

WHO IS THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER? See the Grand Long School Tale INSIDE

**The GEM** **1** <sup>1D</sup>/<sub>2</sub>

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**"RENTON OF THE ROVERS!"**  
A Tale of the Footer Field.

**"THE SACRED IDOL!"**  
A Tale of Tom Merry & Co.

**"SLAVE ISLAND!"**  
A Thrilling Adventure Story.



**THE FACE AT THE WINDOW!** So fascinated were the juniors by the strange idol that they failed to notice the evil eyes watching them!

(A tense moment in the Grand, Complete School Story inside.)

## MY READERS' OWN CORNER.

NOTE.—Half-a-crown will be awarded to the sender of every par. published on this page.

### WHISTLING.

Australia can boast of whistling spiders, whistling snakes, and whistling moths. But has anyone ever heard of the whistling language? In the Canaries the natives are expert whistlers. They hold conversations with one another through this medium. The New Guinea whistling snake is a dangerous reptile. It rushes at an intruder, and its bite causes instant death.—Neil R. Cameron, c.o. Mr. A. Bell, 409½, Argyle Street, Glasgow.

### OUR OPERA SEASON.

I had reached the age of eleven when I formed the star opera company. My small sister was engaged at 2d. a week as the world-famous soprano. I was managing-director, and a small boy took the job of attendant. The first night we opened at six. There was a massed audience of five boys and girls. Our stage was a table. The curtain was a bit risky. The pole was supported by a shelf and a rickety pile of boxes. We should have been all right if the chucker-out, in ejecting an unruly member of the crowd, had not brought the house down with a crash. The noise brought the authorities. The theatre was emptied in a twinkling, and the box-office only showed 5d. on the "season."—Arthur Moore, 2, Marina Road, Douglas, Isle of Man.

### SAILORS' SUPERSTITIONS!

Most sailors are superstitious, and the majority of them believe that bad luck clings to a ship that changes its name, and that misfortune follows the craft whose name ends with the letter A. Some instances of this are the Victoria, sunk in the Mediterranean, the Stalla, lost off the Channel Islands, the Arequipa, ashore on the West Coast of America, the Cobra, a destroyer which came to grief during her first trip in the North Sea, and the Sardinia, burned in harbour at Malta. Sailors also believe that it is bad luck for a hitch to occur during the launching of a vessel.—Wm. Hogg, 14, White House Terrace, Burnhope, Co. Durham.

### THINGS WE NEVER SEE!

A sheet from the bed of a river,  
A tongue from the mouth of a stream,  
A toe from the foot of a mountain,  
And a page from a volume of steam,  
A wink from the eye of a needle,  
A nail from the finger of Fate,  
A plume from the wing of an army,  
And a drink at the bar of a grate,  
A hair from the head of a hammer,  
A bite from the teeth of a saw,  
A race in the course of study,  
And a joint from the limb of the law.  
—N. Hibbert, 66, Chapel Street, Handsworth, Birmingham.

### THE TRADING RAT.

This curious little animal is found in the Rocky Mountains. The trappers named it in this style because of its habit of never stealing anything without putting something in the place of the article taken. Two women out camping left their biscuit-tin open one night. In the morning all the biscuits were gone, and the box was filled with a mixture of chips, bits of wood, and, in fact, everything movable near at hand. The trading rat is like the squirrel, and has a violent fancy for anything of a bright red hue.—Vincent S. Burrows, Burrows, Miners' Arms, Chesterton, Staffs.

### HIS OWN GRANDFATHER!

I married a widow, who had a grown-up step-daughter. My father came to see me, of course, and, being a widower, he fell in love with my step-daughter and married her. My father, therefore, became my son-in-law, and my step-daughter became my mother, because she married my father.

In due time my wife had a son, who was, of course, my father's brother-in-law and my uncle, for he was the brother of my step-mother. My father's wife, who was my step-daughter, remember, also had a son, who was my brother, and, at the same time, my grandchild, for he was the son of my daughter.

Now, my wife was my grandmother, because she was my mother's mother. I was, therefore, my wife's husband and grandchild, and as the husband of a person's grandmother is his grandfather, I was, therefore, my own grandfather.—Albert E. Gilliland, 187, Grosvenor Road, Belfast, Ireland.

### CLEVER!

"Thomas must be doing splendidly on the stage," remarked his mother. "He writes me that he appears every evening as a villager, a gipsy, and two kinds of soldiers, while Mr. Hamlet—the star, you know—performs only one part."—Allen C. Bulla, Iona, Lisburn Road, Belfast.

### A SAD CASE.

"There once was a young man of Kreft,  
Who of his senses was nearly bereft;  
When his newsagent said,  
'Don't go off your head,  
But I haven't a single "Gem" left.'"  
—Miss Iris Lamb, Havelock House, 1, Havelock Road, Birmingham.

### THE RETORT!

A Parliamentary candidate was addressing a meeting, but he had no sooner risen and said "Gentlemen," than somebody hurled an egg at him. Quite unperturbed, he turned to the offender: "I was not speaking to you, sir."—E. Mathias, 29, Coleraine Road, Hornsey, N. 8.

## YOUR EDITOR'S CHAT.

Address: Editor, The GEM, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C. 4.

### GREAT ATTRACTION FOR NEXT WEDNESDAY.

#### "THE ST. JIM'S HUNGER-STRIKER."

In next week's long complete story of the chums of St. Jim's, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy has more trouble with Mr. Selby, the tyrannical master of the Third. His disagreeing with the severe punishment that Mr. Selby administers to his young brother Wally, leads to the Head's intervention. The result is the swell of the Fourth goes on hunger-strike. His chums are very much concerned with this surprising move on his part; but, although they try various methods to induce him to change his mind, they are entirely unsuccessful. How this alarming situation is dealt with will be related in

#### "THE ST. JIM'S HUNGER-STRIKER,"

By Martin Clifford.

There will also be a further instalment of our magnificent football story entitled:

#### "RENTON OF THE ROVERS!"

By Paul Masters,

in which Jimmy Renton and Billy Desmond put their heads together to find a way out of the trap into which they have fallen. They at last conceive a plan which, they hope, will enable them to escape. Whether they are successful you will eventually find when you read the next chapter.

Our splendid, romantic adventure serial,

#### "SLAVE ISLAND!"

By Matthew Ironside,

will also be continued in this grand number.

A corner will be found for that interesting page of readers' contributions, which are paid for at the rate of half-a-crown each paragraph, under the title of

#### "MY READERS' OWN CORNER,"

and an odd space for

#### "THE EDITOR'S CHAT."

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#### MUSIC.

A Belfast reader suggests that there should be a special corner for music and musical matters in the Companion Papers. I am sure he knows what he is talking about when he says that there are thousands of fellows in Great Britain with the same hobby as he has. It is a first-rate notion; but the question is—can we spare the space, with so many other things to consider?

All contributions to this feature should be sent to: The Editor, The "Gem" Library Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4., and marked: "Readers' Own Corner."

Your Editor



## A Grand Football Serial. By PAUL MASTERS.

### Synopsis of First Chapters.

**JIMMY RENTON**, a footballer with a future, seeks an engagement as a professional in one of the big League teams. Assisting him in his quest is his chum,

**BILLY DESMOND**, a gay, good-hearted young fellow of about Jimmy's own age, who is shortly to become a reporter on the staff of the "Daily Sportsman."

Jimmy and Billy have their headquarters at an old-fashioned inn situated in the King's Forest. They are instrumental in rescuing Madge Trevor, the charming daughter of one of the directors of Belmont Rovers' Football Club, from the hands of gypsies, by whom the girl has been kidnapped. This leads, of course, to an introduction to Madge's father, who offers to give Jimmy Renton a trial with the Rovers. Jimmy makes a very favourable impression, and he is selected to play in the next League match, to the exclusion of

**LUKE RAYNER**, a mean, detestable fellow, with whom Jimmy has often been at loggerheads in the past. Rayner's father, a dishonest, unscrupulous man, and who happens to be a director of the club, disapproves of the choice falling upon Jimmy.

"I protest! I protest!" he says vehemently.

(Now read on.)

### The Committee's Decision.

"**B**UT why? You must admit that Renton displayed better form than your son," said Mr. Trevor. "For the simple reason that my son was off-colour," promptly replied Mr. Rayner.

"Nonsense! I was speaking to him shortly before the game started, and he told me he had never felt in better trim!"

Mr. Rayner frowned.

"Be that as it may, my son is a better man than Renton," he said.

"You are bigoted, sir," said Mr. Trevor. "What do you know about Renton, apart from what you have seen of him this afternoon?"

"He is a most inconsistent player—the sort of man who acquires himself well in one match and goes all to pieces in the next. Whereas my son—"

"Pardon my plain speaking," said Mr. Trevor, "but your son is not in the same class as Renton. He is a fairly good player, I grant you, but by comparison with Renton he is a clumsy novice!"

Mr. Trevor was not in the habit of mincing his words, and his painfully outspoken comments goaded Mr. Rayner almost to fury.

"I venture to think," chimed in the inoffensive Mr. Dodds, "that Renton should be selected to take the place of Hughes in the next League match."

"What you venture to think, sir," stormed Mr. Rayner, "is of no consequence! Be silent!"

And the timid Mr. Dodds promptly edged away from his irate colleague.

"I shall tell the selection committee," continued Mr. Rayner, "that I consider my son has the prior claim. He possesses the necessary match-winning temperament—"

"It wasn't in evidence just now," said Mr. Trevor curtly. "Your son was on the losing side, and although he played well at times, he was always well held by the opposing defence. Renton, on the other hand—"

"Bah! I am sick and tired of listening to all this twaddle about Renton!" snorted Mr. Rayner. "Just because he happened to render you a service, you are doing your best to get him a place in the first team without regard to his abilities as a footballer."

"That is a very unfair and libellous

statement!" said Mr. Trevor heatedly. "You have no right—"

"Shucks, sir! I will see that my son gets fair play at the hands of the selection committee! I shall tell them that Renton is an inconsistent and unreliable player, and as I am the senior to you as a director, I have no doubt the committee will be guided by my views and advice."

So saying, Mr. Rayner turned on his heel and strode angrily away.

The heated conversation between the directors had been overheard by Billy and Desmond and Madge Trevor.

Billy gave a chuckle.

"Old man Rayner seems to have been letting off steam somewhat," he remarked.

"He is a hateful man!" said Madge. "I detest him! Everything he says and does is coarse and ungentlemanly."

"And his son?"

"He is worse, if anything, than his father. It will be a rank injustice if he is chosen in preference to Jimmy Renton. By the way, you speak as if you know young Rayner. Do you?"

"Only too well, dear girl. I had the misfortune to work with him on the staff of a provincial paper. He's a sneak, and a cad, and a toad, and all the unpleasant things you can think of. In fact, he got Jimmy Renton sacked from his job."

"The cad!" exclaimed Madge, her eyes flashing.

At that moment Jimmy Renton came on the scene. He had changed into his ordinary attire.

"Well played!" said Madge cordially. "You put up a splendid show!"

"Spare my blushes!" murmured Jimmy.

"What did Kennedy have to say about your form?"

"He said I'd be a dead cert. for the next League match."

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"And so you will, although Mr. Rayner will do his level best to keep you out of the team."

"I'm quite prepared for that," said Jimmy.

The trio remained in the stand for about half an hour, discussing things in general, and football in particular. And then Mr. Trevor, who had been absent during that time, suddenly reappeared.

"I have seen the selection committee, Renton," he began.

"Yes, sir?" said Jimmy eagerly.

"And I strongly urge your claims to play for the club on Saturday. Unfortunately, one of the other directors vigorously opposed my suggestion, with the result that a deadlock has occurred, and the committee cannot make up their minds whom to select. They are meeting again later in the week, when it is to be hoped they will arrive at a decision."

"How shall I know whether I'm playing, sir?" asked Jimmy Renton.

"The names of the players will appear in all the sporting papers on Saturday morning. If your name is down—and I sincerely hope it will be—you must arrange to be here by two o'clock on that day. It is a home fixture, against Winton City."

Jimmy nodded.

"I'm awfully grateful to you for recommending me, sir," he said.

"Don't mention it, my boy. You played up like a Trojan this afternoon, and it will be scandalous if you are excluded from the first team."

"Hear, hear!" said Billy Desmond. "And now, Jimmy, old sport, we must homeward throb our weary way. Start up the merry engine, while I breathe a touching farewell to Miss Trevor."

As the two chums were in the act of leaving the ground, Luke Rayner lounged up to them.

"Why, here's the friend and companion of our youth!" exclaimed Billy Desmond. "How did you manage to squirm your way into the ranks of Belmont Rovers, Rayner?"

Rayner ignored the speaker, and turned to Jimmy Renton.

"I s'pose you've cut me out?" he said sneeringly. "You've toadied up to Trevor, and got him to recommend you to the selection committee—what?"

Jimmy Renton clenched his fists, and but for the fact that Madge Trevor was standing a dozen yards away, he would promptly have floored his interrogator.

"Clear off, you worm!" muttered Jimmy angrily. "I've had just about enough of you! You deliberately fouled me during the game this afternoon, and if it wasn't for the fact that Miss Trevor's looking on, I'd give you a hiding!"

Rayner backed away. He had had more than one experience of Jimmy Renton's hitting powers, and knew that Jimmy was his master, both as fighter and footballer.

"Are you down to play on Saturday or not?" he asked. "That's all I want to know."

"Then your thirst for information must remain unquenched," said Billy Desmond. "No decision has been arrived at yet. Giance at the sporting papers on Saturday morning, and you'll find that Jimmy's outside-left and you're left outside!"

With a muttered imprecation, Rayner turned and walked away. And Jimmy Renton and Billy Desmond returned to their headquarters, the Forest Arms.

There was only a short interval until Saturday morning, but to Jimmy it seemed like a cycle of slow-moving years. He was on tenterhooks to learn the decision of the selection committee.

Was he to make his debut in League football on Saturday? Or would Luke Rayner enjoy that honour?

Early on the Saturday morning Jimmy Renton was up and doing. He borrowed his chum's motor-cycle, and sped off to the nearest railway-station, arriving there just as the morning papers were taken off the London train.

"Piper, sir?" said a small urchin. "Daily Sportsman, please!" said Jimmy.

The paper was handed over, and Jimmy's gaze alighted on the familiar headline:

#### "TEAMS FOR TO-DAY'S MATCHES."

Half-way down the column appeared the following:

"BELMONT ROVERS v. WINTON CITY."

"At Belmont. Kick-off 2.30 p.m."

"Belmont Rovers: Richmond; Belton, Burnside; Milton, Merrivale, Masters; Carr, Drake, Welsh, Kennedy, and Rayner—or Renton."

So it was still undecided whether Jimmy should play!

Although it was Saturday morning, the selection committee had not yet arrived at a decision.

