the steamer chuckled, and Captain Crane, on the bridge, grinned broadly.

The sight of the swell of St. Jim's rolling on the deck, and Fatty Wynn clinging round his neck and rolling, too, was too funny.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Fatty Wynn rested on D'Arcy, when they stopped rolling, panting for breath. Arthur Augustus gasped under the weight of the fat Fourth-Former.

"Ow! Gwool! Gwool! Gawwoff, you ass!"

"Oh!" panted Fatty Wynn. "Ow!"

"Gwooh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Dwag him off, you fellows," murmured D'Arcy, in a faint voice. "He's ewushin' me feahfully. Dwag the uttah ass off!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! Help!"

Figgins and Kerr seized their fat chum, and dragged him off. Fatty Wynn sat on the deck and glared at D'Arcy. D'Arcy sat up and glared back. He groped for his eyeglass, and jammed it into his eye, and fixed a lightning stare upon the fat Fourth-Former of St. Jim's.

"You uttah ass!"

"You howling dummy!" snorted Fatty Wynn.

"I wefuse to be called a howlin' dummy. You fwabjous ass!"

"You burbling idiot!"

"You fathead!"

"You worm!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I fail to see any cause for wibald inewwiment, you fellows," said D'Arcy. "I wegard Wynn as a dangewous ass! What did he want to fall on me for?"

"Why couldn't you hold me?" roared Fatty Wynn.

"You were a clumsy ass!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry. "Perhaps it was partly due to Lowther bumping the hammock! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove!"

"He bumped the hammock, did he?" snorted Fatty Wynn.

"Come on, D'Arcy. Let's bump him!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

The two juniors jumped up breathlessly, and ran towards Monty Lowther. The humorist of the Shell fled for his life.

It was too hot for running. Fatty Wynn collapsed after a couple of minutes, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gave in a few minutes later. He shook his fist at the grinning Lowther across the deck.

"You uttah wottah!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It is too warm to chastise you now, Lowthah, but when we return to St. Jim's I shall give you a feahful thwashin'."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gave it up, and went below to his state-room to put a clean collar on.

CHAPTER 4.

Done!

"GREAT Scott!"

Tom Merry uttered the exclamation in tones of amazement.

He was standing by the rail, with the binoculars to his eyes, scanning the wide blue waters of the Gulf of Guinea.

A steamer was passing on a different course, heading for the distant Congo, while the Opossum was steaming on towards the Gold Coast.

The stranger, a smaller vessel than the Opossum, was within easy view of the glasses, and Tom Merry had turned them upon her.

He lowered them with amazement in his face.

"My hat!"

"What's the matter?" asked Jack Blake.

"That steamer!"

"What about it?"

"I can see three men on her deck—three men we know."

"Lend me the glasses."

Blake took the binoculars, and turned them upon the steamer. Then he, too, uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

"The Spaniards!"

On the deck of the passing vessel three men stood in a group. They were smoking cigars and chatting, and not looking towards the Opossum.

Blake recognised them at once.

One of them was an Englishman, with a darkly-bronzed face and a slouched hat. The other two were Spaniards, and one of them had ear-rings in his ears.

The sight of them brought back to Blake's mind the journey of the St. Jim's juniors to Southampton. They had had a packet to deliver to the skipper of the Opossum from Sir Richard Standish. On the road, the three rascals had made more than one attempt to rob them of it. Gally, Rodriguez, and Yancez—the three adventurers—had been left behind, as the juniors supposed, in England. It was amazing to see them on the deck of a steamer in the Gulf of Guinea. What were they doing there?

"What is it, deah boys?" asked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, who had just returned on deck.

"Look!"

"Bai Jove!"

The juniors took the binoculars in turn. There was no mistake about it; they were the three men who had tried to rob them of the packet on the Southampton railway.

"My only hat!" ejaculated Monty Lowther. "What are they doing here?"

"What's the trouble, young gentlemen?"

It was Captain Crane's voice. The captain of the Opossum had descended from the bridge. He looked curiously at the juniors.

"The Spaniards, sir," said Tom Merry.

"The man who tried to rob you of Sir Richard's packet?"

"Yes, sir."

Captain Crane looked at the passing steamer through the glasses. The vessel was passing further from view now. The skipper looked very grave.

"They look three tough customers," he remarked. "I don't know what they are doing here. But, after all, they did not succeed in getting hold of the packet."

"They had hold of it once," said Kerr.

"But we got it back before they were able to open it," said Tom Merry.

Kerr was silent.

"Well, they are going to a different part of the coast, to judge by the course they are steering," said Captain Crane.

"You will not see them again."

"I hope not, sir," said Tom Merry.

But he remained very thoughtful. It had been a shock to him to see the adventurers there. Tom Merry and his comrades had been entrusted to take the mysterious packet from Sir Richard Standish to the skipper of the Opossum. On the road to Southampton the packet had, indeed, fallen into the hands of the rascals, but the juniors had recovered it, apparently unopened. The packet contained valuable papers to be delivered to Mr. Hudson, Sir Richard's agent, at Cape Three Points, on the West Coast. But the packet reposed now in the safe in Captain Crane's cabin. What had brought the three rascals there?

The strange steamer passed on out of view on the wide waters of the Gulf of Guinea. The Opossum forged on her way to the Gold Coast. But Tom Merry could not get from his mind the mental picture of the three dark, desperate faces.

"The waseals are up to some mischief," Arthur Augustus D'Arcy opined, and the other fellows agreed with him.

It was later in the day that the dark, forest-shaded coast

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came in sight, and the steamer ran in to her anchorage under the shadow of Cape Three Points. The moment the anchor was down, a native boat was seen putting off from the beach. It contained two rowers as black as the ace of spades, and a white man in a big shady hat, with a sun-browned face, and a cigar between his lips. The boat pulled out to the steamer, and the white man came on board.

Captain Crane evidently knew him. He shook hands with the new-comer, who glanced in great surprise at the group of schoolboys.

"You have passengers, I guess," he remarked. Sir Richard's agent was evidently an American.

The skipper looked surprised in his turn.

"You did not know they were coming?" he asked.

"No! What do you mean? They haven't come to see me, I guess!"

"Sir Richard sent them out to you."

"Hey?"

"I have his written instructions," said the skipper, looking puzzled.

Mr. Hudson stared at him.

"Written instructions?"

"Yes."

"Snakes!" said the agent. "Then these are the boys that Sir Richard cabled me about—the young rascals who have run away from school."

"What!"

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, turning his eyeglass upon the coast agent. "Pway explain yourself, my dear sir. We certainly have not run away from school. We are here by Sir Richard's instructions."

"Yes, rather," said Tom Merry.

The American fumbled in the pockets of his loose linen coat, and drew out a crumpled paper.

"Here's Sir Richard's message to me over the wires," he said, and he read: "Packet coming by Opossum. Delivered to Crane by party schoolboys who have sailed in Opossum, reason unknown. Send them back in Opossum.—STANLISH."

The juniors listened in blank amazement. But their amazement did not equal that of Captain Crane.

"I tell you I have Sir Richard's written instructions!" he almost shouted. "Do you think I should bring a party of schoolboys to this coast on a holiday—eh?"

The American shrugged his shoulders.

"Show me the instructions," he said. "Are they with the packet?"

"Ay, ay!"

Captain Crane darted below, and returned in a couple of minutes, with the sealed packet in one hand and the baronet's letter in the other. He handed both of them to the coast agent.

Mr. Hudson glanced over the letter, and his brown face grew amazed. He removed the cigar from his lips, and read it a second time.

The letter was clear enough. It directed Captain Crane to take the packet to Hudson at Cape Three Points, and at the same time to take the party of schoolboys with him, and deliver them into the charge of the agent.

"Waal, I swear!" said Mr. Hudson, in astonishment.

"There's the instructions in Sir Richard's own hand!" said the skipper warmly.

Mr. Hudson scanned the letter closely.

"It looks like it," he admitted. "Wait a minute."

He opened the packet.

The juniors looked on eagerly. The packet that they had carried from the baronet to the skipper of the Opossum had a great interest for them. There was a mystery about it that excited their imaginations.

Mr. Hudson removed the outer wrapping, and then another wrapping, and then another. A small wooden box was revealed.

He opened it, and uttered an exclamation.

"Great snakes!"

The juniors stared blankly at the box. It contained a folded newspaper—a "Daily Mail" of the date of the day before the Opossum had sailed. Nothing was written upon it. The box contained nothing else.

"Done!" said Mr. Hudson.

"But—but what does it mean?" gasped Tom Merry.

"I guess it means that this packet has been opened and the papers stolen," said Mr. Hudson. "I guess it means that this letter is a forgery. I guess I'm going to know what you kids have done with them papers!"

The agent's face took on a dark expression, and his brown hand felt behind his belt, and came back with a revolver in it. The shining barrel glimmered in the tropical sun. Mr. Hudson fixed his eyes upon the startled juniors.

"Where are them papers?" he asked.

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CHAPTER 5.

The Pursuit.

TOM MERRY & CO. stared at the coast agent in astonishment.

There was anger and dark suspicion in Mr. Hudson's look, and a savage expression in his eyes. The way he handled the revolver showed that he was not unused to handling such weapons.

But Tom Merry was not scared. He was only indignant. "What do you mean?" he exclaimed. "Do you imagine that we have opened the packet?"

"Bai Jove!"

"I guess somebody has," said Mr. Hudson. "Sir Richard didn't send out an old copy of the 'Daily Mail' by special steamer, I guess. This here packet has been opened, and the papers have been taken out, and this old newspaper put in instead. How did this packet reach you, Captain Crane?"

"These boys brought it from Sir Richard."

"I guess you didn't open it?"

"Certainly not," said the skipper.

"Then it was opened, and the papers stolen, by the messenger who brought it to you," said Mr. Hudson.

Tom Merry flushed scarlet.

"I was the messenger," he said.

Mr. Hudson's keen eyes turned upon him. The revolver swayed forward.

"Where are them papers?" he said.

"I do not know. If the packet contained papers, they must be in it now," said Tom Merry, very much flurried. "I cannot understand it. The packet was certainly not opened while it was in my possession."

"Did it leave your hands at all?" asked the American, looking at him very keenly.

Tom Merry started.

"Three men tried to rob us of it, on the road," he said.

"I guess one of them was a Spanish galeot with gold earrings," said Mr. Hudson.

"That is right."

"And did they get hold of it?"

"Yes, for a short time. But we recaptured it," said Tom Merry. "We found it upon one of them, still unopened. We concluded that he had taken it for himself, swindling the other two, and that he hadn't had time to open it."

"I guess Gally and Rodriguez and Yanez haven't fallen out," he said. "They're all in this. I've seen those three scoundrels at work before. If the packet was in their hands, they opened it at once, and they took the papers. Gally is a clever hand at anybody's fist, and I guess he wrote this letter in Sir Richard's hand to put in the packet, when he sealed it up again with an old newspaper inside."

"Good heavens!"

"Gally has the papers," said Mr. Hudson, putting the revolver back in his pocket. "What possessed Sir Richard to trust them to a schoolboy, gets me."

"He was being watched by the Spaniards, and he thought that a schoolboy could take the packet without exciting suspicion," Tom Merry explained.

"Not a bad idea; only the galeots must have tumbled to the game," said Mr. Hudson. "They laid for you, took the papers out of it, forged this letter and sealed it up again, and let you recapture it."

Kerr smiled quietly. He was the only one in the party who had had a suspicion that there was something queer about the ease with which the juniors had recovered the packet, unopened.

"We've been done," said Blake.

"Yeas, wathah!"

Tom Merry was utterly dismayed.

"Then—then if Sir Richard did not write that letter, it was not his intention that we should sail in the Opossum," he exclaimed.

"I guess not."

"Nor the Head's intention, either," said Figgins. "What must they have thought, when we didn't come back to St. Jim's?"

"Bai Jove!"

"Oh, its rotten!" said Kerr. "We never suspected this. I don't see how we could. But the Head must have been in a fearful state, when we didn't come back."

Mr. Hudson grinned. Although he and his employer had been hopelessly done by the rascals, he had an American's admiration of 'cuteness in any form, and he admired the way Gally had carried out his rascality.

"I guess Gally had the papers, and he didn't want you young fellows to go back to the baronet and say so," he remarked; "so he forged a letter to get you taken away in the steamer. I guess it was smart."

"The scoundrel!"

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"Quite right; but he's done us," said Mr. Hudson.

"Where the rascals are now is a puzzle."

Tom Merry uttered an exclamation.

"We've seen them!"

"What! Seen them! Where?"

"On a steamer, sailing towards the coast, to-day," said Tom Merry.

Mr. Hudson showed some trace of excitement.

"Then they've got the papers, and they're after the rubber," he exclaimed. "If we knew where they were going, we might ring in a cold deal on them yet."

"I know where they were going," said Captain Crane, "they were steering for the Congo Coast when we passed them."

"Then they know the location," said Mr. Hudson. "I know it, too, I guess, though not close enough without the papers. But I guess I know enough to find them. I guess we're going on the same tack, and you can get your anchor up again, Captain Crane."

"You're not going ashore again?"

"I guess not. I'm going to put this business through, and save the rubber for Sir Richard, if I can," said Mr. Hudson.

"Ay, ay! I'm under your orders, sir."

Mr. Hudson stepped to the side, and called out to the negro boatmen.

"You lib for shore, pretty quick!"

The negroes grinned, and the boat pulled away. Mr. Hudson lighted a fresh cigar, and wrinkled his sunburnt brows in thought. The steamer's anchor was raised, and she glided out again upon the blue waters of the Gulf of Guinea. The juniors, not yet recovered from their amazement, watched the shore recede from sight.

"Well," said Figgins at last, "this is a go!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I never guessed," said Tom Merry ruefully, "I suppose I ought to have guessed, especially as Kerr was suspicious about it. But—"

"I didn't guess what they'd done," said Kerr.

"I say, this is pretty serious," Fatty Wynn remarked thoughtfully.

"Yaas, wathah! The packet—"

"Eh?"

"The packet is no use without the papahs—"

"Who's talking about a packet?" said Fatty Wynn crossly. "I mean it's serious our not going ashore here. Captain Crane was going to get in fresh grub here, and a lot of fresh fruit. I'd been looking forward to it."

"Weally, Wynn—"

"Of course, it's serious about Sir Richard's papers, too," Fatty Wynn admitted, after some reflection.

"Go hon!" said Monty Lowther sarcastically.

"I wish we could cable to the Head that we're safe and sound," said Tom Merry; "but it's impossible, so it's no good thinking of it. By Jove! I'd like to get within hitting distance of those scoundrels! The rotters—to steal the papers, and send us all this way with a dummy packet! I feel as if we're to blame, but we couldn't help it."

"Wathah not! When I meet that man Gally, I shall give him a feahful thwashin'," said Arthur Augustus, polishing his eyeglass meditatively. "I wegard him as an uttah beast."

Mr. Hudson came over towards the juniors, with his hands in his pockets, and the cigar projecting from the corner of his mouth.

"I reckon I don't know what to do with you youngsters," he said.

"Weally, sir—"

"We're going into danger," said the American.

"Good!" said all the juniors at once.

Mr. Hudson smiled, and showed a double row of teeth blackened by tobacco.

"That's all very well," he said. "I'm going to try to get those papers back from Gally, and prevent him from robbing my boss of a cool million, I guess. He will fight—there will be shooting, my sons. And you will have to keep out of it."

"We jolly well sha'n't," said Tom Merry warmly. "We lost the papers, although we could not help it, and we're entitled to take a hand in getting them back again. And we're not afraid of shooting, sir. As a matter of fact, some of us have been under fire before."

"But you're only kids," said Mr. Hudson dubiously. "I reckon I shall have a tough job with three of them agin me, but I'm going to put it through, I guess. Sir Richard doesn't pay me a handsome salary to sit round and have the flies fanned off me by niggers."

Tom Merry laughed.

"I suppose not, sir. And will Sir Richard expect you to get the papers back?"

"I guess he will, if there's a half chance of working the rifle," said the American. "I'm going to try, I guess."

Besides, I have a share in the concern. Gally is robbing me as well. And he's not going to rob Henry K. Hudson so long as Henry K. Hudson has a kick left in his hind legs, I guess."

"But you can't think of tackling the three rotters alone, sir."

"I guess I am going to do that, sonny."

"You're not. We're going to help," said Tom Merry, determinedly. "You must let us, sir. We are not afraid of the scoundrels, and there are nine of us to lend a hand in dealing with them. There are only three of the rascals, sir, and we could eat them if we once got at close quarters."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Henry K. Hudson cocked his eye at Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, and smiled over his big cigar, showing all his brown teeth at once. He had a most expansive smile, and sometimes gave a fine view of gums as well as teeth.

"I guess you'd knock them with your monocle," he said. "I suppose that is the most dangerous thing about you, sonny. But really I reckon if we get into danger I shall shove you below in a box, this side up with care."

The swell of St. Jim's flushed crimson, and the other juniors chuckled. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy turned his monocle upon the American with a stare that certainly ought to have rooted him to the deck, but which had no perceptible effect upon Mr. Henry K. Hudson.

"Weally, Mr. Hudson—"

"Cheese it, Gussy!"

"I wefuse to cheese it, Tom Mewwy. Mr. Hudson has made a dispawagin' remark. When we come into contact with those dweadful wuffians, I considah that I shall give a good account of myself, and I considah—"

"We'll see," grinned the American. "I'm goin' to have them papers back, or bust a biler. If any of you kids know how to shoot, I may let you chip in."

"I guess we'll all chip in," said Tom Merry.

"I guess we'll see," laughed Mr. Hudson.

And there the discussion terminated, the American going on the bridge to talk to Captain Crane. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy cast a glance of disdainful indignation after him.

"I wegard that man as a wottah," he said.

"He's all right," said Tom Merry laughing. "You see, you don't impress strangers as being such a terrific fighting-man as you really are, Gussy."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I shall insist upon takin' my share of the fightin'," said D'Arcy, "and I will show that Amewican boundah that a membah of one of the oldest families in England can fight quite as well as a Yankee boundah."

And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy concluded with an expressive sniff, which conveyed his complete disdain for Henry K. Hudson and all the opinions he might hold concerning elegant youths who wore monocles.

CHAPTER 6.

On the Congo.

"MY word!" said Digby.

Sniff! Sniff! Sniff!

It was a couple of days later. The steamer was gliding slowly along in sight of the African coast, and from the densely wooded shore came a strange smell, that made the juniors sniff and sniff again.

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, with an expression of great disgust upon his aristocratic features. "If that is how Afweeah smells, deah boys, I shall soon be fed-up with Afweeah!"

Tom Merry laughed.

"It doesn't all smell like that, I suppose," he said. "I think we're near the mouth of some river, and perhaps it brings decayed vegetation down to the sea. It isn't nice."

"It's howwid!"

"Not enjoyable," said Figgins. "But we can stand it. I'm anxious to get at those rotters! Mr. Hudson seems pretty certain of finding them."

"Yaas, wathah! But I have vewy little faith in Mr. Hudson," said D'Arcy stiffly. "He has made sevewal disrespectful remarks the last day or two on the subject of monocles!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There is nothin' whatevah to laugh at! I wegard it as wude!"

"Monocles aren't common on the West Coast," said Kerr.

"No; but mannahs are, appawently!" said D'Arcy, very sarcastically.

Mr. Hudson had just come within hearing; and D'Arcy intended to crush him with that remark.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Manners, of the Shell. "What's that?"

