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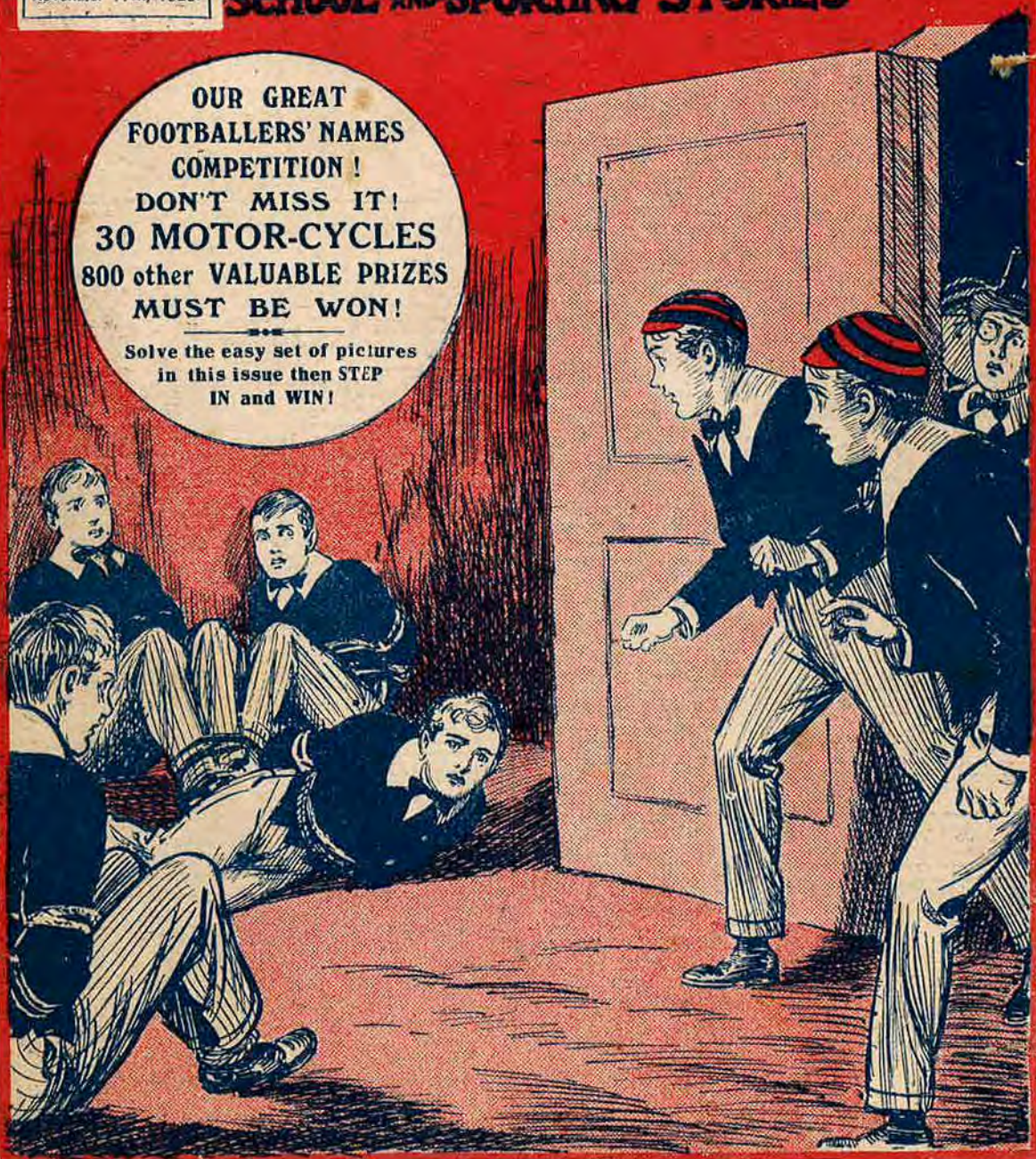
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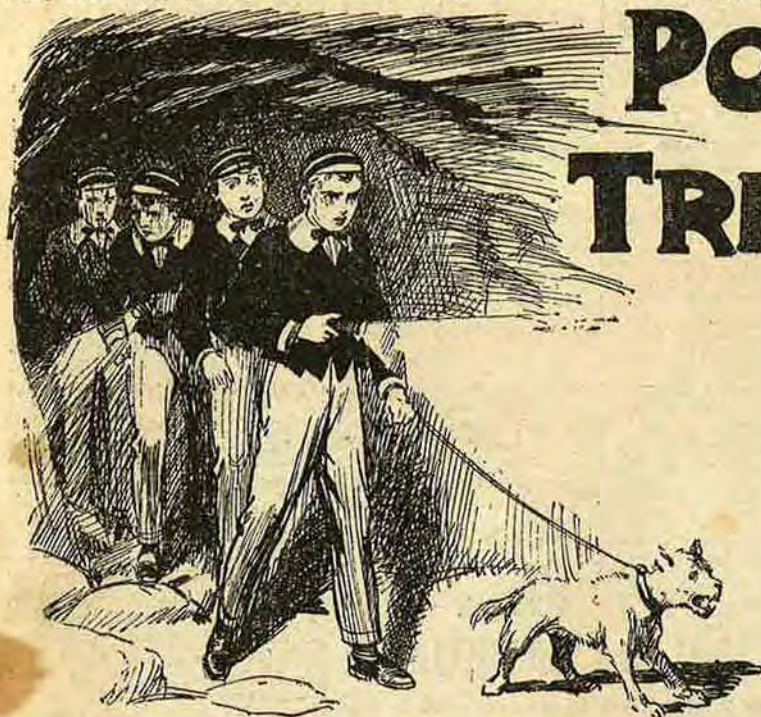


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CHAPTER 1.

Lord Conway, a Spectator!

"BUCK up, you fellows!" panted Tom Merry, his usually cheery face looking anxious. "Game's nearly up, and we can't afford to let these New House bounders lick us!"

"Bai Jove, wathah not!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, a trifle breathlessly. "We weally must buck up, you know, deah boys."

Talbot of the Shell flung a swift glance at the white face of the St. Jim's School clock that just showed through the naked branches of the trees fringing the footer ground, and groaned.

"Three minutes for time!" he gasped. "We'll never do it, you chaps! Old Fatty Wynn's like a blessed ball of indiarubber between the sticks. We're done!"

"No, we're not!" snapped Tom Merry, setting his teeth. "Plenty of time for another goal in three minutes. If we can only equalise old Figgy can't—Hullo!"

The referee's whistle cut short Tom's remarks, and there was a rush of School House players as the ball came swinging up the field. The long-legged Figgins neatly trapped the dropping ball, and next moment his feet were flashing towards the School House citadel. From round the field came a roar:

"Go it, Figgins! Oh, good man!"

"After him, you School House cripples!"

"Oh, good for you, Gussy! Gussy's got it! Bravo!"

Arthur Augustus had got it—there was no doubt about that.

The nimble-footed Swell of the Fourth, moving like greased lightning, had nipped in and robbed Figgins of the leather with a pretty bit of footwork that brought a roar of applause from both New House and School House.

But he did not keep it long. Suddenly steadying himself, the Swell of the Fourth turned swiftly and swung the ball out to Talbot on the left wing. Talbot took the ball in his stride and flashed down the wing like a hare, with the ball like a living thing at his toes.

Then, like one man, the School House front line swung into action. With bewildering rapidity the leather was swung from man to man amid a perfect hurricane of shouts. Like a knife through cheese Tom Merry and his men went through the New House defence, and then Tom shot for goal.

But alas, for the School House hopes! For even as he shot Tom's foot slipped on the ground, sodden with recent rain, and Fatty Wynn's fat face beamed into a wide grin as he watched the ball whiz past him yards away.

It was hard luck, and as the School House players lined up their faces were grim. Dozens of eyes were furtively

watching the clock in the old tower. Only a minute left, and New House were leading two to one! All the players looked pretty well exhausted now, for it had been a gruelling game—as House matches usually were. It seemed hopeless now for School House to equalise.

But Tom Merry & Co. had not shot their bolt yet, as they soon proved.

Two seconds from the goal-kick Blake captured the ball from Redfern. He whanged it at once out to Lowther, and a second later Tom Merry had it, and once again the School House front line was sweeping down like a well-oiled machine.

Into the next few thrilling moments was packed enough excitement for a whole game. Again and again the School House forward line bombarded the New House citadel with an energy and fury born of desperation.

Then came a groan from the School House supporters as Kerr trapped the ball, and, not having time to nurse it, sent it whizzing across to Figgins. Figgy kicked to clear, but even as he did so Tom Merry gave a terrific jump, stopped the speeding leather with his curly head, and almost in the same movement Tom sent the spinning sphere right to D'Arcy's foot.

And Arthur Augustus was not found wanting.

His foot shot out like lightning, and the ball went for goal like a shot from a cannon.

The breathless onlookers had a brief vision of Fatty Wynn stretched like a great fat spider across the goal-mouth, and then they saw the rigging shaking behind him.

"Goal!"

It was, though it had come so swiftly that the spectators hardly realised it for a moment. But when they did a great roar of applause went up—a roar that almost drowned the shrill sheep of the whistle announcing time.

The game had ended in a draw after all, and Tom Merry & Co. were looking more than satisfied as they trooped off the ground, muddy and exhausted, but happy.

"Good old Gussy!" panted Blake, dropping a hand affectionately on the muddy shoulder of Arthur Augustus. "You saved our bacon that time, old nut!"

"True, O King!" grinned Lowther. "How did you do it, Adolphus?"

"I weally don't know myself, bai Jove!" admitted D'Arcy modestly. "I just caught a glimpse of the ball at my feet, and I lashed out at it quick as thought, don't you know. It was—"

Arthur Augustus broke off with a gasp. At that moment Wally D'Arcy of the Third came up with a rush and a whoop and clapped his major on the back with no little vigour.

"Good old Gus!" he yelled. "Bravo!"

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"Ow! You young wuffian!"
 "Saved the side!" yelled Wally enthusiastically. "Saved the School House a jolly old licking! Blessed if I know how you did it, Gus!"

Arthur Augustus beamed.

"Weally, Wally, deah boy—"

"Of course," added Wally, grinning, "everyone knows it was a howling fluke—the most howling fluke that ever howled! I bet you were jolly surprised when you saw the ball in the net, Gus—what? Aimed it for old Talbot on the left wing, didn't you?"

"Bai Jove!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" howled Reggie Manners and Curly Gibson.

"You cheeky young wascal—"

"Still, you did it," grinned Wally. "Accident or no acc— Here! Yow! Hands off! What—"

Wally's cheeky words ended in a roar as Blake took him grimly by the ear.

"You're a jolly sight too cheeky, young D'Arcy!" said Blake. "Gussy's goal was a jolly good goal! Can't have grubby little sweeps of the flag tribe cheeking men in the Fourth, anyway! Take that—and that—and that!"

Wally of the Third roared as Blake emphasised his remarks with the toe of his boot.

"Yecop! Leggo! Keep your rotten boots to yourself, Blake, or I'll jolly well hack your shins!" howled Wally. "Stop it! I only wanted to tell Gussy old Conway's here."

"What?"

"He's over there talking to Kildare," grumbled Wally, rubbing his ear as Blake released him. "He wants you, Gussy, you dummy!"

"Bai Jove!"

D'Arcy major glanced quickly round the field, and as his noble eye fell upon a tall, well-set-up gentleman standing beyond the ropes talking to Kildare of "Sixth he gave a delighted yell.

"It is—weally is old Conway, bai Jove!" he gasped. "Pway excuse me, deah boys. This is weally wippin'!"

And with his eyeglass, unheeded, streaming behind him at the end of its cord, the Hon. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy tore away to greet his elder brother, Lord Conway.

CHAPTER 2.

"Wats!"

LORD CONWAY turned and held out his hand with a smile as Arthur Augustus ran up to him breathlessly.

"Here you are, Arthur!" he said. "How are you? Well played, my boy! That goal of yours was fine! Just got here in time to see it."

Arthur Augustus blushed as he shook hands warmly.

"How wippin' to see you, deah boy!" he beamed. "Are you staying long, Con? You'll have tea with us in our study, of course?"

"Sorry—no," was the smiling reply. "This is just a flying visit, Arthur; I want to see the Head, and then I must get back to Wayland. The fact is, I've already ordered tea in Wayland. But—"

"Wotten!"

"Not at all, Arthur; you see, I was hoping you and your chums would join me there. Robinson is bringing the car along at five-thirty, and I've ordered a taxi also, to take the overflow.

The look of gloom vanished from the face of Arthur Augustus like magic.

"Bai Jove! That is weally wippin' of you, Conway!" he said delightedly. "Simply great!"

"Five-thirty, then, remember," said Lord Conway, with a laugh. "Now I must be off; see your chums later."

And D'Arcy's brother walked away with Kildare, while Arthur Augustus raced back to his chums, his noble face beaming.

The Terrible Three and D'Arcy's own chums of the Fourth heard the news with great joy. Both Co.'s happened to be in that unpleasant state known as "stony," and the prospect of tea at Lord Conway's expense was very satisfactory.

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"I've not much love for the bloated aristocracy," remarked Lowther. "But I must say your big brother's a sport, Gussy, old man."

"Yes, rather," grinned Tom Merry. "I suppose tea will be at Willet's—that's the best place in Wayland."

"Yaas, wathah—bound to be, deah boy. It will be a treat; old Conway nevah does things by halves."

"Top-hole," agreed Wally D'Arcy. "Hear that, young Levison, and you, young Manners—tea at Willet's to-day, old tops! You can come, too, Curly. Cut along, and find old Jameson, Reggie; he'd better come, too."

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus, blinking through his monocle at his cheery minor. "I do not wemembah heahing Conway include you in the invite, Wally, you young wascal!"

"A mere oversight, Gus," said the fag coolly. "We're coming, old nut!"

"But, weally, Wally—"

"Oh, give your chin a rest, Gus, do!" said Wally warmly. "Old Con didn't intend leaving us out, I'll bet. Anyway, we're coming. Now, where's old Jammy? Hallo, there he is! Come on, you cripples!"

"Bai Jove!" remarked Arthur Augustus, frowning. "If those young wascals insist upon comin' there will be wathah a cwush, you know. And, weally, Willet's is wathah a swaggah place to take those weekless young wuffians. How-eva, we must see what Conway says."

"Better buck up!" grinned Tom Merry. "We haven't any too much time. Better—Hallo! What the thump—"

Tom broke off suddenly. From the pavilion ahead there arose a sudden hub-bub—shouts, yells, and the hollow clatter and scuffling of heavy boots on the wooded floor.

"Sounds like trouble," grinned Manners.

"House row, I'll bet!" snapped Tom Merry. "Old Figgy on the warpath, I expect. Well, we'll jolly soon see about that! Come on!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

The juniors finished the remainder of the distance at top speed, bursting into the pavilion, ready for any trouble that may come. Then they stared.

Apparently it wasn't a House row. The commotion had ceased almost as soon as it had begun, and the footballers were now standing around, with excited and heated faces. And all, both New House and School House, were grinning.

"My hat!" ejaculated Tom Merry, eyeing Figgins suspiciously. "What the thump's all this rumpus about? What's the matter?"

"Rats!" said Figgins cheerfully.

"What?"

"Rats!"

Tom Merry gave a warlike snort.

"If you say 'rats' to me, Figgins—"

"Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy severely. "I must agree, Figgy, that youah remark was wude and uncalled for. Mewwy asked a civil question, and—"

"I said 'rats!' and I mean 'rats!'" grinned Figgins.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The assembled footballers roared at the exasperated looks on the faces of Tom Merry & Co.

"Look here—" snorted Tom Merry, flushing.

"Keep cool, Tommy!" grinned Levison. "Figgy said 'rats!' and it was rats, or, rather, a rat. The giddy old rodent dropped out of Redfern's coat when he took it from the wall. We had a rare old chase after it. It got away, though—vanished up the wall there just when you came in. See?"

"Oh!"

There was another roar, and Tom Merry & Co. grinned feebly.

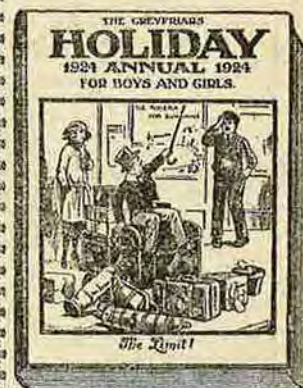
"Oh, a blessed rat!" grumbled Blake. "I thought it must have been a riot, at least. I suppose you New House funks lost your heads, eh?"

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As Levison played the light on the ditch Pongo gave a joyful bark, then rushing at Levison, he grasped the junior's trousers in his teeth and pulled as if to drag him towards the hole. (See page 8.)

"Yaas, wathah!" remarked Arthur Augustus, reaching up for his coat. "I must wemark, Figgy, that I considah you New House chaps wathah nervous, you know. Fancy bein' startled by a wat! Oh deah! Yawooogh! Take the howwible thing—"

Crash!

It was the rat—the rat which, according to D'Arcy, should not have startled anyone. As Arthur Augustus took his coat from its peg the frightened rodent leapt from its hiding place on to D'Arcy's shoulder. Arthur Augustus dropped the coat with a wild yell, and, stumbling backwards over a form, went down with a crash.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Tally-ho!" roared Figgins excitedly. "After it! Ha, ha!"

In a flash all was confusion as the laughing juniors went after the rat in a wild stampede. To and fro across the floor scuttled the frightened rodent as the excited juniors swiped at it with coats or lunged at it with footer-boots—the kicks more often than not landing on the shins of other hunters.

At last the end came—at least, the end of the rat-hunt. Finding the rat suddenly at his toes, Herries of the Fourth kicked out at it recklessly. Unfortunately the terrific kick missed the rat by a yard and landed home with a crack on the bare shin of George Figgins.

"Yarooogh!" roared Figgins.

For a few seconds the leader of the New House juniors hopped about, frantically hugging his shin, and then suddenly catching sight of a broad grin on the face of Herries, he gave a second roar and went for Herries.

In a flash both were at grips, punching each other often and hard.

That started it. It usually needed less than that to start a House row, and the rest followed as a matter of course. In a moment a dozen "scraps" were in progress as the rival factions selected their opponents.

"Go it, New House!" roared Figgins. "Rescue!"

"Back up, School House!" yelled Tom Merry. "Out of the pav with the rotters!"

The rat was completely forgotten now—indeed, it had already vanished through the open doorway. Locked in deadly embrace, the struggling figures waltzed around the room, or rolled about the dusty floor amid a perfect uproar of shouts and cat-calls. Even Wally and his chums of the Third took a hand, there being quite a number of New House fags in the pavilion.

But the luck was with the School House, if not the honours. The New House were in the minority, and one by one they were slung through the open doorway. Figgins was the last to go, still struggling and fighting desperately, and as Tom Merry and Blake slung him out into the open air like a sack, Tom slammed and bolted the door.

"Phew!" panted the School House leader, mopping his heated brow. "That was warm work, and no mistake. What the thump started it—blessed if I know!"

"Old Herries hacked Figgy on the shin, I think!" grunted Blake. "He was kicking at that blessed rat. I suppose the rat got away, blow it!"

"It was a fine scrap, anyway!" grinned Grundy, mopping his nose breathlessly. "My hat! Fancy rats in here, though!"

"I'd better get the groundsman to set a trap," grinned Tom Merry. "We must safeguard Guesy's nerves, you know."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I say, what a lark, though!" chuckled Wally D'Arcy, his eyes gleaming. "I'll tell you what! I'll bring old Pongo along after lights out to-night. He's a top-hole ratter! My hat, yes; we'll do it, Curly—what?"

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gave a gasp of alarm, and frowned sternly upon his cheery minor.

"Weally, Wally, you young wascal," he ejaculated. "I twust you will nevah dweam of bweaking bounds for such a weekless—"

"Oh, you dry up, Gus!" said Wally, winking at Curly.

Gibson. "Think we're nervous old ladies who jump at sight of a rat—like you? Come on, you kids, there's half-past five striking. We're not going to miss that feed, if these old fogies are!"

