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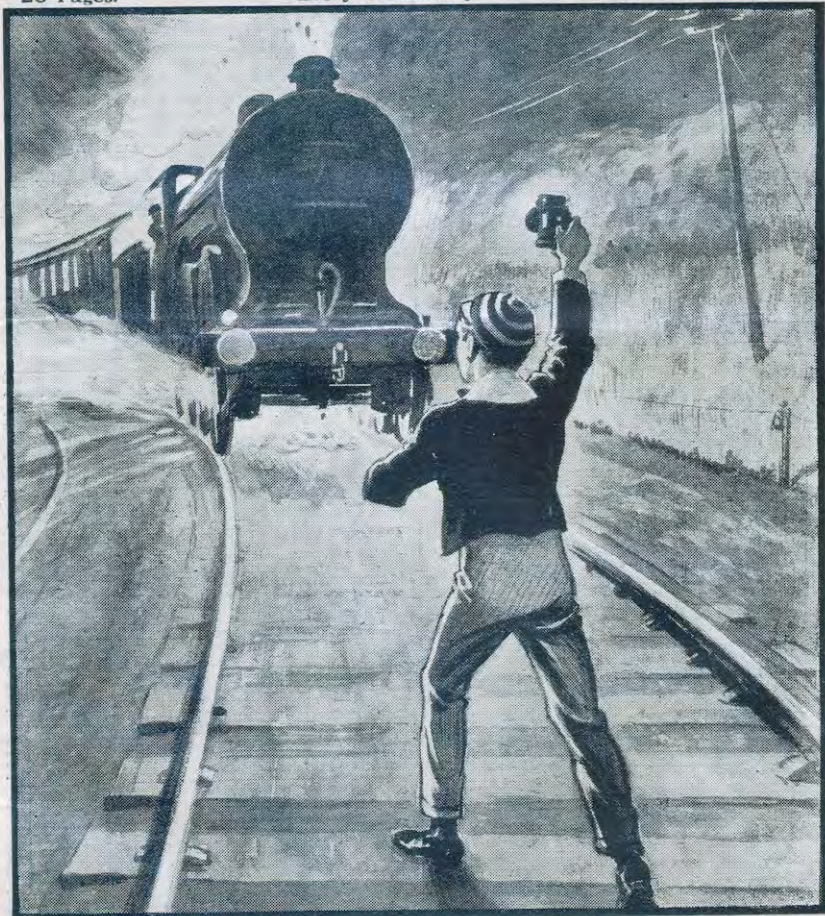
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An Old Man's Secret

A Grand Long Complete Story of the Chums of St. Jim's. By Martin Clifford.

CHAPTER 1.

In the Nick of Time.

"GROOH! What a rotten road!"

Tom Merry, the stalwart captain of the Shell Form of St. Jim's, gave vent to that exclamation.

Night had crept over the countryside; not a star glimmered in the sky, and the moon was completely obscured by a thick bank of cloud.

Tom was cycling back from Huckleberry Heath. He had been over there to see Miss Priscilla Fawcett, his old nurse and guardian, who had been unwell with influenza.

He had been greatly cheered to find that Miss Priscilla was a great deal better. She had made him some of her famous "seedy" cake and strawberry jam-tarts, and Tom had left it rather late in departing for St. Jim's. Eight o'clock had chimed from the village church he had just left, but Tom did not mind. The Head had allowed him a special late pass so he was quite safe from lines or lickings so long as he arrived back at the school by nine.

Cycling through that part of the countryside was by no means a pleasant task—especially after dark. The road he had taken was full of ruts and holes, and several times he had nearly met with disaster.

"My word! This is too bad!" gasped Tom, as his machine lurched into another deep rut, and a torrent of muddy water came surging round his legs. "I—I think I had better take this road to the left, over the railway. It's a lotter way round, but I think it's a better road."

So he turned his machine to the left, and, finding the surface of the road considerably less bumpy, dug hard at his pedals, and simply buzzed along towards the railway.

He dismounted at the level-crossing to light his rear lamp, which had gone out. The gates, which were of an automatic pattern, were locked, and the signal just ahead showed a green light, which indicated that a train would soon be passing.

Tom glanced keenly along the metal track, which was dimly visible in the darkness.

All at once he gave a start, and strained his ears to listen.

Through the gusty wind, which was now beginning to whirl a faint drizzle of rain about him, there came a low sound from the railway-track.

It was the sound of a groan.

But it was only for a moment. The sound died away, and only the wintry wind could be heard sweeping over the wet fields and rustling tree-branches.

"My hat!" muttered the St. Jim's junior, peering harder towards the spot where he thought the sound had come. "Surely there's nobody on the line! I—"

He broke off, and stood quite still to listen.

It was so dark that he could barely see three feet before him. Only the gaunt, rustling trees loomed up half-seen in the gloom.

Through the sighing of the wind he heard that sound again. It was unmistakably a groan, uttered by a human voice. And it came from somewhere along the railway-line.

An eerie feeling stole over Tom Merry. There was somebody on the line, helpless. Again he heard that groan, and then he did not hesitate.

Setting his teeth hard, he gripped the top rung of the crossing-gate, and vaulted lightly over.

A noise in the distance behind caused him to look back quickly over his shoulder, and, not far away in the distance,

he could hear a train approaching, and see the fitful light from its furnace.

There was no time to lose. He must find out the meaning of that groan.

He ran along the hard flints between the sleepers, and as he ran he heard the groaning more distinctly. Two minutes later, he stumbled across a huddled figure lying across the up-line.

Tom looked at the signal, and saw that it was an up-line train that was approaching.

"What's the matter?" panted the St. Jim's junior, bending down, and peering into a gaunt, haggard face. "Can't you get up?"

"No," moaned the old man, stirring slightly. "I—I have caught my foot in the line and hurt my head. Oh, my head! Get me off, lad; there is a train coming!"

Tom bent down quickly, and wrenched at the foot that had been caught in the metals. The old man winced with the pain, and Tom realised that it would take time to get him released.

A piercing whistle broke through the darkness, and a quickly-approaching rumble denoted that the train was very close now.

What could he do?

It was impossible to remove the old man from the line in time.

To save a ghastly tragedy the train must be stopped.

Tom Merry dashed back towards the level crossing, his eyes strained on the approaching train. It had not yet reached the level-crossing, but it was getting near there—very near.

Would he be in time?

A desperate thought had entered his head.

He reached through the bars of the fence, where he had propped up his bicycle, and took off his rear lamp.

Turning the wick higher, so that a bright red light would show, he ran back to the railway-line, and, standing in the middle of the track, waved the lamp aloft.

Would the engine-driver see it?

The train came dashing nearer. The very sleeper on which Tom Merry was standing began to tremble with the vibration of the coming monster.

With every nerve tightened, his lips firmly set, Tom Merry stood there in the path of the fast-moving train, and waved his signal.

Why didn't the driver see that red light?

He had to run backwards, for the train was coming very near now. But he still held the warning signal aloft. He could do no more to save the old man, who was lying helpless on the steel lines. And just as he was about to cry out in despair he heard the engine shriek, and the grinding of brakes came through the darkness, sending a thrill of joy and thankfulness through the plucky lad's soul.

The train was stopping. The engine-driver had seen the warning light.

With a hissing of steam and a clatter of noise, the train stopped—a few bare yards from the spot where the old man was huddled.

"Oh, thank Heaven!" muttered Tom Merry, still holding the red lamp on high. "Thank Heaven I was in time!"

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CHAPTER 2.

A Strange Story.

THE engine-driver and fireman looked out of their cabin, whilst excited passengers poked their heads out of the train-windows.

"What's the matter?" came the hoarse voice of the engine-driver in the gloom.

"There's a man on the line, unable to move!" cried Tom, coming forward. "I—I was afraid you wouldn't see this light. If you hadn't—" He broke off with a shudder.

The engine-driver peered down at the schoolboy in the darkness.

"What's that you used—a bike-lamp?" he said. "My word! You're a plucked 'un, and no mistake, laddie. You've done somebody a real good turn to-night, anyway. Come on, Bates"—this to the fireman—"we'll have a look at the man on the line."

When the rescuers came up the old man was almost unconscious. His head, where he had struck it on the steel line, was bleeding profusely.

One of two passengers, realising what was the matter, came up, and between them they soon managed to release the old man from his awful predicament.

They laid him on the grassy bank, and brandy from one of the passenger's flask was forced between his lips.

Gradually consciousness returned, and he sat up, looking bewilderingly round him, pressing his hand to his throbbing temple.

"Where am I?" he muttered hoarsely. "Oh, I remember! Then the boy saved me?"

"If it hadn't been for the prompt action of this plucky lad you would have been killed," said one of the passengers gravely. "You owe your life to him!"

"Yes, yes; I will thank him in a minute. But my box—the leather box—where is it?"

"Have you dropped a leather box?" asked Tom Merry.

"Yes, lad. Find it for me. It mustn't get lost. Look for it—now!"

Tom ran back to the spot where the old man had fallen, and, by the aid of his red lamp, discovered a small, black leather bag lying on the flints between the two tracks.

"Ah, that is my box!" exclaimed the old man, almost snatching it from Tom Merry's hand. "Thank you, my boy. I feel better now. I live close to here. Will you assist me home?"

"Certainly, sir!" replied Tom Merry respectfully.

The engine-driver, fireman, and the passengers looked at the stalwart St. Jim's boy in admiration. The words of praise they uttered brought a crimson flush to Tom Merry's cheeks.

A few minutes later the train moved on its way, and Tom Merry was left alone by the railway-track, with the old man he had rescued from a ghastly death.

He caught Tom Merry by the arm and leaned on him.

"My ankle is twisted; I can hardly walk," he said. "My house is yonder—behind those trees. Help me over there, my lad. I want to have a talk with you."

Tom placed his bicycle in a cluster of bushes, and then assisted the old man across a rough path towards a large, rambling old mansion that loomed up in the darkness.

The wind was now howling amongst the chimney-pots and the ivy that clustered thickly on the walls of the mansion, and trees were sighing mournfully. It was an eerie place, but somehow, Tom thought, it suited the old man.

Two large mastiffs barked loudly as the old man opened the gate, and he and Tom Merry entered, but a sharp word from their master silenced the dogs.

Five minutes later Tom Merry was in an old-fashioned kitchen, with raftered ceilings and oak-paneled walls. A bright log fire burned in the large open fireplace.

"Take a seat, lad," said the old man, sinking, with a relieved gasp, into an armchair, and drawing it closer to the fire. The black leather box he still hugged to him. "Come up to the fire. I want to talk to you."

Tom Merry looked round the dimly-lighted room and its wizened tenant.

He now had an opportunity of studying the old man closer. He was a kindly-looking face enough, but lined and hardened with care and worry. His hair was snowy white, and hung, in thick masses, over his shoulders. The hands were large, hairy, and brown.

Instantly the thought leapt into Tom's mind that this old man was a miser, that the leather box he clutched to him contained his hoard of wealth.

He suddenly became aware of the other's steely grey eyes fixed searchingly on his face.

"You are thinking about me, wondering who I am?" The voice, hard and wheezy, had a note of laughter in it. "I am a strange old fellow, you suppose. Well, I'll tell you all about myself—not only because you just now saved my life,

but because I like the look of you, and feel that you are a boy to be trusted."

"My name is Calob Taggart; I am English, and love my native country, yet most of my life has been spent abroad—in the Big Woods of Canada, in the wild Western lands, and in the icebound regions of the Yukon and the Klondike. The latter part of my life was spent in the Klondike, hunting for gold."

"Twenty years ago, I had a partner—Seth Gibbons. We found gold, and he played me a low-down trick. I was old even then, and he was yet in his 'forties. He set me adrift in an isolated, unknown region, and kept our find of gold to himself. But I also discovered gold—much more gold than we had ever dreamed of finding—in the wild place where he left me to die. I found a place that was abundant with gold, and would make the fortune of the man who worked it."

"I was old and getting feeble, and unable to work it all myself. I dug sufficient for my needs, and then set about finding my way back to civilization. It took me ten months, and by the end of that time I was a physical wreck. Of Seth Gibbons I heard no more, except that he had left the Klondike a rich man. But I did not care. I held the secret of a mine that contained unlimited gold. I had written a plan of it upon parchment so that it could be located again. That was my secret. I meant to revisit that place when my health was recovered, and make myself rich—rich enough to find my boy, who was lost to me thirty years ago. But taking their toll."

"During an illness, I babbled of the secret I held, spoke of the secret plan of the gold-mine, the plan that was hidden in a leather box—the box that you see here now. Seth Gibbons got to know of it, and ever since then he has been dogging me. He is after this plan; he wants to rob me of my secret. I managed to hide from him, but now he has discovered me! Yesterday, he was prying about this house. He means to rob me of this box, which contains the secret of the Klondike mine. So, fearing that to-night he would break into this house, I went out in the dark with the box, intending to bury it in a hole I had found in the railway-bank—an old drain, I believe. But, in crossing the line, my foot got caught, and, but for you, I should have been killed."

"My boy, I do not know how to thank you. Now, I am poor, but soon I hope to be rich. For I have found my son; he is a man now. He is travelling home from South America, and he will arrive in a few days' time. I will give him the box, and he will take a party to the Klondike, and work that mine which I discovered, and make himself and me rich. Only a few days to wait before Kenneth arrives; but Seth Gibbons is here, and means to get that box."

"Cannot you keep it at a bank?" asked Tom Merry, who had listened with breathless interest to the old man's story. Caleb Taggart shook his head.

"I do not trust the banks," he said. "No, my lad. I must find some other means. Tell me about yourself. You are a fine-looking lad, and I like you."

