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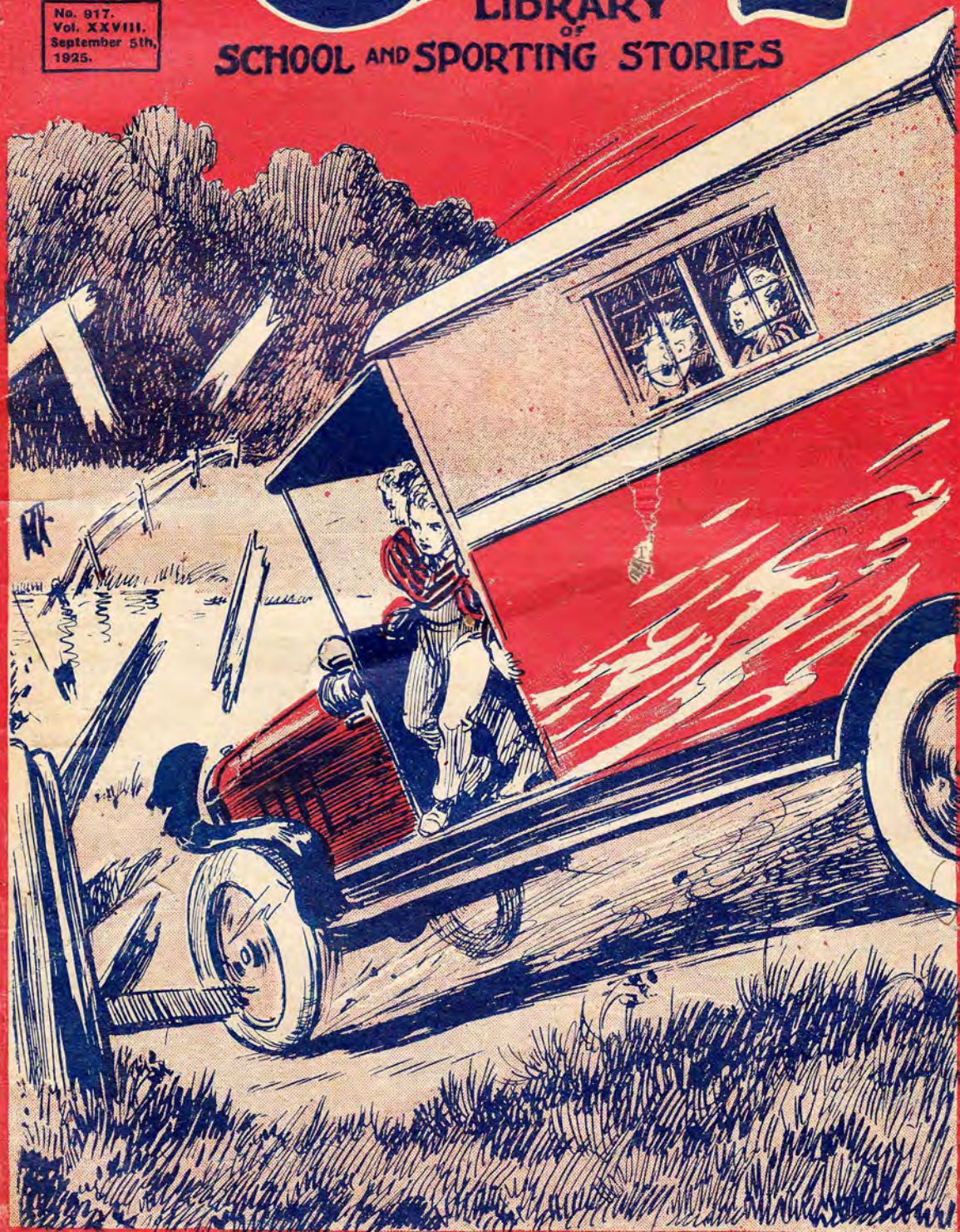
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THE RUNAWAY CARAVAN!

(A thrilling incident from this week's gem of a story, featuring Tom Merry & Co., inside.)

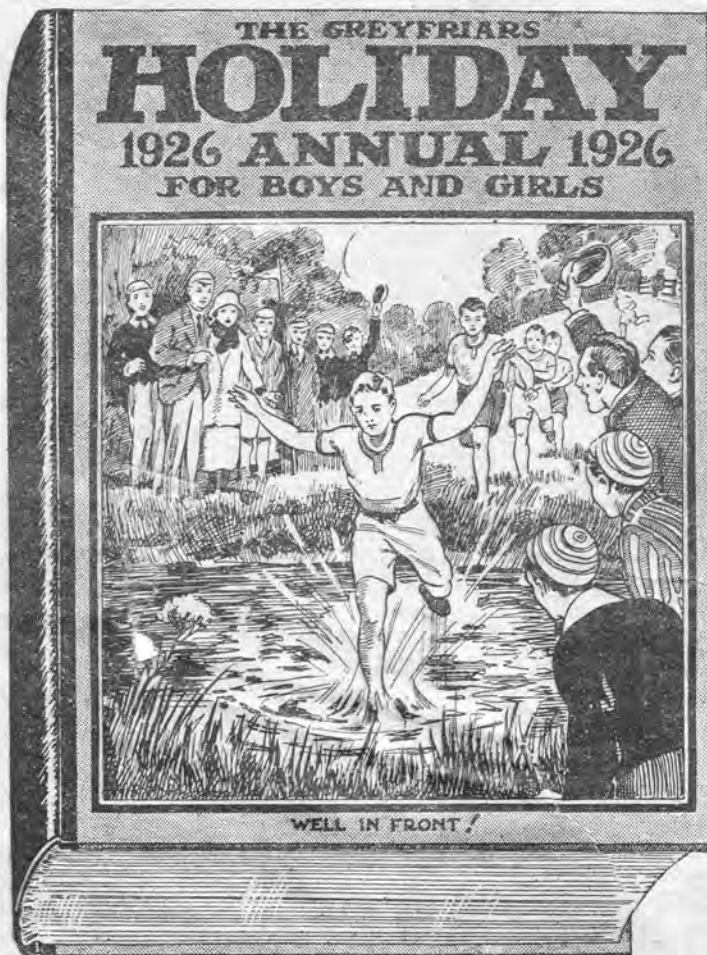
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THE STRANDED CARAVANNERS!

A Magnificent, New, Long Complete Story of Tom Merry & Co., introducing Nippy from Nowhere!

By
Martin Clifford.

CHAPTER 1.

Baggy's Awakening!

TOM MERRY yawned, and rubbed the sleep from his eyes drowsily. Then, with sudden decision, he flung aside his blankets and slid to the floor of the caravan.

In the other three bunks of Noah's Ark, Lowther, Manners, and Baggy Trimble were slumbering peacefully, the two former St. Jim's juniors breathing gently, and the latter junior snoring resonantly.

Tom Merry eyed them with a chuckle, and then he bawled out:

"Tumble up, you lazy slackers! Show a leg! Time to get up!"

From three bunks came protested mumbles.

"Groooogh! Shurrup, fathead!"

"Who's that ass making a row?"

"Tain't rising-bell yet! Gerraway!"

This last came from Baggy Trimble. Apparently, Baggy imagined he was in the Fourth Form dormitory at St. Jim's instead of in the camp of the St. Jim's caravanners. And having mumbled that, Baggy did what he usually did at St. Jim's at rising-bell—he promptly dropped asleep again, and his snore rumbled through the caravan.

"Well, my hat!" said Tom Merry, in disgust. "Blessed if I ever saw such a lot of lazy slackers! Come on, out you get!"

"Just five minutes more?" mumbled Lowther, opening his eyes.

"Only five?" pleaded Manners.

"Not a thumping minute!" said Tom Merry grimly.

"We've got to pack up and get on the road again this morning, remember; there's work to do. If you aren't up in two tics, I'm going to sling you out, neck and crop!"

"Oh, dear!"

"Brute!"

From Lowther and Manners came grunts of disgust, but they knew Tom Merry would keep his word, and they "tumbled out" quickly enough. Baggy Trimble still snored on, however. Tom was just about to carry out his threat when Lowther—eager enough to make others get up now he, himself, was up—stopped him.

"Leave him to me, Tommy," he grinned. "Doesn't he look a cherub with his eyes shut and his mouth open?"

For a moment Lowther gazed down at the sleeping, fat junior, and then he stepped to the little caravan stove. There was no fire in the stove, but there was plenty of soot, and Lowther scraped some on his fingers. Then he stepped back to the snoring Baggy, and gently and deftly traced a huge, black moustache across Baggy's upper lip, and a neat, black goatee beard on Baggy's fat chin. Then he finished up his artistic effort by whitening the rest of

Baggy's fat features with a handful of flour from the larder.

And still Baggy's snore resounded through the caravan.

"I'll wake him now," said Lowther.

Reaching down Blake's bugle from a hook behind the door, Lowther placed it close to Baggy's ear and blew a terrific blast upon it.

"Ta-ra-ra-ra! Ta-to-to-rah!"

Baggy still snored on.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, Blake, Digby, and Herries, clad only in their pyjamas, came rushing into the caravan as that wild blast rent the air.

"Bai Jove!" said D'Arcy. "What's w'ong— Oh, my, hat!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A roar of laughter went up as Trimble's features came into view.

"Ta-ra-rara!" Lowther tried the bugle again.

This time, the result was electrical.

With a gasping howl, Baggy Trimble leaped upright, quite forgetting, as usual, the bottom of the bunk above his.

Crack!

"Yarrooooooh!"

Baggy's howl of pain outdid Blake's bugle.

"Told you I'd wake him," said Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Baggy rubbed frantically at his head, and glowered furiously at the laughing juniors. With the black moustache and goatee, and the flour on his face, his scowling features looked positively fiendish, sending the Terrible Three into fits of laughter.

"Oh, you—you beasts!" wailed Trimble, still rubbing at his singing head. "Wharrer you want to wake a chap up like that for? Oh, my head! Groooooogh! Ow-wow! I jolly well won't get up now! Beasts!"

"Your little mistake!" said Tom Merry grimly. "Out you get!"

Grabbing the blankets, Tom flung them off the fat form of Trimble. Then he grabbed one of Trimble's fat legs, and hauled the junior out. Trimble hit the floor-boards of Noah's Ark with a bump and a roar.

"Now get yourself dressed, you fat slacker!" said Tom severely. "You're always the first to turn in and the last to turn out, Trimble. But you've got to turn out this morning, my lad. We're going to be on the road before ten."

Trimble's howls ceased abruptly.

"On—on the road," he repeated, blinking up in alarm at Tom Merry. "Oh—oh, dear! Not this morning?"

"Yes, of course, fathead! Think we're going to stay here for ever?"

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Trimble's fat face was the picture of dismay.

"I say, you chaps!" he gasped. "Why not stay here a few days longer, you know? It—it's a ripping place, this. Lots of—of fun here. What about staying a bit longer?"

"What on earth for, ass?"

"It—it's such a nice place, Puddleham," mumbled Baggy. "Be—besides, the girls might come back, you know. I vote we stay in—in case they do."

Tom Merry looked at his chums, and then he looked at Baggy Trimble very curiously.

He was puzzled—very puzzled. For the last few days the St. Jim's caravanners had been camped on the slope of a sunny Dorset hill near the little village of Puddleham—not because they liked the place, pretty as it undoubtedly was, but for another and a stronger reason.

Quite accidentally, Tom Merry & Co. had stumbled upon some very old friends of theirs—Ethel Cleveland, who was D'Arcy's cousin, Doris Levison, and two other girl friends, who were, like them, caravanning during the vacation. During those last few days the two caravanning parties had spent some jolly times together, picnicking and rambling over the wooded countryside.

But now the two parties had separated, Cousin Ethel and her chums to go on their way, which was in the opposite direction to which Tom Merry & Co. were going. The previous evening the juniors had seen them off, and now there being no longer a reason for them to stay in Puddleham, they also were about to go on their way.

Apparently, Baggy Trimble did not wish to go, for some reason unknown. It seemed rather curious to Tom Merry.

"Look here, Trimble," he said, eyeing the fat junior suspiciously. "What little game have you got on here? You were gassing last night about wanting to stay here."

"Was—was I?" stammered Trimble.

"Yes, you were. Why the thump should you suddenly want to stay here, you fat ass?"

"You—you see, it's such a nice place," explained Trimble, blinking at the curious juniors feebly. "The—woods, and the—river, and the—the downs."

"Rats! What do you care about anything else but grub?" snorted Tom.

"You—you see—"

"I've got it!" chuckled Lowther. "Baggy's fallen in love with the girl at the village post-office. He always seems to be trotting there lately, anyway."

"So he does," grinned Tom Merry. "Well, if that's so, Baggy, you'll have to do your lovmaking by post—or else stay behind. Come on! Let's get a dip."

With towels slung over their shoulders, the party went for their morning dip, leaving Trimble to his own devices. As they went, they chuckled—why, Trimble would have known had he looked in the glass.

Trimble, however, did not trouble to look in the glass. He watched the juniors, joined now by Nippy, the driver, who came out of his little tent as they passed, vanish through the trees, and then he left the caravan, and ran round to the front of the chassis. With the aid of a spanner, taken from the toolbox, he unscrewed the starting-handle of the engine, and took it off. Then, after replacing the spanner, he hurried into the thick woods. When he came back some moments later Trimble's hands were empty, but his fat face wore a grin of satisfaction.

"Leave here to-day, will they?" he chuckled. "We'll jolly well see about that! And now for breakfast."

Still chuckling gleefully, Baggy Trimble started to get busy with the cooking-stove.

CHAPTER 2.

The Missing Handle!

A PLEASANT and appetising smell of frying bacon greeted Tom Merry & Co. when they returned from their bathe, and the juniors sniffed appreciatively.

The caravanners chuckled as they saw that Trimble had not washed yet—nor discovered the flour and soot on his face. Trimble never did wash at all if he could help it, and the only time he did wash was when Tom Merry & Co. forced him to wash. They had omitted that necessary task as yet, and therefore Trimble had not washed.

"It's all right, you chaps," grinned Lowther. "Don't let on. I fancied the lazy toad wouldn't wash, and he won't if we don't make him. We'll send him to the village for something after brekker."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Trimble blinked up from the cooking-stove at the laughing juniors.

"I say, you chaps," he said peevishly, "wharrer you laughing at me for all the blessed time? It's a bit thick, I call it—me working like a nigger while you rotters go bathing. I've had my wash long ago, and nearly got brekker ready, too!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Baggy's statement that he had washed was too much for the juniors. They roared.

"Bai Jove, Twimble!" remarked Arthur Augustus, with a chuckle. "You are a most feahful fibbah, you know! How could you have washed when—Yooop! Lowthah, you clumsy wottah, your heel caught my shin then!"

"Sorry, Gussy!" said Lowther hastily, giving Gussy a warning wink. "Anyway, let's get brekker now, chaps. I expect Baggy's afraid of bringing his weight down if he were to wash."

"Ha, ha! Yes!"

"Beasts!" snorted Trimble. "Blessed if I can see anything to cackle at!"

The others could, however, and they cackled—greatly to Trimble's growing wrath. Breakfast started off in an atmosphere of grins, and it ended in an atmosphere of grins. It was most exasperating to Baggy Trimble, who realised from the way the rest looked at him that they were laughing at him.

Tom Merry was the first to finish breakfast, and he jumped up briskly from the grass.

"Buck up, you chaps!" he said. "I want to be on the move again. Engine all serene, Nippy?"

"Right as rain!" grinned Nippy. "I gave it a good overhauling last night."

"Plenty of petrol?"

"Lots!"

"Good egg! Then let's have those tents down and get off, and heigh-ho for Devonshire and clotted cream!"

"Hear, hear!"

"You—you're making for Devonshire, then?" exclaimed Nippy abruptly.

"Yes. And after that Cornwall, if we can manage it," said Tom Merry. "We're taking the coast route. I want to be smelling the bonnie briny again."

"The—the coast route!" echoed Nippy, a startled look appearing in his handsome face. "Oh!"

"Why, what's the matter, Nippy?" asked Tom, staring curiously at the youthful driver of the caravan. "Any reason why we shouldn't?"

"N-nunno! Not at all," stammered Nippy, flushing a little as he felt the junior's eyes upon him. "Only—only I thought it would be better to—to stick inland."

"Why?" asked Tom in surprise. "We can easily use the map if you don't know the road."

"I—I know the road all right," said Nippy. "But—but it's hilly by the coast."

"So it is inland," said Tom, laughing. "Anyway, we thought of making for the coast, and striking it somewhere about Lyme Regis, and then on along the Devonshire coast to Cornwall."

"I—I shouldn't if I were you," said Nippy, with curious hesitation. "Why not cut across country, and—and through Exeter, say? It will save time. Better than going all along the coast."

"We sha'n't keep to the coast all the way, of course," said Tom. "In any case, we've plenty of time—heaps! But, look here, Nippy, if you've any reason why we shouldn't go to any particular place—"

"Oh, no! It's all serene," stammered Nippy. "It isn't for me to say, of course. Only—well, I was only wondering which way you intended going."

With that Nippy walked away towards the motor-caravan, his usually cheery face clouded and rather disturbed.

The St. Jim's juniors stared after him, all of them not a little curiously.

"More mystery," remarked Blake. "Nippy's a jolly decent chap, but—but there's a mystery about the chap that beats me hollow."

"No doubt about that!"