Jimmy tucked the paper into his pocket and rode back to the Forest Arms. He found Billy Desmond seated at the breakfast-table.

"Well, what's the verdict?" asked Billy, looking up. "You're down to play, surely?"

"It's still undecided," said Jimmy.

"The paper says Rayner or Renton."

"By Jove! That doze selection committee wants waking up. Why can't

they make up their minds one way or the other?"

"Give it up," said Jimmy. "What had I better do?"

"Ring up Trevor, and tell him you're in a state of harrowing suspense, and that you're dying to know your fate. There's a telephone in the lounge."

Jimmy nodded, and a few moments later he succeeded in getting through to Mr. Trevor.

"Renton speaking, sir," he said. "Has the selection committee decided anything yet?"

"Yes, my boy. There was a special meeting late last evening, and you have been selected to play. There was strenuous opposition—I need not mention who was responsible for it—but in the end the committee decided in your favour. We shall expect to see you on the ground at two o'clock sharp."

Jimmy Renton felt like dancing a jazz in his delight; but he restrained himself, and replied cheerfully:

"I'll be there, sir!"

And then, replacing the receiver on its hook, he dashed into the parlour of the inn to acquaint Billy Desmond with the good news.

#### Intercepted!

"WHAT news, Comrade James?" asked Billy Desmond, as his chum burst into the inn parlour, where he was dissecting the morning kipper.

"I'm down to play!" said Jimmy Renton breathlessly.

"Good, dear boy! Ought I to rise and cheer, or dance a jig on the hearth-rug? Which is the proper caper?"

"Don't be an ass, Billy! It's stunning news, though, isn't it? Think of it, man! I'm down to play for Belmont Rovers, the team I've always worshipped ever since I could toddle!"

Billy Desmond jerked back a chair. "Sit down and have your brekker, dear boy. Your kipper's getting cold."

"Blow the kipper!"

"That'll make it colder still."

"Look here, Billy, you needn't pretend not to be excited. I can see that you're every bit as excited as I am."

"Well, I won't say there isn't a slight fluttering here," said Billy Desmond, placing his hand over his heart. "By the way, what time's the kick-off?"

"Two-thirty. But I'm to be on the ground at two."

"We'll go over to Belmont by motor-bike, with your noble self tucked in the sidecar," said Billy. "I think we shall manage it all serene."

Jimmy Renton was impatient to start, but his chum insisted that there was plenty of time. It was past midday when they left the inn.

Jimmy stepped into the sidecar, and his chum was at the helm, so to speak.

"What sort of a team has Winton City got?" inquired Billy Desmond.

"Pretty good, I believe. But they've not been able to lick the Rovers on the Belmont ground for eight years."

"Great Scott! It's about time they broke the ice, then!"

"Hope they don't break it this afternoon!" said Jimmy Renton. "I don't want to be on the losing side in my first League match."

"No; that would be rather awful, wouldn't it? Have you got your shooting-boots on, Jimmy?"

"I never felt in better form in my life."

"Good! Then the Winton City backs will have a busy afternoon."

It was a long way to Belmont, and only half the distance had been accomplished, when a calamity occurred.

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The front tyre of the motor-cycle passed over a sharp flint, and there was a resounding pop!

"Punctured, by Jove!" exclaimed Billy Desmond, halting the machine.

Jimmy Renton looked anxious. "How long will it take you to repair it?" he asked.

Billy Desmond did not reply. A dazed expression came over his face.

"Hallo! What's up now?" asked Jimmy.

"Kick me for a confounded idiot!" growled Billy Desmond. "I've left my repair outfit behind!"

"Oh crumbs!" The two chums exchanged hopeless glances.

They were in the very heart of the forest, miles away from civilisation. The nearest motor repair works were at least a dozen miles distant.

"What are we going to do?" asked Jimmy Renton helplessly.

"There's nothing for it, dear boy, but to wait here in the hope that another motor-cyclist will come along and help us."

"I doubt if another motor-bike will pass this way for hours. The question is, how are we going to get to Belmont? The nearest railway-station is Bewley, and that's a dozen miles away. By the time we'd tramped that distance the match would have started."

"We're in a hopeless fix," admitted Billy Desmond, "and it's all my fault for forgetting to bring the repair outfit. There must be a serious leakage in my memory-tank. I shall have to Spell-manise."

Jimmy Renton sat chafing in the side-car, while his chum glanced up and down the lane, in the faint hope of obtaining assistance.

For some moments nothing happened. Then the purr of an automobile became audible, and presently a car swung into view round a bend in the lane. It was a big, yellow car, and it took up every available inch of roadway.

A heavy-featured, broad-shouldered man was at the steering-wheel, and he had a companion beside him.

The car slowed up. It had to, for the stationary motor-cycle obstructed its progress.

"In trouble?" inquired the driver pleasantly.

Billy Desmond nodded.

"Punctured," he said briefly. "Can you help us?"

"Where do you want to get to?" "Belmont."

The driver of the car appeared to reflect for a moment.

"Tell you what," he said, at length. "You can leave your motor-bike at the Coach and Horses, which is only a few hundred yards from here, and then you and your friend can come on in the car with us."

"That's awfully good of you!" said Billy Desmond gratefully. "But I'm afraid it'll be out of your way. You don't happen to be going towards Belmont?"

"It'll be no trouble to turn back," said the driver.

There was something about the man which Jimmy Renton didn't like. He seemed too gushing, too eager to please.

But Billy Desmond apparently had no suspicions, for he at once closed with the offer.

The motor-cycle was conveyed to the Coach and Horses, a ramshackle wayside inn, and then the two chums clambered into the back of the car, and were soon being whirled through the forest at a dizzy speed.

From time to time the driver turned his head, and indulged in conversation.

And the more Jimmy Renton saw of the man the less he liked him.

The driver's companion, too, was not the sort of man to inspire confidence. His face was swarthy and sinister, and he looked like a Spaniard.

Jimmy Renton felt strangely uneasy. But his chum was in high spirits.

"This is a stroke of luck, and no mistake," said Billy Desmond. "If this car hadn't turned up we might have been stranded for hours. As it is, we shall get to Belmont in heaps of time for the match."

The car struck off down a side-turning, and Jimmy Renton looked alarmed.

"This isn't the way to Belmont!" he exclaimed.

"I know that," said the driver. "But my home is near here, and I thought we might pop indoors for some light refreshment."

"We're not hungry," protested Jimmy.

"Speak for yourself, dear boy," said Billy Desmond. "Personally, I think it's a jolly good idea to partake of sandwiches and coffee. We sha'n't get another meal until after the match."

"And you won't be able to score goals on an empty stomach," said the swarthy-faced man, addressing Jimmy Renton. "If you want to win the match for Belmont Rovers you must lay a solid foundation."

"How did you know I was playing for Belmont Rovers?" demanded Jimmy sharply.

The man bit his lip. He realised that he had been letting his tongue run away with him.

"I—I guessed," he said. "You've got a bag with you, and it evidently contains football clobber. Besides, your friend mentioned a match. So it doesn't need a Sherlock Holmes to deduce that you're playing."

Jimmy Renton was far from satisfied with this explanation. And his mind was full of forebodings. He whispered in Billy Desmond's ear.

"I don't trust these fellows. Let's insist on going straight to Belmont."

"Rot!" replied Billy, in an undertone. "Everything's perfectly square and above board, and it's jolly decent of these chaps to help us."

The car slowed up presently before an old-fashioned, isolated house. The mere sight of the gloomy old building struck a chill into the heart of Jimmy Renton. He felt sure that he was right and his chum was wrong—that the two men had some ulterior motive in bringing them here.

"Come along, Rizzi!" said the driver to his companion. "We'll entertain the strangers within the gates, and then take 'em along to Belmont."

"Right you are, Rayburn!"

The two men led the way into the house, and Jimmy Renton and Billy Desmond followed.

Jimmy's uneasiness increased, and his suspicions grew stronger. And even Billy Desmond felt a tremor of apprehension as he passed into the hall. For a musty smell, like that associated with a dungeon, came to his nostrils. Moreover, he noticed that the walls were damp, and that the place was in a state of decay.

"Not exactly a cheerful place to live in, is it?" said Rayburn, interpreting Billy's thoughts. "But it suits Rizzi and I down to the ground. We're bachelors, you see, and—"

"It's past one o'clock," said Jimmy Renton, glancing at his watch. "And I've got to be at Belmont by two. Let's buck up and have that snack."

"This way," said Rayburn.

He descended a stone staircase, and the others followed.

"Is your kitchen situated in the bowels of the earth?" inquired Billy Desmond.

"Pretty well," was the reply.

Jimmy Renton felt like turning back. But Billy Desmond was in advance of him, and he could not leave his chum.

Besides, might not his suspicions be unfounded? Might not the motives of Rayburn and Rizzi be perfectly generous and honourable?

The two men led the way into a dark, dingy room in the basement of the house. It certainly contained a side-board, but there was nothing else to suggest that the place was a kitchen. The walls were damp, the floor was uncarpeted, there were no windows. The door, however, was very stout and solid.

"It's not my place to criticise your house, Mr. Rayburn," said Billy Desmond; "but I wouldn't live here for a fortune!"

Rayburn laughed. It was a low, mocking laugh, which startled the two chums.

"I'm afraid you'll have to," he replied. "For some time, at any rate."

"What?"

"You see, you are our prisoners!"

For a moment there was silence. It was broken at length by Jimmy Renton.

"I knew it, Billy!" he exclaimed. "I knew it all along! This is a plot—a plot to prevent me from playing in the match!"

"Oh crumbs!"

Billy Desmond's heart sank, and he reproached himself for his guilelessness in walking into the trap. But he wasn't going to let the kidnappers have things all their own way.

"Come on, Jimmy!" he muttered.

"We'll jolly soon get out of this!"

And he sprang to the door.

The next instant, however, he halted abruptly.

For the man Rayburn was standing with his back to the door. And in his hand glistened a revolver.

"If you come a step further," he said grimly, "I shall fire!"

Billy Desmond fell back in dismay.

And then Rayburn and his accomplice went out.

There was the sound of a key grating in the lock and of a bolt being shot. And Jimmy Renton and Billy Desmond were alone, caught like rats in a trap!

Jimmy Renton was the first to speak.

"I can see Rayner's hand in this!" he said savagely.

"Rayner senior or Rayner junior?"

"Both."

"You think Rayburn and Rizzi were bribed by them to do this?"

"I'm sure of it!"

"But—but why?"

"You needn't look very far for motives," said Jimmy Renton. "Don't you realise what this means? I sha'n't be able to get to Belmont, and Rayner will play in my place. And he'll continue to play in my place so long as I'm kept here."

"But how long do you suppose we shall be kept here?"

"Goodness knows! Weeks, perhaps!"

"You always were a delightful optimist, Jimmy."

"Well, I don't see any loophole of escape," replied Jimmy Renton. "The door's locked and bolted, and there isn't a window. You must admit that we're in a jolly tight corner."

(Another instalment of this grand

football serial next week.)

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Baggy turned his head and looked into the glittering eyes of Pertab Sindar, the Hindu.

## CHAPTER 1.

### A Queer Visitor!

"COME in!" Mr. Railton, Housemaster of the School House at St. Jim's, called out cheerily as a knock sounded at his study door. As the door opened to admit Toby, the pageboy, he glanced over the top of his newspaper enquiringly.

"Well, Marsh, what is it?"

"Which as 'ow there's a gent wants to see you, sir," said Toby.

Mr. Railton frowned slightly. Outside in the quad the dusk was thickening, and the master had only just lit the gas, and settled himself comfortably in the armchair before the fire, hoping to snatch a few brief minutes with the paper before calling-over.

"Did he not leave a card—or give his name?" he demanded.

"No sir. But he's a nigger—"

"What?"

"A nigger, sir—leastways, 'e looks like a Hindian, same as Koumi Rao of the New House, sir."

Mr. Railton looked surprised. He tossed the newspaper on to the table with a sigh.

"Kindly show the gentleman in, Marsh," he said.

He rose to his feet and glanced curiously at the man whom Toby ushered into the room a moment later. He was a tall, lank individual, dressed in dingy, tight-fitting European clothes, with a thin brown face and black gleaming eyes—unmistakably a Hindu. He entered the room with a soft, cat-like tread, and as he bowed with a curious snake-like motion to Mr. Railton, his white teeth gleamed in an ingratiating smile.

"You Mr. Railton?" he asked, in soft, silky English, "Lieutenant Railton?"

The Housemaster raised his eyebrows.

"That is my name," he said. "And who might I—"

"I am Pertab Sindar," said the Hindu, speaking softly and rapidly. "In the great war I sailed from India with the Indian Expeditionary Force, and fought with the British Army in France. With

me I carried something—something that was more to me and mine than life itself. It was an image—a small gold idol, sahib."

The Hindu paused. His dark eyes, which had been flashing round the room as he spoke, now fixed themselves upon Mr. Railton's face with fierce intensity. At his queer visitor's last words, the amazed Housemaster had given a quick start.

"Neither day nor night," went on Pertab Sindar, before the master could speak, "did the small gold idol go out of my keeping, until—until one night in very great battle I was sorely wounded, and precious idol was lost—the small gold idol that was more than life to me, sahib, was lost. It was found by British officer named Railton. I have come for that which belongs to me, sahib, I want small gold idol. Where is it?"

There was a silence. Mr. Railton gazed fixedly at his strange visitor, a curious look of mingled astonishment and anger on his clean-cut features. There was something sinister and menacing in the Hindu's smooth, silky tones, and the Housemaster did not like it.

He spoke at last.

"It is true what you say, my man," he exclaimed quietly. "I certainly did find a small image of gold in a devastated town when serving in France—though at the time I was far from suspecting its composition was gold, and after making a few casual enquiries to no purpose, I kept it as a souvenir. It was only a few months ago, and quite by chance, that I became aware of its real value. I then—"

"You have it now?" interrupted Pertab Sindar, in a tone of fierce eagerness. "It is mine. Give it to me! Where is—"

"One moment, my friend," said Mr. Railton quickly. "This image is of solid gold, and of considerable value. I shall certainly not hand it to you unless you show clear proof that it really belongs to you."

The Hindu's eyes gleamed white in the gaslight.

"Let me see it," he said, in a soft,

sublimant hiss. "It is mine. Let me see it, and I will prove the idol is mine, sahib."

Mr. Railton hesitated. But though the fellow's manner and appearance inspired anything but confidence and trust, his story seemed feasible enough. The little gold image he had found in those dark days of the war was certainly an Eastern idol. And it was quite possible that this stranger from the dark, mysterious East was the rightful owner, who, with the patience and cunning of his race, had traced the thing at last.

Without a word Mr. Railton crossed the room and unlocked the safe. From a drawer he took out something and held it up to the light. It was a small, ugly misshapen image—seemingly of bronze. Only the dents and scratches, gleaming dully in the gaslight, hinted at its real composition.