"Well, there isn't really much to tell," laughed Tom. "My name is Merry—Tom Merry—and I am just an ordinary schoolboy belonging to St. Jim's, which is not far from here."

Caleb Taggart nodded.

"Yes, I know St. Jim's—a grand old place," he said. And then he laid a hand on Tom's knee. "I have a plan, Merry—a plan to fool Seth Gibbons. You take this box with you back to St. Jim's, and keep it for me. I know that I can trust you to keep a secret, and not tell anybody. Seth Gibbons will never dream that my secret is being kept in a boys' school; it will be safe until Kenneth comes to guard it for me. Will you do that for me?"

Tom Merry laughed.

"Why, of course!" he said cheerfully. "That's a ripping idea! I'll take this box to St. Jim's with me, and keep it there until you call for it. Nobody will be any the wiser, except my two chums who share my study. I shall have to get in, but they are absolutely honest and trustworthy. Depend upon it, sir, not a word shall be breathed outside our study."

"Very well," said the old man. "Take the box, Merry, and I will call for it when Kenneth arrives. But do not give it to anybody else. I cannot reward you sufficiently now for the great service you have done me to-night, but, later on, my boy—"

"Oh, that's all right!" interposed Tom, rising from the chair. "What I did, anybody else would have done. It was only just luck that I happened to come along on my bike. I must be going now, sir, or I shall get into trouble. Gates are locked at eight, and I have a pass till nine o'clock. I shall get in by then unless I hustle."

"All right, my boy! Mind that box doesn't jostle out of

your pocket. I am more than grateful to you. Good-night!"

"Good-night, sir!"

With a brief handshake, Tom Merry was gone.

When he had traversed the tree-bordered road for some distance, he looked back at the large, gaunt house in the darkness.

"What a rummily old fellow!" he mused. "He tells a strange yarn, but it rings true. I like him, and his box will be safe enough in my keeping, I reckon."

Tom Merry found his machine where he had left it, and, remounting, he cycled over the level crossing, and made his way through the night back to St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 3.

The Japer Japed.

"NICE goin's hon!"

Thus Taggles, the old and ancient school-porter at St. Jim's.

Tom Merry's ringing at the gate-bell had brought Taggles out of his snug little lodge, away from his gin-and-water, into the dark, bleak night.

"Which you're late!" growled the porter surlily, as he opened the side gate, to admit Tom and his bicycle. "Which these is fine goin's hon? You young rips is always givin' me trouble! Wot I says is this 'ere—all boys ought to be drowned at birth!"

"Go hon!" chuckled Tom Merry cheerfully.

He did not wait to hear more of what Taggles had to say. He wheeled his machine across to the cycle-shed, saw it safely installed in there, and then walked across the pitch black Close to the School House.

"Bai Jove! Heah you are at last, Tom Mewwy!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth espied Tom as he came in, and hurried over to him.

Monty Lowther, Manners, Jack Blake, Herries and Digby came up, too.

"Where the merry dickens have you been, Tommy?" inquired Monty Lowther, regarding his leader curiously.

"Railton's been looking for you. It's nearly half-past nine!"

"Oh, I've had a rotten ride back from Huckleberry Heath," replied Tom evasively. "You should have seen the state of the roads. Awful isn't the word!"

"How is Miss Priscilla?" asked Blake of the Fourth.

"Much better, thanks!" said Tom Merry cheerfully. "She seems more concerned over my health than her own. Why, she wouldn't let me leave her place before I'd got a rotten chest-protector strapped on me, and she made me take a dose of some horrible chill-preventer—Grooogh!"

"Poor chap!" grinned Monty Lowther sympathetically. "Where's the chest-protector, Tommy?"

"I took it off and threw it in a ditch when I'd gone about half a mile," said Tom. "Miss Priscilla means well, but I hate being mollycoddled like a kid!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We've had some real fun this afternoon, Tommy," said Monty Lowther. "We all went to the Wayland Picture-drome, and met those Grammar School blighters in there. Gordon Gay & Co. are properly on the warpath against us once more, you know. We were in the back row of the cinema, and they got in the row just in front. The rotters all sat up high in the seats, and shoved their thick heads together, so that we couldn't see. Of course, we couldn't stand that—"

"No, wathah not, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus excitedly. "So we got up and punched their heads, bai Jove, an'—"

"And they punched back!" broke in Jack Blake enthusiastically. "And in a few minutes there was a perfect rumpus. We all got kicked out of the cinema on our necks—Gordon Gay & Co. as well—and then we chased 'em down the High Street, caught them by the railway-station, and then Figgis & Co. came up, and we gave the Grammarians a high old time!"

The chums of the School House chuckled.

Since time immemorial, constant strife had been waged between St. Jim's and Rylcombe Grammar School. The two schools were not far apart, and Tom Merry & Co. and Gordon Gay & Co. were always ragging each other. Each side had brought off a number of coups, but it had never yet been decided which of the two factions were the top dogs. That question was likely to remain unsettled for all time, it seemed.

"Oh, well, I suppose I had better go along and see Railton," said Tom Merry, with a sigh. "There will be a hundred lines waiting for me, no doubt."

Mr. Railton, the Housemaster of the School House, greeted Tom Merry with rather a severe look when the Shell captain entered his study.

"Well, Merry, where have you been?" he asked. "The pass you were granted allowed you out until nine o'clock."

"I'm sorry, sir," replied Tom. "The roads were terrible for cycling, and—and I took a longer route, across the railway by Wayland."

Mr. Railton looked hard at him.

"You have no other excuse, Merry?"

"No, sir," replied Tom.

"Then I consider you a very noble and modest lad, to say nothing of the gallant act you performed this evening," said the Housemaster, smiling. "A gentleman named Calot Taggart has just rung up to say that you were detained by saving him from a horrible death on the railway-line. He described how you did it, and told me your name. He was anxious, you see, that you should not get into trouble for being late."

Tom Merry's face flushed with pleasure.

"Oh, that was splendid of him!" he exclaimed. "I—I had no idea he would ring up an excuse for me."

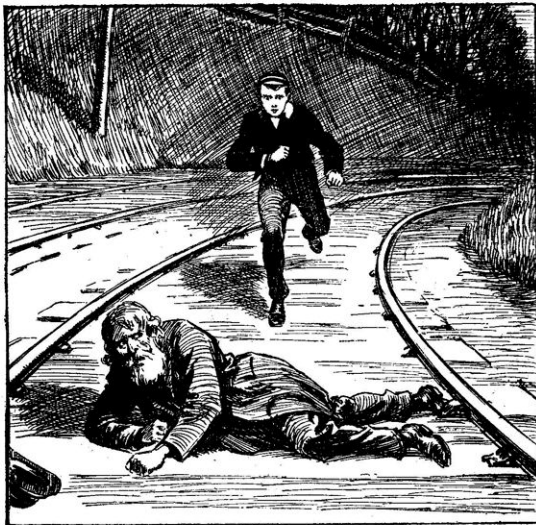
"It was splendid of you, Merry, to have done such a brave deed and not boasted of it," said Mr. Railton kindly. "You are a boy that St. Jim's is proud of. You may go, Merry, and, under the circumstances, I think you may be excused your preparation."

"Oh, thank you, sir!"

Tom Merry rejoined his chums, with a beaming face.

"No lines?" inquired Monty Lowther in considerable surprise.

"No. Railton was quite nice over it!" smiled Tom.



There was no time to lose. Tom ran along the track between the sleepers, and as he ran he heard the groaning more distinctly. Two minutes later he reached a huddled figure lying across the up-line. It was that of an old man.

"Rotten roads and dark night, you know. Hallo! What's the rumpus?"

There was a commotion on the upper landing.

Next minute, Wally D'Arcy of the Third came dashing down the stairs in pursuit of his pet mongrel, Pongo.

"Stop him!" shrieked Wally. "Pongo's run off with our supper! He's got all our kippers! Stop the little blighter!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry & Co.

Pongo, who had a large paper parcel held tight between his teeth, looked round him desperately. He did not mean to part with those kippers without a struggle. He had run off with them from the Third Form-room whilst the fags were making tea. Mr. Selby had taken prep earlier than usual that evening, which gave Wally D'Arcy & Co. an opportunity to have a late supper in the Form-room before going to bed.

"Go it, Pongo!" chuckled Blake. "He's a good old kipper-snatcher!"

Wally made a grab at Pongo, but the lithe little mongrel slithered between the legs of Arthur Augustus, and made a bee-line down the stairs that led to the domestic regions, where Mrs. Kebble, the matron, held sway.

"Pongo!" yelled Wally, dashing in pursuit. "Drop those kippers, you little beggar! Drop 'em!"

But Pongo, like Balaam's ass, heeded not the voice of his master.

He scampered down the stairs, through the kitchen, into the bakehouse.

One of the large oven doors was open a little way, and into this Pongo leapt like a rocket.

"Got him!" cried Wally joyfully, pounding towards the oven door.

"Now the little blighter will have to give 'em up!"

"Why, mum-mum-my only sainted Aunt Jane!"

Strange sounds were proceeding from inside that oven, noises such as Pongo himself could not have made.

Wild scuffles and sounds of turmoil came from the oven, and a series of howls and gurgles arose.

"Good heavens!" gasped Wally. "There's somebody in the oven! A—barglar!"

With this swift suspicion uppermost in his mind, Wally slammed the door of the oven and shot the bolt.

"Grooong-hooongh!" came in a muffled gurgle from inside the oven. "Lemme out!"

Wally, holding on tight to the oven door handle, bawled up the stairs at the top of his voice.

"Come down here, you fellows! I've caught a barglar!"

Tom Merry & Co. and Blake & Co. dashed down the stairs at top speed.

They stood stock-still, and gazed at the Third-Former holding the oven door, and gasped.

"He's in here!" exclaimed Wally.

"Who? Pongo?" asked Tom Merry.

"Yes; and the barglar!" said Wally. "Hark at 'em! I reckon old Pongo's going for him, and giving him a high old time!"

"Gwest Scott!"

The School House juniors listened, and heard weird noises inside the oven.

"Yap! Yap! Gr-rrrr-rrr!"

"Yarocoooh! Lemme out!"

Tom Merry strode forward.

"My hat, there is somebody in the oven, chaps!" he exclaimed. "Crowd round, and get your fists ready! When I open the door, grab him at once!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

Tom Merry gripped the oven door, and, with a quick movement, pulled it open.

A dusty, dishevelled figure came out, and the others pounced upon the intruder at once.

"Yooocooop! Leggo! Hands off, you bouncers!"

Tom Merry & Co. fell back, thunderstruck, and blinked at the floury individual who had tumbled from the oven.

"My only Sunday topper!" exclaimed Jack Blake in a faint voice. "Gordon Gay!"

"You—you blighter!"

The hero of Rylcombe Grammar School struggled to his feet. He was smothered with flour and breadcrumbs, his trousers were torn at the knees, and his jacket was ripped up the back.

Gordon Gay was in a parlous state. He groaned, and blinked dolefully at Tom Merry & Co.

"Yowp! I reckon my luck's out to-night!" he gasped. "You've got me, you beggars, all through that confounded tripod!"

"Good old Pongo!" said Wally, fondling his pet, who had by now masticated half the kippers inside the oven. "If it hadn't been for you we shouldn't have spotted this awful bouncer! Carry on with the kippers, old sport! You deserve 'em! We couldn't think of eating 'em now, anyway!"

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 718.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Gordon Gay blinked.

"Well, you'd better let me go now, you chaps," he said.

"I shall have to be getting back to school—it's nearly bedtime."

"Plenty of time for a chinwag yet, Gay, old chap!" said Tom Merry cheerfully. "Now, what the merry dickens are you doing in a respectable school at this time o' night?"

Gordon Gay grinned ruefully.

"I reckon I came to get a little of my own back for the ragging your chaps gave us this afternoon," he said. "I thought about emptying the contents of the dormitory water-jugs into your beds, that's all. You would have had a regular old festival when you went to bed, and—"

"Bai Jove! You faithful wotah!"

Tom Merry chuckled.

"Thank goodness your little game has been nipped in the bud!" he said. "You Grammar School worms are getting much too cheeky lately, and we feel that it's up to us, as members of the superior school, to teach you a lesson. Don't we, chaps?"

Gordon Gay's face assumed a haunted look.

"I—say, pax, you know!" he said uneasily.

"Not much!" chuckled Tom Merry. "You came for a rag, and you're going to have one, Gay, old scout! There's a flour sack in the corner, empty. We'll shove him in that, as a preliminary!"

"Ha, ha! Good egg!"

Gordon Gay was bundled rudely into the flour sack, two holes being cut in the bottom to allow his legs to go through.

The sack was tied under his armpits by means of some string.

"Here is a packet of dried peas," said Jack Blake, diving into the pantry. "Let's make him do penance, with peas in his boots!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yes, you do!" howled Gordon Gay, struggling wildly. "Don't you touch my feet, or I'll kick!"

But the luckless Grammarian's legs were captured and held firmly, whilst Tom Merry and Blake removed his boots, put a layer of peas inside Gordon Gay's socks, beneath the soles of his feet, and then replaced his boots.

"Yow-ow!" moaned Gay, dancing as he trod on those peas. "Oh, you horrid rotters! Take these things out of my socks!"

"No fear!"

"Plaster his head with treacle! There's plenty here, and we don't like it at table!" chuckled Tom Merry.

Gordon Gay howled as this ghastly operation was carried out; but Kit Wildrake placed a large hand across his mouth, until Manners procured a gag for the hapless Grammarian leader.

"A few oats sprinkled on the treacle would give an artistic effect!" smiled Monty Lowther, and ladled out the rolled oats liberally.

Gordon Gay soon looked a sight for gods and men and little fishes.

Tom Merry & Co. looked at him and roared.

