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THE CRIMSON CLAW!

916
SUPER-MYSTERY
STORY INSIDE

EVERY WEDNESDAY.

The GEM 2^d

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SCHOOL AND SPORTING STORIES

No. 916.
Vol. XXVIII.
August 29th,
1925.



Doris Levison's Plucky Attempt to Rescue the Kidnapped Caravanner!

(A breathless incident from the magnificent extra-long story of Tom Merry & Co., the St. Jim's Caravanners—inside.)

YOUR EDITOR CHATS WITH HIS READERS!

Address your letters to
The Editor, The "Gem"
Library, The Fleetway
House, Farringdon
Street, London, E.C.4.

A BAD TEMPER!

AN enthusiastic Gemite in the North is worried no end by an unpleasant temper. Don't run away with the idea that this unenviable trait is his own. Not a bit of it. The irascible temperament in question belongs to a workfellow of his. My correspondent desires to know what to do. That's a difficult question to answer without knowing all the circumstances. Tempers are funny things, prompted and encouraged by all manner of moods. Often "tempers" arise from one being out of sorts. In that case, it is advisable to turn a blind eye to the owner's shortcomings. Better still, keep a smiling face yourself and be agreeable. Smiling faces and good spirits are catching; bad tempers have to bow the knee before them. My correspondent, apparently, is acting on these lines, and success must greet him in the long run. He must remember, too, that he is the possessor of a temper himself, and at times, perhaps, other people have to put up with his "moods." After all, a fellow without a temper—is there such a being?—is not a first class specimen of humanity. In their right places tempers are fine things, but before any of us give too ample rein to them we must learn the great lesson of control.

ST. JIM'S JINGLES!

This great feature starts in next week's issue of the GEM, and will, I feel sure, catch on. Our rhymster sets the ball rolling with a breezy poem on Eric Kildare, the popular captain of the

school. A good start, you will all agree. In their turn come the inimitable Gussy, Tom Merry, Fatty Wynn, Talbot, and the others. Stand by for No. 1, chums—next week!

THE MAJORITY!

My daily mailbag contains some extraordinary requests from readers all over the globe. Some want a shorter St. Jim's yarn, others want a six-page supplement devoted to the "News." While, again, others want a ten-thousand word instalment of a detective adventure story every week. The majority, however, desire the following programme: A longer St. Jim's yarn than has been the case recently, a "News" Supplement, and a good whack of serial story. The "complete" stories that followed the St. Jim's yarn must then be squeezed out. Well, chums, you will notice that the Tom Merry stories have been lengthened. You will observe, too, that the "completes" have gone by the board. In three weeks' time, too, a new "News" supplement will gladden your eyes. I am always out to please my readers, and the only fair way for me to do that is to act on the requests of the majority. Anyway, it's a better-than-ever GEM nowadays, isn't it?

NEXT WEEK'S PROGRAMME!

"THE STRANDED CARAVANNERS!"

By Martin Clifford.

That's the title of the next long complete story of Tom Merry & Co. dealing with their amazing adventures while on holiday. You'll enjoy every word of it!

"THE CRIMSON CLAW!"

By Lester Bidston.

Another trenchant instalment of this popular mystery serial is billed for next week, and Gemites will be more familiar with the wily cunning and resource of the outcast, Prince Yen How.

TUCK-HAMPERS and HALF-CROWNS.

This offer is repeated again in next Wednesday's number. If you know a good joke, send it in.

Cheerio, chums, till next week!

Your Editor.

"MY READERS' OWN CORNER!"

OUR TUCK HAMPERS ARE PRIME!

Remember, boys and girls, we award a delicious Tuck Hamper for the best storyette sent us each week—also half-a-crown is paid for each other contribution accepted. Cut out the coupon on this page, and send it, together with your joke, to me.

HAPPY HULL.

UPS AND DOWNS OF LIFE!

Old Lady Passenger (on steamer in dense fog): "Why don't we go faster?" Sailor: "The fog, mum." Old Lady: "But the sky is quite clear." Sailor: "Yes, mum, but we don't go that way till the boiler bursts!"—A Tuck Hamper, filled with delicious Tuck, has been awarded to H. B. Knott, 53, Eton Street, Hesse Road, Hull, Yorks.

A TIMELY QUESTION!

In making the winning hit at a local cricket match the batsman skied the ball with a beautiful drive which went to the pavilion and hit the clock. "Is that what you call timing the ball?" asked his friend Jones. "No," was the reply. "It is known as playing against the clock!"—Half-a-crown has been awarded to Fintan Larkin, 54, Upper Beechwood Avenue, Ranelagh, Dublin, Ireland.

CROSS WORD CRAZY!

A stout gentleman wearing a loudly-checked suit had been standing looking into a shop window, when a dirty little urchin came up behind him, and stood looking at him with a puzzled frown on his face. At last the gentleman turned round. "Why are you standing gazing at me?" he asked in a gruff tone. "I was tryin' yer puzzle, sir," replied the boy. "But where's the clues?"—Half-a-crown has been awarded to Miss Ruth T. Cochran, Ormidale, Grange Avenue, Milngavie, nr. Glasgow.

HANDICAPPED!

Bill: "My brother is so short-sighted that he's working himself to death at his new job." Jack: "But what's his short sight to do with him being overworked?" Bill: "Well, you see, he's so short-sighted that he can't see when the foreman isn't looking!"—Half-a-crown has been awarded to H. E. Millichap, 209, Bracebridge Street, Birmingham.

Now, chums, make use of the coupon below and send in that witty joke you know.

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A HELPLESS WITNESS! A prisoner himself, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy watches the kidnapping of his friend, powerless to render him any assistance!



KIDNAPPED!

A Thrilling Extra-Long Complete
Story of Tom Merry & Co. of
St. Jim's, describing their amazing
adventures on holiday.

By

MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER I.

Baggy Goes Too Far!

JOVE! It's hot!"
"Jolly hot!"
"And I'm tired!"
"So'm I!"
"And I'm dashed hungry!"
"Same here!"
"Yaas, wathah!"

It was a hearty chorus this time. Manners, from the Shell Form at St. Jim's, had agreed with Tom Merry that it was hot, and Blake had assured Tom that he also was tired. But every one of the schoolboy caravanners—not to mention Nippy, the driver—agreed with him that they also were hungry.

It was long past the St. Jim's juniors' usual teatime, and Tom Merry & Co. were just making for home—and tea. Noah's Ark—the name Lowther had humorously given to their lumbering motor-caravan—was at rest on the sunny slope of the Dorsetshire downs, where the caravanners had camped the night before. And since noon Tom Merry & Co. and Nippy, the driver, had been rambling over the breezy heath and along the pretty Dorset lanes, having left Baggy Trimble in charge of their camp.

But now they were returning, all of them more or less hot and dusty and tired, and all of them decidedly hungry.

"Let's hope that fat ass, Trimble, has had the sense to get tea ready!" exclaimed Herries. "If he hasn't—"

"Ass!" remarked Tom Merry. "How could he get tea ready when we locked the larder up before starting out?"

"Sure you did?" asked Digby anxiously. "You know what a fat thief Trimble is?"

"You bet I did!" grinned Tom Merry. "I took jolly good care to do that, old top! I expect the fat frog will be about famished by this time. He'll be blessing us, I know."

The thought of the always hungry Trimble waiting for his tea, like a hungry dog for his dinner, seemed to amuse the caravanners.

"Better put it on, though," said Lowther, becoming serious again. "We don't want Baggy to get desperate and start chewing up the camp utensils and crockery, you know."

"Yes, we will," agreed Tom Merry. "I've just remembered that I forgot to put the jug of milk in the larder before locking up. Baggy's bound to have scoffed that—if he's spotted it on the shelf."

"Oh, you careless ass!" groaned Manners. "That means no milk for tea—unless someone wants a tramp to the farm, and that's a mile beyond the village."

"Easily buy a tin of condensed milk in the village," said Tom. "Hallo, there's the camp!"

Topping a rise of the downs, the juniors came suddenly into sight of their camp, nestling among the trees across

the little valley. Through the green and brown foliage showed the roof of the big caravan, and the white of the large bell tent and the small patrol tent which was the sleeping abode of Nippy, the driver.

"Don't see any smoke!" growled Blake. "Looks to me as if that fat slacker's let the fire out. We'll smash him if he has!"

"I'm afraid so. Never mind," said Tom cheerfully; "we can easily use the oil-stove or the spirit-stove. If Baggy has let it out, though, we'll bump him well!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

The sight of the camp hastened the feet of the tired juniors, and they hurried down the rutty cart-track and up the further slope to the encampment. They soon found Blake's surmise correct. Only a few glowing embers remained of the camp-fire. Moreover, the camp had a curiously deserted appearance.

"The dashed fire's out right enough!" grunted Blake, as they entered the grassy clearing. "And where is the fat ass?"

"Sleeping somewhere, I bet," said Tom. "I'll give him a yell."

And Tom did, raising the woodland echoes with the sound of Trimble's name.

"Trimble, ahoy!"

At the third yell there followed a rustling in the thickets, and a fat face appeared amid the foliage. It was the face of Baggy Trimble, and, save for smears of jam on his fat cheeks, and stains of chocolate round his mouth, Baggy's face was almost as white as chalk.

"Oh!" he gasped. "Oh, you chaps have come back, then! Oh, thank goodness!"

"Yes, you fat clam!" snorted Blake, staring curiously at Trimble's features. "What's this mean, Trimble? What the thump have you been doing to let the fire out?"

"And what the dickens are you hiding in the wood for?" exclaimed Tom Merry, staring.

Trimble came out of the wood, staring about him nervously as he did so.

"Ow! Oh dear!" he gasped. "I say, you fellows, I've had such a fright! They've been again! Didn't you see anything of them?"

"Eh? See anything of whom?" snapped Tom impatiently. "No fibs, mind! What have you been up to?"

"Look here—"

"He's been up to something," said Blake, eyeing Trimble suspiciously. "He's been eating chocolate and jam, and he looks as if he's been feeding up to the chin."

"Oh, really, Blake—"

"There's no chocolate in the larder, anyway," said Herries, in a tone of relief, "so he can't have got the stuff from there. I expect he's either pinched or borrowed some cash from someone."

"Will you fellows listen?"

"He's been away from the camp, that's clear," said Tom grimly. "This is what happens when we leave that fat ass

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in charge—fire out and camp left to the mercy of any tramp that might come along! Now, Trimble—”

“Will you fellows listen?” howled Trimble excitedly. “Don’t I keep telling you they’ve been—just gone before you came! I found ’em prowling round the camp, the awful rascals!”

“Found whom?” exclaimed Tom, with sudden interest. “You don’t mean—”

“Yes, I do! It was Patchy and Snooky, the awful brutes!” gasped Trimble, his fat face still shaking a little—apparently with fright. “They were here when I came back—prowling round the camp.”

“Oh!”

“Bai Jove!”

The juniors looked at each other with rather startled faces, and then they looked at Trimble. That Trimble was, for once, speaking the truth, and that he had been badly frightened, was obvious to them now.

“Patchy and Snooky!” breathed Tom Merry. “So—so we haven’t finished with those merchants even yet! It’s nearly a fortnight since we pitched them into that ditch near Bournemouth, and I’d almost forgotten them.”

“Might have known the brutes wouldn’t chuck up their game so easily, though,” said Manners, shaking his head. “They’ve followed us through Sussex and Hampshire, and they’ve had more than one dust-up with us.”

“It’s rotten!” said Tom, frowning. “They must want to get hold of Nippy jolly badly, anyway. I don’t like it at all. Did the brutes touch you, Baggy?”

“No,” grunted Trimble. “I jolly well didn’t give them a chance. It was a jolly lucky thing for me I did leave the dashed camp, anyway!”

“You did leave it, then, you fat slacker?”

“Yes. I went to the village to—I mean, I just went for a stroll—to stretch my legs, you know,” stammered Trimble. “And—when I got back I spotted them through the trees. They were rooting about the camp, and were in a tearing rage over something. I hid and watched ’em. I say, you fellows, d’you know what I heard that villain Patchy say? I heard him say that Nippy was worth thousands to ’em, and that he wasn’t going to give in if he had to follow us all over England. Fancy that!”

“My hat!”

Almost unconsciously the eyes of the juniors went towards Nippy as Trimble said that. While the juniors had been talking Nippy had gone off, and was now gathering firewood at the edge of the woodland. Besides being driver to the party, Nippy from Nowhere—as he styled himself—made himself useful in many other ways to the caravanners.

All the juniors liked Nippy—excepting, perhaps, Trimble, who did not count—for he was willing and cheerful, and since he had left a travelling menagerie and thrown in his lot with the schoolboy caravanners, they had become quite attached to him and treated him as one of themselves.

From the very beginning the juniors had guessed that there was some mystery surrounding the waif from the travelling show. In speech and manner and appearance Nippy did not seem at all the kind of fellow who had been reared among such surroundings. But as Nippy was curiously reluctant to discuss his private affairs, the juniors had never attempted to question him. He was a very decent fellow, and that was quite enough for Tom Merry & Co.

Then, before Nippy had been a member of the caravan party many hours, another and very real mystery had cropped up concerning him. Two former members of the travelling show, nicknamed Patchy and Snooky, had appeared and demanded the return of Nippy, attempting to use force when Nippy had refused. And since then, during the caravan’s wanderings in Sussex and Hampshire, the rascals had made several attempts to kidnap the boy—why, even Nippy himself claimed not to know.

It was no wonder, then, that Tom Merry and his chums looked across at Nippy in rather a scared way as Baggy Trimble repeated what he had overheard Patchy and Snooky say.

“Worth thousands to them, is he?” exclaimed Tom Merry rather grimly. “My hat! This is getting rather serious, you chaps! It’s a giddy mystery! I wonder—Hallo, here’s Nippy!”

As if he had guessed the juniors were discussing him, Nippy came across the glade, carrying armfuls of firewood. He glanced curiously at the juniors’ serious faces.

“Anything wrong, you fellows?” he asked, grinning. “This fat chap up to his games again?”

Trimble snorted and sniffed. In Trimble’s view, Nippy should have been put “in his place” long ago. That Nippy treated the juniors as equals instead of as superiors made Baggy exceedingly indignant. In Trimble’s opinion, Nippy should address the juniors as “Sir,” and should be kept in his place as driver and mechanic of the caravanners.

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Needless to say, Tom Merry & Co. did not share Trimble’s views and opinions in those respects.

But Trimble did, and he elevated his fat little nose and glared at Nippy now.

“I’ll thank you to refer to me in more respectful terms, fellow!” he snorted disdainfully. “You forget that I am a member of this caravan party, and you are the driver. I expect you to treat me as I should be treated!”

Nippy grinned. He was quite used to Baggy’s little ways. “You want me to treat you as you should be treated?” he ejaculated.

“Naturally!”

“Right!” said Nippy cheerfully. “As you ask me, I will treat you as you should be treated. Here goes!”

Grabbing Baggy Trimble by his collar, Nippy raised his boot and kicked the fat junior hard, not once, but many times. And Baggy yelled in sheer surprise and pain.

“Yaroooooh! Oh, crumbs! Stoppit! Yoooooop!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

CHAPTER 2.

Bowled Out!

TOM MERRY & CO. roared at Nippy’s interpretation of Baggy’s request. Baggy also roared, but in a different manner altogether; he roared with astonished anguish.

“Yooooop! Draggimoff, you fellows!” he howled, wriggling and jumping to avoid that large size in boots. “Leggo, you awful beast! You dare to—Yaroooooh!”

With a final playful kick, Nippy released the yelling Baggy, and that astonished and hurt youth jumped away and bolted.

Nippy grinned at the laughing juniors.

“I suppose you fellows will sack me after that—such disrespect to one of my giddy employers!” he remarked.

“Not at all, old man,” said Lowther, with enthusiasm. “Kick him again—right round the camp this time—and we’ll raise your wages!”

“Yaas, wathah!”

“That’s what he wants as a medicine every morning!” said Tom Merry. “A jolly good kicking before breakfast every morning should do him a great deal of good in many ways. Anyway, you were asking what was wrong, Nippy?”

Nippy nodded.

“I’ll soon tell you that,” said Tom, his face clouding over. “Trimble claims that Patchy and Snooky have been prowling round again, Nippy.”

“Oh!”

Nippy’s cheery face clouded over.

“Those rotters again,” he said quietly. “I—I say, you fellows, I’m awfully sorry to be the cause of all this worry. You’d better sack me before those brutes do any damage. It’s only me they want!”

“What rot!” said Tom Merry warmly. “My dear man, we’re not letting you go for all the Patchys and Snookys in the country!”

“Wathah not!” agreed Arthur Augustus D’Arcy, beaming through his eyeglass at the frowning Nippy. “You are too indispensable to us, deah boy. Gweat Scott! We should be fairly stwanded without you!”

“That’s so,” said Blake, grinning. “You’re too jolly good a driver, and too-jolly useful with an engine to lose, old top! Besides, being shadowed and chivvied like this is great fun. We’re sticking to you like glue, Nippy. If Patchy says you’re worth thousands to them—”

“Oh!” ejaculated Nippy. “Did Patchy say that?”

Blake nodded, and told what Trimble had related having overheard.

“Does that tell you anything, Nippy?” asked Tom Merry, noting the strange look that had appeared on the youthful driver’s face. “Does that tell you why these fellows want to get hold of you?”

Nippy flushed, and then he slowly shook his head.

“Not—not exactly,” he stammered. “It—it’s queer! They—they must be mad! Anyway, hang the brutes! I’d better be getting that fire lit; I’m jolly hungry.”

With that Nippy turned abruptly, and, picking up his firewood, walked away with it. Obviously he did not wish to continue discussing the subject.

“That’s queer!” said Tom Merry, staring after him curiously. “Think he does know why those chaps want him?”

“He suspects now—if he doesn’t actually know,” said Blake grimly. “Anyway, I suppose it’s his own bizney.”

“Yes. Let’s get tea,” said Tom abruptly.

The juniors dropped the subject and started to get tea ready. Tom ran into the caravan to get out the spirit-stove, whilst his chums busied themselves in other ways with cloth and crockery and foodstuffs from the larder. The vague suspicion that Trimble might have tampered with the lock and got at the foodstuffs was soon proved



Monty Lowther stared out of the window, and Tom Merry pointed across the clearing. "Look over there—under the trees," he whispered. "See it—that white—white thing!" "Phew! What the——" Lowther gasped and stopped as he sighted a gigantic white form, headless, and with outstretched arms, that loomed high against the trees, swaying, monstrous, and awe-inspiring! (See page 8.)

unfounded, for the larder was in order. Where Baggy had obtained the feed he had undoubtedly consumed that afternoon was a mystery as yet. Certainly, as Tom had feared, the milk-jug had been emptied, and Blake was about to tackle Baggy about it when Tom Merry looked out of the van, a surprised look on his face.

"Any of you fellows seen the spirit-stove?" he demanded. "It was in the van here this morning!"

"I saw it there," said Herries. "Why, has it gone?"

"Yes; clean vanished," said Tom. "Have a look in the tent, someone."

Digby ran over to the large bell tent, and came back a moment later shaking his head.

"Not there," he announced.

"That's queer," said Tom, frowning.

"Some of the knives and forks seem to be missing, too," said Lowther, rummaging in the larder. "Trimble, you fat ass! Have you seen the spirit-stove?"

"The—the spirit-stove?" stammered Baggy.

"Yes. And some knives and forks are missing, too," grunted Lowther. "You haven't swallowed 'em, I hope, Baggy?"

"N-nunno!" gasped Baggy, blinking at the juniors. "I—I say, you fellows, I know. Those rascals must have pinched 'em."

"What?"

"Patchy and Snooky must have pinched them—they went in the van, you know," said Trimble, speaking confidently now. "That's it. Exactly! In fact—in fact, I saw them with something——"

"What rot!" snapped Tom Merry. "Those brutes are after bigger game than a few blessed knives and forks and a spirit-stove, you ass! Besides, if they wanted to pinch any-

thing they'd have pinched something more valuable. Anyway, we'll hunt round after tea. Nippy's lit the fire, I see, so we can shove the kettle on that."

"What about milk?" grunted Herries, glaring at Trimble.

"You were an ass, Tommy, to leave it out."

"Oh, don't grouse again about that!" said Tom crossly.

"Can't we drink lemonade for once?"

"There is none."

"Then if you must have milk in your blessed tea, I'll fetch some from the village," said Tom. "Anybody coming with me?"

"I'll come," said Manners.

"Come on, then," said Tom. "It's only five minutes to the village, and we'll be back before tea's ready."

"I—I say, you fellows," said Trimble, with ill-disguised alarm. "I—I shouldn't go all the way to the village if I were you."