"This is it," exclaimed Mr. Railton grimly. "If you can prove your ownership, I will gladly give it up. Since discovering its real value, the thing has been a constant source of anxiety—ah!"

The Housemaster broke off suddenly with a gasp. Turning, he found himself staring along the cold, blue barrel of an automatic. Behind it was the Hindu's dark, livid face. The pupils of his eyes were contracted like those of a venomous snake.

"That is mine," said the Hindu menacingly. "Give it to me—at once, my friend."

He padded softly across the room, his thin brown hand outstretched to grasp the gold idol. And in that instant an astonishing and utterly unexpected thing happened.

From the shelter of the chintz-covered Chesterfield, three youthful figures leaped with shouts, and flung themselves upon the Hindu. There was a savage snarl, and a deafening report as the revolver dropped to the carpet and exploded harmlessly. It was followed by a crash, as the struggling figures went to the carpet in a sprawling, fighting heap.

"Ah!" said Mr. Railton. "Merry, Manner, and Lowther. Leave the scoundrel to me, boys."

# THE SACRED IDOL!

A SPLENDID LONG, COMPLETE  
STORY OF TOM MERRY & CO.,  
THE CHUMS OF ST. JIM'S  
SCHOOL.

By

Martin Clifford

He stooped swiftly. But the Hindu fought like a wild-cat, and it was as hard for the three Shell juniors to let go as it was to hold the squirming, sinewy Indian.

"Give in, you rotter!" panted Tom Merry, banging the fellow's head on the carpet. "We've got you."

But had they? Even at Tom Merry's triumphant shout, the man showed his white teeth in a snarl, and his black eyes scintillated with rage as he glared up at the junior. Then he gave a sudden, snake-like wriggle, and before Mr. Railton could get a grip again, the writhing heap rolled in a struggling mass against the table.

There followed a shrill howl of terror. Then from beneath the table scrambled the fat, shaking form of Baggy Trimble of the Fourth. He stood for a brief instant, staring at the struggling figures on the floor, his eyes goggling, and his fat cheeks shaking like a jelly with fright. And then he scuttled to the door, wrenched it open, and fled along the passage, howling.

And at that moment the Hindu's steely muscles seemed to slack, and his sinewy body became limp in the juniors' grasp. He lay flat on his back, his brown face set and his eyes closed.

"Stunned, I think," gasped Tom Merry, lurching to his feet. "My hat! What a scrap!"

From the passage without came a scurry of footsteps and a clamour of questioning voices. In the open doorway appeared a crowd of alarmed juniors.

"This won't do!" said Mr. Railton quickly.

He gave one glance at the apparently unconscious Indian, and, seeming satisfied that the fellow was helpless, he stepped quickly to the door, closed and locked it. Then he picked up the revolver and placed it with the idol in the safe. It was as he swung the heavy door to that it happened.

Like Tom Merry, Manners and Lowther had deemed the Hindu helpless, and had relaxed their grasp. And in that instant the apparently stunned man leaped to his feet, and sprang across the room like a panther.

"Stop him!" yelled Tom Merry, springing forward.

They were too late. The night was mild, and the lower sash of the window was raised, and the blinds undrawn. They had a brief glimpse of the Hindu's dark figure balancing on the sill, and then it was gone.

## CHAPTER 2.

### A Surprise!

"GREAT Scott!" gasped Tom Merry, aghast, forgetting the master's presence in his excitement. "The beggar's jumped it—twenty blessed feet!"

He leaned out of the window, and stared into the shadows of the quadrangle. But for long patches of light from the windows, and the open doorway of the School House, he could see nothing. He strained his ears and listened intently. Save for the soft whisper of the breeze in the leafless old elms, the quad was silent and still.

Tom Merry set his teeth.

"Come on, you chaps!" he snapped. "What that blessed blacking merchant can do, we can do! After him!"

The junior vaulted on to the low sill. He was about to swing through, when a hand grasped his collar, and he was hauled back into the room.

"No, no, Merry!" said Mr. Railton sharply. "To follow the man now would be futile—and dangerous. Let the

scoundrel go. He has failed in his quest—though but for your timely interruption, heaven knows what may have happened."

The Housemaster closed the window and drew down the blinds. Then, as he turned grimly to the juniors, they exchanged dismal glances. They guessed what was coming next.

"And now, boys," exclaimed Mr. Railton sternly, "perhaps you will be good enough to explain the presence of yourselves and Trimble in my study just now! Now, Merry!"

There was a silence. The explanation was simple enough, really. The greedy and unscrupulous Baggy Trimble had raided their tea that evening, and with the avenging Shell fellows on his trail, the fat Fourth-Former had, in desperation, taken refuge in Mr. Railton's unoccupied study. Barely had they followed him into the darkened room, however, when the footsteps of the Housemaster were heard approaching along the passage. On the spur of the moment, Manners, Lowther, and Merry had taken refuge behind the Chesterfield couch, while Baggy Trimble had dived beneath the table. They had watched in dismay as the Housemaster lit the gas and settled down with his newspaper. And the rest we know.

But, though true and simple enough, the three juniors could hardly tell Mr. Railton that, and they looked at each other dismally. Then Tom Merry took the plunge.

"We—wo—that is, we came after Trimble, sir!" stammered Tom. "You—you see, we wanted to speak to him. That is—"

"Very well," said Mr. Railton sternly, though his eyes were twinkling. "Under the circumstances, I will accept your explanation. And now—"

The Housemaster paused as the clamour of voices in the passage outside suddenly ceased. Then came firm footsteps and a sharp knock on the door. Mr. Railton turned the key and opened it. It was the Head.

"What—what does this mean, Railton?" ejaculated Dr. Holmes, gazing round the disordered room in astonishment. "I have just heard a most amazing story from Trimble, of the Fourth Form. Is it possible—"

"His story is doubtless true enough, sir," said Mr. Railton quietly. "These three boys and myself have had a most astonishing and alarming experience, Dr. Holmes."

And he related all that had happened. "Bless my soul!" gasped the astonished Head. "This is truly alarming. I remember your little souvenir very well, Railton. It makes one wonder if there can be some mysterious secret attached to the idol."

"Of that I have no doubt, sir," said Mr. Railton, taking the little idol from the safe. "It must be of great value, apart from its weight in gold, for the man to make such a desperate attempt to gain possession of it. Some of these Eastern relics, I believe, are held to be sacred by the superstitious Asiatics. And this certainly does appear to have a history."

The Housemaster handed the little image to the Head, who examined it critically in the gaslight. Suddenly he gave a start.

"Ah! I see there are hieroglyphics scratched on the base!" he exclaimed. "I wonder—"

"Hindustani, I should imagine, sir, though I have not succeeded in deciphering the inscription."

"And my knowledge of that language is limited," smiled Dr. Holmes, handing the image back. "It would be extremely

interesting to know what that inscription means, Railton!"

"Per—perhaps Koumi Rao of the New House could read it, sir," ventured Tom Merry meekly.

"Ah, yes! An excellent suggestion, Merry!" said Dr. Holmes, with a smile. "I confess I am most curious to know. Will you walk over to the New House and ask him to come here, my boy?"

"Certainly, sir!"

Tom Merry left the room. In the passage the crowd of excited and curious juniors swarmed round him eagerly. But loftily ignoring the questions and abuse hurled at him, the junior captain of St. Jim's pushed his way through and made across the shadowy quad to the New House.

He found Koumi Rao, the youthful Jam of Bundelpore, seated alone in his study reading. He looked up and smiled on Tom Merry's entrance. The quiet Indian junior had many friends, but few chums; and Tom Merry was one of the few.

"You're wanted in Railton's study, Jammy, old son!" said Tom Merry cheerily. "Buck up!"

"I will come at once, my chum!"

The Indian junior grasped his cap, and, without asking any questions, accompanied Tom Merry across the quad and to Mr. Railton's study.

"Ah, my boy!" said Mr. Railton, as the Indian junior stood before him.

"Dr. Holmes and myself are curious to know the meaning of this—Why—what—"

The Housemaster broke off blankly. As Koumi Rao's dark eyes fell upon the image in Mr. Railton's hand, his slim figure stiffened, and his calm, expressionless face underwent an amazing change.

Without warning he snatched the little idol from the astounded master's hand. Then he faced them, his face amazed, his fierce eyes flashing anger and defiance.

"That is mine!" he hissed passionately. "How comes that here? It belongs to me—to my people!"

Then followed a full minute's stupefied silence. Mr. Railton seemed dazed. Tom Merry and his chums stared transfixed at the Indian junior. For the first time they realised, with a thrill, that Koumi Rao, their chum, was not of themselves—that he was a child of that dark, mysterious East.

Dr. Holmes broke the silence.

"Boy!" he thundered angrily. "How dare you? Return that to Mr. Railton at once!"

Koumi Rao turned his smouldering eyes upon the Head. He seemed to make a mighty effort to control himself.

"That I cannot do, sir!" he answered fiercely. "It is mine. It is the Sacred Idol of Bundelpore. To me it is more than life. It is ordained that never must the Sacred Idol leave the keeping of my race. Its value is—But look!"

Koumi Rao's slim brown hands twisted queerly. There was a slight click, and the flat base of the idol swung open on a tiny invisible pivot. From the others came gasps of astonishment. The little image—seemingly of solid gold—was hollow. In the padded orifice, something—a great green stone—glittered like a blazing star in the gas-light.

Koumi Rao closed it with a snap.

"It is a green diamond, and—priceless," he said simply. "But to me it is worth infinitely more than the most precious jewels. My people are swayed by superstition. Without it my throne and my life would be worth nothing. With this in their possession my enemies would triumph. How came the sacred idol of Bundelpore in your possession, my master?"

Mr. Railton was too staggered to reply for the moment. There was no mistaking the sincerity and earnestness of the Indian junior's words, nor doubting the truth of his claim.

And yet it seemed incredible that the little dingy image found by Mr. Railton on the battlefield of France could be the property of Koumi Rao, a junior at St. Jim's.

It was only too clear now that the claim of the rascally Pertab Sindar was false—that he had no more right to the precious talisman than they themselves had.

Mr. Railton and the Head exchanged meaning glances.

"Perhaps you had better explain, Mr. Railton," said the Head quietly.

"Listen, my boy," exclaimed Mr. Railton, kindly. "Until to-night the history of that image was utterly unknown to me. It was picked up by me when passing through a French village during the war. For some considerable time it reposed on the mantelpiece in this study. Some months ago, however, it was pointed out to me that its composition was not bronze, as I had supposed, but gold, and I immediately locked it up in my safe for safety. At the same time I communicated with the Government as to its disposal. But beyond a curt letter of acknowledgment, I have heard nothing further—a fact that is not surprising, when one remembers the notorious slackness of Government departments. What surprises me," ended the master, in a puzzled tone, "is that you yourself, my boy, have not seen and claimed the idol before this."

"I did not know. I have seen and heard nothing of it," said Koumi Rao, in wonder. "I did not dream—Why should I, believing as I did that the Sacred Idol was in the safe keeping of my people in Blundelpore?"

Mr. Railton nodded. He remembered now that Koumi Rao was in the New House, and that he rarely—if at all—had occasion to visit the study of a School House master other than his own Form-master.

"And now," said Dr. Holmes kindly, "you must hand that image into my care, my boy, and I will keep it in a place of safety until it can be sent back to India. It is unwise for any boy to have such a precious article in his possession."

"It is more than unwise—it is dangerous!" exclaimed Mr. Railton gravely. "Already one desperate attempt to get it has been made by that scoundrel, Pertab Sindar."

And he then told Koumi Rao the startling story of what had taken place that evening, and as he listened the Indian junior's eyes gleamed, and he raised his head proudly.

"Pertab Sindar—I do not know the dog!" he muttered fiercely. "He was lying. He has been sent by my enemies. But I am not afraid of my enemies. Neither day nor night shall the idol leave me now, and I will guard it with my life. I will not give up the idol."

And he would not. All the Head's and Mr. Railton's advice and persuasion were futile. There was a streak of obstinacy in the Hindu junior's nature, and he would not listen to them.

"Very well," exclaimed Dr. Holmes, somewhat impatiently. "You are very foolish, boy! However, it seems obvious that the man who came to-night was quite unaware that you are a scholar here, or he would not have so openly claimed that which was not his. But I advise you to be on your guard, and while there is risk of that man still remaining in the vicinity, I forbid you to leave the precincts of the school. You may go, boys!"

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Tom Merry & Co. left the room with Koumi Rao. The Indian junior clutched the precious image to his breast. Out in the passage Tom Merry turned to him, his face sombre.

"You are an ass, Jammy!" he said. "You ought to have given the thing to the Head to take care of. But, come along! We'll see you safely to that casual ward of a New House, or if that ugly merchant is still hanging round, he'll p'r'aps collar you and the idol, old son!"

Koumi Rao smiled faintly, but did not reply; and after seeing the New House junior safely to his quarters, Tom Merry & Co. returned to their study for prep.

But Tom Merry, at least, for the rest of that evening was looking grave and thoughtful. He felt instinctively that this was but the beginning of the affair. He felt they had not looked their last on the sinister face of Pertab Sindar, the Hindu.

And he was right.

## CHAPTER 3.

### A Night Alarm!

**T**OM MERRY stirred and awoke. For a brief space of time he lay trembling, his body bathed in perspiration, his mind a welter of confused emotions. Then he sat up in bed with a shudder, and blinked drowsily round under heavy, sleep-laden eyelids.

The Shell dormitory was wrapt in slumber. From the other beds, dimly seen in the gloom, came the soft breathing of his Form-fellows.

The moon had risen and glimmered through the tall window, and spread in silvery, grotesque patches on the dormitory floor. From the School House tower the last booming stroke of midnight had just chimed, and still hung quivering on the still night air.

"Thank Heaven!" muttered Tom Merry, with a shiver. "Then it was only a dream. Ugh! I can almost feel the beastly brute's skinny hands now!"

Tom Merry had been dreaming, and the central figure of his dream was the ominous figure of Pertab Sindar, the Hindu.

Perhaps this was not to be wondered at. Before bed-time all St. Jim's had buzzed with the amazing story of Koumi Rao's sacred image, and of the desperate rascal who had come from far-off India to get it by fair means or foul. And in the Shell dormitory the juniors had sat up discussing the affair in breathless whispers until a late hour.

But upon Tom Merry the affair had made a deeper impression perhaps than upon anyone, and long after the other fellows had dropped off to sleep he lay awake, his mind full of vague fears and forebodings for the safety of the lonely Indian junior who called him "chum."

But at last he had fallen asleep—to dream he was once again at grips with the desperate Hindu. It was a dream as realistic as it was unpleasant, and it was little wonder when he woke suddenly to find it was but a dream that he experienced a feeling of profound relief.

The junior lay back in bed again, and pulled the bedclothes around him. But barely had he composed himself to sleep when he sat up again with a jerk.