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "You really do look wild, Gay, dear boy! Ha, ha, ha! I wogahd this jape as distinctly funny, bai Jove!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yerrugh! Gug! Gug!" gurgled the unhappy Grammarian, from behind his gag. Those were the only sounds he was able to utter, but his looks spoke whole volumes. He hopped wildly on the hard peas that were in his socks.

"Cave!" said Kit Wildrake suddenly, listening at the door. The cowboy junior had quick ears. Here comes the matron! There'll be no end of a shindy if she discovers us here. We'd better scat!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

Tom Merry & Co. promptly "scatted," taking their unhappy prisoner with them.

Gordon Gay was taken into the quadrangle, where all was quiet and dark. Tom Merry affixed a lighted cycle-lamp to his rival's chest.

"Better give him a rear light as well!" chuckled Monty Lowther, tying a red lamp at the back of Gordon Gay's waist.

"My word, you're fixed up a treat now, old sport! Better hurry back to your casual ward, or you'll be late for bed!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The gag was removed from Gay's mouth, and he was bundled through the side gate, into the Rylcombe Lane.

He hopped and leaped wildly in the air, for those hard peas hurt!

"Yow-ow-ow! My feet! Oh, you—your howling rotters!"

moaned Gay, quite overcome with rage and humiliation.

"I'll pay you out for this! Mark my words! The Grammar School won't stand this insult without getting its own back! We'll make you sing small, you rotters! Yow-ow-ow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the St. Jim's juniors.

They propelled Gordon Gay along the lane, and set him going in the direction of the Grammar School. Gordon Gay went, hopping and skipping as though treading on hot bricks. He howled, and uttered sulphurous threats of battle, murder, and sudden death.

Tom Merry & Co., quite unabashed, watched their hapless rival go down the lane, the bicycle-lamp shedding a light in his path, and the red lamp glimmering in the rear.

"Good-bye, Bluebell!" cried Tom Merry. "Don't give your schoolmates too much of a fright when you arrive, will you?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And, as the red lamp flickered farther away in the darkness, Tom Merry & Co. returned to the School House, to chuckle over their gorgeous jape on their Grammarian rival, and then prepared for bed.

CHAPTER 4. Wildrake Chips In.

"I will be safe enough in my desk, I reckon," said Tom Merry.

"Unless Baggy Trimble came nosing in here, and ran off with it," said Monty Lowther. Manners shook his head.

"Baggy won't do that in a hurry," he said; "not after that licking I gave him yesterday. The little beggar came in here, opened a new packet of photographic plates, and spoilt the lot! When I caught Baggy, I spoilt him, and I threatened to wipe up the quad with him next time he was found in this study."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Terrible Three had been discussing the strange story of old Caleb Taggart. Lessons were over for the morning, and they had come into their study for a "jaw."

"Poor old fellow!" mused Tom Merry thoughtfully. "I felt quite sorry for him. It's pretty certain that his old partner, Seth Gibbons, is an out-and-out rotter, and if only to keep the box from his hands, I'd move heaven and earth to keep it safely. Wonder whether he did break into the Gables last night? I—hope the old man is all right."

Monty Lowther looked dubious.

"Do you think he is safe, Tommy?" he asked. "A fellow like Gibbons, who left his partner to die in the Klondike, must be a tough customer, and would stop at nothing to gain his ends."

Tom Merry nodded.

"You're right, Monty," he said. "Old Taggart isn't safe in that house all alone, with that rascal prowling about. Let's cycle over there. It won't take long, and we need only see that the old man's all right. We'll take Wildrake."

"All serene, Tommy!"

Kit Wildrake, the Canadian junior, was taken into the secret, and at once expressed his willingness to accompany the Terrible Three to the Gables.

The Terrible Three and Wildrake took their cycles out, and pedalled away swiftly through Rylcombe Wood, to the outskirts of the village, where Wayland Heath commenced.

The Gables, looking just as mysterious and weird even in the daylight, stood in the midst of a thick cluster of trees, down a narrow and unfrequented road.

Tom Merry & Co. cycled down there slowly, and dismounted at the bottom.

They looked through the large iron gates, and saw the ground all weed-grown, bare, and neglected.

"Pretty dismal-looking shanty," said Kit Wildrake. "Certainly not a safe place for an old man to live in, with a desperate enemy dogging him. Hallo! Look there! Footprints!"

The keen eyes of the Canadian junior had been scrutinising the ground inside the gates of the house. He bent down, and looked carefully at the marks that had attracted his attention.

"Yes, by Jove!" he said, and examined the gate. "Look at these scratches on the ironwork! Somebody has just recently climbed this gate, and walked up to the house along this path! Things look fishy to me!"

"My hat! You're right, Wildrake," said Tom Merry, and his eyes glittered. "The old man might have been murdered, for all we know. Let's get over the gate and make a search."

One by one, the plucky St. Jim's juniors clambered over the gate. Kit Wildrake led the way, following, with all the Canadian woodsman's cunning, the footprints he had discovered.

"Look here," he said grimly, thrusting aside the branches of a thicket of bushes near by.

Tom Merry and the others looked, and uttered cries of horror.

The stiff, lifeless bodies of two large, handsome mastiffs were lying on the ground. Kit Wildrake bent down and examined them briefly.

"Poisoned!" he said curtly. "The man who killed these dogs was a Canadian woodsman; I can tell that by the way the animals have been killed. A tiny arrow, filled with a deadly poison, was shot into the bodies of each of these dogs. It's one of the methods the woodsman uses to kill the wolves; they learnt it from the Indians. There is no doubt, now, that Seth Gibbons has been here."

"And still may be here," said Tom Merry, looking round quickly. "We had better not be seen entering the house, you fellows!"

Wildrake nodded.

"Follow me!" he said. "These bramble-bushes afford us excellent cover. We'll be able to sneak in through one of the back windows."

With the stealth of Red Indians, they crept over the grounds towards the Gables. Wildrake very cautiously thrust open a window in the rear of the ivy-clad house, and they climbed in, one after the other.

"Hark!" said the Canadian junior, stiffening suddenly. "Did you hear that?"

It was a footfall on the bare boards of the corridor they were standing in.

The juniors dodged back into an alcove. Peering out cautiously, Wildrake saw a large, burly man cross the hall and climb the stairs.

"It must be Gibbons," he whispered. "Come on, you fellows; but be careful not to make a noise. We'll follow and find out what his little game is. I guess we'll take star turns in this show!"

The stairs were thickly carpeted, which considerably assisted the boys in climbing them noiselessly.

They heard the door of a room in the upper corridor slam, and then a gruff voice came to their ears.



Tom Merry gripped the oven door, and, with a quick movement, pulled it open. The juniors fell back, thunderstruck, and blinked at the individual in the oven. "My only Sunday topper!" exclaimed Jack Blake in a faint voice. "Gordon Gay!"

"Well?" It was the voice of a burly man, whose life had been spent in the open air. "Have you come to your senses yet, Caleb? I offer you a square deal—a thousand quid in real Bank of England notes, in exchange for that plan of your secret mine! What's the use of that mine to you? You're too old to return to the Klondike and work it. Take it from me, pard, you'd best accept my offer while I'm in the mood. I'm apt to get nasty an' irritable like, an' Seth Gibbons is famous in the West as a crittur wot don't stand on ceremony. Now, wot's it goin' to be, Caleb?"

"I don't care for your threats, Gibbons!" Old Caleb Taggart's voice, though weak and tremulous, had a determined ring in it. "You may threaten, or do as you like, but you'll never wrest my secret from me!"

There came an ugly snarl from the other man. "Where've you hidden the box?" he demanded viciously. "Tell me, Caleb, or by gar, there'll be no accountin' for what I do! I guess I've searched high an' low in this brick shebang of yours, but you've found a pesky clever hidin' place for it."

"Look where you will!" retorted the old man defiantly. "The box, Gibbons, is not in this house. It's where you'll never find it."

"You old scum!"

Next minute there was a scuffle and a shriek from Caleb Taggart.

Kit Wildrake, gaining the door of the room, saw the big hulking bully holding the old man's throat in large, cruel hands. Caleb Taggart was bound with rope, lying helpless on the bed.

"Tell me! Tell me where the box is!" snarled Gibbons passionately. "Tell me, or I'll squeeze the breath out of your old body!"

"Hands off!"

Kit Wildrake's voice rang out sharply, like the crack of a whip. Seth Gibbons released his hold of Taggart's throat, and wheeled round with an oath.

"Grab him, chaps!" sang out Tom Merry, springing forward.

Next minute, all four boys had flung themselves at the hulking lout.

He went to the floor with a wild yell, struggling with all his brutal strength.

Kit Wildrake got astride the fellow, and his long, strong hands closed over Gibbons' throat. The Canadian junior's grip tightened, and the bully's struggles became feebler.

"Let go! Let go, curse you!" he panted, striving to get his breath.

"Take that rope off Mr. Taggart, chaps, and bind this antelope!" ordered Wildrake. "I guess we've turned the trick on you, Gibbons. Nothin' like the old Wild West tricks—eh?"

Manners and Lowther sat on Gibbons with Wildrake, whilst Tom Merry quickly unbound Mr. Taggart, and, with the same rope, secured the man on the floor.

"Trussed up like a chicken!" smiled Wildrake, rising. "Plenty of fresh air now, Gibbons. Let loose all the ranch talk you please—don't mind me. I'm used to it."

Seth Gibbons was looking hard and balefully at the Canadian junior.

"You little whelp!" he raged. "I've seen you before somewhere—in Canada!"

"Sure! It's more than likely!" smiled Wildrake. "I'm from Boot Leg Ranch, British Columbia, and I guess I know all the mountains and the woods and the prairies, as well as the towns, out there in the West."

"Wildrake's son! I know you now!" ejaculated the ruffian on the floor. "By gorry! I never figured on seein' Wildrake's son over here!"

"That so?" chuckled Wildrake cheerfully. "This is a funny world, isn't it, Gibbons? So you know my popper—eh?"

"Worked for him, the durned boob!" growled the other. "I guess you've got me, sons, but it won't be for long! Seth Gibbons has broke the stone jug many a time, an' can do it again, too, in this goldrained country! An', what's more, Caleb, I'll have the laugh of you yet!"

Caleb Taggart laughed.

"I don't care a rap for you now, Gibbons, or any of your threats!" he said. "My secret is safe—thanks to these boys. You came just in time, my lads. I'm more than grateful to you all. I'll ring up the police, and ask them to fetch this rascal away."

"That's the ticket!" said Kit Wildrake. "We'll stay here, I guess, until the police arrive. There's no trusting skunks like Seth Gibbons."

Caleb Taggart telephoned to the Wayland police. Seth Gibbons lay on the floor where the juniors had deposited him, scowling and muttering under his breath.

At length, the inspector and two constables arrived. Mr. Taggart gave their prisoner in charge, and Gibbons was led away in custody.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 718.

Tom Merry & Co. and Kit Wildrake then left the Gables, and returned on their cycles to St. Jim's.

They arrived just in time for dinner. Jack Blake & Co. were curious to know where they had been, but they did not, of course, enlighten the Fourth-Formers.

"Say, Merry," observed Kit Wildrake to the Shell captain, when lessons were over that afternoon, and he met the Terrible Three outside the Common-room, "what about that box containing the old man's plans? Goin' to give it back to him?"

"No," he asked me to keep it till his son returns," replied Tom. "It's the best way, I think, in case of accidents, and—Hullo! Do you want me, Kildare?"

"Yes. There's somebody on the 'phone for you," replied the stalwart skipper of St. Jim's, appearing at the end of the passage.

Tom Merry, looking surprised and curious, hurried away.

He returned to his chums a few minutes afterwards, and there was a serious, dismayed look on his handsome face. "Well, better keep a look-out for him," said Monty Lowther sympathetically. "Bad news of Miss Priscilla?"

"No," said Tom shortly. "Caleb Taggart rang me up to say that Seth Gibbons has escaped from the police, and is again at large!"

"Whew!"

"Great Scott!"

"I guess I'm sorry to hear that!" remarked Kit Wildrake. "The rascal will be proving around here now!"

"We'd better keep a look-out for him," said Tom Merry. "The police are hot on his track, anyway, and the rotter may be recaptured any hour now."

But that was scanty comfort to the St. Jim's juniors. They knew what a desperate rascal Seth Gibbons was, and could not help wondering what his next move would be.

CHAPTER 5.

Grammarians Abroad.

"CAREFUL!" whispered Gordon Gay.

Then a howl came from the darkness below.

"Yarcoo! Mind where you're putting your feet, you idiot! That was my napper!"

"Sorry, Franky!"

Frank Monk grunted, and rubbed his head.

It was night, and Rylcombe Grammar School was wrapped in gloom.

Gordon Gay & Co. had waited for the stroke of eleven; then they had risen from their beds, dressed quickly in the dark, taken certain articles that had been smuggled under the beds, and stole quietly from their dormitory.

To the lithe and active juniors it was easy enough to drop lightly upon the leads of the outhouse below the box-room window, and thence clamber to the ground.

In a few minutes Gordon Gay, Frank Monk, the two Woottons, Tadpole, Mont Blong, and Carboy were standing in the quadrangle.

They scouted round the dark quadrangle, and reached the school wall.

Then Gordon Gay withdrew a rope ladder from the bundle he carried. The end of this ladder was fitted with a steel grappler. He threw it to the top of the wall, the grappler clung to the other side of the brickwork, and the juniors were thus able to climb the wall, one by one.

In a few minutes more they were all in the road outside the school.

Red lights glimmered through the darkness, and a small fire cast a yellowish radiance into the fitful shadows at the side of the road. The road was "up" outside the Grammar School. Rylcombe District Council were having new gas-mains laid. The lamps hanging on the barriers round the excavations were responsible for the red lights, and, in a cabin near by, the night watchman was warming himself by the coke fire.