"Why?" said Tom, staring.

"Wha-what's the good?" gasped Baggy. "Just for a tin of milk! Look—look here! Just gimme the money, and I'll go."

"Oh, will you?" exclaimed Tom Merry grimly. "And let you spend the cash on feeding your fat chivvy, eh? Not much, you fat owl!"

"But I mean it——"

"And I mean this!" said Tom grimly.

Grasping Baggy by his fat shoulders, the leader of the caravanners sat him down on the grass with a hearty bump. Then, leaving Trimble roaring, he ran off on his errand with Manners.

"Now what's that fat fraud been up to, I wonder?" said Tom, as they trotted away village-wards. "He didn't want

us to go to the village for some reason or other. Hope he hasn't been pinching there, at all events."

"Looks rummy!" agreed Manners.

It certainly did look "rummy." But they were very soon to learn why Trimble did not wish them to visit the village. They reached it in less than five minutes, and as they entered the little general store, Tom Merry stopped half way into the dingy village shop with a jump.

Behind the counter was standing the shopkeeper—an elderly, bewhiskered individual—and he was busily engaged upon polishing up a shining spirit-stove with a duster.

It was a very nice spirit-stove, and was almost new save for a slight dint showing on its polished surface. And there seemed something curiously familiar to Tom Merry about that nice stove with the dint in it.

"Mum-my hat!" he gasped. "Look at that stove, Harry!"

Harry Manners saw the stove, and he also jumped.

"Great pip!" he ejaculated. "It—it's it!"

The elderly grocer peered over his spectacles at the juniors.

"Good-evening, young gentlemen!" he exclaimed, following the juniors' stares. "You seem very interested in this stove. Perhaps you would like to buy it, young gentlemen?"

The young gentlemen stared as if mesmerised at the stove.

"B-buy it?" repeated Tom Merry feebly.

"Yes. It is second-hand, of course," explained the grocer genially. "I do not usually deal in second-hand goods, but I bought it cheaply this afternoon, and I can sell it very cheaply. The youth I bought it from seemed to be very hard up, and—"

"You—you bought it this afternoon from a youth?" said Tom Merry, his brow going suddenly grim. "What was the youth like, may I ask?"

"A fat boy—a very fat boy," said the grocer, eyeing the juniors in some surprise. "He wore—yes, he wore clothes like yours, young gentlemen, and a straw hat with a coloured band like yours, now I remember. I hope—"

"Trimble!" yelled Manners.

"Trimble, without a doubt!" breathed Tom Merry. "Well, the fat thief! He's pinched our stove and sold it. No wonder we couldn't find the dashed thing!"

The grocer looked suddenly alarmed.

"Did—do I understand that this stove belonged to you?" he said.

"Yes, it did," said Tom grimly. "The fat fraud who sold it had no right to do so. Did he sell you anything else?"

"Oh dear! Yes—yes, young sirs. He persuaded me to buy some knives and forks—six of each."

"Great Scott!"

"The fat thief!"

"I'm very sorry about this," mumbled the grocer, looking greatly distressed. "If I'd known the things were stolen, of course—"

"They're not exactly stolen," said Tom, half-smiling despite his wrath. "But the fat rotter had no right to sell them, for all that. He's a member of our caravan party—"

"That's what he said," said the grocer. "He said that you had run out of money, and were forced to sell the articles. He also wanted me to buy a camera—"

"A camera?" almost shouted Manners.

"Yes. It was a very nice camera, too, but I knew I should have no sale for such an article here," explained the shopkeeper. "But—but this is terrible. I do hope you will not make trouble for me—"

"Certainly not," smiled Tom, anxious to reassure the elderly gentleman. "It's quite all right; the fat idiot hardly realises what he does. If you'll sell the things back to us—"

"But my camera?" gritted Manners wrathfully. "Look here! What did the rotter do with the camera?"

"He took it back, I should think; there's nowhere here he could sell it, I reckon. But—but I'll be very glad indeed to sell you the things back at the price I gave for them, young gentlemen. I shall be only too thankful to get rid of them now I know how that fat young rascal came by them. I gave him five shillings for the spirit-stove—"

"It cost twelve-and-six only a few weeks ago," said Tom.

"That was all I could afford to give him, though. And I gave him five shillings for the knives and forks."

"Phew!"

The St. Jim's juniors looked at each other, and then they fumbled in their pockets, and luckily they managed to make the ten shillings up. Then they left the shop, the grocer having wrapped up the knives and forks and the stove for them in brown paper—only too thankful to be rid of the "stolen" articles.

"Well, my hat!" breathed Tom Merry, as they reached the street. "Now, isn't that fat burglar the outside edge?"

"But my camera!" wailed Manners, almost beside himself with fear for his precious camera. "It cost twelve guineas, and I expect that howling rotter's sold it for five bob or something like that!"

"That merchant said he couldn't sell such a thing here," said Tom. "So I expect he's taken it back to the camp. Anyway, let's get back. We—we'll make that fat rotter sit up for this!"

"Sit up!" echoed Manners, almost in a hiss. "If—if he's sold my camera, or mucked it up, I'll—I'll boil the burglar-jorm in oil! Come on!"

The two wrathful juniors did the journey back in record time. They realised only too well now why Trimble had not wanted them to go to the village—and how he had got jam and chocolate on his fat features. Manners could scarcely contain his anxiety to know what had become of his precious twelve-guinea camera. Panting and breathless and wrathily they reached the camp at last, and as they sighted Trimble mouching round the camp-fire, Manners gave a wild howl and made a rush at him.

"My camera!" he yelled. "You fat worm, what have you done with my camera?"

"Oh dear!" gasped Trimble.

He blinked at the two juniors, and then, suddenly catching sight of the parcels they carried, he turned abruptly and scuttled away, shouting over his shoulder.

"It's all right—it's all right, Manners!" he howled desperately. "It's in the van—go and look! I put it back—Yooop!"

Trimble stumbled over a tree-root, and went crashing down, and next moment Manners had pounced upon him. He dragged the yelling fat junior to his feet and shook him angrily.

"Great pip!" exclaimed Blake, running up with the others. "What's the fat ass been up to now?"

"Up to?" howled Manners furiously. "He's sold the dashed stove, and the knives and forks at the village shop, and he's tried to sell my camera—my twelve guinea camera! Oh, you—you—"

"I didn't! Ow-wow! I haven't!" howled Baggy in terror. "Yow! Stop—sha-aking me! Yarrooooh! Didn't I tell you those awful villains pinched 'em, and they must have pinched your camera, Manners! Yoooop!"

"What?" howled Manners. "You said it was in the van, you—"

Suddenly releasing the fat junior, Manners tore across to the caravan to make sure. He came back to find Trimble wriggling in Tom Merry's grasp. But Manners was looking relieved now.

"It's all right," he gasped. "The camera's there all serene. He mustn't have been able to sell it, thank goodness! My hat! If the fat rascal had—"

"I tell you I know nothing about it—absolutely nothing!" gasped Trimble, blinking about him. "It was Patchy and Snooky. I saw 'em, you know. Now lemme go!"

"Not much!" snapped Tom Merry. "You—you burglar! We'll teach you a lasting lesson, you fat porpoise! So that's how you got the cash to get a dashed feed with? You jolly well had the nerve to sell—"

"Don't I keep telling you I didn't!" howled Baggy.

"Besides, it was your own fault—you can't deny that! If you hadn't locked the larder I shouldn't have had to—I—I mean—that is to say—I—I know nothing about it at all. Why, I saw Patchy—"

"Oh, shut up and don't tell any more fibs!" snorted Blake. "You've admitted it now!"

"It doesn't need any admitting," said Manners. "The grocer described the fat rotter clearly enough. I don't believe Patchy and Snooky have been here at all—blessed if I do!"

"Nor do I!" said Tom. "He knew we'd play Hamlet when we missed the things, and he's made up that yarn. Anyway, I vote we give the greedy boulder a good licking, and make him go without tea and supper for this."

"Hear, hear!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Oh dear! I—I say, you chaps, don't be beasts!" wailed Baggy.

But the chaps insisted upon being "beasts"—according to Baggy's description. The fat junior was laid face downwards across a fallen log, and then a hefty stick was brought into play upon his anatomy. And for the next few minutes Trimble's wild howls awoke the echoes.

ANSWERS

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The St. Jim's caravanners had almost reached the end of the platform when Tom Merry pulled up suddenly. "Look, there's Trimble!" he gasped. "But—what the thump—" The other juniors stopped also, astonished at what they saw. It was Baggy Trimble right enough, and the occupation he was engaged in was so peculiar that the juniors could do nothing else but stand and stare at him. (See page 13.)

"There," said Tom Merry, when he laid the stick down at last. "That's a little lesson you've been asking for for some time, old fat pippin. But that's not all. You'll go without tea, and you'll go without supper, and I'll watch you don't get the chance to burgle the larder. I'm sleeping with the key under my pillow to-night. Got that?"

"Yow-ow! Beasts! Oh dear! Yooop!"

Leaving the hapless fat junior wriggling and groaning in anguish, the juniors started tea. And they kept their word to the letter. Baggy Trimble had no tea and no supper that night, and when the caravanners retired to rest as night descended upon the encampment, Baggy also retired, his groans and pathetic appeals for mercy falling upon deaf ears. Baggy had gone too far for once, and the schoolboy caravanners were determined to teach him a lasting lesson.

CHAPTER 3.

A Scare and a Shock!

"WAKE up! Wake up, you chaps! Oh dear!"

Tom Merry awoke with a start. Someone was shaking him violently, and someone was gasping excitedly into his ear.

He recognised the fat, throaty voice of Baggy Trimble, and he glimpsed a fat, pyjama-clad form by his bunk-side. He blinked at it sleepily.

"Wharrer marrer, Trimble?" he murmured drowsily. "What the thump—"

"Ghosts!"

"Wha-what?"

"Ghosts!" gasped Trimble excitedly. "Come and look! Out under the trees there! Oh dear!"

Tom Merry sat up suddenly—too suddenly—and he gave a yelp as his head struck the bunk above him with a crack. "Yoooop!"

The yelp rang through the silent caravan, and a mumble of drowsy voices came from the other two bunks as Lowther and Manners were rudely awakened from their slumbers.

"What's up?"

"Who's that yelling?"

As the sleepy murmurs went up, sounds of movement came from the two bunks, and then, with startling suddenness sounded two more distinct cracks, and two more distinct yelps of woe. Though all the juniors took it in regular turns to sleep in the bunks in the caravan, they never could remember that it was unwise and decidedly painful to sit up suddenly in them on account of the low rafters.

Tom Merry chuckled and slipped out on to the caravan floor, and fumbled for a light.

"Now, Trimble, you fat clam!" he exclaimed. "What are you gassing about? Ghosts! I'll jolly well give you ghosts if you've wakened me up for nothing!"

"I tell you it's a fact!" came Trimble's excited voice through the gloom. "Come and look, Tom Merry!"

Tom could just make out the fat junior's form by the little window of the caravan, and without stopping to strike a match, he stepped over to him and peered through the window.

Only a few glowing embers remained of the camp-fire, but a full round moon rode high in the sky, throwing a silvery flood of light over the caravan encampment. The caravan itself was under the shadowy trees, but the two tents showed clear and white in the moonlight, still and ghostly. Through the open window came the soft, eerie whisper of the night breeze among the rustling foliage.

"You fat ass!" murmured Tom Merry. "I can see nothing—only the dashed tents! You've been dreaming!"

"I—I haven't!" mumbled Baggy. "Look! Look over there, under the trees! It's a g-ghost!"

"Bunkum!"

Tom Merry stared out across the moonlit clearing, and then he gave a violent start.

Something was there, undoubtedly. Under the trees, vague and shadowy, was something huge, grotesque, and white—a gigantic white form, headless, and with outstretched arms, that loomed high under the trees, swaying, monstrous, and awe-inspiring.

"Mum-my hat!" breathed Tom Merry.

Despite himself, Tom felt his hair beginning to rise on his scalp.

"What is it?" demanded Lowther. "What's this game?"

He squeezed to the window, and Tom pointed across the clearing.

"Over there, under the trees!" he whispered. "See it—that white—white thing?"

"Phew! What the—?"

Lowther gasped and stopped as he sighted the object under the trees. Just then Manners also had a glimpse, and he gasped as he sighted the waving monstrosity.

"Wha-what is it?" breathed Manners.

"It's a ghost, you fellows!" said Baggy Trimble. Curiously enough, though his voice was excited, Baggy seemed less disturbed than any of the juniors, which was very surprising, considering the fact that Baggy was the biggest funk at St. Jim's. "It's a ghost, you fellows," he said confidently. "Why not go out and lay it? I believe you fellows are frightened!"

"You—you fat idiot!" snapped Tom Merry. "Yes, we'll lay it! You lead the way, as you're so dashed brave, Baggy."

"I—I would," said Baggy, "only—only I don't mind admitting that I'm frightened, too. I say, I don't believe it is a ghost, though. I believe it's some village chaps playing tricks on us."

"Oh!"

"Great Scott!"

"That's it!"

Baggy's suggestion swept the juniors' fears away with a rush, and Tom Merry fairly chuckled in relief. Of course, that was it without a doubt. The caravan encampment was quite close to the village, and several village urchins had visited the camp, being greatly interested in it. Tom remembered especially several older louts who had jeered at the campers from the edge of the woodland only that afternoon.

"That's it, of course!" said Tom, with rather a shaky laugh. "My hat! It gave me quite a turn at first, though."

"It's a blessed sheet, with a pole stuck through it," said Manners, staring hard across the ghostly clearing. "Come on, you chaps, let's investigate!"

"Wait a minute," grinned Tom. "We'll get some things on, first, and if the merry jokers are still hanging about, we'll give them what for!"

"Good egg!"

The Terrible Three hurriedly rushed on trousers and coats over their pyjamas, and, donning tennis shoes, they slipped out of the van. None of them noticed that Baggy Trimble did not follow them.

"Keep in the shadows," whispered Tom. "Look here; slip round under the trees to the big tent and waken Blake and his lot, Manners. If we go carefully we'll catch the rotters napping. Look! They must be somewhere near now!"

He pointed across the moonlit clearing. The grotesque figure under the trees could be seen more clearly now, and it was not only waving in the breeze, but it was dancing up and down, as if pulled by a string.

"It's a sheet right enough," breathed Tom. "And it's got a string or cord tied to the top, and some joker's pulling it. We'll nab them nicely, with a bit of luck."

Manners slipped silently away, creeping round the camp in the shadows of the trees. In silence Tom Merry and Lowther waited, and after a wait of some minutes Manners came back, and creeping behind him were Blake, Herries, D'Arcy, and Digby, all of them looking sleepy and excited, and with coats and trousers over their pyjamas.

"Good!" whispered Tom Merry. "You've seen it, Blake?"

"Yes," said Blake, with a chuckle. "We've seen it, and we're ready to deal with the merry jokers if you are."

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"It'll be a lark, anyway," grinned Herries.

"Listen," said Tom, staring across at the "ghost." "It looks as if the rotters have spotted us, or something; the blessed sheet isn't jumping now. Anyway, if we're slippy we'll catch the cads. Blake, you take your lot round to the right, and I'll go round to the left with Manners and Lowther. Get right well behind the giddy ghost. Got that?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Off you go, then!"

Tom Merry led his own chums to the left, and Blake led his men to the right, both parties being lost to sight amid the shadowy trees. All the juniors were Scouts, trained to scouting and used to night scouting. They trod through the dark trees cautiously, scarcely making a sound as they picked their way amid the undergrowth, ears and eyes on the alert for sight or sound of the practical jokers they believed were in hiding behind the ghost.

Spreading out fanwise, each party worked round the clearing, meeting together at last well behind the ghostly-looking form, which they knew now was, indeed, a sheet fixed to a pole.

As Tom Merry glimpsed Blake's white face amid the dark trees, he gave a grunt.

"No luck?" he whispered. "We've seen nothing. I expect they've bolted."

Blake was looking a trifle excited.

"We've neither seen nor heard anyone," he whispered.

"But—but there's a fire through the trees over there—a camp-fire, I believe."

"A—a camp-fire?" ejaculated Tom.

"Yes. I spotted the gleam of it a few seconds ago through the trees higher up the slope. What about having a look round?"

"Yes, rather!" said Tom eagerly. "Lead on, Blake."

Without a word Blake turned, and the juniors trooped silently after him. They were all wide awake now, and eager to capture the jokers who had disturbed their slumbers. Moreover, an adventure always appealed to Tom Merry & Co.

Through the trees and up the wooded slope Blake led them, and now all the juniors could see a glow through the trees—a flickering, spasmodic gleam—obviously a camp-fire.

They had not very far to go. Blake stopped suddenly on the edge of a wide clearing in the woods. The caravanners had not ventured this way before, and now they gasped at what they saw.

In the clearing, visible in the light from the harvest moon, was an encampment. A nice white bell-tent was there, with a glowing, flickering camp-fire some yards away. And some yards still farther away stood a caravan—a small, smart vehicle, with its shafts resting on the ground. And, just under the trees, showed the outlines of a horse, tethered to a tree.

It was a silent, peaceful scene, and the juniors blinked at it.

"Great pip!" whispered Tom Merry. "A camp here, and we never knew it!"

"I say," muttered Manners in a scared voice, "supposing it's those brutes, Patchy and Snooky? They followed us in a van, you know."

CHAPTER 4.

A Fearful Blunder.

TOM MERRY shook his head promptly.

"Ass!" he exclaimed in a whisper. "The van those rotters had was an old, tumble-down article, and they certainly had no tent. These chaps, whoever they are, are campers like ourselves. That tent's new, and the van's a jolly nice van. Besides, look how neat and tidy everything is. I don't think we need look any farther for the merchants who played that ghost trick on us."

"Eh? What d'you mean, fathead?"

"Can't you see?" hissed Tom, staring at the sleeping camp with gleaming eyes. "It wasn't the village louts who did it—after all, it's scarcely likely such beggars would trouble to do it at this hour. The chaps who shoved that ghost up were these merchants, for a pension!"

"Phew!"

"That's it!"

"Vewy likely, Tom Mewwy."

"I bet I'm right!" said Tom wrathfully. "The merchants must have known we were camped there, and must have crept up and fixed that sheet up to scare us. But—but we'll scare the funny jokers for this, whoever they are."

"But—but we saw that sheet jumping about. Someone must have been hiding behind it pulling a cord, or something," objected Blake. "And it's pretty clear they're all asleep here. Look, the dashed tent flap's laced up. They're all asleep."

"Yaas, wathah! It is vewy queer, you know."

"Queer be blown!" snorted Tom stubbornly. "It's these chaps, I'm certain, who did it. They guessed we'd spotted the trick, and they bolted back here. I bet—Hark!"

From the tent across the glade came a faint sound of whispering, and Tom fancied he caught the sound of a smothered laugh.

"That settles it!" hissed Tom. "Oh, the rotters! They've heard us coming, and are watching us now, I bet!"

"You're right, Tommy!"

"No doubt about that!"

Even Blake agreed with Tom Merry after hearing that whispering from the tent, and his eyes gleamed.

"Mop the cheeky rotters up!" he breathed. "Let's go for 'em and yank 'em out!"

"Hold on!" said Tom softly. "I've got a better wheeze. Turn back and let 'em think we're gone if they do happen to be watching us—though I hardly believe they can be. We'll let their dashed tent down on top of them."

"Good egg!"

"Tophole!"

Tom's idea struck all of them as a suitable reprisal for the ghost trick, and they turned and slipped back among the trees. Then they followed Tom round the clearing. At the nearest spot to the tent Tom paused.

"After me," he breathed. "Each of you take a peg and loosen the rope, and we'll slip round in a tic. Quietly and smartly, mind."

Tom dashed softly across the grass, with his eager chums at his heels. They had reached the tent in a flash, and with nimble fingers they moved softly round the tent, loosening the ropes, chuckling softly as they did so. Since that first faint sound of whispering no further sound had come from the tent, but the silence did not last long.

As the last rope was loosened, the tent-pole creaked, and swayed, and then it came down with a rush amid a billowing, heaving mass of canvas.

The juniors jumped away, chuckling explosively with half-suppressed mirth; but their mirth did not last very long. Indeed, it ceased quite suddenly.

From the heaving mass of canvas came muffled cries of

alarm and muffled shrieks. As they heard them the St. Jim's caravanners stopped short and fairly jumped.

For the cries of alarm were in unmistakable feminine voices, and the shrieks were unmistakably feminine shrieks.

"B-bub-bai Jove!"

"M-mum-my hat!"

"Oh—oh dear!"