The early winter's evening was mild, and the window was open a few inches to the night; and faintly above the sighing of the wind in the old elms beyond the cloisters came a sharp, slow creaking sound—the unmistakable sound of a window raised by cautious hands.

Tom Merry was bristling with suspicion at once. Had Pertab Sindar returned to make a second attempt to

end his quest? The junior's imagination rioted at the thought.

Creak, creak!

Again came the cautious sounds, and the junior hesitated no longer. His bare feet hit the cold linoleum with a soft smack as he leaped from bed and pattered to the window. Softly raising the sash, he stared out.

St. Jim's lay still and silent under the stars. A clear moon rode in the sky, and shed its radiance on the ancient roofs and chimneys of the old school buildings. It filled the dark well of the quadrangle with silver floods of light and abnormal, eerie shadows.

"Hallo!" breathed Tom Merry suddenly.

Something moved in the shadowy blackness below—he was sure of it. His straining eyes caught two moving shadows—darker than the rest. Even as he stared, with tense, set nerves, from a dark window below a blaze of white light shot out into the quad. He caught a glimmer of dusky faces and black, glittering eyes.

"My hat!" gasped Tom Merry. "There's more than one of 'em. And they've had the nerve to light the gas! Well, the beggars won't get the idol, but, with a bit of luck, we'll get them!"

He withdrew his head, and stepped softly to the bed where Manners lay sleeping, and shook him gently.

"Whassermarrer?" mumbled Manners, rubbing his eyes drowsily. "What the—"

"Quiet, you ass!" whispered Tom Merry. "It's that scug of an Indian back again. He's in Railton's study, I think."

"My hat!"

Manners was out of bed on the instant, and less than a minute later Monty Lowther had also been roused.

"Better wake Railton," muttered Tom Merry, after he had explained matters. "No good rousing the others, though. Too many cooks—"

Only stopping to put on slippers, and slip coats over pyjamas, the excited juniors stole softly from the dormitory. The moonlight, shimmering through the landing-window, lit up the corridor as light as day. Once round the corner, however, it was pitch-dark. They had to feel their way cautiously.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Lowther suddenly. "Look! A light! Old Railton must be out of bed!"

It was true enough. From beneath the door of the Housemaster's bedroom shined a thin gleam of light. As they reached it, Tom Merry tapped lightly on the door. There was no answer. He tapped again, louder, without result.

Such a silence within the lighted room was uncanny. But the occasion brooked no delay. Tom Merry pushed open the door and entered. The gas streamed full upon the tumbled bedclothes and an empty room.

The juniors exchanged alarmed glances.

"Jolly rummy!" muttered Tom Merry. "He must be down. What's that?"

From somewhere downstairs rang out a loud cry.

"Help, help!"

The juniors stood stock still, their hearts thumping. Tom Merry broke the silence.

"Quick!" he panted. "That was Railton's voice. Come on!"

He led the way with a rush to the top of the stairs, and began to descend. Vaguely from behind them came sounds of doors opening and alarmed voices questioning. Along the lower passage they seudded to Mr. Railton's study.



"Give in, you rotter!" panted Tom Merry, banging the fellow's head on the carpet. "We've got you!" But had they? Even at Tom Merry's triumphant shout, the man showed his teeth in a snarl, and his black eyes glittered with rage as he glared into the junior's face. (See page 7.)

Beneath the door a thin ribbon of light showed. Tom Merry wrenched at the knob and flung the door open. Even as he did so the light went out. As the juniors rushed into the room they were just in time to see a dim figure outlined against the open window. Then it vanished.

"Quick! Light the gas!" cried Tom Merry.

He dashed to the window, and stared out into the night. Across the moonlit quad three dim figures were speeding. They reached the shelter of the cloisters, and were swallowed up in the shadows.

The gas flared up as he turned, disappointed, to hear Lowther's quick cry of horror.

"Good heavens! Look! Mr. Railton!"

The room was in the wildest disorder. The safe had been ransacked, likewise the desk and cupboards. And, lying on the carpet near the table, lay the Housemaster, his eyes closed, his face ashen.

The alarmed juniors bent over him. "Is—is he—" faltered Manners.

"Stunned, I believe!" muttered Tom Merry. "He's breathing! Oh, good!"

Mr. Railton opened his eyes slowly

and raised his hand weakly to his head. At that moment Dr. Holmes and Kildare appeared in the doorway, and behind them a startled crowd of masters and boys.

"Good heavens! What has happened?"

The Head stepped into the room and dropped to his knees. Between the kindly old Head and the young Housemaster was a deep bond of something more than mutual esteem. The Head's face was anxious and agitated as he looked into the white face of his colleague.

"I—I'm all right, sir," muttered Mr. Railton, smiling weakly. "It was a nasty knock on the head; but fortunately my skull is pretty thick, and I shall soon be all right. But—but those scoundrels? Have they escaped?"

"I'm afraid so," said Dr. Holmes, with a glance at the window. "Is it possible that this is the work of that scoundrel again, Railton?"

"Yes, sir; but this time he had accomplices with him. I could not sleep, and, fancying I heard a slight noise downstairs, I hastily flung on a few clothes, and hurried down to investigate. As I suspected, someone was at work in my study. Thinking I had

only that rascal Pertab Sindar to deal with, I dashed into the room, and whilst at grips with one of the rascally Asiatics, a second man struck me down from behind. After that I remember nothing more."

Mr. Railton paused and pressed his hands to his throbbing temples.

"This is most distressing," said Dr. Holmes. "They shall pay dearly for this night's work, Railton."

Mr. Lathom and Kildare assisted the injured master to the armchair. Then Dr. Holmes turned his attention to the shivering crowd in the doorway.

"Boys," he exclaimed gravely, "Mr. Railton has been injured in an affray with—with burglars. But there is no cause for undue alarm. You will kindly return to your beds as quietly as possible. Ah, Mr. Lathom, and you, Kildare, will, perhaps, see the juniors to their respective dormitories."

Mr. Lathom motioned to Tom Merry & Co., and in a few moments, with Kildare's assistance, had shepherded the boys back to bed.

When they had gone, Dr. Holmes turned gravely to Mr. Railton, who by now was recovering from his unpleasant experience rapidly.

"This strange business is proving to be much more serious than I had imagined, Railton," he exclaimed. "It is clear that those scoundrels are determined to gain possession of that idol at all costs."

"Of that there can be no doubt," replied the Housemaster slowly. "But to me the idol itself is of little consequence, sir. I am thinking of Koumi Rao. At present his enemies do not appear to be aware that the boy is here. But sooner or later they will find out, and then—"

Dr. Holmes nodded slowly, his face careworn.

"But what can we do?" he said wearily. "The danger to the boy is terrible. I have already been in communication with the local police once this evening, though I fear little help can be expected from that quarter. I really think it would be advisable to get into communication with Major Mordant, through the India Office. As you know, Koumi Rao is a ward of that department. Major Mordant is, of course, political agent for Bundelore, and was instrumental in the boy being sent to this school."

"I quite agree with you, sir," said Mr. Railton quickly. "He surely will be in a position to advise you as to the best course to take for ensuring Koumi Rao's safety."

Dr. Holmes frowned thoughtfully. "I will write to them in the morning," he said at last. "And now I advise you to retire, Railton, and to try to get some sleep. I do not think we need fear another visit from those scoundrels to-night."

Dr. Holmes was right.

For the remainder of that eventful night St. Jim's slept undisturbed.

#### CHAPTER 4.

##### The Adventures of Trimble!

IT was not until after dinner the next day that Dr. Holmes had an opportunity of writing to Major Mordant at the India Office. And immediately it was written and sealed, the Head began to look about for someone to take the letter to Rylcombe Post Office.

In the ordinary way, Toby, the page, would have taken it, but it happened to be that he-buttoned youth's half-day off. It happened also to be Wednesday, a half-day for the St. Jim's juniors. But possibly that fact did not occur to the worthy doctor.

He looked out into the passage and beckoned to Baggy Trimble, who was loafing about at the moment.

"One moment, Trimble."

The unlucky Trimble quaked inwardly. The fat junior had a good many sins on his conscience, and he wondered dismally which of the brood had come to light.

"Y-yes, sir."

"I want you to take this letter to Rylcombe Post Office and despatch it by express post, my boy," said the Head. "It is a most important communication, and must be posted without delay. You understand?"

"Y-es, sir."

The Head handed over the missive, and Baggy took it almost mechanically. Though intensely relieved to discover his guilty fears were unfounded, Baggy did not look pleased—very much the reverse, in fact. Walking did not appeal to him—exercise of that kind never did.

"Well, if that isn't a bit thick," he sniffed, when the door had closed upon Dr. Holmes. "Fancy making a chap walk to Rylcombe and back—on a half-holiday, too. Must take a fellow for a blessed postman. B-r-r-r!"

Baggy scowled at the letter in deep

disgust. But there was no help for it. And a minute later he was rolling discontentedly through the gates.

Apparently Baggy Trimble did not share the Head's view as to the urgency of the letter. He ambled along between the black hedges, gloomily, until he reached the stile leading on to the path through Rylcombe woods. Feeling entitled to a rest, he seated himself thereon, and scowled again at the letter in his grubby fist.

"H'm. Major Mordant, India Office—who the thump is that, I wonder? My hat, perhaps it's about—"

Baggy broke off abruptly. In the thicket behind him sounded a faint, stealthy rustle. He turned his head, and glanced—into the black, glittering eyes and dark, sinister face of Pertab Sindar, the Hindu.

For one brief, breathless instant Baggy stared, petrified, too terrified even to yell. And next second a thin, brown hand slapped over his gaping mouth, a sinewy arm swept round his podgy waist, and he was borne, squirming, into the gloomy recesses of the wood.

Baggy was far from being a lightweight, but the Hindu carried him with seeming ease, as he threaded his way between the stark tree trunks.

He stopped at last in a little clearing, deep in the wood, and dropped his terrified burden on a bed of wet, dead leaves.

"One sound, or move, and I kill you, my friend," hissed the Hindu softly.

His menacing glance met Trimble's terrified gaze, and then he looked about him and gave a soft, curious whistle. The whistle was almost immediately answered, and into the clearing stepped two more dark-skinned men.

One, like Pertab Sindar, was shabbily dressed and of evil appearance. But the other was dressed in neat, well-cut European clothes. He held himself with an unmistakable air of breeding and authority—obviously a Hindu of high caste.

The latter gave one quick glance at the unfortunate Baggy Trimble as he lay, shaking with fright, and then he turned upon Pertab Sindar with an angry frown.

"What does this mean?" he snapped, speaking English, with the polished accent of a cultured Indian. "Who is this—this boy?"

Pertab Sindar salaamed cringingly, and broke into a torrent of words in his own tongue. Then, as he finished, he pointed a slim brown finger at Baggy Trimble, and the high caste Indian's eyes gleamed.

"Be quick, then," he ordered briefly. Pertab Sindar grinned evilly, and dropped on his knees beside the unhappy Fourth-Former.

"Listen, my friend," he said. "You were in room last night when I come to get sacred idol. It is not there now. Where is it? Speak!"

The fat junior fairly shook. He licked his dry lips and strove to speak.

"Quick!" hissed the Hindu fiercely. "Where is idol, and you go free. Tell me not, and you die. Quick! or—"

"Oh, stop! I'll tell you," almost shrieked Baggy. "Koumi Rao's got it—"

"What?"

It was a chorus of amazement. The three brown men stared at Baggy, in blank amazement. Then they exchanged startled looks. Pertab Sindar scowled savagely at the junior.

"You lie!" he hissed. "How can he whom you say be here?"

"I tell you it's true," waited Baggy tearfully. "He took it from Mr. Railton. He said it—"

"It is impossible—"

"Silence!" rapped out the small, spare Indian, his eyes gleaming. "It is quite possible. He is in England—at an English public school. I know it. But here—"

He stooped and gazed fixedly into Baggy Trimble's terrified eyes.

"Tell me, boy," he said harshly. "What do you know of Koumi Rao? Is he here at— Ah!"

The man broke off suddenly. He snatched something from the junior's hand. It was the letter to Major Mordant, which Baggy still clutched unconsciously. His keen eyes had caught a glimpse of the address.

Eagerly, feverishly, he broke the seal and tore the letter open. As his eyes rapidly ran over the writing, they burned like lambent coals.

"The boy speaks truly," he said. "Koumi Rao, Jam of Bundelore, is here—at this school. And he has—it. And I never dreamed. Yet it is true. It is amazing, but it is also—splendid. We shall get both he and it, my friends. And afterwards—"

He dropped his English, and spoke rapidly in Hindustani to his hirelings. Then, without another glance at the junior, he glided from the clearing and was lost to view.

Pertab Sindar bared his teeth in a grin, and looked down at his captive. Baggy shuddered as he stared up at the Hindu's evil face.

"Let me go now," he whimpered. "I—I've told you—"

"Not yet, my friend; there is information we want. You speak of Koumi Rao. We would know where he lives—where he sleeps. Tell us quickly!"

Baggy Trimble was no hero—far from it. He was shaking in every limb, and almost green with fright. But to betray the whereabouts of the idol was one thing, to betray his schoolfellow into the hands of these murderous ruffians was something far different. It was too much even for Baggy Trimble—at the moment.

"I—I won't tell you!" he panted hoarsely. "I—I don't know! I—I mean, I can't tell you! Oh, help, help, help! Rescue!"

The fat junior's shrieks for help rang out through the silent wood. Pertab Sindar laughed softly as he clapped a hand swiftly over the boy's mouth.

"I give you one minute," he purred softly. "Unless you tell before the end of minute, you die, and will be flung into river, my friend!"

Baggy Trimble shuddered. He blinked into the cruel face of the Hindu. He read no mercy there, and knew the man was quite capable of carrying out his threat.

All Baggy's new-found courage evaporated. And well within the minute he was burbling out answers to the quick questions put to him.

Sindar, at length. "And now, what? That is good!" murmured Pertab. Shall we do with this boy, Lal Chundra?"

Baggy gave a start. It had not occurred to the fat youth that the two Indians would never dare to let him go free after what had happened.

"But—but—" he stammered. "You—you said—"

"I will not kill you!" grinned the Hindu. "But let you go free—no, no, no! That would not do. You must come! What is that?"

From the depths of the wood came a sudden loud hail. It rang out clearly under the leafless branches of the trees. It was followed by the crashing of running feet in the undergrowth. Next moment a youthful figure emerged into



Tom Merry kicked open the door and dashed into the small cabin. As the junior's clenched fist caught the Hindu full upon his open mouth, Figgins flashed across to the couch. "Quick, Jammy!" panted the lanky New House junior, as he slashed at the bonds which held Koumi Rao. (See page 10.)

the clearing, and stopped dead at sight of them.

It was Tom Merry. He stared for one brief second, dumbfounded at the scene, and then he dashed at the crouching form of Pertab Sindar. His fist shot out and the rascally Hindu rolled over with a queer, gasping snarl.