"Oh, gweat Scott!"

Even Arthur Augustus had completely forgotten about tea at Wayland in the excitement of the past few minutes. But now there was a sudden rush for coats, and then a rush for the door.

But Wally of the Third was already tugging at the door—in vain. He had pulled back the bolts, but the door would not open.

"The blessed thing's locked, or something!" growled Wally.

"What?"

Tom Merry wrenched madly at the door. It was, indeed, locked.

The juniors fairly blinked at each other. They understood now why Figgins & Co. had been laughing when they departed. They had evidently found the key in the lock on the outside, and had made their enemies prisoners.

"My hat! We'll make the rotters sit up for this!" vowed Tom Merry savagely. "How the thump are we to get out? Everybody seems to have gone now."

That was the question. The footer field was deserted—a quick glance through the window of the pavilion showed them that. A brief examination of the window showed them also that escape that way was hopeless. Not only were the windows small, but they were covered on the outside by strong wire network.

"We're done!" groaned Manners. "Oh, my hat! I suppose the cars will be waiting at the gates for us even now."

The thought that Lord Conway would be waiting for them made Tom Merry & Co. grind their teeth with rage.

"Weally, this is too wotten for words!" remarked Arthur Augustus, in great distress. "This is too bad of Figgy, you know."

"The silly chump doesn't know about our feed, of course," said Tom Merry dismally. "Still, even Figgy won't want to do us out of our tea; he'll be sending someone to let us out soon."

But Tom Merry was an optimist there. For it was fully half an hour before a small figure came in sight. It was Hankey of the Third, a New House fag. He came strolling towards the pavilion, whistling carelessly.

By this time Tom Merry & Co. were in a state bordering on frenzy, and Tom Merry yelled furiously at the fag as he came up.

"You young idiot, get a move on!" roared Tom. "Get this door open, you blessed slow coach!"

The fag looked up and gave a jump on seeing the furious faces at the pavilion window. He gave a bigger jump a second later on finding the door locked. But a chorus of threats soon made him open it.

"You young ass!" yelled Tom Merry, as the juniors swarmed outside. "I suppose Figgy sent you—eh?"

"Yes, Merry," said the startled and bewildered fag. "He told me to bring you this note—said I'd find you here. But—but—"

Tom Merry snatched the note, and glanced at it. On it was written the single word, "Rats!"

Tom Merry didn't give it a second glance. He flung the note on the ground and jumped on it. Then he started off at top speed for the school with his wrathful chums at his heels.

As they came in sight of the school gates Blake gave a groan of dismay. There was no sign of either car or taxi to be seen.

"Too late, blow it!" panted Tom Merry. "I suppose your brother's got fed up with waiting for us, Gussy. Oh, dash that ass, Figgy!"

"That's too bad, you know," remarked D'Arcy, frowning. "I'm wathah surprised at old Conway. He might—Hullo, wathah's old Taggles waving to us. Perhaps he's got a message ffrom Conway."

Taggles had. The old porter came forward and handed D'Arcy a letter.

"Which it's from Lord Conway, Master D'Arcy," said Taggles. "E said I was to 'and it to you when you come in."

"Has the car gone?" said Blake eagerly.

"There weren't no car—only a taxikeb," said Taggles. "His lordship were waiting by the gates when Mr. Railton sent a message as he was wanted on the phone. He came back a minute later, and arter 'anding me that note for you, he jumped into the taxikeb and went off like mad. He was in a rare old—"

Taggles was interrupted by a sudden gasp from D'Arcy as that worthy opened the missive. Inside was a sheet of paper and a couple of Treasury notes.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus, fairly blinking at the note. "Just listen to this, deah boys."

And the swell of the Fourth read the note aloud.

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"Dear Arthur.—So frightfully sorry to disappoint you and your chums, but I'm afraid our little tea at Wayland will have to be postponed. I have just had a telephone message from Robinson at Wayland, saying the car has mysteriously disappeared. Robinson, it appears, left the car outside a garage in Wayland whilst he went in to order petrol, and when he returned the car had vanished. I am rushing off now to see to the matter. Am afraid I shall not have the time to return to St. Jim's to-night; but I hope the enclosed will take the edge off your disappointment. Please express my regrets to your chums. In great haste,

"CONWAY."

"Great Scott!"

The juniors stared at each other as Arthur Augustus finished reading the startling note. It was rather a sell, of course, and they were disappointed. But they hardly gave the tea at Wayland a thought now. They were frankly alarmed.

And they had good reason to be. In and around Sussex there had been an epidemic of motor thefts of late. Only a week ago Mr. Glyn, of Glyn House, and the father of Bernard Glyn in the Shell, had had a thousand guinea car stolen, and up to date the police had not found the vestige of a clue as to where it had gone. Being chums of Glyn's, the juniors had naturally given the subject their interest.

And now—this!

"Phew!" breathed Tom Merry. "That's bad, Gussy, old man—about the car, I mean. Looks as if it's gone the same way as the one belonging to Glyn's pater."

"Rotten!" agreed Blake.

"It does sound wathah wotten," remarked Arthur Augustus. "Howevah, theah is weally no cause to wowwy, deah boys. Old Conway is a feashfully clevah chup, you know. He'll soon tyack the wascals down. I weally must apologise to you fellows about the tea, though. It is weally too—"

"My dear man—"

"Howevah," went on D'Arcy, brightening up, "I twast you will now accompany me to the tuckshop. Two Fishahs will go quite a long way, you know."

"Yes, rather!"

"Good old Gussy!"

And D'Arcy's chums accompanied him to the school tuckshop under the bare elms quite willingly, as did Wally and his chums also. They were hungry, and even the bad news about the car could not banish that hunger. And as the noble Arthur Augustus did not seem to be worrying, they did not worry. Certainly they were not so optimistic as was Arthur Augustus. But they were just as hungry, and they soon forgot the car, as they helped Arthur Augustus to spend the two "Fishahs."

CHAPTER 3.

Out of Bounds!

"WAKE up, Carly, you blessed slacker! Tumble out!" Thus Wally of the Third. He was standing by the bedside of Carly Gibson, and emphasising his whispered remarks by a series of by no means gentle shakes.

"What's the matter, you burbling chump?" demanded Carly Gibson drowsily, roused at last from his slumbers. "What—why, it's dark yet! You silly—"

"Of course it is!" hissed Wally. "Don't make a row. Have you forgotten what we arranged, you dummy? Blessed if you don't take more waking than a stone image! Tumble out!"

Carly Gibson blinked round the moonlit dormitory and groaned.

"Oh! Ah! Yes!" he grumbled. "That blessed rat-hunting stunt. But I—I say, Wally, I've been thinking. What about to-morrow night? P'raps won't be so moonlight—eh? Suppose we postpone—Here! Oh, all right, you ass! I'll get up!"

And Carly Gibson got up—he deemed it best, as Wally had already wrenched the sheets from the bed, and was squeezing a sponge filled with cold water over his face.

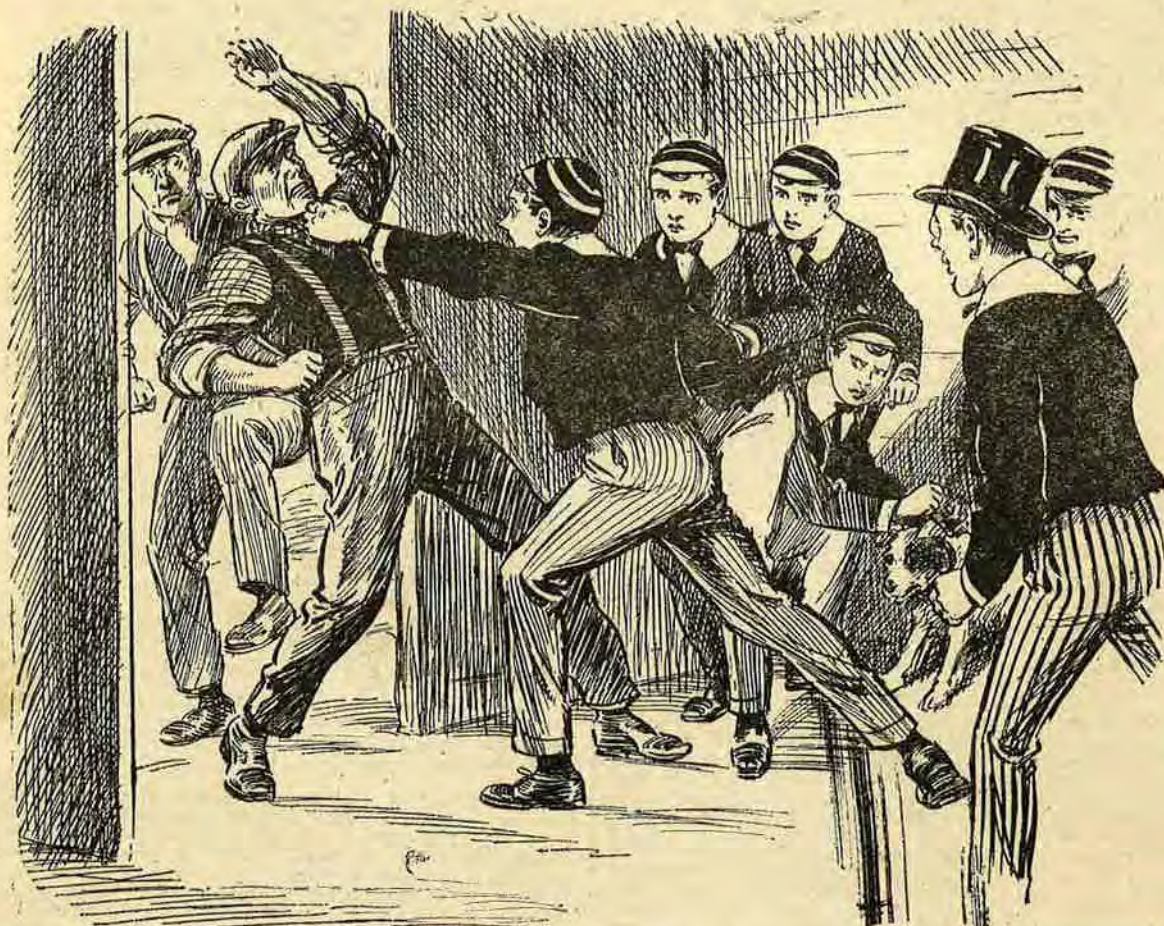
"Silly sort of game, if you ask me!" he grumbled, slipping into his trousers. "B-r-r-r! It's jolly cold, too!"

"Don't be a funk, you lazy slacker!" sniffed Wally D'Arcy. "Buck up and dress while I rouse these other asses."

And the leader of the fag tribe at St. Jim's moved softly over to Levison minor's bed. Wally was a born leader, and once having made up his youthful mind to a thing, there was no turning him from it.

At all events, his chums found the task beyond them on this occasion. And though Reggie Manners and Levison minor protested just as Gibson had done, they tumbled out at last, still grumbling. Somehow the thoughts of a midnight rat-hunting expedition did not seem half so fascinating by night as by day.

"Never mind old Jameson," whispered Wally, as they dressed swiftly. "Four of us are quite enough. Got your



As the motor thieves rushed upon Tom Merry & Co., Wally released Pongo from the leash. "Home, Pongo, old boy!" he cried. "Home—home!" Like a shot from a gun Pongo dashed away with Tom Merry's note securely tied to his collar. (See page 16.)

pocket torch, young Levison? Good! Then come on, and not a sound!"

The expedition left the dormitory silently—three members of it very reluctantly. All three carried cricket-stumps, apparently for the benefit of the rats. Had Tom Merry & Co. only seen them then they would have been very startled indeed—D'Arcy certainly would have been more than startled. The latter certainly had taken Wally's suggestion in the pavilion that afternoon quite seriously; but even he had completely forgotten Wally's remarks since then.

But Wally & Co. had not forgotten. They had planned the expedition that evening with enthusiasm. To them it was a splendid chance for a "lark," and Wally & Co. looked upon larks as the beginning and end of existence.

In single file the four fags made their way to the lower box-room, and after putting on their shoes, dropped quietly into the quad. Overhead a full moon shed its radiance over the sleeping school; but in the shadow of the old buildings it was as black as pitch.

"Phew! It's parky, and no mistake," whispered Wally, a trifle nervously. "All serene, though! You chaps had better make for the back of the chapel, while I run and get old Pongo. I'll join you there in a tic."

"Right-ho!" muttered Curly Gibson.

And as Wally disappeared amid the shadows, his three chums hurried stealthily round the quad, taking care to keep in the shadows.

By now the keen air had banished their drowsiness, and their spirits were rising accordingly. They reached the rear of the chapel in safety at last, breathless, and tingling with excitement.

There Wally joined them a few seconds later, with Pongo, his beloved terrier, leaping and prancing at his heels. Pongo was looking a very astonished dog indeed. He was simply quivering with suppressed excitement, and seemed to know that something unusual was afoot. Wally had all his work cut out to prevent him giving tongue to his joy.

"Here you are," whispered Wally quickly. "I say, let's be getting away from here. Poor old Pongo's fairly got the

jumps. He's doing his best to keep quiet, but I'm afraid he'll start making a row soon."

There seemed every possibility of this happening, so without further ado the party started across the playing-fields at a brisk trot. In the open it was almost as light as day, but they had little fear of being seen at that hour.

The dark pavilion, looking shadowy and ghostly in the bright moonlight, loomed up before them in no time, and then as they stopped breathlessly on the little veranda Levison gave a gasp of dismay.

"You've forgotten one thing, Wally," he panted in a subdued tone. "What about the key? We're stumped."

Wally chuckled.

"That's all you know, young Levison," he grinned. "Trust your uncle Wally to see to that. I took jolly good care to be the last out of here this afternoon, and I pinched the blessed key then. Here it is!"

The Third Form leader produced a key from his pocket and slid it softly in the lock of the door.

"Now, get ready," he whispered. "When I shove the door open follow me in with a rush. You stand by with that torch, young Levison."

"What-ho!"

The fags were wound up to a high pitch of excitement now. They had never taken part in a rat-hunt before, and what they did not know about that somewhat dingy sport would have filled volumes. They gripped their cricket-stumps and waited, as if they expected the walls and floor of the pavilion to be swarming with rodents.

It wasn't! As Wally turned the key and flung the door open they dashed in valiantly. Then they stopped. Nothing had happened. There followed no scamper of tiny feet, no terrified squeaks. The place was deserted, dark, and silent as the grave.

"What a blessed sell!" grumbled Reggie Manners, as Levison shone the light round the empty room. "I told you how it would be, Wally, you chump. That rat this afternoon was only a stray one—one swallow don't make a summer, you know."

"Rats!" grunted Wally. "Don't croak, you— Oh crumbs!"

At that moment Pongo took a hand in the game. Up to now he had been straining at his leash, quivering with excitement, and making queer, whining squeaks in his chest.

With startling suddenness he tore the leash from his master's grip, and, giving a low growl, he shot across the room like a streak of lightning.

What followed was somewhat bewildering—to three of the fags, at least. There followed the sudden frightened squeal of a rat, a sharp scuffling at the far end of the room. Then something came back across the room like a thunderbolt.

It was Pongo chasing the rat.

"Look out!" yelled Wally.

But the warning came too late. Pongo's headlong rush took him between Levison's legs. Levison yelled, stumbled back against Manners minor and Gibson. They staggered backwards in their turn, stumbled over a form behind them, and went down together with a resounding crash.

"After the beggar!" roared Wally. "Good old Pongo! Quick, you fellows!"

Wally shot through the doorway after Pongo and the rat. But his chums did not follow at once. The torch had been sent flying from Levison minor's grip, leaving them in darkness.

"You chaps hurt?" gasped Levison minor. "My hat! What was it?"

"Hurt?" howled Reggie Manners. "Some silly ass shoved his foot in my face. What's this I'm sitting on? Oh, it's you, Curly, you frabjous chump!"

Growling and rubbing themselves painfully, Manners and Curly Gibson staggered to their feet, still half dazed. Then they followed Levison minor as he rushed outside to look for Wally. From somewhere at the rear of the pavilion they could hear Pongo barking excitedly. Then as Levison shouted his chum's name they heard Wally's voice:

"Come on, you silly dummies! Old Pongo's chased the beggar round here somewhere. Bring that blessed—"

Wally's voice ended abruptly in a queer, strangled yell. There followed a second's silence, and then came a faint, dull thud.

"What the thump—" ejaculated Manners minor.

Startled, the fags looked at each other. And then, as a sudden frantic barking came from Pongo, they rushed round to see what was amiss. The back of the pavilion was in deep shadow; but as Levison played the torch on the spot there was a gasp.

The pavilion had been built in a deep hollow in one corner of the field. But while the front was level with the field, the back had been built up on piles. And between this and the hedge was a deep ditch—a ditch which only that afternoon had been filled with water.

Yet now, as Levison played the light on the ditch, it showed no water. The ditch had been drained almost dry, and in one spot was a black, jagged hole showing where the water had gone.

But that was not all they saw. For, leaping and prancing round the ominous hole in a state of frantic excitement was Pongo, yelping wildly. As Levison played the light on him, Pongo gave a joyful bark, and, rushing at Levison, he grasped the fag's trousers in his teeth, and pulled as if to drag him towards the hole. Then suddenly releasing his grip, he leaped towards the hole and vanished headlong down it.

Many times and oft had Wally stoutly averred that Pongo had more brains than many humans. But at that act, Wally's chums realised that Pongo possessed something in addition—a deep and loyal devotion to his youthful master.

"Mum-my hat!" panted Levison, going white. "Old Wally must be down there, you chaps—in that horrible hole. Come on!"

And, followed by his startled chums, Levison minor worked his way swiftly alongside the pavilion wall towards the hole in the ditch bottom. Reaching it, he played the light of the torch downwards.

"Wally!" he cried shakily.

"Hallo, old top," came a voice—Wally's voice—and though faint, it was as chirpy as ever. "I say, keep clear, you asses! You'll have the whole show down on top of me if you're not careful."

The fags drew deep breaths of relief.

"What's happened, Wally?" called Levison. "What is it?"

"Blessed if I know," said Wally. "A blessed tunnel or something. Old Pongo chased that blessed rat under the floor, and I was after him when I dropped down here—clean down. It fairly gave me a shock, I can tell you. Don't you—"

But Levison had already acted. The light had showed Wally standing on a heap of rubble and sodden earth some eight feet below, and, heedless of the thick mud, Levison scrambled to the hole and dropped through. He was followed in quick succession by Manners and Curly Gibson.

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CHAPTER 4.

Lost!

"YOU silly asses!" gasped Wally in alarm. "How the thump are we to get out now?"

"Oh crumbs!"

The reckless fags had not thought of that. They

had got in, but how to get out again was another matter.

"Well, this is a go!" groaned Wally dismally. "I say, lend me the light a sec, Franky."

Frank Levison handed over the torch, and Wally played the light around them. It showed them standing upon a heap of broken bricks and rubble, sodden with water from the ditch above, in what was obviously an arched tunnel of bricks and stone. The dark maw of the tunnel branched off schoolwards in one direction, and in the other under the footer ground—where to they could only guess. But obviously the tunnel was of great age.

"I say, you fellows, what a lark!" exclaimed Wally, his voice shaking with excitement. "I bet this old passage leads from the vaults under the school to Wayland Castle. Everybody believes there is one, but nobody's been able to find it."

"Except us," grinned Curly Gibson. "Jove, what a jolly old lark. That blessed rat-hunt was short and sweet, but it's led to a discovery and no mistake. Shall we explore, chaps?"

"I vote we get out of this quickly," said Frank Levison soberly. "We can't get back through the hole again, but we can make for the vaults."

"Rats! Don't be a funk," said Wally, his eyes dancing with excitement.

"I'm not a funk," said Levison minor stoutly, "but this beastly place gives me the shivers, and midnight isn't the time for exploring. Besides, we've only got that torch, and—"

"What's the good of making for the vaults?" demanded Wally. "The crypt is kept locked, and we'd have to stay there for ever before anyone heard us shouting. We've got to explore, you ass, to find a way out."