"Sh!" whispered Gordon Gay. "We don't want to arouse the old watchy. Here we go on the giddy warpath! To-night we get our own back on those St. Jim's rotters!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Sh!"

Moving like very phantoms in the night, the Grammar School juniors crept past the night watchman, and then hastened along the lane towards St. Jim's.

They reached the walls of their rival school, and once again the rope ladder, with its grappler attachment, was utilised.

Gordon Gay, Frank Monk, Harry Wootton, and Carboy climbed over the wall into the dark quadrangle of St. Jim's, leaving Jack Wootton, Mont Blong, and Tadpole to "keep cave" outside.

"Now for the burglar stunt!" chuckled Gordon Gay, as they scouted round the School House. "Let me see, those are the Shell study windows above us, aren't they? You, Wootton and Carboy, stay down here with the sack to catch the things as we drop them out of the windows. I mean to burgle all the movable articles belonging to those St.

Jim's bounders, so that they'll have the shock of their lives in the morning to find that their studies have been broken into and all their things pinched! I've got a note here for Tom Merry, which I shall leave on his desk, saying that if they want their things back again they must come to the Grammar School, carrying white flags for truce, apologise for the japes they have worked on us lately, and ask us very nicely for the return of their property. Ripping wheeze, isn't it? We shall have them all in a cleft stick properly! They wouldn't sneak to the masters, but will have to eat humble pie! Tom Merry & Co. will kick themselves to-morrow morning!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" murmured Gay. "You two chaps stay here, as I said. Come on, Franky—our job is to get into this miserable hole they call a school!"

The two raiders scuttled away, Harry Wootton and Carboy remaining behind to perform their part in that deep dark plot.

Lights were gleaming from several of the masters' rooms. The Head's study, Mr. Railton's study, and Mr. Lathom's were all lighted. But the blinds were down, and all was still, dark, and silent in the quadrangle.

Gordon Gay, who knew St. Jim's well, and had several times in the past carried out night raids on the rival school, located the box-room window, and he and Monk climbed in.

They groped their way cautiously along the dark corridors until the Shell passage was reached.

Beginning with the Terrible Three's room, the Grammarians made a tour of the studies.

"Here's Manners' camera!" chuckled Gordon Gay, opening a large desk in Tom Merry's study. "He'll tear his hair when he finds that gone! Be careful not to damage it, Franky—we're not out to spoil anything. Tie that cord round it firmly, and lower it to the others."

Manners' camera, with several other things, was lowered out of the window into the waiting hands of Harry Wootton and Carboy below, who untied them from the string and placed them in a sack.

"Here's a funny little black leather box," said Gordon Gay, rummaging at the bottom of the desk. "Doesn't look very valuable; but still, one never knows. Drop it down, anyway!"

Having thus visited each study in the Shell passage in turn, the midnight marauders went along to the Fourth Form quarters, and proceeded to turn out all the movable articles in the studies.

Jack Blake's cherished wireless outfit went, also Digby's "Meccano" set, D'Arcy's beautiful gold-cased fountain-pen, the silver cup Levison had won at the village sports for marksmanship, Kit Wildrake's valuable Indian bowie-knife, watches, clocks, footballs, fishing-tackle, boxing-gloves, ornaments, tool sets, albums, medals—in fact, everything they could conveniently take away with them, and which they thought would be missed by the owners.

At length, their work completed, they clambered out of the box-room window again, and rejoined Wootton and Carboy in the quadrangle.

"We've got two sacks full of plunder!" chuckled Harry Wootton. "My word! It's a good job we all came! There are only just enough of us to carry this lot!"

"Shurrup!" murmured Gordon Gay. "Not so much jaw, Harry! Let's get this swag away as soon as possible!"

They carried it across the quadrangle, and Jack Wootton, Mont Blong, and Tadpole helped them over the wall with it.

Carrying their spoils between them, the Grammarians made their way back swiftly to their own school.

They crept up the lane, where the watchman's fire was still burning brightly.

"Wonder if he's awake?" murmured Gordon Gay, listening. "Hark! Can you hear him snoring?"

They listened, and then a puzzled look came over Gay's face.

"Did you hear that moan?" he asked.

"Yes, I thought it was a moan," said Frank Monk. "I—I hope there's nothing wrong."

Gordon Gay crept up stealthily to the watchman's cabin, and was startled to discover the old watchman propped up inside the wooden box, his hands tied to his sides, and a gag secured over his mouth.

"My hat!" said Gordon Gay, beckoning to his chums. "This looks fishy! We shall have to give ourselves away, and release the old chap!"

They vaulted over the wooden barrier, and soon relieved the old watchman of his bonds.

"What happened?" demanded Gordon Gay.

"I saw a man climbing over the school wall!" gasped the watchman breathlessly. "I called out to him, and he came back at me. He was a big, heavy brute, and before I knew what had happened he had me down, and did me up just as you found me."

"Where is he now?" asked Gay eagerly. "Did he clear off?"

"No; he got over the school wall, and is still in there, young man!"

Gordon Gay set his teeth firmly.

"Come on, chaps!" he said. "This is where we catch a real burglar!"

They climbed over the school wall quickly, by means of the ladder they had brought with them, not forgetting to take their plunder as well.

The Grammarian juniors looked round keenly in the darkness, their heads thumping with excitement.

Suddenly, Mont Blong, the French junior, gave a start.

"Mon Dieu! There is somebody in ze trees over zair, mes amis!"

Gordon Gay & Co. listened, and heard the rustle of leaves among the bushes that separated the Close from the playing-fields.

"You're right, Mont Blong!" ejaculated Gordon Gay. "Stay with this stuff, old chap, while we scout out for the burglar. We'll split up into pairs, and go in different directions."

This plan was acted upon. Leaving Mont Blong to guard the watch-plunder, the Grammarians ran off quietly in the darkness in pairs.

Gordon Gay and Jack Wootton suddenly pounced on a shadowy figure among the bushes.

"Got him!" exclaimed Gay, and whistled to the others.

"Leggo!" gasped their captive, wriggling. "It's only me—Gilette!"

"Great pip!"

The Grammarians blinked at the other in the darkness, and were able to recognise him as Percy Gilette, a member of their own Form.

Gilette was not a popular schoolmate of theirs. He was not Gordon Gay & Co.'s sort, being more addicted to breaking bounds at night with Racke & Co. of St. Jim's, and smoking and playing nap, than taking part in the school games.

"Gilette!" exclaimed Gordon Gay. "What the dickens are you doing out here?"

"Nun-nothing!" stuttered the Fourth-Former, wriggling.

"I—I—"

"Didn't you chaps hear us whistle?" cried Frank Monk, dashing up with the others at his heels. "We've seen the burglar, but he got away. A big, hefty fellow he was. But he had nothing with him. Hallo! Is this Gilette? He must be the fellow we saw the burglar talking to."

"Great Scott!"

Gordon Gay & Co. looked grimly at their Form-fellow.

"Have you been talking to the burglar, Gilette?" demanded Gordon Gay.

Percy Gilette gave a sickly grin.

"Ye-es. He stopped me, you know," he said. "I was out, looking for you chaps. I knew you were raiding Tom Merry & Co.'s studies at St. Jim's, and, as I couldn't sleep, I thought I'd follow, and take a hand. I met the burglar in these trees. He stopped me, and wanted to know which was Tom Merry's room. He had mistaken the two schools, and thought this was St. Jim's. I told him of his mistake, and he went quietly enough. He didn't come to burgle the school. He was from Tom Merry, of St. Jim's."

Gordon Gay & Co. looked at each other in amazement.

"My only Sunday topper!" exclaimed the Grammarian leader. "That's a queer yarn, and no mistake! Are you trying to pull our legs, Gilette, or—"

"I've told you the truth!" said Gilette bluntly.

"Yes; but we know what a truthful chap you are, Gilette—I don't think!" retorted Gordon Gay. "You were out on the tiles again to-night, I suppose, pub-haunting, as usual, thinking yourself a regular gay dog and a power! I don't know how much to believe of the rest of your yarn. Of course, it's quite possible that a burglar not acquainted with the neighbourhood, wanting St. Jim's, might mistake our school for it in the darkness. But what the dickens is the fellow after Tom Merry for?"

Percy Gilette shrugged his thin shoulders.

"How the dickens should I know?" he said.

"I suppose you told the fellow how to get to St. Jim's, and all he wanted to know—eh?"

"Well, what if I did?" asked Gilette defiantly. "He was a rough brute, I tell you, and might have laid me out—"

"Oh, rats!" snapped Gordon Gay. "You chaps had better take Gilette and our swag indoors, while I run back to St. Jim's, and see that everything is all right. I sha'n't be long."

Gordon Gay ran off; but outside he met the watchman, conversing with two mounted policemen.

"Have you captured him?" asked the Grammarian leader eagerly.

One of the policemen shook his head.

"No, my lad; but he's on the run," he said. "The fellow who broke into your school is Seth Gibbons, who escaped from Wayland Gaol yesterday. We have been hunting him."

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 718.

ever since. The rascal has showed plenty of daring in entering your school to-night."

"He meant to get into St. Jim's—after Tom Merry," said Gordon Gay.

"By Jove! Tom Merry is one of the lads who gave him away," said the policeman. "Naturally, the fellow would be wanting to get his own back. Well, I should advise you to return to your bed, my lad. I'll have a special look-out stationed round St. Jim's. Gibbons didn't run in that direction, anyway; but it's as well to be on the safe side."

"Yes, rather!"

Gordon Gay, five minutes later, rejoined his chums in the dormitory.

"It's all serene; the police are going to watch St. Jim's," he said cheerfully. "Well, chaps, here's our swag; and I reckon those St. Jim's microbes will be tearing their hair in the morning! What a night of excitement it's been!"

Soon the candles were blown out, and silence reigned in the Fourth Form dormitory at Rylcombe Grammar School.

Gordon Gay & Co. were soon asleep.

A little time elapsed, and then Percy Gillette sat up in bed.

"You fellows awake?" he asked cautiously.

There was no answer. Tadpole's unmusical snore was the only sound that disturbed the silence of the night.

Gillette jumped out of bed, and went over to the pile of "swag" that had been passed by the large wardrobe.

"I wonder if they happened to take that black box?" he mused, as he commenced to rummage amongst the various articles raised from St. Jim's.

"My word, if only I could get hold of that box! The chap offered me twenty quid if I managed to get it from Tom Merry. Twenty quid! If those rotters have brought it away with them with the other stuff, then my luck's in. Ah! What's this?"

The cad of the Grammarian Fourth chuckled with glee when he pulled out the black leather box he had been hunting for.

"Got it," he muttered. "Nobody will know I've got it. To-morrow night I'll see Gibbons, and hand it over to him. Twenty quid! My hat!"

He took the box to bed with him, and thrust it under his pillow. And, chuckling softly, he composed himself to sleep.

CHAPTER 6.

Under Suspicion.

"MUM-MY only hat!"

"What the merry thunder—"

"Great pip!"

Thus the Terrible Three when they entered Study No. 10 next morning.

That famous den presented a curiously bare and empty appearance.

"Where's the clock?" gasped Tom Merry, wondering.

"And my silver inkstand, and the bronze flower-vase?" said the bewildered Monty Lowther. "And my boxing-gloves, and the fencing-foils?"

"And the fire-screen, and my photograph album, and my airgun?" gurgled Manners in a faint voice.

The Terrible Three blinked.

A large envelope was pinned on the cupboard door, and, like one in a dream, Tom Merry went over and picked it up.

It was addressed to him, and, still mechanically, he tore the envelope, and read the following amazing epistle:

"To Tom Merry, Chief of the St. Jim's Jinglewitted Jossers!"

Dear Old Bun,—This is to inform you that the heroes of Rylcombe Grammar School have this night entered by stealth your tumble-down old home for incurables, and have annexed all the movable property which we thought you might miss.

In fact, we have had a general clear out of the Shell and Fourth Form passages. Now, we have felt it necessary to do this, in view of the cheekiness that you St. Jim's jossers have shown lately towards us, your moral, physical, and mental superiors. You poor little bits of cheese must be put back into your places, before you get out of hand.

We do not mean to deprive you entirely of your things, and you may rest assured that nothing shall be damaged or tampered with in any way. But take it from us, you cannot have your things back unless you come to the Grammar School and ask for them, like good little boys.

You must come waving white flags of truce, and be sure to put clean collars on and wash your necks! Then you must humbly apologise for your misdeeds towards us, promise never, never again to attempt to ride the high horse over us, and beseech us to show mercy unto you, and give you back your things.

Unless you do this, your giddy goods and chattels must remain at the Grammar School for the rest of the term.

"Your old pal,

"GORDON GAY."

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Tom Merry read this aloud, and both Monty Lowther and Manners gave queer, gasping gurgles.

"Well, of all the cool, sheer, unadulterated cheek!" exclaimed Tom Merry, blinking at his chums. "This is the giddy limit!"

"The last word, absolutely!" said Monty Lowther.

Manners ran quickly over to the desk, dragged it open, and looked inside.

"He gave a roar."

"The howling rotters! They've got my camera!"

"They've boned my book of puns!" shrieked Monty Lowther furiously.

"What about old Caleb Taggart's black box?" asked Tom Merry anxiously. "Have the blighters taken that too?"

"It's not here!"

"Oh, good heavens!"

Tom Merry ran quickly through the remainder of the contents of the black box to be seen.

But no sign of the black box was to be seen.

The Shell captain clenched his fists hard.

"They've taken the box, and—and Mr. Taggart might be wanting it to-day or to-morrow!" he exclaimed. "Oh crumbs! How are we to get it back?"