"Run for it, Baggy!" shouted Tom Merry.

But the fat youth needed no telling to do that. He bounded to his feet, and dashed from the clearing. Tom Merry spun round, and, instinctively dodging the outstretched arm of Lal Chundra, darted away through the wood after him.

But Tom Merry's luck was out that day. Barely had he taken twenty steps through the brown, rotting undergrowth, when his feet tripped over something.

He had a brief vision of black, rotting logs of wood spread out before his eyes, and then he fell heavily, his head struck something with terrific force, and he remembered nothing more.

## CHAPTER 5.

### Missing!

**B**AGGY TRIMBLE emerged from the wintry gloom of Rylcombe woods like a stone from a catapult. He burst through the low hedge that bordered the outer fringe of

trees, and sprawled almost at the very feet of three cheery-faced juniors who were sauntering along the lane.

"Help, help!" he howled, recognising the juniors. "Help! Murder! Help!"

George Figgins, the lanky leader of the New House juniors at St. Jim's, was one of the three. The others were his bosom chums, Fatty Wynn and Kerr. They stared in astonishment at the fat figure grovelling at their feet.

"What the thump—" ejaculated Figgins.

"Help, help!" yelled Baggy, springing to his feet, and pointing to the woods. "Tom Merry—they've got him—"

"You silly ass! Who's got him?"

"Indians!" panted Baggy Trimble.

"What?"

"Indians! Those awful Indians have got him! Quick! Rescue!"

"You spoofing rotter!"

"I tell you it's true!" shrieked the fat junior, tugging frantically at Figgins' arm. "They've got Tom Merry. 'They're goin' to kill him like they did me—I mean, like they were going to do me. Come on! Rescue!"

"M-m-my hat!"

Figgins & Co. stared at the excited Baggy, and then they exchanged startled glances. The alarming events of the previous night were still fresh in their minds. Baggy Trimble was bareheaded and dishevelled, and there

was no mistaking the genuineness of his terror. His eyes were bulging, and his fat face green with it.

"Come on!" exclaimed Figgins grimly. "Better look into this. But if the fat idiot's spoofing us—"

But Baggy Trimble hadn't waited to hear Figgins' dark threats. He scrambled up the bank, and the New House juniors followed. With the stalwart fighting-men of the New House behind him, the fat youth was brave enough now. He dashed into the wood with Figgins & Co. at his heels.

"This way, you fellows!" panted Trimble.

Amid a crashing and swishing, they dashed through the bare thickets and dead leaves. Trimble stopped at last in the little clearing where his adventures with the Indians had taken place.

But as the Fourth-Former's eyes swept the place, his jaw dropped. The clearing was empty. Not a sign of the men or of Tom Merry was visible.

Figgins & Co. eyed Trimble suspiciously.

"Well, what about it?" demanded Figgins. "Where's your blessed Indians—and Tom Merry?"

"I—I don't know," stammered Trimble, in alarm. "They—they've gone. But it's the truth, and I'm certain this is the place. And look!"

The fat junior stooped, and picked up his cap from a bed of leaves. He

stooped again, and picked up something that gleamed white in the cold wintry sun—that lit up the clearing. It was a knife—a long, sharp, evil-looking thing. "Great pip!"

It seemed to be proof positive, in the face of that sinister find, and the New House juniors doubted Baggy no longer.

"It's jolly queer," said Kerr, frowning. "But let's hear the yarn, Baggy. What happened?"

Baggy Trimble was just about to launch out into his story, when a sudden thought came to him. Supposing his unwilling betrayal of Koumi Rao to his enemies had tragic results to the dusky-skinned junior—what then? Would he be held in any way responsible?

Certainly he had given the information under strong compulsion. But in any case, he had an uneasy feeling that that part of the story did not reflect any credit upon himself. Perhaps it would be as well not to relate that questionable part of the story.

Kerr broke in upon his reflections.

"Back up, lard tub!" he said suspiciously. "Trying to wangle a yarn, or what?"

"Ye-es—I mean, nunno!" gasped Baggy. And forthwith he gave a highly-coloured account of his adventure, taking care not to tell how he had been forced to give details concerning Koumi Rao.

"Then the brutes know now that old Jammy 'has the idol'?" said Kerr gravely.

"Y-yes; they read that in—in the letter, you know," stammered Trimble.

"Blessed if I don't believe you're keeping something back, you fat frog!" grunted Kerr, eyeing Baggy keenly. "But never mind that now. What about Tom Merry? You say you left him struggling with those Hindus?"

"Just the sort of thing he would do!" growled Figgins. "Old Tommy rushed to his rescue, and then the fat funk barked and left him to face it alone—the fat worm!"

"Oh, but he told me to run for it!" burred Baggy. "And I thought—"

"Blow what you thought!" snapped Figgins. "But we're wasting time. We'd better have a hunt round, you chaps!"

The juniors set to work in earnest, and spent fully an hour searching the wood in the vicinity. But it was to no purpose, and at last Figgins & Co. gave it up with sinking hearts.

"It's no good, you chaps," said Figgins gloomily. "It would take the four of us a blessed month to search these woods thoroughly. I vote we go and round up a crowd and do the thing properly."

Kerr and Fatty Wynn concurring, they made a quick return to St. Jim's. As they passed through the gates they met Manners and Lowther, and Figgins hurriedly related the news.

"My hat!" muttered Manners, in great alarm. "We were wondering where Tommy had got to. Come on, Monty, we'll jolly soon show those dusky merchants—"

"Don't be an ass!" said Figgins sharply. "You want at least twenty fellows to search the woods properly. I vote you chaps cut off to the playing-fields, and rope in all the fellows you can, while I go with Trimble and report the matter to Railton."

Lowther and Manners saw the sense of this. With Kerr and Wynn they dashed off to Little Side. Figgins and Trimble hurried indoors, and a few minutes later they were relating what had happened to Mr. Railton. Not until they had finished their story did the Housemaster

speak; but when he rose from his chair at last, his face was grave.

"Dr. Holmes must hear of this at once, boys!" he exclaimed quietly. "Come with me!"

They proceeded at once to the Head's study, and as Mr. Railton explained the situation, the Head's face grew haggard.

"Bless my soul, Railton, this is terrible!" he said, in an amazed tone. "Is there to be no end to the machinations of those scoundrels?"

"Not until they have been apprehended, I'm afraid, sir," replied Mr. Railton. "I cannot understand how Merry came to be in the woods alone at the time."

"I think I can explain that," said the Head quickly. "Ten minutes after Trimble had gone with the letter, I had a telephone-call from Major Mordant, himself in London, stating he intends to visit the school on urgent business tomorrow. I then despatched Merry post haste to overtake Trimble, if possible, and stop him sending the letter. I should imagine Merry took the path through the woods, and heard Trimble calling for help."

"Then—then I presume Major Mordant has also discovered that I was in possession of the idol?" observed Mr. Railton quickly. "And is coming to the—"

"On the contrary," said Dr. Holmes. "Major Mordant was astonished, incredulous when I told him the facts. Like Koumi Rao, he does not appear to have had the slightest suspicion that the idol was in England—and even now I strongly suspect he does not believe that it is the genuine Sacred Idol of Bundel-pore."

"But—but all this time—surely the authorities in the principality must have missed such a valuable—"

"Ah, yes, yes! Major Mordant was fully aware that the idol was missing. The story is a curious one, Railton. From the brief account he gave me on the telephone, it appears that the Sacred Idol was stolen from the treasury in Bundel-pore in the early part of the war, and strenuous efforts have been proceeding ever since to trace it. The people there are swayed by superstition, and the reigning Jam, or prince, would have, I understand, little chance of keeping his throne without it. That is why, on the advice of Major Mordant, the loss of the image was kept a closely-guarded secret by the authorities—not even Koumi Rao himself being told of its loss."

"Extraordinary!" murmured the Housemaster. "Then why is the Major visiting the school now—"

"Because quite recently the secret leaked out. Certain unscrupulous rascals—powerful enemies of Koumi Rao and strongly opposed to the British rule there—have discovered the truth. Learning these men had sailed on a secret mission to England, the major at once followed, believing they intended harm to Koumi Rao. However, we can discuss the matter fully with Major Mordant to-morrow. Meanwhile, that poor boy Merry must be found. Can you suggest any—"

"I think I had better organise a search-party of seniors," suggested Mr. Railton. "They could form two parties, one to cover the woods, and the other to search Wayland Heath."

"That must certainly be done!" agreed the Head. "I will get into communication with the police at once. And I sincerely hope and trust that we shall soon hear good news of the boy."

But, unhappily, that hope was not realised that night.

The junior search-party returned first. They came trooping in, tired but empty-handed. And when the seniors under Kildare came in as dusk was falling, their report was just as unfavourable. They had searched every inch of the woods between Rylcombe Lane and the river, but had not succeeded in finding any trace of the missing junior.

In the quadrangle that evening, over which the winter's dusk had descended like a pall, dozens of juniors strolled about waiting for news, and discussing the strange affair which had cast a shadow over the whole school.

But they waited in vain. And when bed-time came at last, the juniors trooped up to their dormitories without any news, favourable or otherwise, of Tom Merry. In the Shell and Fourth dormitories, the anxious juniors sat up until long after lights-out, talking over the affair in whispers.

It was the same over in the New House. Koumi Rao especially, usually so calm and emotionless, seemed more concerned than anyone.

"I am sorry—deeply sorry, that I should have caused such misfortune to my chum Merry," he confided to Figgins as they undressed. "I would that it had been myself than my friend."

"Don't you worry, old son!" replied Figgins kindly. "It isn't your fault, whatever happens. But you'd better look out for yourself now, Jammy. Now those rotters know you have that blessed idol thing, they'll not rest until they've got it—and you, too!"

"If they want it they will have to kill me first!" said the dusky junior proudly. "I do not fear my enemies, Figgins, my chum. I am only afraid and sorry that—"

"I say, Jammy," broke in Fatty Wynn. "Let's have a squint at the old idol, will you?"

"Yes, do, Jammy!" came an eager chorus.

"Good idea," added Figgins curiously. "I've never seen the blessed thing! Out with it, Jammy, there's a good chap!"

The Indian junior frowned, and hesitated. But Figgins was, perhaps, his closest chum at St. Jim's, and he did not care to refuse him.

"Look, then, my friends!" he exclaimed.

The juniors stared with no little curiosity and awe at the little misshapen thing that had caused so much commotion as Koumi Rao held it up to the light. But as the dusky junior smiled, and opened the tiny secret compartment, disclosing to view the diamond, flashing and sparkling in the gaslight, they gave a low murmur of amazement and admiration.

Fascinated as they were at sight of the flashing stone, not one of them took their eyes from it. Had they done so, and glanced towards the window, their amazement would have changed to alarm.

At the window, clearly outlined against the blackness outside, were the head and shoulders of a man. The face was a dusky, evil face, with black eyes that glittered as they watched every movement of Koumi Rao's, until he snapped to the base of the idol and placed the precious thing beneath his pillow, and then the face vanished.

"My hat!" breathed Figgins slowly. "No blessed wonder those rotters want to get hold of that thing, Jammy!"

Koumi Rao, Jam of Bundel-pore, laughed softly as he climbed into bed.

"They will never get it, Figgins, my chum!" he said.

# CHAPTER 6.

## In Rylcombe Woods.

IT seemed to George Figgins that he had scarcely been asleep two minutes when he awoke again suddenly. For a brief instant he lay wondering what had awakened him, and then a sharp, agonising pain shot up his face, and he understood.

"Oh dear! That thumping neuralgia again!" he groaned wearily. "And I fondly imagined that blessed stuff of Redfern's had cured it. No more sleep for me to-night, blow it!"

For days now the unfortunate Figgins had been the victim of a series of particularly malignant attacks of neuralgia—until that morning, in fact, when Redfern had lent him a jar of a remedy guaranteed to cure neuralgia and all allied maladies.

Sure enough, one application of the stuff had brought instant relief. Figgins had not been troubled again that day, and he had fondly hoped that the cure was permanent.

Now, however, encouraged, as is often the case, by a warm bed and quietness, the trouble had started again, and a particularly violent spasm had awakened him.

Figgins turned over and tried hard to ignore the shooting pains in an attempt to woo sleep again. But the sharp pangs were too insistent; sleep was an impossibility. For fully half an hour he lay tossing, groaning in misery, and at last he could endure it no longer.

"Oh crumbs!" he moaned dismally. "I've simply got to stop the beastly pain somehow, or I shall go potty! What an utter ass I was not to bring that stuff up to bed with me. Anyway, here goes to get it."

It needed no little effort to leave the warm bed, but Figgie set his teeth, and, groping in the dark for his socks, slipped them on.

It was the work of a moment to slip trousers and coat over his pyjamas, and after shoving his feet in slippers, and arming himself with his pocket torch, the junior stole softly from the dormitory.

Outside, the passages were dark and deserted. He reached his study at last, and at once began to look about for the neuralgia balm.

But it was not to be found. For quite ten minutes the unfortunate junior hunted desperately. He was just on the point of giving the search up in despair, when he remembered he had returned the stuff to Redfern early that afternoon.

"Shades of Pelman!" he grunted, in disgust. "What a thumpin' memory I've got! But I've simply got to get it, so I'll have to burgle Reddy's study."

Being a great pal of Reddy's, the junior had no scruples, and he wended his way to that youth's study. Almost the first thing his eyes fell upon as he flashed the light cautiously round the room was the precious remedy reposing on top of the bookshelves.

He rubbed some of the stuff on his face, and almost immediately the burning paste had a soothing effect on the nerves.

"Good egg!" he murmured thankfully. "Now for bed and sleep!"

Figgins slipped the jar into his pocket and left the study. Outside in the passage a fitful gleam of moonlight streamed through the landing window at the bottom of the staircase. And barely had Figgins taken half a dozen steps towards the stairs when he stopped abruptly.

Something—a huge dark object, more resembling a bundle of bedclothes than anything else—had suddenly darkened the window from outside. The startled junior had only a brief glimpse before

it dropped jerkily past the window and was gone.

"M-m-my hat!" breathed the junior, aghast. "Wha-what the thump—"

Bristling with suspicion, the New House junior darted to the high window and peered out. At first only the shadowy well of the quad met his gaze. Suddenly his straining eyes beheld a flimsy something swaying gently within a couple of feet of the glass.

"A rope-ladder, by gum!" gasped Figgins. "Then—then—"

Figgins drew his head back swiftly as the swaying ladder outside shook convulsively. Only just in time! Next second the looming figure of a man, huge, grotesque in the eerie moonlight, swung down the swaying ladder.

And almost instantly the dark, ominous figure was followed by a second, and this time the startled junior caught a glimpse of his face. It was only a glimpse—a fleeting vision of a dark, swarthy face, of black gleaming eyes and glistening teeth—the face of an Asiatic.