The juniors were absolutely dumbfounded. They felt they could have dropped with horror and dismay. And as they stood there a face suddenly appeared through a slit in the canvas. It was a very pretty face, framed in a mass of pretty hair, but the face was white and alarmed now.

"Oh!" its owner gasped. "What—what's happened? Oh dear, I— Oh!"

Quite suddenly the girl glimpsed the juniors standing there, clearly visible in the moonlight and firelight. She stared, and then her face flushed with sudden wrath.

"Oh!" she gasped. "Oh, you horrid cads!"

"I—I—I—"

Tom Merry began to stammer and stutter helplessly, but Arthur Augustus D'Arcy came to the rescue.

"Excuse me," he said politely. "I weally must apologise for this unhappy mistake! We are frightfully sowwy!"

"Yes, that's it!" began Tom Merry. "You see, it's a mistake!"

"Pway allow us, deah boy—I mean miss—to ewect your tent again. We—"

"Off with you, you horrid young cads!" snapped the girl. "We are quite capable of putting up our own tent! You're a horrid lot of rascals!"

"But you see, we—that is I—" began Tom Merry, stuttering afresh in his anxiety to put matters right.

"Be off!"

"But—but—"

The captain of the Shell fumbled hopelessly for words. Then something happened which solved the problem of what to do next for the flustered, hapless jokers.

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From the direction of the van sounded the sudden quick rattle of a chain, and then a long, low growl—a blood-curdling growl that almost froze the blood in their veins.

"Oh, my hat!" yelled Manners. "Look—look out!" All of them glimpsed it at once—a dark shape that leaped out from beneath the shelter of the caravan. It leaped out into the firelight—a great bulldog with the most ugly and ferocious face the juniors had ever seen. Growling horribly, it came leaping across the clearing amid a swift rattling of its chain.

"Run for it!"

"Oh, great pip!"

"Wun, deah boys!" shrieked Arthur Augustus wildly.

"Oh, bai Jove!"

And Tom Merry & Co. did run for it. They turned tail and bolted like rabbits. They were glad enough to get away in any case, but the sight of that ferocious-looking bulldog tearing towards them quite settled the question of flight.

Headless of bumps and collision and bruises, the juniors bolted into the dark woodland, and went crashing back towards their encampment. Though the bulldog was obviously on a long chain, they were taking no risks of that chain breaking.

But apparently the chain did not break, for the growls and the disappointed howls died away behind them, and then Tom Merry called a halt as they reached the camp at last.

"Oh—oh crumbs!" he panted. "We've done it this time, you fellows! Isn't it awful?"

"Tewwible, bai Jove!"

"Fearful!"

Dismayed and horrified at what they had done, the juniors blinked at each other in the gloom with scarlet faces. To play such a trick on girl campers was the last thing any of them would have dreamed of doing. But they had done it—there was no getting away from that fact—and they all felt ashamed of themselves.

"Oh dear!" groaned Tom Merry. "What will they think of us? What cads they'll think us! And—and we can do nothing. We can't go back and help them to shove that tent up again, of course!"

"Wathah not, bai Jove!" groaned Arthur Augustus, whose aristocratic features were pink. "That young lady who spoke to us wufused my offah of assistance. Oh deah! What a tewwible blundah, bai Jove! Fancy playin' a twick like that on gals! Oh deah! What are we to do, deah boys?"

"I'm blessed if I know what we can do!" grunted Tom Merry dismally. "We can't do anything to-night, that's pretty clear. We can only wait until morning, and then we'll go over and apologise. They—they'll make us squirm, I bet!"

"No doubt about that!"

"But there's one thing!" snapped Tom Merry, in a curiously grim voice. "If we catch the chap who has played this ghost trick on us, we—we'll boil him in oil after this!"

"You—you don't think it could have been those girl campers, then, of course?" said Manners hesitatingly.

"Of course not!"

"Certainly not, ass!"

"Bai Jove! Wathah not!" said Arthur Augustus firmly. "Gals would never play a twick on stwangers like that."

Tom Merry & Co. seemed to be all agreed upon that point. Whoever had played the trick it was certainly not the girl campers. Tom Merry, indeed, did not give the suggestion a moment's thought. A sudden suspicion of another nature had occurred to Tom Merry in the last minute or so.

"No, it certainly wasn't those girls!" he said grimly. "But—but I'm beginning to think I can guess who did do it, though."

"Those village louts?"

"No; not them, either!" said Tom. "Just think, you chaps! It was Trimble who first saw the blessed ghost, wasn't it?"

"Y-y-yes!" stammered Blake, giving a slight start.

"And Trimble usually sleeps like a log. It takes a blessed earthquake almost to waken him, doesn't it? Now, shouldn't we have heard a noise first, if there had been a noise? Well, how did the fat clam know the ghost was there?"

"Perhaps he was prowling round," grinned Lowther. "He was desperate for grub when we pitched him into his bunk at lights out."

"That's so. But it's queer, for all that. And it's queerer still that he was the only one who didn't seem to be scared at all. We all know what a shocking funk he is. If he'd felt there was anything to be frightened of, he'd have howled blue murder and buried his head under the blankets."

"Phew! That's so!"

"And it was he who suggested that we should rush out and lay the dashed ghost, and it was he who suggested also that perhaps it was the village chaps playing tricks."

"Mum-my hat!"

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"Bai Jove!"

"The—the fat rascal!"

"And he stayed behind when we started out!" went on Tom Merry, more grimly still. "If he had been really afraid of a ghost he would never have dared to remain in the van alone."

"No fear!"

There was a silence. The juniors blinked at Tom Merry with growing wrath and disgust on their faces—disgust at the thought that they had failed to see all this before.

But they saw it now, and not for one moment did they doubt that Tom was right.

"It was Trimble, for a pension," said Tom quietly. "He knew I had the key of the larder under my pillow, and he knew his only chance of getting to the grub was to get us out of the van for a few minutes. He was desperate, you know, for grub, and when Baggy's desperately hungry he never counts risks or cost. But—but we'll soon prove it, chaps. If this sheet is ours, then it was Baggy, without a doubt!"

As he spoke, Tom jumped upwards and dragged at the white sheet still swaying in the breeze above their heads. The sheet came down with a rush—so did the pole, which caught Tom Merry a fearful crack on the head.

But Tom, though he gave a muffled yelp, scarcely heeded it, as he took the sheet into the moonlight and spread it out, pointing to a dark patch on it as he did so.

"That's the ink that ass Gussy spilt on it two nights ago!" he said grimly. "The sheet's one of ours right enough. Now we'll see where this cord leads us to. It seems to be tied somewhere."

"Phew!"

Tom grabbed the cord that was tied to the pole and the sheet, and the juniors followed him as he followed the cord up. It wound away through the undergrowth, where it had caught on brambles and twigs, and as Tom had expected, the trail led them to the caravan, where the cord vanished through the open window.

"That settles it!" whispered Tom. "But listen! The fat rascal's asleep. We'll prove matters absolutely before we charge him."

"Right-ho!"

The juniors stepped one after the other softly into the van, which vibrated with Baggy Trimble's snoring. Whether Baggy had been up to tricks or not, he was obviously fast asleep now.

Tom stepped to the open window, and at once he felt the cord. He tugged at it, and the knotted end fell to the floor—out of Trimble's bunk.

That settled the matter for Tom Merry & Co. But they soon found further proof of Baggy's guilt, for all that. Tom found that the larder door was still locked, and the key was still under his pillow. But the key was decidedly sticky and jammy, and the larder, on investigation, had obviously been raided.

And the raider was undoubtedly Baggy Trimble.

As Tom Merry shone a light into his bunk, revealing Trimble's fat features, smiling and contented and peaceful on the white pillow, it also showed smears of jam and custard and cream on the same fat features.

Apparently, having had his feed, Baggy had succumbed to slumber, blissfully unconscious of the approaching reckoning. But he did not remain unconscious for long. As the light flashed over his closed eyes Baggy opened them and blinked out at the juniors.

"Oh!" he gasped suddenly, sighting seven wrathful faces in the candle-light. "Oh dear!"

"Yank the fat cad out!" hissed Blake, in blood-curdling accents. "Yank the fat rotter out!"

"Ow! I—I sus-say, you chaps," gasped Baggy, blinking feebly at the juniors. "Dud-did you capture the—the g-ghost?"

"Yes, we've captured him all right!" said Tom Merry grimly. "Come on! Out of that, you fat burglar! We'll teach you to play your giddy little games with us! Come out!"

"I—I say— Oh dear! I—I say, you fellows, I—I'd rather not, you know!" gasped Baggy, blinking out in sudden alarm. "What d'you want me for? If you think— Here, leggo! Yow-wow! Leggo! I say, you— Yoop!"

Bump!

"Yaroooooh!"

Tom Merry whirled the fat junior out of his bunk, and he went to the floor amid a smother of blankets, and with a heavy bump and a howl.

"Now, you fat frog," hissed Tom Merry, "we're going to deal with you at once—midnight or no midnight! After the feast the reckoning, my pippin! You've had your feast by the look of things, and you've had your little joke, too. Now you're going to have your reckoning, and we're going to have the joke for a change."

"Yow-wow!" groaned Baggy, blinking up at the juniors' furious faces. "Oh dear! Wha-what's this for? If you

think I played that ghost trick, you—you're mistaken—quite mistaken."

"You fat fibber—"

"Ow! I know nothing about it!" yelped Baggy, as Blake fastened his thumb and finger on the fat junior's ear. "Lemme alone! It wasn't me who tied that sheet up, I tell you! Not at all. It was those village louts—or p'raps it was Patchy and Snooky! Yes, that's it. It was those awful rascals. Now you know, just lemme go back to bed, you beasts!"

"You—you worm!"

"I tell you it's a fact!" howled Baggy. "I know nothing about any g-gug-ghost. Don't I keep telling you?"

"It was you, you fat rotter!" hooted Manners. "We've already proved it, and now we're going to make make you sit up for it."

"Ow - wow! I say, you fellows, you're making a fearful mistake if you think it was me. Besides, it was your own doing. You wouldn't give me any tea, and you wouldn't give me my supper, and you locked the rotten larder up, didn't you? I had to do something; I was starving, famished. Oh dear! I—I mean to say I'm absolutely innocent—never even knew there was a ghost!"

"Bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus, blinking down at the squirming Baggy through a glimmering monocle. "You—you weally are the limit, Baggy. We have already pwoved you guilty—"

"I'm not—not at all. Don't I keep telling you it wasn't me?" howled Baggy. "I never even thought of rigging up that sheet so that Merry would go outside and let me get the key from his pillow—never even thought of such a thing. Besides—Yoooop!"

Baggy yelped fiendishly as Blake lifted him up by his fat ears. The yelp brought Nippy—who had slept through the disturbance so far—running from his tent to the caravan. He stared sleepily and in no little surprise at the fat form of Baggy, squirming in Blake's heavy grasp.

"Hallo!" he ejaculated. "That fat merchant up to his games again—at this time of the night, too?"

Tom Merry nodded, and grimly related what had happened.

"Well, I'm hanged!" gasped Nippy, eyeing Baggy in wonder. "That chap takes the giddy biscuit for nerve. Why, it was only earlier on he had a licking."

"And he's going to get another one now," said Blake angrily. "That licking evidently wasn't enough. And it won't wait until morning."

"No fear!"

"Let the fat rotter have it hot and strong!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

There was no mercy for Baggy this time—none whatever. Even the tender-hearted Gussy was unmoved by Baggy's fearful howls for mercy. He was soundly bumped again and again on the caravan floor, and then Lowther brought Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's walking-cane into play on Baggy's anatomy.

For some moments the most fearful howls, and a sound like the beating of a stout carpet floated out into the night from the caravan door and windows. When at last the hapless grub-raider crawled into his bunk he was wriggling and groaning with anguish.

But though the punishing of Baggy was some small satisfaction to the juniors, it was long before any of them got

to sleep again that night—or, rather, morning. Their thoughts were of the girl caravanners, and of the trick they had played upon them. Their cheeks burned as they thought that even then the unfortunate girls might be struggling to get their tent up again. And—in Tom Merry's case, at least—the round moon was waning and a glimmer of dawn was showing in the east before he closed his tired and worried eyes to sleep.

CHAPTER 5.

Gone!

"WE 'V E got to do it now!"

"Yaas, wathah, Tom Mewwy!"

"No getting out of it," said Manners. "We've done the girls a rotten trick, and we've got to make the only amends we can."

"We've certainly got to do it," agreed Tom again. "But—but it won't be pleasant. They're bound to have had a bad night, and they're bound to give us what for with their tongues. Oh dear! They may even set that beastly dog loose on us!"

"Oh, bai Jove!"

Over the remains of breakfast the St. Jim's caravanners looked at each other dismally. They had awakened late that morning, and in a far from merry and bright state of mind. All of the juniors agreed—excepting Baggy Trimble, who found it wisest to keep very silent

and very much out of the limelight that morning—that something had to be done. As decent fellows they felt they could not possibly allow things to remain as they were. The very least they could do—and the only thing—to make amends in some way was to visit the girls and apologise most humbly, and explain most carefully, how the fearful blunder had come about.

It had to be done—there was no getting out of it. As Tom Merry said, it would not be a pleasant task at all. And as Tom opined, they might even set the dog on them.

It was certainly a very awkward position for Tom Merry & Co. to find themselves in.

"And it's all through that fat rotter!" snorted Blake, glowering at Baggy Trimble across the camp-fire. "I vote we walk the fat rotter to the nearest station and get rid of him."

"Hear, hear!"

"We can't do that, you know, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus, shaking his head. "I have given my solemn word to Baggy that he could accompany us for the west of the tour, and I do not pwopose to bweak it."

"Rot!"

"Bunkum!" snorted Herries wrathfully. "Didn't the fat swizzler trick you into giving your dashed word? He threatened to drop all your silly clobber into that duckpond unless you promised. In my view, you'd be quite justified in breaking it."

"Wubbish!" said Arthur Augustus firmly. "Nothin' would tempt me to bweak my word, Hewwies; you should know that, deah boy."

"But we didn't give our word," snorted Blake. "And I vote we kick the fat rotter out for good and all. Never mind old Gussy."

"Hear, hear!"

"I—I say, you fellows—"



Cousin Ethel watched, her heart thumping, as Doris Levison started on her perilous descent to the bottom of the chalky pit. (See page 21.)

"Oh, never mind that fat toad now!" snapped Tom Merry crossly. "We've got to settle this other matter, you chaps. Are we to go at once and risk the blessed-dog, or not?"

"Let's go and get it over now!" groaned Monty Lowther. "They can't eat us, anyway!"

"But the dashed dog might," grinned Digby. "That's the real trouble, if you ask me. I didn't at all like the look of that bulldog."

"Nor me. Oh dear!"

Tom Merry got to his feet, his features set and resolute. He had evidently made up his mind at last.

"Come on; we'll go at once," he said, making a wry face. "It's got to be done, anyway. If the dog bites—well, we'll get bitten, that's all. And whatever we get will serve us jolly well right for jumping too hastily at conclusions last night. We'll apologise handsomely—"

"Right-ho!"

"Oh dear!"

Tom's chums got up, none of them looking at all eager for the task before them. But it had to be done, and next moment they were getting ready.

It took them much longer to make themselves presentable than usual. As Arthur Augustus pointed out rather severely to his more carelessly attired chums, it was absolutely necessary to make a very favourable impression when on such a delicate errand.

They were all ready at last, however, and Tom led the way through the woods, with a sympathetic farewell from Nippy.

"Gussy had better be the spokesman—what?" said Tom Merry thoughtfully, as they tramped on. "He's always quacking about his tact and judgment, anyway."

"Bai Jove! Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Oh, for goodness' sake, don't let Gussy do the gassing!" growled Blake. "He'll make a worse muck of things than ever."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Well, perhaps I'd better do it," said Tom, with a sigh.

"Gussy is an awful ass, and would certainly muck things up."

"Bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus indignantly. "I

"Well," exclaimed Tom Merry, "what's the programme now, chaps? Are we to stay here longer, or are we to pack up and get on the road again? I vote we move on."

"So do I."

"Hear, hear!"

"We'll make for the station first of all, though," said Blake, with a grim glance at Baggy Trimble, who was moodily washing up dishes. "And we'll shove Trimble into a carriage, pay his fare home, and pack the fat rascal off. How's that?"

"Oh, really, Blake—" snorted Baggy.

"Weally, you know, Blake—" began Arthur Augustus warmly.

"Carried unanimously," said Tom Merry promptly. "We're all fed up to the chin with Baggy, and Baggy must go!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Look here, you fellows, I'm jolly well not going!" said Baggy Trimble, glowering at the juniors. "If Gussy says I can stay, I'm staying. Gussy's running this tour, not you, and it's like your cheek to try to boot me out, I must say."

"Why, you cheeky—"

"Besides, haven't you already licked me for what I did?" mumbled Baggy. "And, besides, I didn't do it. You fellows have made an awful mistake in thinking I did it. Anyway, I'm jolly well not going!"

"Aren't you?" said Blake grimly. "We'll see about that! Gussy or no Gussy, you've got to go. We've given you every chance. We said you could stay with us if you behaved yourself. But you've been nothing but a nuisance since the beginning of the tour! You're going!"

"Hear, hear!"

There was a chorus of agreement—from all but Arthur Augustus. That junior screwed his eyeglass into place and regarded Blake very firmly.

"One moment, Blake," he said tartly. "I wathah think I have a say in this mattah. Twimble is not goin', bai Jove! He is a wascal and a nuisance. But I have given my word, and I ppropose to keep it. I uttably wufuse to allow Twimble to be kicked out! That is flat, deah boy!"

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should certainly not muck things up, as you so vulgarly express it, Tom Mewwy. Howevah, I—I weally think I would wathah not be the spokesman, deah boys!"

There was a chuckle, and Tom Merry grinned ruefully.

"You chaps must back me up, then," he said, with a dismal groan. "I'm blessed if I know how to start the apology. I've been trying to work up a speech since I got up. But it won't come. Anyway—Hallo, here we are! Here's the—the—Mum-my hat!"

Tom Merry stood and stared. His chums likewise stood and stared and rubbed their eyes and stared.

The grassy glade was still there right enough, as was a few blackened cinders from the camp-fire. But the tent, the horse, the caravan, the bulldog, and the caravanners had vanished. The pretty little glade was empty and deserted!

"Well, I'm hanged!" breathed Blake. "They—they've gone!"

There was no possible doubt about that.

"Well, this puts the lid on the apology, anyway," said Tom. "They've been gone some time, if I'm not mistaken. I suppose they were up early and packed and cleared out."

"Didn't bother to put the tent up again, perhaps," said Blake, shaking his head. "But—but I'd feel a good bit more comfortable if we could only have explained matters for all that. It makes me feel an awful cad!"

"Same here!"

"Wotten, bai Jove!" agreed Arthur Augustus, looking anything but happy. "Howevah, it cannot be helped, deah boys, and perhaps a chance will come to make mattahs wight. We may dwop on the gals on the woad later."

The St. Jim's caravanners returned to their camp very quiet and very troubled. It was a great relief to have been saved the trouble and possible unpleasantness of making the apology, but they would all have preferred to have been obliged to make it for all that—if only to relieve their own minds. But as Arthur Augustus had sagely remarked, it couldn't be helped, and there was not much sense in going after the girl caravanners, who might be miles away by this time. So they returned to camp in a dismal mood.

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With that Arthur Augustus walked towards the caravan and entered it. What he was going for Blake did not know—or care. But it suited him very well to see Arthur Augustus enter the van just then.

Quick as a flash, he ran across to the van after Gussy, and, pulling the door shut, he locked it. Then, ignoring the sudden alarmed yell from Arthur Augustus within, he ran back to his chums.

"Now Gussy's out of the way we can get down to the job," he said, with a grim chuckle. "We're all agreed that Trimble must go?"

"Yes, rather!"

"I say, you beasts—"

"Shut up, Trimble! You're stone dead now. You've had a long run, but your crooked course is ended!"

"Ha, ha! Yes!"

"Get his cap," said Blake. "You can drop those dishes, Trimble; you're sacked!"

Crash, crash, crash!

Trimble obeyed with unexpected promptness, and three or four nice plates went crashing to the ground. Then Baggy bolted as the juniors made a rush at him.

But Baggy was no runner, and in a few yards Blake and Lowther caught him up and yanked him back.

"Leggo!" roared Baggy, struggling furiously. "I tell you I won't go! I'm Gussy's guest just as much as you beasts are! Look here, Tom Merry, don't be a beast!"

"No good, Baggy!" said Tom Merry firmly. "You've had your chance, and you've gone too far this time. We're fed up. You practically swindled Gussy into giving his word, and it doesn't stand with us. You've no luggage, have you?"

"Beasts!"