"Phew!"

Levison minor whistled, and his face paled a trifle as the truth of Wally's argument dawned upon him. He was a much more thoughtful youngster than his bare-brained chums. He began to realise that their predicament was not quite such a lark after all.

"Well, let's start then," he said grimly. "But—but I don't like this at all, you chaps."

They started out, and it wasn't long before the others began to feel that they didn't quite like it either. The blackness, the damp chill of the air, and the tomb-like stillness of the underground tunnel began to get on their nerves. Moreover, Pongo's curious behaviour damped their spirits considerably.

From the first the usually stouthearted Pongo had shown plain signs of being afraid. He whined dismally, and had to be dragged along by Wally. And as Wally pointed out rather gloomily, if Pongo was nervous, then there was something to be nervous about.

But they pushed on doggedly, in silence for the most part. It was not all easy going, for in places parts of the roof had caved in, and they had to clamber over the slimy earth and stone.

At last they came to a spot where a heavy fall of earth had completely filled up the tunnel before them. But as Wally cast the light round him it showed a jagged hole in the wall of the tunnel on the left—a black patch through which the white beam of light passed unchecked, revealing another tunnel, or a continuation of the one they were in.

"We'll rest here," muttered Wally, making an heroic effort to be cheerful. "Buck up, you fellows. We must be well under Wayland Moor now, and will soon be out."

His chums did not answer. They seated themselves on lumps of stone to rest—and they needed a rest badly. The stooping and tramping, and the bad, damp air of the place had sapped their energies and lowered their spirits alarmingly.

In silent misery they sat for some minutes, and then Wally stood up and led the way through the hole in the wall. Wally was carrying Pongo now, for his pet seemed to find the horrible journey more trying than the chums did.

Here, had the hapless fags only had the spirit to examine, they would have soon seen a difference. The passage was almost wholly hewn out of solid stone, with water dripping from cracks in the walls and roof. Moreover, they had already passed several places where other passages branched off, but had trusted to luck to take the right one.

At last, however, Wally realised the truth.

"I—I say, you chaps!" he muttered, his voice hoarse. "Do you realise where we are? We must have passed into the old quarry workings when we came through that hole."

"Oh!"

"Better go back," said Levison minor, striving to make his voice steady. "We—we mustn't get lost!"

Without a word Wally turned about, and they started back, their wearied feet dragging now, their limbs like lead, and their hearts sinking. A terrible fear was in all their minds now, for they knew the meaning of Levison's warning only too well.

The old quarry workings, long ago disused, were a veritable labyrinth of passages, twisting and winding beneath Wayland Moor for miles. Anyone lost in them would be lost indeed. The terrible thought brought an icy clutch to their hearts, and made them hasten their steps fearfully.

For what must have been half an hour they tramped on again, their hearts growing more hopeless with every step they took. And then, at last, Wally stopped, and when he spoke his voice was shaking.

"Chaps," he said, "we—we ought to have reached that hole long ago. We're lost!"

Reggie Manners echoed the word in a whimpering cry. His chums stood silent, stunned and shaking. Youngsters as they were, it was no wonder their hearts failed them in that moment.

And then, even as they stood thus, the light went out and a deep blackness enveloped them. From Pongo came a dismal whine.

"The light—the light!" cried Manners, almost in a shriek. "Turn it on!"

"Turn it on, Wally!" cried Curly Gibson, a queer catch in his voice. "This—this blackness—I—I can't stand it!"

But the light did not come on. And when at last Wally spoke his voice was trembling.

"You—you fellows," he stammered. "I—I can't. It's given out!"

CHAPTER 5. On the Trail!

"CHEERIO, Gussy, old man! Any news about the car yet?"

Tom Merry asked the question as the juniors were streaming out from breakfast the following morning.

D'Arcy nodded rather glumly.

"Wotten news, deah boys," he said. "I had a brief note from Conway this morning. The dashed car seems to have completely vanished—not a trace of it. It is weally remarkable, bai Jove!"

"I noticed you'd got a letter," said Tom Merry. "Well, it's only what we expected. It's rather staggering, though, vanishing in broad daylight like that. I hear the police are fairly stumped all round. Motor-bikes as well as cars have gone—simply melted away."

"Remarkable!" repeated Arthur Augustus, frowning. "I wathah fancy—Bai Jove, what is the mattah with Levison, deah boys?"

Ernest Levison of the Fourth came up to the group, looking considerably disturbed.

"Seen anything of my minor, you fellows?" he asked. "I can't find the beggar anywhere. Young Wally and Reggie and Curly Gibson seem to have mizzled somewhere, too."

"I noticed they weren't in the dining-hall at brekker," said Tom Merry, smiling. "The young scamps are up to something."

"They cut chapel as well," said Levison seriously. "Not only that, young Jameson tells me that they must have been up before rising-bell—their beds were empty. Old Selby's raving, I believe."

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus looked considerably alarmed at that, as did Manners.

"That's queer," Manners said, frowning. "Isn't like those young asses to get up before rising-bell—not on parky mornings, anyway."

"Up to some little game," grinned Lowther. "My hat! I wouldn't have old Selby's job for anything; rather be a keeper at a monkey-house. Hallo, here's Railton!"

Mr. Railton came up to the juniors, his brow grim.

"Ah! I was just about to send Kildare to look for you boys," he said. "D'Arcy, Manners, and Levison, I mean. Do you know where your young brothers are?"

"No, sir!" came the startled reply from each.

"They cannot be found anywhere within the precincts of the school," said the Housemaster. "It is very strange. However, you will kindly send them at once to me should you see them."

"Looks like trouble for the young asses, and no mistake," said Tom Merry, as Mr. Railton walked away. "We'd better have a hunt round."

Together the juniors made a hurried, though none the less thorough, search of the school buildings, looking in every likely and unlikely place. As they were coming indoors again they overtook Herries, who had left them just after breakfast to attend to his bulldog, Towser.

"Those young imps not turned up yet?" he asked.

"No; it's getting rather worrying," said Manners. "Why have you—?"

"Only I've just discovered that Pongo's missing, too," answered Herries grimly.

"Broken loose, you mean?"

"Not a bit of it. Young Wally must have taken him out for an early-morning run, I expect."

"That's a relief, anyway," said Tom Merry. "I expect the young idiots have turned out—"

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gave a start.

"Oh, bai Jove!" he exclaimed in alarm. "Don't you remember Wally's remarks in the pavilion—about bwingin' Pongo along aftah lights out, waddin'?"

"But—but, you don't—"

"The young waseals!" said Arthur Augustus. "That explains the mystewy, deah boys. They've taken Pongo waddin', aftah all!"

"That's it, for a pension," said Tom Merry, grinning. "I thought the young idiot was only pulling your leg, Gussy. If Pongo isn't in his kennel, then you can bet that's where they are. They've got up early, and gone down there."

"Must be a jolly exciting sport for them to forget chapel and brekker, then," chuckled Monty Lowther.

"I'll punch my young minor for this," grunted Manners.

"They'll have trouble enough to meet when they do turn up," said Tom Merry. "Anyway, I vote we trot along to the pav and waken 'em up."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Considerably relieved at this simple explanation of the mystery, the juniors started for the footer pavilion at a trot. But their astonishment and dismay was great when they found the place empty.

"They've been here, though!" snapped Levison, his keen eyes scanning the floor of the veranda. "Look! Pongo's footprints."

The juniors stared at them. They were still staring when Stubbs, the school groundsman, came up.

"Any of you young gentlemen been in the pavilion during the night, Master Merry?" he asked.

"Of course not! Why?" asked Blake quickly.

"Cause someone has," said Stubbs. "When I came round to lock up last night, I found the door already locked and the key gone. And this morning the door was wide open. Looked as if some young gents 'ad bin in there larking, too."

"Phew!"

"You haven't seen any of the Third round here this morning, then, Stubbs?" asked Levison blankly.

"Nobody been round here—not since seven o'clock," said the groundsman.

Without saying anything further to Stubbs, the juniors hurried back schoolwards, more puzzled than ever now. Obviously the missing fags had visited the pavilion since the evening before. But where were they now?

"It beats the band," said Blake soberly. "Had we better report our suspicions to Railton, Tommy—about the rattin' biz, I mean?"

"I think not—at all events, not yet," said Tom, shaking his head. "Might only make things worse for them. Hang it all, they're bound to turn up some time this morning."

The bell for morning classes was ringing as the juniors reached the school. They had half hoped to find that the fags had returned whilst they were away. But they hadn't returned.

Nor was Tom Merry's optimism justified. The fags hadn't turned up at the end of first lesson, nor at the end of second lesson. By this time most of the juniors had heard the news, and morning lessons ended in a buzz of excited conjecture.

Immediately they had left the Form-rooms Tom Merry called his chums and Levison together.

"I've been thinking, you chaps," he said quietly. "It's pretty certain now that something's happened to those kids. They visited the pavilion either last night or very early this morning, without a doubt."

"Then where are they now?" said Manners despondently.

"That's what we've got to find out," said Tom. "We've got to discover where they went after leaving the pavilion. It should be easy enough—"

"Easy?"

"Quite. The ground's muddy and soft yet; their hoof-prints can be easily tracked—Pongo's especially. I vote we drop all thoughts of dinner and everything else, and try to track them."

"Good idea," said Herries quickly. "And I'll bring old Towser along. You chaps know what a scorching Towser is at picking up a trail. He'd jolly soon—"

"Bai Jove, Hewwies!" exclaimed D'Arcy warmly. "I stwongly object to that! If that bwate comes, then, sewious as the mattah is, I fesh I must absolutely decline to join the party. Wathah not!"

"You silly dummy—"

"Steady, Herries," said Tom Merry peaceably. "Ahem! I—I don't think you ought to—to bring Towser, old chap. You—you see, his feet might spoil Pongo's tracks. Besides, it's a jolly shame to keep Towser from his dinner."

But Herries didn't see—or didn't wish to see. His chums, however, didn't give him the chance to argue. They did not share his sublime faith in Towser's abilities as a tracker. And, rather than waste time arguing the matter, they snatched their caps and started out. Herries followed, grumbling.

There was not a soul in or about the footer pavilion, and they lost no time getting to work. As Tom Merry had said, the trail was easy to follow—easy enough even for a tenderfoot in scouting to follow. And Tom Merry & Co. were by no means tenderfeet.

Without hesitation, Tom Merry followed the sign from the dried prints on the veranda round to the back of the pavilion, and as his eyes fell upon the ominous-looking hole in the ditch-bottom he gave vent to a yell of amazement.

"Keep back, you fellows!" he warned, his voice thrilling with excitement. "Looks as though the whole show might go in any minute!"

But there was no holding the juniors back—certainly not Levison, D'Arcy, and Manners. They pressed round Tom eagerly as he tried to read the tell-tale tracks round the hole.

"Yes, they went down here," said Tom at last, his face paling. "Pongo went, too. Well, I'm hanged! No; don't be an ass," he went on warningly, as Levison seemed about to drop recklessly through. "We want a rope first."

Herries rushed back to the pavilion for a rope, whilst Tom struck a match and held it over the hole. It revealed the heap of earth and rubble below but little more.

"They went down!" said Tom Merry grimly. "But it's pretty clear they didn't come up again—couldn't, I suppose. I'm afraid they went exploring, and— Hallo, here's a rope! Good!"

Herries handed the rope over, and Tom tied it securely to one of the piles. The loose end he dropped into the darkness below.

"Now we can get back when we want to," said Tom. "Here goes!"

He dropped through the aperture, and his chums followed, one by one. Tom Merry struck another match and looked around him. Then he whistled.

"Jove, it's a tunnel, you fellows!" he exclaimed in astonishment. "It's a blessed secret tunnel—probably the one people say runs between the school vaults and the vaults under the old castle on Wayland Hill."

"But—but how—" "I see what's happened," said Tom. "The recent heavy rains have proved too much for the ditch—the roof of the tunnel's caved in here—at its weakest point in the hollow."

"Gwreat Scott!" "Tom Merry struck another match, and scrutinised the ground round about. On the sodden floor he soon picked up the traces of Wally & Co.

"That settles it, then," said Tom gravely. "Those young rascals discovered this—probably one of them pitched through this hole. And they've explored the tunnel."

"But—but where are they now?" asked Manners, his voice shaking.

"We've got to discover that!" said Tom grimly. "Gussy, you're about the best runner here. Cut back to the school hard as you can pelt, and get lamps, candles—anything to make a light. Don't say anything to anyone, though, yet. Go on—and run like blazes! We'll follow the trail up until we find them."

Arthur Augustus gasped and hesitated, but only for a moment. Then, heedless of his clothes even, he swarmed up the rope, clambered out of the hole with difficulty, and disappeared from his chums' sight. They stood where they were and waited, almost in silence.

CHAPTER 6.

An Amazing Discovery!

IN that terrible moment, when the light failed and the inky darkness of the tunnel closed in around them, even Wally D'Arcy, stout-hearted as the youngster was, gave way to a feeling of hopeless despair.

And it was no wonder. Lost in that labyrinth of winding, twisting passages, without light to guide them, and with pitfalls unknown whichever way they turned, the outlook was perilous and hopeless indeed. And the ceaseless drip of water all around them only accentuated the ghastly silence of the place.

Since Wally had stammered out the terrible news that the torch was useless, none of the four had spoken again. Stunned by this new catastrophe, they stood huddled together as if for mutual protection from the unknown dangers around.

Pongo was quiet now. He lay snuggled close in Wally's arms, and, though his body trembled, his warm tongue licked

Wally's face occasionally as if he, at least, had not lost faith in his master's ability to bring them to safety.

Then, quite suddenly, Reggie Manners broke out into fitful sobbing, and the sound roused Wally from his lethargy.

He remembered that he was the leader, that his chums looked up to him, and would expect him to lead. Whoever else gave way to despair, he could not do so. He must play the man now, though his body ached with fatigue and fear clutched at his heart.

With a tremendous effort he pulled himself together, and when he spoke his voice was steeled to calmness.

"You fellows," he said quietly, "there's no need to give way. We're not beaten yet. There's a way out of this horrible place, and I'm going to find it. We've got to keep going. We've got to brace up and fight our way out."

"It's no good, Wally, and it isn't safe to move in this awful darkness!" muttered Curly Gibson, striving to hide the break in his voice. "Besides, I—I'm about done. I can't go much farther."

"We must—we must!" said Wally doggedly. "We can't stay here. The floor's running with water, and we can't even rest. We must go on if only to find a dry spot to sleep on. I—I don't want to raise false hopes, but I've good reason to think we're not so far from the open as we feared."

There sounded the quick intaking of breath, and Levison's voice sounded eager, though faltering.

"What—what do you mean, Wally?"

Wally D'Arcy did not answer at once. They heard him drawing in deep breaths of air, and when at last he spoke his voice thrilled with hope.

"Haven't you noticed it, you fellows? Haven't you noticed that the air seems much fresher now than it has done since we started? I'm—I'm certain it is. That means—"

"I believe you are right, Wally," said Frank Levison at once. "It—it's fresher and draughtier here, too. You—you think—"

"I'm certain we're not far from open air," said Wally stoutly. "Pongo knows it, too. He wants to get down. I can hardly hold him. Here, steady, old boy!"

As if Pongo understood Wally's words and wished to prove his statements, he suddenly gave vent to a series of cheering yelps, and began to wriggle and kick in his master's grasp.

With sudden determination Wally put the dog down and took a tight grip of his leash.

"Listen, you chaps!" he said, striving to make their faces out in the deep gloom. "We're going on, and Pongo's going to lead us. We'll leave it to him. Old Pongo won't fail us. Keep together, though, for goodness' sake. Ready?"

Pongo's strange and sudden liveliness, and Wally's dogged faith in his pet's sagacity, had an instant and cheering effect on the spirits of the luckless fags. If fresh air was not far away then Pongo would find it. His sense of smell could be relied upon for that.

Pongo was already straining at the leash, and Wally stooped and patted him fondly.

"Home, Pongo, old boy!" he said, his voice husky with emotion. "You've got to save us, you know. Go on—home! You understand, don't you?"

Pongo understood well enough. He gave a sharp bark—a sound that echoed queerly in that strange underground world—and tugged hard at the lead. And then they started out into the unknown.

They went slowly, Wally having all his work cut out to hold Pongo back. The horrible blackness lay like a solid wall in front as they tramped on, stumbling over piles of rock and earth, over each other's dragging feet, their heads bent low to avoid contact with the uneven, rocky ceiling.

It was a nightmare journey, and how they stuck it they never knew. They lurched and stumbled along with dragging feet, bruised and aching, spent and exhausted, physically and mentally.

But they did stick it, for with every step they took the air seemed to get fresher. They pressed on, forgetful now of their intense weariness and of the damp chill of the place which struck to their bones.

Only twice did Pongo falter where side galleries branched off, but each time, after a moment's hesitation, he pressed on again with renewed eagerness and confidence.

By this they had abundant evidence that they were on the right track. The tunnel became wider and loftier, and was obviously one of the main arteries in that vast network of man-made burrows.

The end of the strange journey came with startling suddenness.

For the last few minutes Pongo had been strangely excited, making a queer, whining noise in his chest and tugging strongly at his head. And now, without warning, he wrenched the leash from his master's hand, and vanished into the blackness ahead.

Wally gave a hoarse gasp of alarm, and shouted after him desperately.

"Pongo! Come back—come back! Pongo, old boy!"

The fag's voice rang appealingly, but only the hollow echoes of his own despairing tones answered him. The four youngsters waited, their hearts thumping, stunned by this last happening. Had Pongo—old Pongo—deserted them, after all?

They knew the next instant. From the darkness ahead there sounded the pattering of Pongo's feet, and they saw his eyes shining in the darkness. He pattered up to them, making a curious growling noise in his throat.

“Good old Pongo!” muttered Wally, a lump in his throat. “You've found something, old boy. What—?”

The fag broke off abruptly, speechless, with surprise for the moment. Was it fancy, or had his eyes detected a light ahead—a faint glimmer?

For fully a minute he stared fixedly into the gloom, ignoring Pongo, who was leaping up at him, tugging frantically at his coat. Then he spoke.

“There's a light ahead, you chaps!” he panted. “A light.”

“It can't be,” said Levison quickly. “You—you're mistaken, Wally. It can't be daylight yet, and how—?”

“There is!” muttered Wally, with conviction. “Pongo wants us to go on. Can't you see? Come on!”

He grabbed Pongo's leash, and the excited dog almost dragged him, so great was his eagerness. And then Wally's chums saw it, too. There was indeed light ahead—light which came in streaks that surrounded an oblong patch of blackness. Apparently a door.

It was a door—of sorts. They were up to it almost before they knew it, and Wally's hand pressed it. It was of matchboarding, fixed in a framework of wood stretching across the tunnel.

The discovery almost took the fags' breath away.

They stared at it, and at the streaks of light—obviously artificial light—that showed round it. Their hearts thumped with the sudden revulsion of feeling—of joy and thankfulness. Light meant human beings and rescue.

Pongo was growling fiercely now, a deep, threatening note. He sprang again and again at the rickety door, making it shake and rattle violently. From the other side there came a sudden, hoarse exclamation, followed by drowsy voices—men's voices.

“Down, Pongo! Quiet, old boy!” whispered Wally tensely, strangely uneasy, why he knew not. “Be quiet!”

He hesitated, his hands feeling cautiously over the woodwork. Now safety seemed to be in sight, he felt strangely reluctant to make their presence known to whoever was beyond the partition.

But Pongo had already done that. Even as Wally hesitated, the door fell away before them, and a glare of light almost blinded them. They stumbled forward through the open doorway and collapsed, blinking in the sudden light, on to a boarded floor.

For some moments the fags lay there, too exhausted to note their surroundings yet. They were dimly aware that two men were standing before them, eyeing them in astounded surprise.

“Well, I'm hanged! They're kids—school kids! Who—who in thunder are you? What are you doing here, eh?”

The harsh voice, the note of fierce menace in the tones, roused Wally suddenly. He staggered to his feet, leaned shakily against the matchboarding, and blinked dazedly around him.