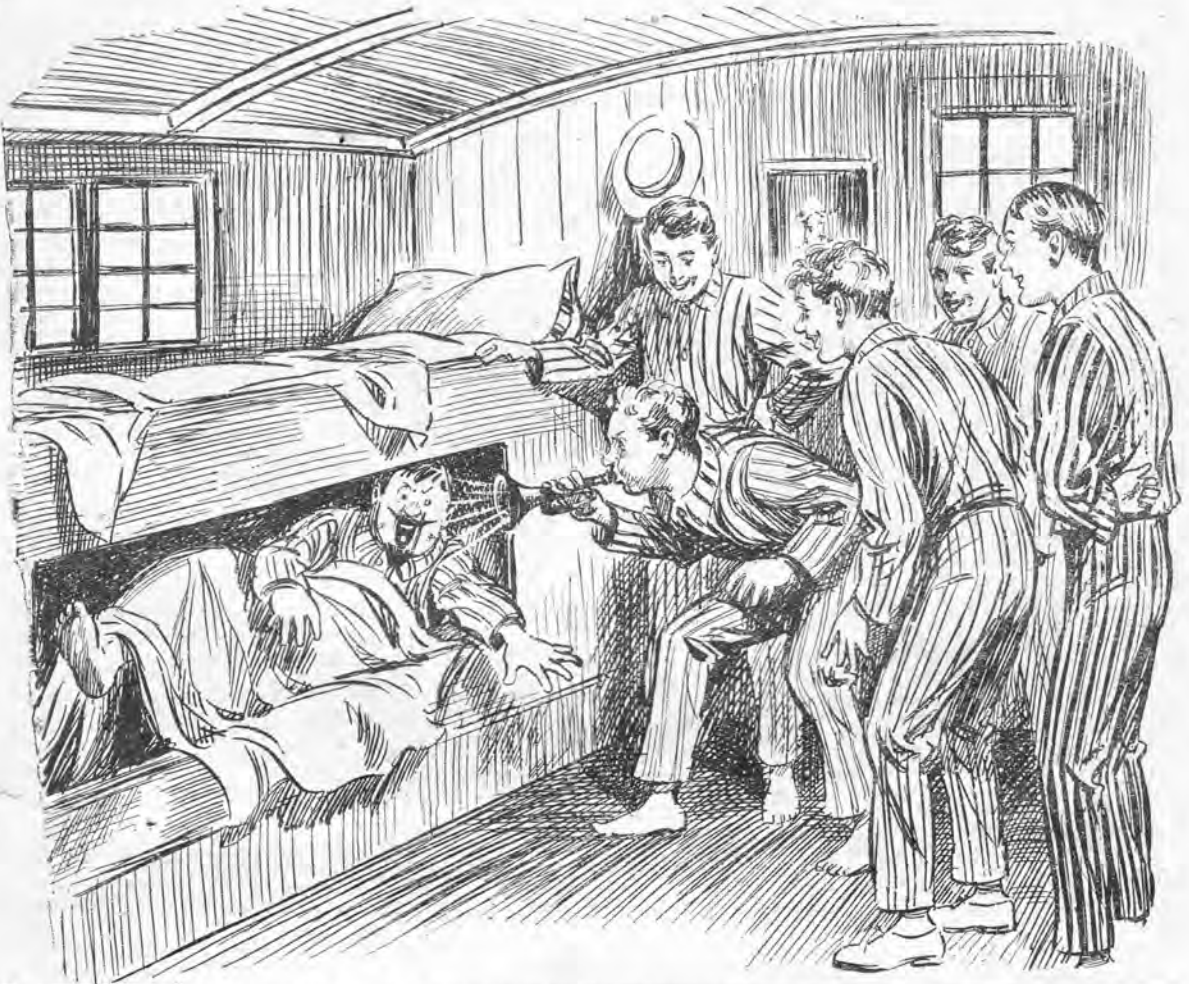
"He fairly looked startled when you mentioned going along the Devonshire coast," went on Blake slowly. "Now, why the thump shouldn't he want to go that way, chaps?"

"It's queer, certainly," said Tom frowning. "In fact, there's a great deal about Nippy that's queer. Anyway, it's giving a bit of excitement to the tour," added Tom, grinning. "Yaas, wathah!"

There was no doubt about that. Since Nippy—or Nippy from Nowhere, as he called himself—had joined the St. Jim's caravanners there certainly had been plenty of excitement—more than the juniors had wanted at times.

When the juniors had first known Nippy he had been a member of a travelling menagerie. But, owing chiefly to rough treatment, Nippy had left the show, afterwards stumbling across the St. Jim's caravanners. At the time the juniors were stranded without a driver in Sussex, and as Nippy had proved himself a clever driver and mechanic, they had been only too glad to take him on. And since then Nippy had not only given every satisfaction, but he had become more than popular with the St. Jim's caravanners.

Yet in many ways the juniors could not make Nippy out at all. He was refined in speech and manners, and had



"Now I'll wake the fat bouncer up," said Monty Lowther, having finished his artistic effort. Reaching down Blake's bugle, he placed it close to Baggy Trimble's ear and blew a terrific blast upon it. "Ta-ra-raara! Ta-ta-ta-rah!" The result was electrical, for with a gasping howl the fat Fourth Former leaped upright—cracking his head on the bottom of the bunk above him. (See page 3.)

obviously known a good home—in fact, it seemed incredible to the juniors that he should once have belonged to a travelling show. But knowing the boy was curiously reluctant to discuss his private affairs, the juniors had refrained carefully from asking questions. Nor had Nippy volunteered any information.

And then, when Nippy had scarcely been with the juniors a day, had started a series of curious adventures. In their wanderings through Sussex, Hampshire, and Dorsetshire, the juniors had been shadowed by a horse caravan manned by two rascally men, known as Patchy and Snooky, and formerly members of the travelling show Nippy had belonged to.

Again and again they had raided the caravanners in desperate attempts to get hold of Nippy—why, Nippy himself seemed to be ignorant. Though the juniors had given them sharp lessons each time, the rascals seemed resolutely determined to get hold of the youth by hook or by crook.

Only a few days ago they had succeeded—for a time. They had captured Nippy, and had imprisoned him in a chalk-pit near the caravanners' camp. But—mainly through the aid and pluck of Doris Levison and Ethel Cleveland—the juniors had tracked them down, and had captured the rascals in their turn.

But—and here was the mysterious part—Nippy had refused, as before, to bring the police into the matter, and the triumphant juniors had been obliged to let the burly ruffians escape unpunished. In fact, the juniors now strongly suspected that Nippy himself was afraid of the police—certainly a disturbing suspicion to Tom Merry & Co.

It was, perhaps, no wonder that the juniors scented more mystery now Nippy had shown such alarm at the news that they proposed to take the coast road through Devonshire.

"We've not done with excitement yet," went on Tom Merry grimly. "Patchy and Snooky have gone, but I fancy we shall see more of the brutes before we've finished this tour. They won't be far away, and when we move on, they'll

move on. That's one reason why I want to be going. We'll keep on the move all day to-day, and we'll show them a clean pair of heels this time, if we can. Anyway, let's be—Hullo, where's Baggy off to?"

Tom Merry broke off abruptly to ask that question. While the juniors had been talking together, Baggy Trimble had walked over to the caravan, and now he emerged wearing his cap.

"Here," exclaimed Tom Merry warmly, "where the thump are you off to, Trimble?"

"Only for a stroll," said Trimble airily. "It's all right, I sha'n't be long."

"He's going to the post-office to see his girl," said Lowther. "Let him go, Tommy. Don't put obstacles in the way of true love. I was going to suggest sending Baggy to the village, in any case. He'll cause a sensation in the village—what?"

"Ha, ha! Yes."

The juniors laughed—they could not help it at the thought of Trimble visiting the village in blissful ignorance of his decorated face.

Tom Merry frowned, however, the next moment.

"We've no time for jokes now, Lowther," he said. "We want to be getting on the road. You know we're moving the moment we've packed, Trimble?"

"Yes. That's all right," said Trimble cheerfully. "I'll be back before you move on."

"Oh, will you?" said Tom grimly. "Very well, you can clear off, my fat pippin! But if you're not back in time, we shall move on without you. Understand?"

Trimble nodded and chuckled.

"It's all right, you fellows," he grinned. "You can go without me, if you like. I don't mind."

"Oh, don't you!" ejaculated Tom Merry.

"Not at all," grinned Trimble. "It'll be quite all right—oh, quite! He, he, he!"

And with that fat cackinnation, Baggy Trimble strolled away, grinning over his shoulder as he went. Tom Merry and his chums also grinned. They could not help it. Baggy's fat face, adorned with a black moustache and beard, looked a sight for gods and men and little fishes.

Tom Merry shook his head as Baggy vanished through the trees.

"The fat toad's got some game on!" he grunted. "I'm wondering why he wanted us to stay here longer. And I'm wondering why he isn't afraid of being left behind. It's queer!"

All the juniors agreed that it was queer. But they were not long in finding the reason. For scarcely had the juniors started work dismantling the tents when Nippy came across from the motor-van, a rather puzzled look on his features.

"Any of you fellows been monkeying about with the starting-handle?" he inquired.

There was a general shaking of heads.

"Why?" asked Tom Merry.

"Because it's gone," said Nippy, with a faint grin. "It was there last night when I tried the engine, but it's vanished now."

"Great pip!"

"Bai Jove!"

"It's been taken off this morning, I fancy," said Nippy. "Anyway, it's not to be found anywhere."

The juniors blinked at each other in sudden alarm. If the starting-handle was gone, then moving on was off—for that day, at all events, they imagined.

"Well, my only hat!" breathed Blake. "So—so that's why that fat worm was grinning; so that's why he didn't mind being left behind—simply because he knew we couldn't go, of course. Oh, the—the crafty fat rotter!"

"Bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus blankly. "You—you think Twimble has removed the cwank-handle?"

"Of course!" snorted Blake witheringly. "Can't you see that? He didn't want us to go yet. Wasn't he worrying this morning—and last night, too, for that matter. For some reason or other he wants to stay in this place. Oh, my hat! Dished and done!"

"Fairly," agreed Tom Merry grimly. "Never mind. The fat burglar's bound to come in for dinner, and we'll collar him then. And we'll jolly well smash him to a jelly if he doesn't tell us where he's hidden the dashed thing."

"Yaas, wathah! Twimble is weally the limit, you know!"

There was no doubt about that, and Tom Merry & Co. fairly gritted their teeth at the thought of how the fat junior had gained his end.

Only Nippy did not rave. He let the chums run on for a few seconds, and then he chuckled.

"I fancy he hasn't scored, you chaps!" he grinned. "No need to go off at the deep end yet. Luckily, we've got a spare starting-handle."

"Wha-a-at?"

Nippy nodded, with a chuckle.

"It's in the tool-box," he grinned. "So the fat chap hasn't done you, after all. I'll be able to fix it on in less than a wink."

"Oh, good egg!"

"What a sell for Baggy!" chuckled Lowther. "I say, what about taking him at his word? Why not go without him now? He isn't likely to come back for a bit, you bet!"

"Good wheeze!" chortled Blake.

"Hear, hear!"

"Well, I'm blessed if we won't, you chaps!" said Tom Merry, his eyes gleaming. "I'm sick and tired of that fat cad's monkey-tricks! We've given him our word that we wouldn't kick him out until the end of the tour, of course. But this is a different matter."

"Of course!"

"Bai Jove, weally, you know——"

"You dry up, Gussy!" said Blake promptly. "Trimble's given us his permission to go without him if he isn't back in time, and this is the chance of a lifetime to get rid of the fat rotter. He said distinctly that it would be quite all right, and that he didn't mind. Well, we'll take him at his word."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Come on, then!" said Tom briskly. "We'll pack up and get off right away. I'll leave the fat rotter enough cash to pay for a wire to his pater. That's more than he deserves. I've already paid his ticket home once, and he did us down over that. But he won't this time!"

"Rather not!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Laughing uproariously, the juniors started packing up—in real earnest this time. All of them were absolutely fed-

up with Baggy, and now they had the chance to get rid of him they were determined to make the most of it.

And they did!

CHAPTER 3. Stranded!

"H E, he, he!"

Thus Baggy Trimble, as he strolled on through the woods towards the village—and the post-office.

For Lowther had been partly right in that regard. Baggy's intention was to visit the little local post-office, but it was far from being to see the girl behind the counter. Baggy had been known to fall in love, but it was not a case of love this time.

"Ho, he, he!" cackled Baggy, as he ambled along the leafy woodland path. "I've done 'em properly this time. They won't dream I've taken the thumping handle away, and it may be days before they're able to get another one. I shall have a blessed answer to my letter by then. It heats me why I haven't heard before this! Oh dear! Wonder if I shoved the right address on the envelope? Lemme see!"

With a grunt, Baggy Trimble seated himself on a fallen tree-trunk, and, after a hasty blink round him, he drew a newspaper from his pocket. It was an old paper, crumpled, torn, and grimy, and it was a copy of the "Daily Mail," dated nearly a year before.

Baggy opened it out to a paragraph marked in blue pencil. It was headed, "MISSING" and underneath was the photograph of a boy—a boy who bore a striking resemblance to Nippy from Nowhere. Beneath the photo, too, was a description and notice:

"Missing since September 15th, the above boy. Aged 16 (looks 18); about 5ft. 9in.; 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 first giving information that will lead to the whereabouts of the boy being discovered."

Baggy Trimble had already read the announcement dozens of times during the past three or four days, and he read it again now.

"It's Nippy, right enough!" he mumbled to himself. "It's just him, and I've seen that scar many a time—when he's been bathing especially. My hat, if those rotters could only see this!"

Baggy Trimble grinned at the thought. Then he became serious again.

"It's queer!" he grunted disgustedly. "I wrote to that blessed colonel four days ago, and he hasn't answered yet. Substantial reward—eh? My hat! If there's no thumping answer this morning, I'll write to those solicitor chaps. No good going to the bobbies—they'd only collar the reward themselves and do me down!"

With that reflection Baggy grunted again, and, cramming the paper into his pocket, he went on again towards the village.

From the footpath Baggy merged on to a rough cart-track, leading down the slope, and at the bottom, just beyond the gateway leading into the lane he met a farm-labourer.

As he sighted Baggy the labourer stopped and stared. He stared and stared at Baggy, and then he gave a roar.

"Haw, haw, haw!"

Baggy Trimble looked at him and scowled—at which the labourer again roared with laughter. But it was a lonely spot, and, though astonished and wrathful at being laughed at, Baggy contented himself with scowling, and rolled on again.

He met the local postman next, and that worthy also stopped and stared. Then he, too, roared with laughter.

"Look here!" snorted Baggy, blinking wrathfully at the hilarious postman. "What the thump are you laughing at, my man?"

"Go 'ome and arsk your miammy!" grinned the postman. "She ain't washed 'you this mornin', I ken see. Haw, haw, haw! What a face!"

The postman ambled on with his letters, and Baggy rolled on, after glancing at the departing postman in speechless amazement.

Baggy couldn't understand it at all; nor could he understand it when several other men, on their way to work, also roared and advised him to go home and wash.

Baggy next met several village urchins of various tender ages, who, after staring at him open-mouthed, turned and bolted for their lives, some of them screaming.



"Yaroooooh!" roared Baggy Trimble as he felt the business end of the broom. "Ooooooh!" "It my 'Erb, would you?" cried the enraged lady in a shrill voice. "I'll learn you, you great 'ulking bully! Take that, and that, and that!" Whack, whack, whack, whack! Baggy took them all, and he fairly roared and bolted for his life down the street. (See page 8.)

"M-mum-my hat!" gasped Baggy, gaping after the fleeing urchins. "Everybody seems to be jolly well potty this morning! Bless if I can understand it!"

Baggy rolled on again, ignoring an old lady who stared at him, open-mouthed, from a cottage doorway, and then, just as he entered the village, Baggy had the misfortune to meet half a dozen village urchins of far from tender ages.

They were cheery youngsters of thirteen or thereabouts, and, unlike the others Baggy had met, they did not content themselves with staring, but accompanied Baggy, yelling far from complimentary remarks at the hapless fat junior.

"Yah! What a guy!"

"Look at 'is whiskers! My heve!"

"Who's let 'im out? Yah! What a face!"

"Ho, ho, ho!"

Yelling personal remarks, and howling with laughter, the youngsters trotted at Baggy's heels as he walked along the village street, fairly dazed with wrath and amazement. There were few people about, it being early yet, but what few there were gazed at Baggy and joined in the laughter.

Several times Baggy turned and made a desperate rush at his tormentors, but they scattered, only to join up again as Baggy rolled on.

It was with deep thankfulness that Trimble reached the little post-office at last and took shelter from the rabble. As he stepped to the counter, the girl Lowther had referred to—a young lady years older than Baggy—emerged from the back of the shop.

She jumped and gave a little squeal of alarm on sight of Baggy's extraordinary features. Then, after staring at the fat junior for a moment, she giggled, and then she laughed in Baggy's wrathful face.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, with another giggle. "You do look funny!"

Baggy glared at her, straightening himself with haughty dignity. It was getting a bit too thick, Baggy thought.

"Look here, miss," he snapped, "what the thump are you laughing at? I think everybody must be potty this morning!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Go on, laugh!" snarled Baggy. "I think you forget yourself, miss! I'm not accustomed to being treated like this by public servants!"

"Oh, aren't you?" sniffed the young lady, drawing herself up. "Very well. I was going to tell you something that you don't seem to know about. But I won't now for your impudence!"

"Look here!" said Baggy, with dignity. "If it is about a letter—"

"It isn't about a letter!"

Baggy's face fell with disappointment.

"Look here," he snorted indignantly, "it's a bit thick—and it's just like you post-office people. I've been expecting a letter here for two days now, and it ought to have come—name of Trimble. Have you got one waiting for me or not?"

"Not!" snapped the young lady.

Baggy sniffed, and turned for the door. As he did so the young lady seemed suddenly to recollect something, and she called him back.

"Wait a minute!" she said stiffly. "I've just remembered that there is a letter here—been waiting here for four days. But it's addressed to 'Master Grimble'—at least, that's what we've taken it for, though the writing's so shocking that nobody can tell what it is. Perhaps it is Trimble."