"Weally, Mannahs—"

"Common, am I?" said Manners.

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and

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"I wasn't alludin' to you, deah boy. I was speakin' of mannahs—"

"Well, I am Manners—"

"I meant mannahs genevally, you see. Pway allow me to explain fully—"

"Oh, don't!" said Manners. "The remedy's worse than the disease! I accept your apology."

"But I wasn't apologise!" shouted D'Arcy.

"Never mind; I accept it, all the same! I say, Mr. Hudson, what's that awful niff?"

The American laughed.

"I guess that's the sweet scent of the Congo," he said.

"The Congo!"

"I guess so."

The juniors looked landward with keen interest.

The Congo!

The great river that rolls a gigantic flood seaward from the heart of Darkest Africa—the river upon whose banks countless atrocities have been perpetrated in the relentless quest of rubber and ivory.

The very name was thrilling to the juniors.

"Where is it?" asked Tom Merry.

Mr. Hudson waved a black cigar towards the distant sand-banks.

"There!"

"Bai Jove! The Congo!" said D'Arcy. "That's where the atrocities come from!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Belgians and niggers and rubber and ivory and murders, I guess," said Mr. Hudson. "That's the product of the Congo Free State. We shall be at Boma to-night."

"Boma!" said Tom Merry.

"The capital of the Congo Free State. We shall have to stop there and jaw with the Belgians, and bribe some of them," said the American carelessly. "Then I am going up the river to look for Gally and Rodriguez and Pedro Yanez."

"And we're coming with you."

The American shook his head, with a grin that showed every brown tooth in his head.

"I guess not."

"But you're not going alone."

"That's the racket, sonny."

"To tackle three desperate rascals—eh?"

"I reckon."

"Bai Jove! I could not possibly allow that! I shall certainly come!"

"Monocle and all!" grinned Mr. Hudson.

"Weally, sir—"

"The niggers would capture you, and use you for a fetich, I guess," said Mr. Hudson, with a roar of laughter. "I haven't any use for you myself. You stay at Boma in the steamer."

"Rats!" said Figgins.

The American laughed, and said no more. But he was evidently resolved. Whether the juniors could help him or not, he did not feel justified in taking them into the deadly dangers of the Congo. They would be in danger of malaria at Boma, and that was enough.

But the juniors of St. Jim's held a very different opinion. They felt that they were entitled to help in recapturing the papers. And they did not like the idea of Mr. Hudson going alone. His cool nerve, in setting out alone to track down three desperadoes in a wild and lawless country, they could not help admiring. But they meant to take a hand in the game, as Mr. Hudson would have expressed it himself, all the same.

In the red sunset the steamer entered the Congo. The swift little vessel cleaved the brown waters, which smelt all the stronger at close quarters. But the juniors were growing accustomed to the smell now.

As they glided on to Boma, Mr. Hudson, reclining in a deck chair, with his long legs resting one over another, and a cigar, of course, in his mouth, told them some particulars of the strange affair which they had long been curious to know. Tom Merry brought up the subject.

"Would there be any harm in our knowing what the trouble is, sir?" he asked. "I know that Gally and the rest have stolen some papers belonging to Sir Richard Standish. But that's all. It seems jolly mysterious."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Mr. Hudson nodded genially.

"I guess you can know," he said. "It was being kept dark to keep it from Gally and Rodriguez, but I guess it can't be kept dark from them now. There was a man on the coast who discovered a new rubber territory, in a region where rubber has never been found before. I reckon you know that rubber is one of the chief products of this hyer one-horse country—the Congo Free State."

"Yes. They say that the natives are treated very badly—to make them gather the rubber and bring it in to the Belgian officials," said Tom Merry.

"I guess it's the frozen truth. The Belgians are—pigs!"

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said Mr. Hudson. "About as bad as the niggers themselves, I guess. Well, a new rubber region is a big find, because the price of rubber's going up, and the supply of it is going down. I reckon you kids use bike tyres in England, and the rubber was gathered along this hyer river. Sir Richard is the head of a company that does a big business with the Congo, and the man who made the discovery—Kelly his name was—offered him the secret. You see, if Sir Richard could get a concession from the native king, and make terms with the Belgians, he would command the new supply of rubber. It might mean a million pounds—it might mean five millions, according to the price of rubber in the market."

"I see."

"Sooner or later the discovery would be made, anyhow, and the new region worked dry. Well, Kelly made plans and maps, and took them with him to London, and drove a bargain with Sir Richard. He also took coast fever with him, and died in London. His share goes to his wife and family, if the thing is worked. Sir Richard sent the papers out to me, for me to get to the native king, and to work the game at Boma with the Belgian officials. You see, the Belgians claim to rule the whole country hereabouts—it's marked as theirs on the map, though there are a good many parts of it they dare not enter. But without the papers I can't locate the territory, you see. I must get them back from the galoots who have boned them. They're ahead of us, but—"

"They're making for the place, then?"

"I guess so. But I've got a good chance of catching them up. You don't travel up the Congo as you could travel up the Thames or the Seine, I guess. If they get to the place first, I guess they'll make terms with King Bonny, and I shall be cooked and eaten by the ju-ju priests when I get there."

"Good heavens!"

"But they won't get there first, if I can help it. Once I've got it fixed up with King Bonny, the rest is easy. I've got plenty of influence in Boma, and Sir Richard has plenty of influence in Brussels. But it's no good using influence to secure a territory you don't know the location of within five hundred miles or more."

"I suppose not."

"I've got to catch those galoots on the Congo, and get the papers back. If I can do it, my fortune's made; if I can't, I guess I shall never go down the Congo again, and they won't ever say 'Howdy-do?' to me again on Broadway, New York!" said Henry K. Hudson, blowing out a cloud of smoke. "But I guess Henry K. Hudson will work the rifle!"

"They are bound to resist?"

"I reckon."

"That settles it," said Tom Merry. "We're coming!" Henry K. Hudson laughed, and lighted a fresh cigar.

CHAPTER 7.

Left Behind.

BOMA was blazing under a tropical sun.

The wide, evil-smelling river, the dank swamps in the distance, the white houses of the Belgian officials, the huts of the natives, lay scorching under the blaze.

The juniors, as lightly clad as possible, in shady Panama hats, lounged breathlessly on the deck of the anchored steamer, which was scorching to the touch.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's monocle hung idle at the end of its cord. The rim of it was too hot to allow him to insert it into his eye.

"Bai Jove!" said D'Arcy. "I wondah how long Mr. Hudson is going to be."

Officials had come on board the little steamer, and gone. Mr. Henry K. Hudson had gone with them, and several hours had elapsed, and he had not returned to the ship.

He had not said what time he would return; he had not, in fact, said that he would return at all, and the juniors had asked Captain Crane, and had received an enigmatical smile in response.

"I wonder when he is going to start up the river?" said Figgins. "He seems to be losing a lot of time, considering that Gally & Co. are getting further away every minute, and nearer to the prize."

"Yaas, wathah! As a mattah of fact, I have vewy little faith in the chap, you know," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, with a wise shake of the head.

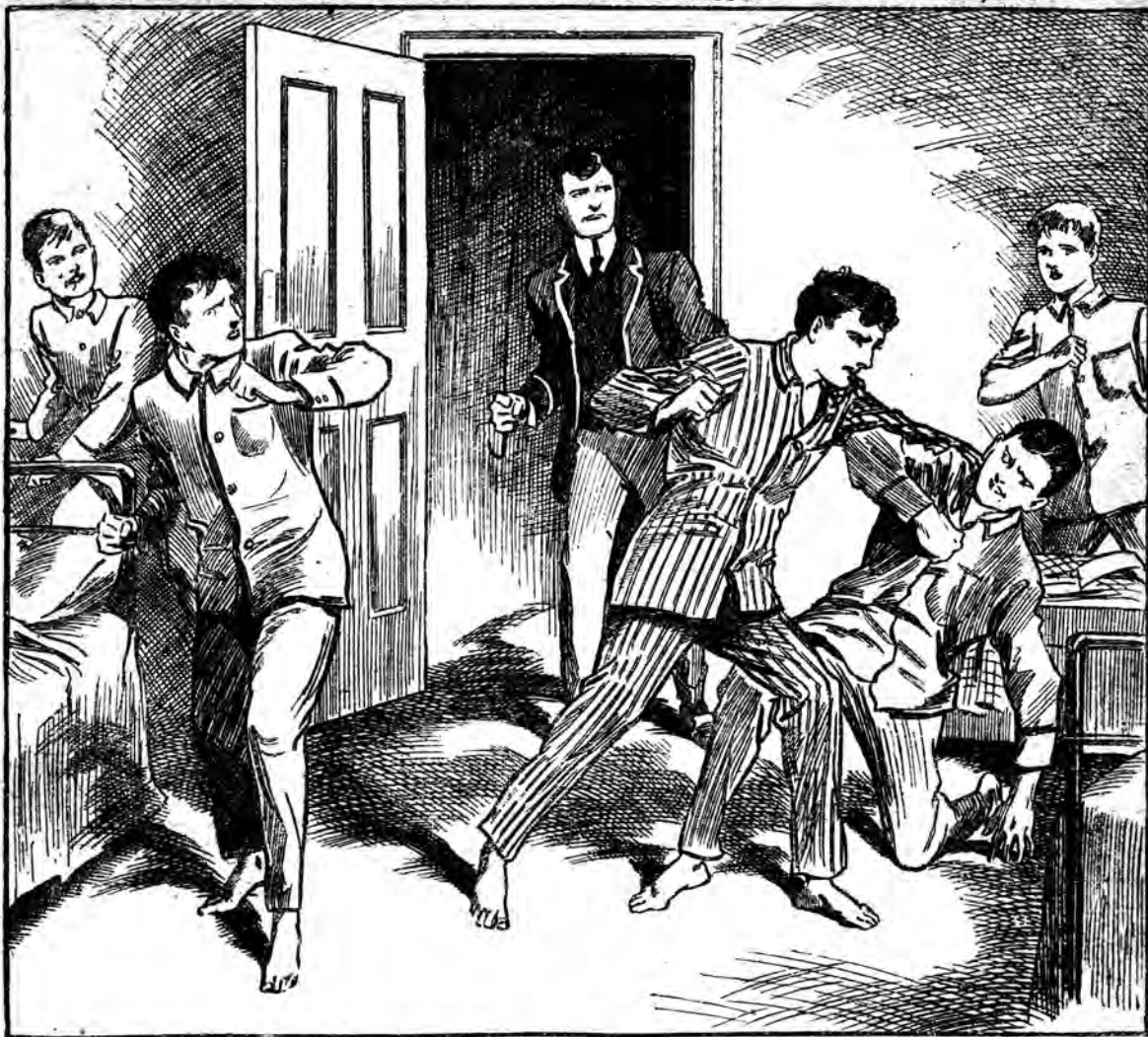
"I wish he'd come back!" said Tom Merry. "Hallo! The men appear to be getting ready to go down the river. The steamer can't be sailing without Mr. Hudson."

"Bai Jove! Let's ask the skipper!"

The juniors ran to the steps of the bridge. Captain Crane was busy giving orders to the seamen. In the first pause, Tom Merry called to him:

"Are you going up the river now, sir?"

Captain Crane smiled.



"Why, you rascals!" exclaimed Courtney. "How dare you! Stop it!" But the two fighting Removites did not stop it. Courtney wasted no more time in words. He took a tight grasp upon his cane and ran at the two juniors. The cane rose and fell, with great impartiality, upon both of them.

(A lively incident from "AN UNGRATEFUL SON!" the splendid, complete school tale of Harry Wharton & Co., by Frank Richards, contained in this week's "MAGNET" Library. Now on Sale. Price One Penny.)

"No, my lad; I'm going down the river!"

"Back to sea?"

"Ay, ay!"

"But Mr. Hudson—he hasn't returned!"

"He isn't coming back," said Captain Crane. "He has gone up the river, hours ago, in a steam-launch. He kept it dark, because you boys wanted to go, and he didn't want a fuss."

The juniors stood dumbfounded.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated D'Arcy at last.

"He's given us the slip!" said Tom Merry, in dismay.

The captain smiled again.

"You boys are coming back to England in the Opossum," he said.

Tom Merry knitted his brows.

"We're not going back to England, leaving Mr. Hudson to face those three scoundrels alone!" he exclaimed.

"But he is gone."

"How long?"

"Two hours."

"Bai Jove! I wegard it as a wotten twick!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy indignantly. "He has given us the slip, and I do not wegard it as playin' the game!"

"He's not going to leave us behind like this!" said Figgins.

"But he has done it, deah boy!"

"What price following him?" asked Tom Merry, looking round.

"Bai Jove!"

"If he's only two hours ahead, we may overtake him,"

said the hero of the Shell. "Are you all game? Shall we go?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Hurrah!"

"Ripping!"

Tom Merry ran to the side of the steamer. Native boats were plying on the river in crowds, some with fruit in great piles to sell at the ships' sides, some empty, to take people to and from the landing-stages of Boma.

Tom waved his hand to a large boat containing four black oarsmen. The boat ranged up to the steamer immediately.

"Jump in!" said Tom Merry.

The juniors had few belongings. What few they had could be fetched up from below in a few minutes.

Figgins, Blake, and Lowther ran down for them. The rest of the juniors jumped into a boat. Captain Crane had turned away, but he turned back as one of the seamen called his attention to the action of Tom Merry & Co. He came striding towards the side of the steamer with a very excited face.

"Belay there!" he shouted. "What are you doing? This isn't a time to go on a pleasure trip when we're just sailing!"

"We're not going on a pleasure trip, sir," said Tom Merry. "This is business. We're going after Mr. Hudson."

"What!"

"You need not wait for us in Boma; we can come home by another vessel if you like," said the St. Jim's junior. "We're on in this act, that's all."

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"You young madman—"

"Thanks!"

"Come on the ship immediately!"

"Can't be done!"

"Wathah not!"

"Do you think I'll let you go up the Congo on your own?" roared Captain Crane. "Come back at once, or I'll come and fetch you!"

Tom Merry laughed.

"You'd find it rather difficult to fetch nine chaps," he said, "and I warn you we shall resist. We mean business."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Lowther, Blake, and Figgins came on deck with hastily-tied bundles, which they tossed into the boat. They jumped in after them.

Captain Crane almost danced with rage and excitement. To let the juniors go up the Congo "on their own" seemed impossible to him. But if they were determined, he had no power to stop them. His men were not numerous enough to deal with nine athletic fellows who were determined to have their own way. As for the negro boatmen, Tom Merry had already shown them a gold piece, and they were sure to back up their employers—the juniors.

"You can't go!" yelled the skipper. "You know you can't!"

Tom Merry grinned.

"We can, and we know we can," he replied. "It's all right, sir. If anything goes wrong, you're not to blame. You couldn't help it, you see."

"Wathah not! In case of anythin' goin' w'ong, sir, we shall be awfully careful to exonerate you entirely," said Arthur Augustus gracefully.

Captain Crane brandished his clenched fists.

"Come back!" he roared.

"Rats!"

"Weally, Lowthah, you should not weply to Captain Cwane in that extremly flippant mannah. I am shocked at you. Captain Cwane, I withdwaw the word 'wats' which Montay Lowthah has used. But we are not comin' back, all the same."

Tom Merry tapped one of the negro boatmen on the shoulder, and pointed up the river. He had picked up some of the lingo of the coast on board the steamer, and he was able to speak to the man.

"You lib for dem river," he said.

The negro grinned.

"Me lib sharp jolly quick, massa."

The four negroes paddled away up the brown stream. Captain Crane was almost dancing with rage and dismay on the deck of the steamer. But he was powerless to do anything else. The boat glided swiftly up the wide Congo, and disappeared from his sight.

CHAPTER 8.

In Fearful Peril.

TOM MERRY & CO. had taken a desperate step; how desperate they did not realise at the time. In a boat, without provisions, almost without arms, with little more clothing than they stood up in, they had embarked upon a voyage they knew not whither, excepting that it was into the heart of Africa, among cannibals, and lions, and snakes, and white men little less savage than the black barbarians of the forest.

Yet they did not hesitate.

To return to England and say that they had lost the papers entrusted to them, and that they had let a man go singly in search of them, with three desperate enemies to encounter—that was impossible. They would be ashamed to tell Sir Richard such a story; they would be ashamed to show their faces at St. Jim's again. Henry K. Hudson had left them behind. All they could do was to follow him whether he liked it or not. If they could not find him that would not be their fault; they would have done their best. But they would not give up the task till they had had a hard try. And it was quite possible that on the wide reaches of the Congo they might themselves come in contact with Gally and his companions, and win back the papers without the aid of Henry K. Hudson at all. That would be a triumph for the juniors of St. Jim's.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy turned his eyeglass back towards the steamer. It had disappeared. The boat was gliding on swiftly up the rolling river. Some of the juniors were very serious and thoughtful; Fatty Wynn was looking decidedly so.

"Cheer up, Fatty!" said Figgins, slapping the fat Fourth-Former on the shoulder. "Cheer up, my son! Are you thinking of the cannibals?"

"No, I'm not," said Fatty Wynn peevishly. "I'm thinking of the grub."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

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MENT "AN UNGRATEFUL SON!" The Splendid, Long, Complete School Story. "MAGNET" LIBRARY. Now on Sale. Price One Penny.

"It's not a laughing matter," said Fatty Wynn seriously. "I think we ought to stop at Boma and get some provisions. We have plenty of money—at least, Tom Merry and Gussy have, and it's all the same."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"We can't stop at Boma," said Kerr quietly.

"Why not?" demanded Fatty Wynn warmly.

"Because Captain Crane would jolly soon have us stopped. He thinks we're going into fearful danger—I dare say we are—and he would appeal to the Belgian officials to stop us and send us back on board the Opossum."

"My hat!" said Tom Merry. "That's very likely. Captain Crane is right from his point of view, but we're going, all the same."

"Yaas, wathah! I should uttably wufuse to go back."

The chief of the negro boatmen turned to Tom Merry with his endless grin. The white roofs of Boma had disappeared now behind a bend of the river.

"You lib for where?" asked the boatman.

"Up the river. What's your name, my man?"

"M'pong."

"Well, M'pong, we're going a long way up the river, and if you take us in your boat we'll pay you well," said Tom Merry. Then, as the black man looked puzzled, he went on: "You lib for dem river all the time, savvy?"

"Me savvy."

"Me lib for pay," said Tom Merry, showing a gold piece in the palm of his hand.

The black man's eyes glistened strangely.

He bowed his woolly head to Tom Merry, and took his paddle again. The four paddles moved the long boat along at a good rate. The negroes began to chatter at one another in their own dialect, not a word of which was understood by the juniors. But Kerr, the keen Scotsman, watched the expression of their faces, and his own face grew very grave.

"What's the trouble, Kerr?" asked Tom Merry, looking at him.

"Parlez en Francais," said Kerr; and he went on in that language. "That chap understands English as well as we do. I don't think you were wise to show him a gold piece."

Tom Merry started.

"He wouldn't work for us if he wasn't sure of his pay," he replied in French—St. Jim's French, which might have caused slight smiles on the boulevards of Paris, but which was quite good enough for the present purpose.

"But now he knows you have plenty of money."

"Yes."

"We're alone on the Congo with four big niggers, that's all, and any one of them looks as if he would commit murders at a shilling a time."

"Phew!" said Tom Merry—in English this time.