Then it vanished. Next second the rope-ladder wriggled and shook, and dropped in a coiling heap past the window.

Figgins stood transfixed, his heart thumping. The junior wondered for a moment if he were dreaming. Only for a moment, though; then the full significance of it all dawned upon him.

What did it mean? The momentary glimpse of that dark, sinister face alone told him what it meant.

He remembered in a flash that the room above his head was his own dormitory. Koumi Rao had been kidnapped! He had been lowered to the ground by those scoundrelly Hindus. And only a couple of hours ago he himself had warned the Indian junior of such a possibility. A sudden gust of fury swept over Figgins at the thought, and his eyes blazed.

"They—they've got poor old Jammy!" he breathed, in a tense whisper. "But—but they shan't keep him!"

Figgins hesitated a brief moment, thinking rapidly. To rush up to the dorm and make certain of his fears and suspicions would take time, as would also the raising of the alarm, and every moment was precious.

No, if Koumi Rao was to be saved, he alone must act—and promptly.

Figgins was always an impulsive youth, and he acted impulsively now. Gone now was his neuralgia, or, if it did still pain him, he did not feel it. All he felt then was a fierce anger against the rascally kidnappers, and a consuming desire to save his chum.

He dashed back to his own study and snatched up a pair of boots and a muffler. In a couple of minutes he had gained the lower box-room. From there he dropped into the quadrangle, and less than four minutes from making his decision the junior was standing in the shadows on the far side of the school wall.

Then he stood undecided. The darkness was intense. And then, even as he stared into the blackness, a thin, watery moon shone through a rift of scudding clouds, and lit up the stretch of Rylcombe Lane before him. It showed up mistily a dark, shadowy group of ghostly moving figures some distance ahead.

"Three of 'em, by gum!" breathed Figgins. "Well, here goes!"

He scudded across the white patch of road, and was soon padding over the stubble grass under the shadow of the black hedge. That he was pitting himself against three desperate and merciless ruffians did not trouble Figgins. He knew, of course, he could not hope to cope with them single-handed. But he

could follow and discover their destination. And this Figgins was grimly determined to do. Afterwards—

The junior padded on, thinking only of the present. He was overtaking them fast now. When within fifty yards of the ruffians and their burden, he saw them stop suddenly at the stile leading into Rylcombe Woods. They negotiated the stile and vanished into the black maw of the woods.

Figgins reached the stile and hesitated, his heart beating fast. Even in the brightness of a summer's afternoon, an eerie and mysterious gloom brooded over the deep glades of Rylcombe Woods. But at midnight, on a dark winter's night, with a cruel and unscrupulous foe lurking somewhere in the gloomy depths, the prospect was anything but inviting.

Figgins set his teeth and entered. As he stepped among the thick trees, a blackness as of a pall descended upon him. Save for the rustle of the wind in the trees and bare branches, there was silence. And then suddenly his staring eyes caught a dim flicker of light moving like a will-o'-the-wisp through the intervening trees ahead.

With every nerve tense, and every sense keenly alert, the junior began to tread cautiously towards the moving light. It was no easy task, this. A single false step, a snapping twig, and his safety was jeopardised.

Suddenly the light ahead vanished, and he knew the ruffians had emerged from the wood on the far side. And with the knowledge came a haunting dread into Figgins' heart.

Beyond the wood lay the river. Why had the kidnappers made for the river with their helpless burden? He knew that Koumi Rao's enemies wished the youthful prince out of their path, and that they would stick at nothing to gain their ends.

At the thought, Figgins threw all caution to the winds. Heedless of knocks and scratches, he plunged on through the dark trees. But barely had the junior reached the edge of the wood, when he pulled himself up—why, he knew not.

Before him, gorse-covered ground sloped gently down to the river. Beyond this stretched the Ryll, its surface shining cold and silvery in the moonlight. And from the dark, wooded island across the water a small rowing-boat was gliding, propelled by a single oarsman. And as his eyes fell upon this, and the dark group of figures waiting at the water's edge, all his fears for the immediate safety of Koumi Rao vanished.

"So that's where the beggars are hanging out, is it?" muttered Figgins. "My hat! I believe they've got Tom Merry over there, and now they intend to keep Jammy a prisoner there, too! Not if I know it, though!"

To Figgins, his next plan of action seemed simple enough. He had tracked down the kidnappers to their hiding-place, and all that remained to do was to return with all speed to St. Jim's and get help.

From the shadows of the trees Figgins watched breathlessly, and saw the boat touch the shore and the helpless burden lifted into it. And then the junior literally made his first false step.

He turned abruptly to retrace his steps. Forgetting caution in his excitement and eagerness, he trod on a bough hidden in the dense undergrowth.

Snap! The rotten wood snapped with a report that cut like a pistol-shot in the silence of the wood. It was followed almost immediately by a startled cry from the dark figures at the water's edge.

"Oh, my hat! That's done it!" groaned Figgins.

It had. From the group a couple of dim forms detached themselves, and came running across the rough ground towards him. Knowing his own safety and that of his chums rested on instant flight, the junior plunged headlong into the dark trees.

His eyes were becoming accustomed to the darkness by now, but for all that, the race that followed was like a hideous nightmare to Figgins. From behind came shouts and the crashing of pursuit. Only his keen eyesight saved him dozens of times from collisions with the dim tree-trunks as he dashed, tripping and stumbling and lurching, through the wild undergrowth of the wood.

But presently, to his intense relief, the sounds of pursuit died away. Exhausted and breathless, but feeling secure now, he dropped to a stumbling walk, glancing behind him constantly as he threaded his way through the thick trees. Several times the junior fancied he heard faint sounds behind him. But whenever he stopped, the suspicious sounds ceased.

"This is getting on my blessed nerves," muttered the junior at last. "The beggars seem to have dropped the trail, and yet—Hullo, what's this?"

Figgins stiffened suddenly. From somewhere—it seemed to him from the bowels of the earth—came a faint, uncanny cry—a cry for help.

Figgins stood stock-still. And then, quite suddenly, as he realised where he stood, his heart jumped, and a queer, creepy sensation ran over his scalp.

Before him was a little clearing, filled by a dim, ghostly sheen of moonlight. In the centre of the white patch of light was the square platform of rotting logs of wood that covered the Monks' Well—an old, disused well as ancient as the vaults of St. Jim's.

The spot was familiar to Figgins, as it was to all St. Jimites. Tradition had it that the well was bottomless, and local superstition claimed that the well was haunted.

Figgins was not superstitious, and he was no coward. But considering the place, time, and circumstances, it was no wonder the New House fellow stood rooted to the earth, and trembling in every limb.

"Help, help!"

Again came the weird cry—louder and clearer this time.

As he heard it, all Figgins' fear left him, and he almost fell down with astonishment. The voice, though ghostly-sounding enough, was human—a boy's voice, and familiar to him.

It was the voice of Tom Merry, of the Shell.

"M-m-my hat!" muttered Figgins. "What—"

Stupefied with amazement, Figgins stood a brief moment. Then he dashed forward and began to fling away the huge black logs with feverish energy.

He hurled the last one crashing into the bushes, and leaned over and stared down into the well. He was about to shout into the black maw, when from behind him came a sudden rustle.

Startled, he spun round, just in time to see the lithe figure of a man spring at him from the dark shadows of the trees. Next second it was upon him, and the man's flat hand lunged at his chest.

For one brief, breathless instant the junior swayed on the brink, striving desperately to regain his balance, and then, with a stifled gasp of terror, he dropped from sight into the unknown depths of the old Monks' Well.

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## CHAPTER 7 The Old Well!

THOSE next few seconds seemed an eternity to George Figgins as he hurtled down the black shaft of the old Monk's Well, his brain throbbing, his ears singing, and a horrible feeling that the whole world was falling away from him. Then: Splash!

His sprawling body smacked the cushion-like, slime-filled bottom of the well with a queer, quick splash that echoed hollowly up the shaft. As if in a bewildering dream he heard a startled exclamation quite close to him, and then he found himself floundering, almost suffocated, in the horrible evil-smelling ooze.

"Hold up—I've got you," came a voice—Tom Merry's voice—from the velvet blackness. And next instant a strong arm gripped him, and hauled him upright.

He found himself standing up to his waist in the slime. A deep sense of thankfulness swept over him to feel his feet were on solid ground.

"Thanks, Tommy," panted Figgins, dazedly, shuddering. "Great Scott! I thought I was—"

There was an amazed exclamation from Tom Merry.

"My hat! It's Figgy!" he almost shouted. "I wondered who on earth—hallo!"

Both the imprisoned juniors looked up suddenly as a dull, distant thud came above their heads. Far up the shaft a faint half-circle of moonlit sky glimmered. Even as they gazed, there came a second thud, and the patch of light grew smaller.

"He—he's putting the lid on," said Figgins shakily.

It was true enough. In less than a minute the patch of light had vanished and total darkness fell upon the juniors.

There was a tomb-like silence. Figgins turned. He could faintly make out his chum's white face in the deep gloom.

"We're fairly boxed up now, Tommy," he muttered shakily. "We're prisoners, and goodness knows when we'll be found—perhaps never. My hat! So this is where you've been. No wonder half the school couldn't find you. I suppose that Hindu merchant shoved you down here yesterday?"

"Yes," said Tom Merry, in a low tone. "I've had a horrible time—and a jolly narrow escape, Figgy. They were chasing me through the wood when I tripped over those dashed planks above. I was fairly knocked silly, and the murderous ruffians must have chucked me straight down here, and boxed me in."

"Great Scott! But—but how—"

"By the greatest good luck," said Tom Merry grimly. "The sudden shock of dropping into this beastly stuff must have brought me round—otherwise I should have drowned for a cert. Anyway, I found myself struggling in this horrible stuff, and half-suffocated. Then I stumbled across this log of wood here, and for hours and hours I've been sitting astride it, half conscious most of the time. It was awful."

"You've had a pretty thin time, Tommy, old man."

"Beastly. It was ages before I had strength even to shout, and it wasn't until you lifted the blessed lid off this pill-box that I knew whether it was day or night. But how on earth did you find me, Figgy?"

"By a sheer fluke," exclaimed Figgins. And a moment later he was relating to the astonished Tom Merry his midnight adventures up to dropping down the well.

"Well, my only aunt!" exclaimed Tom

Merry. "Poor old Jammy. Then the sooner we get out of this horrible hole the better for us and him. If only we had a light and could see—"

"Great pip! What an ass I am," ejaculated Figgins. "I've got an electric torch."

He fumbled in his sodden jacket-pocket and produced the torch. Next moment a welcome beam of white light glistered upon the green moss and waterweeds in which they stood. It glistered also upon the slimy stone walls of their prison, smooth and hopeless of ascent.

"Nothing doing!" groaned Tom Merry. "A blessed fly couldn't climb—Hullo! What's this? Shine the light up here a tic, Figgy."

Tom Merry's voice was wildly excited as he pointed up the slime-covered stone wall. Some ten feet above their heads was a dark patch—a hole in the wall.

"Well, what about it?" queried Figgins. "Only a blessed break in the stonework. That won't help—"

"If there's room for the two of us to crouch there, it will be better than standing shivering like half-drowned rats in this blessed soup," muttered Tom Merry. "Look here. Keep the light on while I stick this plank up, old son."

With a mighty heave the junior lifted the heavy, sodden log of wood from the slime, and jammed it aslant against the wall beneath the dark gap. As Figgins held the light fixed on the spot, he swarmed up the plank, and, grasping the edge of the stonework, hauled his dripping figure up into the cavity. And almost at once a shout of surprise left his lips.

"Great Scott, Figgy! A find! It goes right in—I believe it's a regular tunnel!" he shouted, in great excitement. "Come up with that light—quick!"

It seemed to be too good to be true. But as Figgins, excited as his chum now, swarmed up, and sprayed the light into the hole, it proved to be true enough. The white shaft from the torch shone upon the low, arched, bricked walls of a passage stretching away into the blackness. It was dry and clean in comparison with the morass of filth they had left.

"Good egg!" breathed Tom Merry. "We've stumbled on something this time, and no mistake, Figgy! It's a blessed secret passage! This old well is hundreds of years old, you know. May lead us to the vaults under St. Jim's, for all we know."

"Or the old castle on Wayland Heath," added Figgins eagerly. "Anyway, if it leads us out of this horrible place it'll suit us, old son."

"Yes, rather! Come on!"

A moment later, with Figgins leading the way, the two juniors were stumbling over the rough, uneven floor of the tunnel. It wasn't a pleasant journey, by any means. Their sodden clothing clung to them, making walking a misery. In no part of the passage could they walk upright. More often than not they progressed on hands and knees.

For about a mile the passage went fairly straight, and then it took a sudden turn, and began to slope upwards. Presently they became aware that the close, musty air was changing for the better. A chill draught blew upon them from somewhere ahead. And then, with startling suddenness, they came to a broken flight of stone steps leading upwards.

They stumbled up these, and came to an abrupt halt. Above their heads the light gleamed upon a square slab of stone.

"A trapdoor, by gum!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

He placed his shoulders beneath the stone slab, and drove upwards. Nothing happened. Figgins joined him, and together they heaved with all their strength. The stone moved upwards slowly, and as they increased the pressure it swung away, and fell over with a dull thud.

Figgins clambered through, and Tom Merry followed. As Figgins flashed the light round, they found themselves standing in a lofty, barnlike building. Round them were ranged sacks of potatoes, piles of turnips, and various agricultural implements and machines. That the place was used as a barn was plain enough. But that it had not always been used as such was obvious from the arched and carved architecture of the roof and windows, now festooned with thick, dust-covered cobwebs.

"M-m-my only topper!" gasped Figgins. "I know this place, surely! It's the old barn at Abbey Farm!"

"No doubt about that," agreed Tom Merry. "Would you believe it? But come on! Let's hope the blessed door ain't locked!"

Fortunately for them, the door was not locked. Tom Merry raised the latch, and as the heavy door swung open, they emerged into the open air.

The juniors drew in deep breaths of fresh air, and glanced about them.

Nobody was astr. The farmyard and buildings were still and silent. The windows of the old farmhouse were yellow where the blinds were drawn.

The moon was waning. Over in the east showed a long, thin streak of white light in the sky—the herald of dawn! As they stood in the still silence, from somewhere near them a cock crowed.

"Time to be moving, Figgy," said Tom Merry briskly. "Our night's work ain't done yet by a long way. We've got to hoof it now for all—"

"What's the programme, Tommy?" asked Figgins eagerly.

Tom Merry smiled grimly.

"I suppose we ought by rights to rouse Railton or the Head, and leave the rest of the business to them!" he exclaimed. "But you know what that would mean? They'd pack us both off to bye-bye, and the giddy seniors would get all the fun—and most likely make a muck of things."

"No doubt about that," agreed Figgins, with a faint grin.