"Bai Jove! Have you fellows been wobbled, too?"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy came down the passage, followed by Jack Blake, Herries, Digby, Talbot, Wildrake, Levison, and a number of other Fourth-Formers.

"We've all had our studies burgled!" said Clifton Dane.

"It's the most amazing thing I've ever heard of!"

"I say, you fellows, I'm going to call in Fenners Locke!" piped Baggy Trimble. "My valuable diamond tiepin is missing, and a ten-pound note—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A roar of incredulous laughter greeted Baggy Trimble's statements.

"It's nothing to laugh at, I tell you!" hooted Baggy furiously. "My tiepin is worth at least a hundred pounds, and a five's a five!"

"I thought that five was a tenner; at least, you said so just now, Baggy!" smiled Cardew. "And you needn't brag about your diamond tiepin, we all know the history of that. Young Joe Frayne of the Third gave it to you in exchange for an old penknife you picked up in the village!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I tell you," howled Baggy; but his voice was lost in the din of many voices.

"Not so much row, chaps!" exclaimed Tom Merry, holding up his hand. "We don't want the masters or prefects up here. Our studies haven't been actually burgled. Grammarian cads did it during the night!"

"Bai Jove!"

D'Arcy meant to say that Gordon Gay & Co. had the awful nerve to break here during the night and raid all our studies!" demanded Jack Blake.

"The rotters have nerve enough for anything," replied Tom Merry shortly. "Look at that, you fellows!"

And he handed to Blake the letter which Gordon Gay had left.

Blake read it out aloud, and yells of astonishment and anger arose.

"Greatest Scott!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, adjusting his monocle and looking hard at the letter. "Weally, this is the limit! We simply can't do as they ask, dear boys. It's utterly impossible for us to go to the Grammar School wavin' white flags and askin' humbly for our things! That would be infwa dig. Bai Jove! Somethin's got to be done!"

"Hear, hear!" howled Blake. "We're not going to take this lying down! We can't eat humble pie! Tom Merry, it's up to you, as captain of the Lower School, to think out some dodge of getting our things back!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"That's the idea!" said George Gore, whose treasured album of foreign stamps was missing. "It's up to you, Tom Merry. Gordon Gay & Co. have got our things, and we rely on you to get 'em back—without having to bow and scrape to those rotten Grammarians, either!"

"If he doesn't, we won't have him for a captain any more!" yelled Baggy Trimble. "We want a captain to stick up for us, and—Yow-ow-ow-ow! Leggo my ear, Tom Merry, you beast!"

"I'd pull it off for two pence, you fat worm!" exclaimed Tom Merry, tweaking Trimble's ear. "Not so much jaw! I'll do my best to do Gordon Gay in the eye. Don't let this get to the ears of the masters or prefects. We can settle this thing without them chipping in. I'll think of a way!"

The Terrible Three walked back into Study No. 10, and the excited crowd in the Shell passage dispersed.

Tom Merry stood looking out of the window moodily, his hands thrust deep into trouser-pockets. There was a frown on his face as he turned to his chums.

"I'm worrying mostly about old Caleb Taggart's box," he said. "I must get that back, anyhow. The best thing to do,

I think, is to ask the Head's permission to ring up Gordon Gay, and ask him about it."

"The Head will want to know the ins and outs of the matter, then," said Manners. "It isn't usual, you know, for juniors to use the 'phone."

"Then I'll ask Kildare if I may use the 'phone in the principals' room," said Tom.

Eric Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, gave Tom permission without asking awkward questions.

Tom Merry returned to his chums, smiling.

"It's all serene," he said. "Gordon Gay has the box, and I'm to go and meet him in the lane. He'll look after it. Gay's a chump, but he's an honourable chap!"

"Right you are!" said Manners. "We'll come with you to meet Gordon Gay, if you like, Tommy."

"Right-ho!"

The Terrible Three set off down the lane, and found Gordon Gay waiting for them at the stile.

"Hallo, you ass!" said Tom Merry. "Have you got the box?"

Gordon Gay shook his head.

"No. I can't find it!"

"Wha-a-at!"

"It's gone!" replied the Grammarian leader seriously. "I searched amongst the maided things, but the box was nowhere to be seen. Blessed if I can imagine where it's got to. We couldn't have dropped it out of the bag. It's been stolen!"

Tom Merry looked at Gordon Gay in amazement and dismay.

"Who could have taken it?" he asked.

"Ask me another!" said Gordon Gay. "We've hunted high and low, all over the school for it. The only fellow we thought might have taken it swears he knows nothing about the box. We've searched all his things, and really, it doesn't seem that he was lying."

"Which fellow is that?" asked Tom Merry quickly.

"Gilette of our Form. He was out last night, and met Seth Gibbons in the quadrangle."

He then proceeded to tell Tom Merry & Co. of the amazing episode at the Grammar School in the chap of the previous night.

The Terrible Three listened with rapt attention.

"There's really nothing we can put up against Gilette," said Gordon Gay, in conclusion.

"We all know what a sneak and a liar he is, of course; but his yarn seems straight-forward enough. He was breaking bounds last night when he ran up against this fellow who is after you. Gibbons made him tell where St. Jim's was, and then cleared off. How should Gilette know anything about the box?"

Tom Merry bit his lip hard.

"It—it's bewildering!" he said. "It's rotten, I know, for us to think that there's a thief in your school—"

"We thought the same," replied Gordon Gay. "I've done all I can to find out where the box is, but it seems that it's outside the school. Possibly Seth Gibbons came in again last night and took the box. Gilette might have told him of the raid."

"It's likely, but not probable," said Tom Merry. He clenched his fists so tight that his nails dug into the palms of his hands.

"It's rotten luck—dashed rotten luck!" he said bitterly. "Goodness knows how we are to get that box now!"

Gordon Gay was looking distressed.

"I'm awfully sorry, Tom Merry," he said. "Of course, I shouldn't have touched the box had I known—"

"Of course not," replied the St. Jim's junior captain. "I don't blame you, Gay. It's just a rotten stroke of luck, that's all. Look here, suppose young Gilette had taken the box; don't you think it is possible that he might have got rid of it by now?"

Gordon Gay shook his head decisively.

"He's been in the sunny all day with a cold," he replied. "The young rotter must have caught a chill through being out last night. I don't suppose he'll be out of the sunny for a day or two."

Tom Merry brightened considerably.

"Of course, I'm not haping on my belief that Gilette is the

thief," he said, "but you must admit, Gay, that he seems the only one, barring Seth Gibbons himself, that we can suspect."

"Certainly," replied Gordon Gay. "You may rely on it, you chaps, we shall keep an eye on Gilette."

The Terrible Three wended their way back to St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 7. Wound Up!

"O H, it's rotten!"

Tom Merry spoke savagely.

Monty Lowther and Manners looked gloomy, too.

"We've got the whole of the Lower School against us now!" said Manners. "They seem to think we are traitors to the cause. Something's got to be done!"

"That's it!" said Monty Lowther. "Something's got to be done! We've lost the confidence of the chaps, and it's up to us to regain it. That can only be done by regaining the stolen property!"

"What I am worrying about more than ever," said Tom Merry, "is the recovering of the box. Goodness knows what I shall say to Mr. Taggart when he comes for it!"

Tap!

There was a knock on the door, and Tom Merry called out for the visitor to enter.

It was Kit Wildrake.

"I guess I've come to have a chat," said the Canadian junior, closing the door behind him. "The other fellows are saying all sorts of unkind things about you chumming with Gordon Gay. Of course, I realised what was at the bottom of the affair. You were asking Gay about the box?"

"Yes," said Tom Merry. "He took it from my room last night—but now it's missing!"

"Gee whizz!"

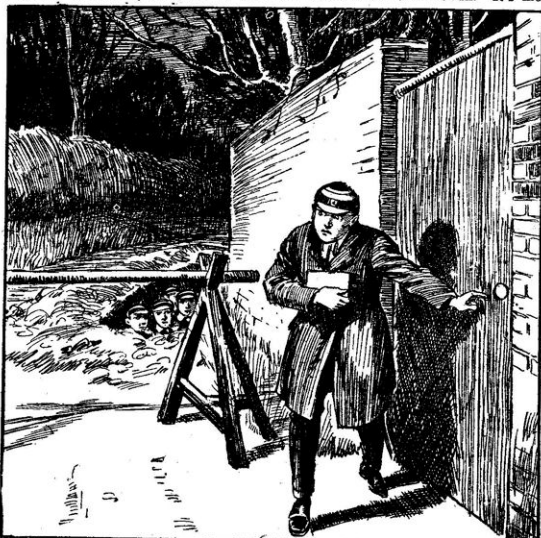
Tom Merry then explained to Kit Wildrake what Gordon Gay had told him.

The cowboy Fourth-Former whistled.

"So, you see," said Tom Merry, "we are practically at a standstill. The box is missing—and we don't know who's got it!"

"We can pretty well guess," replied Kit Wildrake quietly.

"Gilette is the fellow we must look after—take it from me! I happen to have heard a little about him; he's a fellow of the same kidney as Racke and Crooke and Mellish. It's more



The juniors crept up to the end of the trench, and saw a stealthy figure come out of the wooden gate and close it cautiously behind him. It was Percy Gilette! He was carrying something in his hand, and the juniors exchanged glances. "Come on!" muttered Kit Wildrake.

than likely that he and Seth Gibbons exchanged confidences last night, and Gibbons persuaded Gilette to get the box for him. Now, assuming that to be the case, what shall we assume next? Gilette, having the box, would have to convey it to Gibbons as soon as possible. Gilette, we can safely say, hasn't yet disposed of the box, having been in the sanny all day. In any case, it wouldn't be safe for him to meet Gibbons in daylight, for Gibbons' own safety as well as for he is being hunted by the police, remember. Naturally, then, they would meet at night. The probability is, that they'll meet this very night. Gilette could easily get out of the sanny. My advice is, that we watch the Grammar School to-night. Seth Gibbons might be there, if not Gilette."

The Terrible Three drew deep breaths. "By Jove! You're right, Wildrake!" said the captain of the Shell. "Gilette seems to be the only fellow who could possibly have the box, and he's sure to want to get rid of it at once. We'll watch the Grammar School to-night. Nothing may come of it, of course, but it's a chance worth taking."

"Yes, rather!" said Manners and Lowther. "It's settled; then?" said Wildrake. "We four will break bounds to-night. I'll be outside the box-room window at eleven."

"Right-ho!" The Terrible Three did their prep in a much more cheerful mood.

They did not speak to many of their Form-fellows when they went to bed that night.

Racke & Co. were openly sneering. Grundy was angry, and he did not fail to remind his schoolfellows of that fact.

"I reckon we shall never see our things back again, if we leave matters to Tom Merry," he said. "You chaps had better follow my leadership, and we'll put the kybosh on those Grammarian cads without the assistance of our patriotic captain, who chums with the enemy."

"Oh, rats!" said Kangaroo, glancing across at Tom Merry. "You're an ass, Grundy! Look here, Tom Merry, what are you going to do about it?"

Tom Merry looked round at the stern faces, and winced a little.

"I'll do all I can," he said quietly. "If I can possibly get those things back without knuckling under to Gordon Gay & Co., I'll do it!"

"You might do it by heaping soft-sawder on him, you know!" sneered Racke. "A handshake will often do more than a biff on the nose, you know, and— Yarooogh! Yah! Oooooogh!"

Racke broke off as a well-aimed boot, propelled from the hand of Monty Lowther, struck him forcibly in the chest and sent him reeling backwards on his bed.

Monty Lowther held up his other boot

"If you say any more, Racke, you'll get a biff on the nose with this!" he said. "We've had enough jaw from all of you, and are fed up with it! Shurrup, and don't be so suspicious of your old uncles!"

Racke gasped, and rubbed his chest, but he did not make any further sarcastic observations.

Kildare saw lights out in the Shell dormitory, and, after the usual few minutes of conversation, the dormitory was soon wrapped in gloom and silence.

A quarter to eleven boomed from the school clock tower, and the Terrible Three sat up.

"Anybody awake?" asked Tom Merry softly.

There was no reply.

The Terrible Three arose, dressed quickly, slung their boots over their shoulders, and crept from the dormitory.

All was dark and silent in the deserted corridors. They reached the box-room without mishap, and clambered through the window.

Kit Wildrake was awaiting them below.

"All serene?" he asked.

"Quite!" whispered Tom Merry. "We shall have to buck up. I see you've brought your lasso, Wildrake."

"Rather!" responded the Canadian junior. "It's a jolly useful little article, you know—and it may come in handy at any time!"

They traversed the dimly moonlit quadrangle, and clambered over the school wall from the large oak tree by the Cloisters.

It did not take them long to reach Rylcombe Grammar School.

Outside, the road was still up. A long, deep trench had been dug, extending along the lane where the school wall bordered it.

"This trench is just the thing!" said Tom Merry. "If we station ourselves in it a little distance apart, we shall be able to keep watch on the whole length of the school wall."

"That's a topping idea!"

The four St. Jim's juniors crept under the wooden poles, and hid in the road excavation. There was a distance of about a hundred yards separating each of them. Tom Merry spoke to the watchman, and explained to him that they were waiting for the previous night's burglar, and he promised to keep his eye open, too, for anybody entering or leaving the Grammar School.

They lay in their places of concealment, and waited.

Darl and gloomy, the massive pile of Rylcombe Grammar School looked in the deep, black shadows of the night, amongst the gaunt trees.

A cold wind was blowing, clouds were racing across the night sky, shutting out the moon now and then, and the wind struck the juniors with a chill.

What if Seth Gibbons had come earlier, and was already making his way out of the district with the box? What if Percy Gilette had made other arrangements to get the box into the rascal's hands?