He had certainly not thought of that. He had taken the boat and its crew into service by chance; he was in too great a hurry to get away from the steamer to pick and choose. But now that Kerr had called attention to the fact, he realised that it was a very risky business for the juniors to trust themselves to the black boatmen in this way. The blacks could tell easily enough that the boys had money, and their clothes and their watches would be worth a small fortune to negroes of the Congo.

If the four blacks should turn upon them—Tom Merry was far from suspicious by nature, but now that Kerr had spoken he could not help observing that there seemed to be an understanding among the negroes. He could not understand what they said, but they spoke in significant tones in their strange, barbarous tongue, and exchanged grins and nods.

The paddles worked incessantly, and the boat travelled up the river at a surprising speed. It seemed as if the black boatmen, instead of having to be driven to work as usual, were as keen as the juniors in the race up the river. That in itself was singular enough, unless they intended foul play, and were in a hurry to get far from the white man's town in order to carry out their plans.

Tom Merry & Co. realised with a chill that if the negroes turned upon them it would not mean simply robbery. The black men were of the Congo—the place where human life is held cheap. They would not leave the juniors alive to tell tales in Boma. If they robbed them they would murder them; there was not the slightest doubt upon that. The yellow waters of the Congo would roll over the dead bodies and hide the crime.

It was strange, almost incredible, that a trip on a steamer

ANSWERS

should bear the lads from a country where human life is so sacred, in a short time, to a land where a man is killed as carelessly as a coconut is knocked from a tree. But so it was. The Congo rolled under the shadow of death.

Tom Merry's teeth set grimly.

If it came to a fight with the four blacks, after all, there were nine of the juniors. The villains would attempt to take them by surprise, but that would not succeed. Nine sturdy fellows would give a good account of themselves, even against four brawny Congo blacks.

The blacks had no weapons excepting their paddles. They were clad only in dirty loin-cloths, and could have no weapons concealed about them. The unfortunate thing was that Tom Merry & Co. were unarmed. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had a gold-headed cane, and several of the juniors had sticks, but that was all. The rest had their fists.

The juniors, with such thoughts in their minds, could not help feeling uneasy, and perhaps their uneasiness betrayed itself in their looks.

M'pong cast quick and suspicious glances at them after a time, and chattered to his companions, and dark, ugly looks came over the faces of the negroes.

The boat was by this time many a long mile from Boma, and the banks, clothed in forest, seemed desolate of any sign of human habitation.

The sun was setting over the great trees in the distance, and the surface of the river rolled a flood of crimson.

"Look out!" murmured Kerr.

"Yaas, wathah! The howwid weseals!"

M'pong rose to his feet. Without a word, without any preliminary warning, he struck with his paddle right at Tom Merry's head. That savage and murderous attack was the first warning of hostility.

But the hero of the Shell was ready. He was watching M'pong, and he ducked his head, avoided the murderous slash, and leaped forward, hitting out with right and left. His right caught the negro under the chin, his left in the ribs as the man staggered, and M'pong gave a wild howl, and fell backwards over the gunwale.

There was a splash, and he disappeared into the deep waters of the Congo.

An instant more, and the other three blacks had rushed upon the juniors, and the boat was rocking and swaying violently as they closed in contact.

CHAPTER 9.

Saving a Foe!

"BACK up, St. Jim's!"

It was a strange cry to be heard on the wide waters of the Congo—to echo among the mangrove swamps of Central Africa.

"Back up, St. Jim's! Hurrah!"

The boat rocked wildly, and the combatants rolled to and fro. The juniors had met the blacks more than half way, attacking them with sticks and fists furiously. And as they were three to one, and the leader of the enemy was gone, they had the better chance.

The active lads had seized upon the black ruffians, and were wrestling with them so closely that they had no chance to use their paddles.

Blake, and Kerr and Figgins and Lowther had dragged one of them down, and, with a great combined effort, they flung him over the side into the river.

Then all the juniors turned upon the other two.

Under a shower of blows, the two blacks retreated to the end of the boat, gnashing their white teeth like wild animals, and as the juniors rushed them, they leaped into the water and swam for their lives.

The St. Jim's juniors remained in possession of the boat. It was rocking so violently that a wash of water came over the gunwale.

"Careful!" called out Tom Merry. "We shall capsize in a minute!"

"Yaas, wathah!" gasped Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Bai Jove! I feel in quite a fluttah!"

Tom Merry shaded his eyes with his hand, from the level glare of the sun, and looked across the crimson river.

Three of the blacks were swimming steadily towards the distant shore, and as he looked, he saw them reach the mangroves, and drag themselves out of the water.

Where was the other one—M'pong? Tom Merry felt a sick feeling in his breast. The rascals had tried to murder them; but—but Tom Merry hoped that M'pong was not drowned.

It was terrible to punish even so hopeless a savage with death.

"Can you see M'pong, you fellows?"

"Gweat Scott!"

"What—where is he?"

"Cwocodiles, deah boys!"

"Oh!"

They could see the hideous creature now. The snout showed above the water. The crocodile had headed M'pong off from the shore; the negro, partly dazed by the blows Tom Merry had given him, had not swum so well as his comrades. He had paused, and was swimming in a fresh direction, and the crocodile was pursuing him, and gaining fast. There was no hope of escape for the negro.

Tom Merry's very heart turned sick.

It was his first real sight of the conditions of Central Africa—of Nature, wild and savage and untamed.

The negro never even thought of swimming towards the boat. He would have expected to be brained by a paddle if he had approached it.

He was striving to swim across the river, as the crocodile had cut him off from the nearer shore, but the attempt was hopeless.

Tom Merry grasped a paddle.

"We must save him!" he muttered hoarsely.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Yes, yes!" muttered Figgins. "We can't see even such a brute killed! Paddle away!"

Most of the juniors knew how to handle the paddles. They had paddled canoes often enough on the silvery Ryll at St. Jim's. These paddles were different, but they succeeded in handling them. The boat glided towards the swimming negro, and then for the first time M'pong looked at it. He rolled his eyes at the juniors, showing the whites of them, with a look of horror and despair that went straight to their hearts.

Tom Merry waved his hand.

"This way, M'pong! We will save you!"

The negro's eyes rolled wildly.

"Lib for boat!" shouted Tom Merry.

M'pong did not change his direction. The Congo negro is not quick of apprehension. He either did not understand or did not believe.

The juniors paddled quickly. The boat glided through the water, and interposed between the crocodile and his victim. The snout of the huge brute crashed against the frail timber of the boat, and made it shake and tremble from stem to stern. M'pong was on the other side of the boat.

"M'pong! M'pong! Here—lib for boat, quick!"

The negro understood then. He could not doubt his eyes; he could see now that the juniors desired to save him from the crocodile. His huge, black hands grasped the gunwale of the boat, and the juniors tried to drag him in. He was too exhausted to climb in himself. Their hands slid and glided on the smooth, wet skin; till Kerr seized the man by his mop of woolly hair, and dragged. M'pong came over the side of the boat, and rolled in, and lay gasping, and streaming with water.

Crash!

The boat trembled again as the crocodile crashed upon it. The brute seemed to have turned its fury upon the boat. As it came near, Blake and Figgins struck at it with the paddles, but they might as well have hurled peas at a stone wall.

"We must run for it," said Tom Merry.

"Paddle away, deah boys!"

The paddles worked actively.

The boat ran swiftly against the sluggish current, and the next rush of the crocodile missed it; and then the brute appeared to give up the contest, for it disappeared among the floating logs on the current.

The juniors breathed more freely.

"That was a close shave for all of us!" muttered Digby.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I'm jolly glad that croc's gone," grinned Moaty Lowther. "This boat is a rotten old crock, and he was the stronger croc, of the two."

"Bai Jove! How can you make wotten puns at such a time, Lowthah? I am surprised at you. I wegard it as wotten!"

"Ass!"

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Well, we're safe and sound," said Tom Merry. "But what are we going to do with Pongo?"

The black sat up in the boat, dashing the water from his face, and stared at the juniors.

They sat round him, ready to fling him overboard at the slightest sign of hostility. But there was no hostility in the manner of the black man.

CHAPTER 10.

On the Track.

M'PONG rose upon his haunches, and crawled forward towards Tom Merry. Some of the juniors made a movement; but it was clear that M'pong did not mean mischief. He crawled to Tom Merry's feet, and knocked his forehead upon the bottom of the boat. Then he

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squatted up and looked at the hero of the Shell. Tom Merry watched these proceedings in growing surprise.

"Does anybody know what he's getting at?" he asked.

"Seems to be off his wackah, deah boy."

"Massa lib for save M'pong," said the black. "M'pong lib for serve massa like slave."

"Bai Jove!"

"That's what he means," said Kerr. "You saved his life, he reckons, and he's going to serve you faithfully now, instead of murdering you for your gold watch. I dare say it's what he would call playing the game."

Tom Merry wrinkled his brows thoughtfully.

"Well, if he means it, honest Injun, that's all right," he said. "It would be much better to have him along with us in exploring this giddy river, of course, as we don't know the place in the least. But if he is treacherous—"

M'pong evidently understood.

"Me lib for serve massa. Lib for die for massa!" he interjected.

"That means he'll die for you if necessary," said Kerr.

"Bai Jove! I wathah think he's all wight, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Let's give him a chance."

"Good!"

"I dare say he might be able to get us something to eat, too," Fatty Wynn remarked. "I don't know how you fellows feel, but I'm getting hungry."

"Very well, M'pong," said Tom Merry. "You want to come with us—you lib for come up dem river along massa."

The negro nodded emphatically.

"You lib for serve true and nebber steal."

Another emphatic nod.

"We'll trust you, then. After all, you fellows, it's his boat," Tom Merry remarked. "We don't want to steal it. If he stays with us, we'll pay him for the use of the boat, and for his services, just the same as if nothing had happened."

"But we'll keep an eye on him, all the same," said Kerr.

"Oh, yes, rather!"

M'pong bumped his thick head upon the bottom of the boat again.

"No lib for pay," he said.

Tom Merry smiled.

"That looks like the real thing," he remarked.

"We shall see," said Kerr.

"Well, I trust him, for one," said Tom Merry. "It's all right, M'pong. Now we lib for dem river, sharp."

"Yes, sah!"

And M'pong, having recovered his breath, sat down to his paddle again. Three of the juniors took the other paddles. But M'pong easily did as much work as the other three. His huge, brawny arms were tireless. For the fate of his companions he seemed to care nothing; he did not say a word about them, or give a glance along the fading shore. The only clear thought in the dull brain of the savage was that he wished to serve Tom Merry for having saved his life.

In the fading daylight, the juniors looked round at the banks they were passing. Swamps and forests, forests and swamps! Here and there, at long intervals, something like a sprawling village on the banks, with naked negroes and scrambling babies—here and there the white walls of some Belgian villa. But almost all the time, Nature in savage garb. And the further they went, the slighter grew the signs of civilisation.

Night swooped down upon the Congo.

M'pong still paddled on, waiting for orders. Fatty Wynn was very hungry now, and growing dangerously near a state of hysterics on the subject. Tom Merry tapped M'pong on the shoulder, and the black looked at him.

"We are hungry," said Tom Merry. "Where can we get food? Lib for eat."

M'pong grinned.

"Yes, sah."

He pointed to the distant bank, swallowed up in the darkness.

"Lib for buy food," he said.

"Take us there, then."

"Yes, sah."

The boat glided towards the shore in the darkness. Kerr looked very uneasy, and so did some of the others.

"He'll run us into some blessed nigger village," muttered Kerr. "There's no law and order in this country, out of the range of the Belgian guns. He may get a crowd of nigger fiends round us, and we shall be done for."

"I trust him," said Tom Merry.

"That's all very well, but—"

"Well, we must have food. We shall be famished by morning. It's a risk that we've got to take, it seems to me."

"I suppose so," admitted Kerr. "Look here, we'll stay in the boat, and give M'pong money to go ashore and buy THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 191.

food. If he is faithful, he'll bring it to us. If he isn't, we don't want to trust ourselves ashore with him."

"Good old Kerr!" said Figgins admiringly. "He works these things out in algebra, I believe. I think Kerr is right, Tom Merry."

Tom Merry nodded.

"All serene," he said. He went towards M'pong, as the boat glided into the shadow of the mangroves. "M'pong you lib for food, quick; we wait in the boat. Savvy?"

"Yes, sah."

"Here is some money; you lib for pay."

"Yes, sah."

The boat stopped in the thick mangroves. From somewhere in the darkness came a gleam of light, but the juniors could see no signs of a village. M'pong put the handful of silver coins into some recess of his waistcloth, and clambered among the low-hanging mangroves, and disappeared in the darkness.

The juniors waited in the boat.

At a sign of treachery they were ready to paddle away, and they listened intently, and watched in the darkness.

But the gloom was too intense for them to see an inch before their noses.

Out on the broad breast of the Congo the stars were reflected dancing in the rolling waters, but in the deep shadow of the mangrove thickets blackness reigned.

It was amazing to the juniors that M'pong could find his way among the mangroves to the shore, but doubtless he knew the locality well.

Many minutes passed, and there was no sound of his return.

Kerr sniffed at last. From the moment that he had suspected M'pong first, and his suspicion had turned out to be well-founded, the Scottish junior had not trusted him.

"He's deserted us," he said.

"I don't think so," replied Tom Merry quietly. "Anyway, we'll give him a chance."

"Yaa, wathah!"

"I'm awfully hungry," said Fatty Wynn plaintively. "It was jolly careless to leave the steamer without any grub, when you come to think of it, Tom Merry."

"We mightn't have got away at all if we'd stayed for grub, Fatty."

"Well, I'm famished."

There was a rustle in the mangroves.

"Look out! Here's M'pong!"

M'pong it was. He came back with two rush baskets strung upon his back, and he rolled them into the boat. Then he followed them in, panting. Fatty Wynn dragged open the baskets, and uttered an exclamation of satisfaction.

"Cold chickens and jelly?" asked Monty Lowther.

"No, you ass; but it's a good prog, and there's plenty of it, that's the chief thing!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was plenty indeed. There was dried fish of several sorts, and Indian bread, and fruits of many kinds, and a variety of nuts and a curious kind of brown cake. Fatty Wynn lost no time in beginning, and the hungry juniors joined him quickly enough. M'pong paddled the boat out into the wide Congo again while they ate.

Under the stars that studded the wide, blue heavens the boat glided on on that strange voyage, and the juniors, having finished their meal, lay down in the boat to rest, one or two of them keeping awake to watch. Tom Merry offered to relieve M'pong at the paddle, but the negro shook his head; he seemed tireless. With slower but still steady strokes he paddled on through the silent hours of the starry night.

CHAPTER 11.

Up the Congo.

ANOTHER day—glaring sun and blazing heat on the rolling Congo. And yet another, and another, each the same as the previous one—heat and sun, sun and heat—mosquitoes by the myriad—mangrove swamps with sickly smells—primeval forests, whence came at night the roaring of ferocious beasts; each day, each night, was like the previous one, but strange and wild to the juniors. From St. Jim's to the Congo was a wonderful change, and they did not easily get used to it, but at last they dropped into the way of their surroundings.

During those days they kept a keen watch for any sign of the steam-launch and the American. But they did not find Henry K. Hudson. Tom Merry had explained to M'pong what he was seeking on the river, and the black man entered into the quest keenly enough, and made inquiries of passing boats and rafts, and at the native villages on the banks. The Congo black was invaluable to the juniors; without him they would have pushed on just the same, but he made the difficult path much easier. He could speak the dialects of the river, and gain information that would have been sealed to them, and on several occasions he brought news to Tom

Merry that a steam-launch had passed a day or two days before, as the case might be. And Tom Merry was relieved to know it—it proved that the juniors were on the track, and that Henry K. Hudson had not yet overtaken the three adventurers, and when he did overtake them Tom Merry had not the slightest doubt that he would be murdered if he were unaided.

It was a race up the Congo—a strange race, with three starters. Ahead were Gally and Rodriguez and Yanez, the three rascals who had stolen Sir Richard's papers. With those papers they could ascertain the exact whereabouts of the new rubber region, and they could then destroy the papers, so that the secret would be locked in their own bosoms. Then they could take their time about getting the concession from the native chief and from the Belgian Government. Behind the three adventurers, undoubtedly in a much swifter craft, was the American, the agent of Sir Richard, determined to recapture the papers or die in the attempt. And after the American came the juniors of St. Jim's, determined that he should not leave them out of the struggle with the adventurers who had stolen the secret of the rubber territory.

The race was strange enough, and the juniors felt the thrill of the excitement of it as the days passed on. M'pong was invaluable. For a few silver coins at a time he seemed able to purchase any quantity of provisions, and the juniors were kept well supplied. Even the keen and canny Kerr was convinced by this time that the black man was faithful. The juniors improved as paddlers with practice, and they brought the boat along at a good speed, and M'pong paddled at night when they were resting.

Tom Merry's chief worry was that he and his companions were unarmed. They had cut themselves cudgels in the thickets, shaping them with their pocket-knives, and these would be dangerous enough in a fight, but of more deadly weapons they had none. And they were venturing into wild regions, where lions prowled unchecked, and wild elephants crashed through the forests, and cannibals lived upon the banks of the river, and human bones could be seen decorating the huts of the ju-ja men.

But they never thought of turning back.

The love of adventure, inbred in every British boy, was strong in Tom Merry & Co., and it was growing keener now amid their wild surroundings.

More than once, the juniors thought, M'pong had averted an attack from savage negroes by talking to them in their own dialect. They could not help feeling that they would not have got so far without fighting but for the help of the black man. And the juniors found themselves growing quite attached to M'pong.

The juniors grew sunburnt almost to the colour of berries. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's white skin had changed to the colour of a chestnut. They were burnt and tattered—for their clothes did not stand the wear and tear of those rough days in the boat. But they did not care. They were healthy enough in the midst of sickly surroundings. They did not drink or smoke, and they defied the climate.

"Bai Jove!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy remarked, as he fanned himself with a plantain leaf on the fifth afternoon, in the blazing glare of the sun. "Bai Jove, I'm gettin' wathah to like this life, you know! I wegarid it as bettah than gwindin' Latin in the class-rooms at St. Jim's."

"What-ho!" said Figgins emphatically.

"I am not at all in a huwy to go home," said D'Arcy. "The only twouble is that my silk hat is practically ruined. But I do not weally need it here."

"Go hon!"

"Weally, Lowthah—"

Crack!

Tom Merry sprang to his feet.

"Hark! What was that?"

Crack! Crack!

It was the report of a rifle. The sound came clearly across the wide waters. The sharp reports echoed a thousand times in the great trees, which flung the sound back upon the river again.

The juniors were all upon their feet at once. It might be some hunter, it might be the Belgian soldiery shooting down negroes for failing to bring in the required amount of rubber. But it might be the man they sought.

Crack! Crack!

The reports were lighter, and evidently came from a revolver. Then the sharp, loud crack of a rifle was heard again. Tom Merry shaded his eyes with his hand and scanned the river.

The firing came from behind a point of thickly-wooded land that jutted out into the Congo. Who was firing, and what he was firing at, could not be seen.

The firing was so rapid that it seemed as if more than one rifle was being used. But Kerr did not think so.

"It's one man firing all the time," he said. "The ping is just the same each time. He's using a rifle and revolver

alternately. He must be pretty hard pressed, I should thin and he's trying to keep a crowd off."

"Yaas, wathah! Paddle away, deah boys; we're goin' to see what's the mattah!"

"Yes, rather!"

M'pong looked earnestly at Tom Merry.

"Lib for run," he said, "Savages—cannibals—lib for eat Massa Tom. Lib for run."

Tom Merry shook his head.