"Therefore we ain't going to do that. What I propose is, that you creep into the New House and wake up Wynn and Kerr, while I rouse Manners and Lowther and Blake's lot. That will be ten of us—quite enough to deal with those blacking merchants, I think."

"Yes, rather!"

"We can arm ourselves with cricket-stumps and things, and then we'll sally out and raid the island. And, with a bit of luck, we'll rescue old Jammy, and rake in the whole gang. How's that?"

"Splendid, Tommy! We'll do it!"

"Then come on!"

And the juniors vaulted the low wall of the yard, and set off across the dark fields at a brisk run, which soon sent the warm blood racing through their chilled veins.

## CHAPTER 8.

### Too Late!

"READY, you chaps?"

Tom Merry asked the question in a whisper as the dark forms of Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn shinned over the high school wall, and dropped into the lane where the School House contingent were waiting. Everything so far had gone without

a hitch. In the School House, Tom Merry had roused his own chums, and Blake, Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy of the Fourth. Figgins had roused his own chums, Kerr and Fatty Wynn, in the New House. Not a soul other than those taking part in the expedition had been awakened.

Wisely, both Tom Merry and Figgins had had a quick rub down with towels, and a complete change of clothing, and, despite their night's terrible adventures, they were now feeling fit and ready for anything.

"Through the woods, I suppose?" asked Blake, as they started off at a brisk trot.

"Boathouse for boats, my son! What about the river?"

"My hat! I never thought of that!"

So far, Blake and the others had only had a brief outline of the story. But now, as they hurried towards the boathouse, Tom Merry and Figgins gave a clear account of all that had happened.

"Great Scott! You've had a pretty thin time between you!" commented Blake grimly. "But we'll make those Hindu johnnies sit up for this!"

"Yaas, wathah!" agreed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "But supposin' the wascals have left the island, deah boys—"

"That's quite on the cards—especially now they've got poor old Jammy!" muttered Tom Merry. "And that's why we must lose no time. Hallo, here we are!"

The juniors stopped as the dark outlines of the boathouse loomed up ahead, with the cold gleam of the river beyond.

In deadly earnest now, the juniors set to work with a will, and in less than five minutes they had a couple of boats launched, and were pulling strongly up stream. It was rapidly growing lighter now, and soon they saw the thickly-wooded island looming ahead.

Tom Merry dropped his sculls and turned to the others.

"Remember, this ain't a picnic, you chaps," he exclaimed seriously. "Those ruffians are well armed and desperate, and will stick at nothing. It will be warm work, and dangerous, I can tell you!"

"Bai Jove, deah boys!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, staring through his monocle at the silent island. "I fail to see anybody anywhere!"

"I expect the rotters are asleep still," said Tom Merry, glancing uneasily over the quiet water. "I'd hoped we should get here before it was light, and take 'em by surprise. But we shall have to risk being spotted. I expect they are hanging out in that old ruined hut. Anyway, we'll soon know!"

A minute later the boats grounded, and the juniors jumped ashore.

"Follow me!" said Tom Merry quietly. "And not a sound mind!"

The excited juniors took a firmer grip of their weapons, and advanced cautiously through the thick trees. Though they anticipated a desperate tussle they did not falter.

Presently Tom Merry gave a warning hiss. Next moment they found themselves at the edge of the fringe of trees bordering the clearing. There was no sign or sound of life anywhere. The woodman's old, ramshackle hut looked deserted. An uncanny and ominous silence seemed to brood over the lonely spot.

"Looks as if the birds have flown," whispered Herries.

"I'm afraid so," murmured Tom Merry, glancing uneasily round him. "But we can't see inside, and we can't

afford to risk anything. So if you chaps are ready—"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Then come on!"

The excited juniors burst from the trees, and surrounded the hut, their weapons ready. Tom Merry and Jack Blake reached the doorway together, and then they halted dismayed.

The hut was empty!

"Gone!" groaned Tom Merry.

"We're too late, chaps! They've gone, and old Jammy's gone with them!"

"Bai jove, how wotten!"

The juniors crowded into the dilapidated hut. It needed but a glance to show that the hut had indeed been lived in but recently. There was a candle-end stuck to the top of an old box. On the rough wooden benches round the little room were scraps of food, and greasy paper bags that had obviously held food. Scattered about the earth floor were dozens of cigarette-ends, while the place was still pungent with stale tobacco smoke.

There was little doubt now in the minds of the juniors that the kidnappers had been there and had gone, taking their captive with them.

Tom Merry set his teeth hard.

"Well, it's no good standing staring," he muttered. "They've gone, and it's up to us to follow on the trail. I vote —"

There was a sudden exclamation from Kerr. The keen Scottish junior stooped beneath one of the benches and held up something white. It was a silk handkerchief, white, with a yellow border.

"Koumi Rao's," said Figgins, in a low tone. "I'd know 'em anywhere. He always uses— What's that?"

From the folds of the handkerchief a twisted piece of paper had fallen. Figgins pounced upon it at once. It was an old envelope. He flattened it out, and then his eyes lit up eagerly.

"My hat—as I guessed! It's a message from Jammy!" he shouted excitedly. "Listen!"

They crowded round Figgy as he held the paper to the light and read the message scrawled upon the white back. It was written in pencil, and plainly under great difficulty, for the writing was sprawling and uneven. It was as follows:

"To my chums,—I am a prisoner in hands of my enemies. They are taking me to yacht at place called Seahaven. Come quickly, or—"

The writing broke off abruptly, as though the writer had been interrupted. Figgins turned to the others, his eyes shining, his heart heavy.

"Poor old Jammy!" he said huskily.

"The old beggar knew we should follow—"

"And we're going to!" said Tom Merry doggedly. "Seahaven is along the coast—I know it well. But we shall want money—"

"I've got a couple of Bwadbuwys, deah boy!" exclaimed D'Arcy eagerly.

"And I have a quid or so!" added Digby quickly.

"That's plenty with the quid I've got!" said Tom Merry briskly. "And now we haven't a moment to waste. We've got to catch the first train from Wayland. Come on!"

Tom Merry's brisk earnestness was infectious. A moment later the juniors had swarmed from the hut, and were dashing through the woods for the boats. They sprang aboard and pulled across the river, and within twenty minutes were speeding across Wayland Heath to the station.

Of school and classes they recked

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nothing. Only deep anxiety and a haunting fear filled their minds.

Would they again be too late?

## CHAPTER 9. A Foiled Hope!

**"SEAHAVEN!"**  
George Figgins muttered the word with a deep sigh of relief as the train ran slowly into the station of the little seaport.

Without the loss of a moment the juniors hurried out of the station, and made all speed for the harbour. And immediately they reached there, Tom Merry scanned the few craft lying there with anxious eyes.

There were a couple of coasters and a few fishing-vessels in the harbour. But of a yacht—or any craft that could possibly answer to that description—there was no sign. And the juniors' hearts sank as they realised what this portended.

If the yacht had been there at all, it was now gone. They were too late once again!

"Gone!" exclaimed Figgins hoarsely, as the juniors stared dumbly at each other. "They've beaten us, Tommy."

"Afraid so," said Tom Merry slowly. "But it's no use giving way to despair until we're certain, Figgy. Better make inquiries."

As he spoke, the junior stepped towards a harbour official who was lounging near them. He stood talking to the man for a moment, and when he joined his chums again his face was keen and hopeful.

"The game's not up yet, you fellows!" he said eagerly. "The blessed yacht's never been here. But that chap says there's a mysterious foreign yacht anchored off the coast about a mile from here."

"Oh, good! That sounds like it!"

"Yes. So there's still a chance. But we mustn't lose a sec. Buck up!"

Tom Merry led the way briskly from the harbour-jetty, and in a very few minutes the ten juniors were trotting along the shore path. They had been going some minutes, when Lowther gave an exclamation and pointed out to sea.

The harbour official's information was correct. A yacht was there—a trim little steam-yacht, painted white—riding at anchor on the grey sea. From her funnel black smoke poured in clouds.

"Huwviah!" cried Arthur Augustus. "Come on, deah boys!"

The juniors broke into a run along the shingle, excited and hopeful. Not one of them doubted but that Koumi Rao was a prisoner aboard the yacht. Only Tom Merry's face was sombre as they ran. The yacht was there, certainly. But how to get to her was another matter. And if they succeeded in boarding the yacht, what could they do? They had left their weapons behind in the boats on the Ryll. And, in any case, what good would cricket-stumps have been against revolvers and knives? And then there was the crew of the yacht to be reckoned with!

It was a formidable proposition, and it only dawned upon the others when they stopped at last, near the little jetty below the fishing-village. The beach was deserted. As they crouched behind the low sea wall, Jack Blake voiced the thoughts of all.

"Well, I'm blessed if I know what we're going to do now we are here," he said glumly. "There's a small rowing-boat drawn up on the sands there; but—"

"They'd see us coming and shoot us down like rats!" said Tom Merry hopelessly. "But they've got steam up, and we've simply got to do something quickly, or—Hullo! Look there!"

Tom Merry's voice thrilled with excitement and hope.

At first the juniors stared over the sea wall, seeing nothing. Then suddenly Kerr uttered an exclamation.

"A sea-mist," he said quietly, "and it's coming along fast. My hat, what luck!"

Kerr was right. Far out at sea a solid mass of white mist was creeping over the cold grey waves landwards. Even as he watched, the mist engulfed the yacht, blotting it from view. They watched it creep nearer until it reached the end of the jetty. Then Tom Merry sprang to his feet.

"It's now or never, chaps!" he said swiftly. "Make for the boat, and—"

Tom did not stay to finish his sentence, but the others knew what he meant. Wildly excited, they vaulted the low wall and dashed across the shingle through the thick mist. They grasped the boat and ran it into the murmuring waves. As the little dinghy rode the waves, the juniors swarmed aboard her, and Merry and Blake picked up the oars.

The blades of the oars hit the water, and the boat moved through the mist towards the yacht. The mist was thickening, and they could scarcely see a hand before them. But they had a fairly clear idea where the yacht lay. Tom Merry and Blake laboured at the oars in silence. The others were silent also. The desperate nature of the task they had set themselves was obvious to all. But they did not falter.

"Gently now!" breathed Tom Merry, staring into the mist.

The blades dipped in with scarcely a splash, and the boat crept on slowly.

"There she is, bai Jove!"

The graceful outline of the yacht loomed up in the mist. Tom Merry shipped his oars silently, and took the tiller. Under Blake's deft, gentle pulls the dinghy crept towards it, scarcely moving. Every instant the juniors expected to hear a challenging hail from the yacht.

But none came. Like a ghostly shadow the boat crept round the stern of the yacht. Figgins silently shipped his oars. As they drew up to the side of the yacht something hanging over the side touched D'Arcy's face, and he grasped it. It was a rope-ladder.

"What topping luck!" whispered

Tom Merry. "Now listen! You, Fatty and Manners, had better wait in the boat. If anything should happen to us, don't be silly asses and come to look for us, but row like blazes to Seahaven for help. Understand?"

"Right-ho!"

"Follow me, you chaps, and not a sound, on your life!"

Tom Merry took a deep breath, and, grasping the ladder, swarmed up it. After a moment's wait the other seven followed in turn, and a minute later all stood in a silent group on the deck of the mysterious yacht. They peered about them in the thick mist. From the engine-room below came the clang of a shovel and a queer, high-pitched voice singing in a foreign tongue. No sounds of movement on the deck reached their straining ears until—

"Look out, Tom!"

It was a thrilling gasp from Blake. From the mist a dim figure loomed along the deck—a white figure clad in Hindu burnous and coloured turban. And the face—it was the dusky, scowling face of Pertab Sindar.

What followed was swift and silent. At sight of the startled group of boys the Indian's swarthy face grew livid with rage. He opened his mouth to shout, when Tom Merry sprang. They went to the deck together with a slithering thud. Next moment eight nimble juniors sprawled over him. He uttered a stifled cry; but Blake jammed a handkerchief into his gaping mouth, and rammed it tight.

"Quick!" hissed Tom Merry. "Tie the beggar!"

The squirming Hindu, active, strong as he was, stood no chance. A rope was found, and, after securing the gag, they bound him hand and foot, and rolled him under a tarpaulin-sheet. Then, praying that the friendly mist would hold out, the juniors moved cautiously along the deck.

Quite suddenly Tom Merry stopped and held out a warning hand. From somewhere quite near them came the sound of voices. It seemed to come from a tiny window above their heads. Stepping towards it, Tom Merry found himself staring into a luxuriously-furnished deck-cabin. And the scene being enacted within made the junior's eyes flash and his heart leap.

Lying, bound hand and foot, on a small settee in the tiny cabin, was the junior they hoped to rescue—Koumi Rao of St. Jim's. Seated facing him was a small, spare Indian, dressed in Europeans, but wearing a turban. In the man's slender brown hands was the Sacred Idol. From the gloating expression on the fellow's dusky face, he appeared to be taunting the helpless junior.

Tom Merry turned, and whispered rapidly to his chums. Then he grasped the knob of the cabin-door and dashed within. Even as the Hindu turned a startled face, Tom Merry gave one leap across the tiny cabin, and his fist shot out.

Smack!

The blow caught the little Indian full upon his open mouth. His head went back, and, with a choking gasp, he dropped sideways to the floor. His head struck the table-leg, and he lay still.

"Quick! See to Jammy!" panted Tom Merry.

Figgins was across the cabin in a flash. His knife slashed at Koumi Rao's bonds, and a moment later he was free.

"Thank you, my comrades—"

Koumi Rao's grateful words ended. From outside came a sudden clamour of excited, rage-filled voices and the soft padding of feet on the deck. Tom Merry

(Continued on page 19.)

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JASPER STANDISH plans to have his revenge on his enemy, RICHARD HARMER, by kidnapping his son DICK and transporting him to SLAVE ISLAND. He makes a bargain with the owner, HANS MEPPLE, to this effect, and the Dutchman succeeds in carrying off Dick Harmer to the strange island, where he is made a slave. Here Dick meets Elaine, a charming little slave.

When Standish returns home, he discovers that this girl is none other than his long-lost daughter, who had been missing for many years.

CAPTAIN DIRK KENTISH, R.N.R., a retired sea captain, is employed by Dick's father to search for him. The captain visits Chinatown to recruit a crew to sail with him on his strange quest. He meets some old friends.

Having completed his tour of the Chinese quarters, he is threading his way homewards when he sees an old enemy, one Giuseppe Gaglietto, an Italian, who is in the company of Peter Van Lardent, a Dutch acquaintance of Meppel's. Kentish follows the two to the former's opium-den, and through a successful ruse he rescues the Dutchman from the clutches of the Italian. Lardent then informs the captain that he can show him where Slave Island is situated, and they commence their journey.

Dick and Elaine see their opportunity of escaping by stowing away in one of Meppel's steamers which is about to leave. They contrive to dodge the overseers, and make with all speed to the docks.

(Now go on with the story.)