She took a rather grimy-looking envelope from a rack and tossed it on the counter. Trimble's eyes were gleaming now. But as he blinked at the writing on the envelope he almost fell down.

The letter was his right enough. It was addressed to "Master Trimble," to be called for at the Puddleham Post Office, and it was addressed in Baggy's own handwriting.

Baggy fairly tore the envelope open, and as he looked at the enclosures he understood why he had had no reply to his letter to Colonel Brockways—the letter in which he had fondly hoped would bring him the "substantial reward."

Inside was his letter to the colonel, and inside also was the stamped addressed envelope to Colonel Brockways.

Baggy had blundered as usual—blundered badly.

In his excitement at his discovery that night, Baggy had inadvertently placed the wrong envelope inside. The envelope addressed to the colonel he had placed inside the envelope addressed to himself—and, of course, it had returned to himself.

"Mum-my hat!" mumbled Baggy dismally. "Oh dear! No wonder I haven't heard anything! And—and, oh dear! We're moving on to-day, and it's no good sending it again; I can't give him any address. And I can't have them sent on after me because I don't know where we're going."

"Well, is the letter yours—the one you've been worrying me for days about?" sniffed the post-office young lady.

Baggy scarcely heard the question. He crammed the luckless letter into his pocket, and left the shop, groaning with disappointment. His appearance in the village street again was greeted by a scream of laughter.

He had forgotten all about the troublesome youngsters since entering the shop, but now, as he found himself surrounded by the yelling crowd of urchins, Baggy remembered, and made a wild, furious rush at them.

They scattered, yelling with laughter, but this time Baggy succeeded in catching one—a chubby-faced, red-haired youngster who howled frantically as Baggy started to cuff him soundly.

But he did not cuff long. Quite suddenly Baggy himself howled as something struck him a fearful clump over the head.

It was the business end of a broom, and it was wielded vigorously by a lady in a blue-spotted skirt and a red blouse, who had just emerged from a cottage doorway.

"Yarrocooh!" roared Baggy fiendishly.

"It my 'Erb, would you?" said the lady in a shrill voice. "I'll learn you, you great 'ulking bully! Take that, and that, and that!"

Whack, whack, whack, whack!

Baggy took them all, either on his head or on his broad back, and he fairly roared and bolted for his life down the village street. Nor did he stop running until he was well clear of the village.

As he stopped at last, and collapsed, panting and groaning on a big stone by the roadside, a burly country policeman came strolling along.

He stopped and regarded Baggy Trimble with a good-natured grin.

"Well, what's this game, young 'un?" he inquired. "Won't do to go about frightening folks with a face like that, you know."

Baggy Trimble glowered at him.

"Look here," he groaned. "What's the matter with my face? Everybody in Puddleham seems to have jolly well gone mad this morning!"

"Look at it and see!" grinned the friendly constable.

He took out a pocket mirror and passed it to Baggy. That junior blinked into it curiously, and then he almost fainted at what he saw.

"Oh!" he gasped feebly. "So—so that's why! Oh crumbs! Those awful beasts must have done it when I was asleep. Oh, the awful rotter!"

"Somebody's played a little trick on you, plain enough," grinned the constable. "Better trot off home and wash it off, youngster."

The policeman strolled on, and Baggy also moved on then, almost gibbering with wrath. But he didn't wait until he got "home." He washed the sooty moustache and beard off, likewise the flour, in the first stream he came to, and then he started for the encampment, determined to tell his fellow-campers just what he thought of them.

He reached the little glade at last, and as he tramped through the trees and sighted it he got the second shock of the morning.

The glade was empty. The caravan had gone, the tents had gone, and Tom Merry & Co. and Nippy had gone. Baggy blinked and blinked, a terrible fear in his fat mind now. Then his eyes caught sight of an envelope stuck into the forked end of a stake stuck in the ground.

He snatched it out and tore open the envelope. Out fell a couple of half-crowns and a note. Baggy pocketed the

five shillings and read the note, and as he read it his jaw dropped.

"Dear old Baggy," he read. "As you told us we could go without you if we liked, and that it would be quite all right, we are taking you at your word. Good-bye-ee! Don't cry-eee! Enclosed is five bob, to see you through until your pater wires on your fare home to Trimble Hall, or Trimble Towers. Fare thee well!—Tom MERRY."

"Oh—oh dear!" groaned Baggy dismally. "Wha-what shall I d-do? Oh, the awful beasts! They must have got another blessed starting-handle or something. Oh dear!"

It was the last straw for Baggy Trimble. His fond hopes of that "substantial reward" offered by Colonel Brockways had disappeared into the dim distance, and now he was stranded—had been left behind by his heartless fellow-caravanners.

Baggy could have wept.

For minute after minute he stood staring at the ominous note, and then he groaned and rolled away again towards the village. But he did not send a wire to his pater. He went to the village tuckshop and spent the five shillings feeding his inner man, the while he thought the problem out. And it certainly needed thinking out.

But Baggy was a stickler, and though he had "come un-stuck," as it were from the St. Jim's touring party, he wasn't beaten yet, not by a long way.

CHAPTER 4.

Like a Bad Ha'penny!

HONK, honk!

"Hallo, another blessed car!" remarked Tom Merry with a grin. "Better give him room, Nippy. He sounds a bit urgent."

Nippy chuckled, and toolled the lumbering caravan a trifle nearer the left ditch. It was but a trifle, too, for the lane was narrow, and the caravan was wide—very wide. Whoever had built Noah's Ark had gone in more for space and comfort rather than beauty and grace of outline. As Lowther said, it only needed the windows blocking up to become an exceptionally roomy furniture-van.

At all events, the caravan was exceptionally wide, far too wide for narrow lanes and byroads. And as Tom Merry preferred the byeways to the highways, the St. Jim's caravanners were constantly having wordy arguments with passing motorists and carters as they wandered on their way.

It was all in the day's work, however, and, being in the majority usually, the caravanners came off best in the wordy warfare.

As a general rule, Noah's Ark was toolled along the pleasant country lanes at a snail's pace, with most of the juniors trudging cheerily alongside. They had plenty of time, and they were out to see the country and to enjoy themselves in a leisurely manner.

But to-day Nippy was taking the caravan along at quite a decent pace. The St. Jim's caravanners had spent a jolly time in Dorsetshire, and now they were eager to sample the granite uplands, the fertile vales, and the cream—especially the latter—of Devonshire.

So now the old caravan was travelling at an unusually good speed, which was, Lowther claimed, because it hadn't Baggy Trimble's weight to haul along. And they had been on the road more than an hour when Tom Merry heard that brazen Honk, honk! from behind them.

As Nippy took the van to one side, Tom Merry, who was sitting with him on the driving-seat, peered round the side of the caravan.

"It's a taxi, or an apology for one," he grinned. "Built about the year one, I should say. Hark to the engine!"

The engine of the overtaking taxicab certainly was making a row. The vehicle drew alongside, and as it did so the driver—rather an ancient, bewhiskered individual—shouted to Nippy.

"Old on, mister!" he bawled.

"What's the giddy merchant want?" growled Nippy.

He pulled the rumbling caravan to a halt, and the taxi-driver drew his rattling vehicle alongside. Over the half-heck door at the front of the caravan appeared several faces, as Blake and the others looked out.

"Hallo, what are we stopping for?" inquired Blake.

"Blessed if I know!" said Tom Merry, watching as the taxi-driver jumped down and opened the door of his ramshackle vehicle. "I expect somebody—Mum-my hat!"

Tom Merry's jaw dropped as a youth stepped out from the taxi—a fat youth with a fat, greasy face.

"Trimble!"

The St. Jim's caravanners blinked at him.

"Trimble!" gasped Tom Merry faintly.

"Twimble, hai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus.

It was Baggy Trimble right enough. He stood in the road, and he blinked up at the astounded juniors with a

grin on his face. It was rather an apprehensive grin, however.

"I say, you fellows!" he said feebly. "You might have waited for me, you know."

The fellows did not reply. They were too flabbergasted. "But it's all right now, isn't it?" went on Trimble, blinking up at the juniors. "I knew you fellows wouldn't want to—lose me, so I hired this blessed old taxicab. It was the only one in the village, and the rotten thing's broken down three times since we started. That's why I'm rather late. Isn't it lucky we managed to catch you up, though?"

"You—you fat, crafty——"

"It's quite all right, you chaps. You needn't apologise," said Baggy with a wave of a fat hand. "I'll forgive you, though it was rather rotten leaving me like that. Still, here I am. I think I'll get inside now."

Baggy was walking round to the back of the van when the taxi-driver, who had been eyeing him very suspiciously, grabbed a fat shoulder and hauled him back.

"Ere, 'ere!" he grunted. "Don't be in such a hurry, mister. What about my fare? Two pun-ten I wants afore you gets inter that there van!"

"Two—two pound-ten, did you say?" stammered Baggy.

"Yus! And I wants it now, mister!"

"That's all right!" said Baggy. "I—I'll make a note of it, and—I'll send it on. I—I've got your address, my man!"

"Ho, will you!" snorted the taximan. "I likes that. I bin suspicious of you all along. Send it on, hey? Likely, ain't it? Bringing me out all this 'ere way, and then tellin' me that, hey? No. I bin bilked afore like that, mister. I wants my two pun-ten! Got that?"

"Look—look here——" stammered Baggy.

"I ain't looking nowhere!" bawled the taximan, beginning to get excited. "I knowed all along as this was a bloomin' bilk. Jest you 'and over that there two pun-ten!"

"Oh dear!"

Baggy Trimble blinked up pathetically at the faces of Tom Merry & Co. All of them were grinning now. They understood the predicament the egregious Baggy had landed himself in.

"I say, you fellows!" groaned Baggy. "Help a chap out, won't you? This beast seems to think I ought to pay him. Blessed if I know what the lower classes are coming to. Gussy, old man, lend me two pound-ten, will you, there's a good sort?"

"Bai Jove! Weally, Twimble——"

"You—you fat idiot!" snapped Tom Merry, becoming serious. "You deserved to be locked up for playing this trick. You knew perfectly well you couldn't pay the man. I suppose you banked on us paying him, you rotter?"

"Look—look here!" groaned Trimble. "It's not my fault. I had to do something, hadn't I? You beasts shouldn't have left me stranded like that. It was a rotten trick!"

"You ought to know, Baggy, being a specialist in rotten tricks," grinned Lowther. "But there's nothing doing, Baggy. You can stew in your own juice, old fat-lard-tub."

"Oh dear! I say, Gussy, dear old fellow—— Yooop!"

Baggy broke off with a yelp as a huge, gnarled fist was pressed against his little fat nose, sending his head bang against the side of the van.

The taxi-driver was getting rather impatient.

"Does this 'ere mean as I ain't goin' to get my two-ten?" he roared. "By hokey, fatty, you're for it if it does! I'm going to smash you, and then I'm goin' to 'and you over to the fust bobby we come to! Bilke me, hey?"

"Yarrooooo!" roared Baggy, as the excited driver tapped his nose suggestively. "Help! Oh, dear! Help, you fellows! Grooooooh! Rescue! Oh, crumbs!"

Tom Merry jumped down on to the roadway, and the rest of the juniors followed, nearly all of them grinning. But Tom Merry was looking angry. Baggy certainly deserved all he looked like getting, but Tom was the last fellow to allow even Baggy Trimble to be thrashed by a taxi-driver.

He caught the man's arm, and yanked him away from the yelling Baggy.

"Hold on, my man!" he said quietly. "Leave that chap alone!"

"Ho!" said the man, glowering at the junior. "You chippin' in, hey? You goin' to pay me two-pun ten, or ain't you? If you ain't, I'm ready to wipe up the darned road with the bloomin' lot of you!"

"You'll get your money, all right!" snapped Tom.

He turned to his chums grimly.

"It's no good, you chaps," he said ruefully. "Baggy's done us again. We'll have to pay up. We can't let a St. Jim's chap be knocked about, and we can't let him be locked up for bilking, either. We'll have to have a whip round and shell out."

"The—the fat worm!" hooted Blake. "He deserves——"

"He deserves a jolly good licking, certainly," said Tom.

"But—we'll have to see him through this, for all that, chaps. It only means a bit over seven bob each. Come on, and let's be getting on."

The juniors fairly glowered at Baggy Trimble, but they saw like Tom that there was nothing else for it. Baggy, after all, was a St. Jim's fellow, and it wasn't a personal matter now.

Grumblingly, they felt in their pockets, and each of them handed over seven shillings to Tom, who added eight shillings. He handed the lot to the taxi-driver, who boarded his cab grumbling something about "no bloomin' tip," and drove away back again.

Then the juniors looked at Baggy Trimble grimly.

"You fat worm!"

"You crafty burglar!"

"Weally, Twimble, you are a fearful wottah!"

"What are we going to do with him now?" snorted Blake.

"We'll have to take him with us, of course," grunted Tom Merry. "We can't kick him out now he's here. In any case, we gave the fat rotter our word that he should stay with us for the tour, and we can't very well back out. But we'll have our seven bobs' worth!"

"Yes, rather!"

"Bump him!"

"Hear, hear!"

Baggy howled as the juniors made a rush at him.

"Here, wharrer you playing at? Look here—— Yooop!"

Bump, bump, bump, bump!"

Baggy's fat form raised the dust of the lane again and again, and his yells awoke the echoes. It was a record bumping, even for Baggy, and then the juniors kicked him into the caravan, and followed themselves, feeling they had had their seven shillings' worth, at all events. Then Nippy started up the engine again, and the caravan rolled on its way, with Baggy Trimble once more a member of the St. Jim's caravanners.

CHAPTER 5.

Alarming!

LATE that afternoon, the St. Jim's caravanners passed through Lyme Regis, and late that night they camped on the borders of Dorsetshire and Devonshire. In the early morning they were away again, and that night they camped in a snug hollow on the Devonshire coast. Then on again, at an easy pace now, along the beautiful coast, in glorious weather, taking their fill of sea-bathing and sight-seeing. All the party were brown as berries, and all—excepting the noble Arthur Augustus D'Arcy—were ragged and travel-stained, and looked, as Arthur Augustus told them severely and often, like a lot of tramps.

The juniors only grinned, however, when Arthur Augustus told them that; they were enjoying themselves, and that was all that mattered. They were quite satisfied to allow the noble swell of the Fourth to keep up the credit of the party where dress and appearance was concerned.

From Sidmouth, the caravanners cut across country to Exeter. All of them were keen to see something of the ancient city, with its beautiful cathedral, and they spent a day there, and then rumbled on again.

During those days Baggy Trimble was unusually well-behaved, and all went swimmingly for the St. Jim's caravanners. They had seen nothing whatever of Patchy and Snooky and their ramshackle caravan, and the juniors were beginning to believe, with relief, that they had, at last, succeeded in shaking off those troublesome and resolute rascals.

But once having left Exeter behind, Tom Merry began to note a curious change in Nippy from Nowhere. He seemed to become more thoughtful and worried with every mile the rumbling caravan travelled.

"I'm blessed if I can understand the chap," remarked Tom Merry, as they were sitting chatting after dinner one day. "He's worrying about us taking this route, I fancy—goodness knows why. He asked this morning if we proposed to call at Teignmouth, and he fairly went white when I told him we did."

"Rummy!" said Blake thoughtfully. "But—but why not accommodate the chap? He's a rattling good sort, and I don't like the idea of sticking out against him, if he seems so jolly keen on not calling there. Any reason why we should call at Teignmouth? It's a ripping place, I know, but——"

Tom Merry chuckled.

"I hadn't troubled to decide about the place at all until five minutes ago," he grinned. "Then it suddenly struck me that someone we know very well is staying for part of the vac at a little place near Teignmouth."

"Who d'you mean?" began Blake, and then he gave a jump. "Figgins!" he ejaculated.

"Bai Jove! Of course, dear boys!" said Arthur Augustus.

"He's staying with an uncle, or an aunt, or a grand-mothah, or something, near Teignmouth. Bai Jove!"

"Quite so!" grinned Tom Merry. "I hadn't thought about it until about five minutes ago. Then it struck me what a lark it would be to hunt up Figgy and his pals. We could have some fun together."

"There'll be trouble!" grinned Blake. "There always is when those New House rotters are about."

"Well, that's what we want," grinned the captain of the St. Jim's juniors. "Things are getting a bit tame, and a bit of excitement is what we want. I was going to suggest that we make a stay there, and hunt old Figgy up. Only now— Well, there's Nippy."

"It's awkward."

"Jolly awkward," agreed Tom. "I don't like going against the chap's wishes myself, but— Hallo, here he is!"

The juniors ceased chatting as Nippy came over from the motor-caravan, a piece of cotton-waste in his oily hands. There was a cloud on Nippy's smudgy features, and he eyed the juniors a trifle hesitatingly.

"Look here, you fellows," he said quietly. "You've decided to call at Teignmouth, I suppose?"

Tom Merry looked uncomfortable.

"We—we were thinking of doing so, Nippy," he said. "You see, there's some chaps staying near there, fellows from St. Jim's, and we wanted to hunt them up. Look here, Nippy, why don't you want us to call there?"

Tom Merry asked the question abruptly, and Nippy coloured under the oil and grease on his face. He hesitated a moment, and then he dropped on the grass as if he had reached a decision.

"I'll be quite straight with you, chaps," he said quietly. "It isn't Teignmouth I don't want to call at; it's a little place close by, a place called Plymsea, a little watering place a few miles out. There—there's someone there I know, someone I don't want to meet. It—it would put me in a hole—a rotten hole—if I was recognised by anyone there."

"Oh!"

"Bai Jove!"

"It's not for me to say where you chaps should go," went on Nippy, in a low voice. "But—but if you'd care to do me a good turn, you'll give that place a miss. I don't want to leave you chaps; I'm enjoying this trip, and I should be thundering sorry to have to leave you in the lurch. But—but I've got to steer clear of Plymsea."