"That may be our friend in danger, M'pong. Paddle away."

The black made no further objection. M'pong and three juniors handled the paddles, and they made the boat fly. It rounded the neck of land. The rest of the fellows stood ready, with their cudgels in their hands. The boat ran suddenly into sight of the fighting.

A steam-launch was aground in the thick, yellow mud of the Congo. Behind the mud-banks was a stretch of sickly mangrove swamps, and beyond them the forest. In front of the stranded launch was the wide river, and on the river three canoes with savage negroes cramming them. The horrible, bestial faces of the blacks showed that they belonged to the lowest type of the Congo savage. In the wind on the river a smell was wafted from their canoes to the boat, so filthy were the savages. Some of them wore human bones strung on their necks and round their middle. They were armed with clubs and spears, and some of them were hurling spears at the launch, while others paddled.

On the deck of the launch several boxes and packages had been piled up to form a sort of defence against the spears. Behind this frail barricade a white man was kneeling, and the juniors caught a glimpse of him. The boxes before him and round him were studded with spears that had stuck into them, and there was a splash of blood across the white man's sun-browned face. But his keen, grey eyes were steady, and the hand on his rifle never faltered.

Crack—crack—crack!

The white man's aim was deadly.

He was picking his men as if he were shooting at a target. In each canoe one man rolled over under the fire, and each man shot down was one of the paddlers.

Crack—crack—crack!

Three more paddlers, dead or disabled, rolled over among the legs of their companions.

The aim of the white man was evidently to keep the canoes from getting too close. But in spite of the execution they paddled nearer. Then a hand grasping a revolver came into view over the barricade, and a rain of rapid shots scattered among the blacks. Thrown into confusion, the negroes tumbled over one another, yelling wildly, and the canoes drifted further off.

"It's Mr. Hudson!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Did you see him?"

"Yes, for a second."

"And he's alone!" muttered Figgins.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"We're going to help him," said Tom Merry. "I think we'd better try to get to the launch and get on board. The niggers haven't seen us yet, and they're knocked out for a bit."

The savages in the canoes had retreated now. The three canoes had drifted some little distance on the river, and deep groans and cries came from them. But there were still a score of the savages unhurt, and they were uttering cries of rage.

"Lib for dem smoke boat, M'pong," said Tom Merry.

"Yes, sah."

The boat ran swiftly along the shore towards the stranded launch. The negroes in the canoes were too much occupied to see it at first. Tom Merry called out in English as they neared the launch:

"Mr. Hudson! Don't fire!"

There was a cry of amazement from the launch.

"Thunder! Who's that?"

"Tom Merry!"

"Well, carry me home to die!" ejaculated the American.

"Look sharp! You'll have their spears about your ears in a shake of a lamb's tail!"

"Buck up!"

The boat ran against the hull of the launch. There was a yell from the blacks—they had seen it now. Spears came hurtling through the air, but they fell short, splashing in the river. The juniors clambered on board the steam-launch quickly enough, followed by M'pong. There came a fiendish burst of yells, and the canoes came paddling on to the attack again. The dead had been flung into the river—perhaps the wounded with them—the Central African black is not particular. Brandishing their spears, the cannibals came on.

"Better get under cover," said Mr. Hudson coolly—as coolly as if the juniors had come to pay him an afternoon

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call, and he had been expecting them. "I guess this is going to be hot! Go below, especially you with the monocle!"

"Weally, sir—"

"Vamoose, I say—you're in the way."

"I wefuse to vamoose, whatever that may mean. A D'Arcy's place is in dangah, when there is any dangah," said the swell of St. Jim's, with dignity.

"Get below!" roared Mr. Hudson. "Into the cabin—into the engine-room—anywhere! You're in the way! If any of you kids can shoot, there are a couple of rifles standing behind the hatch there. Lots of cartridges here. Below, the rest of you!"

Crack! crack! crack!

The American, his eyes gleaming under the blood-stained bandage on his forehead, was firing again, and his fire was answered by wild yells from the Congo cannibals.

CHAPTER 12.

Fighting the Cannibals.

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY made a jump for the rifles. He did not even stop to fix his monocle. He grasped one of the magazine rifles, and loaded it with quick, precise fingers. Arthur Augustus had shot often enough at home at Eastwood, and as a matter of fact he was quite as good a shot as Henry K. Hudson. Tom Merry seized the other rifle, and Figgins picked up the revolver Mr. Hudson had laid beside him. The three of them joined in the firing.

The savages were making a determined onslaught now.

Paddling furiously, they brought the canoes with a rush right up to the launch, though black after black rolled over under Mr. Hudson's rapid shots.

The three canoes bumped against the launch together, and the blacks swarmed up the side. There were a dozen of them at least, brawny, filthy, ferocious savages, spear in hand, with madly-glaring eyes.

"I guess this is the last round," said Henry K. Hudson, coolly. He jammed his teeth hard upon his unlighted cigar, and fired the last shot in his rifle. A negro rolled over with a splash into the river.

It was at this moment that the juniors chimed in.

Crack! crack! crack! cra-ack-ack!

Figgins was pumping away with the revolver as fast as he could pull the trigger. Tom Merry and D'Arcy fired with the magazine rifles almost as fast. They did not need to take aim—they pumped bullets into the thick of the crowded savages.

The sudden burst of firing swept the cannibals back.

With bullets tearing through them at close range, nearly all of them hit with the fast-flying lead, they surged back over the side of the launch.

Splash! splash! splash!

Bump! bump!

Into the river, or into the boats, the cannibals dropped. The juniors were still firing, though their lead swept only the empty air now. Henry K. Hudson chuckled grimly.

"I reckon you can save your cartridges," he drawled, "they're gone."

He loaded up his rifle, and then laid it down, struck a match, and lighted his cigar. He blew out a cloud of thick strong smoke with a great deal of satisfaction.

"I guess they're fed up," he remarked.

The cannibals were certainly "fed up." What were left of them had fled, the canoes paddling away in mad haste. The crocodiles of the Congo had taken heavy toll of the assailants.

Henry K. Hudson rose, and stretched his limbs, and yawned.

"You've saved my life, you kids," he said. "That last rush would have finished it. I never reckoned I should get out of this alive—I guessed I'd not as many of the black devils as I could before I went under, that's all. You've saved my life. But how on earth did you get here! I want to know!"

Tom Merry laughed.

"We didn't stay behind, that's all," he said.

"You followed me up the river, hey?"

"I guess so," grinned Jack Blake.

"Captain Crane ought to have kept you on the steamer."

"He wanted to."

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"And you reckoned you wouldn't stay."

"Exactly."

"Well," said Henry K. Hudson, "I ought to wade into you with a rope's end, I guess, but you've saved my life, so I suppose I must say I'm glad to see you."

"Yaas, wathah! And I am vewy glad we came along in time to take a hand, sir; though I hope and twust I have not killed anybody."

"Oh, you couldn't hit a house," said Mr. Hudson, showing all his brown teeth in a great grin. "You needn't be afraid of that, Master Eyeglass."

D'Arcy coloured.

"Weally, Mr. Hudson—"

"Well, hyer we are," said Mr. Hudson, smoking away at a great rate, and apparently deriving great satisfaction from the black cigar, the mere smell of which made the juniors feel a little qualmy. "Hyer we are, and I guess it's no good telling you to go back."

"Ha, ha! No fear!"

"Then you will have to come on with me. The launch will hold you, I guess, once you get her off the mud—and your black man can stoke."

Tom Merry turned to M'pong.

"You lib for stoke," he said.

"Yes, sah."

"You've got your nigger in good order. I must remark," said Mr. Hudson, "I wish mine had been half as good, and I guess I shouldn't have been in this fix."

"How did it happen?" said Tom Merry.

The American shrugged his shoulders.

"I guess I owe it to Gally and Rodriguez. They got wind of my being after them. You see, they are going up the river in a native boat with rowers, and so I gained on them in a steam launch. But they were ready for me—the tamation scoundrels. They had this gang of niggers all ready primed—and as soon as they attacked the launch, my niggers vamoose, engineer and stoker and all. They absquatulated into the mangroves, and I was left on my lonesome. The launch drifted into the mud, and I've been shooting ever since—and I guess I've made them black cusses sorry for themselves—some."

"It was pretty deep of Gally," said Tom Merry, "I wonder how he induced the cannibals to go for you."

"I guess he's been up this hyer river before, and knows the ropes," said Mr. Hudson. "He's had dealings with them cannibals many a time. I reckon. He's paid them for this—and I daresay he's pitched them a yarn that the steam launch came from Boma, and that I was a Belgian blighter after rubber. The niggers are death on Belgians, when they get a cat's chance."

Tom Merry shuddered.

"Then those poor wretches were perhaps attacking you under a mistake, thinking that you were coming to harm them."

"I guess it's likely enough."

"It seems horrible."

"Oh, I guess you needn't waste any sympathy on them," said Mr. Hudson. "They'll eat their fathers and mother's when they are hungry. The more they're wiped out, the better it is for everybody. I reckon. I guess I've took some of the shine out of their black hides this time. But enough jaw—the blighters who have got away may come back with hundreds more, and if we're still here, they'll torture us to death with their ju-ju business. I suppose you wouldn't like to be buried up to the neck in sand, with the mid-day sun burning your head to a blister and honey smeared on your nose to attract the ants."

"Good heavens!"

"Do they really do those things?" asked Figgins, shivering.

"They do, my son—I've seen 'em," said the American, "and when you've seen all that I've seen, you'll be willing to take a pot shot at a Congo cannibal whenever you get a chance. The Belgians are cruel scoundrels, but the niggers—Groo! But let's get the launch off. I guess if you tow her after that boat of yours, she'll come off the mud."

"Right you are, sir."

The juniors set to work actively at once under the burning sun.

A rope was passed from the stem of the launch to the

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M'pong crawled forward to Tom Merry's feet, and knocked his forehead upon the bottom of the boat. "Massa lib for save M'pong," he said. "M'pong lib for serve Massa like slave," (See Chapter X.)

stern of the boat, and the juniors manned the latter and paddled away.

The launch was stuck in soft mud, partly heeled over; but the steady pull upon her dragged her into shallow water, and then she floated on an even keel.

"All O.K.," called out Mr. Hudson. "You can come aboard. M'pong, if that's your name, you'll bank up the fire, I guess, and stoke."

"Yes sah."

The juniors clambered on board again. The steam launch was a good size, and a very handsome and useful vessel. When the engine was throbbing again she moved out into the main channel of the river at a good speed, dragging the boat after her. Mr. Hudson drew a knife to cut the rope.

"Hold on," said Tom Merry, "that boat belongs to M'pong."

"I guess I'll pay him for it," said Mr. Hudson, "we can't tow it all the way up the Congo. We may have to go hundreds of miles yet, and we may have to hustle."

He cut the rope, and the boat drifted away.

The launch throbbed on up the brown river. Now that the juniors were on board, they made a more than sufficiently numerous crew for the little steamer, and Mr. Hudson apportioned them their duties.

"I guess we don't want any slackers here," he remarked. "If you're staying on board the launch, my sons, you're working."

"We don't want to slack, sir," said Digby; "we're willing to work."

"Yaas, wathah."

"Oh, you can't work, Master Eyeglass," said Mr. Hudson. "I'll let you slide. But the others can buckle to. Take it in turns to help M'pong with the stoking."

"Weally, Mr. Hudson—"

"No back talk to the skipper of this hyer craft," said Mr. Hudson, with a wave of his cigar. "You can't work! Keep your eyes open, you kids."

The juniors were on the look-out without being told.

In the distance, behind, a number of canoes shot out from the mangroves of the river bank. Mr. Hudson chuckled as he saw them.

"They've come back," he remarked. "I guess they'll have a try to catch us—but they won't work the rifle, I reckon."

The American was right. The canoes pulled out after the launch, but the little steamer simply walked away from them, fast as they paddled. In a quarter of an hour the last of the canoes was dropped out of sight astern. The steam launch throbbed on swiftly up the Congo.

CHAPTER 13.

Run Down.

HENRY K. HUDSON seemed to be in high spirits now. He removed the bloodstained bandage from his forehead, and washed the cut there, and Tom Merry tied a fresh bandage on for him. He smoked black cigars in quick succession, the strong tobacco seeming to have no effect upon him, excepting to make his brown teeth a little browner. He frequently burst into a chuckle as he scanned the wide reaches of the river.

"You think we shall find them soon?" Tom Merry asked, as the sun was sinking in the west towards the far Atlantic, turning the great river into a rolling flood of crimson and gold.

"I guess so. You see, I know they were close at hand this morning, and they can't have got very far. We shall run them down."

"Good."

"And I'm glad to have you kids with me," said Mr. Hudson. "The scallywags won't have much chance against a crowd. I shouldn't have been justified in bringing you up here with me, but now you're here, I'm glad. See?"

Tom Merry laughed.

"I see! I hope we shall find Gally & Co! But suppose they leave their boat, and take to the banks. What then?"

The American grinned.

"They'll not be likely to do that," he said. "They would be eaten by the niggers the first day on shore, I guess. Besides, it's no easy thing to travel on the banks of the Congo. You'd have to blaze your way through the thickets with an axe in some places, and to tramp over fever swamps in others. They'll keep to the river, unless they're driven to take to the land—and if they're driven ashore, they'll get back to the river just as fast as they can."

"I suppose you're right."

"I reckon I am, sonny."

Night descended upon the Congo. The moon sailed high over the African forests. The launch throbbed on through the night. From the banks came the deep roar of lions prowling in the forests for prey.

"Bai Jove!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy remarked, turning his eyeglass upon the sombre woods, "I should like to have a shot at a lion, deah boys."

Mr. Hudson chuckled.

"I guess you'd run if you saw one," he remarked, "and you wouldn't stop for your monocle, neither."

The swell of St. Jim's sniffed indignantly.

"I wegard your remarks as wude," he said.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"A chap can wear an eyeglass, and still keep his end up in a swamp," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I wegard you as a Yankee boundah."

"Cheese it, Gussy," said Tom Merry.

"I wefuse to cheese it, I—"

"It's all right, I guess," said Mr. Hudson, chuckling. "But I should like to see Master Eyeglass with a lion. He, he, he!"

And he turned away quite good-humouredly. Arthur Augustus gave him a withering look through the monocle which amused Mr. Hudson so much.

"I twust that boundah will not pwovoke me into givin' him a feashful thwashin'," he remarked.

"No, that would be too fearful," agreed Monty Lowther. "But I would help to sweep up what was left of him after you'd finished, Gussy."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"I say, what about grub?" said Fatty Wynn. "I'm getting hungry. I don't know whether there's enough grub on this craft for all of us."

"Bester look," said Monty Lowther, with a yawn.

Fatty Wynn approached Mr. Hudson, and questioned him on the subject. The American laughed.

"I guess there's plenty of grub here," he said. "Tins of meat and biscuir, and plenty of tea and sugar and rum."

"I don't want any rum," said Fatty Wynn. "But the other things are all right. I'll be cook, if you like, sir, and get the grub ready. I generally do the cooking in the study in the New House at St. Jim's."

"Go ahead, then."

Fatty Wynn went ahead. He soon had a meal ready, and the juniors ate on deck in the moonlight, with good appetites. Henry K. Hudson was scanning the river as the launch throbbed on.

"I suppose we shall keep watch to-night, sir," Tom Merry remarked presently.

"I guess I shall, sonny."

"You can't stay awake day and night, sir. Better let us take it in turns."

"Yess, wathah! I shall insist upon takin' my turn with the watchin'."

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"Oh, you'd go to sleep," said Mr. Hudson.

"Weally, sir—"

"But I guess you can take turns, some of you," said the coast agent. "Tom Merry and Figgins and Blake—you seem the likeliest—and you, Korr. You can take it in turns, two at a time, in case one nods off. You can wake me at midnight."

"Yes, sir."

The American stretched himself upon the deck, and was asleep in two minutes—a rifle by his side, and a revolver in his hand.

Henry K. Hudson was not likely to be caught napping, whatever happened.

The speed of the launch had been reduced so that she was doing little more than keeping her own against the sluggish current of the Congo. Tom Merry was steering and watching, and Figgins watched, too, while M'Pong was at work below. The other juniors slept on the deck.

The night passed without alarm. The juniors were used, by this time, to the cries of wild beasts in the forests, and they hardly noticed them.

Mr. Hudson was awakened at midnight, and he took the wheel, and did not close his eyes again. He seemed to be able to exist on very little sleep.

Tom Merry awakened soon after dawn.

The launch, at a good speed now, was throbbing and puffing up the river, which gleamed and rippled in the rising sun.

Huge forests rose on either side of the stream, and the juniors could see monkeys climbing and clinging in the branches, chattering to one another with a strange sound. More dangerous animals could be seen—a huge serpent, writhing over a branch that extended over the river, and a lion crouching in the thicket. The sight of the king of beasts thrilled the juniors. They had seen lions in the Zoo at London, but to see one wild in an African forest was another matter. And after one look at him, they felt glad that he was upon the shore, and themselves upon the boat.

"Upon the whole I'd wathah leave the beast alone," Arthur Augustus remarked.

Mr. Hudson chuckled.

"In two minutes he wouldn't leave enough of you to make a rim round your monocle," he remarked.

"Weally, my deah sir—"

The American laughed. He evidently did not think that it was incumbent upon him to waste politeness upon young persons, and he had formed an altogether unjust estimate of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, from his monocle and his accent and his elegant ways.

Mr. Hudson scanned the lonely river with unresting eyes.

On either bank, there was no sign of human life. Even savages did not seem to live upon the solitary upper waters of the Congo.

The juniors were eating their breakfast when a sudden exclamation from Mr. Hudson caused them to spring up, forgetful of crackers and corned beef.

"I guess I've spotted the cusses."

Ahead, on the gleaming river, a boat was floating, with six negroes at the oars. It looked like a ship's boat. In one end was a canvas shelter, with the sides open, and under the canvas three white men were sprawling lazily and smoking. White men by race, at least, their faces being burnt by the sun to almost the hue of the black faces of their companions.

One of them was less swarthy than the others. The juniors had only to look at them to know them. They were Gally and the two Spaniards—the scoundrels who had robbed Tom Merry of Sir Richard's papers in the wood in far-off England, and who had sent him on a wild-goose chase to West Africa with a dummy packet. In the sun the juniors caught the gleam of gold in the ear-rings of Juan Rodriguez.

"Bai Jove, there they are!"

Mr. Hudson showed his brown teeth in a smile of great satisfaction.

"I guess that boat can't walk away from steam power," he remarked.

"Wathah not!"

"Keep under cover," said the American. "Those rascals will shoot."

He picked up his rifle. Tom Merry took one of the others, and Figgins another. These were all the firearms on board, with the exception of Mr. Hudson's revolver. But the other juniors had their cudgels, as well as spears that had been dropped on board by the cannibals who had boarded the launch.

The launch's crew were undoubtedly more than a match for the men in the boat, even if the negro oarsmen sided with their employers, which was very doubtful.

Besides that, it was easy for the launch to run down the boat, and smash it, and throw its crew into the water, if Mr. Hudson chose.

The throb of the launch on the silent river soon caught

the ears of the men in the boat. They were seen to raise themselves, and look back across the gleaming Congo.

As they sighted the launch, they sprang to their feet.

The American chuckled.

"I guess they're surprised to see us," he remarked. "They reckoned I was eaten by the cannibals by this time, and they never expected to see you here. Ha, ha, ha!"

The three men in the boat were staring blankly at the launch, and the faces of the crew. They seemed to be lost in astonishment.