The light that had at first seemed almost to blind them was from a lantern, set on the floor. The apartment—if apartment it could be called—was some eight feet wide—the width of the tunnel—and about ten feet long. A small stove stood in one corner, pervading the place with a welcome, cosy warmth. The room was unfurnished, save for the couple of rough beds on the floor. From the tumbled state of the rough blankets the men had evidently been roused from slumber by their arrival.

“Well?” demanded the speaker savagely. “D'you hear, kids? Who are you, and what the thunder are you doing here?”

The fags were staggered. The added harshness in the words brought Levison, Manners, and Gibson to their feet. Pongo crouched between Wally's feet, growling uneasily.

What did it mean? Was it safety after all? They had escaped unknown perils—for what? Obviously they were anything but welcome. Had they jumped from the frying-pan into the fire?

It seemed so. Wally's heart sank, and he licked his dry lips and stared at the men. They were very ordinary-looking men of the artisan type. Save for boots and coats, they were fully dressed.

Wally answered at last.

“We—we lost ourselves in the quarry-workings,” he stammered huskily. “We—we saw the light, and—and found ourselves here. We've been wandering about for hours!”

“That's no answer!” snapped one of the men. “What were you doing in the workings—at this time of night? What's your game?”

Wally explained, haltingly and with growing uneasiness. The men's looks, as he proceeded, were anything but comforting.

“Well, you've stumbled into the wrong place if you're looking for a way out!” said one man, as Wally finished. “You're not wanted here. But that don't mean we're goin' to let you go—no fear! You're here, and here you'll stay now, hang you!”

He drew his companion aside, and they whispered together for a minute or so. Then he spoke again.

“Look here, kids,” he said, in a milder tone. “You've struck it unlucky, buttin' in on us. But you'll come to no harm as long as you behave yourselves. But you've got to stop now you've come. Got that?”

“We aren't likely to try to escape,” said Wally wearily. “We're chilled through and dead-beat—all of us. All we want is rest and sleep.”

“Then, take it now you've got the chance!” was the grim answer. “We've no feather beds to offer you, but I reckon you'll sleep all right in the corner there. Any games, mind you, and you'll be sorry. Kick that growling brute of a dog out of here, and shake down smart!”

Wally picked Pongo up in his arms, and his eyes gleamed fiercely.

“If Pongo—if the dog goes out, you can kick me out, too!” he muttered huskily. “He's not leaving me—”



Hand over hand, and taking advantage of every nook and cranny in the rocky quarry, Tom Merry pulled himself up the steep quarry side. “Come back!” cried his rasally pursuer from below. “Come back, you young fool, or you'll be killed!” Tom Merry heeded not, but went on climbing with the agility of a cat. (See page 20.)

"Nuff said!" grinned the man. "You can keep the little brute with you—only don't let him come nosing round me, or his number's up. See? Get a move on, now!"

He closed the door, and secured it with a peg of wood. Then he dragged his bed over against it, and flung himself upon it. His companion, scowling at the fags, dragged his bed against the further door, up to now unnoticed by the boys, and lay down upon it. Obviously they did not intend the hapless fags to have a chance to escape.

But Wally & Co. had no thoughts of escape then. They were thankful for their escape from the terrors of that underground maze, and they were thankful for the warmth and dryness of that strange den. But, most of all, they were deeply thankful for the chance to rest, to sleep.

Almost fainting from weariness, aching and sore in mind and body, they stumbled to the corner, and flung themselves down. Only once did Wally speak, and that was to murmur over Pongo as he smuggled his pet to him. The murmured words brought a savage threat from the man nearest them, and Wally closed his lips tight after that. Silence fell upon that queer underground apartment, and, hardly noticing the hardness of their couch, heedless of their strange plight, the fags sank into sleep—a deep sleep of utter exhaustion.

CHAPTER 7. Tracked Down!

TOM MERRY and his chums could scarcely restrain their burning impatience as they waited under that queer hole at the back of the footer pavilion for the return of D'Arcy.

They had been anxious enough before making their strange discovery; they were doubly anxious now.

In their minds they had no doubt whatever that the missing fags had descended into that forbidding underground passage. Knowing the reckless daring of Wally & Co., they took it for granted that, having discovered the tunnel, the adventure-loving fags would at once resolve to explore, without thought of possible danger, without troubling their young heads to make adequate preparations for such a hazardous expedition.

And, if so, what then had happened to them? They had been gone since before rising-bell—that much was certain. Where were they now? Had they been overcome by the bad air, by poisonous gases? Had they been trapped by another fall of roof, or were they still wandering blindly, lost, in that unknown underworld?

All sorts of dread possibilities occurred to the juniors as they waited, white-faced and almost sick with anxiety.

It seemed hours before D'Arcy did put in an appearance, though in reality it was only a few minutes. As his form appeared in the aperture above them, the juniors gasped their relief.

"All sewene, deah boys!" exclaimed D'Arcy breathlessly. "I've managed to get two torches and some candles. Catch!"

Tom Merry caught the small package D'Arcy dropped down, and stood aside as Arthur Augustus dropped lightly through after it. The swell of the Fourth's face was red and heated with running, and his hitherto elegant clothes were ruffled and smothered in mud. But for once the noble Arthur Augustus scarcely seemed to be aware of the fact.

"Eweybody was at dinnah, and I scairely met a soul," he explained. "I wan like anythin', bai Jove!"

Tom Merry took charge of one of the torches, and handed the other to Blake, and the candles to Monty Lowther.

"Don't light them," he counselled quietly. "We'll keep them in reserve, and use this now."

He switched on the torch he held, and closely examined the ground round about. Then he looked up.

"As I guessed, they haven't bothered to explore school-wards," he muttered grimly. "That way, you fellows. I don't quite like the look of the roof hereabouts, and the sooner we make tracks the better."

Even as Tom spoke a thin trickle of earth and stones fell upon them in a shower. Without more ado Tom led the way along the tunnel, his eyes scanning the ground as he went. And scarcely had they gone a dozen yards when his suspicions regarding the roof were fully justified in an alarming manner.

From behind them came a sudden slithering sound, and as he heard it Tom Merry gave a yell:

"Look out—run for it!"

Forewarned as they were, the juniors acted like lightning. They ran for it, helter-skelter, into the darkness ahead—and only just in time.

Scarcely had they left the spot when the slithering sounds were followed by the rush and thunder of falling earth and stones, deafening in that confined passage. Then silence fell.

"Phew! That was a narrow escape, you fellows!" gasped Tom Merry, white-faced and trembling, as the juniors came.

to a halt. "Wait here; I'll run back and see what's happened."

Tom ran back. He had not to run far. And what he saw was what he had feared seeing.

The tunnel was blocked up—choked from side to side and roof to floor with earth and rock. But in this instance the crust of earth had not been broken. There was not a glimmer of daylight visible anywhere.

Tom Merry's face hardened. Their escape was cut off now—there was nothing else for it but to go on.

He returned to his waiting chums and told the news.

"There's no need to worry about that, though," he explained hopefully. "This tunnel must lead to somewhere—the old castle on Wayland Hill I believe. Come on!"

They pressed on quickly enough. There was little need yet even to trouble to follow the tracks, plain as they were. It was only when they reached the spot where the fall of earth had checked Wally & Co. the night before, that the juniors began to meet with difficulty.

"They've gone through this hole in the wall," pointed out Blake. "That's pretty plain."

"I know," said Tom Merry. "But—but that's just where they went wrong. That's no part of the tunnel. It's—don't you see—part of the old quarry workings. If—if they've wandered into those—"

"They've got lost," muttered Levison huskily. "Don't waste time. Come on!"

"Their tracks will show. We'll find them all right," said Tom Merry stoutly.

He led the way through the jagged hole. They found the footprints almost at once; but from that point the tracking became anything but easy. In places the floor was dry and rocky, and here the tracks scarcely showed. In other places the running water had obliterated them.

But each time they picked the faint tracks up again, and went doggedly on, becoming more uneasy and despondent as they went. The evidence was becoming more and more abundant now that the fags had been indeed lost, and had been in sore straits. The dragging steps, the hesitation at the cross-roads and re-crossing of footprints told their pitiful tale only too clearly. The mere thought of the hapless plight of the wretched fags made the juniors sick with anxiety.

But it also stiffened their determination to find them. The scarcity of Pongo's footprints had, at first, puzzled the juniors. Then they had realised the truth—that Wally had been carrying Pongo most of the way. And the realisation brought lumps to their throats.

"The poor little beggars must have been fairly done up," said Herries thickly. "It's just like Wally to do that, though; he'd have done the same with old Towser, I'll bet."

Since Herries had passed that remark none of the juniors had spoken; but suddenly Tom Merry broke the silence.

"Have you fellows noticed," he said, his voice thrilling with hope, "the air's been getting better the last few minutes? I'm certain of it."

"I fancied so, too," said Levison eagerly. "But—but I daren't say so; I didn't want to raise false hopes."

The sudden announcement roused the juniors' flagging energies, and they went on faster now. And they had not gone many yards when Tom Merry gave a sudden cry and snatched something from the floor at his feet.

It was the pocket-torch Wally had flung aside when he made the terrible discovery that it was useless. As the juniors stared at it their faces blanched. If the luckless fags had had no other light, then their plight must have been terrible.

"No need to lose heart, though!" muttered Tom Merry, closely studying the tracks. "See the tracks—from here they seem to have left it to Pongo. They couldn't have done a better thing. Pongo would nose a way out if there was one."

And the fact that Pongo had indeed done so was soon obvious to the juniors. From thence on the tracks ran without hesitation, and at last they reached the spot where Pongo had rushed on ahead the night before. Almost with the discovery Tom Merry made the same discovery Wally had made.

His keen eyes picked out the faint gleams of light ahead, and he gave a yell. And three minutes later the juniors were staring in astounded bewilderment at the white door of match-boarding as Tom shone the light upon it.

"Well, I'm hanged!" breathed the junior. "A door here! What can it mean?"

"It's new wood, too!" gasped Levison. "Can it—"

He broke off. From beyond the queer partition there came a sudden sound—a sound that made the rescuers' hearts leap with joy.

It was the warning bark of a dog, sharp and clear.

"Pongo!" yelled Arthur Augustus. "Bai Jove, you fellows, that's Pongo!"

CHAPTER 8.

The Old Quarry Shed!

It was Pongo, of course. And he was a very astonished dog indeed when he heard that yell in the well-known tones of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. But he was nothing like so astonished as the other occupants of that underground apartment.

Wally & Co., who had been stretched out in various attitudes on the floor, sat bolt upright, hardly believing the evidence of their own ears.

But, though their captors were not in the room, though they were alone, they did not jump to their feet and rush to the door—they couldn't.

They were bound hand and foot, and it was all they could do to sit upright.

Although it was many hours since they had entered the place, they had discovered no clue to its mystery, or of the men into whose hands they had fallen.

When they awoke that morning from a deep sleep it was to find their captors already dressed and at breakfast. And as they stretched their aching limbs it was soon made clear to them that their chances of escape alone were hopeless.

After giving each of them a slice of bread and a cup of tea, the men had straight away tied their wrists behind them and their feet together.

This had not been done without trouble, however. The fags had submitted quietly enough—they could do nothing else. But Pongo had objected strongly to his master being handled thus. And only Wally's restraining influence had prevented him flying at the throats of the men.

Fortunately, the men treated the little terrier's pluck and fighting spirit with coarse amusement, and they made no effort to harm the dog or to part him from his master.

Having satisfied themselves that the boys were helpless, they had both donned suits of dirty overalls, and, with many warning threats, had left the room, closing the outer door securely after them.

Since then Wally & Co. had spent the long hours as best they could, alternately discussing their predicament in whispers or dozing in periods of gloomy silence.

Then, with startling suddenness, had come Pongo's warning bark, followed instantly by the voice of Arthur Augustus, and the fags' listlessness had left them abruptly.

But, though overcome with joy almost, Wally, at least, remembered the need for caution.

"Quiet, you fellows—quiet, Pongo!" he hissed warningly. "Quiet, old boy!" Then, as the partition door rattled, he raised his voice desperately. "That you, Gussy? Don't make a row for goodness' sake! Wait a minute."

There followed an amazed exclamation, and the door ceased to rattle abruptly. Wally listened a moment, and then, setting his teeth, he began to roll himself over the floor towards it. Luckily, the man had removed his bed early that morning, grumbling about the draught, and, after a painful journey, Wally reached the door.

Exhausted and panting, he paused a moment or two to rest, and then he worked his face close to the peg jammed under the door.

It was only a small peg of soft wood, and, pressing his face close to the floor, Wally set his teeth into the peg and tugged. Luckily, Tom Merry, by rattling the door, had served to loosen it, and almost at once it came away.

Only just in time did Wally roll clear as the door swung open, for the impatient and wondering juniors beyond rushed in at once, almost falling over the prostrate fag as they did so.

But over the threshold they halted, blinking in the sudden light, and almost petrified with amazement at the scene which met their gaze.

"What—what, bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus blankly.

It was all he could say; as for Tom Merry and the rest they were rendered speechless for the moment. And before they could give vent to the mingled feelings of joy and astonishment that gripped them, Wally D'Arcy recovered himself and spoke.

"Quiet, you fellows!" he panted quickly. "Cut us loose! Wake up, you old fogies! We'll explain afterwards. Cut us loose!"

Tom Merry seemed to grasp the situation first. His hand flew to his pocket, and, next instant he was slashing at the cords round Wally's wrists and ankles. Then his chums awoke to the fact that matters were urgent, and began to follow his example, freeing the other luckless fags one by one.

The sudden joy of seeing their rescuers, and finding themselves free, rendered the fags almost hysterical, and it was some moments before Tom Merry could voice his amazement.

"What on earth does it mean, kids?" he gasped helplessly. "It's ripping to find you, after all, but—but what's this show, and why are you trussed up like this?"

Wally grinned. It was surprising how quickly the

youngster recovered his spirits; but he could afford to grin now—or, at least, he felt he could.

"Ask me something I know?" he returned cheekily. "We're somewhere under Wayland Moor, and we've been trussed up by some merchants you'll meet soon enough if you go on making that row."

As he spoke Wally listened intently at the outer door. Then Tom Merry became suddenly aware of a light hammering sound that came from beyond the partition.

"They're still knocking away," grinned Wally, "so they can't have heard anything—luckily for us. Anyway, I'll soon tell you the story, old tops."

And briefly and quickly Wally explained all they knew of the mystery surrounding that queer underground apartment. The juniors gasped as he finished.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus blankly. "What a weally remarkable thing, you know!"

"It's jolly rummy," said Tom Merry, frowning. "But—but what are they doing? What's their game?"

"Ask me another," said Wally. "They've been hammering and working away all morning like that; but being tied up like chickens we couldn't investigate, could we? We can jolly soon find out now, though!"

Wally finished by pointing up to the top of the partition above the outer door. And then Tom Merry's eyes gleamed.

This partition, unlike the one they had passed through, did not quite reach the ceiling of the tunnel. There was fully two feet of space left open, apparently to let fresh air in.

"Oh, good!" breathed Tom Merry. He had already discovered that the door was secured on the outside, and the discovery had lowered his spirits considerably, though he had said nothing to the others of his fears. But now he turned to them, his eyes gleaming hopefully.

"That gives us a chance, then—a chance to get out of this," he said quietly. "That fall of earth, of course, puts going back that way out of the question. And we daren't tackle the quarries—the risk of getting lost is too great. That's our only way, chaps!"

"It means scrapping, then," grinned Wally. "Those merchants are hefty chaps, too. I'm ready, though. Say the word, and over the top we go, and the best of luck to us!"

"We'll need it," said Tom Merry, smiling grimly. "I'll see how the land lies. Give me a back, one of you."

Herries stooped before the partition, and Tom Merry scrambled up, grasped the top, and pulled himself cautiously up. With his feet on Herries' broad back, he peered cautiously over.

What he saw almost took his breath away.

CHAPTER 9.

A Dash for Liberty!

HE found himself staring blankly into the interior of a long, low shed—an old shed with a roof of corrugated iron. It was lit up by a couple of powerful motor-lamps, yet daylight filtered in streaks from cracks in the plank walls and through cracks in the great double doors at the far end.

And then in a flash Tom Merry recognised the shed and its position.

It was the old quarry shed at the bottom of one of the many disused quarries scattered over Wayland Moor. Tom Merry knew it well. He had often, on drowsy summer afternoons, amused himself by throwing stones from the top of the quarry above to hear them rattle faintly on the iron roof far below.

He had half expected something of the sort, though. What did astonish him was the use to which the old quarry shed was being put now. For it was being used as nothing less than a secret garage, and apparently a motor-repair shop.

There were at least half a dozen cars in the shed, and, in addition, two or three motor-cycles. In the shed, working by the light from the lamps, were three men in overalls. One of them was apparently fitting a new bonnet to a car—a proceeding which solved the meaning of the strange hammering to Tom Merry. A second man was painting a new number-plate to the same car, and yet a third was busy repainting the body of another car.

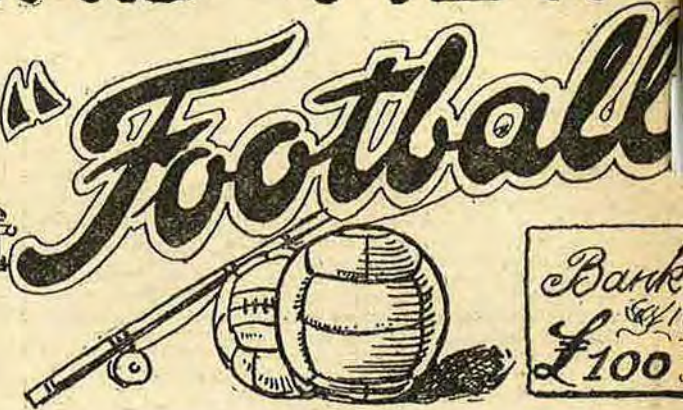
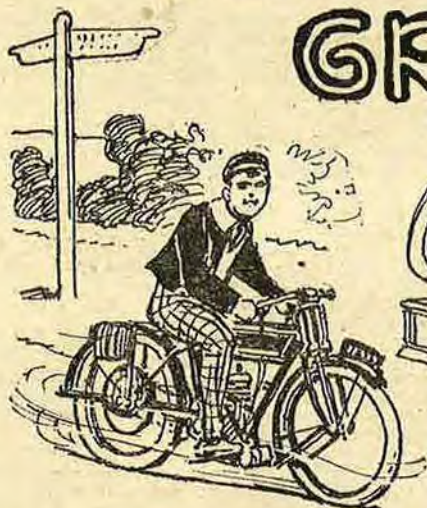
But all Tom Merry's attention was now riveted on two of the cars—the sight of which made the whole mystery of it all clear as daylight to the junior.

One of them—a magnificent Panhard—he recognised at a glance as the property of Mr. Glyn, of Glyn House, the very car that had been stolen a week or so ago; the other—a Rolls-Royce—was Lord Eastwood's car, Gussy's pater's car.

The mystery was solved. The men were motor thieves—the very gang which had been mystifying the county police, and the police of other counties, for weeks past. And no wonder! For here, in this lonely, desolate spot, hidden from prying eyes, was their secret hiding-place—the garage where they repainted and changed the appearance of the

(Continued on page 16.)

A RECORD PRIZE LIST! CHAPS, HERE GRAND NEW



Bank
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**First Prize,
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Shorts, and Shirt). **50 Pairs of BOXING GLOVES. 100 Pairs of ROLLER SKATES.**

250 BO
Conso

RULES AND CONDITIONS

which must be strictly adhered to.

1.—The First Prize of £100 in cash will be awarded to the competitor who sends in the correct, or nearest correct, solution of all eight sets of the pictures according to the Editor's official solution.

2.—The Second Prize of £50, and the others in the splendid variety of prizes will be awarded in order of merit.

3.—All the prizes will be awarded. If two or more competitors tie, however, the prize or prizes, or their value, will be divided, and the Editor reserves full rights in this respect.

4.—No solutions may be sent in until all the sets of the pictures and the necessary coupon have been published. Full directions will then be given.