There was a silence. Tom Merry, after eyeing Nippy curiously, broke it.

"That settles it, of course, Nippy," he said. "We can give that place a miss easily enough. The place we want to call at is a little village called Torlish, outside Teignmouth. We shan't have to go through Plymsea, I suppose, to get there?"

Nippy's face cleared.

"No," he answered, with relief. "There's another road. I know these parts well. We should be near Plymsea this afternoon. I'll take the inland road, and I suppose you chaps won't mind if I make her hum until we're well out of the district?"

"Well, no," said Tom, smiling. "Just do as you like, Nippy. Start in ten minutes or so, then."

"Good. And thanks, you chaps," said Nippy.

He walked back to his precious engine, and the juniors exchanged meaning looks.

"It's queer, isn't it?" said Tom. "Anyway, we're backing him up."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I say, you chaps," grinned Trimble. "I know why Nippy doesn't want to go near Plymsea."

"You fat fibber!"

"I know what I know!" grinned Baggy mysteriously. "I could tell you chaps something if I liked. He, he, he!"

And Baggy also rolled away to get on with the washing-up. Tom Merry and the others didn't trouble to glance after him. Baggy always claimed to know things, and was seldom taken seriously.

For once, however, Baggy Trimble did know something,

and he was looking very thoughtful as he washed up the dinner dishes. Since they had left Puddleham, he had had no chance to send off his letter to Colonel Brockways—or, at least, he knew it was useless to do so since the caravanners had made no lengthy stay anywhere. Baggy did not intend to send any letter at all now. He intended to visit the colonel in person instead—if he got the chance. Baggy was determined to bag that reward.

A glance at the motoring map had shown Baggy that Plymsea lay in their direct route, and he had planned his programme out already. Now, though delighted that his suspicions were indeed correct—Nippy's fear of visiting Plymsea proved that—Baggy was realising that his programme would have to be altered. Baggy's face grew grimmer and gloomier as he began to realise that fact.

How he was to visit Colonel Brockways at the Grange, Plymsea, if the caravanners were giving that place a miss, was a problem.

Baggy finished washing-up, and after shoving the crockery safely in the van, he rolled across to Tom Merry with a scowl on his fat face.

"Look here, Merry," he snorted. "I think it's a bit thick letting that chap Nippy have his own way like this. Who is he, anyway—the blessed driver?"

"What the thump—"

"About calling at Plymsea!" snorted Baggy indignantly.

"I was hoping to see that place, and now—"

"Great pip!" exclaimed Tom Merry, staring. "And why do you want to call there, Baggy?"

"Because—because I've heard it's a jolly nice little place," said Baggy, blinking at Tom. "Look here, let Nippy go and chop chips. Aren't I a more important member of the party? I asked you last night if we were going there, and you said yes. And now you ain't, just because of that chap."

"Oh, dry up, you fat ass!"

"I jolly well won't!" snorted Baggy. "I tell you I'm not going to be sat on by that chap—a beastly driver. I'm not standing it!"

"Then sit it, Baggy!" grinned Tom Merry.

And grabbing Baggy by his fat shoulders, Tom sat him down with a bump. There was a prickly bush just behind Baggy, and he howled fiendishly as his fat person made acquaintance with the prickles.

The honk of the motor-horn sounded just then, and Tom Merry ran to the caravan, and mounted into the driving-seat with Nippy. The rest of the juniors boarded the caravan, and Baggy scrambled up and just boarded it as the van moved off the grassy clearing on to the dusty road. Then the van lumbered off on its travels again.

Baggy did not trouble to tackle Tom Merry about the matter again. After all, he reflected, they were bound to stay some days when they met Figgins & Co., and there would be chance then to slip over to Plymsea—or so Baggy imagined. He rolled into one of the bunks and settled down for a snooze. Blake had scrambled up by Tom Merry and Nippy, and the rest of the juniors lounged in bunks or on lockers in the caravan, some reading and some chatting.

Mile after mile slid away under the rumbling wheels as the caravan lumbered along the pretty Devonshire lanes. It was a glorious summer afternoon, with a brisk breeze blowing from the seaboard, and to the left the juniors caught frequent glimpses of the sunlit sea. On the driving seat Tom Merry, Blake and Nippy chatted casually—none of them referring to the matter they had been discussing after dinner. But after an hour or so's running, Nippy turned the van off the main road on to a narrow, winding lane, and Tom glanced about him curiously.

"Close to Plymsea now, Nippy?" he asked.

Nippy nodded, his thoughtful face grim.

"Can't see it from here," he said quietly. "But it's less than a couple of miles away over the hill there. We'll soon be clear of it, though. I'm going to let her rip now."

And he did with such good effect that the pots and pans within the caravan rattled and banged as the lumbering vehicle lurched and thundered along.

"We're fairly going it now!" grinned Tom.

Nippy nodded, his hands gripping the steering-wheel hard. "There's rather a nasty hill just round the corner," he said, grinning. "We'll see what the old bus will make of it. Here we are!"

They were round the corner in a flash, with a steep hill—certainly a nasty one—stretching down before them. Tom Merry grinned faintly as the heavy vehicle went rumbling down it with a rush.

"Better slow her up a bit, Nippy," he grinned. "The brakes on this old bus may be a bit rocky. I've just remembered that I didn't sign the 'Daily Mail' Insurance Coupon."

Nippy grinned and nodded, and was just reaching for

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"Oh dear! I say, Gussy, dear old fellow, lend me—Yooop!" Baggie Trimble broke off with a yelp as a huge, gnarled fist was pressed against his little fat nose, sending his head bang up against the side of the van. "Does this 'ere mean as I ain't goin' to get me two-pun' ten?" roared the taxi-driver, getting rather impatient. "By hokey, fatty, you're for it if it does!" (See page 9.)

the hand brake when there sounded a sudden alarming and ominous snap of fracturing metal.

As if released abruptly from a leash that had held it back, Noah's Ark fairly leaped ahead.

"Great pip!" gasped Blake. "What—what—"

"Oh, crumbs!" gasped Nippy, in sudden alarm. "It's the carden shaft—the blessed carden shaft's gone! I can't use—"

He wrenched desperately at the lever of the other brake, but only a series of ear-splitting squeals resulted.

Nippy's face went white.

"That's done it!" he gasped. "Oh, my hat! Look out, you chaps!"

"You—you don't mean—" began Tom horrified.

"I do. She's out of control. Now for a holy smash!" breathed Nippy.

CHAPTER 6.

Marooned!

NIPPY'S face was white and strained as he struggled frantically with the levers.

The caravan was out of control—careering down hill at breakneck speed, and a glance ahead showed Tom Merry what they could expect at the bottom.

It was a long hill, but he could see the distant curve at the bottom, with a high brick wall just visible and facing them.

Unless Nippy could steer the lumbering juggernaut round the nasty bend, Tom saw they were booked for a frightful catastrophe.

Rumble, rumble! Clatter, clatter!

Nippy clung desperately to the wheel, his face set hard, and Blake and Tom Merry clung to their seats as Noah's Ark thundered on amid a clattering crash of falling utensils and crockery within the van.

From within sounded a frightened howl in Trimble's voice, and then several startled faces peered over the door.

"Great pip!" gasped Lowther, blinking out in alarm.

"Here, slow her down, you awful ass, Nippy! Aren't you letting her rip a bit too— Oh, my hat!"

Lowther caught a glimpse of his chums' white faces, and he understood that something was wrong. His own face whitened as he saw what lay ahead.

"Good heavens!" he gasped. "Can't Nippy—"

"Hold tight and leave it to Nippy!" shouted Tom Merry.

It was the only thing to be done, and Tom knew better than worry Nippy with questions or advice at such a time. To see them safely through, the boy would need all his nerve and resolution.

Tight-lipped, with eyes staring ahead, he clung to the wheel with both hands now—he had realised that only his own steady hands and judgment could save the caravan and its hapless passengers.

The heavy vehicle roared on down hill at anything between twenty and thirty miles, lurching and rocking in a sickening manner that brought stifled gasps from the lips of Tom Merry & Co.

The crisis was almost at hand now—the bottom of the hill with the ugly bend, and the high brick wall before them. To the trembling juniors it seemed that only a miracle could save them.

But Nippy was cool and collected—though his own face was whiter, if anything, than the juniors' faces. He alone knew what lay beyond the bend, even if they did get round safely.

Then suddenly Nippy yelled.

"Hold on, you chaps! Now for it!"

The rush and thunderous roar almost drowned Nippy's voice. They were hugging the inside ditch now.

"He'll never do it!" panted Jack Blake. "Oh!"

It was done in a flash.

The high wall seemed to leap towards them, and as it loomed above them, Nippy set his teeth and whipped the wheel round.

The caravan lurched horribly, skidded a couple of yards—just what Nippy had prayed for—and then, at the crucial moment, Nippy spun the wheel back.

The van swerved sickeningly, missed a telegraph pole by inches, and was round the bend—on her four wheels.

Even as the juniors gulped with utter relief, they saw that the danger was by no means over.

For before the runaway caravan stretched another, and, if anything, steeper hill.

Tom Merry groaned, and then he got a glimpse of something—a triangular stretch of level turf in the far corner of which was a gate.

"Go for the gate!" yelled Tom.

Nippy nodded. He had already made that decision. It was their only chance—a risky chance, certainly. If the sudden swerve should prove too much—

"Sit tight!" he yelled.

The wheel spun round—the van swerved horribly. But it came round. A bump, a fearful crash of crockery from within the van, and then a terrific crash in front as the heavy vehicle smashed through the gate amid a splintering of wood.

What followed was more surprising than alarming.

There sounded a sudden swishing and splashing, and with a terrific jerk, the caravan stopped dead, in the exact centre of a large duckpond.

It was a particularly evil-smelling and evil-looking duckpond, too, though the caravanners scarcely noticed that then. They were too full of deep thankfulness for the exceedingly narrow escape they had had. Even now Tom Merry could scarcely believe they had escaped.

"Nippy," said Tom, taking Nippy's hand almost unconsciously, "it seems like a miracle! You—you played up well, old man!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Yaas, watah!" panted Arthur Augustus, licking his dry lips. "Bai Jove! I—I thought we were done for that time, deah boys! Bai Jove! I am shaking all over, you know."

But they were all doing that, and they eyed each other with shaky grins.

"My hat!" breathed Blake, looking at Nippy admiringly. "Nippy, old son, you managed that jolly well. You must have nerves like iron. But—Great Scott! We're fairly landed in the soup now!"

"Oh crumbs!"

The caravanners blinked round at the green, slime-covered water that surrounded the van. Then they looked at each other and howled with hysterical laughter. They could not help it. As Blake said, they were fairly "in the soup"—a particularly unpleasant-looking soup, too!

"Well, this is the blessed limit, you chaps," said Tom Merry, surveying the situation dismally. "How on earth are we to get out of it?"

"Blessed if I know!" grunted Blake. "We can't wade through that muck, anyway. We've only got the clothes we stand up in—at least, we all have, except Gussy. Old Gussy will have to wade through the muck and fetch help!"

Arthur Augustus jammed his eyeglass into place, and stared at Blake frigidly.

"I shall certainly do nothin' of the sort, Jack Blake!" he said indignantly. "Bai Jove! Wade through that feaful watah! Nevah! My clobber would be wuined, and I should nevah feel clean again, bai Jove! Watah not!"

"Well, this is a go!" breathed Tom Merry.

The juniors looked at each other helplessly. They had laughed at their predicament at first, but now they were beginning to wonder how they were going to get out of it—without wading through the horrible mixture of the pond. All around them—fully twenty feet or more from the muddy shore—was the slimy water which none of them felt he could face. In any case, only Arthur Augustus, of them all, had a change of clothing.

It was certainly awkward.

Deep in the mud was the caravan, which had lurched over to one side in an alarming manner already. With the engine hopelessly "crooked," the St. Jim's caravanners were, indeed, stranded in more ways than one. Nippy seemed suddenly to realise that fact, and his grin suddenly faded.

"This is a rotten bit of luck for me, Merry," he muttered. "We're less than a couple of miles from Plymsea village, and—and it looks as if we're going to be stranded here for goodness knows how long."

"Oh!" exclaimed Tom.

He had never thought of that, and his face clouded.

"I'm sorry, Nippy," he said dismally. "But it can't be helped, can it? In any case we'll get out of this somehow, and we'll arrange something about you. We'll have to remain here, though, until someone comes along. Not a soul about, blow it!"

But Tom was wrong there, as he knew the next instant. For just then there sounded from the lane the ringing of

cycle bells. In a flash Tom had leaped on to the seat, and was peering round the corner of the van.

Over the hedge, just having swept round the corner, showed the straw hats of three cyclists, and Tom Merry gave a yell.

"Help, help, help!"

From the roadway sounded the jarring of brakes hastily applied, and then the sliding of feet on the road.

"Oh, good!" said Tom. "It's all right, you chaps! Here's someone!"

A few seconds lapsed, and then Tom saw three figures coming through the broken gateway from the road. They were three youths in straw hats, cricketing flannels, and school blazers.

Tom Merry almost fell into the duckpond at sight of them, so utterly astonished was he.

For the three youths approaching were familiar to Tom Merry—very familiar. The first one was tall and lanky, with a cheery, freckled face. The second was short and fat, with a fat, good-humoured face. The third was of medium size, wiry-looking, and with keen, alert features.

"Figgins!" stuttered Tom Merry. "Hanged if it isn't old Figgy, you chaps!"

It was, indeed, Figgins & Co., the cheery New House rivals of Tom Merry & Co., from St. Jim's. They rounded to the front of the van, and the others, who had scarcely grasped Tom's meaning, also saw them.

"Figgy! Oh, by Jove!"

"Great pip! And old Kerr!"

"And Fatty Wynn!" gasped Herries. "Well—well—"

Words failed him.

The caravanners stared at Figgins & Co., and Figgins & Co. stared at them, open-mouthed.

If anything they were far more astonished at the unexpected meeting than Tom Merry & Co. were. Tom Merry & Co. certainly had known that the cheery New House juniors were somewhere in the vicinity of Teignmouth, but Figgins & Co. had had no idea that their School House rivals were even near the county of Devonshire.

They were simply staggered.

"Well," stuttered George Figgins, blinking almost unbelievably at the stranded juniors. "Well, upon my word!"

Kerr gave a sudden splutter as he realised the predicament Tom Merry & Co. were in.

"Look at 'em, Figgy!" he gurgled. "Oh, just look at 'em!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgins & Co. had all grasped something of the unfortunate situation now, and they simply howled with laughter.

Tom Merry & Co. glowered at them speechlessly for some horrible moments. They were—or, rather, had been, keen enough for help to come along. But the last persons they wanted to see them in their hapless plight were their ancient rivals of the New House at St. Jim's.

In helpless chagrin, and hopeless humiliation and dismay, they glowered at Figgins & Co.

"Look here, Figgy," shouted Tom warmly, at last. "It's nothing—to laugh at, you idiots!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgins and his hilarious chums apparently thought it was for they howled again and again.

"What are you doing it for?" gurgled Figgins, at length, wiping the tears of merriment from his cheeks. "Posing for your giddy photographs, or are you playing at being Robinson Crusoes? Oh dear!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Only Figgy and Fatty Wynn laughed this time—Kerr was, at the moment, otherwise engaged. Figgy's remark concerning a photograph had given him an idea, which he acted upon with lightning-like swiftness.

Over his shoulder a camera was slung, and in a flash it was in his hands, and he was focusing it upon the caravan stuck in the duck-pond.

Click!

It was done—the snap was taken before Tom Merry & Co. grasped the fact that the camera was in his hands. But when they did grasp the truth they fairly howled with wrath.

"Here, Kerr, you howling cad—"

"Kerr, you rotter, none of that!"

"Oh, bai Jove! Kerr, you feaful wascal!"

Kerr hurriedly focused again, and as he did so there was a yell and a scramble to get into the van, and out of range of the terrible camera.

Click!

Kerr chuckled as he got them—scrambling frantically to get through the narrow, "half-beck" doorway into the van behind.

"Good!" grinned Kerr. "That one will be better than the first, I think!"

"You—you got them?" gasped Figgins delightedly.

"All O.K.," grinned Kerr. "This will be useful when we get back to St. Jim's—what?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgins & Co. roared with laughter.

Visions of the endless fun they would have with those photos when they got back to St. Jim's at term time floated in the minds of Figgins & Co. Visions of such a happening floated also in the dismayed minds of Tom Merry & Co., and, safe within the van, they also roared—with helpless fury.

Tom Merry could just imagine what they would look like—stranded in the middle of that slimy duck-pond, and huddled together in the front of the van with dismal, doleful faces. As for the "snap," showing them scrambling frantically for safety, they simply dare not think of it.

It was some moments before Tom Merry dared to peer out of the van, and he saw that Figgins & Co. were standing on the verge of the pond, doubled up with laughter.

"Oh, you rotter, Figgins!" he yelled. "I'll smash you for that, Kerr, when I get clear of this!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, you howling cads!" howled Tom. "Play the game, Figgy, and get us out of this! Can't you do something? Go and fetch help instead of standing cackling there like potty idiots!"

"Yaas, wathah, Figgay!" called Arthur Augustus, peering cautiously out of the van. "Play the game, deah boy, and twy to wescue us fwom this howwible posish!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Kerr, you awful wottah! I weally twust you do not propose to make use of those wotten photos?"

"Oh, no—not at all!" grinned Kerr. "I just took 'em to destroy again—I don't think. You wait until we get back to St. Jim's, and you'll see, you School House freaks!"

"Oh, bai Jove!"

here, and I see some fun coming along, my infants. They're bound to be landed here for a bit, and we'll keep an eye on them."

"Ha, ha! Yes, rather!"

"Then come on!"