Henry K. Hudson waved his brown hand.

"We're after you!" he shouted, the wind carrying his voice the distance. "I guess we're on you this time, you scalawags."

The answer was sudden. The dusky hand of the ear-ringed Spaniard went up, there was a flash and a sharp report, and a bullet whistled past the ear of the American.

CHAPTER 14.

Not Yet!

CRACK!

The report followed the whistle of the bullet.

Henry K. Hudson did not move a muscle.

"I guess that was a poor shot," he remarked. "Our dusky friend was in too great a hurry. Cover—quick!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Lie down!"

The juniors threw themselves flat on the deck.

The three rascals in the boat were firing now, and bullets whistled over the launch. The adventurers were desperate; they did not intend to yield up the papers while they had a chance left. Gally was shouting to the black oarsmen to row hard, and the boat travelled at a greater speed in the water.

Henry K. Hudson took aim at one of the black rowers, and shot him in the arm. He did not wish to kill the man; but he intended to stop the boat. The shot had the result that he anticipated.

The wounded black sprang up with a wild yell, clutching at his arm, and his oar slid into the water. Without a moment's hesitation, the wounded man sprang into the river, and swam for the mangroves along the bank. In a second, the other five had thrown down their oars, and followed his example.

The three white men were left alone in the drifting boat, without the chance of stopping the flight of their crew.

The boat rocked on.

The loud curses of the abandoned adventurers could be heard across the gleaming waters of the Congo. Rodriguez in his rage turned his revolver upon the swimming blacks, and fired three or four shots. The bullets splashed up the water round the negroes, and one of them gave a sharp yelping cry, and sank out of sight.

Gally grasped the Spaniard's arm angrily.

"You fool! You are wasting your lead!" he muttered.

Rodriguez ground his teeth.

Gally seized an oar, and paddled the boat towards the bank. Rodriguez and Yanez kept up a fire on the launch. But Henry K. Hudson was master of the situation. Bales and boxes had already been rigged up to screen the steersman, and Tom Merry steered the launch without danger from the fire. Henry K. Hudson lay at full length on the deck, his rifle before him, and his keen, grey eye on the enemy.

His magazine rifle was spitting fire.

The juniors were breathless. Lying on the deck, they could see little, but the sound of the incessant firing, and the bullets whistling overhead, thrilled them through and through. How was it going to end?

They realised, with beating hearts, that it was a fight for life or death—that the three desperadoes, if they could, would kill every soul on board the little steamer, and that Henry K. Hudson was shooting to kill.

On the Congo every man's life depended upon himself and his rifle, and there was no law to answer to, save that of his own conscience.

Crack, crack, crack!

The oar splintered in Gally's hand, struck by a bullet.

The man started, and fell on his knees in the boat. A lucky accident for him, for Henry K. Hudson's next bullet whistled clear over his head.

But the boat was rocking now close to the thick mud of the banks.

Crack, crack, crack!

Startled monkeys looked from the branches of big trees overlooking the river, and chattered and grinned, as the deadly bullets flew beneath.

There was a sudden sharp shriek from Yanez, the Spaniard, and he tumbled backwards into the boat with a crash.

He lay there, moving feebly.

Hudson chuckled softly. He had put at least one of the enemy hors de combat. The launch was closing upon the boat now, but the boat was already at the mud on the edge of the belt of mangroves. The range was very short.

Gally and Rodriguez leaped out of the boat, knee-deep in mud, and plunged ashore.

They held their rifles over their heads as they tramped and splashed through the mud, making for the cover of the mangroves.

Henry K. Hudson leaped to his feet.

There was no fire to fear from the enemy now; their backs were turned in flight.

The American, standing on the deck, threw his rifle to his shoulder, and pumped out bullets after the fleeing adventurers.

Tom Merry uttered a cry.

He was not used yet to the merciless warfare of the heart of Africa.

"Mr. Hudson, spare them; they are running!"

The American snapped his brown teeth.

"And the papers with them, you young fool! Hold your tongue!"

Tom Merry caught his breath.

It was true—Gally or the ear-ringed Spaniard had stolen papers in his possession, and if they escaped the papers were lost.

Henry K. Hudson had not ceased to fire while he was answering Tom Merry. His magazine-rifle was spitting bullets all the time.

Crack, crack, crack!

Bullets tore the mangrove branches and splashed up the soft, thick mud round the fugitives as they tramped madly for the shore. In the boat, rocking on the edge of the swamp, lay Yanez groaning. Not a thought did his comrades give to the wounded Spaniard. They were thinking only of themselves and of the precious papers.

They followed a zigzag course, leaping and plunging to and fro to avoid the bullets of the American. Gally clapped a hand to his head suddenly, and drew it away with the fingers streaming red. But he tramped on, and disappeared into the mangroves.

The ear-ringed Spaniard paused for a second to look back and shake a clenched fist at the launch, and then he disappeared after his companion.

Henry K. Hudson muttered something between his teeth. He threw down his empty rifle, and caught one from Figgins, and pumped away every shot into the mangroves.

But no cry answered.

The adventurers had evidently gained a place of safety. From the boat, faintly across the river, came the sound of the groans of the wounded Spaniard.

"By Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "That poor wottah must be sufficin' howwibly! What are you goin' to do for him, sir?"

Henry K. Hudson shrugged his shoulders.

"I am going to search him for the papers, though there isn't much chance that he has them," he replied.

"Rodriguez or Gally would have them, I guess."

"I mean, he must be assisted in some way."

"Stuff!"

"My dear sir—"

"Hold your tongue, Master Eyeglass!"

"Weally, Mr. Hudson—"

The American turned away. He kept a keen eye on the shore, in case a shot should come from that direction. The two adventurers who had escaped still had their rifles, and they might be looking for a chance of sniping. But the mangroves grew too thickly in the mud to allow men on the dry land a chance of shooting—there were fifty yards of the swampy thickets between the river and the bank, and they screened the launch as much as they screened the escaped adventurers. The steam-launch ran up to the rocking boat on the edge of the swamp, and Hudson, after a last keen glance round, jumped into it.

Yanez groaned deeply.

His dusky hand made a motion towards the knife in his belt, but he could not draw it—he had no strength. The American's bullet was deep in his shoulder, and the Spaniard was badly wounded.

Mr. Hudson picked up his rifle and cartridge belt, and tossed them on board the launch.

"I guess they will be useful," he remarked.

A look of hate flashed over the face of the wounded man.

"Carambo! I have them not!" he murmured faintly.

"I guess that's so, but I'm going to see."

And Henry K. Hudson went scientifically through the Spaniard's clothes. He was soon satisfied. Yanez had none of the papers. The man was merely a follower, and his leaders were not likely to trust him with the precious documents.

"Who has them," asked Mr. Hudson—"Gally or Rodriguez?"

"I will tell you nothing!"

"Do you want me to pitch you over to the crocodiles?"

Yanez shuddered.

"Gally has them!" he muttered.

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"Good!"

The American stood up, and looked towards the man-groves. Then he leaped back on the launch, and rapped out an order. Tom Merry ran towards him.

"Mr. Hudson, you are not going to leave that man there?"

Mr. Hudson stared at him.

"I guess I am!" he replied.

"You—you can't! He's wounded!"

"So should I have been. I guess, if he'd been able to shoot a little straighter," said Mr. Hudson carelessly.

"Yes—but—"

"Nuff said! Our way lies up the river, I guess!"

"Mr. Hudson, his comrades will not return for him; I am sure of that. They have deserted him basely. Besides, if they did, the boat will drift off in a few minutes; he will be there in the blazing sun till it oversets, and then the crocodiles—"

"Perhaps you're right," said Mr. Hudson. "A bullet through the head now would be more merciful!"

He reached for his rifle.

"I did not mean anything of the sort!" exclaimed Tom Merry indignantly. "He is wounded. I don't care whether he's an enemy or not, he must be taken care of!"

"But we can't stop here for days—weeks—looking after a wounded thief," said the American, laughing at the idea.

"We can take him on board."

"I guess this launch isn't being run as a floating hospital, is it?"

"Look here, Mr. Hudson, we must do it! If we left the poor wretch there, it would haunt me for ever!" said Tom Merry, with a shudder. "He must come on board!"

"Yass, wathah!"

"He can be disarmed, and a wounded man can't do much harm, anyway, sir," said Figgins.

"And we'll look after him, sir," said Blake.

"Yass, wathah!"

Mr. Hudson hesitated. Under his rough exterior, he had a kind heart enough, but life on the West Coast of Africa had hardened him. Mercy to an enemy was an idea which was seldom heard of on the banks of the Congo. The wounded Spaniard was watching the launch with dull eyes. He had not the slightest expectation of pity. He would have finished a wounded enemy himself with a knife-thrust, and he had no expectation of better treatment.

Mr. Hudson looked at the juniors, and his better nature seemed to awaken at the sight of the earnest, boyish faces.

"I guess you don't know the Congo," he remarked. "But here's your way. You can get the brute on board if you like!"

"Thank you, sir!"

Mr. Hudson lighted a black cigar, and whistled carelessly. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy turned his eyeglass scornfully upon the American.

"But Jove!" he murmured. "I told you fellows all along that the man was a wotah!"

"Oh, it's only his way!" said Digby.

"Wats! A man who would speak disrespectfully of a fellow's monacle would do anything!"

Digby grinned. The juniors all bore a hand in getting the wounded Spaniard aboard. Yanez did not understand in the least what he was being treated so for. He muttered something in Spanish which the juniors did not understand. Mr. Hudson watched the whole proceedings with a satirical smile, and the launch throbbed on her way up the river with the wounded Spaniard on board.

CHAPTER 15.

The Quality of Mercy.

THROUGH the blazing sunshine of the Congo the little steamer panted on.

Henry K. Hudson was keeping a keen look-out on deck, but he was no longer watching the river for a boat. The enemy were on shore now, but the American expected to see something of them.

That Gally and the earringed Spaniard would keep on their way he was certain, and he was equally certain that they could not hope to reach their destination by land, through cannibal tribes and impassable forests. They must take to the river again sooner or later, and when they did so he hoped to spot them.

So far up the wild river they had no chance of obtaining a fresh boat and rowers; they would have to depend upon stealing some native canoe, and paddling themselves. They would be utterly at the mercy of the launch if the American succeeded in getting his eyes upon them.

Tom Merry & Co. were busier with the wounded Spaniard than with thoughts of the missing papers or the escaped adventurers. It might be weak and dangerous to spare an enemy in such a country, but the juniors did not choose to

think of that. They only knew that they came from a land where human life was held as sacred, and where Christians were taught to succour even their enemies.

The wretched man was placed in a bed, and the boys did what they could for him. They could not extract the bullet, but they stopped the bleeding, and washed and bandaged the wound. The wounded man asked eagerly for drink, but his lips curled up contemptuously when water was brought. It was rum that he wanted, but it would have been sheer poison to him in his state. And soon thirst drove him to drink the water. His black eyes rested continually upon the juniors as they took turns in looking after him. His wonder was evident in his face. He did not know why his life was spared, he did not know why he was cared for, and his looks betrayed it.

"Senorito," he said, towards sundown, as Tom Merry came up with a cheery smile—"senorito, what is your intention?"

"We're looking after you," said Tom Merry.

"To take me back to Boma and send me to prison?"

The junior laughed.

"No; to get you well."

"Why?"

"Well, because—because—because we are, you know."

Yanez was silent for some minutes. Tom Merry offered him a drink, but he declined it with a movement of the head. Thinking that he wished to rest, Tom Merry was about to withdraw, but the Spaniard made him a sign to remain.

"Hold, senorito."

"Can I do anything for you?" asked Tom Merry.

"No, senorito; but I can do something for you."

"For me!" said Tom Merry, in wonder.

"Si, senorito! You are the nino—you are the boy who carried the papers of Sir Richard Standish from the school in England to Southampton, to deliver them to the captain of the Opossum?"

"Yes," said Tom Merry.

"Rodriguez heard all the plan, from a window-sill in the school," said Yanez, with a faint grin. "We knew it all along, when you left the school with the papers, senorito. But listen. Those papers that you were robbed of—are you answerable for them?"

"In a way—yes," said Tom Merry. "Sir Richard will not blame me for being robbed of them, perhaps, but unless we recover them, it will be very unpleasant for me to face him. It will inflict a heavy loss upon him, for the benefit of a set of rascals."

Yanez grinned again.

"They have deserted me," he said. "I stood by them from first to last, and they deserted me, wounded and dying as they thought, to die in the sun. If they win the prize now, they will not share with me—I have dropped out of the game."

Tom Merry nodded. He thought that very likely. It would be months before the wounded man was able to look after himself, even if he recovered at all. The adventurers were not likely to seek him out to share with him.

"Senorito, you are trying to save my life, after I have done nothing but try to injure you," said the Spaniard, in a low voice. "Listen. Get your leader to swear that he will cure me if he can, and set me free, and I will tell him what I know of Gally's plans, and help you to recover the papers you have lost."

Tom Merry started.

"You mean that?" he exclaimed.

"Si, senorito!"

"I call Mr. Hudson at once, then!"

In a couple of minutes Henry K. Hudson stood by the bedside of the Spaniard. There was a very keen expression upon the face of the American.

"I guess I'll make that promise you want," he said. "I don't want to send you to prison, even if the Belgians would take the trouble to send you there, and you can go to the gallows whichever way you prefer. Now, what can you tell me about the papers? Have you seen them?"

The Spaniard shook his head.

"No; merely a glance, and I understood little of them, as they are written in English, and I speak English, but do not read it. And Gally and Rodriguez explained nothing to me."

"That was sensible of them, I guess. But what do you know, then?"

"I know where they were making for, when I was with them, senor."

The American's grey eyes gleamed.

"I guess that's O.K.," he said. "If you know that, you know the region the maps cover. It was on the Congo."

"Si, senor! They were making for the Ubanghi, and they intended to follow that river and land at N'lolo, and then strike north on land."

The American gave a long, low whistle.

"My hat! If that's the truth, you're worth your weight in gold to me, Yanez. We shall strike the Ubanghi river

in a couple of days, and I might have run on right up the Congo, and missed the scoundrels. I knew that the rubber land lay up the Congo past Stanley Pool, and somewhere near the Ubanghi region, but I guess I didn't know it was up the Ubanghi. Kelly kept that dark from me, at least. Are you telling me the truth, Yanez?"

"By all the saints, senior."

"Look here," said Henry K. Hudson, "you are in my hands here. If you have told me the truth, you shall have your liberty and a hundred dollars. If you have lied, Yanez, and I miss them, I shall find that you have lied, and I swear I will give you to the ju-ju men on the Congo to make a human sacrifice of. Savvy?"

The Spaniard shuddered.

"I have told you the truth, senior."

"I guess you have, Yanez; but if you've deceived me, better think it over, and yaup out the facts, or the ju-ju niggers will have a white man to torture—if you call yourself a white man."

And Henry K. Hudson lighted another cigar, and strolled away.

The wounded man fixed an earnest look upon Tom Merry.

"I have told the truth, seniorito," he said.

"I'm sure you have," said Tom Merry, "and you won't be sorry for it. You've done right; and as for those base scoundrels who left you to die, they do not deserve anything at your hands—excepting this."

The Spaniard's eyes gleamed.

"You are right, seniorito. Give me to drink."

Henry K. Hudson came to see the Spaniard again several times. He began to take care of the wounded man, and he extracted the bullet from his wound. After that Yanez improved very much, though it was clear that many days would elapse before he was able to stand upon his feet.

Henry K. Hudson put the launch at full speed ahead now. If the adventurers were making for the Ubanghi, as he believed now, they might cut across country, or follow one of the numerous subsidiary streams of the Congo. He had had the luck to happen on them once; it was not in reason to expect the same luck a second time. But the information Yanez had given him made his task more easy. He had to get ahead of the adventurers, which was easy in the steam-launch, and lay for them, as he expressed it, on the banks of the Ubanghi, near N'lolo, where they intended to land. Mr. Hudson knew the Ubanghi as well as any white man knew it, and he had been N'lolo as an ivory trader.

The American was very gleeful now. It was clear that he anticipated success; and he was quite willing to give Tom Merry & Co. their share of the credit.

"I guess it was good business saving that scallywag," he remarked. "Things like that work out as paying ventures at times. Those galoos who deserted him reckon that he's gone under; they won't even dream of this. It will be a little surprise party for them at N'lolo on the Ubanghi—some!"

And he grinned.

"You kids have done it!" he said. "If I pull off this rifle, I shall let Sir Richard know that you kids did half at least. You saved my life, and you got me this information by being soft-hearted, soft-headed greenhorns—"

"Weally, Mr. Hudson—"

"But the greenhorn comes out ahead of the old hand sometimes, and that's what you've done," said Mr. Hudson. "I give you all the credit. And I guess we shall ring in a cold deal on Rodriguez now!"

And Mr. Hudson rubbed his brown hands together, and chuckled with satisfaction.

CHAPTER 16. D'Arcy the Hero.

THE Ubanghi!" said Mr. Hudson.

The steam-launch throbbed on up that little-known river in the heart of the Dark Continent. The juniors gazed in awe and interest at the darkly-wooded banks, trodden seldom by white men's feet—by few, if any, save those of the Belgian officers.

"Well, we can call ourselves explorers now, at any rate," Figgins remarked. "Precious few white men have been where we are now."

"Yass, wathah!"

"And an eyeglass has never been seen on this hyer river before, I guess," said Mr. Hudson, with a chuckle.

Arthur Augustus sniffed angrily. He was growing exasperated with Mr. Hudson's incessant little jokes at his eyeglass, his elegant manners and customs, and his supposed softness in every way. The swell of St. Jim's was really roughing it as well as anybody, but the American persisted in regarding him as a soft "dude," as he called it in the American language. He really had no reason to hold that opinion, unless it was because of the care D'Arcy lavished

upon the remains of his silk hat. The swell of St. Jim's had only one topper with him, and he had a belief that some occasion might arise when it would be necessary to wear one, and so he was guarding that topper like the apple of his eye. As he explained to his chums, his hatters had no branch establishment on the upper waters of the Congo.

But D'Arcy was getting "fed up" with Mr. Hudson's jokes. He persisted in adorning his face with the eyeglass, out of British independence. He was longing for some opportunity of putting the Yankee in his place, and his chums had several times restrained him with difficulty from an open "row" with the coast agent. Though if Arthur Augustus had lost his aristocratic temper, and slanged the American as hard as he could, in all probability Mr. Hudson would have taken it as a joke, and roared with laughter over the fury of the swell of St. Jim's.

D'Arcy turned his back upon Mr. Hudson: a proceeding which only brought a further chuckle from that gentleman. The juniors were all grinning; even M'pong, who was on deck just then, grinned. Arthur Augustus frowned at the black man.

The sun was setting, and the juniors sat down round the deck to their evening meal. Mr. Hudson smoked a cigar forward, watching the river ahead. The launch wound on through mud and sand-banks, churning merrily under overhanging branches of gigantic trees. The swell of St. Jim's lay on the deck, the back of his head resting upon his hands, and gazed dreamily up through the foliage overhead, as the launch drifted on.

The sandbanks were thickening ahead, and Mr. Hudson gave the order to slacken speed. The launch was crawling through the water now.

Suddenly the swell of St. Jim's gave a start.

He sat up on deck, and then jumped to his feet, jamming the monocle more tightly into his eye, and scanning the thick tree over the steamer.

"Bai Jove!" he ejaculated.

"What's the matter, Gussy?"