Tom Merry felt a vague uneasiness creep over him at the thought, but he managed to shake it off. It was improbable that Gilette would have been able to leave the school earlier. And when he came out, he would not have any suspicion that St. Jim's fellows were on his track.

The moon emerged at last from a large bank of black clouds and shed a mystic radiance on the scene. The watchman's fire crackled, and the sound seemed alarmingly loud in the dead silence of the night.

The juniors began to shiver, in spite of their overcoats. It was a very cold night, and too cold to remain still without discomfort. How long would they have to wait? Was this night vigil to be in vain, after all?

Eleven!

Tom Merry heard the chime, and the striking of the hour.

Tom Merry & Co. shifted their positions a little, careful not to make a noise, or to cause shadows to move in the moonlight.

Another quarter of an hour, and the clock chimed again. The juniors were shuddering with cold. The earth in the excavations in which they were hiding was damp and chill.

There was no sign of either of their quarryies yet. Suddenly they all became alert.

A faint sneeze came through the darkness.

"Ah-ti-shoo!"

Tom Merry & Co. heard it distinctly, and their hearts thrilled with excitement. It could be nobody else but Percy Gilette, whom they knew was suffering with a cold.

Carefully they crept up to the end of the trench opposite the tradesmen's entrance to the school. They saw a stealthy figure come out of the wooden gate, and close it cautiously behind him.

It was a schoolboy, muffled up in a scarf and thick overcoat. Percy Gilette! He was carrying something in his hand, and the others exchanged glances.

The box!

Percy Gilette looked round him, and crept to the other side

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of the lane. He was lost to view in the blackness of a cluster of trees, but they could hear his muffled sneeze.

"Come on!" muttered Kit Wildrake. "Don't rush on him yet; wait for Seth Gibbons. We were right in our calculations. Gibbons won't be long!"

Gilette was standing still, evidently waiting for somebody. The juniors crouched in the road excavation, their eyes and ears keenly on the alert. A cold, cutting wind whistled past their ears, and caused the trees to rustle. But soon they heard another rustling in the trees behind them. It was a rustle caused by a man thrusting his way carefully through them.

The large, thick-set figure of Seth Gibbons appeared for a fleeting second in the light of the watchman's fire. Then he disappeared into the shadow of the trees where Gilette was.

They heard low, muttered sneezes.

"Quiet!" muttered Kit Wildrake, and, setting his teeth, he crept forward.

Nobody knew better than the Canadian junior how to track a foe. With lasso slung across his shoulder, he moved as the wind rustled the branches, and gradually approached the spot where Percy Gilette and Seth Gibbons were conversing in low, whispered tones.

Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther watched breathlessly. Kit Wildrake's keen eyes sought Gibbons in the pale moonlight; for a brief second the rope was twirled above his head, and then it swept forward, like a long snake in the air, coiled above Gibbons' head, and the noose dropped neatly over his head.

Wildrake pulled the noose tight, and a hoarse cry in the darkness indicated that the man was caught.

"Now, you fellows!" exclaimed the Canadian junior, keeping a firm hold on the rope, and gradually hauling it in.

The Terrible Three dashed forward, and whilst Tom Merry went to Wildrake's assistance, Manners and Lowther grasped Percy Gilette and bore him, struggling and kicking wildly, to the ground.

"Got you!" panted Lowther, sitting on the young scamp's chest. "Have you caught Gibbons, Tommy?"

"Fine!" exclaimed Tom.

He and Wildrake had tied the rest of the lasso rope about Seth Gibbons' body, pinning his hands to his sides.

"Curse you!" snarled the outwitted rascal, glaring badly at the boys in the moonlight. "It's you again, is it? Durn the lot of you!"

"Durn away, hobo!" chuckled Kit Wildrake. "Got that box, Merry?"

"Rather!" said Tom Merry, who had picked it up from the grass. "This won't leave my hands again, I reckon! Hallo! Here's the watchy, with a policeman!"

"Wot's all this?" demanded the constable, shining the light of his lantern on the scene.

"We charge this man with attempting to break into the Grammar School!" said Tom Merry. "He is already wanted. You see, he happens to be Seth Gibbons, who escaped from Wayland gaol two days ago."

"By George!"

The policeman looked pleased.

"Take him!" said Kit Wildrake. "I guess I'll call for my lasso in the morning!"

The constable hurried the scowling rascal away, leaving the four St. Jim's juniors with Percy Gilette.

The Grammarian cowered before them, sneezing and snivelling.

"Well, you worm!" Tom Merry's lip curled with contempt. "You deserve the biggest ragging that ever a rotter did have! If it wasn't so late we'd—"

"Look here, Tom Merry, I'm supposed to be in the sanatorium, and I'm c-c-cold and shivering," panted Gilette. "I admit I've played you a rotten trick, but if I do you a good turn now, will that make up for it?"

"What do you mean?" demanded Tom Merry.

"Suppose I show you where your things are, so that you can take them back to St. Jim's with you to-night?"

"My hat!"

Tom Merry drew a deep breath. He had forgotten the other missing articles, in the excitement of recovering Caleb Taggart's precious box. All that remained now to set his mind completely at rest was to recover the things that Gordon Gay & Co. had raided from St. Jim's the previous evening.

Gilette offered to show them where those things were. It was a glorious chance, worth taking. How the fellows would be surprised in the morning, if they discovered all their things back at St. Jim's, safe and sound! And how Gordon Gay & Co. would be ready to kick themselves when they found their plunder missing.

"By Jove!" said Monty Lowther, looking at his leader with shining eyes. "What do you say, Tommy?"

"All's fair in love and war, I guess!" remarked Kit Wildrake.

"I'll accept your offer, Gilette," said Tom Merry. "Mind, if you play us false, you'll have the dickens to pay. Lead us to where the stuff is, and see us safely off the premises, and we'll say nothing about the part you took in this business."

"Right ho," said Gilette. "Come with me."

Tom Merry & Co. accompanied him back into the Grammar School. Gilette showed them up to a large box-room, where, stowed away inside a number of old boxes, was the raided property.

Tom Merry & Co. took each a box, well-filled with articles, and with such things as fishing-rods and fencing-foils slung over their shoulders, they left the Grammar School, without rousing any of the sleeping inmates, and, like the Arabs in the poem, silently drifted away into the night.

They returned to St. Jim's, and, having deposited the recovered plunder in Tom Merry's study, the Terrible Three and Kit Wildrake went to their respective dormitories.

"Well, things are O.K. now, my lads!" chuckled Tom Merry, with the leather box under his pillow. "The chaps are going to have the surprise of their lives in the morning. I'll make 'em all apologise to me for the nasty things they have been saying to-day."

"Yes, rather! Good-night, Tommy!"

And the Terrible Three tucked themselves in between the sheets, and were soon sleeping the sleep of the just.

The juniors of the School House at St. Jim's had a surprise indeed next morning, when, being summoned by a notice to the Common-room, they found the Terrible Three there, surrounded by a pile of various articles.

Gasps of amazement arose when they recognised their own property, which they thought still to be in the hands of Gordon Gay & Co.

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, adjusting his monocle and beaming with delight. "This is weally wippen! Howevah did you manage it, Tom Mewwy, deah boy?"

"Ah! That's telling!" said Tom Merry, with a chuckle. "You silly jabberwocks thought I was shacking, didn't you? And called me all sorts of names. Little did you know the true facts of the matter. During the night we raided the Grammar School, and fetched away these things without the slightest trouble! Now, what have you to say for yourselves, you chumps?"

"Well, this beats it!" said Jack Blake. "We owe you an apology, you chaps!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

The Terrible Three accepted the apologies, which were freely given, and then a general distribution of possessions took place. Everybody departed satisfied.

And, later on that day, Mr. Caleb Taggart called, with his son, a handsome, strapping man, to see Tom Merry. Tom handed them the box safe and sound, and received twenty pounds as his reward—all the old man was able to afford at the time. Seth Gibbons was in prison, and the authorities took excellent care that he did not escape again. The old man and his son left St. Jim's on the best of terms with the Terrible Three, who wished them good fortune in the working of the Klondike mine.

The twenty pounds went to swell the funds of the Junior Footer Club, which was a splendid means of disposing of the reward of Tom Merry's Trust.

THE END.

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D'ARCY HAS HIS FORTUNE TOLD.

By CURLY GIBSON.

THE swell of St. Jim's was partaking of tea and buns with his chums in No. 6 Study, and the conversation led to the telling of fortunes. "Wediculous!" D'Arcy said, to Blake, leader of No. 6 Study, "I don't believe it. How on earth can one chap tell another precisely what will happen in the future? Base fool I call it!"

"But I say," remonstrated his chum. "It is perfectly true. Finish drinking your tea and then drain your cup in your saucer, and I will endeavour—"

"Blake, have reason, dear boy. I would not lower myself to such an extent."

"You crass ass!" said Blake furiously. "Why even your young minor has heard of fortune telling by teacups."

"Blow my young brother, Blake," answered D'Arcy. "It would be more pleasin' to hear that Wally knew how to keep his collars clean."

Herries and Digby grinned, but Blake scowled.

"Why the dickens don't you go somewhere and drown yourself?" he said heatedly. "You'll be telling me in a minute that you have never heard of old Koumi Rao spouting fortunes!"

"Bal Jove, Blake!" ejaculated D'Arcy. "You are wottin' y' wotter. Koumi Rao can do no such thing."

It was well known to all that the Indian junior of the New House possessed to be able to tell one's future, but of course D'Arcy believed it all to be bunkum.

Blake, seeing the chance of pulling the leg of the aristocratic swell of St. Jim's, had rushed along to Koumi Rao, and had now returned, his absence not having been detected.

The subject was dropped for a little while, when D'Arcy suddenly jumped up from the chair in which he had been seated.

"Blake, dear boy!" he murmured, looking at his half-startled comrade. "I've been thinkin' that you may be wight. I will pop round and see Koumi Rao, wight now."

"And what may I do you for?" asked the dark-complexioned youth of the elegant swell of St. Jim's. "Er—I mean, what can I do for you?"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy screwed his monocle further into his eye, and the look he gave Koumi Rao seemed to freeze that junior's very soul.

It was a full minute before he broke the painful silence.

"I say, dear boy," Gussy broke forth suddenly. "It has been brought to my notice by some of my associates that you are takin' up the noble callin' of a fortune-teller. P'way put me at my ease, and tell me if the information I have gleaned is correct?"

Koumi Rao beckoned D'Arcy to a chair. "I pray be seated, elegant youth," he implored, "and it will endeavour to explain."

Arthur Augustus accepted the proffered chair and waited intently for Koumi Rao's explanation.

"It is just like this," began the dark-skinned junior from far away India. "When I was a young boy I had an aunt who was passionately fond of me, and who took a great interest in me. She seemed gifted

with the power of looking into one's future. People marvelled at her power. People visited her from all quarters, offering her princely gifts for but a few words of advice. Well, this dear old aunt of mine explained how during a short conversation with an individual their future appeared before her eyes."

"Bal Jove!" expostulated D'Arcy. "How weally cleveh!" "Strange as it may seem," continued Koumi Rao, "it is true."

D'Arcy shifted somewhat uneasily in his chair. He wondered if the fellow he was now listening to was reading him then. He withdrew a silk handkerchief from his breast pocket and drew it across his perspiring brow.

He was relieved at last to see those searching eyes of Koumi's switch off him. Whilst he was wondering what would be the outcome of his visit to a study sheltering such a mysterious person as he, a man walked over to a large trunk that stood in the corner of the room.

D'Arcy eyed him interestedly.

Koumi Rao knelt before the large trunk, and fished a tray which he extracted from his inside pocket. The slight turn he gave was followed by a click. The catch fell back, and Koumi gently raised the lid. Arthur Augustus bent forward eagerly as he did so, anxious to see the contents of that trunk.

His gaze proved fruitless, however, for spread over the contents of the top of the trunk was a sheet of brown paper.

Koumi Rao, evidently intent on not satisfying his client's curiosity, let the brown paper covering stay as it was, but from the back he withdrew what appeared to be a bag, he unwrapped it, and placed it under his arm, he again rummaged into the box.

Gussy now began to get a little fidgety. It is true he knew Koumi Rao well, but he could not help shuddering a little. Supposing a dagger was concealed in that box, what then? Indians are funny people, he thought. He was aroused from his dream at last, when the lid of the box dropped with a bang.

Koumi had evidently found what he wanted, for in his hand he held a large-sized crystal which glittered in the gaslight of the study. This he laid on the table, drawing his chair up so that he could easily look into it.

"D'Arcy, most immaculate of youths," he said, addressing that junior. "You will oblige by drawing your chair closer to the table."

Gussy did as he was bid, a flush coming to his cheek, and then he sat motionless.

Koumi Rao, who had now perched himself in his soiled coat—a coat which would have put the celebrated coat of Joseph in the shade—gazed hard into the crystal before him.

Arthur Augustus sniffed, but it did not attract the attention of the "learned" one. "Friend D'Arcy," began the fortune-teller, "I see many things in this crystal, but before divulging what I know, I must pass between us"—he held out his hand. "What have you to offer?"

"Weally, dear boy," ejaculated D'Arcy, "this is surely not genuin'?"

"As genuin as you are yourself, my good man," returned the other. "If you have no gold to offer me, kindly refrain from wasting my time. Do you hear?"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's hand went to his jacket pocket, and he drew forth his magnificent wallet. He was just extracting a pound note, when Koumi Rao broke forth again.

"Dude of dudes," he said, "didst thou not

hear me say gold? I could not foretell thee thy secrets for fifty of those dirty rumpled looking notes."