And Figgins & Co. mounted their bikes again and went to meet the farm-cart. Tom Merry & Co. had been eager enough to meet Figgins & Co., and they had got their wish sooner than they had expected.

CHAPTER 7.

Nippy Decides to Risk It!

THAT Figgins & Co. had kept their word was soon evident to Tom Merry & Co. The cart Figgins had seen in the distance was a farmer's lorry, and with it was the farmer himself. He proved to be the owner of the pond, likewise the gate. Figgins sent him along—and he came along quickly enough, and he was wrathful when he saw the state of his gate—or what was left of it.

But he proved to be also a good-natured individual, and when he saw the caravanners' predicament, and when he learned that they were willing to pay for the damage, he readily offered to help—not only that, he offered to let them camp on his land if they wished.

It was not an easy job getting the stranded juniors ashore, but, by backing his horse and lorry into the pond, he took them in batches. Then he started to help all the juniors to get their equipment ashore, and having got all they

ST. JIM'S JINGLES.

No. 1.—ERIC KILDARE.

"Kildare for Ireland and St. Jim's!"
The shout booms forth like thunder;
A giant he, of sturdy limbs,
Beloved by all—no wonder!
In school and sport he leads the way,
Right proud are we to follow;
He proves a giant in the fray—
Rivals are beaten hollow!

We would not wish a finer man
To fill the role of skipper;
He's idolized by every clan,
From senior down to nipper.
We always find him just and true
In all his daily dealings:

(His ashplant, though, we often rue
With squirmings and with squealings!)
A boxer of the very best
Is this great-hearted giant;
He smites and slogs with skill and zest,
Supreme and self-reliant.
And woo-betide the cunning Knox
When with Kildare he quarrels!
Our skipper gives him fistic shocks,
Thus adding to his laurels!



ERIC KILDARE.

At cricket, he's a youthful Grace,
At footer, he's a Buchan;
On running tracks, he shows a pace
Which really very few can!
At shooting he's a big success,
At swimming he is famous;
Even at games like golf, I guess
He's not an ignoramus.

But here's the charm about Kildare,
He smiles in cordial fashion;
He never raves, nor tears his hair,
Nor flies into a passion.
He's unlike Knox, and other men
Who act in manner Hunnish;
In fact, he's never happy when
He's called upon to punish.

Kildare! my jingles can't convey
A just appreciation
Of the all-wise and manly way
You govern this Foundation.
To "write you up" in proper style
Would need the pen of Kipling;
And doubtless they will make you smile—
These verses of a stripling!

NEXT WEEK—ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY.

Blake popped his face round the van door in his turn. "Look here, you howling rotters!" he bawled wrathfully. "Are you going to help us out of this or not?"

"Is that how you usually ask favours, Blake?" inquired Figgins sweetly.

"Can't you see we're stranded?" howled Blake. "Can't you be decent for once, and go for help?"

"Oh!" grinned Figgins. "Is that all you want? Well, we'll do that. What happened? Did you barge into that pond in search of tiddlers?"

"Can't you see what's happened?" snarled Blake. "Our thumping engine's smashed, and we had to dive in here, or we'd have been smashed up. Look here, Figgy, just play the game and fetch help—a motor or something to fetch us out."

Figgy nodded after a moment's hesitation.

"All right!" he agreed, with a chuckle. "We'll go and send help along. Cheerio! Mind you don't get your tootsies wet, won't you?"

With that Figgins led his two chums away. They reached the road and mounted their bikes, and the next moment they were speeding downhill, roaring with laughter as they went. At the bottom of the steep hill Figgins called a halt.

"Here's a carter coming along!" he grinned, nodding at a farm-cart in the distance. "We'll send him along to help—can't leave those chaps as they are, of course."

"Of course not!" grinned the Co.

"But we won't go," grinned Figgins. "We're going to see what happens to the dear lads. I'm thumping glad they've turned up. Things were getting a bit slow round

needed for camping, the juniors locked up the stranded caravan until the farmer could bring a team of horses to drag it from the mire on to dry land.

It was pretty clear that the caravanners were doomed to stay in the vicinity for some time, and they carefully selected a spot, close by a rippling spring of clear water, and within easy reach of the sea, and then they camped.

After all, as Tom Merry pointed out, it was jolly country, with sea-bathing and glorious rambles within easy reach. They knew, too, that Figgins & Co. were likewise within easy reach—though their attitude to Figgins & Co. was far from being a friendly one now.

But they wanted to get into touch with Figgins & Co. again badly—little dreaming that those cheery youths had watched them from camp behind the shelter of a nearby hedge. And the reason they wanted to see Figgins & Co. again was to get their hands on Kerr's camera—or the films, at all events.

The more Tom Merry & Co. discussed the matter of those "snaps," the more determined and desperate they became to get their hands on them. They knew that Figgins would see that the films would be printed in dozens and distributed among the New House fraternity. And they knew that this would lead to endless and humiliating times for them. They would be the laughing stock of St. Jim's when term started again.

Actually the fact that the accident meant staying in the vicinity for some time did not trouble Tom Merry & Co.

much—from their own point of view. The position in which it placed Nippy, however, was another matter.

Nippy was obviously alarmed at the prospect, and over tea that afternoon he brought the subject up again.

"It's no good, you fellows," he said glumly. "It means I shall have to do a bunk. Where to, goodness knows! I can't risk staying here. Why? I'd rather you chaps didn't ask. I know you're wondering what all this mystery means. I know you've wondered since we first met. But I daren't tell you. I wish I could. Anyway, I'll have to clear out from here."

"That's rotten, Nippy!" said Tom in alarm. "Where on earth could you go? We've got to stay by the caravan, of course. And we'll get the repairs carried out as soon as we can. There's a motor-repair place in Plymsea, I suppose?"

"Yes," muttered Nippy, "and that's another trouble. I'm well-known in Plymsea. I don't mind telling you that. Somebody who knows me is bound to spot me sooner or later. I'd better go."

"Oh dear!"

"Hold on!" said Lowther, grinning. "I've got a wheeze. Why not disguise yourself, Nippy?"

"Bai Jove!" remarked Arthur Augustus eagerly. "That's wathah a good ideah, you know!"

Tom Merry nodded, his eyes gleaming.

"A jolly good wheeze, Lowther!" he said. "Look here, I've got it. We were talking of going over to Teignmouth to-night to the pictures, or to run round. Why not get something then? And if there's no theatrical costumier's in Teignmouth we'll train it to Newton Abbot to-morrow and try there."

"But—but—"

"A moustache would do it, especially if you don't wash too often," grinned Tom. "After all, you're a giddy mechanic now, and you could keep your chivvy well greased and smudged; that's a disguise in itself, old chap. And you could lie low at the camp here until we've fixed you up."

"There's this farmer chap!" muttered Nippy. "If—"

"He doesn't know you, does he?"

"No; but he'll spot the difference."

"He'll not remember," grinned Tom. "I think it's a jolly good wheeze myself. What about it?"

Nippy nodded after a moment's reflection.

"I'll chance it," he said. "Yes; if you chaps will fix me up with a disguise I'll stay on and risk it."

"Good egg!"

So it was arranged without further discussion. Tom Merry & Co. were keen enough to visit Teignmouth, and, having had tea early, they cleaned themselves up and started out, leaving Baggy Trimble and Nippy to mind the camp.

For once Baggy did not even ask to accompany the juniors, though he knew they were partly on pleasure bent. For Baggy had other business on that evening—though he did not tell the rest of the caravanners so. As a matter of fact, Baggy Trimble could scarcely conceal his delight at being stranded so close to Plymsea. Things were working out very well for Baggy Trimble.

Scarcely had Tom Merry & Co. vanished through the trees when the fat junior rolled into the tent and got his cap. Then he rolled out, and started off. Nippy called to him:

"Hallo, where are you off to, old fat pippin?"

"Mind your own dashed business!" snapped Baggy.

He rolled on. Baggy never wasted much politeness on Nippy. But Nippy only grinned after him—little dreaming where, and on what errand, the fat junior was bound.

That he was about to play rather a traitorous game, Baggy himself was far from feeling. He saw nothing caddish, or even mean, in his desire to play the informer against Nippy. Baggy was a very suspicious junior, who usually took the worst possible view of anyone's troubles. And he honestly believed that Nippy had been "up" to something—was, in fact, a criminal escaping from justice. The undoubted fact that Nippy was the "wanted" boy who was missing was enough for him. He was after the reward, and he meant to get it.

Baggy had already discovered in which direction the village of Plymsea lay, and he made straight for it across the fields.

He trudged on, fairly quivering with eager anticipation and excitement. To visit the colonel in person with his news was far better than giving the information by letter, and perhaps being done out of the reward in the end. Baggy was suspicious of everyone as well as the police.

Across three or four fields went Baggy, and then he reached a thick belt of woodland, surrounded by wire-netting. That it was private property beyond the netting never occurred to him; he only knew he could not be far from the village now.

"Blow it!" he grunted, blinking doubtfully at the fence. "I wish I'd jolly well gone round by road now! Here goes, anyway!"

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 917.

Baggy climbed over the netted fence with some difficulty and dropped over the other side. Then he tramped on through the woodland. For some minutes he went ahead, and then quite suddenly he found himself up against another fence—a smart, white-painted iron fence.

Climbing this, Baggy found himself on a well-kept lawn, surrounded by shady trees, through which he caught a glimpse of a large house beyond.

He stopped then. Even the obtuse fat junior realised he was on private property now.

"I'm not jolly well going back, anyway!" he grunted. "Blow it! It's a house, and there's bound to be a road on the other side. I'll risk it!"

So Baggy risked it, treading the lawn cautiously in search of a path that would, he hoped, lead to the road beyond the house. And then suddenly Baggy stopped short.

Rounding a clump of bushes he came upon a pleasant scene—a trimly-kept stretch of lawn up against the house, and almost surrounded by laurels and rhododendrons. It was overlooked by a blank wall, and not a soul appeared to be in sight.

But something very interesting was in sight to Baggy Trimble. On the lawn stood a table, and on the table a nice white teacloth, and on this was a meal—tea, and bread-and-butter, and cakes—ripping-looking cakes—on pretty silver cake-stands and-dishes. The table glittered with china and silver.

Baggy blinked at it, and his mouth fairly watered at sight of the delicious-looking cakes.

"Oh dear!" he murmured, licking his fat lips. "What ripping cakes! How I wish I could sample 'em!"

The cakes fascinated Baggy. Heedless of the fact that he had no right there at all, he gazed at them, and as he gazed the temptation—a faint, forlorn temptation at first—grew and grew. Baggy could not take his eyes from them.

He blinked round him cautiously at last. Not a soul was in sight. The garden appeared to be deserted. It was really more than Baggy Trimble could bear.

"I—I think I'll try one—just one!" murmured Baggy, still blinking about him. "Nobody would know, anyway. I can easily bolt if I hear anyone coming. They won't miss one, anyway. It serves 'em right for leaving 'em out here like this. They ought to be taught a lesson."

Baggy was already beginning to look upon it as his duty to teach the owner of the cakes a lesson for being so thoughtless as to leave temptation in people's way. Baggy had a very accommodating conscience where food was concerned.

He sampled one of the cakes. It was as ripping to eat as it was to look at. So Baggy tried another—and then another.

He was fairly started now, and Baggy began to get reckless. It was scarcely half an hour since he had disposed of an ample tea, but he was ready for another for all that. The cakes began to vanish at lightning speed.

"This is prime," mumbled the fat junior, blinking about him as he ate. "I don't suppose the people here will mind really. It's a thumping big house, and— Oh dear!"

Baggy paused, with a chocolate éclair clutched in his fat fist. He fairly trembled.

A footstep had sounded terrifyingly close at hand, and as Baggy trembled there followed a bellow of mingled rage and amazement.

"Begad! What—what—what the dooce does this mean, hey? You rascal!"

So suddenly had the footstep and rumbling bellow sounded that Baggy stood helplessly, too petrified with fright to move. And as he stood, wondering where the voice came from, an elderly man emerged abruptly from the shelter of a high clump of laurels behind him. Baggy had been watching the house, and had quite omitted to watch anywhere else.

He realised his mistake now, and he blinked at the elderly gentleman as if rooted to the lawn. The newcomer—dressed in golfing attire, and with fierce white moustaches and an extremely bald head—also seemed to be rooted to the lawn. He stared at Baggy as if he could scarcely believe his eyes.

"You—you rascal!" he stuttered. "Well, upon my word! A—a schoolboy! On—on my own lawn! Helping his confounded self to my—my tea, begad! Well, I—I—"

Words failed him, and he resorted to actions. Giving a bellow of wrath, the elderly gentleman made a wild rush at the hapless Baggy.

Trimble woke out of his trance of terror then, and he turned and bolted for his life, with the elderly gentleman thumping after him, bellowing and waving his stick aloft.

Round the first clump of laurels dashed Baggy, gasping aloud with fear, and almost at once he came to grief—as did his pursuer.

Stumbling unexpectedly upon a series of croquet hoops, Baggy tripped over one and went crashing down, and over him went the unfortunate elderly gentleman.

He went headlong over the prostrate Baggy, amid a bellow of rage, and a squeak of terror from Baggy.

But Baggy was up first, and, scrambling to his feet, he



"Here, Kerr, you howling cad—" "Kerr, you rotter, none of that!" "Oh, bai Jove! Kerr, you feahful wascal!" There was a scramble to get into the van, and out of range of the camera. The New House junior chuckled as he snapped the School House chums scrambling frantically to get through the narrow doorway into the van. (See page 12.)

fairly flew. More by luck than good judgment, he found the white fence at last, and he fairly hurled himself over it, and crashed on through the belt of woodland, panting and gasping, and with beads of perspiration glistening on his fat features.

To his immense relief, no sounds of pursuit reached his ears. Evidently that fall had been a shock to the elderly gentleman, to say the least of it—though Baggy never troubled to worry on his behalf.

He halted at last when well beyond the wire netting and mopped his brow breathlessly.

"Oh dear!" groaned the fat junior. "Phew! That was a narrow escape, and no mistake! Oh crumbs! I shouldn't like to meet that old hunk again! Phew! I'll have to go round by the thumping road, after all! Never mind! I scoffed four of the cakes, anyway! He, he, he!"

And chuckling now he was out of the wood, Baggy ambled on, skirting the woodland. As he expected, it brought him out at last into a narrow lane, and through the trees he glimpsed the village church spire.

"Oh, good!"

Trimble took to the lane, and tramping along it for some distance he reached the church, nestling among ancient trees, and then he entered the village. It was a pretty village, though Baggy never noticed that. He blinked round doubtfully, and just then a postman came trudging along. Baggy stopped him, and inquired which was the Grange. The postman pointed up the lane.

"Fust gate you'm come to," he said. "Big iron gates they be—you'm can't miss 'em!"

Baggy grunted ungraciously, and very soon reached the gates. It was the Grange right enough, and he rolled along an extensive drive, fairly quivering with triumphant anticipation. He reached the house at last, and, stepping up the entrance steps, rang the bell. It was answered promptly by a trim maidservant.

She eyed the dusty and travel-worn fat junior with obvious suspicion and distaste.

"Well?" she snapped.

"I want to see Colonel Brockways," said Baggy loftily.

"Oh, do you? What's your business?"

"Never mind my business!" snorted Baggy, with dignity. "You are impertinent, miss! Show me in to the colonel at once. My business is most important!"

Baggy's lofty dignity quite impressed the maid. She hesitated a brief moment, and then she vanished indoors. She came back in less than a minute.

"Will you come this way?" she sniffed.

Baggy Trimble grinned, and followed her across a wide hall into a well-furnished library. She bade him wait there, and hurried out. She was scarcely gone a minute when a heavy tread sounded from the hall and a gentleman stumped into the room.

He was an elderly gentleman in golfing attire, and he sported a very bald head, a fierce white, bristling moustache, and a very red face. And he carried a stout walking-stick.

Baggy Trimble looked at him, and then he jumped.

It was the same elderly gentleman whose tea he had raided, and whom he had brought down crashing on the croquet lawn!

CHAPTER 8.

Baggy Proves Useful!

BAGGY TRIMBLE blinked at him aghast, and the elderly gentleman blinked at Baggy.

In a flash, the fat junior realised the truth. He had unknowingly visited the Grange already—by the backway, and now he was visiting it again—knowingly this time—from the front way.

And this—this fiery, military-looking gentleman was none other than Colonel Brockways.

Baggy was thunderstruck.

He blinked at the colonel in horrified alarm, and the colonel blinked at him, his features gradually growing from a brick-red hue into a deep purple.

Then, quite suddenly, the colonel spluttered—spluttered with astounded and towering wrath.

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"Begad!" he gasped, his voice trembling with rage. "Begad! It—it's the same young villain—the young rascal who purloined my tea, and nearly broke my confounded neck! You—you impudent, daring young scoundrel! You—you dare to come here after—after— Ha!"

With a sudden snort, the colonel dropped words for actions and made a blind rush for the fat youth, brandishing his stick aloft.

Whack, whack, whack!

Three times the stick whacked home on Baggy's fat shoulders, and then, as the colonel made a savage clutch at him, Baggy howled and made a frantic dash round the table, sending a chair crashing over as he did so.

Crash!

"Yooop!"

Baggy was round the table in a flash, and he made a frantic leap for the door, realising as he did so that the colonel had gone headlong over the fallen chair.

But though he heard the crash and the furious howl, Baggy didn't trouble about the colonel's misfortunes.

He went through the doorway like a stone from a catapult and tore across the hall. There was a terrified shriek as Baggy narrowly escaped knocking the trim maidservant over, but he neither heard it nor saw her.

Luckily the hall door was still wide open, and Baggy went through it, taking the steps beyond in a couple of desperate leaps.

Next moment he was tearing along the drive as though fiends were at his heels. Nor did he stop running until he was a hundred yards and more along the lane outside.