5.—The names under the pictures must be written IN INK.

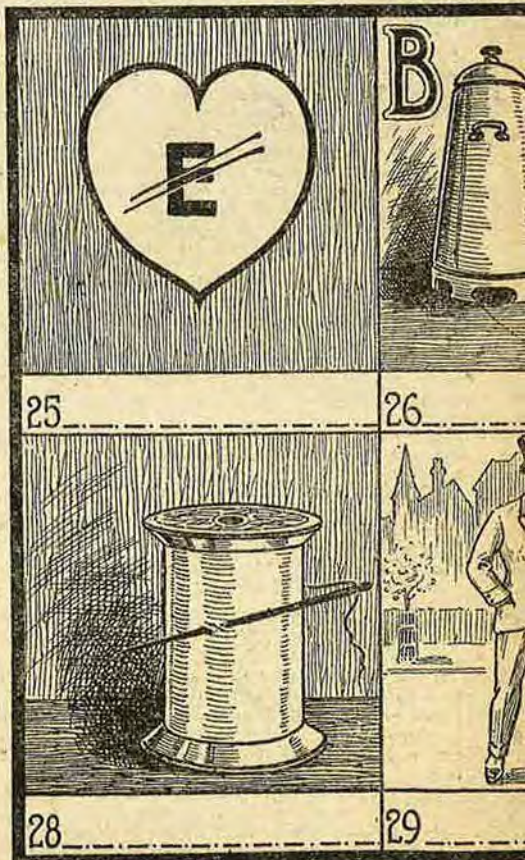
6.—Employees of the proprietors of this journal are not eligible to compete.

7.—Entry to this competition is on the full understanding that the Editor's decision is final and legally binding throughout.



SET No. 5.

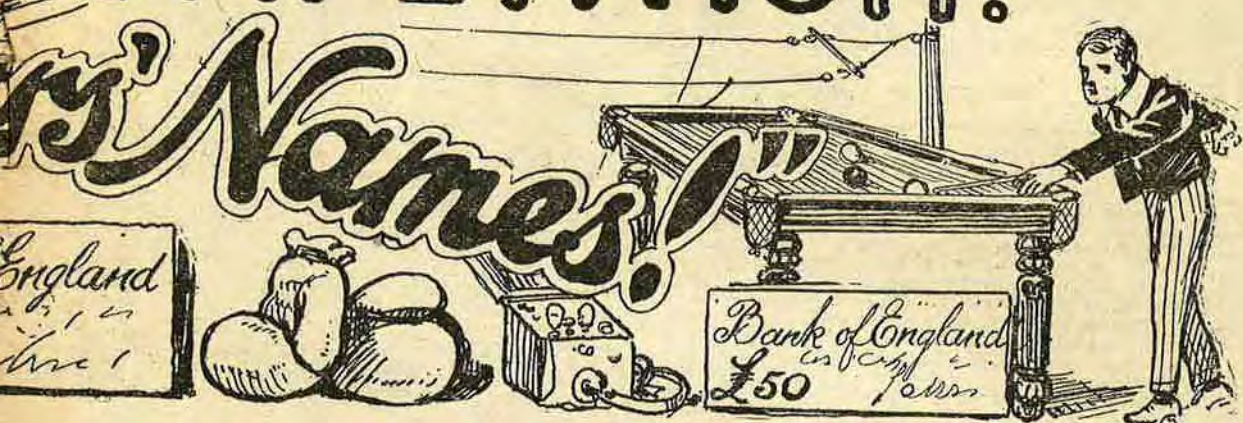
THREE



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15



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MORE SETS TO COME!

ALL YOU HAVE TO DO

is to write **IN INK** in the allotted space under each of the puzzle-pictures the name of the footballer which you think the picture represents. Surely a simple enough task—only six names to discover each week!

In all there will be **EIGHT SETS OF PICTURES**, so keep your solutions until the other sets appear.

DO NOT SEND YOUR ENTRIES YET.

To help you still further we have published in the four preceding issues of the GEM a list of footballers' names, which contains the actual names of the footballers represented by the pictures appearing in this competition.

New readers desirous of entering this contest will also find in **LAST WEEK'S** issue of the GEM the **FIRST FOUR SETS** of the puzzle-pictures. Back numbers of the GEM can be obtained on application to the "Back Numbers Dept.," Bear Alley, Farringdon Street, E.C.4. For each single number required twopence in stamps should be forwarded, also one penny stamp to cover postage. The postal rate for additional copies is an extra halfpenny per copy.

Readers of the "Champion," "Boys' Realm," "Union Jack," "Boys' Friend," "Pluck," "Boys' Cinema," "Young Britain," "Popular," "Maguet," "Rocket," and "Nelson Lee Library" are also taking part in the Contest, so that additional attempts may be made with the pictures from these allied journals.



OUT FOR SET NO. 6—APPEARS NEXT WEEK!



stolen cars and cycles before despatching them to London and other places for disposal.

Tom Merry fairly blinked at the scene. He had imagined all sorts of theories to account for the men's presence there. He had thought of coiners, of forgers, of all sorts of law-breakers. He had never dreamed of this, though.

For fully a minute Tom Merry watched the strange scene, his brain working rapidly, and then he dropped back and rejoined his chums, his eyes dancing with excitement, his face flushed with resolve. Blank looks of astonishment spread over the faces of his chums as he breathlessly related what he had seen.

"It means," he ended up grimly, "that we've now not only got to escape, but we've got to capture those rascals as well—if we can."

"We'll jolly well recover those cars, anyway," said Blake eagerly. "But—but what's your programme, Tommy?"

"Easy enough," sniffed Wally valiantly. "All we've got to do is to give those merchants the kybosh. We're twelve to three, ain't we—not counting old Pongo?"

"It won't be so easy," said Tom, frowning. "Those chaps are bound to be armed to begin with. It's pretty plain that the door leading to the tunnel was built solely as a means of escape if danger threatened. That proves there's a way out that way. But we don't know it. It would be different if that fall of roof hadn't occurred. We've got to tackle the beggars to get out this way."

"We could rush 'em," growled Herries.

"We'll try strategy first," said Tom. "We've got to consider young Wally & Co. I've got it! Our first thought must be to get a message for help through to the school. Will Pongo make for home if you tell him to, Wally?"

"What-ho!" grinned Wally. "Old Pongo has more brains—"

"Then we've got to get him through. Here—"

Tom Merry broke off, his eyes gleaming. Taking his pocket-book out, he tore a leaf from it and scribbled on it rapidly. Then he twisted the note up, and tied it securely to Pongo's collar.

"Now, listen," he said quietly. "Our only chance is to take those men by surprise—no good climbing over and tackling 'em. A revolver would soon put a stop to our chances. I'm going to get them to open the door, then we'll tackle them and make our dash. You, Wally, will attend to Pongo. Send him home directly the door opens. During the confusion he should get through easily—plenty of holes in the shed outside for him to scramble through. Got that?"

The juniors and fags had. They surrounded the door, their eyes gleaming with excitement.

Tom Merry gave one glance at Pongo. That intelligent animal seemed fully to understand what was wanted of him. His body was trembling with excitement as he crouched, taut and waiting, before the door. As Wally stooped over him and whispered, Pongo licked his face, and then again turned his pointed nose towards the crack in the door.

Tom Merry turned and began to hammer on the door with his fists.

He thumped away with all his force until the rickety door rattled and shook under the hurricane of blows. Tom's idea was to bring the men rushing to investigate—and the plan succeeded.

From the far end of the shed there came a yell, followed by the hurried clatter of heavy feet. They heard a savage voice shouting to the effect that "them young imps 'ave got loose!" and next second the door flew open.

"Now!" yelled Tom Merry.

The surprise was complete. The sight of Tom Merry & Co. alone must have been a shock to the rascals. And even as the foremost set foot within the room they got a shock of a different nature.

As he shouted out, Tom Merry swung a neat left under the chin of the man, sending him staggering backwards against his accomplice behind. And in the confusion which followed Wally had acted.

He had already released Pongo from the leash, with which he had been holding the excited animal with difficulty. But as Tom Merry threw confusion upon the rascals Wally gave his pet a gentle slap.

"Home, Pongo, old boy!" he hissed swiftly. "Home—home!"

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He released his grasp of Pongo, and as if a spring had held him Pongo shot away. Diving between the sprawling legs of the reeling rascal Tom had hit, he flashed down the length of the shed like a streak of light.

In the same instant Tom Merry's voice rang out again.

"Rush them! Down with them, you chaps! Quick!"

It all took place in a matter of seconds, and before the startled men had recovered themselves the desperate St. Jim's boys were upon them.

The first man went down with a crash, Tom Merry, Blake, and Herries still clinging to him. The second man held his own for a moment against the combined attack of Arthur Augustus, Levison, and Lowther, until young Carly Gibson flung himself at his legs from behind, and he went down also, with the four sprawling juniors over him.

The third man proved the toughest of the lot. He was a burly fellow, strong as an ox, and he never gave the juniors a chance to get to grips. Manners and Digby he sent spinning with a couple of savage blows, and as Wally, Frank Levison, and Reggie Manners closed pluckily with him he sent them reeling back one after the other.

Then what Tom Merry had feared came about.

The man's hand shot to his hip-pocket, and reappeared an instant later holding something that glinted in the bright light.

"Stand back!" yelled the fellow menacingly. "Back, you little hounds, or—"

He broke off meaningly, and before that pointing weapon the fags hung back, their faces scared.

At the same moment Tom Merry, still struggling on the floor, caught a glimpse of the automatic, and yelled warningly:

"Give in, chaps! Don't move! It's no good."

He ceased struggling abruptly, as did Blake and the others. For themselves the chums of the Fourth and Shell might have risked the firing. Indeed, Tom himself did not believe the fellow would dare to fire. They did not seem to be the sort of men to go to such lengths. But with Third-Formers there Tom Merry was taking no chances.

"Give in, you fellows!" repeated Tom Merry hoarsely. "We—we're beaten."

"You'd better!" sneered the big fellow. "See to them, you two!"

Grinning triumphantly now the other two men rose to their feet, and a moment later the St. Jim's boys were being shepherd back into the living-room, their faces downcast. The three men followed them in, and two of them set to work at once to truss them up.

It seemed that the attempt to get free had failed. But had it? Jack Blake wondered, as he noted that Pongo had not been missed yet. And then, as his eyes ran round the room, Blake's eyes gleamed strangely. He noticed an amazing thing.

Of the twelve St. Jim's fellows who had made that wild dash for liberty only eleven were in the room now.

With a strange thrill Jack Blake scanned the faces of his fellow-captives, and then he knew.

One fellow was undoubtedly missing, and that fellow was Tom Merry.

CHAPTER 10.

Tom Merry's Gallant Effort!

IT was true enough. Yet, baffling as the discovery was to Jack Blake, the explanation was simple enough.

When Tom Merry had risen to his feet, after counselling his chums to give in, he was standing half-hidden from the man holding the automatic by the body of a car.

And as the two men began to shepherd them back to the underground room a sudden desperate plan occurred to him, and he acted upon it like lightning.

A glance showed him that none of the men had their eyes upon him, and as the rest of the hapless juniors surged against him, he slipped like a flash round the rear of the car.

It was done so swiftly and cleverly that even his own chums did not notice the manœuvre. Tom knew that, in that whirling struggle on the floor, there had been no time for anyone to see his features. He guessed also that the men would never think of counting.

And he was right as events proved.

Hardly breathing as he stood motionless behind the big car, Tom Merry waited, almost trembling with anxiety. But though he heard the men fuming at the luckless St. Jim's captives inside the room, no voice of alarm was raised to tell him that his absence was discovered.

Framed in the doorway, with his broad back to him, was the burly leader of the rascals, and, after watching him for a moment, Tom took hold of his courage and began to tip-toe softly down the shed.

In safety he reached to within a few yards of the door, and then he halted, his heart thumping with the excitement that gripped him.

(Continued on page 26.)

A REAL FULL-OF-THRILL YARN!



FILM ACTOR'S LUCK!

River-wise Ned finds that the lot of the film-star is not all honey. Another exciting adventure of the stalwart chums of the Thames barge, Estuary Belle.

By

ROLAND SPENCER.

CHAPTER 1.

No Freights Wanted!

NED DERRY, the young skipper of the London sailing-barge, Estuary Belle, was grumbling. This was a surprising mood for the never-worry young bargee, and Tony Parr and Long Jim Cartwright, Ned's two mates, gaped in wonder as their skipper, with a grimace, threw the letters he had just fetched from the post-office on to the cabin table one by one.

"Letter from Edgar Brunt," said Ned, as the first letter planed down through the air on to the well-scrubbed deal table. Then, as the second, third, and fourth letters took to flight: "One from Beard's Ropeworks, Limited; a bill. 'Nother from Hathernmore's; bill for the use of their grid, of course. 'Nother one from someone unknown—probably a letter from the Lunacy Commissioners warning me that they're calling for you two maniacs—"

But Ned didn't get any further just then. In fact, he went backwards with a yell as a well-directed shot with a boot from the hand of Tony Parr caught him on the chest.

Tony Parr and Long Jim laughed loudly as Ned picked himself up from the floor.

"Why the thump are you growling like a grizzly bear, Ned?" said Long Jim. "Because we haven't had a freight for a week doesn't mean we'll never get one!"

"Doesn't it?" replied Ned. "Well, I'm afraid we sha'n't get business working on our present lines! Other barges are owned by firms that have runners working to secure freights for them. We have to take what we can pick up, and that's precious little! I'm afraid that you two chaps will have to take it in turns acting as runners."

The faces of Tony and Jim fell. That would mean that they would never be able to sail all three together. One would have to be ashore all the time, securing business for the barge.

At last Tony Parr spoke:

"See what that last letter is, anyway, Ned. Maybe it is a bit of business for the barge, or p'raps you've come into a fortune, or something."

Ned grunted, and a trifle savagely ripped the envelope open. Then, as he read, his chums saw a look of blank amazement overspread his bronzed face. This changed to delighted wonder, and

the wonder to a broad grin of sheer delight.

Suddenly, waving the letter on high, Ned began prancing about like one gone mad. He caught Long Jim round the waist and whirled him here and there, knocking Tony Parr over the stove in the course of his wild dance.

"Moderate your transports, you idiotic ass!" howled Tony Parr, from the regions of the stove, afraid yet to rise to his feet. "What's the giddy news, anyway?"

"Ay, ay, spout it out, Ned!" gasped Long Jim, tearing himself away from his young skipper's grasp. "What's the capering for?"

"Read that! Just as we were in need of a stroke of luck, too!" shouted Ned, throwing the letter which had been the cause of the commotion among the unopen ones on the table.

Tony Parr and Long Jim eagerly snatched up the paper, and read:

"Conner's Films, Ltd.,

Henley-on-Thames.

N. Derry, Esq.,

Barge Estuary Belle.

Dear Sir,—A friend of yours—Miss Dorothy Farnie—is taking the leading part in a new feature film being produced by this company. In the scenario the characters have adventures on a London sailing-barge, so I am desirous of securing the services of some barge-owner who knows the London river well, and who could manœuvre his barge in accordance with our requirements for certain scenes in the drama.

I cannot, of course, go into details until I know that you will sign the contract, so I should be glad to hear from you by return. If you and your mates Mr. Parr and Mr. Cartwright could come to see me at once, we could talk things over.

I would mention that the fees will be worth-while ones, and if the matter is carried through successfully I can offer you a retaining fee for the use of your barge whenever this company may need her. That will be, of course, a regular cheque sent to you every month, and when you and your barge are required

for the making of a film, extra fees will then be paid.

I cannot go into exact figures till we meet, so I trust you will reply to this letter in person as soon as you possibly can.

Yours faithfully,

RUDOLPH CONNER

(Producer).

P.S.—If your call will be in the morning, please come to the London offices, 119b, Shaftesbury Avenue.—R. C."

Tony and Jim stood dazed for a second or two. Then they also burst into song and dance. Ned caught the fever again, and, with dangerously high temperatures, the chums whooped and shouted and stamped and jumped in that little cabin till they were breathless.

"What a stroke of luck!" at last gasped Tony, as he lay sprawled out on a locker to regain his breath.

"It's the best news we've had for ages!"

"How much will they offer, do you think?"

"I'll bet the playing-fees will be high. P'raps four pounds or so per time. And you can bet the retaining-fee won't be less than about two pounds a week!"

"H'm! Don't you be too optimistic about the fees, you enthusiastic chumps, or you may be disappointed!"

Ned was serious again. He had hauled out the boot-polish and brushes, and his chums took their cue from their skipper. Then there was much brushing and splashing, and selecting of ties and shirts. At last the lads were bright and spruce, ready for their journey to Shaftesbury Avenue to interview the great English film producer, Rudolph Conner.

That day at about one o'clock a tea-shop opposite No. 119b, Shaftesbury Avenue saw a right royal feed treated right royally by three wildly happy and excited young bargees. They and their barge had been engaged for picture-making at a retaining fee of six pounds a week and playing-fees of twenty-one pounds per day!

After that historic feed the chums got back to the Belle to impart the great news to their lady-love, and put an extra Turk's-head knot on the midship spoke of the wheel in honour of the great occasion.

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ANSWERS
EVERY MONDAY...PRICE 2:

CHAPTER 2.

Mystery!

THE chums had received full instructions and a copy of the scenario of the drama: "The Heritage of Might!" Scenes 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 35, and 36 were marked with blue crayon. These were the scenes that interested the chums most. Scene 15 was the barge at a wharf. The hero comes staggering along with the senseless heroine, Christina, in his arms. Ned and his chums scramble ashore, and are seen in Scene 16 taking the beautiful Christina—Miss Farne—from Reginald Arbutnot, the hero. Arbutnot sinks down exhausted; and, as Ned gets Christina on the barge, Scene 17 shows Tony and Jim staggering down with Reggie, who is now senseless as well.

In Scene 18 villains appear on the wharf and shoot with big revolvers at the people on the barge. The old Belle's warps are cut, the topsail is drawn out, and, with a face like cast iron and a jaw stuck out as far as he can get it, Ned takes the barge clear of the wharf, spinning the wheel round rapidly.

Scene 19 shows the barge at sea. Scene 20 shows a floating mine, all bristling with spikes, and ready to go off if you look at it too quickly. Scene 21 shows the mine drifting close up to the bow of the barge. Then the story is switched back to the shore, the idea being to leave the audience breathless and rigid, not knowing what will be the fate of Reggie, Christina, and the barge. In Scene 35 the barge is again shown, just about to leap on top of the mine. Scene 36 is the most ghastly part of the picture. It is a terrific explosion, with planks, spars, cordage, and what not ascending into

the air—in fact, the blowing up of the barge.

That ended the chums' part in the picture. The other scenes were the hero and heroine clinging desperately to a lump of wreckage floating on the morning tide. A steamer picks them up, and they get ashore to have further adventures with Jasper Marlow, the villain.

Obviously, the blowing up of the barge was to be a "wangle," and Mr. Conner, the producer, had told Ned that he and his assistant, Mr. Vincent Harn, would be ready to discuss the matter with him any Saturday evening at the country house in Kent, where he was wont to spend his week-ends. The barge, of course, would really suffer no hurt.

With the idea of having a talk with the producer, the chums went ashore the following Saturday at Greenhithe, where the barge was lying, and walked inland. They arrived at the house at about nine o'clock p.m., but no lights were showing in the front windows.

"H'm! Mr. Conner can't be here this week-end," said Ned to his chums. "No good us rattling at the doorknocker or buzzing the bell if nobody's there. Let's go round to the back of the house and see if there are any lights there before we start kicking up a rumpus with the doorknocker."

"The lads, who had been to the house before on business with Mr. Conner, went through the lattice gate at the side and walked across the lawn. To their satisfaction they saw a path of light streaming out on to the grass from the french windows of Conner's favourite room. The lads were about to go round to the front again, when River-wise Ned gripped his chums' arms.

"Listen!" whispered the young bargee. "That's Vincent Harn's voice. Crumbs, he and Conner are having a

row. We'd better get back to the Belle and see the producer on Monday in London."