"No. He hasn't even a giddy toothbrush!" grinned Lowther.

"Then we'll start at once," said Tom. "Nippy, you can let old Gussy out of the van after we've been gone a bit. Kim on, Baggy, my lad. This way to the station!"

"Yaroooooh! Leggo!" roared Baggy. "I tell you I won't go. Yoop!"

But Baggy did go. With Tom Merry on one side and Blake on the other, and with Lowther bringing his shoe into play at the rear, Baggy went out of the encampment with a rush and a roar, while Digby and Herries and Manners trotted in the rear, ready to speed the departing guest with a tennis-shoe, if necessary.

There was no escape for Baggy Trimble.

CHAPTER 6.

Another Shock!

"KIM on!"
"Yarooooop!"
"Pick 'em up!"
"Leggo! Rescue!"

But there was no rescue for Trimble. The only fellow who might have attempted to rescue him was locked up in the caravan. Arthur Augustus would, doubtless enough, have felt in duty bound to rescue Trimble—had he been able to do so. But he wasn't, and as Gussy's chums knew very well, it was a certainty that Arthur Augustus himself would be very thankful indeed to be rid of the charming society of the greedy, fatuous Baggy just as they were.

For Tom Merry & Co. were in earnest—very much in earnest. They were more than "fed-up" with Trimble. They had "stood him" as long as they could, partly on account of the precious, golden "word" of Arthur Augustus, partly out of sheer kindness of heart, and partly because Baggy was undoubtedly a good cook.

The caravanners felt that they could stand him no longer, and Blake's suggestion found them all in just the right mood to carry it into execution. They felt that any expense and any amount of trouble was worth while to get rid of Baggy Trimble. And Baggy's frantic howls and plaintive pleadings found no sympathetic response in the stony hearts of Tom Merry & Co. on that bright summer's morning.

It was a sultry morning, but the station was but a short distance, and they kept the pace up, arriving at the little station perspiring and breathless. The pay-shutter of the little booking-office was closed, so the juniors strolled on to the station platform, keeping a very wary eye on Baggy Trimble.

"I say, you chaps," mumbled Trimble, blinking round him pathetically. "You—you needn't wait; I—I'll get my own ticket. We—we can say good-bye now."

"That chicken won't fight, Baggy!" laughed Tom Merry. "We're not only going to see you into the local, but we're going to see you into the London train at Puddleham Junction."

"Beasts!"

"Hallo, train's signalled!" grinned Lowther.

It was, and at the same moment there sounded the "click" of the pay-shutter in the booking-office. Tom Merry got the tickets, and returned to his chums, and when the local steamed in some minutes later, all of the party boarded it. Baggy did not want to board it, but they persuaded him—with their feet!

By this time Baggy had realised, if he hadn't done so before, that Tom Merry & Co. were in deadly earnest, and his face was the picture of wrath and dismay. He realised

also that they were taking no chances of his leaving the local at Puddleham Junction, and walking back by road.

It was only a few minutes' run to the junction, and Baggy spent the time pleading pathetically for forgiveness. But Tom Merry & Co. were unyielding, and as the train stopped Tom flung the carriage door open with a chuckle.

"Out you get, old fat lard-tub!" he said. "There's a refreshment-bar here, I believe, and we'll stand you a good feed before—Ow! Yoooooop!"

It was done in a flash.

As Tom rose to step first out of the carriage, Baggy Trimble's eyes gleamed, and he gave Tom a vicious push, sending him sprawling out on the platform on his face. Then, before any of the others could act, he sprang out after him, and tore away along the platform.

"Oh, my hat!" yelled Blake. "After the fat rascal!"

He was gone, and darting in and out of the people and luggage on the platform, before Blake and the others could jump out on to the platform.

The juniors leaped from the train, but by this time Baggy's fat form was lost among the crowd on the platform. Tom Merry staggered to his feet, mopping a streaming nose and fairly trembling with wrath.

"Where is he—where is the fat rotter?" he gasped. "Great pip! I—I'll burst him for this! Where—"

"It's all right!" said Herries grimly. "The fat cad can't leave the station without a ticket. We'll get him sooner or later. Come on! He went this way."

The juniors started off at a run along the platform, threading in and out of the people. It happened to be a market day, and there were a great number of people about.

They had almost reached the end of the train when Tom Merry pulled up suddenly.

"There he is!" he gasped. "But—but what the thump is—"

The other juniors stopped also, astonished at what they saw. It was Baggy Trimble, right enough, and the occupation he was engaged in was so peculiar that the juniors could do nothing but stand and stare at him.

The guard's-van had drawn up just opposite to the white wicket gate that gave admittance to the station yard. From the van the guard, aided by a porter, was dropping empty milk-cans on to the platform. These were being trundled away to a waiting farmer's cart in the station yard by another porter and a farmhand.

As the chums arrived on the scene, they were just in time to see Baggy Trimble grab one of the cans and start trundling it after the porter and the farmhand, who were just taking one each through the wicket gate.

Having no ticket, Baggy was hoping to get out of the station by the station yard by pretending to be helping on the job of unloading and loading the empty cans.

The sheer cheek and audacity of the "wheeze" almost took the juniors' combined breath away.

But the guard and porter were busily engaged, and neither they nor the other porter and farmhand appeared to have spotted Baggy, and it certainly looked like being a success.

"Great pip!" gasped Blake, as he fully grasped the idea. "Well—well, my word! The crafty, fat toad!"

"And he'll do it yet!" yelled Tom Merry. "Quick, you asses! After him!"

He led the way with a rush towards the fat junior. Trimble heard the yell, and he looked round suddenly. He was almost through the wicket gate by this, and suddenly



RICHARD CLARKE.

A member of the New House, sharing Study No. 2 with William Robinson. A very quiet and reserved junior is Clarke; friendly with all the other members of the House although he does not join in with them in their japes upon the rival House. Always happy and cheerful and a stickler for his lessons. Some of the sneaks try to take a rise out of him at times, but he is always equal to the occasion. Like Harry Manners, he has a fondness for photography, and can often be found tramping the country lanes view-finding.

dropping the can, he bolted through the gate and went tearing across the yard beyond.

It was a move the juniors had not expected, and before he could stop himself, Tom Merry went headlong over the rolling milk-can, and as Blake was just behind him, he did likewise. And as their chums were rushing just behind them, the results were what might have been expected.

Crash, crash! Clatter, clatter! Crash!

"Yaroooh! Yoooh! Yaroooh!"

Amid a terrific rattling and crashing, the rolling milk-can crashed into a pile of others, sending them spinning and rattling away along the platform, while Tom Merry & Co. rolled and struggled and yelled in a confused heap.

But they were soon up again, and heedless of bumps and bruises, and heedless of the yells of the porter and guard, they went in pursuit of Baggy Trimble across the station yard.

By this time Baggy was just vanishing through the double white gates into the lane beyond.

With furious howls the infuriated juniors went in pursuit, and the cries of the porters and guard died away behind them.

The little market town was some distance from the station, and the juniors found themselves on a narrow country lane. Tom Merry sighted Baggy Trimble in the distance at once, and he led the way, his chums pounding behind him, fairly raising the dust of the lane with their pounding feet.

"Go it, chaps!" gasped Tom Merry. "My hat! We'll fairly give the rascal socks for this!"

"And we'll thumping well see he does go now, if we have to take him home our giddy selves!" vowed Blake. "Put it on, chaps!"

"Yes, rather!"

The juniors "put it on." Baggy looked round once, and as he saw them tearing behind, he increased his pace, though he was gasping and wheezing noisily, and the perspiration was streaming down his fat face.

But it was a hopeless task for Baggy, as he must have realised, for he turned suddenly and dived through a hole in the hedge. When the juniors dived through the gap a few seconds later, they glimpsed his fat form making for a belt of woodland at the far end of the meadow.

"After him!" panted Tom. "If he reaches that wood, we'll lose him, sure as eggs is eggs!"

"He's whacked!" grinned Blake. "We'll get him, all right."

Blake proved a true prophet. Trimble was certainly "whacked." His progress across the bumpy meadow was more a roll than a run, and as he reached the hedge bordering the woodland, he lurched and sprawled headlong.

Before he could scramble up again, Tom Merry & Co. came up with a rush, and pounced upon him.

"Got him!" snorted Blake triumphantly. "Up you get, my pippin!"

"Ow-ow!" gasped Baggy. "Ow-ow! Grooooooh! Ow! Oh, dear! Ow! Leggo! Help, help!"

The sight of the infuriated faces round him quite frightened Baggy, and he fairly howled with fear. He was still yelling and struggling in the juniors' grasp when a ringing and imperious voice called:

"Stop!"

"Mum-my hat!"

At a gap in the hedge a figure had suddenly appeared—a slight, girlish figure in white tennis dress and striped, school blazer, and white tennis shoes. Her face was oval and pretty, and her curly, auburn hair was surmounted by a white Panama-hat, with a school band round it.

"Stop!" she repeated, her face flushing indignantly. "Let that poor boy go, you cowardly bullies!"

CHAPTER 7.

Awkward!

"O H, dear!"

Tom Merry and the rest of the "cowardly bullies" released Baggy Trimble as though he had suddenly become red-hot.

They flushed scarlet to the roots of their hair, and they one and all wished for the ground to open and swallow them up as they met the scornful, contemptuous, indignant glance of the imperious young lady.

"You cowards!" exclaimed the young lady, eyeing them steadily and still more contemptuously. "Six of you attacking one poor boy! Aren't you ashamed of yourselves?"

Tom Merry & Co. looked it, if they weren't!

"I—I—I—" began Tom feebly, and then he stopped.

"You—you see, miss—" Blake got as far as that, and then he, also, stopped.

Words simply would not come—nor did any of the others help them out.

For his part, besides being flustered and confused, Tom Merry was also puzzled. Somehow he felt certain he had

seen that pretty face before, and quite recently, too. But before he could bring the occasion to mind there came another startling interruption.

Cheerful voices sounded, and three more girls appeared at the gap in the fence. They squeezed through, and as they did so Tom Merry almost shouted with surprise—as did his chums.

For the pretty faces of the three girls were very familiar to the St. Jim's juniors—very familiar indeed.

"M-my hat!" ejaculated Tom Merry involuntarily. "It—it's Cousin Ethel—"

"And Doris Levison—" gasped Blake faintly.

"And—and Miss Stanhope!" mumbled Manners.

The St. Jim's juniors were staggered to see their girl chums in that unexpected place, and at such an unexpected and decidedly awkward time. Miss Ethel Cleveland—besides being cousin to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy—was a very old chum of the juniors, as was Miss Doris Levison, the sister of Ernest and Frank Levison of St. Jim's. And Vera Stanhope, who was a school friend of Cousin Ethel's, was also an old friend of Tom Merry & Co.

But if the St. Jim's juniors were staggered, the girls were more staggered still.

"G-good gracious!" gasped Cousin Ethel, her face flushing with astonished pleasure. "Am I dreaming? Tom Merry and—and all of you here? How lovely!"

"What a jolly surprise!" laughed Doris Levison, also flushing with pleasure. "I heard you were caravanning for the week, but I never dreamed of meeting you here."

The girls held out their hands, and, suddenly remembering their manners, the juniors shook hands, fumbling awkwardly with their hats as they did so. Cousin Ethel laughed.

"You've already met Miss Greenway, then?" she said.

"How strange! Why, what is the matter, Muriel?"

"Matter!" said the imperious young lady coldly. "Do you mean to say, Ethel, that you know these—these bullies?"

"Bullies?" exclaimed Cousin Ethel and Doris Levison both together.

"Yes, bullies. I have just stopped them bullying this poor boy," said Miss Muriel frigidly.

"Oh, you mean Trimble!" said Cousin Ethel, with a merry laugh. "You must have been mistaken, Muriel. Tom Merry and his chums are certainly not bullies."

"Oh!" said Miss Greenway, her face flushing. "Are—are these Tom Merry and his friends? Then—then—"

"You see," stammered Tom Merry. "You—you see, we were just chasing Trimble for—a joke. He was running away, and we just—just ran after him."

"That—that's all," mumbled Blake.

"Oh!" said Miss Muriel, her face changing. "I—I'm so sorry for calling you horrid names, then. I—I thought—"

"That's all right!" stammered Tom.

"Quite all right, Miss Greenway."

The girls laughed, and the juniors laughed—the latter laughing somewhat feebly, however. After that all should have been merry and bright, but it wasn't.

"This is splendid, meeting you here like this!" said Tom, after they had been formally introduced to Miss Greenway. "I thought you were going down into Cornwall for the vac, though?"

"We were," smiled Cousin Ethel, "but we changed our plans at the last moment, and came caravanning instead."

"Cara-caravanning?" stammered Tom, exchanging a startled look with his equally startled chums.

"Yes," said Doris Levison, with a merry laugh. "Girls enjoy roughing it as well as boys. It's a ripping way of spending a holiday, I think. We've just had a few days at a jolly camp on the wooded hill just outside Puddleham, and came on here this morning."

"D-dud-did you?" stammered Tom Merry.

He was more startled than ever now. A dreadful fear was taking possession of him. If Cousin Ethel and her chums had been camping the day before on that wooded hill just outside Puddleham Village, and if they had left their camp on that morning, then—then—

Tom Merry groaned inwardly at the thought. He waited with bated breath for what would come next. It came quickly enough.

"Yes," chimed in Miss Muriel, with sudden indignation in her tone. "It was such a jolly camp, and we meant to stay longer there. But some horrid campers—trippers, I suppose—played us a very dirty and caddish trick last night."

"D-dud-did they?" gasped Tom.

"Yes. It was really too awful," said Cousin Ethel, taking up the tale. "We were fast asleep, when Doris woke up, saying she heard voices. Then, without warning, the tent we were sleeping in crashed down on us."

"You—you don't say?" gasped Blake.

"You can just imagine how terrified we were at first," said Doris Levison, taking up the story again. "We were only half awake, of course, and it was pitch dark in the



Arthur Augustus D'Arcy stared blankly at the sight of the creeping figure rapidly approaching Nippy, then he suddenly remembered himself, and let out a wild yell. "Look out, Nippy! Oh, bai Jove! Look out, behind you, deah boy!" There was the sound of an angry exclamation and Patchy stopped dead, staring at the van window. "Look arter 'im in there, Snooky," he yelled, "while I collar this one!" (See page 17.)

tent, and there were we struggling and shrieking and half-smothered. It was awful."

"And—and didn't you recognise the—the chaps who d-did it?" gasped Tom.

"I did just get a glimpse of them," said Miss Muriel. "I just managed to peep out and saw them. Awful bouncers they looked, though I didn't see them clearly, of course."

"Oh! They—they would be."

"But it was too bad—in fact, it was the work of cads," said Miss Muriel indignantly. "Don't you think so?"

"Oh! Oh, y-y-yeess!"

"If only I were a boy!" sighed Miss Muriel, who seemed to be a very warlike young lady. "I should know how to deal with the cads. They deserve to be dealt with for treating girl-campers in that shabby way in the middle of the night! And if only Doris and Ethel and the others would have backed me up, I should have gone over this morning and boxed their ears soundly."

"W-would you?"

"Yes. But Doris and the others wouldn't hear of it!" said Miss Muriel, with an unladylike snort. "So we packed up early this morning, and—well, here we are."

"It was as well we did, Muriel," said Ethel Cleveland mildly. "I'm sure I didn't want to have anything to do with such thoughtless cads! In any case, they got a fright after all. Muriel tells us that they ran for their lives when Bingo went after them."

"B-bingo!" mumbled Tom Merry, whose face was going more and more scarlet—as were the faces of his hapless chums.

"Yes. Bingo's our bulldog, you know. He's a great dear, and really harmless, you know. He's very old, and very deaf, and almost blind. But he's got a terrible growl, and he scares people to death nearly. We leave him to guard the camp, you see."

The juniors did see. They remembered with humiliating thrills how they had bolted in terror from Bingo the night before. Tom Merry & Co. looked at each other in dumb horror. They were feeling they had never been in a more

awkward situation in their lives before. They had been anxious enough to meet the victims of the trick in order to explain and apologise. But now they knew that those victims were none other than Cousin Ethel and her girl chums, and now they knew just what the girls thought of the "horrid cads" and "trippers" and "awful bouncers," their anxiety to apologise and explain vanished with lightning-like rapidity. The St. Jim's caravanners were anxious to do the right thing, and to make amends, but they felt that no excuse, no apology, and no offer to make amends would suffice in this case. The thought filled them with horror. They simply dare not confess.

Miss Muriel Greenway's remarks about boxing the ears of the "cads" quite settled the hapless juniors' minds on that score. Not for worlds would they have dared to own up to that high-spirited girl. There was little Tom Merry & Co. "funked," but they certainly "funked" that. Tom Merry realised only too well now where he had seen Miss Muriel's face before. He only wondered how she had escaped recognising them in the bright moonlight. And Gussy's voice—surely that would be remembered? Yet, had she identified them? Tom noted, with a sinking feeling of apprehension, that Miss Muriel was eyeing their burning faces suspiciously now.

But obviously Cousin Ethel and the other two girls did not dream of the truth. Doris Levison broke the silence.

"Oh, don't let's talk about the horrid business again!" she said, with a merry laugh. "But you haven't told us yet where you are camping."

"I—I—I—" gasped Tom. "You—you see—"

"Not—not far away!" gasped Blake.

"Oh, good!" remarked Miss Ethel, quite failing to note the juniors' confusion. "But where is Arthur? I suppose you've left him at the camp?"

"Y-yes," said Tom, thankful for the change of subject. "We—we left him behind. I say, we'll bring him over this afternoon if we may."

"Of course," laughed Cousin Ethel. "Won't Arthur get THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 916."

a surprise? But do come along to our camp. We haven't got our tent up yet—"

"Oh, good!" said Tom eagerly. "We'll soon have it up for you, eh, you chaps?"

"Yes, rather!"

"Come along then," said Cousin Ethel cheerily. "This is ripping. You must bring Arthur this afternoon and have tea with us. If you mean to stay round here for a bit we'll have some jolly times!"

She led the way through the gap in the hedge, and her girl chums followed. Lowther, Manners, Herries, and Digby followed them, and Tom Merry and Blake were about to follow in their turn, when a fat, unmusical cachinnation struck their ears.

"He, he, he! I say, just a see, you fellows!"

The two juniors wheeled, to meet Baggy Trimble's grinning face. Tom Merry started at the look on Trimble's face. He had quite forgotten that junior's presence.

"He, he, he!" cackled Baggy gleefully. "I say, you fellows are properly in the cart now, aren't you?"

"Shut up, you fat ass!" hissed Blake.

Trimble cackled again.

"Wait a minute! Don't go!" he grinned. "I say, why don't you fellows own up?"

"You—you—"

"Why don't you own up and play the game?" grinned Baggy. "Be men, you know. Face the music. Tell 'em that you were the awful bounders and the horrid cads who played 'em that rotten trick."

"Oh, you—you—"

"It's all right," grinned Baggy. "They're going on, and can't hear us. But I'm really surprised at you fellows. As you don't seem to be going to own up, I feel it my duty to explain matters to these girls, you know."

"Trimble," hissed Blake, with an apprehensive glance through the gap, "if you dare—"

"It all depends," grinned Baggy, with a sly wink. "If I'm still a member of this caravan party I shall back you up, of course. Otherwise—"

Trimble paused significantly. Tom Merry drew a deep breath. He guessed Trimble's game now.

"You—you mean—"

"You were going to pack me off home this morning—like your cheek," grinned Baggy. "Well, what about it? Am I to go or stay?"

"Oh, you fat rotter!" hissed Blake.

"Sharp's the word!" grinned Baggy, glancing through the gap. "They're waiting for us. Is it a go? Am I to remain or not?"

Blake gave the fat junior a Hunnish glare, and met Tom's glare. He nodded hopelessly.

"Yes, you fat rotter!" hissed Tom.

"For the remainder of the tour?" grinned Baggy.

"Yes."

"And you won't touch me for this?"

"Yes!" breathed Tom Merry thickly.

"Right!" said Baggy cheerily. "It's all right—I'll keep your guilty secret, you chaps. He, he, he! What a pity you spent all that money on that ticket, Merry."

With that Trimble cackled again and passed through the gap. Tom Merry and Blake passed through after him with feelings too deep for words. They found their chums and the girls awaiting them higher up the woodland path, and though Lowther and the others eyed their flushed faces curiously they asked no questions—to their great relief.

The party pushed on up the wooded slope of the downs and soon reached the camp—a wide clearing with a rough, rutty track leading up through it, and a magnificent view of the country around.