"Bal Jove!" ejaculated D'Arcy. "Are you speaking seriously? Or do my ears deceive me?"

"Quiet!" shouted Koumi. "G-O-L-D is what I ask for, and then you shall know that Miss Bunn—"

He broke off sharply, as an eager look changed the features of his listener.

Many attentions had been given to Miss Bunn by the swell of the Fourth Form, but alas, the fair maiden paid no heed whatsoever.

D'Arcy fumbled nervously with his wallet. He could not possibly offer the occupant of No. 1 Study as goodly a sovereign, as such things were now extinct. Suddenly an inspiration flashed into his mind, and like lightning his hand went to his waistcoat pocket.

"Bal Jove!" he muttered. "The very thing!"

His fingers twitched nervously on his golden ticker as he withdrew it from his pocket.

Koumi Rao watched him, a faint smile flickering across his face.

"Well, and hast thou the price I ask?" he said. "Truly your watch is gold. Wouldst thou not part with that to know that one whom you love—"

D'Arcy was lost. He passed his watch over to Koumi Rao.

"Thank!" said the youth of wisdom. "You are quite agreeable to part with this watch as the price of knowing your future?"

"Most certainly, dear boy," answered D'Arcy.

"Well," began Koumi Rao. "You've asked for it, and you've paid for it, so the truth must be made known to you. Ahem!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's monocle dropped to the end of its cord, and its owner waited expectantly.

Koumi Rao looked hard into the crystal for a while, and then, raising his eyes, he bestowed a searching look upon D'Arcy.

The expression on the swell of St. Jim's face was too much for the Indian junior.

He broke into a loud roar of laughter.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy jumped up from his seat spellbound.

"Weally, dear boy," he gasped, "what evah is this mottah?"

"Oh, dear," roared Koumi Rao, holding his sides, and breaking into further roars of laughter. "For goodness' sake, Gussy, desist; you'll send me mad!"

Arthur Augustus could see the error of his ways at last, and his face flushed a crimson hue. He bestowed a cold glare upon his tormentor. Rising from his seat, he rolled up his cuffs in a warlike attitude and moved towards the spoofer.

"You wotter!" he roared. "P'way put up your hands and weecive the lickin' you deserve!"

There was a sudden interruption, and the door of the study was flung open. Blake, Herries, and Digby—who had been listening outside—rushed pell mell into the study, and before D'Arcy realised what was what he was grasped on all sides and whirled out of the study, and led back to his own domain by his laughing chums.

It was some time before the affair blew over, and that Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had been made such a laughing-stock was regarded as a rich joke.

Koumi Rao has since offered to give the Swell of St. Jim's a genuine statement regarding his future, but Gussy has strongly declined to accept.

(Another fine issue of the "St. Jim's News" next week. Be sure you do not miss reading this fine budget of information.)

The Queer Case of Dr. Brutell

Written By Professor Hector Gordon, Science Master of St. Jim's.

They told their curious story to the representative of law and order in the West, and he listened eagerly, in the hope that he would be able to pick up some information which would lead to the arrest of the bandit. But only the driver of the coach could give any clear idea of the man who had sprung out of the bushes and held them up at the point of the revolver.

The rest of them had been too surprised and scared to pay much attention to the personal appearance of the villain. All agreed, however, that he wore a beard!

While the interview was in progress it was reported that the abandoned stage-coach had been discovered, almost at the very door, as it were, of the sheriff's office.

When Brutell had dropped off the vehicle the motionless driver had still kept on, but, being thoroughly exhausted, and without the demented driver to goad them on, they soon pulled up.

On hearing this news the sheriff decided to go out at once, and inspect the coach.

"Why, th' bandit ain't touched a thing!" he exclaimed, after a careful inspection. "All the mail and registered packages are here!"

No one was more surprised to hear the news than the driver, for he fully believed that robber was the bandit's motive. The mysterious affair puzzled a great many others, too.

What reason could a man have in waylaying the coach and driving it off unless it was his intention to make away with the valuables? they asked one another.

Another curious point connected with the affair was the finding of the coach so near to Loneville. The bandit must either be in hiding in the country surrounding the ranch-town or else actually in the district. It did not seem as though the latter could be the case, for the bandit would surely be afraid of discovery. Somebody would be almost sure to recognise him.

Much interest was shown in the mystery by the residents, and many of them declared their willingness to assist the sheriff in hunting him down. Among these volunteers was Dr. Brutell himself. He was a pioneer of the West, and the novelty of a bandit-hunt appealed to him very much.

The place where he and Robert Stanton lived was quite civilized, compared with this mountain-district. Brutell lost no time in calling on the sheriff and offering him his services. When the doctor entered the office the driver of the coach was still there, and he drew back suddenly when he caught sight of the newcomer.

For a moment he was taken by surprise, but he quickly recovered his composure, and he was glad to be asked to reveal his suspicions. When an opportunity arose, however, he walked over towards one of the men who had been a passenger on the coach, and had just been giving him notice to shoo him away.

"The robber looked like the man 'ere with the beard!" the driver remarked briefly; then he waited for the other's reply.

"I've never glanced over to where Brutell was sitting. When he turned towards the driver again there was an amused smile on his countenance.

"That ain't the face!" he replied. "This man's got an angel's face compared with that there bandit wot held us up! I never want to see another face like that one. Besides, I remember now the bandit had a deep scar across his right cheek-bone!"

The driver also recalled this fact.

"Yes, you're right about the face," he returned, somewhat grudgingly; "but I could swear the clothes are the same. Who is that man?"

But Brutell was also a complete stranger to the other, and the question was not answered.

It was evident, however, that the driver of the stage-coach still had considerable doubt in his mind; he was by no means satisfied that his suspicions were not justified. All that

day, in spite of repeated efforts, the mystery of the hold-up still remained unsolved.

The Doctor's Magic!

Dr. Brutell's normal nature continued to remain with him. Madeleine had arranged to give a dinner in the comfortable ranch-house that night, as a sort of house-warming, and Dr. Brutell had promised to perform some of his scientific feats at the end of the meal.

One or two other of the guests had also arranged to assist in the programme of entertainments. The Chinese cook, who had a great reputation as a master of Oriental magic, was first called upon to show his abilities, and he performed a number of clever conjuring and balalaika feats which highly amused the little audience. But the star turn of the evening was undoubtedly Dr. Brutell.

A number of those present had heard something of the inventions of this remarkable man, and they looked forward to his "show" with the greatest of interest. The scientist started with an exhibition of the power of his double X-ray, and the spectators were truly amazed at the many cleverness.

One of his most effective little tricks was to cause an orange to float through the air, and direct it to go in whatever direction he desired. The climax to this came when Brutell caused the orange to disappear before the very eyes of the onlookers, and reappear some moments later. But there were more surprises in store for the little party, which was mainly composed of the head-men belonging to the ranch.

Never before had these rough-and-ready cowboys seen such marvellous tricks. But, of course, the Chinese had something far more than mere conjuring tricks, for Dr. Brutell had as his assistant one of the most powerful aids known to science.

The doctor made little use of his exhibition of hypnotism, and, first of all, he placed the obliging Chinese cook under a hypnotic spell. When the cook was perfectly rigid Brutell placed him upon the floor, and prepared to do what is known as the levitation trick.

This is a performance well known to most conjurers, and whereas the majority of these gentlemen would be the first to admit that it was really nothing more than an illusion, there is not the slightest doubt that Brutell actually performed what he claimed.

The doctor made few more passes over the motionless body of the Chinese cook, and a few seconds later the hypnotized form commenced to rise slowly in the air, and float. Brutell allowed the body of the Chinaman to remain in the air for a short time, so that all those present could satisfy themselves that there was no trickery. Then he lowered the body once again, and brought the yellow man out of his hypnotic state.

When the performance was over the spectators looked at one another in amazement. Brutell, however, who had held them spellbound. One of the men ventured to ask for an explanation.

"It is quite simple," replied Brutell. "As you know, my ordinary X-ray makes the body transparent, so that it is possible to see right through it. Now, under my coat here I have a battery of my double X-ray. This has the power of rendering things not only transparent, but also lighter than air. That is the solution of the remarkable things you have seen here this evening. You can all understand that this would be a very dangerous thing in the hands of an evildoer, for it would give him power to do all sorts of terrible things!"

This possibility caused a shudder to run through the audience, but a member of the audience, but they did not know how useful the double X-ray had already proved to Dr. Brutell, as the evil spells held away over him! When the little party were up for the evening, everyone left with a great feeling of admiration for the clever doctor who had given them such a pleasant evening.

(To be continued next week.)

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 718.



(Continued from last week.)

THE passengers stared with amazement at the driver, who did not seem to be aware of the great danger which lay in front of him, and they rapidly came to the conclusion that the man who had so outrageously held them up was a raving madman. In this conclusion they were not far wrong, for Brutell's success had affected his mind, and he was now in a more dangerous mood than ever.

It seemed that nothing but a miracle would prevent Dr. Brutell and the coach drawn by the frenzied animals from falling headlong over the precipice. He was lashing wildly all the time at the maddest animals, who were quite unused to their driver, and he was also yelling at them in a delirious and deafening manner.

Nevertheless, by an almost superhuman effort the mad driver managed to make them turn the bend in the road before it was too late. The horses now had lost all control of themselves, and the doctor was powerless to get them to answer to the reins. The runaway first careered along at break-neck speed, taking the course that was suited to them. By now the road had been left far behind, and the stage-coach was speeding along over the flat, open country.

It soon became apparent to Brutell that they were fast approaching the direction of Mr. Stanton's ranch-house, and the scientist was too intoxicated with excitement to realize that he was also approaching the danger-zone. For soon, no doubt, some of the ranch cowboys would be awakened by the unaccountable noise, and his capture would be a matter of very few moments.

The horses were rapidly becoming exhausted by their tremendous exertions, and their pace was slackening down considerably. Brutell was aware of this, and he decided that it would be a wise move for him to cut the horses loose and abandon the coach.

He dropped down from his seat, but the coach was still travelling at a fair pace, and the result was that the doctor hit the ground with a force sufficient to render him unconscious. The horses, now without any control whatever, continued on their mad career.

An Unsolved Mystery.

DR. BRUTELL remained unconscious for some time after he abandoned the stage-coach. When at last his senses returned to him once more his evil self had entirely vanished. The strange malady of which the learned doctor and scientist was a victim had left him completely, and he was now without the slightest knowledge of his recent mad escapade, when, disguised as a cowboy bandit, he had waylaid and captured the stage-coach.

The doctor felt considerably dazed when he rose to his feet, and made his way towards the ranch-house. He concluded that an attack of faintness must have seized him, for, try as he would, he could not recall the events of the past. It was now his desire to get to his rooms at the earliest possible moment, for he felt exceedingly tired and worn out.

The next morning there was a considerable excitement amongst the inhabitants of the little ranch-town, when the news of the holding up of the stage-coach became known. The occupants of the coach made their way straight to the sheriff after they had been so unceremoniously turned out of the vehicle the night before.

THE VALLEY OF SURPRISE

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By REID WHITLEY.

THE OPENING CHAPTERS.

Hobby Tarrant and Tony Matthers, with Billy Kettle, a trusted negro servant, are on an expedition in the Andes. A volcanic eruption, causing a tremendous tidal wave, carries them to the Valley of Surprise. The party explore the valley, and meet many weird and wonderful animals, and experience many adventurous times. Reaching a village, they are confronted by a race of strange, primitive men, who show great hospitality and make friends.

"We will come and see you often, Lalo," said Tony Matthers to their leader.

Billy Surprises Maxia.

BUT Lalo still wished to detain them as long as he could. He called out something at which the people shouted, and Lalo nodded vigorously.

"They're going to make a dance," said Billy. "Ain't much room for dancing here." But very quickly they saw that the "dance" of the Afriki had nothing to do with heel and toe exercise. Many stout liana ropes hung in festoons from the upper branches of the trees. The men went aloft with the agility of monkeys, and loosed these, each taking one.

Then the medicine-man gave a signal, and at once the whole male population swung into the air, tumbling and twisting on their ropes in most amazing fashion. Lalo particularly distinguished himself, but his best efforts were surpassed when Maxia took the air.

He was no mean gymnast, and leapt fearlessly from rope to rope in fine style, while his tribesmen looked on admiringly. Billy watched him for a minute, then he began to fidget.

"Dat dere fellow ain't so bad; but lordy! dis here chile could show him some stunts. I reckons I just got to do it, Marse Tony. That fellow wants taking down a peg, he does. I sees two ropes, and dere is a good bit o' pole. Reckon I'll just rig a trapeze and show 'em!"

"You're sure you can do better, go ahead," said Tony. "But be careful!"

"Sure I can do better than that there copper skin!" snorted Billy indignantly, and as the medicine-man concluded his display, rose and began his preparations.

The "dance" came to an abrupt end. Lalo hastened to help Billy, while Maxia stood aloof. Even when he understood what the black god person was about to attempt, he still smiled with certainty of his own superiority. Not till Billy and Lalo had rigged the flying trapeze, and the darkey prepared to begin his performance, did a shade of uneasiness cross Maxia's face.

Billy had discarded his coat and shirt and boots. Clad only in trousers very much the worse for wear, he faced his audience, grinning broadly. In imagination he was once more below the "big top" in some country town of the States.

"Ladies and gemmen, this here is my cele-

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 718.

brated flyin' act, as performed before all de crown heads of Yurupp. You keep your eyes skinned, and you'll sure see something you never see before."

With that he swung off, and the performance began. In a circus tent, with all the regular apparatus, and skilled men to play up and assist, it would have been excellent. There, in the heart of the wild, with a makeshift trapeze, and none but himself to rely upon, it was stupendous.