"Well, if it's a row, Harn's doing all the rowing. One would think Harn the boss, and Conner only second fiddle, instead of the other way about. Gosh!"

The lads stood rigid as a harsh laugh sounded from Harn.

"Dib up, Conner," the assistant producer was saying. "You'll be a fool if you don't, for I can have you in the dust, remember. I only want five hundred now, since your business isn't quite what it was. You'll be a fool if you don't fork out! No, no, stand back, or, by thunder, I'll shoot!"

Ned and his pals crept up to the french windows, which were slightly open. They felt that perhaps their presence might be handy for Mr. Conner, since, obviously, he was being threatened by a firearm. They peeped into the room.

Mr. Conner had subsided into a big, leather-covered easy-chair. His hands were gripping the arms of the chair, the knuckles white with the strong grip he maintained. The man was apparently battling to keep control of himself. Vincent Harn, the assistant producer of the company, was standing sneering on the hearthrug, a small automatic pistol clenched in his fist.

The chums were perplexed. Harn was trying to wrest hush-money from Conner, without doubt. The former was a smallish man with sleek black hair, shifty eyes, and a black toothbrush moustache. The chums had disliked him from the first.

Rudolph Conner, the producer, was quite a different type of man. Both the men were bronzed and seasoned-looking, but while Harn reminded one of a wise ferret, Conner seemed nothing but big and honest and likeable. Yet he was paying hush-money for something to Harn!

At last the producer rose. He threw a contemptuous glance in Harn's direction as he walked across the room. Then he opened a secretaire, drew a cheque-book out of a pigeon-hole, and filled in a cheque. He jerked the slip over to the greedy-eyed Harn with a gesture of utter disgust.

Harn, unruffled, stooped and picked up the cheque from the hearthrug, and then backed towards the french windows.

"You are wise, Conner," said the man, as he opened the window and stepped out backwards, just as Ned and his pals retreated hurriedly.

The evil little man, however, saw the chums scurrying round the corner of the house, and he scowled savagely.

"I see you, you young hounds," he muttered to himself. "Ned Derry and his mates. What game are those young rats up to, I wonder? Spying—eh? Well, I'll deal with them all in my own good time. For the moment I'll slip off just as if I'd not seen them."

With that the blackmailer disappeared in the shrubbery and skirmished round the house on the opposite side to that where Ned and his pals were hiding. Suddenly he straightened up, and, buttoning his coat, he crunched down the drive to the gates.

"Good! Harn hasn't spotted us," said Ned. "Well, chums, I'm afraid we've got a job to do and heard something we oughtn't to



At a word from Ned the three chums rushed upon the big, bearded man. They met him like a bull meeting a stone wall. Scardon hit out right and left with his mutton fists.

know about. Still, we had to stop for fear Mr. Conner would need help. We'd best keep dark about this."

"Ay, we'd better not let anyone know," said Long Jim. "Conner would be the least pleased of anyone to think we'd seen and heard what we have. Let's just ring the bell now and discuss the business just as we should have if we hadn't seen the little drama through the french windows at the back."

"Right-ho! Come on!"

CHAPTER 3.

Who is Scardon?

MR. CONNER, Ned, and his pals worked out a good scheme to get the effect of the barge blowing up, and it was fairly late when the young barges set off again for Greenhithe.

It was a walk of some miles, and they had to pass through some of the prettiest country in Kent—wooded, hilly land, with winding, narrow paths, a trifle dangerous in places in the darkness.

However, Ned knew those woods well. He also knew the shortest cuts, and though they would be trespassing, the chums broke away from the pathway through a sparsely wooded part of the country and plunged into the private grounds of a big house.

"Funny old house," said Ned, jerking his head sideways to indicate where the house was situated. "I've passed through these grounds pretty often, but I've never been seen. If there's anyone living there he keeps pretty well inside his home walls."

"Where'll this voyage of discovery lead us, Ned?" asked Long Jim.

"We'll get through the gateway of the house on to the hard road leading up to the London Road."

"Crums, we shall be pretty near home, then!"

"Ay, ay, it won't be far once we're through this rambling old plantation."

The lads pushed on, Ned signing them to keep silent as they passed close to the house. Soon the chums burst through the ragged bushes on to a weedy, neglected-looking carriage drive. Down this they were about to swing, when Tony Parr dived for shelter, and Ned and Jim followed suit.

The reason for this manoeuvre soon appeared. It was two men strolling up the drive talking earnestly. The chums peered out from their hiding-place.

"Gosh!" gasped Ned. "Harn and a big bloated blighter stepped out of the Chamber of Horrors at Tusaud's."

The chums stared in wonder at running against Harn again just there. Then they crouched low as the two men passed close by. They thrilled with excitement as they heard Harn say:

"Now, understand, Scardon, you mustn't get too near the gate. Conner will be hereabouts a lot now we've got the river scenes in our latest drama to produce. Also, there are those young rats people call River-wise Ned and his mates. They're spying; saw them only an hour or two ago. If Conner gets one sight of you our game is up!"

The men passed on, and Ned and his mates, mystified, slipped out of their hiding-place and got on to the road in double-quick time.

"By jingo, chums," voiced Ned, "it looks as if there's another applecart looming up over the horizon, simply begging us to upset it. What say you?"

"What-ho!" replied Long Jim. "If there's any sort of villainy afoot we'll see if we can interest ourselves in it."

The lads interested themselves in it

earlier than they bargained for. On their arrival at Greenhithe in a little narrow, lonely lane leading down to the waterfront, three men sprang out from a doorway, swinging sandbags. Ned, Tony, and Long Jim dodged and ducked, hitting out where they could, and very soon the attackers and attacked were locked in a deadly embrace.

By common consent, the chums had



Suddenly there was a shattering explosion, and all aboard the Belle, with the exception of Ned Derry, were thrown flat on the deck. Ned crouched low over the wheel as huge lumps of hissing iron came hurtling past his ears.

closed in on their assailants, knowing that the swinging sandbags would be a great danger to them unless they got in to close-quarter fighting.

Accompanied by grunts and gasps and yelps of pain, the struggling six swayed here and there, banging against the brick walls on either side occasionally, but all the time working down the lane towards the water.

Ned, by a lucky fluke, got in a beautiful right hook to the point of his particular opponent's jaw. The man went back without a sound, and Ned then turned fiercely to the aid of his pals. A hard, slogging fight it was even then, but at last the lads, bruised and battered and breathless, managed to tip the two powerful men into the four-foot depth of water alongside the quay. Then, without stopping to apologise, they bundled into their barge boat, rowed out to the Belle, and prepared the barge for a state of siege.

No further attack came, however, so the lads concluded that their assailants had had enough for one night.

"What was the motive for that, do you think?" asked Long Jim, as he dabbed at his right eye with a damp towel. "Gosh, if we hadn't closed quickly we'd have been sandbagged for sure."

"Ay, and then carried off and imprisoned somewhere, I'll bet," said Ned.

"My opinion is that Harn sent those ruffians off to Greenhithe to wait for our return. Heard what he said to that Chamber of Horrors blighter? He did see us at Conner's house, after all! And the cunning beggar walked off as if he'd spotted nothing unusual! He's afraid of us, evidently."

"Well," said Tony, as he rubbed

embrocation into a bruise on his arm, "forewarned is forearmed, anyway. Harn thinks he has the advantage of us. Who's that Scardon chap, anyway, and why is it he mustn't be seen by Conner?"

Ned Derry turned his dripping face to his chums in sudden excitement. The young barge skipper was washing his face, which had stopped a blow or two from a muddy sandbag.

"By Jupiter, chums," he gasped, "I've got the scheme. We'll just bide our time until the day before the taking of the scenes we're to act in, then we'll go and capture Scardon, keep him a prisoner and after the work is done, show him to Conner. Harn himself said that if Conner sees Scardon all their plans will be spoilt. Well, we'll see if we can spoil 'em that way."

"H'm!" said Tony Parr. "But it won't be easy. If Harn thinks it worth while to have three ruffians waiting to attack us with the idea of capturing us because he fancies we know something, you can bet your boots that Scardon will be well looked after."

"It doesn't follow," said Ned. "Remember, you chump, that Harn doesn't know we are aware that Scardon is in the stew, too. We can spring a surprise on them there. The element of surprise has won many a battle and war, you know."

"By Jove, yes! Of course, he won't dream that we know of Scardon, and where Scardon is living and so on. And if Scardon is in the habit of walking in the plantation all alone—pooh, it's simple!"

"Then what we do is sit tight and look after ourselves, keeping our weather eyes

lifted for squalls, until the day before the "stunts." Then look out, Mr. Scardon.

The chums looked themselves into their cabin, set their own particular alarm gadgets to warn them of attack, and slept like the babes in the wood.

CHAPTER 4. The "Stunts."

TO the surprise of the chums of the Belle no further attempt was made to capture them. The lads shrewdly deduced from this that Harn had concluded that they either knew nothing, or felt that what they did know was of too delicate a nature for them to poke their oars in. So things drifted quietly on.

The day before the stunts arrived. Three rehearsals had resulted in great praise for Ned and his chums. They manoeuvred the barge in splendid style, and Miss Farne, the actress, who was being starred in that drama, was delighted with the young bargees' initiative and cleverness in playing their parts.

The explosion business had all been worked out carefully. The mine, of course, was an old war relic with the charge taken out, and Ned had so to steer the barge that the old craft would hit the mine with her lee bow. Just at that instant a depth charge would be exploded between the barge and the camera—very near the barge, though. This explosion would shatter a rough raft of planks and ropes and spars lashed together and held by weights about six feet under water. These, of course, would all be sent soaring skywards, with the accompanying column of water. This would hide the barge from the camera for an instant, and there that part of the picture would stop abruptly. Should the undamaged barge become visible for a flash as the water died down again, the film could be cut after developing.

The lads had a good bit to do preparing for the scenes, but that did not prevent them from slipping quietly ashore during the early evening and journeying up to the old house where Scardon lived his secluded life.

The lads arrived there at the time when dinner would be about finished. They had discovered by a bit of clever scouting that Scardon always had an after-dinner smoke in the grounds. The weather was just right, so it was reasonable to suppose that he would not depart from this habit that evening.

Crouching in the neglected shrubbery, River-wise Ned and his chums watched and waited, their eyes on the big front door of the house. Their patience was rewarded before long. The front door opened, and Scardon bulked into the doorway. He descended the stone steps ponderously, and set off with a heavy tread towards the right, selecting a weed-grown pathway through the plantation.

Ned, Tony, and Jim quietly scouted along through the shrubbery, making for a point some distance along the path Scardon had taken. They arrived at the pathway, where they dropped into cover, and waited with thumping hearts for the big, bearded man to heave into sight.

He came, walking slowly along the pathway, puffing at a fat cigar. At a whispered word from Ned, the three chums leapt up and rushed at the man. They met him like a bull meeting a stone wall. The strength of the man was something to wonder at.

Scardon began to lay about him with his stick. Tony Part caught the cane—a malacca—and wrenched it from the big

man's grasp. Then Scardon hit out right and left with his mutton fists, proving that he was not wholly an unscientific fighter. The weight behind his blows was fearsome, and had the lads stopped one of those swinging punches fair and square, it would probably have been a case of manslaughter.

Scardon shouted, but Long Jim had leapt at his chest. The plucky, lanky mate of the Belle pressed his hand over the man's mouth, and while Scardon was clawing and banging at Jim, Ned and Tony got a rope round his wrists, and soon had him helpless.

The man was then gagged, and Ned piloted the whole party out on to the road from the plantation. There they bundled Scardon into a cart they had hired for the purpose, covered him with sackings, and bore him triumphantly down to the water-front at Greenhithe, en route for the Belle's fo'c'sle.

So far so good. The lads thought that they had secured an easy victory now, for the next morning Harn, in attending for the production of the sea scenes for "The Heritage of Might," was in high good humour. He had evidently not heard of the disappearance of Scardon.

The light was excellent for picture-making that day, so the company got busy. With Mr. Conner directing operations from behind the camera-man, with a megaphone to his lips, and Harn bawling out suggestions here and there, the drama was acted for the last time.

The hero came staggering down to the wharf with the beautiful heroine, who was laughing and joking till they came within the picture area, then she feigned senselessness, hanging limply in Reginald Arbuthnot's arms.

"Now then, Dorry, and you others on the barge, get to it!"

Mr. Conner's voice boomed through the megaphone, and Ned and his chums began to act as the camera was turned round facing them. Ned, with a sailor-like scramble up the ropes dangling over the wharf-side, was beside the hero and heroine just as the hero sank down in a dead faint. Ned gathered Miss Farne up in his arms, bawled to his chums to collect Reggie—the famous film actor, John Garton—and slid down on to the Belle's deck. Tony and Jim followed with the hero, and Ned put the beautiful heroine down on the main hatch, very gently, then leapt for the wheel. The chums

were acting grimly, and shouts of "Good—oh, good, you bargees!" came from Mr. Conner.

"Slash those warps, Tony. Leggo mains'l brail, and draw out the tawp's! Jim!" bawled Ned, just to make things look natural. Then the young barge skipper spun the wheel round, the land breeze bellied out the brown canvas of the barge, and the old craft began to move proudly away from the wharf as the villains of the piece appeared and loosed their revolver-shots, which splashed into the water round about.

The camera was then hastily got on to the producer's launch, Conner and Harn followed, and the old Estuary Belle was pictured as she listed from the breeze and pointed down river. She made a fine picture, for she was being superbly handled. Her sails were set like a yacht's, and Ned kept her well full, so that the audience, when viewing the picture, would almost feel the lunging list from the wind at every stronger blow.

The launch kept well up with the barge. Then Conner bawled through the megaphone:

"Put about now, and point down river. Get her on the mine."

Ned brought the old barge round smartly on to the other tack, Tony and Jim handling the headsails as if their lives depended on it. Then the Belle, with a bone in her teeth, as the appearance of white, frothy water at the fore-foot is termed, bore on steadily towards the floating mine, which could now be seen bobbing about on the water.

The launch had raced over to the mine and had taken scene twenty by the time the Belle approached. Ned's job was now to steer the barge so that his lee bow would hit the mine. Then there would be the explosion, and the fervent hope by all on the barge that they wouldn't be hit by a lump of flying timber.

Miss Farne was nervous. From her position at the weather spit vang, where she had been instructed to stand, having come round from her faint, she spoke to Ned at the wheel.

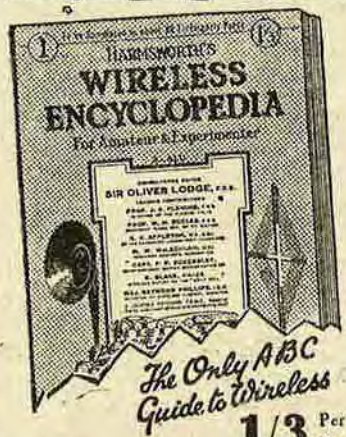
"For goodness' sake sweep away from the explosion as soon as you possibly can, Mr. Dorry!" she said. "Oh, I do so hate explosions!"

"Trust me," said Ned, grinning. "I'm not so fond of explosions myself. The gas-works blew up once near me, and I've never been myself since. I'm not going to touch that mine, though it is a dud. It's down hellum before we get there. It'll look from the launch just as if we have touched it, so the picture won't lose by it."

"Oh dear—don't spoil the picture!" said Miss Farne. "It'll be frightfully difficult to turn round at the right second, won't it?"

"Well, it'll take a bit of judgment, Miss Farne; but we bargees have to rely on fine judgment every hour of the day when sailing. I know the Belle, and the Belle knows me, and my mates know the headsheets, so I'll bet we'll be twenty-five yards away from the big bang when it does occur. There's the mine ahead. Look out now, everyone! I'm going to drive the barge for a few yards. Then we'll come round with a roar."

The mine seemed to rush towards the barge. The launch was some little distance off, the camera man very busy, and Conner and Harn tense with excitement. Suddenly, Miss Farne, in her role of the heroine, threw up her arms with a shriek, and pointed to the mine. The hero caught her in his arms as she swooned, and, with a funny feeling in their breasts, though they knew the



BUY PART 1 TO-DAY

To be completed in about
20 fortnightly parts.

mine was a dud one, the barge leapt at the bristling iron monster.

Ned yelled, and forced the helm hard down, just as the water to leeward was ripped up with a roaring explosion. The smart young barge skipper had missed the bristles of the mine by six inches, and the Belle was on the other tack and swamping away from the column of water and lumps of timber before even they had begun to descend from the skies.

They were well clear, owing to the chums' smart seamanship, and there would be no danger. Miss Farnie turned towards the lads and laughed, and John Garton took out his handkerchief and mopped his brow. Then all but Ned on that deck were thrown flat as a shattering second explosion occurred just astern. Ned crouched low over the wheel as huge lumps of hissing iron came hurtling past his ears, to go tearing through the barge's sails or to plough up furrows in her tough wooden decks.

The wheel seemed loose in Ned's hands as the dazed lad forced the helm up. Tony Parr was lying with blood trickling down his forehead hard by the wheel, and Long Jim was crumpled up with the film actor and actress on the main hatch. The mizzen-sail of the barge sagged over, the mast cracked and broke at a part that had been practically severed by a hurtling lump of iron.

Ned could not steer. The steering-gear was out of action, and the young bargee leapt for the sweep. With this he managed to keep the barge off the wind after he had let go the mainsheet. So the barge sailed right through the bobbing wreckage in the still broken water of the recent explosion.

Ned felt the Belle's stern sinking lower and lower, and the lad's head buzzed as he strained at the sweep. However, the Belle continued her ramp to leeward, and took the mud in a sinking condition, with her rudder shattered and her stempost stove in. The tide was dropping, so for the moment they were safe, and Ned sank down on the main hatch, exhausted, as Mr. Conner and the others on the launch leapt aboard the barge.

Ned rose.

"That mine, Mr. Conner," he said unsteadily—"it was loaded! I saw a lump of timber fall right on to it, and then the second explosion occurred. See to these people. I'll see to my chums. Gosh, talk about being baked fore'n' aft with shrapnel!"

Ned was about to drop down on his knees beside Tony Parr, when he spotted a form wading up through the shallow water and on to the mud that ringed the marshes at that part of the river. With a very grim look, Ned told Mr. Conner to see to the wounded. Then, just as Miss Farnie raised her head as her senses returned, the lad dived overboard, and, with a strong and powerful trudge, every stroke shouting out his determination, he cleaved rapidly through the water, and was soon leaping along over the mud to intercept the escaping Vincent Harn.

Ned closed at once, and got home a mighty left on Harn's solar plexus. The man crumpled up on the mud, and Ned dragged him, slithering, over the bank and so into the water. He was back on the Belle with his burden before long. There he found Long Jim, Miss Farnie, and John Garton, who had by this time recovered consciousness. Long Jim assured Ned that Tony was in no danger, though he had had a clip on the head by a piece of flying shrapnel.

"What about Scardon, Ned?" asked Long Jim.

At the name, Mr. Conner swung round with a white face. He looked questioningly at the chums. Ned thereupon dropped down into the fore-castle of the barge, followed by Jim, and in a trice they had huddled Scardon up on to the deck. The big, brutal-looking man had terror stamped on his flabby features.

Conner fell back with a cry. "Scardon!" he gasped. "How—how did you know about—"

"I didn't know about it—nor do I know now," replied Ned. "I only know that Harn, there, said once that if you were to see Scardon the game, for him, would be up. So my chums and I agreed to give you a view of him—though he isn't a pretty picture to look at."

"He's the fairest picture I've ever looked on, Ned!" gulped Conner. "Lad, I thought I had killed this man. I fired at him once in America, and he fell. I—I've—"

"And Harn there has often taunted you as a murderer, sir. I know! Well, there's Scardon and there's Harn. You can charge them with what you like; but my chums and I are going to charge them with assault and attempted murder by replacing the dud mine for the film drama with a real, live, loaded one!"