"Gweat Scott—look out!"

From the thick branches over the steamer a sinuous form dropped like a cat upon the deck. A cat it was—but a huge cat with spotted skin, and great, greenish-yellow eyes that glared with hunger and ferocity.

It was a leopard!

The animal, beautiful and terrible, was the first the juniors had seen at close quarters, though they had caught distant glimpses of several in the forests from the passing launch.

They stood spellbound.

The leopard was in savage mood, evidently hungry. He had dropped upon the deck close behind Mr. Hudson, who was staring forward, and had not seen the animal; his eyes were upon the difficult passage ahead. At the exclamation of D'Arcy he turned and saw the animal within six or seven paces of him. He sprang back; and a long quiver ran through the leopard's sinuous body as it crouched to spring.

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gave one quick look round, and seized an axe, and dashed forward. Just as the leopard was rising to the spring, the axe descended, with all the strength of the sturdy junior's arm in the blow.

Crash!

The leopard screamed wildly with pain, and fell short in his leap, rolling on the deck with clawing feet.

"Gum!" ejaculated Mr. Hudson.

For once the cool American was unnerved; his hard brown face had turned a ghastly colour, and he stared blankly at the struggling leopard.

D'Arcy rushed upon the leopard again, axe in hand. Then Mr. Hudson recovered himself.

"Stand back!" he shouted. "Stand back! If he claws you, you're dead!"

He grasped his rifle and threw it to his shoulder.

D'Arcy halted.

The leopard, hard hit as he was, was by no means disabled, and he was turning upon D'Arcy with gnashing teeth and glaring eyeballs.

Crack, crack!

Two bullets crashed into the yellow head, and the leopard rolled over again. This time he did not rise.

The American, cool as ice now, advanced upon the struggling, writhing animal, pouring in bullets at close quarters from the magazine rifle.

The terrible creature shuddered and shivered, and the wild glare died out of the eye; the sinuous body lay still at last.

It was dead.

Mr. Hudson tossed the rifle aside. He looked at the slain leopard, and he looked at Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. The swell of St. Jim's dropped the axe, and wiped a spot of blood from his ragged trousers.

Tom Merry found his voice.

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"Good heavens! What a frightfully narrow escape, Mr. Hudson!"

"I guess it was!"

"Oh, Gussy!" said Blake. "Oh, Gussy, Gussy, Gussy! How could you!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Fancy Gussy coming out as a giddy hero!" grinned Figgins.

"Weally, Figgins—"

"Gussy, the leopard-slayer—Gussy, the mighty hunter!" chuckled Kerr. "Oh, Gussy! What will they say at St. Jim's when we tell them!"

"Won't they have pictures of him in the school rag," grinned Monty Lowther. "Won't they have a thrilling description of him in 'Tom Merry's Weekly'!"

"Yes, rather!"

"Why didn't I have my camera ready!" exclaimed Manners. "Gussy, old man, stand with your foot on the body, and the axe in your hand, will you—head well back, eyes forward—attitude like Ajax defying his laundress, and I'll take a photograph—"

"I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort, you uttah ass!" exclaimed the swell of St. Jim's indignantly. "And I wegard you as a lot of wottahs!"

"Oh, Gussy!" exclaimed Tom Merry, slapping him on the back. "It's only fun! We're proud of you, my son—you're a giddy hero! You've saved Mr. Hudson's life—perhaps some of our lives as well. We couldn't have shot the brute as Mr. Hudson did. Gussy, old man, you're a hero! Gimme your list!"

"Oh, weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Hurrah for Gussy!"

"Hip, pip, hurrah!"

"Oh, weally, you know—"

Henry K. Hudson came towards the swell of St. Jim's, a very peculiar expression upon his brown face. He seemed more taken aback by Arthur Augustus's action than by the terrible danger he had passed through.

"Will you give me your paw, young 'un?" he asked quietly.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy jammed his monocle into his eye, and surveyed the American with a great deal of dignity.

"Pway excuse me!" he said. "Undah the cires, I pwefer not to shake hands with you, sir. You have tweated me with the gwosset diswepet eval since our first meetin', and I cannot wegard you as a fwend. I should pwefer not to shake hands with you."

"I guess I apologise," he said.

"Oh, weally! Undah those cires.—"

Mr. Hudson grinned a little.

"I reckon that yellow beast would have had me down in a second more, and I should have been clawed to ribbons," said Mr. Hudson. "I guess he would have clawed some of you after he'd clawed me, too. You saved my life, and you showed pluck, young 'un, which many an old hunter of these forests would be proud to have. There ain't many galoots, I guess, who'd get within arm's-length of a leopard willingly. I take back all I've said about your eyeglass. Gimme your paw!"

"As one gentleman to another, sir, I accept your apology," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, in a very stately way. "I shall be pleased to shake hands with you!"

And he did!

CHAPTER 17.

Victory!

THICK forest, with a break amid the masses of green, where fields of manioc grew green in the sun. Behind the manioc fields, a clump of huts, and among the huts, negro women and children basking in the sun. The steam launch throbbed to a standstill. The explorers had reached their destination; this was N'lolo.

A canoe came pulling out from the shore.

Henry K. Hudson waved his hand to the big black man in it. The man had a necklace of bones round his neck, and the juniors shuddered as they looked at them. Yanez, who was now sitting in a deck chair, though still very weak from his wound, turned deadly pale at the sight of the man.

"What is the matter?" asked Tom Merry.

"Ju-ju!" whispered the Spaniard—"a ju-ju priest! They are the bones of murdered men he wears round his neck."

Tom Merry shuddered.

Mr. Hudson looked down at the man in the canoe, and entered into talk with him, in a barbarous dialect the juniors did not comprehend a word of. The ju-ju man grinned and nodded, and finally paddled away, evidently in a mood of great satisfaction.

Mr. Hudson lighted a cigar, evidently very well satisfied, too.

"I guess we shall have them when they arrive," he said.

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"How so, sir?" Tom Merry asked.

"I've made a bargain with B'poma. He's a thief of a priest, and can do as he likes with the king and the people here. He's agreed to have the whole tribe on the watch for Gally and Rodriguez, and if they come to this bank, for thirty miles up or down, they can't get through. It's all O.K. now, I guess, even if we miss them."

"Good! But what is he going to do it for?"

"Pay, my son, pay! I'm going to send him some traps from the coast. I've done the same before," said Mr. Hudson. "A ju-ju man has to keep up his reputation, you see, or he might be ju-jued himself any time, and a rival take his place. This chap has the power of performing miracles, and he is going strong."

"Miracles!" ejaculated Tom Merry.

"I guess so. He can produce sudden light in complete darkness, without flint or steel or matches, and it strikes the niggers as wonderful."

"Well, it is wonderful, if he can do it," said Figgins.

"I reckon it's not so astonishing when you know he's got a two-dollar electric lamp hidden in his rags," said Henry K. Hudson.

"Oh!"

"Electricity is as much known to these benighted niggers as aeroplanes or artificial teeth," said Mr. Hudson. "He's got them right to heel with his giddy miracles."

"What a rotten swindler!"

"Well, yes; but I guess there are swindlers in other countries, too. People like being taken in, I guess. This scallywag wants to be set up with accumulators, and I guess I'm going to do it, if he hands over them two rascals."

"Bai Jove! I don't half like this," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, in a murmur to his chums. "I should wefuse to have any dealings at all with that disgustin' black wottah!"

But Mr. Hudson evidently thought differently.

Probably he did not trust his ju-ju friend sufficiently to go ashore; at all events, the explorers did not leave the launch at all; but as they had ample supplies, they did not need to.

Several days passed quietly within sight of N'lolo. The natives brought fruit in canoes to sell, but there was no sign of hostility. Henry K. Hudson was evidently well-known there. The explorers waited for the coming of Gally and Rodriguez.

As the days passed, the juniors began to doubt.

The two adventurers, making their way through the wild African forest, had a thousand dangers to encounter. It was only too probable that they would perish by the way. Would they ever arrive as far on their journey as N'lolo?

But Mr. Hudson did not seem to doubt.

He spent his days stretched under an awning, smoking innumerable cigars, and yawning. He appeared content to wait.

It was on the fourth day that the monotony was broken. Tom Merry had awakened at the gleam of dawn, and he stood stretching himself, and looking out over the river, when he caught sight of a canoe paddling up the river against the current.

The junior paid little attention to it at first, for canoes were common enough on the river near N'lolo. But as he glanced at it a second time, he started.

There were two men paddling in it, and they were white men.

"My hat!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

He dashed towards Henry K. Hudson, who was sleeping on the deck, and shook him by the shoulder. The American opened his eyes and yawned.

"Hallo, sonny!"

"They're here."

"What!"

"They're coming."

"Waal, carry me home to die."

Henry K. Hudson jumped up and grasped his rifle. He ran to the side, and looked over the gleaming river.

Then his eyes blazed.

"I've got 'em now!" he muttered.

The launch was almost hidden by the drooping branches of a great tree. The American had planned that. The canoe paddled on, and the juniors, who were all watching now, saw the ear-ringed Spaniard point with his paddle towards the village of N'lolo. The canoe did not pull in towards the bank, so it was pretty clear that the two adventurers did not deem it safe to land at the village, but intended to paddle on to the deserted bank beyond.

Henry K. Hudson smiled grimly.

The worn look of the adventurers showed that they had not had an easy time in the African forests. Gally had a bandage round his head. They were worn and haggard, but there was determination in their bronzed faces.

Henry K. Hudson muttered a word to Tom Merry.

"Silence!"

He levelled his rifle.

"You—you are not going to shoot!" muttered Tom Merry.
"Not a word."

The canoe was coming within easier and easier range. In a few minutes it would pass within thirty feet of the launch. Then the American could pick off the two adventurers like partridges if he chose.

"Hold on!"

Mr. Hudson's voice rang suddenly across the river.

The two men started convulsively, and gazed round. They did not see the launch for a minute. Then they saw it, and the American with levelled rifle.

"Hudson!" muttered Gally, between his teeth.

"Carambo!"

"Hands up!" said Mr. Hudson. "Mind, you'll get it in the neck if you touch a weapon! Ah, would you!"

Gally made a wild plunge for his rifle. He caught it up, and flung it to his shoulder.

Crack!

Mr. Hudson kept his word. He fired before Gally could pull the trigger.

Gally gave a terrible cry, and rolled over in the canoe. Rodriguez clenched his hand, with a wild glare towards the steamer, and then leaped into the river. The waters closed over his head; but he came up again a dozen yards away, towards the further bank.

Crack! crack!

Bullets splashed into the water round him. But he swam on, and disappeared among the tropical vegetation across the river. In the canoe, Gally lay still.

The juniors shivered.

The launch drew out of the shadow of the great tree, and glided beside the rocking canoe. Mr. Hudson waved the juniors back, and descended into the little craft.

Tom Merry & Co. looked at one another with pale faces. It had been a light to the death. If Gally had succeeded in firing, Mr. Hudson would have fallen dead upon the launch. But it was terrible.

The juniors did not look into the canoe. Mr. Hudson was there for five minutes. He came on deck again with a bundle of papers in his hand.

"The papers, sir?" Tom Merry exclaimed eagerly. "Sir Richard's papers."

"I guess so."

"Gally had them?"

"Yes, Rodriguez has got away, but I guess he can't do any harm. I've got the papers," said Mr. Hudson. "Rodriguez has seen them, but he'll never find the place without the maps. It's all O.K."

"And—and Gally?" asked Tom Merry, in a faltering voice.
"Better ask no questions," said Mr. Hudson briefly. "It was his life or mine."

The juniors shivered. They knew what that meant; they knew that there was a dead man in the canoe that went rocking and gliding away upon the shining current of the Ubanghi.

They said nothing. There was nothing to say. But a longing was growing up within them to be away from that land of savage deeds, and back in a country where law and order reigned. Perhaps Mr. Hudson divined their thoughts.

"We've won this yer game, I reckon," he remarked. "I've got the papers. You boys will have to get back to school, I guess—hey?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"It's a better place for you than the Congo, I reckon," said Mr. Hudson, with a smile. "I sha'n't stop to say good-bye to my ju-ju friend. Down the Congo is our way."

And the steam launch throbbed away on the current.

CHAPTER 18.

Good News for St. Jim's!

HERRIES, of the Fourth, tapped at the door of the Head's study at St. Jim's.

It was long—very long since news had been had of Tom Merry & Co.

Although the school knew that the juniors had sailed in the Opossum, and their anxiety had been relieved to that extent, there soon came fresh news that made them uneasy again.

A cable from the coast had announced that Tom Merry & Co. had left the Opossum, and gone up the Congo after Mr. Hudson. The steamer had had to sail without them. That was the last news of Tom Merry and his chums.

Study No. 6 seemed very dreary to Herries in these days. It was Towser's sickness that had kept Herries from going with his chums, and for once in his life Herries was almost cross with Towser. But for that chance, he might have shared the dangers and adventures of his chums—shared their fate, whatever it was. The anxiety of the juniors, of the Head, and of the relations of the missing juniors was great. Herries deserted Study No. 6 at last, and went to "dig" in a Shell study with Kangaroo and Clifton Dane for company. Every day news was looked for; but news did not come.

It was the sight of Sir Richard Standish entering the Head's house that brought Herries to inquire. He determined to ask the Head if the baronet had brought any news, and at last he summoned up his courage to tap at the door.

"Come in," called out the Head.

Herries entered.

Sir Richard was still with Dr. Holmes, and there was a radiant look on his face. Dr. Holmes was looking very elated, too.

Herries looked at them eagerly. He thought that he could read good news in their faces.

"Excuse me, sir—"

"Certainly, Herries. What is it?"

"I—I thought perhaps Sir Richard might have brought news of Blake and the rest, sir," faltered Herries. "We're very anxious about them, sir."

Dr. Holmes nodded.

"I have been very anxious myself, Herries," he replied. "But I am glad to say that there is good news."

"The best of news, my lad," Sir Richard exclaimed.

Herries brightened up.

"Oh, thank you, sir!" he exclaimed.

"I have had a cable from my agent, Mr. Hudson," Sir Richard explained. "You may explain to all Tom Merry's friends that the boys are safe and sound. They have been up the Congo, and they have helped Mr. Hudson to recover some extremely valuable papers that had been stolen, and now they are safe on the coast again—all of them—safe and sound, and have nothing to do but to take the steamer back to England."

"Hurrah!" exclaimed Herries.

The Head laughed.

"I understand your feelings, Herries," he said. "I think I could say hurrah myself. You may go and tell the others."

"Thank you, sir! Oh, this is ripping! It's splendid!"

And Herries dashed from the study to spread the good news.

"The whole thing is very satisfactory," Sir Richard said, turning to the Head again. "Mr. Hudson has recovered the stolen papers, and he is handling the matter now. There is not the slightest doubt that we shall obtain the concession, and a company will be floated, and rubber will be very much to the fore again. I do not know whether there has been any violence used. I trust not. But the papers are recovered, and the boys are safe, and coming back to England. We have reason to be thankful."

"Yes, indeed," said the Head.

"Hark!"

From the old quad, outside came a ringing shout.

"Hurrah! Hip, hip, hurrah!"

Herries had evidently told the good news, and the juniors were cheering when they heard that Tom Merry & Co. were safe.

Out in the quad, there was great excitement. An eager, questioning crowd surrounded Herries, who had suddenly become the most important person at St. Jim's. Cheers burst from the juniors, ringing over the quadrangle—loud cheers, which told how popular Tom Merry and his chums were at the old school.

"My hat!" exclaimed Kangaroo. "So he's coming home, is he?—the bouncer! We'll have a celebration when he does come!"

"Faith, and we will!" said Reilly. "We'll have a feed, and all the fellows of both Houses to it, when Tom Merry comes home!"

"I guess we'll celebrate," said Lumley-Lumley. "The giddy bouncers—up the Congo, among the cannibals! Won't they have some yarns to tell. What on earth has Gussy done for neckties and silk-hats all the time?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"When will they get here, Herries?"

"Blessed if I know," said Herries; "but when they do get here, we'll have a high old time! Hurrah!"

And the juniors of St. Jim's cheered again, and most of them counted the days after that to the time of Tom Merry's return.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK

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Just read this, and you can commence the story to-day.

Dick Dauntless and Jack Orde, chums of Weltsea College, are bathing in the sea early one morning, when they are suddenly seized by enormous octopus-like tentacles and dragged swiftly down beneath the surface of the water. The chums are almost at their last gasp, when a dark trap-door appears before them, and they are pulled aboard a strange submarine craft, the like of which they have never seen before. It is, in fact, a submarine motor-car, and the boys are soon introduced to Captain Flame, the captain of the Octopus, as the strange craft is named.

The crew consists entirely of boys, with whom Dick Dauntless and Jack Orde are soon on good terms. So fascinating does life beneath the waves prove, that when, after a period of thrilling excitement and amazing adventure, Captain Flame offers the two chums their liberty, they decide to remain on board the Octopus and throw in their lot with him.

Their decision is confirmed when the chums learn that Captain Flame is bound for the Pacific with the express intention of searching for Dick Dauntless's millionaire father, who was a friend of his, and whose yacht, the Morning Star, has long been reported missing.

A chance paragraph in a newspaper gives the adventurers a clue, and they make for that dreaded mass of floating weeds known as the Sargossa Sea. There, stuck fast in the midst of the weeds, they find both the Morning Star and a tug which had been sent to aid her.

Captain Flame, with a small party of his boys, embarks in a launch and first visits the tug, but finds it deserted save for a mad stoker. While the party are exploring the vessel, Mopsa, the Chinese boy, and Jack Orde, mysteriously disappear in quick succession. Dick Dauntless is about to dive into the mass of weeds in desperation, when Captain Flame's voice arrests him.

"Stop!" cries the inventor. "We can do nothing now, but as soon as we have visited the Morning Star we will return to the Octopus, and recover our lost ones, living or dead, if we have to pull the whole Sargossa Sea up by the roots to do so!"

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DON'T MISS "AN UNGRATEFUL SON!" The Splendid, Long, Complete School Story appearing in this week's number of the "MAGNET" LIBRARY. Now on Sale. Price One Penny.

Alone in the Sargossa Sea.

Reluctantly Dick Dauntless returned to the tug. He hated to leave the spot where his chum and Mopsa had last been seen; but he realised the truth of Captain Flame's words, and how helpless they would be amongst the strange creatures and fearful monsters they now knew haunted the silent depths of the Sargossa.

"Avery, remain in the stern, and let the launch tow behind. Shoot anything—fish, man, or monster—that attacks her," commanded Captain Flame, when the boys had reached the deck of the tug once more. "Be vigilant, Will. Our lives may depend upon our being able to reach the outer sea in the launch. You, Dauntless, will go to the engine-room. Keep your eyes on the telegraph, and obey every order I send down," he continued. And as Dick, albeit with a heavy heart, descended the engine-room hatch, the inventor made his way to the bridge.

Having turned the wheel backwards and forwards, to assure himself that it worked freely, he signalled full speed ahead, and the gallant little tug commenced her last journey towards the imprisoned yacht.

Well the mad stoker below did his work. Unaided he managed to keep a full head of steam in the boilers; but though for the first half-mile the tug sped at a fair pace, the clinging weeds soon became entwined round her propeller once more, her speed gradually slackened, until, when yet some half-mile from the yacht, her straining engines ceased to work.

The tug had reached her final resting-place in the Sargossa Sea.

Calling through the speaking-tube, Captain Flame summoned Dick Dauntless on deck; then, descending from the bridge, walked towards the stern.