To and fro he swung, doing cartwheels, the long arm swinging hanging head downwards by the knees, then by the toes, over a hundred feet of empty air while his friends' hearts were in their mouths, and the savages gasped.

There was only one who did not enjoy that wonderful exhibition of strength and skill. Maxia stood apart, biting his lips. As they afterwards discovered, he owed his position as medicine-man and virtual boss of the tribe in everything but hunting, to his skill on the ropes.

Now his nose was out of joint with a vengeance, and black hate gleamed in his eyes as they followed the movements of the nigger. Tony saw the venomous glances.

"We'll have to look out for that fellow," he said. "He'll do us an ill-turn if he gets half a chance. He would kill Billy now, if he dared. I almost wish we had not come here."

"Don't worry. Lalo is our friend, at all events, and if the people seem jolly well pleased," jolly well pleased, Hobby.

They were. Maxia wasn't popular. He was very greedy, and used his position to oppress the folks. If he coveted anything he took it. If the owner grumbled he received warning in the shape of a stick, curiously carved and painted, which was set by his door at night.

If he were wise he took the stick to Maxia with a present. If he went on grumbling the day would soon come when he curled up and died in agony, for Maxia knew many deadly poisons.

"No wonder then that the folks yelled their delight as Billy twirled and capered,

and finally concluded with a magnificent double somersault through the air, which landed him on the platform at his friends' feet.

"Dat's de dance to give 'em!" he exclaimed proudly. "Reckon dat showed 'em what can be did!"

"You did splendidly!" said Tony. "But we must go now. Tell them we will come to see them again in a day or two."

Once more the bridge was put in position. They crossed amidst a chorus of adoring praise, and, stepping round the corner of the tree path, were at once out of sight of the village.

The Ambush.

THE return journey was, of course, very much easier than the outward trip. for the way was clear.

"We needn't hurry," said Hobby, after they had gone about half-way. "There's plenty of light, and we won't want to eat much more to-day. I would like to examine those flowers. They are very gorgeous."

Tony shook his head. Then he held up a finger warningly. Somewhere not far off

(Continued on page 17.)



Hobby uttered an exclamation of dismay as he threw up a pointing finger. There, silhouetted against the stars, moving along a branch that bent beneath its weight, was an immense jaguar. Even as they looked they saw the great animal draw itself together for the plunge that would send the king of the forest hurtling towards them!

there was a sudden flutter of wings, and several small birds fled through the dense foliage overhead.

"I thought so," whispered Tony. "I fancied that someone was following us. Now I'm sure. It may be the Ark, who are curious to see where we live, or it may be some of the red Mangas. Anyway, be ready."

They sped on as fast as the path allowed, sometimes along huge branches that gave a secure footing, sometimes over closely inter-twined vines and matted fern stems that sagged beneath their weight. Occasionally they had glimpses of the ground, far beneath, through gaps over which they swung themselves by liana ropes; but mostly they travelled through glades that gave little indication of being in mid-air.

For a while they heard nothing more of their stealthy followers, and were close to the camp when Tony halted and pointed to a bundle of liana cables a short distance ahead. They were swinging slowly to and fro. Something had disturbed them only a few moments before.

"The beggars are in front of us," he said. "They have cut us off. I guess they must be the Mangas, and I think they're in that thick patch of fern. See, the tops of the fronds are shaking. Let us wait a minute."

They remained perfectly still, fingers on triggers. A minute passed—two minutes. Then came the sound of hoarse whispering from the thicket—the same sound as that which Tony had heard on the previous night. The Mangas' ambush having failed, they were uncertain what to do. They were talking the situation over, quite unmindful that they were overheard, which did not argue well for their intelligence.

The debate was abruptly concluded by a harsh grunt, which rose to a roar. The thicket opened, and out leapt a Manga. He was nearly as broad as he was long, very powerful, and clad only in his suit of red hair. In one hand he carried a heavy club, in the other a big stone.

With a terrible howl of defiance he whirled the stone at Tony's head and charged, followed by some half-score of his fellows. Tony ducked, the stone flew overhead, to

thud to the ground harmlessly. And then the guns and Billy's big pistol spoke together. Over went the big leader, clutched at a dangling vine, and hung for a moment before he whirled to earth, lifeless. Another, shot through the body, collapsed in a heap. Two others, who had received the full benefit of Hobby's loads of shot, howled terribly, sprang at the boughs overhead, and went crashing away through the leaves and upper branches with the remainder of the gang close behind them.

Never was rout more sudden and complete. The ages had met, and the Mangas, who represented the first rough sketch of humanity as it had been scores of centuries before, had fled in panic before the weapons of civilisation.

As the noise of the flight died away in the distance the three moved forward cautiously towards the motionless figure crouched in the path, but there was no need for caution. The bullet had done its work. The creature was dead as the proverbial door-nail.

Hobby examined it curiously, pointing to the big canine teeth—the enormously developed muscles of the arms.

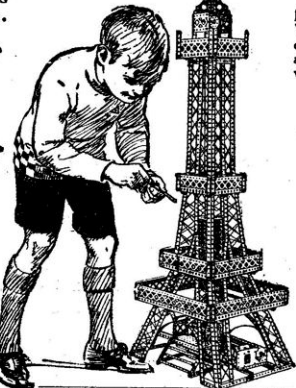
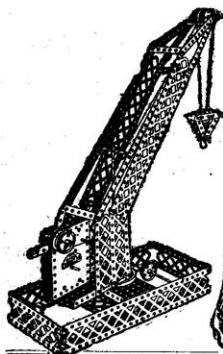
"He's not quite an ape," he said, "and he (Continued on next page.)"

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can scarcely be called cousin. "At the best, he's a sort of distant cousin," put in Billy indignantly. "My folks is all from old Jamaica, sah, and please don't you go calling 'em no names, sah. Dere ain't not one red head in de lot, sah."

"I was only speaking generally, Billy," remonstrated Hobby.

"Den dere ain't no generals in my family, neah, sah!" protested Billy, not altogether appeased. "But my brudder, him sergeant in de West Indian Regiment."

"If he's half as good a sergeant as you are on the trapeze, he deserves to be a general, anyhow," said Tony, with a laugh.

"But we can't leave this fellow here. There's a hole where his brother went through. Catch hold! One, two—"

And with the word "three" the Manga went hurtling below.

An echo of howling in the undergrowth told that he and his leader would not remain long unattended. But now the sun was declining, and Tony was anxious to be safe in camp before darkness came. They could not afford to take any chances in that home of unexpected dangers.

Swiftly they traversed the remaining distance. Billy threw a rope over a projecting branch of their home tree, which he had trimmed for that very purpose, and one by one they swung themselves across the gap.

Nothing had been disturbed; the fire, which had been heaped with slow-burning wood, still smouldered, while a small green parakeet, which had made itself comfortable under the leaf roof, greeted them with a drowsy, crooning noise, but made no effort to escape.

"Don't disturb it!" said Hobby. "Perhaps, if we leave it alone, it will get tame. Then we can teach it to talk."

"Old son, I hope we'll get out of this death-trap long before that," remarked Tony, dropping to a seat. "You don't seem very eager to be gone."

"There are so many new things, and they're all so interesting," murmured Hobby apologetically. "Of course, I want to get back to the world, but I'd like to see all that's to be seen. I've collected a specimen or two. Otherwise, people will never believe us."

"We'll have to take jolly good care the specimens don't collect us!" laughed Tony. "But, seriously, we'll have to collect a specimen to escape as soon as possible. Our clothes won't last for ever. Neither will our ammunition. We can't live eternally on fish."

"Ain't no need to, Marso Tony!" came the voice of Billy from above, looking at the look of dem suares. See here! He dropped to the camp floor and held up seven large, plump pigeons. "Dere will be more to-morrow. Plenty pigeon—plenty big parrot. Parrot-pigeon mighty good, sah!"

"No. No parrots—at least, not yet!" replied Tony hastily.

"You've broken the tradition of eating a bird that could talk seemed almost like cannibalism. Pigeons, however, were quite another matter. Hobby caressed one of the birds lovingly.

"D'rorro, sah. I beg to ask you, at sight of these?" he said. "How would it be if we tried two or three for supper?"

"You're a pig!" answered Tony frankly. "You've been enough for two already. We'll have these for breakfast. Shall I keep the first watch?"

"Me, sah!" begged Billy. "I won't go to sleep, sah, no fear! I rouse you up if de reds come back, for sure."

Certain that Billy would not fail, a second time, Hobby and Tony fell asleep, in spite of the racket of the crows below, which made the night hideous.

Billy sat still at the edge of the platform, occasionally adding a bit of wood to the fire, and keeping his feet open for any noises that might spell danger.

On the whole the darkey was quite happy. He had enough to eat and no work to do. He had been able to show off his accomplishments to a good audience, and his perch seemed safe enough.

"Dis here a heap better than when I work along at Kingston," he thought. "Mighty hard dat was, juggling dem darkeys and ward dat ship. Yessah! Dere's some mighty nasty beesas along here, but dey can't get us, glory be!"

His meditations were cut short by a distant sound that made the skin creep along his spine. It was a long, mournful wail like the cry of a young child, only about ten times louder and more penetrating. It did not rise from the ground, but pealed among the tangled upper ways.

Billy had spent some time in Central and South America. He had heard that sound before, though never in such a terrific manner.

"Ough! It's one of dem nasty jaguars!" he exclaimed. "De beast is up along here, same as us. Mebbe it's coming dis way."

He half-turned to rouse the sleeping aids, but forbore. Time counts, he told himself. If the danger drew near. Perhaps the prowling brute might pass on without scenting them. Anyhow, it seemed improbable that it could get at them. No jaguar he had

ever seen could jump the gap that separated the camp from the nearest tree.

With ears alert for the faintest sound amongst the branches, he waited, hoping to hear another cry which would tell him that the brute had gone onwards. But none came. Billy grew alarmed. He knew well what the silence portended. Either the jaguar had scented them or seen the fire. It was creeping along nearer, making up its mind to attack perhaps.

"Marso Tony! Marso Hobby!" he whispered, and shook the nearest leg. "Wake up, gemmen! Dere's a blinking great jaguar close to us! I dunno where, but he ain't far."

Tony roused to the touch in time to catch the words. Hobby grunted, and spoke sleepily.

"I don't mind if I do have another," he murmured. "I do happen to be a bit peckish!"

"Rouse up, old boy!" hissed Tony in his ear. "Jaguar! It's a bit peckish, too. If it lands among us—"

Hobby shook himself broad awake, and grabbed his gun.

They waited, watching the dark openings in the foliage opposite. For a while they neither saw nor heard anything. Indeed, Tony had begun to wonder whether Billy had not been mistaken, when, silently but balefully, two large green eyes shone for an instant like twin moons, only to disappear as soon as they were glimpsed.

"Jinny! What a whooper!" breathed Hobby, while Billy grunted in his throat.

"He can say so, do it, reckon," muttered the darkey. "Him a big 'un!"

Again there was an interval, during which they saw nothing. Then Hobby's eyes chanced to turn upwards. He uttered an exclamation of dismay as he threw up a pointing finger. There, silhouetted against the stars, moving along a branch that tent beneath its weight, was the immense brute whose eyes they had seen.

It was bent on visiting them, and the better to do it, was getting as high as possible before it leaped. Even as they sighted it, they saw it draw itself together for the plunge that would send it hurtling across the gap, to fall like a thunderbolt of rending claws and teeth—saw the luminous eyes now toward them, and saw the tail that rolled far away across the tree-tops to proclaim that the king of the aerial forest was about to make his kill.

(Another splendid instalment next week.)

EDITORIAL

My Dear Chums,—

Another splendid story of the most popular characters at St. Jim's will appear next week, one which I think you will all admit is amongst the finest yarns the "Gem" has ever given. But to beat the tale in this week's issue will want doing. The "Gem" stories are noted for dramatic surprises, and the discovery made by Tom Merry on the railway as he is cycling back to St. Jim's leads up to some amazing incidents. As might be expected, Tom Merry plays a very fine part in the yarn this week. For his peace of mind, as for others, the raid by the Grammarians on Tom Merry's study was just about the most unfortunate thing in the world. "T. M." figures splendidly throughout, as you can judge for yourselves.

Please remember that this year's "Gem" Christmas Number will be something extra special—all the usual attractions and heaps of additional ones. Of course, we shall have a further instalment of the wonderful adventures experienced by the explorers in the "Valley

of Surprise," while the school tale is really grand.

I receive quite a number of requests asking for an enlargement of the "St. Jim's News," and I hope soon to be able to do this.

The "St. Jim's News" has more than made its mark. It rings up the curtain on the inner history of St. Jim's, and deals with quaint and interesting facts for which there is no room in the stories. The supplement furnishes a want which I know you felt. Readers wish to know something more concerning the favourite characters—and they are all in that class at St. Jim's, or pretty nearly. It stands to reason the author is unable to refer to all particulars as he is working out his plot, but there is very good reason why the missing details should be supplied in a supplement.

The "St. Jim's News" touches on a myriad things which "Gem" supporters want to know. Some of my chums ask for complete lists of all the relations of the members of each Form. That is, naturally, beyond me, but the bright little supplement will do its best, depend on it.

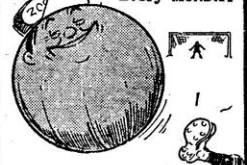
I have to thank all my readers from overseas as well as those at home, for their cheery letters. There are congratulations from China, Canada, India, Japan, and the vast Dominion of Aus-

tralia. The "Gem" finds its way to the most distant corners of the world, and is as welcome there as it is here in the old land.

YOUR EDITOR.

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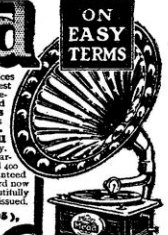
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