Miss Farnie here broke in:

"Ned Derry, you are wonderful! If you had just touched that mine, instead of missing it by inches—"

"The Belle's fore-castle would have parted company with the after-quarters, miss, and Scardon here would never have been able to delight the eyes of Mr. Conner. Hallo, Tony, old chump! Coming round, are you? The drama's ended, old son. Did you get your picture all right, Mr. Conner?"

"I did, my lad—a splendid picture! And I only hope it will be shown in the dim, distant future to these two beauties here when a picture-show is given at Dartmoor or Portland, or wherever they're going! For my charge against Harn is blackmail, and against Scardon the attempted murder of a coloured boy whom he was thrashing to death with a whip when I shot at him."

"What a pretty little bundle of charges!" grinned Ned. "Almost as good as that charge of ammonal the brute must have put in the mine, for all this to happen!"

Ned looked ruefully at his wrecked rudder and mizzen-gear and torn mainsail; but Mr. Conner, now over his shock, slapped the lad on the back.

"Don't worry, Ned!" the jovial producer cried. "The company has to put all that right; you know. And there'll be more pictures where the Belle will be needed later on."

THE END.

(Be sure you read next week's grand footer yarn, boys, "ON THE STROKE OF TIME!" You will enjoy it.)

YOUR EDITOR CHATS ABOUT NEXT WEEK'S "GEM."

My Dear Chums,—There will be something to think over in next week's GEM. This time it is a subject with a special appeal to all admirers of Cardew. There are legions of these. The GEM always provides plenty of interest—plenty of ideas which you have to turn over in your mind. Next Wednesday it does so more than ever. It is all concerning the St. Jim's yarn.

"CARDEW THE REBEL!" By Martin Clifford.

The finest story the famous author has written! That will be your verdict, as it is mine. Cardew slacks once too often. He lets things down at footer practice. Kildare's wrath is roused, and Tom Merry has not any too good reason to like Cardew for his share in the pother. The carry on of this wonderful yarn is prodigious. Matters are rushed to a climax. You get new glimpses of the strange, secretive nature of Cardew. He is a fellow whose obstinate phases have brought about the whirlwind before now. Look out for an entrancing yarn.

THE GREAT COMPETITION!

Time is drawing on. There is still time to join up for the grandest competition ever put before readers; but please remember this point—not any too much time. We often hear about the sands running out. Just try and conjure up in your mind's eye one of those funny old egg boilers, the kind that worries the cook, with the brown sand gently falling from the upper glass cylinder into the lower. It always looks as if the job would take hours, but it does not. This is just a reminder. Time is trickling away, and if you have not turned your attention to the solution of the puzzle pictures—well, do so now. Tell your chums in like case they must not miss this chance.

OUR CHRISTMAS NUMBER!

It will be top-hole. Readers drop me hints about what they want. I have done my best to get what everybody wants in the superlatively fine Christmas issue of the good old GEM.

"ON THE STROKE OF TIME!"

A great footer yarn for next week. Sam Jennings does the big thing on a wreck—risks his own life for another's sake. It is acts of this sort that rip away the commonplace, and show us what life really is. But there is lots more. Read next Wednesday of Sam's re-meeting with the fellow he plucked from the jaws

of death. What does he find? Simply that the comrade he rescued is standing in the place which should be his! The follow on is magnificent.

"THE TRIERS!" By Jack Orichon.

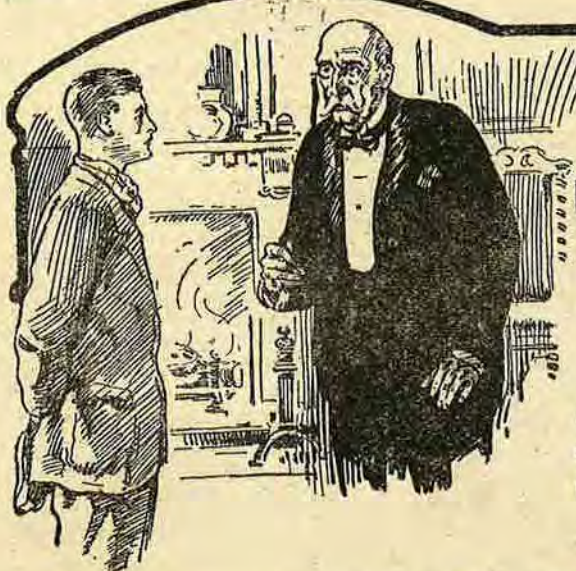
Our next week's programme is full of excellent fare, and one of the first places must be given to a particularly strong and convincing instalment of Jack Orichon's football serial. But to describe this powerful tale like that is to do but bare justice to its scope. The story of the fight in the north—the battle of brains between unscrupulous covetousness and the right cause which is oppressed—is a many-sided affair. It has got character in it, also that fine sense of values, and of playing the game which is the hall-mark of lifelike drama.

MIKE FOR EVER!

I do not know about there being love for Mike, but the quaint person has won heaps of admiration. Coming soon is another humorous story about the worthy with his penchant for making motor-cars. In the new yarn Mike takes on the wireless. Just one of those simple little jobs which must suit him.

Your Editor.

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THE TRIERS

BY
JACK CRICHTON



A victim of Fate, Jack Morton, with the aid of his noble band of "leather chasers" determines to checkmate his rascally cousin, and regain his rights.

Their Big Test!

THERE was no denying the interest that was being taken in the town of Boltwich that afternoon with regard to the match between the Triers and Boltwich Reserves.

Everyone was talking about it, and even if one of the big League teams, bang at the top of the table, had been visiting the first team of the Boltwich club, instead of these unknown, untried lads, there could not have been a bigger crowd or more excitement.

The fact of the matter was, that although the Triers were unknown and untried, a great deal of gossip had gone round Boltwich concerning them. This was something new and novel and unique in the football history of the town. These lads were pitted against the settled, organised club, and it was an open secret that the one thing which bound them together was a common feud against George Clifton.

There was a spice in the business then.

It was not as though either George Clifton or the old Boltwich club were popular in the town. All had been well enough with the club itself until Clifton had become managing director. But since that time he had done so much to annoy the town that the club had suffered in popularity, and now more folks than not in Boltwich were heartily glad to hear that rivals were lifting up their heads.

"Call it sporting of Mr. Clifton to give these lads a chance," quoth Babe Bolton that afternoon, as he strode along in the vast crowd towards the ground. He was surrounded by some friends and admirers, for even a beaten boxer always has certain satellites who hang about him, hoping, it would seem, to gain a little of his reflected glory—even when that glory is somewhat tarnished.

A man close by heard the words. He was no one in particular, just a Boltwich fan, who had been disgusted at the way in which George Clifton had got rid of some of the best men in the team, just to spite his own ill-nature, and he looked across at the Babe with a grin. People didn't take quite so much care of what they said to the Babe since the fight with Harry Turner.

"Sporting!" he exclaimed. "I shouldn't."

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be in a hurry to accuse George Clifton of anything very sporting, Bolton. He is probably doing it because he thinks that the young lads will get such a doing that it will put paid to their account for good! Do you think George Clifton would stand for the game this afternoon if he thought it was going to do anything but finish the Triers?"

"Well, it will!" sneered the Babe.

"We'll see!"

They entered the ground then, paying the increased price which George Clifton had recently put upon the gate, and which had not done much to enhance his popularity with Boltwich, and were soon lost in the crowd.

But while they were saying these things, a conversation a good deal of the same nature was taking place in the dressing-room where Jack Morton and Steve Logan had already changed, and were trying to think of something else beyond their own bad luck.

"We've got to beat these chaps this afternoon, Jack," Steve was saying, "for you can take it from me that the only reason Clifton gave us a game is to make us look small in the eyes of the town, to make us look ridiculous, and there is nothing which kills at Soccer like ridicule."

Jack nodded grimly.

"Yes, I know that, Steve," he said; "and after that performance this morning, sacking us like that, it is war to the knife between us. I want to beat them this afternoon, and I want to prove to all the world that George Clifton is a swindler and a fraud, and did my mother and me out of our rightful inheritance. And I am going to do it!"

"Good luck to you, boy!" muttered Steve, and then started. "Ah, here's Harry!"

It was the first time that either of the lads had seen Harry Turner since the happenings of the early morning. They had had a word from him to say that he was going to turn

out that afternoon, but that was all; and now he came towards them, with a hand held out, and looking very sorry for himself.

"I say, you fellows," he exclaimed, "I am really dreadfully sorry about all this! What can I say? I had to sell. I could not help myself, and I had no idea that the fellow Clifton was such a downright rogue!"

Jack quickly grasped his hand.

"That's all right, Harry!" he exclaimed. "Help us to win this afternoon, and it shall all be forgiven!"

Harry flushed with pleasure at the good fellowship in those simple words.

"Well, you're a sport, Jack!" he said. And then: "Of course, I'll keep goal as I have never done in all my born days. But, I say, what are you two going to do about a job each?"

Steve looked serious.

"Blessed if I know!" he said.

"I've got a job!" said Jack between his teeth.

Both his pals started and looked at him.

"A job! What job?"

"To find out what George Clifton did with the second will my grandfather undoubtedly made the night before he died, and to prove him before all the world a scoundrel and a thief!"

He was able to say no more, for at that moment they were told that it was time to take the field, and out of the dressing-room the lads trooped.

What a reception!

George Clifton, standing in the directors' stand, next to Monty King, the team's trainer, flushed purple. Not in his memory had he heard such a roar go up on the Boltwich ground.

"What's that all about, King?" he snarled, as the Boltwich fans flung caps and hats and sticks in the air, and shouted again and again greetings and good luck to the youngsters. "Why that row?"

Monty King grinned. He was a good old fellow, who knew more about football in one minute than George Clifton would ever know. He had been sorely tried by Clifton. Of course, he had his own job to look after, for he was ageing now, and the jobs went to the younger men, but it had been hard indeed to see good men, such as Steve Logan and Ronnie Stevens, turned out of the Boltwich team because George Clifton didn't happen to like them, and the present cheering told him a good deal.

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE!

For the sake of his invalid mother, Jack Morton, a lad of seventeen, calls upon his grandfather, Sir Jasper Clifton, for aid. It was by no means a pleasant undertaking for Jack, for his mother, much against her father's wishes, had married a worker in Sir Jasper's mill, who was now dead. Sir Jasper, however, is taken up with the lad straight away, saying that he will alter his will and make him co-heir with George Clifton, another grandson, and Jack's cousin, and whose great interest in life is the Boltwich Football Club. In high spirits, Jack gives up his old job to take up work at Clifton's. But Sir Jasper dies that night. Thinking only of his mother, Jack goes to George Clifton, but his appeal proves futile, Clifton telling him that the will is unaltered, and that he is not

wanted. Jack's anger is aroused, and, meeting Ronnie Stevens, whom George Clifton had deemed it wise to sack, the two lads, former players of Boltwich F.C., determine to fight Clifton.

"We'll get a team that won't be beat," said Stevens, "and call them the Triers."

The team shows great promise, much to the annoyance of Clifton. Seeking revenge, the crafty Clifton approaches Harry Turner, for whom Jack Morton is now working. Offering a handsome price, Clifton buys up the business, his sole object being to throw Morton out of employment.

"That settles it!" says Jack. "I'll find out the truth of this will, or my name's not Morton!"

(Now read on.)

"Oh, just wishing the youngsters good luck, Mr. Clifton," he explained.

Clifton ground his teeth.

"Wait till they see the stuff these famous Triers play!"

"Yes, sir," said King quietly.

The game was about to start, and Clifton said no more, though it was clear upon whose side were the sympathies of the enormous crowd.

The day was perfect—little sun, no wind—and the ground true and not too hard. If either side could play Soccer, here was an opportunity.

The Triers had out absolutely their best team, and immediately started off at a great pace.

But within sixty seconds Jack discovered that he was a marked man.

No sooner did he make a move, no sooner was the leather deflected towards him, than a host of enemies rushed down upon him. For a moment or two he thought it was a mere coincidence, but then, when suddenly he found himself mixed up in some very rough business between four opponents, he understood.

He was a marked man, and probably word had gone forth that it didn't much matter if he left the field a little the worse for wear.

Still, he did not lose his head.

He passed word back to Ronnie Stevens at half-back not to bother about him too much, and, to the disgust of the opposing half-backs, who were marking him, the ball scarcely came to Jack at all for the first quarter of an hour.

Instead, whenever he could, Ronnie slipped the ball out to Laurie Robson on the right wing, where that young man was playing his best and fastest game, or to Jim Fraser on the left of Jack.

Of course, ignoring his centre-forward-like this disorganised the Triers, and the Reserves did most of the pressing. But, as ever, Steve Logan was a tower of strength at right back, and young Harvey, the collector's clerk, at left back, was giving him great help.

Still, the pressure continued hard and fast, and at last Steve was beaten.

As he lay on the ground, from a hard, honest charge, the whole Reserve line got away, and there was only Harry Turner in goal against them.

An intaken sob went up from the crowd. It could have been heard a quarter of a mile off. Nothing could save the Triers now. But wait! The ball was nicely placed at the foot of the centre-forward, he ran right in, and shot low and cleverly. No goalkeeper could hope—But, yes, seeming to read what the centre-forward was going to do before he had even touched the ball, Harry had flung himself to the ground into the left-hand corner of the net, and as the ball flashed towards him, he managed to fist it out with one hand.

They were saved—but were they? Two forwards rushed at the ball, but in a moment a roar went up from the crowd:

"Jack—good boy, Jack!"

Somewhat, Jack Morton had raved back, and now he had joined in the fray, and in another moment, and just in the nick of time, he had managed to deflect the ball over the line. The Triers were saved.

It was a tremendous piece of work, and a roar of applause went up from the crowd.

The corner-kick was not a good one, and a moment later Laurie Robson had relieved the pressure by racing away again on the right.

But Jack had made up his mind. It was no good trying to carry on without a centre-forward, as it were. The whole line of attack became utterly disorganised. He spoke a word to Steve and Ronnie, and a minute or so later Ronnie sent a low, straight pass to him.

He started quickly up the field. As usual, he was marked, but he did not lose his head. An opponent came for him, one Bill Atkins, who generally played in the first team, a rough-and-ready customer, who was never too careful as to his methods of play.

Atkins came for Jack head downwards, like a charging bull. Jack very calmly sidestepped, and, to the huge delight of the crowd, with whom Bill Atkins had never been very popular, that gentleman slipped, and landed most ridiculously on the crown of his head, his feet in the air.

"Good old Bill!" roared the crowd. "Do it again!"

Meanwhile Jack sped on. He slipped the leather across to young Jim Fraser, as he was now pressed by the other men, and had the satisfaction of seeing the youngster run round his man.

"Here you are, Jim!" he cried.

And Jim sent it back to him.

He was away.

Boltwich sat up, and yelled with delight. Jack feinted cleverly as he came to the full-back, and in another moment he was on his way to goal.

He took his time.

The din was enormous. He thought he heard someone near by yell to him to look out. But he was not taking notice of anything except the business on hand.

From just inside the penalty-area he shot. It was a real beauty, which would have beaten nine men out of ten. But even as his foot smote the leather and the eyes of the crowd saw it enter the net, an avalanche of human brutality descended upon him.

It was Bill Atkins.

The red-headed customer could endure anything but ridicule, and the laughter of the crowd had sent him mad. Seeing Jack away, he had rushed after him, and, not caring for the consequences, and perhaps recalling certain hints dropped before the game to him by George Clifton, he had fallen upon Jack to destroy him.

Jack scarcely knew what had happened.

There was a terrible pain in the small of his back as the brute's knee caught him there, and he sank with a groan to the ground.

For a few moments there was something like silence.

The whole crowd had witnessed Atkins' dirty action, even as they had started to applaud that excellent, skilful goal.

Then a roar of anger went up.

"Send him off! Kick him! You brute, Atkins! Give him some of his own back!"

The referee was a crony of George Clifton's, and for a moment he stood irresolute. But he was no hero, and the temper of the crowd was too apparent. He went up to Bill Atkins.

"I can't have that sort of thing, Atkins; leave the field!"

"Who are you talking to?" demanded Atkins, white with anger, and sure of Clifton's support.

"You!"

"Well, I'm not leaving any field for you! It was a fair charge!"

Ronnie and Steve were bending over Jack, who was half-unconscious with pain, but young Laurie Robson, neat and dandish in his footer-togs, walked straight up to Atkins.

"By Jove, Atkins," he said, "you are a nasty bit of work! It was the dirtiest thing I have ever seen on a field of Association football, and if you don't leave the field, I shall be jolly well compelled to remove you, myself, don't you know!"

Bill turned red with fury, and his fist clenched. It looked like developing into a very nasty situation. And it did, but not quite as they expected at that moment. Seeing their skipper fallen, the Triers had gathered about Laurie Robson, and the Reserves, knowing well that George Clifton was watching them, went up to the referee, and began to argue with him on Bill Atkins' account.

But the crowd had suddenly lost its temper.

It was too apparent that all was not straight here, and suddenly they burst on to the pitch.

"Look out, Bill!" yelled someone.

And a moment later Bill Atkins had taken to his feet, and was racing for dear life for the stands.

It was a remarkable sight—a hare before hounds, indeed, and Bill only just reached safety in time, dashing into the players' entrance as the crowd sprang furiously after him.

Then someone in the crowd caught sight of George Clifton, white and savage in his stand, and a shout went up.

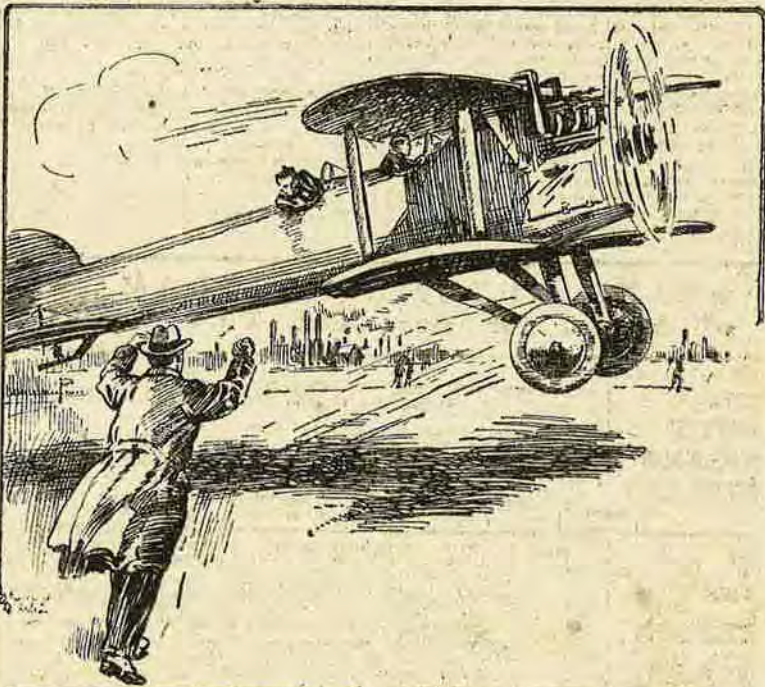
"Shouldn't be surprised if it was your dirty work, George Clifton!"

It looked nasty for a moment, but the police were now taking things in hand, and at the same moment there was silence as four stalwart lads, carrying Jack Morton, came through the crowd.

The whole team followed, and George Clifton suddenly lost his head.

"Hallo, Logan!" he cried to Steve. "What's the matter? You're not going to stop the game?"

Steve, who was helping to carry Jack off, paused and looked up grimly towards the man who had already caused him and Jack such grievous harm.



As the machine containing Jack Morton and Laurie began to rise from the ground, George Clifton came rushing towards it, shaking a furious fist. "What are you doing on my property?" he cried. "Picking daisies, Mr. Clifton!" shouted Jack.

"We play clean football, Mr. Clifton," he cried, "and we like to play with clean teams! We have had enough of this for to-day!"

And the shout of approval which went up from Boltwich made George Clifton turn suddenly white, and he turned quickly away.

A Dirty Plot!

GEORGE CLIFTON and young Jeff Clifford, the junior partner of the firm of solicitors, Brown & Clifford, sat long over their port that evening in the comfortable dining-room of the Old Hall.