Then, looking round and finding he was not pursued, Baggy dropped to a walk, panting, gasping, and utterly exhausted with the effects of his exciting, strenuous experience.

"Ow! Ow-yow!" he panted, wiping the perspiration from his fat, scarlet, face. "Oh dear! That's done it! Fancy that old fool being the blessed colonel! I—I might have known it, though. Oh crumbs!"

Baggy groaned hollowly.

He realised now, only too well, that calling upon Colonel Brockways was now off—decidedly off. Not for all the rewards in the world would Baggy Trimble have dared to face the irate old man after what had happened. Indeed, Baggy was frightened now he came to reflect upon his actions—badly frightened. It occurred to him that the fiery old gentleman would not be satisfied with seeing the last of him. He would undoubtedly cherish a desire for vengeance against the rascal who had so upset his august equilibrium. He would, quite likely, thought Baggy dismally, call in the aid of the police to track him down and bring him to book.

"Oh dear!" groaned the fat junior. "I'd better make for the blessed camp and not show myself after this. Oh dear! What about the reward, though?"

Baggy didn't give that problem much thought just then, however. His chief concern was to reach camp and seek safety there. He dived through the hedge, not daring to creep to the lane, and cut straight across the fields, making for the distant farm which he could just glimpse through the trees. He knew the camp wasn't far from that farm. In his fright, Baggy had taken the wrong turn on emerging from the Grange gates, and he had now to make a wide detour to reach the camp.

But the distant farm buildings told him in which direction the camp lay, and he cut across the fields, reaching the thick bunch of trees in between in a very few minutes. He dived into them and trudged on dismally.

Quite suddenly he stopped, however.

Through the trees ahead floated the sound of laughter and cheery voices.

There was something very familiar to Baggy in the voices, and quite suddenly he recognised them and his eyes gleamed.

"My hat!" he muttered. "I must look into this!"

He crept forward cautiously towards the sounds. The trees suddenly thinned out before him, and Baggy stopped, finding himself staring into a pleasant, sunny glade upon a very pleasant scene.

In the glade a small camp-fire burned, and a little distance away stood three small fly-tents. Near the tents, leaning up against a wooden fence, were three cycles, and near the cycles, reclining more or less gracefully on the warm green grass, were three youths in flannels, blazers, tennis-shoes, and straw hats.

One of them—a remarkably fat youth—was apparently slumbering, with one fat knee swung over another fat knee, and his straw hat tilted over nose and eyes. The other two youths—one long and lanky and freckled, the other a very keen-eyed, alert-looking youth—were reclining at ease, chatting together.

They were Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn, the leaders of the New House juniors at St. Jim's.

Baggy stared at the scene unbelievably. Like Tom Merry

& Co. he had imagined that Figgins & Co. were staying in the neighbourhood of Teignmouth with an uncle, or an aunt, or a grandmother of Figgins' as Arthur Augustus had put it.

But this didn't look like it. Figgins & Co. were obviously cycle-camping. That fact was very obvious—even to Baggy.

"Phew!" breathed Baggy. "Won't Tom Merry be fairly delighted when I tell him this?"

Figgins' cheery voice floated to Baggy's fat ears. Baggy's ears were about the only things that were at all keen about Baggy—unless it was his never-failing appetite.

"Yes, it's a bit of luck and no mistake, Kerr!" Figg was chortling. "With those giddy snaps we'll fairly make those School House bounders squirm at term-time!"

"Yes, rather, Figg!"

"But we're going to make 'em squirm before then!" chuckled Figg. "Our motto is 'Business as Usual'—what?"

"Yes, rather, Figg!"

"Business as usual—even in the hols!" grinned Figg.

"We're only three to seven—not counting Trimble and that red-haired chap. But we'll show 'em what's what!"

"Yes, rather, Figg!"

"You've got the camera and the films safely?" asked Figgins anxiously.

Kerr chuckled.

"Safe as houses, Figg!" he chuckled. "One never knows. Won't do to leave the films lying about here. Those chaps are bound to find we're here sooner or later, and then the trouble will start. They'll raid us, and it won't do for us to risk 'em finding the films. I've hidden 'em in that hollow tree over there, and covered 'em over with twigs and things."

"Good egg! That's good enough. Kerr, old chap! You've got a brain, and no mistake!" said Figg, with satisfaction. "And now what about to-night? Better fix up everything now. I vote we leave it until rather later—midnight, say. They're bound to be asleep then."

"Yes, rather, Figg. Later the better—and safer!" agreed the cautious Scotch junior.

"Right. It isn't likely they have anyone on guard; they think we're staying some distance from here."

"Naturally."

"So it should be as easy as pie," said Figgins, clucking. "We'll creep up to the tent, sling in the bags of flour and the stink-bombs—you've got 'em safely, Kerr?"

Kerr nodded and chuckled.

"Good! And after we've chucked them in we'll let the tent down on top of 'em. My hat, won't they get a shock! It's an old wheeze, of course, but that doesn't make it any less effective. Better loosen most of the tent-pegs first, though."

"Better had."

"That's all, then!" grinned Figg, getting up. "Now, what about trotting over to the village for some grub? Wake up, Fatty, you lazy slacker!"

He digged Fatty Wynn gently in the ribs, and Fatty woke up and sat up. And what happened after that in the New House camp Baggy Trimble neither heard, nor saw, nor cared. He trod cautiously away through the trees, a fat grin on his face.

But he did not go far. Quite abruptly he stopped as a new idea occurred to him. He grinned, and dropped down behind the hedge beyond the fence, and waited.

He had not to wait long. Footsteps and cheery voices sounded presently, and Figgins, Wynn, and Kerr appeared through the trees. They walked along the inside of the fence, and Baggy trembled lest they should glimpse him through the hedge. But they did not do so, but passed on and vanished from sight.

"Good egg!" murmured Trimble.

He waited until the sound of footsteps had ceased, and then he hurried back to the New House fellows' camp. He reached and made straight for the old hollow oak-tree that Baggy's eyes picked out at once. The next moment Baggy was tumbling inside the tree, his fat arm thrust through a hole in the trunk.

He found it at last—the camera was there right enough. Baggy took it out, and opened it. He found the reel of films, and taking them out he slipped the reel into his pocket, with a chuckle. Then, feeling he might as well make hay while the sun shone, so to speak, Baggy started to rummage among the New House fellows' belongings.

He found what he sought quickly enough. There were biscuits and chocolate in the rucksacks, and in the tents Baggy found various packages of foodstuffs, and nearly a whole cake and two tins of condensed milk.

Baggy soon polished off the condensed milk, the chocolate, the cake, and biscuits, and what else he found worth eating. Then, with features fat and shiny and jammy, Baggy Trimble departed, and made tracks for his own camp.

On the whole, his outing had been very disappointing, but

his visit to the New House camp had brought some consolation and satisfaction, at all events.

CHAPTER 9.

Not a Success!

THE summer dusk had deepened into velvety darkness when Tom Merry & Co. found their way to their camp that night. They were all tired and dusty, but quite cheerful. They had had a bright evening's outing, and they had succeeded in getting what they had chiefly gone to get—greatly to the relief of Nippy. They had managed, after a great deal of trouble, in purchasing a false moustache and a pair of false eyebrows; and, to make matters better still for Nippy, they had purchased a pair of spectacles, wide-rimmed, but with plain glass in them.

Amid no little hilarity Nippy had carried out his disguise at once, and the results exceeded even Tom Merry's expectations. The moustache alone made a remarkable transformation, but the eyebrows and glasses put the finishing touch to it.

"My hat!" grinned Tom Merry. "That does it absolutely, Nippy. I'd defy anyone to recognise you now."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"And if you never wash, Nippy, that'll make it better still!" chuckled Blake. "Great pip! I never saw anything like it! You needn't worry now, old chap."

Nippy grinned, and agreed that he need not.

"It's only for a matter of three days at most," said Tom Merry. "The garage men have taken the caravan, and the proprietor claims it will be ready for the road again by then. They're going to hustle things up for us. And now what about supper?"

"Hear, hear!"

Supper was all ready—Nippy and Baggy Trimble had seen to that between them, and the tired juniors settled down to eat in the flickering flames of the camp-fire. As yet Baggy Trimble had not mentioned the news what he had discovered, neither to Nippy nor anyone else. But now he gave a sudden chuckle that drew everyone's attention to him.

"What the thump are you cackling at, Trimble?" demanded Blake.

"He, he, he!" cackled Trimble. "It's something you fellows will be no end interested to hear. I say, you chaps, what would you give to get those films from Kerr?"

"Give, you fat ass!" said Tom Merry grimly. "I'd— I'd give every blessed penny I possess, fatty."

"Same here!" said Blake, with emphasis. "Great pip! We'll never hear the last of it unless we do get them. If we only knew where the rotters were hanging out?"

"He, he, he!"

The juniors looked sharply at Trimble.

"What's the ass cackling about?" asked Herries.

"Was he cackling?" asked Lowther. "I thought it sounded like the fat toad croaking. He's eaten enough already for half a dozen ordinary chaps. I'm expecting him to bust."

"On, really, Lowthah, don't talk rot!" grinned Trimble. "I say, you chaps, you'd like to know where those films are, wouldn't you?"

"Look here, you fat idiot—"

"As it happens," said Trimble, helping himself to a fresh supply of buttered crackers and cheese, "I do know where they are."

"Bai Jove!"

The juniors stopped eating abruptly. Trimble was a fearful fibber, but something in his tone now drew their attention.

"You—you know, Baggy?" snapped Tom Merry.

"Exactly!" grinned Baggy. "While you fellows have been away enjoying yourselves I've been doing a bit of useful scouting. Some chaps," went on Baggy, with a lofty smirk, "have the honour of the School House at heart."

"Oh, my hat!"

"I scouted round," resumed Trimble. "And I found out where Figgins & Co. are. They're not staying with any blessed uncle. They're cycle-camping, and they're camping less than a mile from here."

The juniors stared at Baggy. Tom Merry jumped to his feet.

"You—you mean that, Trimble?" he gasped.

Trimble nodded, thoroughly enjoying the sensation his news was arousing.

"It's a fact!" he grinned. "I crept up to within a few yards of them. I heard them talking. What's more," added Trimble, blinking triumphantly around him, "I heard the rotters discussing a plot to raid us at midnight to-night."

"You—you did?"

"I've said so, haven't I? They're going to come at midnight, and they're going to sling bags of flour and stink-bombs into our tent, and then they're going to let the tent down on top of us."

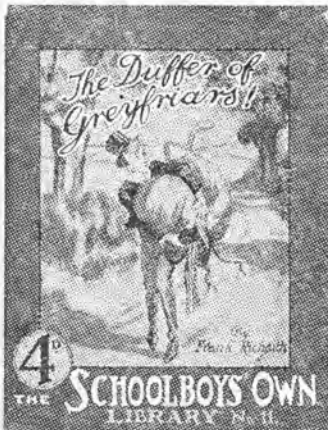
"Oh!" ejaculated Tom Merry. "Are they? We'll see about that! But—but you're such a fibber, Baggy. Is this the truth?"

"Of course, it is!" said Baggy indignantly. "Think I'm telling you this for fun, you asses?"

"Great Scott!" breathed Blake. "I do believe the fat ass is speaking the truth for once. Come on, you fellows! Never mind supper! We'll let Trimble lead us to 'em, and we'll get those films, if we have to boil the rotters in oil to get 'em."

(Continued on next page.)

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"Bai Jove, yaas, wathah!"

"Good egg!"

The juniors jumped eagerly to their feet. Baggy Trimble helped himself to more crackers, and chuckled.

"Hold on!" he grinned. "Don't be in such a hurry, you chaps. It's no good going for those films."

"Oh, and why not?"

"Because I've got 'em. He, he, he!"

"You—you've got them?" breathed Tom Merry, in sudden delight.

"Exactly! But hold on! You chaps said you'd give anything to get 'em, didn't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"Well," said Baggy, "I'm going to keep you to your word. You can't expect a chap to do what I've done for nothing, can you now? A labourer's worthy of his hire, you know. I shall expect a quid at least from old Gussy. He's got plenty of tin, and won't miss it. As for you fellows," added Baggy generously, "I'll let you off with ten bob each."

He stopped eating and waited, apparently, for Tom Merry & Co. to "fork out."

They did nothing of the sort, however. Tom Merry did not even attempt to persuade Baggy to reduce his terms. He simply leaped at Baggy, and that cheerful junior went crashing backwards with a frightened, astonished howl.

"Yarrooooooh!"

"Fetch me a stick, someone," said Tom Merry grimly. "The thickest and biggest stick you can find. I fancy Baggy needs to learn that a member of a caravanning party is expected to back his comrades up, and to play the game without expecting reward."

"Yarroooooh! Look here—Yoop!" roared Baggy, in alarm. "I say—Leggo! Wharrer you at, you beast! Ow-yow!"

Tom Merry soon showed Baggy what he was "at." He twisted the fat youth over on his face, and pinned him down. Blake ran up with a hefty stick, and Tom took it.

"Now, my fat pippin!" said Tom grimly. "You're going to do your duty and tell us where that roll of films is—or the blessed camera. If you won't tell us, I'm going to tan your fat hide until you do!"

"Oh, dear! Beasts!"

Whack!

"Yooooooop!"

"That's to encourage you to do it," said Tom Merry. "Am I to go on with this sort of encouragement, Baggy?"

"Yarroooooh! Nunno! That is—yes! No! Oh, you beasts! I tell you I'm not going to hand 'em over until I—"

"Yooooop! Stoppit!" howled Baggy. "Yes, I'll tell you. Oh, dear! Lemme gerrup, and I'll hand 'em over, you beasts!"

"Get up, then!"

Baggy scrambled to his feet as Tom Merry released him. His eyes were glinting with wrath. But he saw there was no help for it. He blinked at the grinning but determined faces around him, and then he shoved his hand in his pocket and produced a roll of films.

Tom Merry almost snatched them from his hands.

"Thank goodness!" he breathed, glancing at the roll. "Here goes! Sooner the things are done in the better."

As he spoke, Tom stepped to the fire, and flung the roll of films into the flames. They were consumed in a flash.

"That's that, Baggy!" said Tom, grinning his intense relief. "You've deserved well of your giddy country for all that, old bean! When a dog has been a good dog, he usually gets a bone or a lump of sugar! I vote we allow Baggy to have two suppers instead of one, as an appreciation of the great service he has rendered us to-night."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors roared—they could afford to do so now. Not for one moment did they doubt that the films were the right ones. Baggy's furious face was sufficient evidence of that. And the sight of the films being consumed took a great load off their minds. They felt they could stand anything from Figgins & Co. now.

"And now you fellows can finish supper and turn in, if you want to," grinned Tom. "I'll stay up and keep watch. And I'll wake you in good time to deal with dear old Figgins and his pals. We'll give them a little surprise when they do come."

"Rather!"

The juniors settled down to supper again, as did Baggy Trimble. And though Baggy took Tom at his word, and ate enough for a dozen ordinary fellows, his face was the picture of outraged wrath as he munched and munched. The somewhat hopeless outlook as regards Colonel Brockways and the reward, and now the loss of what he had fondly looked upon as a certain substantial supply of ready pocket money, made the fat junior almost weep with wrath and disappointment.

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CHAPTER 10.

Poor Old Figgy!

"Q U I E T !"

"Aren't we being quiet?"

"Don't gas!"

"Don't gas yourself, you ass! I wasn't making a sound."

"Shut up!" hissed Figgins. "If they happen to be awake and hear us, Fatty—"

"But it's you, Figgy—"

"Oh, for goodness' sake, don't start wrangling!" grinned Kerr. "It isn't likely they'll be awake, anyway. Jove, isn't it dark!"

It was dark, there was no doubt about that, under the thick trees at all events. And Figgins & Co. were not having a very cheery time of it. At night-time, the woods were unknown country, still and silent, save for the sea breeze rustling the leaves in the trees, and adding to the eeriness of the black woods.

It was past midnight, and Figgins & Co. were en route for the enemies' camp, to do their fell work. They had already, by daylight, scouted round Tom Merry & Co.'s camp; but in the darkness it was far from an easy matter to find it. They stumbled on, barking their shins against tree-trunks, and bumping into tree-trunks and into each other, and stumbling over creepers, and into numerous other traps for the unwary prowler.

Now they were beginning to feel the effects of their adventure in bruised bodies and frayed tempers.

But even as Kerr passed the truthful remark that it was dark, Figgins stopped as he glimpsed something through the trees.

It was a flickering, dancing light, the flames of a camp-fire, undoubtedly.

"Oh, good egg!" breathed Figgins. "Found it at last! I was beginning to think we should be wandering about these blessed woods for ever and ever. Quiet now!"

"He's at it again!" murmured Fatty.

"Dry up!" hissed Figgins.

He started on again—more warily now—and his chums followed, treading cautiously and in dead silence. In the daytime the adventure had appealed strongly to the New House plotters, but so far it had quite lost its appeal in the actual carrying out.

They reached the clearing at last, the flames of the camp-fire flickering and leaping, showing up the shadowy tents against the velvety blackness around.

Figgins parted the foliage, and stepped softly into the clearing.

"All serene!" he breathed. "There's nobody on guard, chaps. Now go quietly and follow me. We'll just loosen the tent-pegs first, and then let fly with the stuff into the tents."

"Will you?" said a voice.

Figgins & Co. almost leaped out of their skins. That solitary voice, coming suddenly out of the black night behind them, almost frightened the wits out of them. And before they could identify it, it rang out again—louder, this time:

"At 'em, chaps!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Look out!" yelled Figgins. "Oh, my hat!"

Recognising the voice then, Figgins turned to flee, but neither he nor his startled chums had the ghost of a chance to do that. There came a sudden rush, and figures sprang upon them from everywhere—or so it seemed to them.

Crash, crash, crash!