#### Anxious Moments!

THERE seemed not a soul on board. At least, if anyone were there, they were apparently not on deck.

Dick took her hand again, and, leaving the shelter of the fruit-trees, ran swiftly to the water's edge.

Luck still remained with them. A boat was moored to a stake driven into the bank, and Dick signed to the girl to enter it.

Elaine, however, hesitated and drew back.

"It will leave a clue if we are searched for, Dick," she said.

"How?" he asked quickly.

"Why, naturally, when they find it gone—"

"But they won't find it gone," Dick objected, shaking his head. "I am going to row you out, and leave you on the accommodation ladder, which I see has been left lowered."

"And then?"

"I shall row the boat back to the bank, tie it up again, and swim across the waterway to join you once more."

"No, no! It's not necessary," Elaine protested. "I can swim, and do not mind getting wet. We will leave the boat where it is, and both swim straight across to the steamer."

"Rats! We shall do nothing of the kind," Dick declared.

"Did you used to speak to girl friends like that when you were at home, or at your school?" Elaine demanded, with a severity that was spoiled by the twinkling of her dark-lashed eyes.

"When girls are stupid, they must put up with a fellow getting exasperated!" Dick retorted, grinning; and suddenly he seized her in his strong young arms and deposited her unceremoniously into the boat.

Before she could protest, he had followed, untied the painter, and pushed off with a prod of one of the oars at the bank.

He bent over the oars, and swiftly urged the boat across the water to the steamer, bringing it skilfully and accurately to a halt beneath the accommodation ladder.

"Up with you, Elaine!" he urged. "I'll be back with you in less than no time! Cling tight!"

The girl was as agile as she was slender and fair, and, seizing the rungs of the accommodation ladder, she quickly sprang on to it. She stood upon it, and waited as Dick swung the boat round and rowed back to the bank.

He made it fast, left the oars as they had been when they had entered it, then slipped into the water, and, with a rapid over-arm stroke, swam back to his companion.

In a few seconds both had climbed on to the deserted deck.

The boat was so fully loaded with cargo that its Plimsoll marks were almost flush with the water, and it seemed to groan under its load. When they stole over to one of the hatchways and looked down, they saw that the hold was so full that there would be barely room to squeeze themselves in between the various stacks of goods.

They had to hide, however, or all was lost. Dick helped the girl down on to a pile of packing-cases. He dropped to his knees, and, peering down into the gloom, saw her descend to the bottom of the close and tarry-smelling hold.

Swinging his legs over the edge of the hatchway, he dropped to the top of the

cases and sprang down beside her. Under the deck to the right stood sack upon sack of bananas, and, shifting some of these, Dick made sufficient room for them both to creep amongst the tall bags and conceal themselves.

Now came a period of breathless waiting and suspense.

To the boy and the girl, an eternity seemed to pass before they heard the tramp of feet upon the deck above, though in reality they had been in their hiding-place scarcely an hour.

The hatches were presently closed and beaten down, plunging them into total darkness; then faintly there came to them the sounds of hoarsely-shouted orders, the clanking of chains, the rushing to and fro of many feet, and indications that steam was being got up.

At length the vessel's engines were throbbing, and she was vibrating from stem to stern. They heard the clanking of the windlass as the anchor was raised—heard it thud upon the deck, and felt the vessel swaying gently, as she began to move into the centre of the waterway.

"At last!" Dick breathed, his voice thrilling with hope. "In a few minutes we shall be on the open sea!"

Elaine did not reply verbally, but her fingers pressed his exultantly. It seemed certain that they could not have been missed, and now there was every probability that their absence would remain unnoticed, unless some of their fellow-slaves gave them away.

Dick had said nothing to Elaine, not wishing to raise fears that might be groundless; but after they had stowed themselves away on the vessel, he thought that they might be betrayed had come to him.

One might have thought that the slaves on the island would have a common bond of sympathy between them, so that colour or nationality did not count; but it was far from being so.

Those of one nation clung together, and quarrels often arose between slaves of different countries. Again, the white prisoners and the negroes were always more or less at enmity.

Dick frowned, and became more and more uneasy as he allowed these things to pass through his mind.

Another thought had occurred to him. The slaves in his and Elaine's respective sleeping quarters would probably receive some sort of punishment if they failed to report to the overseers that he and the girl had not come in from the plantation and were missing.

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Was it possible to hope that their fellow-captives would remain silent, and risk bringing down the displeasure of the despotic Meppel and his hirelings upon themselves?

To his relief, the lad heard the grinding of the giant, swinging rock as it was swung back to allow of the vessel passing out of the waterway and gaining the open sea.

His pulses raced as, only a matter of seconds later, the ship began to steam forward, and he smiled, and told himself that he had frightened himself needlessly when he heard the movable rock crash back into place behind it.

Whatever happened later on, they were out of the rock-bound prison and upon the open sea!

But the lad's feeling of triumph was short-lived.

The vessel could not have travelled a hundred yards, when once again there came the thunderous crash of the great rock swinging back.

Dick started, a thrill of apprehension gripping him. It could mean only one thing—pursuit!

His fears had been only too well founded. Their absence had been discovered either by accident or their being betrayed. The vessel would be searched, and they would be dragged back to the terrible island and some cruel and savage punishment.

### A Desperate Chance!

"YOU heard?" Dick asked the question in a hoarse whisper, his hand clutching at Elaine's arm.

"The—the rock has been opened again!" she faltered. And he could feel that she was trembling. "It—it means that they have missed us, and are coming in pursuit, Dick!"

"I am afraid so—yes!" he admitted glumly. "I suppose there is nothing for it but to submit to being hauled back to our beastly misery and slavery. By gum, though, I'll try to damage somebody before they get me there!"

The lad's voice shook with anger and indignation. The thought of being cheated of the freedom that had been so nearly gained, and of being once more a slave, roused all that was plucky and British in him. He would fight like a madman, he told himself, as soon as the pursuers laid hands upon him.

"Can we do nothing?" Elaine asked, with tears of mortification in her voice. "Cannot we try to spring overboard and—swim?"

Dick was silent for a moment.

"How well can you swim, Elaine—I mean, how far do you think you could go and keep up?" he asked.

"A very long distance, I think," she replied. "I was something of a champion at school—at least, everyone said so," she added modestly. "I would be willing to swim for it if you would."

"Then, by Jove, we'll try it!" the lad cried. "They'll follow us in the boat you can be sure is coming after the steamer, but in the darkness we might shake them off and get away. If we did not happen to strike some vessel, which is not over likely, we should eventually sink from exhaustion, but—"

"Oh, let us take the risk! Anything is better than going back to the island," Elaine interrupted wearily. "Besides, somehow I have a feeling that they will put us to death when they get us back, after our other attempt at escape, so it is worth taking any chance to try to escape from them!"

Dick was of the same opinion. He knew that it was very unlikely indeed that they would be picked up by any vessel in these seas, and to swim for it, if they were given the opportunity to leap overboard, was almost like committing suicide. Yet, as it was almost certain death either way, it would be foolhardy not to accept the alternative that offered the most hope.

"Ah, the vessel is stopping!" he said, as he felt the steamer slowing down. "I have a plan. When they lift the hatch I shall carry you up to the deck in my arms, and you must lie as if you have fainted from the heat down here and the lack of air. They'll hardly think it necessary to seize hold of me whilst I have you in my arms, and I shall try to jump overboard with you."

"I understand," she said simply. And the boy felt a boundless admiration for her quiet bravery.

Came a wait of perhaps ten minutes, then they heard the guttural tones of Hans Meppel above the hatch.

The Dutchman himself had, they were next to certain, not been aboard the vessel, and he must have been one of those who had come in search of them. They could expect no mercy from the arch-tyrant if they allowed themselves to be recaptured.

"Quick!" Dick breathed, his lips close to the girl's ear. "Let me lift you, and lie quite still. Everything depends upon whether they are taken in or see through our ruse."

In another moment, and just as there came sounds of the hatch being prized up, he had her in his arms, and the girl closed her eyes, allowed her head to droop limply to one side, and remained as still as death.

The hatch was torn up, and a lantern was lowered into the hold upon a rope. Dick knew that concealment could avail them nothing now, and stepped from behind the bananas, carrying the girl.

"Ach, Himmel! So you are down there!" a harsh voice snarled angrily. And as he looked upwards Dick saw the bearded face of the Dutchman glaring down at him. "Come up, you leedle Engleish pig! Donnervetter, but you und dot hussy shall for tis pay dearly!"

"She has fainted from the heat!" Dick said coldly. "I cannot come up unless you lower a ladder down to me!"

Meppel drew back his head, and Dick heard him issue a guttural order. In the matter of seconds a couple of Malay sailors sent a rope ladder snaking down to him, and made it fast. Trembling with suppressed excitement, the boy hoisted the apparently lifeless figure of Elaine over his shoulder and began to ascend.

As he reached the deck he found himself confronted by Meppel and several of his overseers, and in the background stood the evil-faced man who was skipper of the vessel and a dozen or more Malays. But they were all grouped on one side of him, and no sooner had he risen to his feet than he wheeled swiftly round upon his heels, and dashed away in the opposite direction.

Across the deck he went, clinging tightly to the girl, who was still lying over his shoulder, and even while Hans Meppel was gasping with astonishment the lad had gained the vessel's side and mounted to the bulwarks.

Meppel, the captain, the overseers, and sailors came after him in a combined rush as they recovered from their surprise.

Half a dozen pairs of hands were flung out to clutch at him and drag him back, but they were all too late. With Elaine in his arms, Dick jumped and disappeared into the phosphorescent waters beneath.

As soon as he passed beneath the surface he released Elaine, knowing there was no need to bring her up with him. He shot down, down; then, as he steadied himself and struck upwards, he rose and came up a few yards from the ship's side.

He heard excited shouts from the deck, and knew that his enemies would be after him in the boat in which they had pursued the steamer as soon as they could return to it. Probably other boats would be lowered, too, and join in the pursuit; but, at all events, he would give them a run for their money, if only Elaine could keep up with him.

He looked quickly about him, and found her only a few yards from his side. As he blew the water from his mouth and waited for her, she called to him to go on, and proved her ability as a swimmer by quickly coming up with him as he started to strike out away from the vessel.

On, on they sped through the water, and now, to their delight, the moon was once again obscured by drifting clouds.

The men on the ship cursed the darkness, but to the boy and the girl it was a Heaven-sent blessing, and they made the most of it, swimming hard to put as much distance as they could between themselves and their foes whilst the moon was still hidden and the clinging gloom lasted.

Throwing every ounce of strength into the struggle, they swam on, and both hoped that they might get far enough away to elude their pursuers before they could bring a boat or boats into action.

But then they heard the splash of oars, and simultaneously received an unpleasant shock.

Suddenly they found themselves bathed in a brilliant shaft of light.

It was a searchlight which had been turned upon them by those back on the steamer. Dick gave a groan of despair. Whichever way they turned it would follow and pick them out, and recapture now seemed inevitable. The great spear of light from the steamer was stabbing the darkness and accurately picking out the bobbing heads of the swimming lad and girl.

"Dive and swim under the surface!" Dick cried; and, waiting only long enough to make sure Elaine had heard and followed his advice, he took a plunge beneath the water.

He swam strongly for as long as he could hold his breath. Indeed, when he did allow himself to rise once more his lungs were beginning to feel as though they must burst.

Elaine came up quite near him, and fervently Dick hoped that they had been out of sight long enough to cause their foes to think they had gone under for good, and been drawn into the greedy maw of the deep.

But it was not to be. Relentlessly the searchlight swept the waves, until finally it was playing about them for the second time.

Once more they dived and struck out beneath the surface, and once again they remained hidden, until they could no longer hold their breath.

(Another instalment of this magnificent serial next week. Make sure of your copy by ordering early.)

## "THE SACRED IDOL!"

(Continued from page 16.)

snatched up the little image, and jammed it into his pocket. Then he clutched Koumi Rao's arm, and hustled the bewildered youth outside.

"They've found Sindari!" he panted. "To the boats, chaps!"

But it was easier said than done. Dim figures moved about them in the mist. As they dashed blindly across the deck a dim white form loomed up. Blake's fist shot out, and the fellow dropped, and they rushed on. They reached the rails, and stared into the thick fog. Suddenly, above the wild uproar of foreign tongues, came Fatty Wynn's well-known tones.

"This way, St. Jim's! This way!"

"Come on!"

Somehow—how, they never knew—they found the ladder at last, and one by one dropped pell-mell into the waiting boat. Blake and Manners grasped the oars, and the little dinghy shot away.

Tom Merry gave a deep sigh of relief. "We've beaten 'em, chaps!" he said, his voice thrilling with triumph. "My hat, what an adventure!"

Not more than five minutes later the little dinghy grounded on the shingle, and half an hour later the juniors were seated in the train for Ryl-

combe, listening breathlessly to Koumi Rao's story. And as they listened, they felt thankful they had taken the risks they had.

"It was mostly luck, of course," said Tom Merry grimly. "If you hadn't left that message, Jammy, old son, we'd never have traced you!"

"That was luck, as you say, my chums," said Koumi Rao quietly. "They treated me like a dog—I that am a prince! But they gave me food in the hut, and so that I could eat it they loosened my bonds, and when I was not observed I wrote that note, and dropped it beneath the bench, knowing that my loyal chums would search for me. And they did, and have saved my life, and the Sacred Idol. I will not forget my chums!"

And as the juniors looked into Koumi Rao's dark, glistening eyes they knew that he never would.

Of the welcome the rescue-party and Koumi Rao received at St. Jim's little need be said. But the cheering that arose as they entered the gateway of the old school with Koumi Rao in their midst could have been heard at Rylcombe.

And of the interview in the Head's study afterwards, when the full story was told in detail by Tom Merry, little also need be told. Besides Dr. Holmes and Mr. Railton, Major Mordant was there,

and from him the juniors learned a great deal of the history of the Sacred Idol of Bundelpore.

It was not until long afterwards, however, that they learned the full story of the image. It had been stolen from the palace by a rascally Indian soldier in the pay, and at the instigation, of Koumi Rao's enemies. But after stealing it, the man, finding out the real material value of the idol, had played his scoundrelly employers false, and had stuck to it. Before he could dispose of it, however, the man was ordered with his regiment to France, and there, when wounded one night, he lost it. In the course of time he had been invalidated back to India, and there he apparently had fallen into the hands of the men he had tricked, who, probably by torture, had forced the truth from him. They had immediately sent their agents—one of whom was Pertab Sindar—to France, and after months of search and endless inquiries they had traced it to Mr. Railton, at St. Jim's.

All this came out at the trial. For, of course, the rascally gang were captured. When a strong force of police visited Seahaven the yacht had sailed. But a destroyer soon picked them up in the Channel, and they were deported to India, where they paid the penalty for their attempted crimes.

THE END.

(Another grand story of the chums of St. Jim's next week, entitled: "THE HUNGER-STRIKER!")

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