A terrific outcry from Bingo, the bulldog, greeted Tom Merry & Co., but they very quickly made friends with the ugly looking animal, and very soon all were hard at work putting the tent up and putting the camp to rights for the girls. The juniors were only too thankful of the chance to make amends in some little way.

By this time it was close on lunch-time, and after lemonade and biscuits the juniors said good-bye to the girls, promising to bring Arthur Augustus D'Arcy to tea that afternoon, as arranged. Over the work of the camping there had been plenty of fun, and the subject of the affair the night before had not been mentioned again, and the juniors were feeling better now.

But once clear of the camp Tom Merry & Co. gave each other grim and dismal looks.

"Wasn't it awful!" groaned Tom.

"Awful!" agreed the others.

"I feel such a worm about it," said Tom. "We—we ought to own up, I suppose. But—but—"

"Couldn't be done," said Blake, shaking his head. "Nothing we could say would put it right—especially now we've let the chance go by to own up. Thank goodness they

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didn't suspect. But we'll have to shift camp soon, before they talk of coming over."

"Yes, rather!" said Tom. "If once they see our camp it's all up. I wish I could feel certain Miss Greenway doesn't suspect. She looked rather queerly at me several times, I thought. Anyway, I fancy it's all serene now."

"I say, you fellows—"

"Say nothing, you fat clam!" growled Blake, turning and shaking a fist under Trimble's nose. "Say one more word about this, Trimble, and—I'll forget my promise and smash you to a jelly!"

"Oh, let the fat cad alone," grunted Merry dismally. "He's done us, and we'll have to swallow it. But—"

Tom paused, as a quick, light step sounded behind them. He turned, and started as he recognised Miss Muriel Greenway. Blake, who still held his fist under Trimble's nose, dropped it abruptly and coloured to the roots of his hair.

The juniors stopped and raised their hats as the girl caught them up. As he caught the look on her pretty face Tom groaned. He saw trouble ahead.

"Just a minute, you boys!" said Miss Greenway a trifle breathlessly, but in a hard, cold tone. "I want to speak to you before you go."

"Y-yes," mumbled Tom.

"I want to ask you a question," said the girl quietly. "A question you avoided answering when Ethel Cleveland asked it. Where were you camped last night?"

Silence.

"It was on the hillside just overlooking Puddleham Village, wasn't it?"

"Ahem! You—you see—"

"Answer me!" snapped Miss Greenway, stamping her foot.

There was no help for it.

"Yes," stammered Tom, with a groan.

"I thought so. It was just below the clearing where we camped. I saw your tent through the trees this morning," said the girl icily. "I suspected you before, when you stammered and stuttered, and I suspected you more when you refused to give a direct answer as to where you were camping."

"Oh dear!"

"When I saw you first just now I felt sure I had seen you before," said the girl, eyeing their scarlet faces steadily. "And when I remembered that Ethel had told me her cousin Arthur wore a monocle I knew where I had seen you before."

"Oh!"

"I saw you before just outside our tent last night in the moonlight," said the girl remorselessly. "One of you wore a monocle—I saw the glimmer of it clearly."

"Oh dear!"

"It was you who played that dirty trick on us last night!" snapped the girl, with sudden indignant anger. "You were the cowards, the cads, who played that dangerous trick! You thought they were just girls—strangers to you. You didn't dream they were friends, I know. It makes it all the more caddish, of course. Do you dare to deny it was you?"

Silence. Tom Merry & Co., with scarlet faces and lowered heads, stared at the ground, longing for it to open and swallow them.

"You can't deny it, you cads!" said Miss Greenway scornfully. "I can tell by your faces that I am right!"

Tom Merry gulped.

"We—we don't deny it!" he gasped. "It—it's true, Miss Greenway. But—but we can explain—"

"I refuse to hear any explanation!" snapped the lady. "There can be no excuse that will satisfy me, anyway. Had you a good excuse to offer—a decent explanation—you would have given it when we told you the story just now. You did not dare to explain or offer an apology simply because you hadn't a decent explanation to offer."

"But—but—please, listen! It was a mistake—"

"Rubbish!"

"Do please hear us!" stammered Tom. "You see, it was like this. We—"

"I refuse to hear!" said Miss Greenway cuttingly. "It was mean and cowardly of you to remain silent when we were telling you about it. It shows you are heartily ashamed of your conduct. You ought to be."

"We—we are sorry—"

"I don't doubt it!" said the girl biting. "I had understood that you were decent boys. Apparently my friends don't know you very well, after all. I have not told them yet, but I shall certainly do so when I get back. I don't know how you can have the face to accept an invitation to tea with girls whom you have treated so shabbily. If you do come I shall be very much surprised and disgusted if you get a welcome from anyone else. So there!"

With that, and a haughty toss of her pretty head, Miss

Muriel Greenway gave them a last scornful look and turned her back and vanished among the trees.

She left Tom Merry & Co. gazing blankly after her, too hopelessly petrified with dismay and humiliation to attempt to stay her departure.

Her tripping footsteps died away in the wood, and then Tom Merry gave a deep, hollow groan and gave his chums a sickly look.

"Well!" he said. "Well, upon my word! That—that's done it!"

"It has! Oh crumbs!"

"Oh dear!"

"She—she's right, of course, in a way," groaned Tom. "We—we were cads not to own up."

"Y-yes!"

"And, of course, it's all off now," groaned Tom. "Cousin Ethel, and Doris Levison, and all of them, will never forgive us for this. And—and it'll get to Levison at St. Jim's, and—and— Oh dear! It's awful!"

"Beastly!"

"We can't go this afternoon, of course, now," said Tom.

"That's quite off."

"Oh, quite! Oh dear!"

"Best thing we can do," said Blake miserably, "is to pack up and clear out. I feel like getting right out of the blessed county. Come on!"

"Yes, rather! We'll do it."

"He, he, he!"

The six miserable juniors looked at Baggy Trimble. That fat youth's grinning face was in striking contrast to their own miserable faces.

"He, he, he!" cackled Baggy. "You fellows do look like a lot of moulting owls, I must say. He, he, he! I told you so. I advised you to play the game and own up. I urged you to play the man. I told you to face the music. I told you how it would— Here! What! Yooooop!"

Bump!

Baggy's untimely remarks were the last straw for Tom Merry & Co. In that horrible moment they forgot their promise to Trimble—forgot everything except a burning, overmastering desire to smite the grinning Trimble hip and thigh, which they proceeded to do very thoroughly.

Bump, bump, bump, bump!

"Yaroooooh! Oh, help! Yooooop! I'm sorry! Yaroooooh! Leggo! Oh, crumbs! Yooooop! Murder!"

Bump, bump, bump!

Again and again the incensed juniors bumped the fat youth on the ground, and Baggy's howls of anguish rang far and wide through the woodland. But Tom Merry did not mind that now, and they dealt with Baggy, heedless of his howls and shrieks. And then, leaving the hapless fat youth roaring among the undergrowth, they started for home.

It had not been a happy morning for Tom Merry & Co.

CHAPTER 8.

A Helpless Witness!

"**B**AI JOVE! The frightful wottahs!"

That was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's opinion of his chums when he found himself locked in the caravan.

Blake's sudden and unexpected move had taken Arthur Augustus completely by surprise.

For a moment, in great and growing wrath, the swell of the Fourth stared blankly at the closed door. He had heard the click of the key in the lock, and he did not therefore need to try the door to make sure that it was locked.

Instead, he jumped to the farther shutter-door, and then he frowned as he discovered that that was likewise locked.

"Bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "I shall administah a feahful thwashin' to Jack Blake for this. Weally, I—"

Arthur Augustus stepped to the little window of the caravan and looked out. As he saw Baggy Trimble struggling in the grasp of his chums, he understood, or, at least, he suspected. It was not until he saw Baggy being rushed from the encampment that he really understood the meaning of it all.

"Bai Jove! The frightful wottahs!" repeated Arthur Augustus. "They are goin' to cleah Twimble out. Bai Jove!"

The wrath of the Honourable Arthur Augustus D'Arcy knew no bounds. Secretly, Arthur Augustus was as "fed-up" with the egregious and troublesome Trimble as was his chums—more so, in fact. Trimble's ill-mannered and unpleasant tricks and habits were a constant source of annoyance to the fastidious Arthur Augustus. He had been a thorn in the side of the touring party from the beginning, and Arthur Augustus would have been very glad indeed to see the last of him, if such a fortunate happening could

be brought about without his having to break his valuable word.

Now, though the longed-for happening was to be brought about without his aid or approval, Arthur Augustus was not at all pleased, far from it. To be locked in the caravan in this wise hurt Arthur Augustus in his tenderest spot—his dignity. And his lofty dignity was not to be hurt with impunity.

So Arthur Augustus blinked through his monocle and the little window with great wrath on his noble brow.

He saw his chums disappear from sight down the rutty path, and then, as Trimble's yells died away, Arthur Augustus caught sight of Nippy, and shouted to him.

"Nippy, deah boy, pway open this door."

But Nippy went on with the job of pulling down the tent without turning his head. Apparently Nippy was suffering from an attack of deafness that morning. And it was only after shouting and yelling for five minutes or more that it began to dawn in upon the mind of Arthur Augustus that Nippy did not want to hear or heed.

Breathing hard with wrath, the swell of the Fourth glared across the encampment at Nippy, the driver.

"Bai Jove!" he gasped. "Nippy knows vewy well that I am locked in heah, and he knows vewy well that I am shoutin' to him. I shall wemonstware vewy stwongly with the wottah for this. I shall. Oh, bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus broke off suddenly.

His jaw dropped, and his eyeglass fell unheeded from his eye. He could scarcely believe his eyes.

Behind Nippy, who was busy folding up canvas, a form had suddenly appeared out of the depths of the woodland, a stealthily-creeping form.

It was that of a man, a burly, unshaven, roughly-dressed man, with a black patch over one eye; his other eye was small and black and glittering.

Arthur Augustus shuddered as he recognised him.

It was Patchy, Nippy's enemy from the travelling show both had once belonged to. Behind Patchy was another sinister figure, the small, rat-like figure of Snooky, Patchy's accomplice.

"Oh, bai Jove!" repeated Arthur Augustus in horror.

He stared blankly at the sight of the creeping figures rapidly approaching the unconscious boy, and then Arthur Augustus remembered himself, and let out a wild yell.

"Look out, Nippy! Oh, bai Jove! Look out, behind you, deah boy!"

There was the sound of an angry oath, and Patchy stopped dead, staring at the van window. He glimpsed D'Arcy's white face, and he gave a hoarse yell.

"Look arter 'im in there, Snooky!" he yelled.

With that the rascal leaped at Nippy, who had wheeled round abruptly at D'Arcy's wild yell. But Nippy was helpless to defend himself against that sudden, vicious rush. He went crashing down, and Patchy went down on top of him, snarling viciously, and snatching at the boy's wrists.

"Got yer, Nippy!" he snarled. "Got yer at larst, my lad! It ain't no good fighting, Nippy!"

Nippy knew that well enough, but he fought for all that. His clenched fists struck the leering, bristly face above him, once, twice, and then Patchy caught one, and snatched at the other. Nippy struck him again, and then Patchy caught the second wrist and held it tight.

"You brute!" panted Nippy. "Let go!"

He wriggled and kicked helplessly, but he was like a child in the grasp of the burly ruffian now. With a single powerful swing, he twisted the boy over on his face, and wrenched his arms behind him. Then, snatching a length of cord from a pocket of his ragged coat, he deftly tied the boy's wrists together, his heavy shoulder grinding into the boy's back, pinning his arms helplessly down.

It was done at last, and then Patchy lurches to his feet, wiping a cut lip with a red handkerchief. At the same moment Snooky, who had rushed at the onset for the caravan, came back grinning all over his evil face.

"This 'ere beats me, Patchy," he grinned. "The bloke in there—'im with the eyeglass—is locked in. It's all right, it's a fair snip. I knowed we'd get Nippy if we watched our chance. What about the bloke with the eyeglass, though, Patchy?"

"Leave 'im there!" scowled Patchy. "'E won't bring the police inter this, will 'e, Nippy?" he added, his scowl changing to a grin. "If Nippy 'ad wanted the cops brought inter this, 'e'd 'ave done it afore this, I reckon Nippy's done summut he didn't orter 'ave done, as he doesn't want the cops to know where he is."

The burly ruffian chuckled, and, stooping over the boy, he tied another length of cord round his thrashing legs.

"I ain't askin' you to walk, Nippy," he said grimly. "You always was a kid to give trouble, and I ain't risking it. Come on, Snooky, my lad, let's get outer this, sharp!"

"Got to go carefully," said Snooky, glancing about him. "We're takin' a big risk in daylight like this 'ere—"

"We got to take risks on this job, you fool!" grunted Patchy. "You keep your durned peepers open, and don't grouse. There ain't nobody around these woods at this time of the day, and I'll take durned good care he don't holler."

With that the rascal wrenched his dirty scarf off and wrapped it swiftly round Nippy's face, tying it securely at the back. Then he lifted the boy like a child, and with Snooky lurching at his heels, he left the clearing and dived into the woods.

From the little window of the caravan Arthur Augustus D'Arcy watched the ruffians go with feelings that were bordering on frenzy.

Arthur Augustus was as plucky as a terrier, and to stand and watch the brutal ruffians carry away Nippy without being able to lift a hand to help was agony to the junior.

But there was no help for it. D'Arcy had jumped to the door on hearing Snooky trying it, fully intending to rush out and do battle against the odds. But Snooky had not opened it. He had chuckled on finding it locked, and had then returned to his accomplice, leaving Arthur Augustus fuming and dancing in the caravan with helpless agitation.

It was a maddening situation for D'Arcy, and the moment the footsteps of the two ruffians had died away, he started to yell for help, hoping against hope that his chums would soon be returning.

But his frantic yells were not answered, and as the minutes went by, he realised that Tom Merry and the others must have gone farther than the station.

The thought made him grit his teeth at his own helplessness. The windows were tiny, and it was out of the question for him to get through them. And he had already tried the doors without avail. They were strongly made and substantial, like everything else about Noah's Ark, and to force them was also out of the question.

Arthur Augustus realised now with a thrill of dismay that when Baggy Trimble had vowed he had seen the rascally couple in the camp he had been speaking the truth for once. If only they had believed the fat junior, they would have been on their guard, and taken precautions. It was only too clear that Patchy and Snooky had been watching the camp, had seen the juniors leave it, and had taken their chance, possibly having all their plans cut and dried.

It was an alarming thought, and Arthur Augustus stared through the window, and prayed for the speedy return of his chums. His anger against them had gone now—had vanished in this terrible happening.

But the minutes became hours, and Arthur Augustus was beginning to be seriously alarmed on his chums' behalf, when at last the sound of footsteps and voices was heard, and he started to shout urgently.

It was Tom Merry and the others right enough. They had not troubled to return to Puddleham Junction, but had walked back along the road, and they tramped into the encampment dusty and tired and dismal. They stared and grinned feebly, however, as they saw D'Arcy's white face at the window and heard his shouts.

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Blake, in astonishment. "Nippy hasn't let old Gussy out yet."

"Great pip!" said Tom Merry. "But where is the ass?" There was no sign of Nippy, so the juniors ran across to the caravan.

"Look out!" grinned Blake. "He'll be like a raging tiger when he comes out. Look out for trouble!"

"We'll soon settle him!" said Herries grimly. "Collar his eyeglass, and his hat, and threaten to smash 'em up if he starts any games. That'll do it!"

"Ha, ha! Yes!"

A little cheered at the thought of trouble with Gussy, the chums of St. Jim's swarmed round the van steps as Tom turned the key in the lock and stepped back down the steps, prepared for trouble.

But the trouble did not come, and the juniors stared at D'Arcy's white and excited face as he appeared in the doorway.

"Bai Jove, you fellows!" gasped Arthur Augustus before any of them could speak. "Thank goodness you have come at last! I have been pwayin' for your return for hours, deah boys!"

"Well, I'm hanged!" gasped Blake. "Gussy, what's the matter, old chap?"

"Somethin' is vewy much the mattah, Blake," said Arthur Augustus, his voice trembling with excitement. "Nippy has gone—he has been dwaggd away by those wuffians. I was helpless to aid the deah boy, and was obliged to watch them kidnep him."

"You—you mean Patchy and that other ruffian?" gasped Tom Merry, in utter amazement and alarm.

"Yaas," said Arthur Augustus, his face white and agitated. "Twimble was quite wight when he said they were pwowlin' "

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about. They came just aftah you went, and they took Nippy completely by surpwise."

The juniors fairly gasped in horror as Arthur Augustus related what had happened in the clearing.

"Well, this is the limit!" breathed Tom. "It's a mystery about old Nippy if you like. Why should those brutes be so anxious to get hold of him? And—and why should Nippy refuse to let us have the police on the job? It beats me hollow! You—you're sure you heard that brute say that about the police?"

"Oh, yaas! It is wathah disturbin'," said Arthur Augustus, in some distress. "I cannot believe that Nippy has done anythin' w'ong. And yet—"

Tom nodded, his brow clouded. All the juniors liked the cheery and youthful driver, and they all believed him to be an honest, decent fellow. But—but why was he so afraid of the police being brought into the matter? Was it possible that, as Patchy had suggested, he had done something wrong?

But Tom did not ponder that question for long. He realised that every moment was precious, and he suddenly set his lips hard.

"We can talk about that again," he said swiftly. "We also have some rotten news for you, Gussy, but that, too, can wait. We'll spin that yarn as we go along. Our first job now is to get on the trail of those ruffians. We're Scouts, and if we can't track them it'll be a pity!"

"Yaas, wathah! Bai Jove! Heah is Twimble!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, in astonishment. "I thought—"

"So did we," said Blake grimly. "But never mind that fat rotter now. We'll leave him to look after the camp."

Like the rest of the party who had been out, Baggy Trimble had walked by road back again, and he looked about to collapse with fatigue. He blinked furiously at Tom Merry as that junior ran across to him.

"Look here, Trimble," snapped Tom. "We're going off again. You'd better stay and look after the camp!"

"But—but look here—"

"We've no time for gassing!" said Tom curtly. "Something rotten has happened, Trimble. You were right about those brutes Patchy and Snooky being about here. They've been this morning, and they've collared Nippy and taken him off! We're going after him!"

Baggy Trimble blinked in alarm at the juniors; but it was, as usual, alarm on his own behalf.

"Look here," he hooted. "You're going off, you say?"

"Yes!"

"But what about dinner?" howled Baggy wrathfully. "I'm famished, and— Here, come back, you rotters!"

But Tom Merry & Co. did not heed Baggy Trimble. Arthur Augustus had pointed out the way the villainous Patchy and Snooky had taken their prisoner, and Tom Merry & Co. vanished into the woodland, hot on the trail, and heedless of either dinner or Baggy.

Trimble glared after them speechlessly for a moment. He had purposely dawdled after the others, hoping they would have got some dinner ready before he turned up, and to save him helping. The sight of them hurrying away, and no signs of dinner about, filled him with wrath and dismay.

And then a sudden thought struck him, and he hurried into the caravan, and stepped to the cupboard. Then his fat face spread into a fat grin.

The key of the larder was in the lock. For once Tom Merry & Co. had been careless and forgetful. In a flash Baggy had twisted the key, and the well-filled larder was at his mercy.

"Oh, good!" murmured Baggy, with a chuckle. "Do me out of my dinner, would they, the beasts? We'll see about that! Here goes!"

He settled down to get his own dinner—which consisted of sampling everything eatable almost—excepting bread. Baggy drew a line at bread in the larder. On more than one occasion Trimble had been in serious trouble over his habit of raiding the larder, but Baggy never profited by experience. He was hungry, and that was all that mattered to Baggy. Baggy never looked ahead or counted the cost.

For nearly an hour Baggy's strong and hard-worked jaws munched away, and when at last he left the larder, and rolled out of the van, he was breathing heavily, and there was a fat smile of satisfaction on his face.

He strolled across the encampment, wondering what to do with himself, and he had just decided to return to the van for a snooze, when his eye suddenly caught something lying on the grass near the half-folded canvas of the tent.

He picked it up, and then he threw it down again with a grunt. It was a folded newspaper—a "Daily Mail"—dirty, and stained. But no sooner had Baggy thrown it down than he stooped and picked it up again. Something about the paper had caught his eye.

It was a glimpse of a marked paragraph—a paragraph encircled by a ragged blue ring. Marked paragraphs had a fascination for Baggy Trimble. He was an exceedingly



The note was written out at last, and after some difficulty, Cousin Ethel twisted the message round the brass-bound collar of Bingo. Then she spoke to the dog. "Home, Bingo!" she muttered tensely. "Home, old boy!" Bingo seemed to understand what was wanted of him, and after licking the girl's hand, he turned and trotted away. (See page 21).

curious and suspicious youth, and having nothing better to do, Baggy looked at this marked paragraph now.