The three New House raiders went down crashing into the undergrowth, with numerous hands gripping them. They struggled frantically, but it was useless for them to struggle. It was a case of eight against three—for to make sure of a complete capture, Tom Merry had enlisted Nippy's aid—and Figgins & Co. stood no chance whatever either of fighting or escaping.

Yet they struggled desperately as they were dragged into the glare of the fire.

"Hold the beauties!" chuckled Tom Merry. "How-de-do, Figgy, old dear? Fancy us having callers at this time of the night! Quite an—ahem!—expected pleasure, I assure you."

"Oh, you rotters!" gasped Figgins. "Just you let me get loose—"

"That's just what we'd rather not do, Figgy," said Blake. "We like to oblige guests, but, really, you expect too much."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry kicked the fire into a red blaze, and swiftly cords were produced, and the prisoners—or guests, as Blake called them—were corded with their arms behind them.

Then Tom Merry regarded them thoughtfully, and the rest stood round with grins on their faces.

"Look—look here!" gasped Figgy. "Let—let us go, you rotters!"

"Not just now," said Tom, nodding. "Turn their pockets



"Make for the trees!" yelled Tom Merry. "Oh, great pip, this is awful!" But there was worse to come, for as Tom Merry shouted, something hit him in the chest, and the air was filled with a cloud of white, powdery substance. Then came several muffled explosions, followed by a most overpowering smell. "Quick!" cried Tom Merry, realising the situation. "It's those dashed New House rotters pitching things at us!" (See page 21.)

out, chaps. They were bringing us presents of flour and stuff, I believe. We're going to accept them, only as a loan, though. We'll hand the stuff back almost at once."

The prisoners' pockets were bulging, and in a moment or so the grinning School House juniors had emptied them of their contents. There were bags of flour, smaller bags of pepper, and the stink-bombs Trimble had mentioned.

Tom Merry kept his word to the letter. After the flour had been mixed with water, and soot from the fire, it was rubbed into the hair of Figgins & Co.'s heads and smeared over their faces. Some of it dripped on to their clothes, but, as Tom Merry remarked, accidents like that couldn't be helped.

"Oh, you—you rotters!" spluttered Figgins, almost choking, as some of the stuff was jabbed—accidentally or otherwise—into his mouth. "Oh, won't we just make you sit up for this?"

"My dear man, we're only giving you what you so kindly intended to give us," said Blake. "You had your laugh over that pond affair. Now it's our turn."

"Is it?" snarled Figgins. "But our turn will come. If it doesn't soon, it will come when term starts. Oh, won't we just make you cads squirm with those photos. We're going to have heaps printed, and we're going to distribute them all over the school. You'll never dare to show your faces near the New House."

"Oh, you mean those snaps Kerr took of us in the van?"

"Of course!"

"Sure you've got the films safely?" grinned Tom Merry. Figgins gave a slight start at the tone of Tom Merry's voice.

"Eh? What d'you mean?" he stammered in alarm. "You bet we've got 'em safely. They're somewhere where you chaps will never get 'em, anyway."

"If you mean in that hollow tree," said Tom Merry calmly, "I'm afraid you're booked for a disappointment. You see, we removed them from there this evening."

"Wha-a-at?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry & Co. roared at the expression on the paste-covered faces of Figgins & Co. If they had had any doubts that the films Tom had burned were the right ones, those doubts vanished promptly now.

"You—you removed them?" stuttered Figgins faintly. "But—but—"

"Yes. We thought we'd save you the trouble of printing them and distributing them all over St. Jim's," explained Tom Merry blandly. "They were burned hours ago in the fire there. You don't mind, do you?"

If looks testified for anything, Figgins & Co. did mind. They looked at each other with feelings too deep for suitable words.

"Oh—oh, you rotters!" gasped Figgins. "You've done us!"

"Every time," grinned Tom Merry. "But it's getting late for you little fellows to be out and about. We must really send you home. Buck up, you chaps!"

The chaps "bucked up." The three New House juniors were tied together one behind the other, and Tom Merry & Co. were satisfied at last.

"Ow! Oh!" gasped Figgins. "You—you awful rotters! You—you can't be going to turn us out to go home like this?"

"Oh, yes," said Tom. "Why not? You found your way here all right, and I fancy you'll find your way back all serene. You see, we're staying here a day or two, and we want to dissuade you from calling so late at night again. We also wish to impress upon you once and for all that School House is cock-house."

"Yaas, wathah, bai Jove!"

"Start them off, chaps!"

"We jolly well won't go like this!" howled Figgins, almost tearfully. "Oh, you rotters!"

"Your little mistake. Give 'em a shove, you chaps," said Tom Merry.

Blake and Herries complied, and the next moment Figgins & Co. were being shepherded from the clearing into the

black woods. They begged and pleaded to be released, and Figgins raved, and refused to stir until the remorseless School House juniors urged them with frequent prods of sticks. Then Figgins & Co. went, followed by a triumphant and gleeful yell of laughter from Tom Merry & Co.

With Figgins leading, and his hapless chums trailing behind, they vanished into the blackness, and went tramping on, plunging and stumbling and groaning, while Tom Merry & Co., feeling they had earned their night's sleep went off to bed.

How Figgins & Co. found their way out of the woods they scarcely knew. Perspiration oozed on their foreheads, and, mingled with the floury paste, trickled into their eyes and mouths. It had been difficult enough coming, but with their hands tied behind their backs it was doubly difficult.

From the bottom of their hearts Figgins & Co. wished they had not ventured on the expedition now. It was only too clear that Tom Merry & Co. had been within earshot when they had been discussing plans, and the New House juniors writhed at the thought.

They emerged suddenly from the wood at last, however, and found the dark lane before them with deep thankfulness. Their camp, they knew, was less than a hundred yards through the trees on the far side, and they squeezed through the hedge and dropped into the lane.

As they did so the rumble of wheels and the click of stumbling hoofs caught their ears. Looking along the road Figgins saw two rather dim lights approaching.

"Oh, good!" breathed Figgins. "We'll stop this merchant, whoever he is. I was just wondering how on earth we were going to get our hands free."

"It—it's rather queer," muttered Kerr, staring at the lights, "for a cart to be out at this time of the night."

"Rot!" snarled Figgins, whose temper had given out long ago. "It's some blessed carter been on the spree, I bet. Anyway, he'll release us, thank goodness!"

The vehicle rumbled on, and as it came close the juniors glimpsed two dark forms walking by the side of the stumbling horse.

"It—it's a caravan!" breathed Kerr in some alarm. "Keep back, Figgys, you ass! If it's gipsies—"

"Shut up!" snarled Figgins again. "It's some silly holiday caravanners, of course, you idiot! I'm going to stop 'em. Hey, you, just a minute!"

There sounded a sudden startled exclamation in a hoarse, uncultured voice, and next instant the caravan stopped, and a man moved into the light of the near-side lamp.

The juniors felt sudden tremors of alarm as they glimpsed the face. It was not a pleasant face by any means. It was ugly and unshaven, with a square jaw and a patch over one eye, which gave it a singularly evil look. The next instant another face became visible as the second figure moved into the light—a thin, crafty face, likewise unshaven and ugly.

"Oh, my hat!" breathed Kerr. "You've done it now, Figgys. I told you they were gipsies."

"Oh dear!" groaned Fatty Wynn.

To be faced by gipsies—and such evil-looking gipsies—at that hour, and with their hands tied behind them, was not a cheerful situation for Figgins & Co., to say the least of it.

But it was too late to retire now, had they thought of doing so. The men had seen their dark forms, and Figgins steeled his nerves to face it boldly.

He stepped up to the two men. As he did so, with his chums trailing behind him on the cord, there sounded two startled exclamations from the men. Figgins & Co. had forgotten the state of their faces, and now the two men started back, if anything, more alarmed at sight of the weird-looking figures than the juniors were alarmed at sight of them.

"By hokey!" growled the individual with the patch. "By hokey! What the—"

He was interrupted by his companion, who suddenly started forward and peered at Figgins.

"Why, they're blamed kids, Patchy!" he gasped huskily. "It's all right, mate. They're only kids wi' stuff on their faces. 'Ere, wotcher mean by frightenin' blokes like this 'ere?" he growled, catching Figgins by the shoulder.

"It—it's not our fault you—you're mistaken," stammered Figgins in rather a shaky voice. "We—we're not trying to frighten anyone. Some—some chaps have tied us up and shoved this beastly stuff on our faces. We—we stopped you to ask if you'd kindly cut us loose."

"By hokey!"

The two men blinked at the juniors, and then Snooky—for the rascals were none other than Tom Merry & Co.'s old enemies, Patchy and Snooky—lifted out one of the rusty carriage lamps and shone the flickering candle-light on the juniors.

He soon saw the cords binding them, and he grinned.

"It's all right, Patchy!" he grinned. "They're only

village kids bin up to larks, I s'pose. Nice time o' night for nippers to be out, blow me if it ain't! 'Ere, p'raps these kids, bein' village kids, can tell us what we wants to know, Patchy. If the van's bin through Plymsea they've seen it, mor'n likely."

Patchy nodded and looked at the juniors. In their present state, with floury paste over their features and patches of the sticky stuff on their clothes, they looked anything but public school boys on holiday.

"Yes," he said gruffly. "We'll cut 'em loose if they can tell us what we wants to know. Look here," he growled, eyeing Figgins, "do you 'appen to 'ave seen anything of a van—a big motor-caravan painted dark green—passing through these parts this last few days? There was a lot of kids aboard it—young gents on holiday, they was."

Figgins started, as did his chums. What such ruffianly-looking individuals wanted with the St. Jim's caravanners—for it was clearly their van that was referred to—they could not imagine. But while Figgins stared Patchy went on hurriedly.

"It ain't the kids we wanted," he said; "it's the driver, what's a mate of ours. We wants to see him badly, doesn't we, Snooky?"

Snooky growled and nodded.

"They've seen 'em!" he muttered eagerly. "I can see as they 'ave."

"Yes, we've seen the van you mention," said Figgins grimly. "In fact, it's those dashed chaps from the van who treated us like this! The rotters are camping in the wood there, and we've just left them—blow them! If—"

Figgins stopped abruptly as Kerr kicked him suddenly from behind. In a flash it dawned upon the New House leader that it was certainly unwise to give such information to such a pair of rough-looking men. It was the mention of the driver that had caused him to do so, of course. But it was too late for regrets now.

"I knowed it!" grinned Snooky, looking quickly at his companion. "That bloke at Sidmouth told us the truth, mate. Let's get on."

He whipped out a knife and slashed through the cord that bound Figgins to his companions, and then he cut through the cord round the wrists of each of the more than bewildered juniors.

"Better get 'ome to your mummies now, youngsters," he grinned. "Come on, Patchy!"

He gave the horse a kick, and the van rumbled on—greatly to the juniors' relief. Figgins & Co. stared after the men and the van as it rumbled away down the lane.

"Well!" gasped Kerr, with withering scorn. "You utter idiot, Figgys! Fancy giving rascals like them information about anyone! You were an idiot! Goodness knows what the beauties may be after!"

"I know it was rather incautious," granted Figgins. "But when he said it was the driver he wanted I could see nothing wrong. I expect it's all right."

"Perhaps so," said Kerr very doubtfully. "Anyway, let's get back, for goodness' sake! We'll mention this to Merry & Co. when we get the chance to chat to 'em again—if we do!"

"Chat!" snorted Figgins. "It will be a chat when I get the chance to talk to 'em again! Oh, come on!"

Figgins & Co. went on, thankful to be free at last, and dismissing the incident from their minds for the time being. They had troubles of their own to attend to. And some time later, as they rubbed and rubbed at their hair and faces with water and soap, and when they crawled into their sleeping-bags in the small hours of the morning, they passed remarks and made vows that would have startled Tom Merry & Co. had they heard them.

They little dreamed, however, of the bad turn they had all unknowingly already done Tom Merry & Co.

CHAPTER 11.

Rain—and Other Things!

"LOOKS like wain!"

"Let it!"

"Bai Jove, Lowthab, that is what I pwopose to do, as I weally have no powah to stop it!" said Arthur Augustus, with a remarkable and unusual flash of humour. "I said it looks like wain, and I wepeat that it looks like wain. I believe it is goin' to set in for a wet night, deah boys."

"I'm afraid so," said Tom Merry, rising from the grass and yawning. "Well, I'm jolly well going to turn in, you fellows. We've got to be busy in the morning, remember. You'll be able to get the van along across the next field, I suppose, Nippy?"

"There is a cart-track of sorts," said Nippy. "Yes, I'll manage that all right. You're getting the old bus loaded up with petrol, I suppose?"

"I ordered it, anyway," said Tom. "The garage people have done jolly well to get the van repaired so soon. We're lucky. I suppose you're jolly glad we'll be on the move again to-morrow, Nippy?"

Nippy nodded, his face clouded.

"I'll be glad, if only to be able to get rid of these dashed things," he said, with a faint grin, indicating his gingery moustache. "It takes me all my time to keep the blessed things from falling off. Anyway, I am jolly thankful we're moving on again to-morrow!"

"I'm keen to be moving, too," said Blake. "Only I'm sorry we shall be leaving Figgy behind. We haven't seen him lately."

"We'll hunt round for him before we go," grinned Tom Merry. "I'm rather astonished he hasn't tried to get square before this—though we haven't given him much chance. We've been keeping guard at night, and he daren't tackle us in the daytime together."

"No need to keep guard to-night, is there?" grunted Herries, glancing up at the black sky. "They won't be asses enough to raid us to-night, anyway. It's raining now."

"Well, no; we'll risk it to-night," said Tom. "Phew! We're for it, I'm afraid. Better get to bed quickly, chaps. Let the fire go out. Wish we had the old van to sleep in, though. We've been jolly lucky so far with the rain, but we look like getting it to-night. Cheerio, Nippy! I'm off!"

Tom Merry hurried for the big bell-tent, and his chums followed, also calling a cheery good-night to Nippy.

It was a bit of a crush in the bell-tent, though it was a big one—even without Baggy Trimble and Herries' feet, as Lowther put it—but there was only room for one in the little patrol tent they had purchased for the driver's use, and until the van was ready they had to put up with the discomfort of crowded quarters.

But that would soon be ended now. The caravan would be ready in the morning, and they would then return to the old sleeping arrangements. The three days mentioned by the garage people had expired, and the repairs had been carried out as promised. During those days Tom Merry & Co. had spent a jolly time rambling over the cliffs and along the Devonshire lanes, and bathing; and, though they had seen Figgins & Co. several times, there had been no further trouble between them. Knowing Figgy as he did, Tom Merry knew, however, that Figgins was only "biding his time," and he chuckled as he thought of Figgins' wrath and disgust when he discovered that they had gone on the morrow.

As Arthur Augustus had insisted upon pointing out, there was certainly every prospect of it being a wet night on this last night, however, and Tom Merry felt justified in dispensing with a guard. Scarcely had the juniors taken shelter in the tent when the rain came down with a rush, like a shower of pebbles rattling on the canvas of the tent.

"Jolly glad this is practically a new tent!" said Tom Merry, as they undressed by the flickering light of a hurricane lantern. "Heigh-ho! Just listen to it!"

"Wind's getting up, too," said Herries. "Never mind! It's all in the day's work, and we'll be asleep soon. Hope the wind doesn't blow the dashed tent down, anyway!"

"Well, if it does we shall get wet," grinned Tom Merry cheerfully. "Got to take the rough with the smooth in camping. And it's no good grouching over a bit of rain!"

"Who's grouching?" snorted Herries. "I wasn't!"

"I say, you chaps, the water's coming under the blessed flap already!" groaned Baggy Trimble. "Oh dear! How's a fellow going to sleep with this blessed row going on and this water coming in? If I'd known this was what you fellows would have let me in for I jolly well shouldn't have let you persuade me to join you on this trip, I can tell you!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Never mind," said Blake. "If the noise of the rain drowns Baggy's snoring, it'll be a blessing. And the water will save Baggy washing his neck, perhaps. Anyway, dry up. I'm going to sleep."

"So am I. If Trimble grouches again, sling a boot at him."

"I'll pitch him out in the rain if he does," vowed Blake. "Night, night all!"

There was a chorus of sleepy good-nights, and Baggy, who was about to open his mouth to complain again, wisely decided not to complain. And soon his rumbling snore was rivalling the roar and rush of the wind and rain outside the tent.

Tom Merry was the last to drop asleep, and he seemed to have been asleep less than five minutes when he awoke abruptly.

For a moment he could not realise where he was. He felt curiously uncomfortable, and then abruptly he realised that he was wet and not a little cold—and he remembered Trimble's claim that water was coming in under the tent.

It certainly was, and had been since Trimble's remark, apparently, for Tom felt wet through and decidedly uncomfortable. And drops of water were also falling on him from

above somewhere from the "practically new" tent. Outside the rain was fairly rattling on the tent, and the wind tugging at it in fierce gusts.

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Tom Merry. "What a night!"

He thought of getting up and lighting the lantern again, but realised the uselessness of doing so, and remained listening to the eerie swishing and creaking of the trees before the wind.

Then it happened quite abruptly:

Crash!

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Tom Merry.

The tent was gone—clean gone. It fluttered away into the dark, stormy night, and down on the campers pelted the rain remorselessly.

"Great Scott!"

"What—what—"

"Oh, bai Jove! Gwooooh!"

"Yarrooooooh!"

A wild howl of terror from Baggy Trimble awakened the rest of the hapless campers.

In the darkness and the rain, whilst the latter pelted down upon their defenceless heads, they struggled up in their soaked blankets, and blinked about them agast into the inky blackness.

All around them, floating in inches of water were blankets, and ground-sheets, and articles of clothing of every description, in addition to pots and pans and other camp equipment and utensils.

"Oh dear!"

"Make for the trees!" yelled Tom Merry. "Oh, great pip, this is awful!"