Suddenly he quickened his steps, an anxious frown furrowing his brow.

"Avery—Will Avery—where are you, lad?" he cried.

There was no reply.

Will Avery had vanished as mysteriously and completely as his two comrades had done.

Rushing to the stern rail, he looked over.

A sigh of relief escaped his lips, as he saw the launch floating safely on the weeds.

Dick Dauntless joined his chief. His anxious eyes had looked for Will Avery in vain. He tried to question Captain Flame.

Sorrow for the lost ones, horror at the mystery which enveloped their fate, held him dumb.

The inventor read the question Dick's lips could not utter.

He nodded.

For the moment even Dick Dauntless's iron nerve deserted him.

"To the launch! Let us leave this accursed boat whilst we can!" he cried.

Captain Flame seized him by the arm, and shook him violently.

"Steady, Dick; take a grip on yourself, lad. Would you turn back with your goal in view?" he demanded, pointing towards the yacht.

For a moment Dick hesitated, then his native courage reasserted itself, and without a word he watched Captain Flame draw the launch to the side, and followed him into it.

Three minutes later the launch was forcing her way over the verdure-clad sea to where the yacht, her hull half hidden with clinging weeds, rose from the mass of vegetation before them.

Their destination reached, Dick Dauntless followed Captain Flame up the vessel's side, and, overcome with emotion, read the name Morning Star on a boat on the starboard side of the vessel.

Captain Flame was right. It was his father's yacht, that had been reported as lost in the Sargossa Sea.

To what would their search lead them?

He dared not hope that his father yet lived.

Months must have elapsed since the hapless vessel had become embedded in those fearful weeds, and with their experiences on board the tug fresh in his mind, he feared the worst.

Indeed, he was not quite sure that he wished it otherwise.

Better to wish the man he loved so dearly dead than to wish him living amongst such horrors.

Neither Captain Flame nor Dick uttered a cheery hail, as the former had done on approaching the tug.

Instinctively they knew it would be useless.

Here was the same appearance of the ship having been hastily deserted, but the yacht's decks were covered with growing seaweed, amongst which crabs and strange lizard-like creatures peeped at the invaders of their territory, or ran backwards and forwards across decks which still showed signs of the constant scrubbing to which they had been subjected ere this last misfortune had overwhelmed them.

Captain Flame laid his hand with kindly touch on Dick's shoulder.

"Remain here, lad, whilst I go below. Believe me, it is best," he said.

Dick nodded, his heart too full for words.

With a nod of encouragement Captain Flame strode towards the companion-way, and, sweeping aside a curtain of weeds, disappeared from view.

Dreadfully weary—for many hours had passed and much had happened since he had last slept—dazed with despair, Dick Dauntless lent on the yacht's bulwarks, and gazed thoughtfully over the dreary waste of green.

How long he remained thus he never knew.

Suddenly he started from a waking sleep, to find the sun resting on the horizon, and Captain Flame not returned.

A sudden terror gripped his soul.

What if the inventor had also been spirited away, leaving him alone in the fearful sea.

Rushing to the companion-way, he clung to the tarnished brass-rail, and, leaning forward, called:

"Captain Flame! Where are you?"

There was no reply.

Fear for the inventor driving off the lesser terrors that chilled his heart, Dick hastened down the broad, carpeted steps.

Immediately before him was a wide, sumptuously furnished saloon, down the centre of which ran a long table. At the head of the table was a cabinet, the door of which had been broken open, and on the table a small sandal-wood box, its lid prised open, and its contents gone.

Hastening forward, Dick saw that the woodwork of both cabinet and box had been recently riven, and knew that it was the work of Captain Flame.

He remembered afterwards how the inventor had spoken of something on board the Morning Star which must fall into no other hands but his.

He thought nothing of it at the time, but ran from room to room, from cabin to cabin, seeking in vain for his companion.

Though he searched the yacht from stem to stern, from hold to the chart-house, it was in vain.

Captain Flame had disappeared as quietly and mysteriously as Will, Jack, and Mopsa.

Beside himself with grief, Dick Dauntless made his way on deck. The sun had sank beneath the horizon, and night reigned over the scene.

But though the daylight had gone it was not dark.

A strange phosphorescent glare shone over the weeds, and a full moon shone from a cloudless sky.

It was well for Dick that it was so.

His greatly tried nerves could not have borne the added horror of darkness.

Despairingly he gazed around him.

Night had brought a change upon the Sargasso Sea.

The weeds, which had laid so still during the day, were now in a constant state of motion, as though fearful shapes lurked beneath the green vegetation that surrounded him on every side.

He was alone on the Sargasso Sea.

As completely cut off from his kind as though he had suddenly found himself marooned on a distant planet.

The Tug's Fate.

Suddenly Dick was aroused from the stupor of despair into which he was falling by a strange feeling as though he was no longer alone, as though countless eyes were watching him from all sides.

Instinctively he glanced over his shoulder.

Instinct had not played him false.

Swarming over the bulwarks in his rear were innumerable fish-men, their huge, goggle eyes fixed threateningly upon him, their webbed hands were thrust forward as though to seize him.

The knowledge that there were tangible foes to be fought restored Dick's waning courage.

In a moment his ready sword flew from its scabbard.

As the steel glittered in the moonlight the fish-men drew back.

Then one of their number advanced a step, and hurled a lasso of seaweed stalks at the undaunted boy.

Wildly Dick Dauntless slashed at the circling noose.

Luck, rather than skill, guided his blade, and the rope, cut in halves, fell to the deck.

With guttural cries of rage, the fish-men advanced upon the boy.

Realising the futility of fighting against so many foes, Dick rushed to the side, laid his disengaged hand on the bulwark, and leapt into the launch.

One blow with his sword served to cut the rope that held the little craft to the yacht's side. Pushing her off, he hastened to the stern, and, starting the engines, was soon gliding swiftly through the weeds.

Though the fish-men were evidently good swimmers, they made no attempt to follow him, but clustered in crowds on the bulwarks, calling to him, and pointing to where the weeds rose and fell in the ominous manner he had noticed just before his foes attacked him.

Before Dick Dauntless lay the tug, and, eager for human companionship, even though it was but that of a madman, he turned the launch's head towards it.

The fish-men's cries redoubled.

There was an unmistakable note of warning in their cries. Standing up in the launch Dick gazed earnestly at the derelict vessel.

What he saw sent cold shivers of terror chasing each other up and down his spine.

Huge monsters, more terrible than he had ever deemed it possible could exist, were drawing themselves from the weeds on to the tug's decks.

So terrified was Dick Dauntless by this fearful sight that he remained as one turned to stone, whilst the launch's swiftly revolving screw forced her nearer and nearer the terror-haunted vessel.

Suddenly a fearful, horn-armed head, protected by huge green scales, arose above the tug's bulwarks, and fixed its protruding eyes upon the tiny vessel.

The sight recalled Dick to the terror of his position.

A swift turn of the tiller sent the boat speeding off at right angles to the tug, whose monster-laden decks were now but a cable's length away.

A hungry bellow burst from the disappointed monster.

The cry was taken up by its fellows, whose writhing sides, snake-like necks, and ridged backs, could be seen swarming over the tug in all directions.

The ominous roarings were echoed to right, to left, and immediately behind the fleeing boy.

With staring eyeballs Dick Dauntless gazed around him.

The moonlit expanse of the Sargasso Sea teemed with life.

The weeds rose and fell as though a heavy sea was running beneath them.

Now and again the horror-stricken boy would see a claw-armed limb, a grotesquely-horrible head, or a dimly-seen body, so huge as to seem well nigh shapeless, rise above the green surface of the Sargasso Sea.

Look where he might, danger menaced him.

Suddenly he was hurled from the seat on which he crouched, as the launch collided with some unseen object hidden by the floating vegetation.

Then she trembled until Dick feared her every rivet would be shaken from her hardened steel sides, and gradually heeled over until the water poured over her gunwale.

The next moment she righted, and commenced tossing about like a cork on a mill-stream, whilst Dick, calm now that he deemed the end surely near, rose to his feet, and, sword in hand, gazed unflinchingly around him.

The sight which met his eyes was one well calculated to daunt the most fearless heart.

Close at hand a huge, dome-shaped shell, that could only belong to some giant tortoise, rose from the water, an even mark cut through the weeds and shells with which it was encrusted, showing where the swiftly-driven launch had skimmed over its back as it slept beneath the waves.

To his left an enormous sea-serpent raised its repulsive head above the weeds. To his right an octopus raised a rounded body as big as a ship's long boat upon its feelers, and snapped its horrid, parrot-like beak as it fixed its horn-protected eyes upon the boat, as though gloating over its expected victim.

A sound as of a large steamboat being forced rapidly through the waters, drew Dick's attention from the giant octopus.

He glanced over the launch's stern to see that the monster from the tug had taken to the water, and, its terrible mouth agape, was bearing down upon him with fearful rapidity.

Others, larger and more terrible, joined in the chase.

Dick Dauntless gave himself up for lost.

Of what avail would his puny sword be against the monsters by which he was surrounded?

Yet he felt no fear.

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By REGINALD WRAY.

He was beyond that. The nerve-destroying terror which had been his sole companion so long, vanished.

Calmly he awaited the apparently inevitable end.

Dropping on one knee, he snatched up his rifle, and poured shot after shot as fast as he could load and fire at the monsters.

In vain. The steel-coated bullets ricocheted harmlessly off the armoured bodies of his foes.

On they came, filling the air with strident bellowings, and the clashing of their huge forms together, as they crowded round to devour the doomed boy.

Clubbing his rifle—he had dropped his sword at the bottom of the launch, and there was no time to pick it up—he prepared to meet his end, fighting gallantly to the last.

Already he could feel the hot breath of the monsters, laden with unbearable foetid odours, fanning his cheeks, could see their gaping mouths opened to seize him, when the deep, reverberating note of an enormous explosion high above the din was heard.

Wonderingly he gazed in the direction from whence the sound had come.

The sight which met his gaze held him speechless with surprise.

The spot where the tug had been was hidden beneath a thick cloud of steam, above which arose ungainly, writhing bodies, interspersed with shivered baulks of timber, riven planks, bent and distorted pieces of ironwork, and the cranks and rods of the engines.

There was no need to ask what had happened.

The fearful sight told its own tale.

The mad stoker had done his work too well.

The tug's boilers had exploded, hurling the fearful monsters which had swarmed her decks in all directions.

For nearly a minute the air was filled with flying portions of the wreck.

A huge cylinder head swept, like some enormous quoit hurled by a giant's hand, past Dick Dauntless's head, and, striking the water a dozen paces behind him, went skimming over the weed-laden surface until, at last, it disappeared with a sullen plunge beneath the sea.

Then the dismembered form of some huge, lizard-like monster splashed into the sea, so close to the launch that it sent the stout little craft bobbing and whirling about, until Dick thought every moment she must be swamped.

As the heavier objects ceased to fall, lighter parts of the wreck pattered like hail around him.

Presently even these ceased to fall, and, for the first time since the explosion, Dick remembered the fearful monsters which, but for the fortunate diversion, would have been feasting on his flesh by this time.

Fearfully he gazed about him.

A deep sigh, that was almost a sob of relief, burst from his parched lips.

The sluggish surface of the Sargasso Sea lay motionless around him.

Not a ripple broke the stillness that obtained over the moonlit scene; not a monster was in sight.

The explosion of the tug's boilers had sent them cowering back to their haunts beneath the waves.

Dropping into the sternsheet of the launch, Dick Dauntless set the engines in motion, and was soon speeding swiftly towards where, far away in the distance, the moon shone placidly over the sleeping waters of the Pacific.

Hemmed In!

Great was the consternation caused on board the submarine motor-car by Dick Dauntless's unexpected return alone.

All listened, with pale, blanched faces, to the story of his adventures.

Yet Dick did not tell them half the horrors he had witnessed.

He was unwilling to unsettle the nerves of those he intended leading into perils such as, surely, no men had ever been called upon to face.

After a brief consultation with the engineer he ordered the survivors to their posts, and entered the conning-tower.

Grasping the steering wheel with both hands, he signalled to the engine-room, "Full speed astern!"

Waiting until some three hundred yards separated them from the frowning mass of vegetation, he brought the Octopus to a halt, and sent a warning to all on board to hold on for dear life tinkling over the wires.

"All ready, Mr. MacIntyre?" demanded Dick through the telephone.

"Ready, sir," came back the prompt response.

"Then let her rip. Put every ounce of power into her you can get!" shouted Dick excitedly.

The next moment the wondrous submarine machine quivered from front to rear as her mighty engines brought their wondrous power to bear on her ponderous wheels.

For a few seconds they whirled round with a rapidity that

shook the car as though it would shake loose her every rivet, then, as the pads ploughed deep into the shell-strewn ocean bed, the car sprang forward as though she knew that her creator and inventor was imperilled beyond that apparently impenetrable wall of tree-like weed stalks.

So swift was her flight, with so fearful a force did she sweep over every obstacle she could not hurl aside, that the steering-wheel seemed endowed with life, so fiercely did it strive to burst from Dick's grasp.

Holding on to it with all the strength of his finely-trained young muscles, Dick steered straight towards where the tree trunks seemed to open a possible path.

Almost ere Dick was ready for it, the car's sharp bows pierced an interval, scarce six inches in width, between the trunks of two trees.

Dick Dauntless had braced himself for the collision, but, to his astonishment, the trunks offered but little resistance to that ponderous charge.

Stretching like india-rubber, they gave to right and left, and the Octopus plunged deeper and deeper into the Sargasso Sea, as a fish passes through the water-lily stalks in a shallow stream in the dear old England they might never see again.

But though the resistance of those yielding trunks was scarcely felt, it was present, all the same, and, ere a mile had been covered, Dick marked with an alarm that their speed was decreasing with every revolution of the huge wheels.

Nor was the reason difficult to guess.

The deeper they penetrated into the hitherto unexplored depths of the Sargasso Sea, the more tightly the yielding, but strong, stalks clung around the car. Soon their speed grew slower and slower, until at last they stopped altogether.

As the Octopus came to a standstill the trees closed round her until at length she seemed entirely enswathed by the tall, soft, yet terribly strong trunks, as with giant ropes.

Hastening to the water dock Dick donned a diving-suit and strove to leave the car, intent upon examining her position from without.

In vain! The door refused to open, and he returned discouraged to the chart-room.

Summoning the engineer, Dick explained the situation.

MacIntyre shook his head.

"We're in a bad fix, Dick, and hanged if I can see a way out of it!" he declared. "The worst of it is, that every minute we remain here the more hopelessly will we become entangled. Look how those limbs are twisting together overhead. It almost looks as if they were alive."

Dick cast a swift glance through the glass roof of the conning-tower.

His hopes fell to zero.

A fearful horror almost stilled the beating of the boy's heart.

They were hopelessly emmeshed, doomed to drag out a hopeless existence, waiting for the inevitable day, when air would fail, and they would perish miserably.

And what of Captain Flame, Orde, Avery, and Mopsa?

The fate which threatened the Octopus would seal their doom.

Yet what difference could it make?

Drawn beneath the surface of the Sargasso by the fearful fish-men, they must long since have perished.

But even as despair whispered that he would never see his friends again, something within his heart warned him that they yet lived, and that upon him, and upon him alone, hung their fate.

The thought served to rouse him from the lethargy of despair into which he had fallen.

Swiftly, almost fiercely, he turned towards the engineer.

"Back to the engine-room, Mr. MacIntyre. At any cost we must break free," he cried determinedly.

The engineer shook his head doubtfully, but Dick insisted, and, though without hope that any good would come of it, MacIntyre returned to his beloved engines.

In vain did the powerful engines make the huge wheels revolve swiftly both forwards and backwards. It only served to scrape deep holes in the ocean bed, until fearing lest by burying the car to her axles they would render their position even more desperate, Dick was obliged to desist.

Dismayed, he gazed blankly at the dark brown trunks which hemmed them in on every side.

Suddenly he started, and pressed his face eagerly against the wall of glass before him.

Fool that he was, he had forgotten the Octopus's steel tentacles.

In a moment he was at a switchboard, on which were six small brass wheels, working on ball sockets.

These wheels manipulated the steel wire ropes which protruded like feelers from the bows of the submarine car.

Often had Dick Dauntless watched Captain Flame, a wheel in each hand, working the feelers backwards and



Dick Dauntless gazed around him despairingly. The terrible Sargasso Sea was in a constant state of motion, as though fearful shapes lurked beneath the green vegetation. Dick was alone in the Sargasso Sea.
(See page 24.)

forwards, seizing obstructions and hurling them from the car's path, and picking up some rare shell from the sea bed.

But his new found hopes sank as he tried wheel after wheel, only to find that the wire feelers were pressed too tightly to the hull to be moved.

At last partial success rewarded his efforts.

Through the glass of the conning-tower he could see half one of the ropes swaying to and fro through the trunks to his touch.

To his delight he found it would just reach to the door of the water-dock.

Whirling the controlling wheel, now to right now to left, now pushing it up, now thrusting it sideways, or downwards, he set the wire rope in motion, and watched it writhing backwards and forwards like a thing of life.

Presently, his heart beating wildly with anxious expectancy, he made the tapering end of the rope twist round one of the stalks, then guided it upwards.

To Dick's delight it dragged the tough fibre back, stretching and quivering as though made of indiarubber, until at last it snapped with a force that whipped the water into foam.

Stalk after stalk Dick treated thus, until at last he had cleared the water-dock.

Then he rang up the general room.

Tom Allstraw answered his call.

"Mustering all hands in the Armoury!" he ordered.

"Ay, ay, sir!" came back the ready response.

How to Punish a Slacker.

When Dick Dauntless entered the Armoury, he found Tom Allstraw, Harry Monson, and Charlie Steele eagerly awaiting him.

An angry frown furrowed his brow.

"Where is Karl Munchen?" he demanded.

"Reading in his bunk," replied Tom.

"You told him I wanted him?" asked Dick.

Tom Allstraw nodded in the affirmative.

Bidding the others remain where they were, Dick hastened angrily to the crew's quarters.

The German boy lay breathing heavily in his bunk.

"Munchen!" cried Dick, in a loud, sharp tone.

An exaggerated snore was the sole response.

Dick knew that now, or never, must he assert his authority.

Close at hand was a hose connected with water stored at high pressure above the engine-room.

NEXT WEEK: "A SCHOOLBOY'S SLAVE,"
By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

and

"DEEP SEA GOLD,"
By REGINALD WRAY. **ORDER EARLY!**

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 191.

Noiselessly Dick unrolled the hose, turned on the water, clamped the palm of his hand over the nozzle, then returned to the side of his victim's bunk.

Munchen had rolled over on to his face, and, with his head resting on his arms, was pretending to be fast asleep.

Gently raising the shirker's coat collar, Dick thrust the nozzle of the hose down the German's back and let the water go.

As the icy-cold stream swept down his back, Munchen sprang up with a wild yell and rolled from the bunk.

Dick Dauntless gave him no respite.

As the slacker scrambled on to his hands and knees he sent the stream on to the back of his head, and when he raised his face to expostulate, let him have it full in the mouth.

Gurgling, suffocated, half-sobbing, Munchen tried to rise.

In vain. Guided by a steady hand, the full force of the stream continued to play on his face, and, clutching vainly at the empty air, the German boy landed flat on his back with a thud which brought the boys hastening from the Armoury to see the fun.

But even now Dick was not content.