The paragraph was headed "MISSING," and under this heading was a photograph—the photograph of a boy.

Baggy Trimble fairly blinked at it.

There was something vaguely familiar—at first—to Baggy Trimble, in the face, and then as he stared at it, he gave a jump.

"M-mum-my hat!" he mumbled. "It—it's Nippy—that beast, Nippy!"

Baggy felt certain of that. Certainly Nippy himself looked older, and more bronzed than the photo showed him, but it was Nippy nevertheless.

Baggy stared at the photo, and then he read the print beneath it. It read as follows:

"Missing since September 15th, the above boy. Age 16 (looks 18); about 5 ft. 9 in.; complexion tanned; hair very light, almost reddish, and curly; eyes light blue; oval face; upright carriage; very self-possessed; cheery disposition; slight scar on right wrist. Clothing marked 'D. B.'—makers, Peter Wilkenson.

"Information regarding the above should be given to the police, or to Messrs. Cragg & Turner, Solicitors, Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, or to Colonel Brockways, the Grange, Plymsea, Devonshire, and a substantial reward will be paid to anyone giving information that will lead to the whereabouts of the boy being discovered."

Trimble read the notice again and again, and then he whistled loud and long, his little round eyes gleaming with excitement.

"My—my only hat!" he breathed. "What a go! I wonder what the rotter's been up to? Must have been up to something, or he'd jolly soon go home—if that's his home. It's queer, though—jolly queer. What do those rotters want him for? Can't be for the reward—they'd get that by telling the bobbies. Phew! It beats me. I knew there was something jolly fishy about the beast."

Baggy blinked at the notice, and then he turned the paper over and looked at the date. It was dated the end of September.

"And it's now August—nearly a blessed year ago," murmured Baggy. "Not that that matters much, I suppose. They—they'll pay the reward just the same, of course. My hat! Blessed if I don't do it! Sub-substantial reward, eh? Phew! And—and that beast Nippy's kicked me hard more than once. Serve him jolly well right. Besides, it's only a fellow's duty to—to help the—course of justice. Yes, that's it. My hat! What a stroke of luck!"

Baggy's eyes glittered greedily as he read once again the sentence referring to the "substantial reward."

For a long while Baggy sat on the caravan steps, working his brain hard as he reflected upon the matter. Then he jumped up at last with a determined face.

"I'll do it!" he breathed. "I'll give the beast kicking me. And—and there's the reward. My hat! I can laugh at these mean beasts with their rotten caravanning when I get that. I'm not jolly well going to the bobbies, though; they'd only do me down, and collar the blessed reward themselves. I'll write to that Colonel What's-His-Name himself."

Having made up his mind upon this course, Baggy entered the van. He opened D'Arcy's suitcase and took out a small, folding writing-case and a fountain-pen. From the case he took a sheet of plain paper and started to write. For some minutes he wrote, destroying what he had written again and again, till at last he was satisfied.

Folding the letter up he placed it in an envelope, sealed it, and addressed it to Colonel Brockways at the address given. Then he stamped it with one of D'Arcy's stamps, and rolled out, chuckling gleefully. And the next moment Baggy Trimble was rolling towards Puddleham post-office, the letter clutched tightly in his fat fist, and visions of wealth unknown but dimly guessed at in his fat, greedy mind.

CHAPTER 9.

Doris Levison's Pluck !

"THEY won't come now," said Cousin Ethel dismally. "I'm afraid not," assented Doris Levison, with equal dismay. "It was too bad, Muriel; you ought to have given them a chance to explain, dear."

Miss Greenway coloured and nodded, her face more than a trifle remorseful.

"I—I wish I had done now," she said contritely. "But—but I felt so certain they had no explanation as they did not own up earlier. I'm sorry I was so hasty."

Miss Muriel was sorry now. Though quick-tempered and hasty, and rather masterful, Miss Greenway was a very good-natured girl, and she could not help seeing now that she had treated Tom Merry & Co. rather unjustly.

As a matter of fact, she had reached that conclusion before she had arrived back at the camp after parting so angrily from the juniors. And she had been on the point of retracing her steps again when Baggy Trimble's howls of pain reached her ears.

That settled the matter for her, and she had immediately turned and hurried back again. But Tom Merry & Co. had

vanished through the trees when Miss Muriel reached Baggy Trimble.

The sight of the fat junior had given the girl an idea, however, and she had proceeded to subject the groaning Baggy to a searching cross-examination.

Naturally, Trimble had been reluctant to go into details regarding the previous night's affair, but the quick-witted girl had very soon wormed the truth out of the obtuse Baggy. The only point in the affair that she failed to get from him was that he had been the prime cause of the trouble in the first place.

But Miss Greenway had got the truth as to why Tom Merry & Co. had raided their camp, and of their utter ignorance that it was a girls' camp, and it was all Miss Greenway had wanted to know.

It was too late to run after the juniors, either to express regret or anything else, and she had thereupon returned to the camp and told her chums the story—and also how she had treated the juniors.

To say that Cousin Ethel and the others were upset and dismayed would be putting it very mildly. They had not only told many stories of Tom Merry and his chums—stories that proved them to be far from the cads she had imagined them to be—but they had scolded her severely for her hasty action.

The girls' first impulse had been to walk over to Puddleham to see their boy chums and put matters right, but as Cousin Ethel pointed out, they were not at all certain that Tom Merry & Co. had remained at their camp on the slope of the downs.

She, at all events, felt certain that the juniors would never believe such old friends as herself and Doris Levison would refuse to give them a hearing, and, like Doris, she was convinced they would walk over that afternoon despite what had happened.

So after some discussion they had remained at the camp after lunch, patiently and rather anxiously waiting for the arrival of the boy friends.

But to their growing dismay the afternoon passed, and tea-time passed without Tom Merry & Co., and now at six o'clock they were just arriving at the dismal conclusion that Tom Merry & Co. were not going to turn up at all.

"It is a shame," said Cousin Ethel, after a silence. "But—but after all, Muriel, we can hardly blame you; you did not know them as we did."

"I know!" groaned Miss Greenway. "But—now I come to think how we slanged them before their faces—calling the persons who did the trick, cads and bounders and cowards—I really don't wonder they simply couldn't confess to us."

"That's just it," chimed in Miss Doris. "And, after all, what they did was only what boys do. It was just a lark to them to drop a tent in the middle of the night like that. I've heard of boys doing it lots of times for a joke on their chums. We look at things differently, you know."

"We must go over and put things right in the morning," said Miss Vera Stanhope firmly. "But—but— Oh dear! Supposing they break camp and clear out to-day?"

"Oh!"

There was a simultaneous exclamation of dismay at the thought. Doris Levison sprang suddenly to her feet, her face set and determined.

"Look here, girls!" she exclaimed grimly. "We mustn't risk it by waiting until morning. It would be hateful for them to go like this. I vote we hurry over to their camp now."

"But—but we're not sure—"

"We must risk that, and we can inquire," snapped Doris resolutely. "I shall go, at all events. If we hurry we should get back before it's properly dark. In any case, I don't mind if it is dark."

"Nor do I," said Cousin Ethel promptly. "I shall come, of course, Doris. There is no need for us all to go, though. In fact, I think it will be better if just you and I go, as we know them so well. We can take Bingo with us, if you like."

And so it was settled eventually. Both Muriel and Vera wanted to go now they saw their chums were determined, but they gave way at last, realising that Cousin Ethel and Doris Levison, being older friends of the juniors, would heal the breach better alone.

The two girls lost no time in starting out, and with the bulldog at their heels they started at a good pace, taking the footpath across the rolling hills, green and wooded and far-reaching, to the horizon where the sun was setting like a ball of crimson fire.

But neither the beautiful hills nor the glorious sunset took much of the girls' attention just then. They had used the footpath several times recently in their rambles, and they preferred it to the dusty road—not to consider the fact that it was also a short cut to Puddleham village. They walked fast, anxious only to see Tom Merry & Co. and to make matters "right" with those juniors. They had little fear

of failing to accomplish that task, and their only fear was that they would arrive at the camp on the hillside to find the St. Jim's caravanners gone.

They were not fated to reach the camp of Tom Merry & Co. that evening, however.

The two girls had reached a spot about half-way on their journey, when a sudden commotion reached the girls' ears and they stopped abruptly, exchanging startled looks.

It was the sound of shouting—hoarse and savage shouts.

The two girls halted, their hearts thumping. There was something strangely urgent and menacing in the savage, husky voice.

They looked about them in sudden alarm, puzzled and frightened. Where the voices came from they could not make out at all at first. They seemed almost to come from the bowels of the earth, yet quite close at hand.

Then they understood suddenly.

Nothing living was in sight save a few horses grazing in a distant field. But some yards away from them, well away from the fieldpath, and with a few broken railings lining the brow, was a deep gash in the hillside—a chalk cutting, as they saw at a glance now. The girls had passed along the path once or twice recently, but they had failed completely to notice that scarcely visible gash.

They saw it now, however, and they realised that the voices were proceeding from that direction.

Doris Levison gave her chum a questioning glance, and then, a trifle gingerly, she approached the chalk-pit.

It was not an easy descent, for the hill fell away in a series of grassy bumps to the edge of the cutting. But, with Cousin Ethel at her heels, Doris stepped gingerly down to the railings and looked over.

What she saw made her catch her breath abruptly.

Below her, a deep gash in the hillside, was an ancient chalk-pit right enough—a deep, forbidding chasm, with broken edges, crumbled by time and storm, and with bracken and furze growing in profusion on its rocky sides and choking up the gloomy bottom of the pit.

Across this bracken-strewn floor a boy was running, hotly pursued by two rough-looking men. Running and stumbling, leaping over bushes and hummocks of furze-covered chalk, he raced towards the open side of the chalk-pit, the men lurching after him, shouting furiously.

Even as the startled girls glimpsed the strange scene, they saw the youth stumble and go down headlong. In a flash the foremost man—a villainous-looking rascal with a black patch over one eye—was upon him, grinding the hapless fugitive to the chalky soil.

"Oh!" gasped Doris Levison. "Oh, look!"

The girls stared down at the scene below them with terrified eyes. What it could mean they could only guess. The reddish-haired youth had made no sound, and the men had ceased to shout now. But up to the girls' straining ears they heard a deep, menacing voice.

"Got you agen, Nippy, you durned little rip!" came the snarl. "I knowed we'd 'ave to watch you, you slippery little pup! But I'll durned well see as you don't try to escape agen, my lad!"

He wrenched the hapless fugitive to his feet with brutal force, and lifted him as though he were a child in his powerful arms. Then, without a glance round him, he stumbled from sight round a great jutting mass of dingy chalk with his burden, and his accomplice followed him.

"Oh!" repeated Doris Levison in a strained, panting voice. "What—what can that mean, Ethel?"

Cousin Ethel drew a deep, deep breath, striving hard to master her excitement and agitation. She did not know what to make of the strange incident more than her chum did.

Quite obviously, however, there was criminal work afoot in that gloomy, forbidding chasm in the earth—at least, Doris Levison felt certain there was. Before her chum could answer she went on hurriedly, excitedly:

"We must go for help, Ethel, quickly!" she gasped breathlessly. "Those awful-looking men! Oh, what can we do?"

"They—they may be only gipsies ill-treating one of their number," said Cousin Ethel faintly. "But we ought— What is that?"

It was a cry from below—a cry of pain, it seemed, to the white-faced girls.

"They—they are ill-treating that boy!" gasped Doris. "Let us see what is happening! I must, Ethel!"

She glanced about her wildly, and then, followed by her chum, she hurried farther along the crumbling edge. From there, as she expected, they got a view of the scene below.

Across the ancient excavation, deep in the lower side of the chasm, was a hollow—a high, arched cave-like indentation in the cliff face, with jutting crags of dirty, grass-grown chalk almost hiding it completely from above. One might have passed a dozen times near the spot where the girls were standing without seeing that cave-like hollow.

It was a natural hiding-place, and now, though the light was fading fast, the girls could see the grass-grown, rutty track that led to it.

At the end of the track, well screened beneath the overhanging archway, a caravan was at rest—a dingy, rickety vehicle, ugly and dirty. Near it, tethered against the cliff face, was an ancient, decrepit-looking horse. Some yards farther away from this was a small camp-fire, with smoke curling lazily up the cliff face.

But though their eyes took all this in at once, it was the sight of the fugitive that drew their anxious attention. Nippy—for it was that youth—was struggling pluckily in the grasp of both the rascals as they strove to tie him to a wheel of the van.

The girls watched, fascinated, as the men overcame the boy's struggles and lashed him to the wheel. Then they walked away, quarrelling among themselves, towards the fire, and flung themselves down.

"Oh, Doris, what shall we do?" gasped Cousin Ethel. Doris Levison's eyes gleamed, and her face set resolutely. "Get away from here, Ethel," she breathed. "They— they may see us against the skyline. They mustn't see us. Look here! I'm going down there, Ethel—"

"You—you—what?" "I'm going to try to rescue that poor boy," said Doris, her face set and determined. "I think I see a way. I believe I can get down and reach him without them seeing me at all. Come along."

She hurried away to the spot where they had stood before. Cousin Ethel hurried after her, her face white.

"Doris," she gasped in alarm, "this is madness! Let us—"

"I'm going!" retorted Doris firmly. "I can do it, I'm certain. But don't you follow, whatever you do, Ethel. No good both being caught if things go wrong. If anything does happen, just run for help, dear."

"But, Doris—"

Doris Levison shook off her chum's detaining hand and lowered herself over the edge on to a jutting ledge below. Cousin Ethel saw it was useless now to stay her chum from her rash determination. She watched, her heart thumping, as Doris dropped again on to another ledge below. It was not a tremendous climb to the bottom of the pit, nor was it very dangerous to an agile, steady-nerved climber.

But it was risky enough for all that, in the deepening dusk, and under such circumstances. Ethel watched, with staring, anxious eyes, and beating heart, as Doris went down step by step, clinging on here and there to roots and shrubs and tufts of grass. In places it was easy enough, where the ground sloped gently, to yet another edge of the chasm.

She gave a deep, thankful breath of relief as she saw her daring chum reach safe ground at last, and, with a wave of her hand upwards, creep stealthily round the jutting buttress of chalk and vanish from sight.

Several moments passed—anxious, nerve-wracking moments—for the waiting, watching girls. And then, quite abruptly, Ethel's heart seemed to leap to her mouth as a sudden cry rang out, a harsh shout, followed by another, and then followed by a scream—a girl's scream.

"Oh!" panted Cousin Ethel. She knew at once what had happened. Doris had failed in her plucky task—had been caught.

For what seemed a lifetime, Cousin Ethel crouched there on the extreme edge of the excavation, waiting, watching, and listening, sick at heart with fear. Save for that one shriek, however, and a dim mutter of harsh voices, no other sound reached her.

At that moment a low, growling whine behind her reminded her of Bingo, the bulldog, and, looking round, she saw the dog trotting up to her. Out of regard for the dog's age and infirmities, the girls had left him on the path higher up, threatening Bingo with a terrific scolding if he dared to disobey. And up to now he had not disobeyed.

But now he was here, and it was obvious from his dismal whine that he suspected something was wrong. He glanced about him in some agitation, clearly and almost humanly anxious as to what had happened to Doris.

"Quiet, Bingo, old boy!" breathed Cousin Ethel shakily. "Quiet!"

She stood up swiftly, her first impulse being to rush down to see what had happened to her missing chum. Equally as plucky as Doris, she was not quite so impulsive, and at once she realised the fatal folly of rushing to disaster herself, and the next moment wiser counsel prevailed.

She must get help—help at once. With a last glance into the shady hollow, she spoke to Bingo and turned to run, and even as she did so it happened.

At the same moment the lumbering bulldog trotted round her, leaping upwards to her, and tripping over the loose lead, Cousin Ethel went headlong, falling heavily with a low cry of pain.

She lay there for some moments, almost swooning with the sharp pain that seemed to flood her ankle, and then, setting her teeth, she strove to rise.

But as she placed her foot on the ground she crumpled up, sinking to the ground again. Her ankle was sprained. It refused to hold her weight.

With a feeling of sick despair clutching at her heart, Cousin Ethel stared about her hopelessly. But not a soul was in sight. In the west the last red glimmer of sunset was sinking, and already the shadows were deepening over the countryside. All around her was lonely and silent.

What should she do? What could she do?

Then, at that moment, as if to express contrition for his blundering awkwardness, Bingo whined and licked her face again and again. A sudden inspiration occurred to her then, and she fumbled hurriedly in the pocket of her blazer. From it she took a crumpled letter, and from another pocket she drew a silver pencil-case.

With envelope on her knee, Cousin Ethel thought a moment, and then she scribbled fast on the plain back of the letter. It was done at last, and after some difficulty the girl twisted the message round the brass-bound collar of Bingo. Then she spoke to the dog.

"Home, Bingo!" she muttered tensely. "Home, old boy!"

She pushed at the dog again and again, but he set his paws firmly and refused to budge, licking the hands that pushed against him. But at last, as the girl was feeling like weeping with despair, Bingo seemed to understand what was wanted of him. He trotted away a few paces, turned, and regarded her dismally. And then, as she waved him away frantically, he turned again and trotted off.

Cousin Ethel watched him waddle away with increasing speed, and as his lumbering form vanished in the dusk, she gave a deep breath of thankfulness. Then, though the pain in her foot caused her agony, she started to drag herself up towards the field-path. She reached it at last, and, with her back resting against a moss-grown rock, she rested, to watch and wait for the help she hoped and prayed might come quickly.

CHAPTER 10.

A Hopeless Outlook!

DORIS LEVISON scarcely realised what a risk she was taking in more ways than one in that rash undertaking. It had seemed to her, standing on the top of the cutting, that it was quite simple to reach the bottom, and would be quite simple—if risky—to reach the caravan and release the prisoner. From where the men were lounging round the camp-fire, she felt certain they could not see her approach, if she were careful, and Doris intended to be very careful. The van was between the jutting mass of chalk and them, and the prisoner was lashed to the wheel on the side away from them. She felt certain she could approach without being seen by the ruffians.

But after the first few moments of that breathless climb Doris soon discovered that it was more difficult and dangerous than it had looked from above. The soft, crumbling chalk broke away from under her grasp, and the crumbling ground threatened every moment to slide away in an avalanche of rubble under her clinging feet.

But she had no thought of giving up. She stuck to her task doggedly, though her heart was in her mouth most of the time.

She reached the bottom at last, and after pausing to regain her breath, she looked up, and waved to her watching chum, and then she moved stealthily round the buttress of chalk.

She could see the shadowy caravan clearly now, and the sprawling figures round the flickering fire, and the horse cropping the sparse tufts of grass by the chalky wall.

The sight of the men's figures made her catch her breath sharply, and her heart leapt with a thrill of fear.

From above it had seemed that the bulking caravan would hide her from the men, and she had forgotten that on the level the van-wheels would be a very poor screen. Doris could see the men clearly through them, and she knew they could see her—if they looked up.

"Oh dear!" gasped the girl under her breath. At any moment the men might glance up and see her, and, realising this, Doris crouched down, her heart beating painfully, but her mind working rapidly.

Not for one moment did the plucky girl think of retreat. She saw it was going to be no easy matter, after all, however, and she felt thankful she was not alone, that her girl chum was above, ready to race for aid if necessary.

For some moments she remained motionless, and then, determined to risk it, she began to crawl through the bracken, her eyes fixed on the figures round the fire.

A sudden, startled gasp caught her ears, and she stopped abruptly. It came from the reddish-haired prisoner tied to the wheel, and, looking up, Doris saw his face, startled and white, with eyes that goggled with sheer amazement at sight of the girl.

But the men round the fire heard nothing, apparently, and Doris placed a finger warningly to her lips and crept on towards him, pausing cautiously now and again.

Nippy watched her, an expression of agonised fear on his handsome features. He motioned to her again and again to go back, to leave him. But Doris Levison shook her head and went on.

She reached the bound figure at last, and paused to fumble in the pocket of her skirt, her eyes still fixed on the men by the fire, who were mumbling in low tones to each other.

"Go back!" breathed Nippy almost fiercely. "Never mind me! Go!"

Doris grinned faintly, and drew from her pocket a glinting article, which she opened out with trembling fingers. It was a pair of folding scissors.

"Quiet!" she breathed.

Slowly Doris rose to her feet, and began to gnaw at the cord round the youth's arms with the tiny scissors, reckless of being seen through the van-wheels now.

"Oh, you—your little trick!" breathed Nippy. "Be quick, then, for goodness' sake!"

Doris nodded coolly, and hacked away desperately at the tough cord. But the scissors were only meant for cutting cotton, or cloth, and her trembling fingers could scarcely control them.