They had exhausted for the moment, it would seem, all topics of conversation, and were now idly smoking their cigars and relishing the excellence of their wine. They had both agreed again and again that the scenes witnessed at the game that afternoon were a disgrace to Boltwich, and more than once George Clifton had expressed the view that it would be a good thing for the town if such disturbing spirits as Jack Morton and Steve Logan could be cleared out of it for once and for all.

"By the way," asked Clifton suddenly, "have you heard how he is?"

Clifford started.

"Who—young Morton?"

"Yes."

Clifford nodded.

"Yes," he said, "I heard he was not very bad. He will be in bed for about a week. Young Laurie Robson insisted on driving him to his own home in his car, and looking after him there!"

George Clifton flushed angrily.

"What's the matter with that young fool Robson?"

Jeff Clifford shook his head.

"I don't know, except that he seems to be really behind these fellows, especially behind young Morton. He's taken him back to his own place, got the best doctor in the place for him, and sent someone to look after his old mother. Good-natured kid!"

They regarded one another. There was a great deal that had been as yet unspoken between these two. They were men of the same kidney; but, of course, it had been impossible as yet for George Clifton to open his heart and his mind entirely to the youngster opposite him, for although Jeff Clifford was certainly the junior partner in the firm of solicitors who controlled his affairs, he didn't quite know how far it would be safe to go.

But now he seemed to see in Jeff's eye something which invited confidence.

"How have the gees been going lately, Clifford?" he asked suddenly, changing the subject so very obviously that there was no doubting his purpose.

Jeff gave an awkward laugh.

"Slowly!" he said.

Clifford grinned.

"I see. Always do. Well"—he leaned across the table as he continued speaking—"have you by any chance heard any of the rumours that this young fellow Morton has been spreading about the place that my grandfather—his grandfather—er—Sir Jasper—left a second will, in which he and his mother, Mrs. Morton, were favourably mentioned?"

Jeff Clifford's hand shook a little.

"Well, to tell you the truth," he said quietly, "I did hear someone talking about it, but I jolly soon told them to stop such nonsense!"

"Exactly!"

There was a silence for a while as their eyes met.

"You know nothing of such a will, Clifford?" asked George Clifton, with consummate cunning.

"Lord, no, man!"

There was a short silence.

"Do you?" asked Clifford.

"No, of course not!" And then George Clifton suddenly laid out his cards more clearly on the table. "But I don't like this sort of thing to get about the town. What can one do?"

Clifford considered for a moment.

"It is difficult to know what to advise you to do, Clifton," he replied. "These sort of things are so very difficult to trace to their base. If one could, for instance, absolutely bring them home to young Morton, and we don't know that we could, even then there is not much one could do. One might get out an injunction, but that would not do much good, and would only give the matter more publicity."

"Exactly!"

They regarded one another again.

"The fact of the matter is," said George Clifton tersely, "I should be very glad to see that young man well out of Boltwich, where he could not get up to any more of this sort of thing!"

"Quite!" agreed the other.

Clifford shook the end off his smoke.

"Of course," he remarked in a moment, "I only say this to you in the strictest confidence, Clifford, but I have a very shrewd idea that he mixes with some pretty shady characters!"

Clifford started.

"Oh!"

"Yes, and if we could discover anything really against him—if, for instance, it happened that he made a slip in some of his shady transactions one day, and was put away—"

"I say!"

Clifford brought his fist down on the shining table with a crash that reminded himself of Sir Jasper in that old gentleman's palmist days.

"Prison is none too good for a young bound like this!"

"No, I agree," said Jeff Clifford quietly.

Clifford rose, and looked into his guest's eye.

They understood one another perfectly.

"Of course, I am not suggesting for a moment, Clifford," he said, "that we do anything that is not absolutely above board and honourable. But it has been my experience that in this world, this very workaday world, one must fight men with the weapons they bring to bear against oneself. After all, we would have looked clever if we had fought the Boche with kid gloves. Now, you are in touch with all sorts of people, being a solicitor—"

Clifford stopped him with a laugh.

"All right," he said, "don't try and spare my feelings; say that if you want something really dirty done, the best thing to do is to go to a solicitor."

Clifford laughed outright himself.

"Well, that's true, isn't it?"

Clifford shook his head.

"Go on!"

A moment passed. Both understood one another. Clifford knew perfectly well what Clifton wanted, and that now he was going to make an offer.

"Well," said George Clifton, his hand on the young solicitor's shoulder in the most friendly possible manner, "one could not expect you to go to all the trouble of having inquiries made by private detectives, and that sort of thing into young Morton's habits for nothing. Mind you, Clifford, I am dealing with you, not your firm. The day that young Morton is—er—put away for a bit, I shall be delighted to hand you my cheque for a thousand pounds! But, mind you, no costs on top of that!" he laughed finally.

A Surprise for Clifton!

WITHIN a week Jack Morton was out and about again.

Fortunately his hurts had been more painful than serious, and after a couple of days in bed he had been able to sit up. His chief anxiety had been for his old mother; but Laurie Robson had put his mind at rest about that.

Laurie was behaving like a real brick, and, indeed, there was not one of the Triers keener on downing George Clifton than young Robson, and as he said: "I've got the dough to do it with!"

So Jack had remained as a guest of his kind young friend in the beautiful house a little way out of Boltwich, and the two youngsters had discussed many plans for the building up of the Triers into a team to knock the Boltwich club into a cocked hat.

"I've got an idea up my sleeve," Laurie Robson said more than once, "which would surprise everyone; but I am not going to say a word about it."

The result of the match with the reserves, short and sensational as it had been, had brought a great deal of sympathy to the Triers, and they already had several fixtures ahead.

So it was that Laurie was anxious for Jack to have a kick about as soon as possible; and one afternoon, after he had been laid up for a week, they decided that the time had come when they could see how Jack was getting along.

They changed in the house, and then, as the rest of the Triers had not been able to turn up as yet, nothing would satisfy young Robson but that he took Jack for a spin in his biplane.

Jack was nothing loath, for he had never been up before, and within a little while they were soaring over Boltwich, Jack enjoying the experience hugely.

But suddenly the engine began to misfire ominously, and Laurie, looking back over his shoulder, smiled through his one eye-glass at the lad behind him, and exclaimed:

"All right, we'll manage to get down safely; that's the point of keeping up high."

The engine had cut out now, and they started to make for the ground.

Laurie was a skilful pilot, and without a great deal of trouble they landed in a large meadow some way out of the town.

They jumped to the ground, and Laurie at once started to examine his engine.

"I believe that this field belongs to George Clifton!" exclaimed Jack suddenly, looking over to the Old Hall, which they could just see through the trees. "Yes, by Jove, I am sure that it does!"

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THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 823.

Laurie, busy with his engine, only granted.
"Ought to belong to you, my lad," he said, "and one day it jolly well shall!"

"I hope so!" laughed Jack.

Laurie made a wonderful sight in his footer togs and his one eyeglass, attending to his engine, and Jack was quite content to watch him at work. He soon had things right, and told Jack to jump in, and at that moment there came a roar from one end of the field.

They looked back.

It was George Clifton. He was rushing towards them, shaking a furious fist. Of course he had no chance, for the machine had already started; but he came almost up to them, still wildly shaking his fist.

"What are you doing on my property?"

"Picking daisies, Mr. Clifton!" shouted Jack, waving to him; and the man's fury was quite inarticulate, until he cried:

"All right, you young hound, I'll teach you to be clever!"

And then they could hear no more.

So they reached home, and while they housed the machine, Laurie asked Jack what his amiable cousin had said.

Jack told him, and Laurie nodded.

"He's a nice-tempered brute, and no mistake, Jack!" he said. "I've made up my mind. I am going to give him the surprise of his life!"

"How?"

But Laurie shook his head.

"I won't tell you just now," he said, "because the other chaps are waiting for us, and we must not keep them waiting. But I have had an idea in this empty head of mine for a long time, and when I get an idea, something is bound to happen. I'll tell you over our dish of tea after the kick-about."

Jack found that he was still pretty stiff, and he did not take much part in the kick-about; but when it was over he glanced at Laurie Robson, and he saw that that young man was looking very grim and determined.

"Now for my jolly old dish of tea, Jack," he said, "a jolly old tea, and then to business." He spoke in a low voice, so that no one but Jack Morton could hear what he said. "I'm going to attend the meeting of the directors of the Boltwich club to-night."

"What?"

Laurie slipped his arm through that of his companion.

"I don't know why I shouldn't get a predominating interest in the Boltwich club, Jack," he said quietly. "I've got the cash, and it would interest me. I know that George Clifton owns a lot of the shares; but I have been making a few inquiries, and I know where all the shares are. I should not be at all surprised if I attended that directors' meeting to-night."

Jack stared.

"What about the Triers, though?" he asked.

Laurie smiled.

"Oh, there is nothing wrong with the Triers, boy!" he said. "I think we'll absorb them into Boltwich. They are good lads, and we can take 'em all, and the town will be jolly glad to have a decent club. But don't let's go too quick. I have got a lot to do yet."

Nothing that Jack could say could persuade Laurie to divulge another word, and after tea he started out by himself in his car, while Jack went to see his mother.

There was a light of grim determination in young Robson's eyes, and the flash of his eyeglass was a thing not to be missed.

He came to the town at last, and stopped in front of a large provision store.

"Mr. Roberts in?" he asked the assistant, who came immediately, bowing and scraping, when he saw who it was.

"Yes, sir; I'll fetch him."

"No; take me to him."

"Yes, sir!"

He found old Roberts, in his apron and shirt-sleeves—a genial old gentleman, who had known Boltwich for many years—taking tea in a parlour behind the shop, and very distressed that young Mr. Robson should find him like this.

"Evening, Roberts," Laurie said. "No, don't get up! I have come to have a friendly chat. No, no complaints! Just a friendly chat. Do you still want to buy that field of mine?"

The old man flushed.

"That I do, Mr. Robson!"

"Well, you can!"

"I say—"

"If you will sell me something you have got—something I want as badly as you have wanted this field from me, and my father before me."

The old man stared at the lad.

"Why, sir?" he exclaimed. "What can I have that you set such great store on?"

"A bundle of shares in the Boltwich Football Club."

Old Roberts gasped.

"Yes, I have!"

"Are you content with the club, Roberts?"

The grocer brought his fist down on his table, shaking the tea-things violently.

"No, I am not that, sir!" he said. "I've never been so disgusted with anything in my life! If you ask me, George Clifton is ruining the club, and you can have my shares if you want them, Mr. Robson, though I am sorry for you making such a bad bargain for your good money."

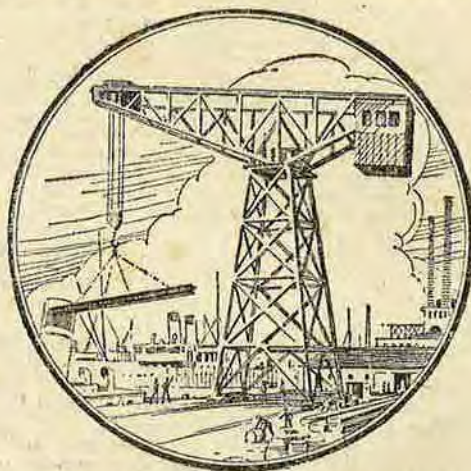
Laurie held out a hand.

"Don't you worry about me and the bargain, Roberts," he said. "Get me pen and ink, and we'll do the whole thing now. I am going to improve the Boltwich club, and I am grateful to you for giving me a chance."

So Laurie Robson spent several hours in Boltwich, visiting different persons, surprising them all by his readiness to exchange perfectly good money for doubtfully valuable Boltwich F.C. shares, and always succeeding in the object he had in view.

(There was a surprise in store for George Clifton! Don't miss next week's grand instalment of this powerful serial, boys!)

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"PONGO'S TRIUMPH!"

(Continued from page 16.)

So far his progress down the shed had been shielded from view by the bulky bodies of the cars. But now, to reach the double doors, he had a clear space to cross. The doors were also in full view of anyone coming out of the underground apartment.

Had the doors been open, Tom would have risked it without a thought. But any second the leader of the rascals might turn his head, and before he could have got the doors open Tom knew he would have been recaptured.

There was nothing for it but to wait, and Tom waited his chance, tingling with impatience.

But it proved to be a long wait. The three rascals came out at last, and walked down the shed, talking together in angry tones.

"It's confounded bad luck, right enough!" the leader was saying savagely. "But we knew it couldn't go on for ever. We've been thundering lucky, as it is. Anyway, we'll have to work night and day, and get this lot cleared out. Jim Kealy's coming to-night for the Daimler, and that'll be one off the list. We'll tell him he can't bring any more here. Hang the luck, though! I was hoping to stick here for another week or two yet."

"What are we to do with the blamed kids?" snarled one of the mechanics, with an imprecation. "We can't feed such a confounded crowd as that, chief."

"We've got to," was the grim answer. "We can't let 'em go, and we can't starve 'em. We've not got to that yet. Anyway, with luck, we'll be able to get clear of here in another week. And now let's get going. Jim will be here for the Daimler at eleven, remember."

Still growling, the men returned to their jobs, and Tom Merry's heart sank. Two of the men were working out of view of the double doors, but the third—the leader—was repainting a big Austin car scarcely a dozen yards away. It was impossible for Tom to move while he was there.

What followed was like a nightmare to the junior. He dare not move, he scarcely dare breathe, as he crouched behind the shelter of the car, until his limbs were stiff and aching with the strain. But he stuck it. He had to. And it must have been fully an hour before relief came—and his chance.

During all that time the men had worked away, hardly exchanging a word. But now the man who was working on the bonnet of the car higher up the shed called to the big man, who went across to him at once.

Tom heard them talking, and then the sound of a hammer. He guessed they were having a struggle to get the bonnet right, and, feeling unable to stand the strain longer, Tom Merry decided to risk all now.

He was across to the doors in a flash, and next moment was struggling frantically with the rusty bolts. The lower one shot back at last with scarcely a sound, but the second one was only just within reach of his fingers. He caught it and tugged desperately. It stuck a moment and then slid back with a harsh, grating sound that rang through the shed with terrifying loudness.

Almost at once there came an alarmed shout—a shout that made the junior's heart leap. Frantically he pushed at the double doors, and as they swung open he rushed out into the daylight.

Before him a rough cart-track sloped upwards between the high quarry cliffs. Tom ran, stumbling and tripping, his cramped limbs almost refusing to obey his will. He heard the shouts of the men and the thudding of feet within the shed, and, knowing he must be overtaken in his present state, the junior dropped behind a pile of boulders, and crouched there, panting.

He wished he had taken the risk and gone on the next moment, however. Instead of stopping to search the quarry itself, as Tom had hoped, the foremost man to rush from the shed came running up the cart-track, glancing round him as he ran.

He passed the spot where Tom was hiding, but a few yards farther on he turned and glanced quickly back.

Then he saw the junior, and gave a yell.

Hopelessly trapped, Tom Merry glanced wildly about him. He saw the man rushing back towards him, while behind the other two men were pounding up. And in that moment of despair the junior made one last mad bid for liberty.

A dash took him to the side of the quarry, and as his

fingers grasped a projecting ledge above his head he pulled himself up. Then he went up, hand-over-hand, taking advantage of every nook and cranny in the rocky face of the quarry.

"Come back!" yelled the big man hoarsely. "Come back! You'll be killed, you young fool!"

But Tom Merry did not come back. He went on climbing with the agility of a cat, sheer desperation giving him new energy. The man shouted again:

"Come back, or I'll shoot, you young idiot!"

Still Tom went on, and the men watched him breathlessly; but they made no attempt to shoot, as Tom guessed they would not. He took risks that made the watching rascals catch their breath more than once, and at last the leader gave vent to a furious oath.

"He'll do it yet—by James, he will!" he shouted, turning on his men savagely. "I—I can't shoot the plucky little whelp, hanged if I can! Wilks, you fool, run round—quick! You'll catch him at the top. Go on, hang you!"

Up above, Tom Merry heard the words, and dismay almost caused him to lose his grip and his nerve. He had made his bold bid unthinkingly, and such a possibility had not occurred to him. But there was no drawing back now. He set his teeth grimly, and went on, hanging on with tooth and nail.

It was a race between the two now, and Tom Merry won—or, at least, he reached the top first.

His bleeding fingers clutched the grassy top of the cliff, and with a last desperate effort he hauled himself over, and sank, panting and exhausted, on the turf.

But even as he did so the man who had raced round the quarry came pounding up. Tom heard him, but he did not move—he could not. That terrible climb had taken the last ounce of energy out of him. He lay, panting hoarsely, spent and helpless.

"Got you, my lad!" grunted the man, pressing his knee into the junior's back. "You've had your little climb for nothing after all, you slippery little whelp! Back you come!"

But the fellow had spoken too soon. At that moment there sounded a yell—a yell which made Tom Merry's heart leap. The yell was followed by the thudding of feet, and looking round swiftly Tom caught a glimpse of figures rushing towards them—familiar figures.

First came Figgins, his good-humoured face red with running. Behind him came Kerr, Fatty Wynn, Grundy, Talbot, and a whole host of St. Jim's juniors.

Tom Merry only caught a swift glimpse of them, for even as he looked something white flashed before his vision. Then came a low growl, followed by a yell of fear.

It was Pongo. And the yell of fear came from the man astride Tom Merry as Wally's devoted pet flew at him, bowling him over like a ninepin.

As in a dream, Tom Merry saw Figgins and Kerr dragging the too-earnest Pongo off the chest of the yelling rascal, saw many hands grasp the fellow and hold him fast.

"Good old Pongo!" he muttered weakly.

Then he fainted.

It was some time before he was recovered sufficiently to take an interest in his surroundings; that nerve-racking climb up the face of the quarry had exacted heavy toll of his strength. He opened his eyes at last, to find only Fatty Wynn and Talbot stooping over him. The captured motor-thief and the rest of the rescue-party had vanished. And on learning that the party had gone to raid the motor-thieves' stronghold without him—that he was fated to miss being in at the death—Tom Merry's feeling of disgust was too deep for words.

But as it turned out, he had not missed much after all. For the two rascals in the quarry below had witnessed the arrival of the swarm of rescuers, and, realising the game was up, had bolted like rabbits into the quarry workings.

"It was as tame as walking into the blessed dining-hall for your dinner!" grunted Grundy, as the party returned at last with the rescued captives in their midst. "I never got even a squint at 'em, let alone a chance to use my left."

"Just as well, perhaps," smiled Tom Merry. "Anyhow, we've got a good description of them, and the police will soon nab them. You got my message then, Figg?"

Figgins nodded and grinned.

"We were standing by the gates, when Pongo came racing up, and I spotted at once that something was wrong by the beggar's antics," he said. "Then Kerr noticed the paper twisted round his collar, and—well, here we are, all serene!"

"All serene—yes, thanks to you, Figg!" grinned Lowther.

"Thanks to Pongo, you mean!" shouted Wally indignantly. "I say, you chaps, I think we ought to give old Pongo a jolly good cheer for this."

"Yaas, wathali!" remarked Arthur Augustus, nodding. "I must say that old Pongo has weally covahed himself with glowy, you know!"

And Arthur Augustus led the cheering with a will—until Pongo slipped behind him and nipped him playfully in the calf; whereupon Arthur Augustus' feelings towards Wally's pet underwent a remarkably sudden change.

Tom Merry proved to be right in regard to the motor-thieves for that evening the local police captured them boarding a train at Wayland Junction. That same evening, also, they captured Jim Kealy.

Of the triumphant return to St. Jim's, of their welcome there, and of the sensation the story aroused, there is no need to tell here. One thing may be told, however. That evening Lord Conway, who had arrived that day in response to an urgent wire from the Head, "stood" the promised tea in Wayland, and a right royal "feed" it was! The Terrible Three were there, as were Levison, Blake & Co., and Wally & Co. And the guest of honour at the ceremony was Pongo!

THE END.

(Is Tom Merry a responsible junior captain? This question has been mentioned so many times that Martin Clifford has taken the matter up. Therefore, be sure you read next week's splendid yarn of St. Jim's, entitled: "CARDEW THE REBEL!" You will vote it great!)

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