For a good five minutes he continued to play on the writhing boy, and did not allow him to get up until he had reduced him to a shivering mass of drenched clothes and soaked flesh.

"Now, Karl Munchen, let that teach you to obey my orders in future," he said, as he replaced the hose on its hook.

"Your orders, indeed! And who may you be?" snarled the German.

"The second in command of the Octopus, as you know very well. In Captain Flame's absence, I—" began Dick, when the German interrupted him with:

"Hang Captain Flame, and you, too! He's dead, thank goodness, and I'm not going to exchange one slavery for another. I'm going to keep in this moving prison until we return to the island, and then I'm going to have my share of the treasure and enjoy myself."

"Oh, indeed! Very interesting!" yawned Dick. "In the meantime you will get a mop and bucket, and clear up this mess."

The German made no answer, but, bending down his head, rushed at Dick.

This was exactly what our hero wanted.

A smart upper cut brought Munchen's face into view just in time for him to receive Dick's fist fairly between the eyes.

Bellowing with rage and pain the lumbering German sat down on the wet floor.

In a moment he was up again. His fists working like the sails of a windmill, he sought to close with his agile opponent.

But Dick Dauntless was not having any.

He fought to win, with the result that science overcoming mere brute strength, as it will ever do, he soon had Munchen thoroughly thrashed.

"Had enough?" he demanded cheerfully.

The German muttered something which Dick took to be a reply in the affirmative.

"Very sensible of you. Now come to the Armoury; we have work before us. You can clear up this room when we come back," declared Dick, then, as the other mumbled some inarticulate reply, led the way from the scene of the fight.

Ten minutes later the boys were hewing away with their axes at the trees outside the Octopus.

It was an easier task than Dick Dauntless had anticipated, for though what may be called the bark of the trees was thick and leathery, the inside was full of sap, through which their axe heads slid almost of their own accord.

To Dick's astonishment the trees did not fall, as they would have done on land, but floated upwards until they formed an impenetrable mass overhead.

That, however, troubled Dick but little. He cared nothing where the severed trunks went to long as they drifted clear of the Octopus.

And here he made a great mistake, as he was soon to find out to his cost.

In less than an hour they had cut the car completely free from the ensnawing stalks. Mounting to the outside of the conning-tower Dick consulted with Mr. MacIntyre, who never left his engines except when she was safely at rest on the islands.

"Well done, my lad, you have worked well!" was the engineer's greeting. "Cut a lane for the old car! When you have got some half mile ahead, I will go at the trees full speed, and may be able to force a way through. They can't be as thick as this all the time, you know."

Dick agreed, and soon the five boys were making royal progress through the elmy, thick-growing trees.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 191.

DON'T MISS "AN UNGRATEFUL SON!" The Splendid, Long-Complete School Story appearing in this week's number of the

Another hour passed, and a loud, booming roar from the Octopus warned the pioneers that Mr. MacIntyre was about to charge at the submarine forest.

"Stand back, lads, and give her room; she's coming!" cried Dick.

Barely had the words left his lips ere he uttered a cry of dismay, for, even as the car began to move the entwined masses of floating trunks, limbs, and branches, descended so swiftly that almost before the terrified boys realised what was taking place, the Octopus was buried beneath an impenetrable mass of vegetation.

For a few seconds the dismayed boys could trace the movements of the car by the heaving of the weeds, then even that ceased, and they gazed blankly at a veritable mountain of vegetation which had overwhelmed the car.

"Good heavens, Dick! What has happened?" gasped Tom Allstraw.

For answer Dick grasped a floating trunk near where they stood, and pointed out that the sap, to which we have before referred was slowly oozing from the hollow centre, water taking its place.

"Come on, lads, we must not stop here, or we will be buried. See the top of the last tree we cut already sinking."

A howl of terror burst from Munchen's lips.

"What a fool I was to leave the Octopus. It's all your fault, Dauntless. If I am killed you will be my murderer," he moaned.

Dick Dauntless comforted him with a sturdy kick, that sent him stumbling on to his knees.

"Hold your whining, you coward! Thank Heaven the other chaps are Britishers!" he cried, adding cheerily:

"Forward, lads, we will take it in turn! Cut a lane just wide enough to pass in single file."

"Can't we get back to the Octopus, Dick?" asked Charlie Steele, with a tremble in his tones he tried in vain to conceal.

Dick Dauntless glanced gravely at the youngster.

"We must hope for the best, Charlie; but I fear she is in a worse position than ever," he declared. "It would take us days to cut through all that wrack, and we haven't hours."

"Then what do you intend to do?" asked Tom Allstraw.

"Search for Captain Flame. We have already left him in the power of the fish-men too long," was the reply.

At that moment Karl Munchen, who was felling the trees, beckoned Dick to approach.

As Dick, squeezing past his comrades, gained the German's side, a sigh of relief escaped his lips.

The outer belt of well-nigh impenetrable forest was past, and they were in comparatively open country.

On a huge slab of granite, polished as smooth as glass by the action of the water, the five boys sat down to rest.

"Now, lads, we cannot go back to the Octopus, so we must press forward," said Dick. "Somewhere in this submarine forest is Captain Flame, Orde, Avery, and Mopsa. I can't believe they're dead, and, at any rate, I do not mean to rest until I have found them."

"How are you going to set about it?" asked Harry Monson. "It's a large order to search the bottom of the Sargasso Sea."

"If I had to search the whole Pacific I would not rest content until I had found our lost ones, or assured myself of their fate!" was the determined reply. "Courage, Harry! You know, Captain Flame has given you a chance to wipe off old errors, and you'll never have a better chance than the present to show what you are made of."

"Oh, I'm game enough for the search, although I know it is not to Flame, but to you, that I owe being here instead of a prisoner on the Island of Lost Hopes," replied the other gratefully.

"That's all right, old chap," replied Dick, patting the other encouragingly on the shoulder. "Forward, you fellows! The remains of the tug are scattered about the sea-bed somewhere, and once I find them I will know within a little where to look for our comrades."

A Battle of Giants.

As the little party pressed deeper into the heart of the Sargasso Sea, the wondrous marine trees beneath which they marched grew further apart, until at last they were able to walk abreast.

Excited by the prospect of adventure, they chatted gaily as they walked, although all knew that they were in great peril—not only from the monsters with which that mysterious sea-bed was infested, but also from the fact that the gas-producing acid with which their helmets were impregnated would only last a certain time, and that ere their supply was exhausted they must either reach dry land or return to the Octopus to renew the supply.

"MAGNET" LIBRARY. Now on Sale. Price One Penny.

However, they soon forgot the more remote danger in contemplation of the fearful perils that surrounded them.

It must not be supposed that the bed of the ocean beneath the Sargasso Sea was a dead-level.

On the contrary,

Now and again they came upon lovely valleys, sheltered from the strong ocean currents by towering walls or rocks, and gay with anemones of a size and beauty such as they had never seen before.

A little further on they would be scrambling over a range of miniature mountains, the slopes of which were the haunts of innumerable squids, some large enough to strike terror into the young adventurers' hearts.

They would have enjoyed the march but for the fact that they had to be constantly on the alert to repel the attacks or, where possible, to avoid contact with the monsters of the deep that surrounded them on every side.

Many of the strange creatures they encountered they had become familiar with, but then they had been viewed from behind the Octopus's glass windows.

That was a very different thing to being out in the open with only their own quickness of eye and arm to stand between themselves and death.

The very prawns in the wondrous land beneath the Sargasso Sea were as large as the largest lobsters, and in such quantities as to at times render it necessary for the boys to make a long detour to avoid wading knee-deep through the fierce-looking creatures.

It would take far too long to describe a tithe of the wonders the boys witnessed in their lonely march beneath the waves.

Suddenly, from below a low range of sandhills that lay athwart their path, came huge swarms of fish of all kinds, and they were almost swept off their feet by swarms of crawling and creeping creatures, evidently fleeing headlong from some unseen danger. The crashing together of their shell-protected bodies produced a deafening din, above which arose a mighty bellowing that caused the five boys to come to an involuntary halt, and gaze at each other in amazement and terror.

Almost as suddenly as they had appeared, the hordes of swimming and creeping things passed by.

Still the bellowing continued, and Dick saw that the water above the spot from whence the fearful sounds arose was tinged with blood.

Little Charlie Steele clung in terror to his leader's arm.

"What is it, Dick? What can it be? Let us leave this awful spot!" he moaned.

"Not until I have found out what it is," declared Dick Dauntless. "Forward, lads!" he added, stepping out bravely. "It is worse than useless stopping here, for if we were attacked by any of those monster lizards I told you of we would not stand a chance in the open."

With not unnatural reluctance, under the circumstances, Will Allstraw and Harry Monson followed Dick towards the sloping breast of the nearest hill. Karl refused at first

to budge, but, finding that he was being left behind, quickened his steps, and overtook his comrade just as Dick Dauntless, with Charlie Steele holding tightly to his belt, reached the top.

A gasping cry of horror was forced from the elder boy's lips.

Charlie Steele fairly shrieked with terror.

Allstraw and Monson stood as though turned to stone.

Carl Munchen cast himself headlong on the sand, and buried his face in his hands.

Nor must the reader deem them cowards. The sight that met their eyes might well have daunted the boldest heart.

Before them was being waged a battle such as, in their wildest frenzy, they had never dreamed possible. Huge, indistinct forms rolled and tumbled over each other, fighting amidst white, wand-like objects that bent and cracked as the fighting monsters jostled against them.

At first Dick Dauntless could not make out what they were, but even as he gazed he saw a huge head raised above the struggling mass, holding in its fearful jaws a lump of quivering flesh.

In a flash the truth burst upon him.

The white objects which had so puzzled him were the bones of the monsters that had been blown to pieces by the explosion of the tug's boilers, and which were being devoured by their ravenous comrades.

It was a nauseating sight, but Dick was glad to have witnessed it, for it showed that they had reached the place where the tug had gone down.

The horror of the sight made him glad to leave that fear-haunted spot.

"To the left, lads. Let us reach yonder wood before the lizards have finished their horrible feast, and look about for other food," he suggested in a hoarse voice.

Willingly the boys obeyed, and, following their leader, had just reached the outskirts of the wood when Dick came to an abrupt halt, feeling as though he had been plunged headlong into an electric bath.

His cries were echoed by his comrades, who, shaking as though stricken with ague, flung themselves, writhing and moaning pitifully, amongst the thick undergrowth of weeds that formed a kind of carpet to the submarine forest.

"Hi, someone, switch off the current!" moaned Dick, with a faint attempt at humour.

"Ugh! My arms and legs are being twisted off!" cried Tom.

"And I'm being turned inside-out!" declared Harry.

Carl Munchen rolled over and over, shrieking with pain and terror.

Little Charlie Steele seized Dick's arm with shaking hands, and was pointing, too terrified to speak, towards a dark, mud-coloured body that was floating slowly towards them some twenty feet above the ground.

(To be continued in next Thursday's number of "THE GEM" Library. Will regular readers kindly hand this number containing these thrilling chapters of "Deep Sea Gold" on to their friends?—The EDITOR.)

CHANGE OF AIR.

The cyclist was fighting hard against a strong head wind across the Yorkshire moors, and wondering what unhappy thought had prompted him to come so far away from home. Darkness was rapidly falling, and, to crown his misery, it was beginning to rain.

After a little practice, the rain came down in its best style, and the wheelman got wet to the skin. Then, as the intelligent reader will have anticipated, a piece of glass laid open his tyre. Some people get all the luck.

Presently there drove up from the opposite direction a benevolent old gentleman in a pony-cart. Gazing at the unturned bike, the perspiring wheelman, and the repair outfit which had been dropped in the mud, he inquired:

"Had a puncture, my friend?"

The cyclist looked up, and swallowed his feelings with a huge gulp.

"No, sir," he replied; "I'm just changing the air in my tyres. The other lot's worn out, you know!"

"SLICK" JUSTICE.

You may not believe it, but the Yankee had been boasting about the way they did things across the "Pond."

Really, he had.

Then the Britisher thought he'd have a whack.

"Talking about justice being meted out quickly," he said, "only yesterday an airman over here fell out of his aeroplane, and he was tried and sentenced to six months in gaol before he hit the ground!"

"You don't say so!" drawled the Yankee. "What was the charge?"

"Vagrancy," replied the Briton. "He had no visible means of support."

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 191.

NEW TALES TO TELL!

THE PLOTTERS.

I stood in the works at midnight, and all was still as the grave, till the file, with rasping accents, defiling discordance gave.

"Now, what's the use of living," he said, with his teeth firm set, "when life is made up of rubbing against all the hard things I've met?"

Then answered the lathe in pity: "I've done some hard things myself."

While the worn-out spindle grunted: "And they've put me on the shelf!"

"Life is a bore!" said the gimlet.

"Ay, with many a broken thread!" said the hollow voice of the steam-pipe, as a condensed tear he shed.

"Then the emery-wheel ground roughly: "A continual ground I say!"

"But watch and wait!" said the flywheel, who had damaged herself that day. "I shall start a revolution in a week or so."

"Look sharp then!" rejoined the chisel. "You're cutting it rather slow!"

"Oh, she's cracked!" said the soldering fluid, as his face he acidly shaped. And in the confusion that followed, I regret that the gas escaped.

NEXT WEEK: "A SCHOOLBOY'S SLAVE,"
By MARTIN CLIFFORD,

and **"DEEP SEA GOLD,"** ORDER EARLY!
By REGINALD WRAY.

OUR NEW WEEKLY FEATURE—



Next Week's Story.

"A SCHOOLBOY'S SLAVE!"

In our long, complete school tale for next Thursday, M'pong, the Congo native who has attached himself so faithfully to Tom Merry, creates a considerable sensation at St. Jim's. He constitutes himself the junior's absolute slave, and does his level best, according to his lights—but with results that are more than disconcerting.

Make sure of reading next Thursday's grand story by ordering the number containing

"A SCHOOLBOY'S SLAVE!"

in advance.

A Girl Reader's View.

The following letter from one of my girl correspondents, besides being interesting in itself, is doubly so in that it voices one view of the suggestion put forward by "Harry S." in a recent number of this paper. "Harry S.'s" idea was that two complete stories should be contained in each issue of THE GEM instead of one complete and a serial. He further suggested that the second complete story should be a rousing football, cricket, or sports yarn. As will be seen, Miss H. N. does not agree with "Harry S."

Tottenham.

"Dear Editor,—I am writing to tell you that we all think THE GEM is the best and healthiest weekly paper published. By 'all' I mean ourselves (three girls and three boys) and some friends of my brothers, to whom we lend THE GEM every week. We have to buy two GEMS per week, as my brothers will not let it out of their sight until they have read it from the first to the last page. That would mean that we girls would have to wait, instead of which we have one to ourselves, and are independent of the boys. My youngest brother, aged 7, likes to read THE GEM, as then he can pretend he is D'Arcy or Fatty Wynn. It is most amusing when he starts, I can tell you.

"In a recent number a Gemite suggests that you do away with serials, and have two complete tales instead, but I hope you will not fall in with his suggestion, as I think your serials are so interesting.—Yours sincerely, H. N.

"P.S.—We have read all THE GEMS from No. 1 upwards, and do all we can to get our different friends to read them."

Many thanks for a very interesting letter, Miss H. N. I shall be interested to see from my daily postbag whether the majority of my readers favour your view of "Harry S.'s" suggestion, or whether the idea is likely to prove a popular one. It gives me great pleasure to read your P.S.

Replies in Brief.

"A Gemite and Magnetite" writes me a card on which very much the same views as Miss H. N.'s are expressed. I should be glad to have all readers' opinions on the question, which is a very important one.

H. Graves, Aberdare.—I hope that "The Iron Island" and "The Brotherhood of Iron" will be obtainable in book form in the near future.

H. F. Hawney, Birkenhead.—Sammy Bunter, the young brother of the fat Remove junior, is still at Greyfriars, and it will not be long before more is heard of him.

Hector McKechnie, Leytonstone.—Yes, Levison, now at St. Jim's, was once upon a time at Greyfriars College.

Miss Effie Phillips, St. Helens.—Many thanks for your nice, long letter. Am glad your father so highly approves of THE GEM and "Magnet" Libraries—most fathers do. Hope you got the numbers you required.

W. Redwood, 47, Dalton Street, Cardiff.—Yes, I am afraid I cannot supply you with GEM back numbers from

the office. Perhaps by watching our Chat page carefully you may get into communication with a fellow-reader willing to dispose of the back numbers you require.

"A Weekly Reader," Abertillery.—In answer to your question, I do not feel justified in saying anything more definite than that the popular stories of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's are to a great extent typical of the life at many of our great British public schools.

Edward Jowett, Leeds.—Your suggestion about Tom Merry & Co. visiting Leeds has been added to my list. Skimpole and Joe Frayne, in THE GEM, and Alonzo Todd, in "The Magnet," have not been forgotten, as they themselves will shortly prove. Very glad to hear how much you enjoy reading "Deep Sea Gold." It is indeed a grand tale.

"Bluebell," Edinburgh.—Certainly Edinburgh is nearer than Africa, as you say, but I cannot say yet when Tom Merry & Co. will visit your beautiful town.

Miss J. Jones, Wolverhampton.—Thanks for your bright letter. Am very pleased indeed to hear that your father is so enthusiastic about our popular tales. You will be pleased that Cousin Ethel has been playing a prominent part in our St. Jim's stories of late.

The Misses Phyllis P., Grace P., and Lily E., Child's Hill.—Thanks for your letter. Glad you take such a lively interest in Tom Merry & Co. I am afraid the idea you suggest might not appeal to the majority of Gemites.

"Nora," Ireland.—I am very much obliged for your nice letter, Miss Nora. You are evidently one of my most loyal readers. I will bear in mind your suggestion that Tom Merry & Co. should visit Dublin during the Christmas holiday.

This Week's Short Article.**Boy Naval Cadets.**

Should you, by any chance, wander into the Royal Naval College at Osborne so early as 6.30 in the morning, you may be startled by the shrill note of a bugle, followed by the pealing of bells. At that moment, in the twelve long, barrack-like bungalows, 416 fellows are hastily preparing for the day. Having washed and arrayed themselves in regulation uniform, which consists of white flannel trousers, blue coats and caps, with no adornment save a white cotton lanyard around the neck, the cadets form themselves under their twenty-four cadet captains and twelve lieutenants, to fall in and tackle their hot cocoa and biscuits.

All this is finished at 7.15, and after various exercises the cadets assemble again just before eight for breakfast. Tea, coffee, or cocoa, porridge, rolls and butter, fish, cold ham or beef, or carried mutton—there is no stinting either in quantity or variety. From 9 till 10.30 ordinary lessons, and then once more they fortify themselves with milk and biscuits. Lessons occupy them from 11.30 to 1, when classes cease and dinner is served—a plain, wholesome meal.

At 6.30, after an afternoon's recreation, tea comes on, though there has probably been an intermediate refreshment at 4.30; and from 7.45 to 8.50 short classes and prayers. By 9.15 they have tumbled into their coats, the bugles sound "Lights out!" and soon over 400 naval officers of the future are peacefully sleeping.

This is the usual routine, but each morning parties of boys are taken to Kingston. Here the cadet dresses as a carpenter, and learns to saw and plane, dovetail and paint; and here he is taught the names and uses of pistons, propellers, valves, and other fearful apparatus which form part of the engineer's equipment.

Periodically, cadets are sent out for a week on a training cruiser to acquire familiarity with the actual working conditions of their profession, and during this week they study engineering, seamanship, and navigation.

THE EDITOR.

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