One strand of cord parted at last, however, and Doris was just starting on the second, when her fumbling, trembling fingers lost grip of the scissors, and they fell, dropping against the wheel of the van with a musical tinkle.

"Oh!" breathed Doris.

She waited breathlessly, and then quite suddenly the worst happened. From the fire came a sudden yell of alarm, followed by scrambling feet, and then round the caravan appeared Patchy, with a rush and clatter of heavy boots.

"By hokey!" he yelled. "There's— Well, I'm blown!"

The sight of the trembling girl fairly took away the breath of the hulking rascal. He stared at her, and as he stared the other man, Snooky, came rushing round the van.

He sighted the girl still standing, too helpless to move, and he gave a yell.

"Crimes, Patchy, it's a durned gal! Blowed if she ain't tryin' to get Nippy loose! Quick, you idiot!"

He rushed past the astonished Patchy, and his grasp fell on Doris Levison's shoulder with a grip that made the girl scream involuntarily. The next instant a huge hand was clapped over her mouth, stifling the scream abruptly.

"Hold 'er, Snooky!" gasped the one-eyed rascal, his bristly, dark face the picture of amazement. "By hokey, this 'ere beats the band! Who in thunder are you, miss?"

"Never mind who she is!" snarled Snooky, who, though not the leader, was rather the more unpleasant rascal of the two. "If I takes my 'and away, she'll howl, you fool, and there may be more of the dratted kids about! She was cuttin' Nippy loose; ain't that enough?"

Patchy stared at the white-faced girl, his ugly face perplexed and uncertain.

"Blow the luck, Snooky!" he muttered savagely. "What in thunder are we goin' to do with the minx—eh? I ask you? This mucks us up fairly!"

"Does it?" snarled Snooky, glowering at Doris, his eyes glinting. "We didn't ask 'er to come bargain' in here, did we? 'Arf a mo, Patchy, I'll jest see if there's more of the nosin' kids about."

He looked up, and scanned the frowning buttress of chalk opposite, and then he ran a little way along the rutty track and looked sharply about him. But he saw nothing—happily. Cousin Ethel, so near as she was, was quite invisible from below; and Snooky returned, his crafty features showing his relief.

"Not a soul in sight, anyway, Patchy," he grunted. "But we can't let the kid go, o' course."

"Of course not!" grunted Patchy, eyeing the girl savagely, and rubbing his unshaven chin. "It just means this, Snooky. We got to get out of this with Nippy—durned slippy, too! We'll start at midnight—there ain't likely to be anyone about then."

"Darn the luck! We was safe, 'ere."

"We ain't now, though. This 'ere gal will be missed, and it won't be long afore they're 'untin' round 'ere for 'er. It ain't like Nippy—they dratted schoolboys would never 'ave tracked 'im to this show."

"And the gal—"

"We'll leave 'er here, o' course—no need to 'urt the kid, but we can't let her go."

"No bloomin' fear! But—but this 'ere place will be one of the first places they'll search, mate, thinkin' she's fell down it. What about that?"

"Nothin'," grinned Patchy. "By that time we'll be miles away, and safe in a little place I knows of where the p'lice or nobody else'll find us—see?"

"Oh! I'd forgotten that."

"They're not likely to come searchin' afore to-morrow,"

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went on Patchy. "She's safe enough 'ere. Shove 'er in the van, Snooky, and lock 'er in. She won't get out like Nippy did, anyway."

Snooky nodded, and scowling at Doris, he pushed her roughly to the van steps, and nodded towards the doorway. Doris hesitated a brief moment, and then, realising her helplessness, she stepped into the van, her face white with bitter disappointment and dismay. Snooky locked the door, and rejoined Patchy.

But if Doris Levison was disappointed and dismayed, it was nothing to the feelings of the luckless Nippy. Of himself he cared little. He had known the rascals long, and he was not afraid of them. He had seen the girl first with feelings of utter alarm, but that alarm had changed to hope—hope that was shattered now. Moreover, the thought of his gallant would-be rescuer a prisoner like himself filled Nippy with hopeless despair. It was of the unknown girl he was thinking now, and not knowing what Doris knew—not having the comforting knowledge that rescue was possible—Nippy felt that the outlook was, indeed, hopeless.

CHAPTER 11.

A Lucky Meeting!

"JOVE, I'm tired, you fellows!"

"Same here!"

"And I'm fed up!"

"Like me!"

"No good going on, I suppose!" said Tom Merry, staring round the dusky, hilly countryside. "We've about raked every possible place, but it's no good. 'And it's nearly dark now. What's more, I'm hanged if I know quite where we are."

"Bai Jove! I weally believe we are lost!" remarked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, blinking round him through his monocle.

"We shall be, if we don't buck up and get home before darkness comes," said Tom Merry. "Let's see if we can find a landmark. It'll be no joke if we get lost round here."

"And walk into that dashed chalk-pit," said Blake. "We can't be so very far away from that."

"I almost wish we'd searched that place thoroughly," said Tom Merry thoughtfully. "It's just the place those brutes would be likely to choose for a hiding-place—though I'm blessed if I can see where they could hide the van. Anyway, we'll have another hunt round at daylight to-morrow."

"Better not go to the police?" said Lowther.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"You know how queer Nippy is about it," he said quietly.

"We'll have to do this off our own bats, chaps. We know those rotters won't harm Nippy—not seriously, anyway. My only fear is that they're miles away by this."

"It's rotten!"

"Wotten, bai Jove!"

Tom Merry & Co. were all agreed about that. It certainly was rotten. Since noon the juniors had been out, scarcely without food, and they had searched the country for miles around, asking and inquiring on every hand for news of the gipsy caravan they were seeking. But nobody seemed to have seen a van that answered to the description the juniors gave, nor men that answered to the description of Patchy and Snooky.

It was a complete mystery to the juniors. They realised, of course, that the rascals would only move after dark, and that they would, naturally enough, be well supplied with food to escape having to visit shops. Trained Scouts as they were, Tom Merry & Co. had found no trace of the men, excepting those in the woods where their encampment lay. And those few tracks had been lost at a swiftly-running stream just out of the wood. The rascals, travelling showmen both, were obviously men used to woodcraft themselves, and old hands at covering up their tracks.

They had completely baffled Tom Merry & Co., at all events.

Now, hungry, tired out, and miserable, the juniors were making for home—or they fondly hoped they were making for home. Arthur Augustus seemed very doubtful on that point. Even Tom Merry was just a bit doubtful.

"Come on," said Tom wearily. "Let's get on and risk it."

The juniors tramped on wearily and silently. They struck a field path after a few moments, and then they stopped.

"Well," said Blake, with a rueful grin. "Is it right or left? Shall we toss up, or— Hallo!"

Blake paused, and stared ahead along the path to the right. At the same moment the juniors became aware of a queer pattering, and then they heard a low growl, and on the pathway a moving object appeared—a small object: that of a dog.

"A giddy bulldog!" said Tom Merry. "Look—great pip! It—it's old Bingo!"

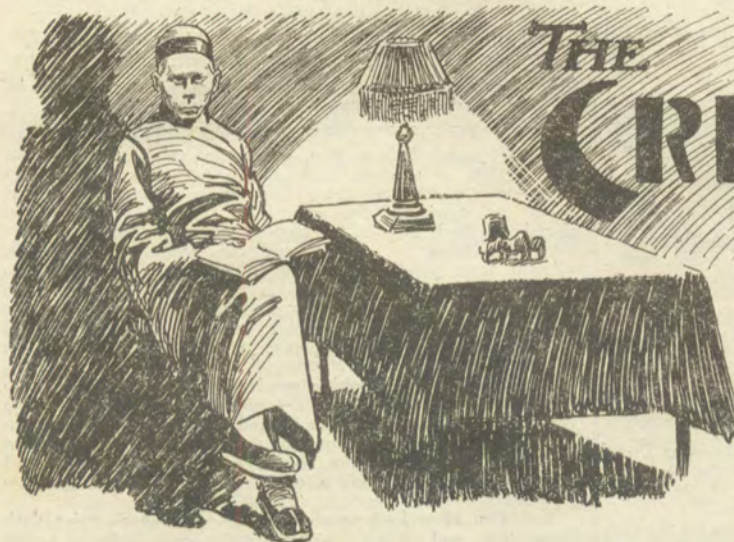
"Bai Jove!"

Tom spoke quickly to the bulldog, and the animal ceased

(Continued on page 27.)

HYPNOTIC POWER!

Yen How's thick lips, curved in a hateful smile, seemed to be whispering tantalising offers, his limpid orbs pleading a sympathy that his victim's inner self knew to be both false and hateful. And such a man holds the secret of—



A Super-Mystery Story, introducing the "Yellow Napoleon," Prince Yen How, and "Penny" Rudd, a sturdy British Secret Service Agent.

BY
LESTER BIDSTON.

In a Tight Corner!

THE knife flew from the jolted hand, described an erratic curve, and stabbed viciously into a wooden partition. Lim's arm swept up to its full height, and, so strong was the force of Fan's kick, that the hunchback pitched backwards to the floor and rolled over in moaning agony!

For perhaps six seconds the onlookers stood motionless and silent, angry that their drugged meditations should be disturbed, and only half understanding the significance of the sudden flare-up. Then, in that strange, fateful pause, the "slap-slap" of loosely-shod feet echoed from the passage and a wildly-excited figure plunged into the middle of the room.

"Ah Woo gone!" this fellow rasped hoarsely. "Door bolted, Woo bolted, something funny long!" He suddenly shot out a hand and pointed straight at Pen. "You came in last. You stanger—what'm done with Woo!"

Both Pen and Fan instantly guessed the trouble, and knew the game was up. The fellow accusing them was the rat-faced dispenser of hok.

He, doubtless wondering why the flow of illicit visitors had so suddenly dried up, had stolen to the alley door to question its guardian—with this result!

For another second or so silence followed the startling exposure. Forshaw was still on his knees, pathetically waiting Lim's orders; but Pen now pulled him upright, pushed him to Fan's arms, and waved his pal to get the old fellow out of harm's way.

There arose a chorus of angry snarls from the assembled Chinks, for with them suspicion was slowly flaming to certainty. They were ripe for trouble, and the moment Lin Lim regained his feet his first words brought hesitation to a close.

"They're spies! The worst enemies we've got!" he snarled. "I know them now. They belong Pekin Legation. They stop here f'good, or we lib English people for always!"

That was an exaggeration in which his listeners im-

plicitly believed. As Lim's ominous hint went home to them the angry murmurs died down to a more sinister silence.

"Lim lies!" Pen said loudly. "Whoever we are, and whatever we're after, we mean you no harm. Behave yourselves, and come away from that door. The place is surrounded, but I'll see you fellows go free if you put those knives away at once."

He pleaded thus because he was loth to use his gun for several reasons. For one thing, a Limehouse scrap would do nothing to help the hunt for Yen How; for another, the killing of one or more of these pests would mean an official inquiry, much undesirable publicity, and the certainty of pinning him down to London for many weeks to come.

He faced them boldly enough, for he knew the yellow beasts would be on him like a pack of starving wolves at the first sign of flinching. For a moment only his calm eyes held them, as a lion-tamer holds the beasts under his control. Then Lim again voiced his hatred and settled the issue.

"Im Penny Ludd, Chinaman's worst enemy!" he squealed venomously. "Im bluffing! No gun, no police! Soon bling 'em along, though, if 'im let out!"

That ended it. With a hungry snarl, the whole pack closed in, knives bared, their minds obsessed with the need of killing this notorious "foleign devil."

Snatching up a heavy chair, Pen swung it down on one snarling rat who leapt in ahead of his fellows. It was Li, the thin-faced seller of hok. He dropped, stunned, and Pen swept the chair sideways, and so forced a clear space about himself. But Lim, making a lucky and plucky grab, seized one of the legs of Pen's clumsy weapon, and some other brute's steel stabbed in like a stinging snake.

The needle point tore the breast of Pen's coat without actually touching the skin—an escape only effected by relinquishing his hold of the chair and springing backwards. True to the creed of the professional, he was still loth to use a lethal weapon, except in the last extremity; but Fan, thinking his chief had received a death-blow, shot and dropped the fellow with a punctured shoulder.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED.

PENDENNIS RUDD, better known as "Penny" Rudd, born and bred in China of English parents. Knows the habits of the Oriental from A to Z. Attached to the Pekin Legation, and holds a watching brief for the British Government on matters affecting British residents in China.

FAN SHEN, a young Chinese, Penny's close friend and assistant.

INSPECTOR WELBECK, known as "Asiatic" Welbeck on account of his activities in the East End of London against Oriental criminals.

PROFESSOR FORSHAW, an authority on Eastern languages and customs.

PRINCE YEN HOW, chief of the notorious League of the Crimson Claw, a vast organisation whose aim is to overthrow the ruling powers in China. Possessed of amazing hypnotic powers and all the mystic trickery of the East, Yen How bids fair to become another Napoleon.

Penny Rudd and Fan Shen journey to England in search of Jules Vidoc, an eminent French detective, who, Rudd feels certain, has fallen foul of Prince Yen How. Penny learns that a murder has been committed in Limehouse, the victim ultimately proving to be Jules Vidoc. Papers of vital importance are taken by the police from the person of Vidoc and given to Professor Forshaw for translation. But Prince Yen How gets at Professor Forshaw in some mysterious fashion, and the papers are destroyed. The professor and Inspector Welbeck are captured by Yen How, and taken to the Joyshop, a haunt in the neighbourhood of Pennyfields. Penny Rudd and Fan Shen, disguised as coolies, visit the place with the idea of rescuing Forshaw and Welbeck. The first part of the programme goes off without a hitch, for the professor is discovered. He seems, however, entirely under the spell of Yen How, who has hypnotised him. Lim, an agent of Yen How, is guarding Forshaw, and he begins to suspect Penny Rudd. Hot words ensue, and Lim draws a knife with the idea of putting Rudd out for keeps. With a spectacular high kick, however, Fan kicks the knife from Lim's hand.

(Now read on.)

"Thanks, Fan!" Pen grinned. "They will have it. But aim low—cripple 'em!" He pointed his advice by snatching out his own gun and nearly pinking one over-eager ruffian in the leg.

"Why no killee?" Fan protested. "They'm no loss. Plenty more no goods in China!" But he obeyed orders, and sent two of his pigmented race screaming backwards with mutilated feet.

Inch by inch, the dazed old professor between them, they sidled along the wall towards the curtained corner. They gained it, and now at least had the satisfaction of knowing the mad crowd could only come at them from the front.

A knife was thrown. That missed, but a bottle took Fan full in the chest, and drove him back into the thick plush curtain.

To his amazement, the door it hid gave way to his touch, and he tumbled in a heap at the foot of a wide wooden stairway. In a flash he saw the advantage of getting up those stairs, and sprang back to his chief.

"Plivate stairs inside," he panted, taking a futile pot-shot at the wary Lim. "Gettee ole fella up! Me keep this scum busy, Penny!"

"I'll look after the scum!" Pen gritted grimly. "Away with Forshaw, and no back-chat!"

The sight of these intruders penetrating yet farther into the place literally threw Lim into a madman's frenzy.

Regardless of his own skin, he charged fearlessly in on Pen, whimpering with rage, and ignoring the barrel that pointed straight between his eyes.

"Back, you animal!" Pen warned. "Back, or—"

But Lim never hesitated. With a cat-like spring he cleared the overturned chair, and aimed a slashing, horrible blow at Pen's throat.

Reluctantly Pen's crooked finger pressed the trigger it touched; but instead of the shattering roar that ought to have heralded Lim's end, a metallic click told that his gun was empty, and that he was in the tightest corner of his life.

Instinctively his gun flicked sideways, and took the slash that was intended for his throat. The slither of metal meeting metal ended by Lim's knife-edge slicing deep into Pen's fist, and the now useless weapon fell from his torn hand.

Despite the searing pain of the wound, Pen's nerve held steady, and his left fist caught Lim a sweeping head buffet that sent him crashing sideways.

But the sight of Pen's bleeding paw, and the knowledge that he was unarmed, encouraged a dozen yellow tigers to take Lim's place. Jumping back to the narrow recess, Pen squirmed aside from one thirsty steel, jolted its owner's head with a terrific upper-cut, spun round, and took the dimly lighted stairs three at a time.

From the upper landing Fan looked down in strained dismay. He knew the tigerish nature of these scourgings of Chinese seaports, and prayed that his chief made no stumble in his hurtling retreat.

"Let 'em have it, Fan!" Pen gasped, jumping the last stair wearily. "My gun's gone! I'm all in!" He stumbled blindly against the wall, panting heavily, and feeling physically sick with the pain of his mutilated hand.

For a moment he was but dimly conscious of the yellow mob crowding the stairs. As in a dream, he looked down on a sea of tossing, knife-laden hands and betel-tinted teeth framed by thick, grinning lips.

Then Fan's gun spoke—a shattering roar that reverberated in the enclosed place like a thunderclap. It brought Pen's wits back with a jolt. He saw the crowd hesitant, one burly ruffian sagging suggestively against his fellows; and in the strange silence that followed, Fan's whisper told of crowning disaster.

"I've one bullet left, Penny Ludd," he breathed softly.

"Um! We never looked for a pitched battle," Pen grunted. "Nash's men must have heard the row; they'll be here any second. If we can only delay these fiends—"

"Loom end of passage," Fan whispered.

"It's a chance—the last," Pen decided swiftly.

Fortunately, the bemused Forshaw had already wandered off in that direction. On a sign from Pen, the two turned and raced down the long passage, tore open the door, and literally pitched the old man into the room. Its strangeness passed unnoticed for a moment, and it was only when the door was banged and bolted that they turned and realised the trap into which they had been driven!

There was one pool of light in a room otherwise shadowy and unreal. Furniture of dull black ebony, curtains on all four walls of black silk, made a strange contrast to a solitary figure facing them across the width of the table.

In that face, ghostly white and fixed like that of a mummy, they recognised the famous "Asiatic" Welbeck, of the Yard. His eyes, feverishly bright, stared unblinkingly at them without sign of recognition or alarm.

And, as though to complete the ghastly picture, a tall, black-robed figure, hitherto unnoticed, stirred from the

shadows, and stepped quietly to the table. With a shock of dismay the two hunted lads recognised the sinister features of Prince Yen How, and realised that their world-wide search had come to an end at the worst possible moment.

The Iron Test!

THE great Prince Yen, outwardly calm, was seething with rage when he faced the intruders. To Pen it was plain that the yellow prince looked upon them as common denizens from the Joyshop's dope-chamber. And, as such, he began to address them.

"Folly-ridden fools!" he said, his voice subdued, but vibrant with passion. "What means this uproar and impertinent intrusion? Back with you to— Ah!" His almond-shaped eyes narrowed, and he leaned forward over the table. "So—the gods are just. I know you now! Penny Rudd and the renegade Shen—into my hands at last!"

Actually, he was looking cynically at a couple of non-descript coolies. Fan was disreputable enough, after the rough house below; but Pen looked as bloodthirsty a ruffian as even a Limehouse slum could produce. The wound in his head had broken out afresh, his slashed hand gushed crimson stickiness, and, altogether, he was a lamentable sight.

Yet Yen How had penetrated the cunning disguise with barely a second glance. A thin, frosty smile flickered across his pigmented face, and, to the hunted pair, it was abundantly clear that he had no doubt of his ability to deal with them.

"So Rudd's luck has deserted him," he purred softly. "It was told to me that Chinese Rudd had journeyed to his sacred ancestors some hours since. Well, someone has blundered, and much that was puzzling me is now crystal clear. To-night, my dear Rudd, we will rectify that little error!"

"We will; but not in your way, How," Pen answered boldly. "You think you have us cornered. The rats outside help in the illusion, probably?"

Yen How listened contemptuously to the savage mob without.

"Lim, quiet your scum and herd them back to their kennel!" he called loudly. Then, as the noise simmered down in the passage, he turned again to the chums, his eyes fixed unwinkingly on Fan: "I know I have you cornered! Why, my friends, should I foolishly doubt the obvious?"

Fan leaned pugnaciously over the table, giving How glance for glance, and pointing his automatic within six inches of the prince's broad chest.

"Because fifty picked men surround the house—if they're not already inside it," Fan answered. "And until they enter this room, How, you are keeping still. Hands up!"

"I think not, Fan Shen," How answered quietly. "Your finger is powerless to fire that gun, but I'll have it!"

Too late, Penny Rudd realised that their mystic enemy had been angling for their solitary weapon from the moment they barged into his room. His compelling eyes, hypnotic to a degree beyond Western understanding, had snared Fan as a snake snares a rabbit. Before Pen's startled warning even issued from his lips, How's hand shot upwards, and the gun was loosed from Fan's unresisting fingers.

Then Pen did the next best thing—an heroic action, when it is remembered how terribly How was armed for evil. His hand dropped heavily on Shen's shoulder, he whirled the lad roughly aside, and faced the prince unflinchingly. Deliberately, he had broken the baleful glance that was subduing his chum's wits and had drawn the power of those mystic orbs on himself.

"Do as you like with us, How," he grinned provokingly. "Shen's right; your only way out is via the Black Maria. Your little day is ended and our job's done. That, my yellow devil, is all that matters!"

"I care not for all the police in London; and my day, as you call it, is but dawning, Rudd," How answered smoothly. "My plans are complete, and it is beyond the power of any but the gods themselves to alter those plans."

Something of the calm confidence in his voice sent a tremor of icy fear racing down Pen's spine. The man was amazing, more sublimely certain of his own powers than Pen could account for. Unhurried, despite the knowledge that the police were closing in on his retreat, he absolutely ignored three of the enemies who occupied the room, and focused all his attention on the youth who faced him across three feet of ebony.

Then a greater fear took hold of Pen, for the truth suddenly shot into his mind that How was seeking to enslave his will as he had already enslaved the wills of the others.

The thick lips, curved in a hateful smile, seemed to be whispering tantalising offers; the limpid orbs pleaded a sympathy that Pen's inner self knew to be both false and hateful.

But, because kindly priests of a Pekin Llamasery were playing their own game against How and his "Crimson Claw," Pen had been taught something of that Eastern mind-poison and its antidote.

Deliberately, he began to think of commonplace things: then, with an effort, he broke the eye-to-eye stare, and forced his glance to rove anywhere but back to the sinister yellow face.

How's counterstroke was swift and compelling. The bore of Fan's automatic touched his chest, and How's voice snapped sharply in his ear.

"Move one inch, Rudd, and I fire!" How snarled. "Now turn your eyes back to me, for only as my slave will you live!"

Though forced to obey, Pen knew that he had scored a strong point, for a mind ruled by anger loses half its power.

So now he eyed the yellow prince coldly, giving back stare for stare, knowing that the test must be made for good or ill. He felt the overpowering ego in that icily compelling glance; he was horribly conscious that he might indeed become mind-slave to this ruthless schemer, or be smashed and swept aside like an offending insect.

But he fought hard—a silent, invisible tug-of-war that brought beads of perspiration to his temples. The one thought dinned and hammered in his weary head: "If I give way, How trails his evil course unchecked!" And he began to have an intolerable longing to give way—to win ease of mind at any price! With an inward shudder the terrible thought came that How was winning. For a single instant his resolution tumbled into hopeless futility; then, with a dynamic effort, he drove chaos from his mind and switched back to harsh, orderly reasoning.

He read and understood the gleam of triumph in those staring orbs. But he read also the agony of the strain that How was feeling, and suddenly grew confident that he could successfully withstand the abominable mind onslaught.

The victor's smile was already wreathing How's sensuous lips, and Pen knew full well the danger of his own eyes telling the monster the truth; so, drooping the lids of his sight, he allowed his head to sink forward as though owning defeat.

In that tense moment a rush of men came hurtling down the passage, and the door-knob was rattled impatiently.

"Rudd, I'm told you've retreated up here," came the Commissioner's call. "We've rounded every man-jack of 'em up, so open the door. You're safe enough now, my lads!"

Safe enough! Even as Nash uttered the words, How's gun screamed its dire message, and Pen dropped to the floor. Deliberately, the yellow fiend pointed the weapon at Fan, now belatedly aroused and springing in to the attack like an angry bull-terrier.

But a hollow click told How that the last cartridge had been fired, and, with a snarl, he flung the useless pistol straight at the electric lamp. In an instant the room was plunged into blinding darkness; but Fan, swerving not a fraction from the straight line, plunged across the table with hands outstretched and grim anger in his heart. His clawing fingers closed on the skulker's throat, and he laughed bitterly.

"You've finished Penn Rudd—now your turn's come!" he screamed, in an abandon of rage. "Use your eyes, How! Use your eyes in this darkness, if you can—for they alone can save you!"

Someone was stumbling about the darkened room, the door was collapsing beneath the onslaught of the police. But these sounds were trifles of no account, for he was obsessed with the bitter truth that Penny Rudd had been shot, and that the murderous assailant was now in his hands!

Then his locked fingers were suddenly torn away from this grim throat-hold. With the shock of one awakening from nightmare, he realised that the room was crowded with plain-clothes men, and that a dozen electric torches were making the place as light as day.

"Let up, Fanny, you jabberwock!" a voice yelled in his ear. "Yen How's done enough damage without you helping him!"

His senses in disorder, a mist of rage still dancing before his eyes, Fan stumbled to his feet and shrank in horror from the speaker.

"Penny Rudd?" he quavered. "But 'im shot—saw 'im drop dead!"

"He's very much alive, old dear!" Pen grinned. "And just in time to stop you putting Welbeck to bye-bye for keeps!"

"Welbeck!"

Shen swung round, took one glance at the fellow he had been doing his best to throttle, and staggered back with a shrill squeal of terror. It was too much! First, the shock of finding his chief alive after seeing a gun fired almost against his chest; then to find he had been choking Inspector Welbeck instead of the slippery Yen How.

Before he could voice his bewilderment, Commissioner Nash stepped from the crowd, and impatiently asked for enlightenment.

"We heard a shot and a yell," he said. "That made us force the door in record time—to find your 'yellow fellow killing one of my best men and you tearing his hands away. Now, what's it all mean?"

Pen's face, ghostly white and blood-streaked, was grimly drawn when he answered.

"It means that Yen How is somewhere in this room," he said quickly. "The tale can wait. But have the door well guarded sir, whilst we tear these confounded curtains down."

But a minute search failed to reveal the slightest trace



As the idol slewed round, Penny Rudd pointed to the two-foot cavity which stood blackly revealed. "That's where Yen How vanished," he said, "through there!"

The Cunning of Yen How!

SHEN was conscious of disturbances all round him, but his mind and energies were concentrated on the punishment of the creature writhing in his grip.

of the yellow prince. It seemed almost incredible to the hunters, but the amazing truth was gradually driven home that Yen How had vanished like a wisp of smoke! One curious fact came to light during the search; the stripping away of the heavy hangings exposed a small, doorless chamber fitted up as a joss-house. But the leering, full-bellied god it contained formed no sort of cover for a man of How's build, and the disgruntled company never gave the thing a second glance.

"He really was in the room with you?" Nash questioned cynically.

"I can vouch for that," Welbeck croaked tenderly, fingering his swollen throat. "I've had a lesson in Eastern mind-stealing that I'll never forget. Oh, yes! Mr. Yen How was very much here, chief."

The Commissioner's frown deepened. When he spoke, however, it was to the superintendent in charge of the raiding party.

"Williams, have the catch sent along to the Dock Road Station," he said. "Put some of your men in charge of the house, and see that it is patrolled back and front until further orders. If anything new develops, report to me here."

"Now, Welbeck, this matter must be thrashed out quickly," he continued. "Either Yen How can render himself invisible, or all four of you are suffering from a peculiar form of delusion."

"The man-handling I've received to-night was no delusion, chief," Welbeck answered sourly.

"Then where is he, man?" Nash demanded impatiently. "Where—"

"Come here!"

As if in answer, Pen called to them from the inner room. They found him closely examining the carved wooden image by the light of a pocket-lantern. As they entered he turned to Nash with a wry grin.

"This ugly beggar accounts for How's vanishing trick," he said. "See the little strip of black silk—it's been torn from his tunic, unless I'm very much astray."

Now, as the beam focused on the base of the image, the others could see a quarter-inch of silk protruding from the pedestal whereon the thick wooden thigh rested.

Nash tore at the strip, to find it firmly caught from the inside. Then he tried brute strength, but the leering idol held immovably.

"No good, sir," Pen advised, casting round. "There's a button or lever somewhere—it can't be far away."

Running his finger along the edge of the slab, he suddenly uttered a cry of satisfaction. The next second, a click echoed through the quiet room, and the idol slewed round so that half its width hung over the edge of the pedestal. In the vacated space a two-foot cavity stood blackly revealed.

Nash uttered a savage exclamation.

"You're right, Rudd!" he said. "He's got ten minutes start—more than enough if he has friends in Pennyfields."

"He has hundreds, I expect," Pen grunted. "But, come along, sir, we won't have far to go."

Climbing through the narrow opening, Pen found the journey even shorter than he expected. Three steps brought him to a wooden partition, and a moment's search revealed the way of sliding it aside.

The beam of his torch lighted up a scantily-furnished room, and, after one amazed glance, he grinned wryly at the simplicity of Yen How's way of escape.

"The house next door," he murmured as the others edged through the opening. "I'll warn the patrol, though I expect the scoundrel's well away by now."

And so it proved. The men guarding the "Joyshop" had never given the quiet house next door a second thought, and now a close search of the premises merely showed a desolation of empty rooms.

In a mood that was anything but amiable, Nash led the way back to the "Joyshop." For a moment he stared sympathetically at the old professor, and was turning away with a sigh when, to his surprise, Forshaw suddenly addressed him.

"Why am I here, Nash?" he asked querulously. "I know there's things going on all about me—I seem to have fits of lucidity mixed up with most unpleasant dreams. But why am I here—how did I get into this horrible place?"

In a few words the Commissioner told him of the night's happenings—a recital to which Forshaw listened with amazement.

"I must believe you, of course," he murmured. "Knowing something of the sinister knowledge that is hidden in China, I can only be thankful that this yellow ruffian has let me off so lightly."

"You've a strange way of looking at things, Forshaw," Nash answered.

"Professor Forshaw is thankful that How has only stolen one small portion of his memory, sir," Pen intervened. "He could just as easily have made his mind a complete blank had it suited him."

Nash stared from Pen to Forshaw in frowning perplexity. To his matter-of-fact mind the whole business seemed impossibly uncanny; but, faced by four shrewd beings, who implicitly believed in How's sinister gift, he was forced to accept the impossible as fact, and driven to an admission that Scotland Yard was up against a tough proposition.

"We'll comb Pennyfields as it's never been combed before," he promised grimly. "Before doing that, however, I must know exactly what has been happening to-night. For instance, I'm quite at sea regarding your movements since leaving Forshaw's flat, Welbeck, and quite at a loss to grasp why Yen How should bring you here."

"When I left the flat, it was with the intention of reporting to you that the Chinese papers were lost," Welbeck began. "We were actually crossing the pavement when a gang of Chinks started up from behind the car and from the area steps. Taken front and rear, I have a hazy idea that Joe charged the car at the bunch, but only a hazy idea—for a Limehouse sandbag put me very definitely to sleep."

"I've had a similar report from your driver," Nash admitted. "Well, you recovered, Welbeck?"

"I recovered to find myself facing that yellow fiend across this table," Welbeck continued. "I've never believed in hypnotism, and I laughed at Rudd here when he hinted that Forshaw had been got at that way." His lips closed grimly. "But I believe in it now, Sir William, for How had me down and out, mentally, when these fellows providentially barged in. At the time, mind you, I wasn't capable of moving, or of thinking of anything but How's orders. I only really woke up when the gun burst in my ear." He turned admiring eyes on Pen. "You saved me from worse than death to-night, Rudd, though I thought you'd got yours when Yen How put you beneath the table."

"You're a millice man, Penny," Fan agreed. "Why you lib at all supprise me."

Pen, almost too weary to answer, still managed a shadowy smile.

"The moment you clumped down the passage, sir," he said, addressing the Commissioner, "I read How's evil purpose in his eyes. I dropped with the intention of heaving the table at him—his bullet must have missed me by scarce an inch. Before I could move again he smashed the light, and Fan went for him like an angry rattlesnake."

"And got him!" Fan whispered, with a frightened side-glance at the inspector. "Only, by his devil magic, he turned into Welbeck in my hands!"



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"No, the beggar snatched at me and pushed me right in your path, you yellow peril," Welbeck chuckled wryly.

"Well, he's been infernally clever," Nash admitted grudgingly. "But his hypnotic gift has not been very successful with any of you except Forshaw."

"Simply because he hadn't a fair chance," Pen answered quietly. "In Welbeck's case our appearance took How's mind off him, and his influence with Shen was broken by me." He leaned forward, looking eagerly at the Commissioner. "Make no mistake, sir! How can do as he likes with most people. He can commit any crime he wishes by proxy."

"I can echo that," Forshaw groaned. "I've heard enough in the last few minutes to know that I've been a catspaw in his hands—to my country's detriment. I can assure you, Nash, that I have no recollection of anything that happened whilst he was in my rooms!"

For several moments Nash remained thoughtfully silent. Then:

"He's evidently a most dangerous ruffian, but we can do little more to-night. I'll have a search made, of course, but Pennyfields is not hopeful for night work. But to-morrow, though, there'll be such a comb-out in Limehouse that it will be a miracle if How dodges us." He jumped briskly to his feet. "You fellows have had more than your share, and are only fit for bed."

"I'm going with your men, sir, if you will per—" Pen began. He tried to rise, but staggered, and would have fallen had not Nash put a restraining arm round him.

"You'll do as I ask, Rudd," the Commissioner said

quietly. "To-night you'll only be a hindrance, and the real work cannot begin until daylight, remember."

Aching in every limb, Pen was forced to admit that Nash was speaking the truth. His head was just one big ache, his thoughts were jumbling in a most annoying manner, and he really felt that he had come to the end of his tether.

"I'll give in, sir," he muttered sleepily. "But don't forget that How's real reason for crossing the world is still hidden from us. The killing of Vidoc and the burning of the 'Crimson Claw' papers has been an unpleasant sideline for him, so to speak. His real game has something to do with—er—ten men, wasn't it?" His arms sprawled forward across the table and his head drooped forward in sheer weariness.

"How's real game is to keep out of my road, if he can," Nash said sharply. Then, noticing that Pen was fast asleep, he smiled pityingly and turned to Welbeck. "Get him along, inspector, and turn in yourself. You as well, professor. I'll take you down to my car now."

Of that late ride across sleeping London, Pen retained no waking recollection. He roused for a moment as Fan and Welbeck helped him from the car, and muttered something about the paper in his pocket. But neither of his tired companions paid much attention to his ramblings, unfortunately, or the morrow's startling happenings might have had a very different ending.

(What fresh adventure is in store for Penny Rudd and his friends? What will be Yen How's next move? Mind you read next week's fine instalment of this amazing mystery yarn, boys.)



(Continued from
page 22.)

to growl, and trotted up to them, whining queerly. Bingo had recognised them, but he showed only a strange excitement.

"What the thump's the matter with the giddy animal?" said Herries, who saw at once that the dog was strangely agitated. "Old Towser's just like that when something's wrong. I wonder—"

He stooped to pat Bingo's head, and as he did so his eye caught the paper twisted round the collar. He snatched it free, and opened the twisted paper suspiciously. Then he gasped, and handed it over to Tom Merry.

"Look at it!" he stammered. "Read that, Tommy!"

Tom Merry read the message on the crumpled envelope, and his face went white. The message was brief:

"Help! Doris and strange boy prisoner of gipsies in chalk-pit just off field-path to Puddleham. Am free, but lying with sprained ankle on grass above pit. Bring help quickly, for Heaven's sake!"
ETHEL."

That was all; but it was enough for Tom Merry & Co., and while it filled them with utter alarm and amazement it also fired them with sudden energy and vitality.

"Come on!" gasped Tom Merry the moment he had read the strange message out. "Quick! You can guess what this means!"

Tom's chums could guess easily enough, and they followed Tom with a rush as he led the way, forgetful of their tiredness, of Bingo, of everything except their alarm and eagerness to reach the chalk-pit. They did not need to be told whom the "gipsies" were, or whom the "strange boy" could be. They remembered that the field-path ran near the brink of the chalk cutting, and they realised Bingo had come from that direction. After them trotted Bingo, as if he realised full well that he had accomplished his task.

They had not to go far. A sudden rise in the ground brought the black outline of the pit railings in sight, and the next moment Blake gave a low cry as he glimpsed a dark form on the path. And even as he glimpsed it a faint, appealing voice reached them.

"Help! Help!"

It was the voice of Cousin Ethel. They had surrounded her in a moment, and were listening to her story, gasped out in a voice that trembled with joy and thankfulness.

"But never mind me!" she ended with a gasp. "I'm all right now. Here's dear old Bingo! He'll stay with me while you rescue Doris. Be quick—quick!"

Tom Merry nodded. He saw that to leave Cousin Ethel was the only thing. To deal with the burly ruffians would take all seven of them all their time, he knew. With a whispered word of confidence, Tom led his chums off along the edge of the chasm. He had only glanced into the chalk-pit on the off-chance that afternoon, as had his chums, and what he had seen had shown him that to attempt to climb down now darkness had come would be utter madness.

There was light enough still, however, to find their way down to the cart-track, and in a matter of three minutes or more the seven juniors had reached the lower ground and were racing along the rough track, heedless of stumbles and tumbles. They rounded the jutting buttress of chalk on the left, and the leaping flames of a camp-fire greeted their eyes. The flames glimmered and flickered on the shadowy caravan and on the dark forms of two men, lying apparently asleep on the chalky ground close by.

"At the brutes!" hissed Tom Merry.

As he spoke, Tom sprang to the dark form against the wheel of the van, and his knife was out in a flash, slashing at the bonds that bound Nippy to the wheel. Knowing the strength and savage characters of the ruffians, he was taking no chances, and realised that Nippy's help would perhaps be needed.

But Nippy's help was not needed. As the cords fell away from the prisoner, Tom sprang to the aid of his chums, who had already flung themselves at Patchy and Snooky.

Those two ruffians had been taken completely by surprise, and their gasps of fury and oaths rang out savagely above the uproar.

"No quarter!" shouted Tom Merry. "Oh, good for you, Blake!"

The burly Patchy had just lurched to his feet, struggling savagely to shake off three of the clinging, desperate juniors, when Blake leaped in, a hefty chunk of wood in his hand.

It rose and fell, and Patchy howled fiendishly and went down again like a falling log. As he lay half-stunned, with Tom Blake, Herries, and Digby pinning him down, Nippy ran up with cut lengths of cord in his hands.

Though every movement must have sent agonising pains through his stiff and cramped limbs, he deftly wound the cords round the ruffian's wrists and legs.

"Good for you, Nippy!" panted Tom Merry. "Now this other merchant!"

But Snooky had already given in the moment his accomplice went down, and to tie him up was the work of a moment.

"That's that!" gasped Tom Merry, leaping to his feet. "And now for Miss Doris. Hallo, there she is calling! Oh, thank goodness! I fancy everything will be all serene now."

"Yaas, wathah!" gasped Arthur Augustus, leading the rush for the caravan.

Everything was "all serene"—in every way. Looking a
(Continued overleaf.)

KIDNAPPED!

(Continued from previous page.)

trifle pale and excited, but little the worse for her trying experience, Miss Doris Levison was released and the party hurried up the track, eager to see to Cousin Ethel now and careless of what happened to Patchy and Snooky—though the juniors grimly promised them a visit in the morning.

Cousin Ethel's ankle, though painful, was not badly sprained, and, after a rough bandaging, the party started for the girls' camp, Tom Merry & Co. making a rough and ready chair for her from the broken fence, and the juniors taking it in turns to carry her upon it. Their tiredness had miraculously vanished now, and the walk seemed nothing to them. It was only on their way home again—after hot coffee hastily made by the relieved and amazed Miss Stanhope and Miss Greenway—that the juniors felt the strain of their day's adventures. But they didn't mind anything now.

For over coffee in the girls' camp, while the camp-fire gleamed and leaped in their smiling faces, apologies were made on both sides and accepted eagerly and gladly on both sides. The breach was healed, the clouds had rolled away, and Tom Merry & Co. returned home late, and tired, but with happy anticipations of jolly days in store to spend with their girl chums before taking the road once again.

They found Baggy Trimble snoring in his bunk in the caravan when they returned, and it was not until the next morning that Baggy heard of the events of the night. And besides being amazed, Baggy was pleased—very pleased—to hear that Tom Merry & Co. proposed to make an—as yet—indefinite stay at Puddleham. But why he was pleased Tom Merry & Co. did not know. They knew nothing of the letter Baggy had sent to a certain Colonel

Brockways regarding Nippy from Nowhere. Had they known about that they—and especially Nippy himself—would have been very much astonished—and alarmed.

And so while Tom Merry & Co. looked forward to jolly days with their girl chums, Baggy looked forward with blissful anticipation to the letter which he believed was destined to have unpleasant results to Nippy, and decidedly pleasant results to himself.

THE END.

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