But worse was to come.

Even as Tom shouted, something hit him in the chest and almost bowled him over. From it burst a cloud of white, powdery substance. And that first thud was followed by other thuds as other missiles flew through the air to find targets on the hapless persons of the campers.

The air seemed full of a whitish powder, and then came several muffled explosions, and the air became full also of a most overpowering smell.

Tom Merry understood then—unbelievable as it seemed. It was a raid—a raid under cover of the darkness, wind, and rain.

"Under the trees!" he howled. "Quick! It's a raid! It's those dashed New House rotters! They're pitching things from the trees there!"

As Tom shouted, there came a yell from the black mass of trees.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

All doubts fled then. It was obviously a raid—though how Figgins & Co. had had the nerve to raid them in such a storm was almost beyond understanding. But they had done so—the laughter, the awful smell of the stink-bombs, the mess of floury paste on their drenched pyjamas, and the sudden collapse of their tent told them that.

The campers had been eager enough to get under the trees—that shout of laughter made them more than eager. It was not shelter they wanted now, but vengeance.

Tom Merry was the first to reach the shelter of them, and as he dived beneath the foliage, he fancied he glimpsed a dancing light away through the trees—the white light of an electric torch.

Tom had been lucky enough to find his blazer and shoes amid the smother, and he had also found his electric torch in a pocket, and he switched it on now as he dived under the trees. For fifty yards or more he plunged on, and then realising the hopelessness of pursuit, he gave it up and retraced his steps, fairly seething with wrath and dismay.

He found his chums crouching under the trees, lamenting and passing remarks concerning Figgins & Co. that would have made the hair of these cheery juniors curl could they have heard them.

"Well," groaned Tom Merry, "what's to be done now? Those awful rotters have got away, of course. Who on earth would have dreamed of this?"

"It's awful—simply awful!"

"Fearful, bai Jove!" wailed Arthur Augustus. "My clobber will be ruined. Perhaps you fellows will make a rush with me and try to wecavah some of it. Luckily I left some of my things at the farm until the van should be ready."

"Blow your dashed clobber!" snorted Blake. "Well, this is a go, and no mistake."

"It's going off now, I think," said Herries hopefully, gazing up at the sky. "Shall we put the tent up again? It's over against the fence, I think."

"I vote we leave it there," said Tom dismally. "What about that barn in the next field? No good thinking of the tent—everything's sopping wet through. I vote—Great Scott! What's happened to Nippy? I'd forgotten all about him."

So had the others—it had taken them all their time to

think about themselves. But they glanced now towards the small patrol tent just visible across the dark clearing. It was still standing, and seemed unharmed—though they could only just make out the vague shadow of it.

"Lucky beggar!" groaned Blake dismally. "Let him go on snoozing, anyway. Blessed if I know how on earth he could go sleeping through the row we made."

Tom Merry was wondering that, too. It seemed impossible that Nippy—usually a light sleeper—should not have awakened at the terrific commotion.

With sudden decision Tom left his chums and the shelter of the trees. The wind seemed to have died down suddenly, and the rain had almost cleared, and a sudden gleam of moonlight shone through a rift in the clouds on to the rain-soaked clearing. Tom ran across to the little patrol tent and pulled open the flap, which was unlatched. He switched on his torch and flashed it into the tent.

Then he jumped. The tent was empty. On the ground was an untidy jumble of blankets and ground-sheets.

That was all.

"Great pip!" gasped Tom Merry. "What the thump—" He ran back and broke the rather astonishing news to his comrades. They all looked alarmed.

"Nippy gone!" gasped Blake. "But—but how could he? If he'd gone after Figgy and his lot, we should have seen him."

"Might have spotted them before we did," suggested Digby.

"He would have given the alarm before Figgy could have done anything if he had," said Tom Merry. "Well, this beats the band! Half a minute!"

He ran back to the little tent, and all but Trimble—who was groaning and shivering dismally—followed him curiously. Tom stepped inside the tent, and, flashing on his torch, he stooped and felt the blankets. They were cold. Nippy had been from his bed some time—that much was obvious.

"Looks as if he's cleared off!" muttered Digby slowly.

"Rubbish!" snapped Tom Merry warmly. "Why should he when he knew we were starting off to-morrow? If he'd intended to go he'd have gone days ago. But—but it's rummy!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Well, the sooner we find shelter for the rest of the night the better, anyway," said Tom, setting his lips. "Figgy's fairly had his own back, and it's no good ybining about it. I vote we carry what stuff we can to that old barn in the next field. It's never locked, I believe."

"Oh, good wheeze!"

"A bwain-wave, bai Jove!"

The juniors cheered up a little. It would be dry in the barn at all events. They started to work without delay. As Tom said, it was no good worrying about Nippy yet. And all of the juniors fully expected him to turn up before they had finished the job they were on.

But all the stuff was carted to the barn, and things made as comfortable as was possible in the circumstances, and even by that time Nippy had not come back.

It was really beginning to look as though Digby's suspicion was true after all. It was impossible to think that Figgins & Co. could have captured him and taken him off with them. That theory was out of the question—especially considering the evidence of the cold blankets.

"Well, it beats me," said Tom at last. "And if he has gone—well, I'm jolly well surprised, I can tell you. And if he's really left us in the lurch for good—well, we are fairly in the soup!"

"My hat! Yes."

It was a dismaying reflection, but the juniors realised they would have to make the best of it. And they did. There was plenty of straw—clean, dry straw—in the barn, and some of the juniors had succeeded in salvaging some of their clothes which had escaped getting wet by getting mixed up in the blankets, and eventually they settled down, Tom Merry deciding to leave the lantern burning, so that if Nippy should return he would see the glimmer of it through the window from the camp in the next field—or what had been the camp.

There was little sleep during the rest of that terrible night for the St. Jim's caravanners, however.

Dawn was creeping through the grimy window of the barn when Tom Merry dropped off. For Tom, besides being tired and dismal, was worried—very worried. The more he reflected on the matter the more certain did he become that Nippy had not deserted them, and that something serious had happened to him.

CHAPTER 12.

Figgins Explains.

DESPITE their almost sleepless night, Tom Merry & Co. were up very early indeed the following morning—or, rather, that same morning—and they emerged from the gloomy barn into a blaze of sunshine that cheered them up wonderfully. All around were pools of water, and the ditches of the fields were running full. From trees and hedges glistening and sparkling rain-drops were still dripping, but the sunshine was rapidly drying the grass, and there was little evidence of the night of storm showing.

They took with them piles of dry straw and wood from the barn, and very soon a huge fire was burning cheerily on the grass of the clearing again. On hurdles made of boughs they stretched their clothes to dry, and then they set to work on breakfast. As they still hoped that Nippy might return, they deemed it better not to put the tent up yet again. An examination of the tent soon showed them a long length of rope tied to one of the guy-ropes of the tent, and they realised that Figgins & Co. had not only loosened the tent-pegs, but had hauled away the tent bodily, thus exposing them to the elements.

They did not worry much about what was past; with the mystery of Nippy's absence still unsolved, and the uncertainty of the future, the St. Jim's caravanners had quite enough to worry about. The grass still being damp, they sat on ground-sheets for breakfast, and over the meal they discussed the situation gloomily.

"We might get a driver to take Nippy's place from the garage where the caravan is," said Tom Merry. "But—but I think we'd better wait for a day, at least, to see if he turns up. The more I think about it the more certain am I that Nippy hasn't deserted us, you chaps. He's proved himself a rattling good sort again and again."

"Yaas, wathah!" agreed Arthur Augustus; and the rest gave a simultaneous nod of the head.

"We'll get everything packed in readiness to clear out, though, in case he turns up," went on Tom. "I think we ought to run over to the garage and see the— Well, I'm hanged!"

Tom Merry leapt to his feet, and stared at the gateway leading from the field on to the rough cart-track that wound round the edge of the woodland.

Three figures had suddenly appeared there—three well known figures.

They were Figgins, Kerr, and Fatty Wynn.

Tom's chums saw them, and all but Trimble leapt up instantly. They stared, dumbfounded at the check of the New House trio in visiting them so soon after what had taken place.

Then they saw that Figgins was waving a white handkerchief—obviously the white flag of peace.

"Pax, you chaps!" he called out, a faint grin on his cheery features. "It's pax! We've come to talk something over with you chaps—something rather important, we think."

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"Oh, have you?" snorted Tom Merry. "Well, of all the cheek!"

Figgins & Co. stopped some yards away.

"Is it pax or not?" called Figgy.

Tom Merry & Co. glared at the three New House fellows. Only their respect for the white flag prevented them from flinging themselves at the grinning trio.

"You can come along, Figgins," said Tom Merry, drawing a deep breath. "We'll make it pax for the moment. But if this is another of your larks—"

"It's not a lark this time, you fellows," said Figgins.

He started forward, his features becoming serious.

"It's about last night, partly," he said, lowering the "flag." "We'd like to know if you chaps have lost anything of value at all, or if anything is wrong?"

"What do you mean?" snapped Blake. "Out with it before I let myself go, you rotters!"

"You won't break the truce if it proves to be a mare's nest?" asked Figgins, with a faint grin.

"If it's no leg-pulling stunt," said Tom Merry, eyeing the New House trio curiously.

"It's serious—at least, we think it may be," said Figgins. "Look here, are you chaps sure there's nothing wrong—you've had nothing pinched at all—last night, I mean?"

Tom Merry shook his head in puzzled wonder.

"No; nothing pinched that we know of," he said, staring. "But—there's plenty wrong for that matter. We've lost our blessed driver. Nippy—you've seen him—vanished last night some time during the storm, and we haven't seen him since."

"Wha-at?"

Figgins & Co. stared aghast at Tom, their faces suddenly paling.

"Nippy—gone!" said Figgins. "That driver chap?"

Tom nodded.

"He must have gone some time between when we turned in at eleven, and when you rotters turned up," he said, eyeing Figgins curiously. "Why, do you know anything about him?" he added eagerly.

Figgins & Co. looked at each other.

"I'll tell you all about it, though it isn't so very much, and it may be all serene, after all," said Figgy. "You remember when you chaps turned us loose with our arms tied the other night?"

"Yes; go on!"

"Well, we reached the lane, and were about to cross it, when a caravan came along. We thought—or rather, I thought—it was some holiday caravanners, but it proved to be gipsies. They were a rough-looking pair, and you can imagine how we felt being tied up and helpless. We asked them to release us, though, and to our amazement they asked us if we'd seen anything of a motor-caravan with some schoolboys with it. We guessed at once they meant you chaps."

"Oh!" muttered Tom Merry. "My hat! Had—had one a black patch over one eye, Figgy?"

"Yes; and a nice pair of brutes they looked!"

"Patchy and Snooky!" breathed Blake.

"That's what they called each other," said Figgy, staring.

"Anyway, like a fool, I told them you were camped here, and they cut us loose and went on down the lane. I was a fool to tell them. I saw it afterwards. I meant to tell you fellows about it, but—but—well, I didn't get a chance the next day, and we all forgot about it afterwards until last night."

"Last night?" breathed Tom, a dim suspicion of the truth dawning in upon him. "Go on, Figgy—quick! What about last night?"

"We saw them again—at least, we think it was them," said Figgy, growing alarm showing in his face. "We almost blundered into two men when we were creeping through the wood to your camp last night. They were carrying something—something like a sack. We got a fright, thinking they were poachers. They passed us, and then one stopped and struck a match, and—and I spotted his face. There was a patch over one eye. I saw it clearly for a second, and then the match went out."

"Bai Jove!"

"Even then we didn't realise anything was wrong—the patch didn't bring recollection to me then. We just took them for poachers. We were too eager to pay you fellows back to bother about anything else. It was only when we talked things over this morning that we began to wonder. And—well, Kerr here said we ought to come and see what you fellows had to say about it. But—but if that chap Nippy's vanished—"

"They've got him!" breathed Tom Merry, his face going white. "Those brutes have got Nippy at last! And, great Scott, the brutes will be miles away by this! Oh, if you'd only warned us, Figgy!"

"But—what does it all mean?" demanded Kerr.

"I'll jolly soon tell you that!" said Tom.

He told them all there was to know of the mystery surrounding Nippy from Nowhere. Tom knew the story would

A SMILE,

A LAUGH,

A ROAR!

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"BUNTER CAUGHT!"

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be safe with Figgins & Co. The faces of the New House trio paled visibly as they listened.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Figgy, at length. "We've fairly done it, then! What blind fools we were not to see something wrong in it. I say, it's rotten!"

"It is rotten!" said Tom Merry, biting his lips. "And we can do nothing—absolutely nothing. We haven't informed the police, and we can't follow without a driver. The brutes have done us after all! Poor old Nippy! If only we could get a driver, or do something—"

He broke off abruptly, his eyes gleaming.

"There's one chance—a pretty slim one, but a chance," he went on tensely. "Will you lend us your bikes and camping outfits, Figgy? If we can get on the trail—three of us—before it's too late, we may do something yet to outwit those villains!"

"Bai Jovè! A good ideal, dear boy!"

"The rest of you can stay behind, until you get a driver, anyway!" snapped Tom. "If you can manage to get hold of one, you can follow on the trail at once. It should be easy enough to trail a horse caravan—especially if we started without delay. Well, what about it, Figgy? Will you do it?"

"No!" snapped Figgins. His own eyes were gleaming resolutely now. "No fear! We've done the damage, and we're going to be the fellows to undo it."

"But—but you scarcely know the rascals. Look here, one of us will come with you. Fatty Wynn can stay behind. I'll take his place, and Blake can be in charge of the van."

There was a silence, and then all the juniors started to press their claims—all of them wanted to go. But Tom Merry won the day, and it was finally settled that the three to start on the trail—a trail that was destined to lead to more excitement and adventure than the trio bargained for—should be Tom Merry, Figgins, and Kerr.

No time was lost, and within half an hour Figgins, Kerr, and Tom Merry had packed up, and were in the saddle, having picked up the wheel-marks of the caravan on the rain-soaked road, and they vanished along the steaming road westward. Blake and the others lost no time after that. To their disappointment the garage people could not supply a driver, but they got one, for all that. One of the farmer's sons, a burly Devonshire youth, who drove his father's car, and who had been in the Mechanical Transport during the War, jumped at the chance of a caravan "holiday," and just after noon that same day, Noah's Ark was on the road again, lumbering along the coast westward with its load of eager, excited adventurers—only Baggy Trimble being apprehensive of what lay before them.

That fat, reward-hunting youth was apprehensive and dismayed as he saw his chances of earning the "substantial reward" fading still further away from him. He wished now from the bottom of his fat mind that he had risked the colonel's fury and claimed the reward, for he saw no chance of getting it by postal means.

But though the rumbling caravan was leaving Plymsea far behind, Baggy Trimble was destined to see Colonel Brockways again sooner than he expected.

THE END.

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NERVE! Without modern machinery and European science to back him up in his ambitious schemes, the arch-criminal Prince Yen How, a "Yellow Napoleon," can do nothing, so he proceeds to kidnap ten of the cleverest scientists of the age!

Yen How's Astonishing Coup!

THE following day was one that Penny Rudd always looked back upon as the most irritating period in his existence.

Overwrought nature caught the boy on the rebound, so to speak. He awoke next morning with a head and hand throbbing like the exhaust of a petrol engine. Stubbornly determined to continue the hunt for How, he slowly dressed and staggered down to a make-believe breakfast. He would even have essayed the journey to Scotland Yard but that Shen—on his own initiative—sent a startling S.O.S. call to the nearest doctor.

That settled Pen's activities for the day. He was peremptorily ordered back to bed, bluntly refused, and was as bluntly informed that he would certainly collapse the moment he left the hotel—and that, he was coldly told, would mean a month in bed—instead of a day.

"But I simply must get along to Scotland Yard," he protested weakly. "I'm abominably late already."

"You'll end the journey in the nearest hospital!" the medico snapped. "You're in a high fever, man. Any more monkeying with those inflamed cuts, and it'll be a cemetery you'll want—not even a hospital!"

"I'll phone Sir Nash if any news that's knocking about," Fan suggested.

Pen had to give in, though he would have been more reluctant had he listened to Fan Shen's peculiar way of asking the Yard for news.

"I'm velly, velly ill, Si' Nash," Fan was saying a moment later. "I'm lambling—not able to know anybody. Nonono! You not callee loud! Doc' say 'im only chance keep quiet allee day!"

To Pen he was equally definite and—er—truthful.

"Si' Nash, 'im say youl not t'wooly," he reported. "I'm going off hunt yellow debbil now. Let Mis' Ludd know allee noos li'l latel on."

So in sheer boredom Pen spent a day and night of restful laziness, and was vastly better by next morning. Briskly ordering Fan to go and chivvy the breakfast department, he was just finishing the meal when his yellow pal returned some time later with Inspector Welbeck in tow.

"Hallo, Rudd!" Welbeck smiled. "This almond-eyed monstrosity gave me to understand you had a temp. of 110 or thereabouts. Thought you'd make quite an interesting sight, so insisted upon being shown your room."

"Penny Ludd velly well again now," Fan nodded shamelessly. "I'm velly, velly ill this day yestelday."

Pen shied a pillow at his over-careful friend and pushed a chair towards the inspector.

"Any news of Yen How?" he asked eagerly.

The smile vanished from Welbeck's face. In a savage grumble he vented his opinion of China and everything and everybody connected with it.

"No offence to you, Shen," he grumbled, "but it's easier to make a clam speak than a Chink—when he doesn't wish to. We had an army of London police trailing Pennysfields all day and half the night. We ransacked every place on our black-list—and many that weren't—and we drew a blessed blank every time."

"But the search goes on?" Pen asked anxiously.

"It goes on, but I don't go with it," Welbeck said. He hesitated. Then: "The chief's detailed me for another job—a queer affair in which the yellow hand again shows itself."

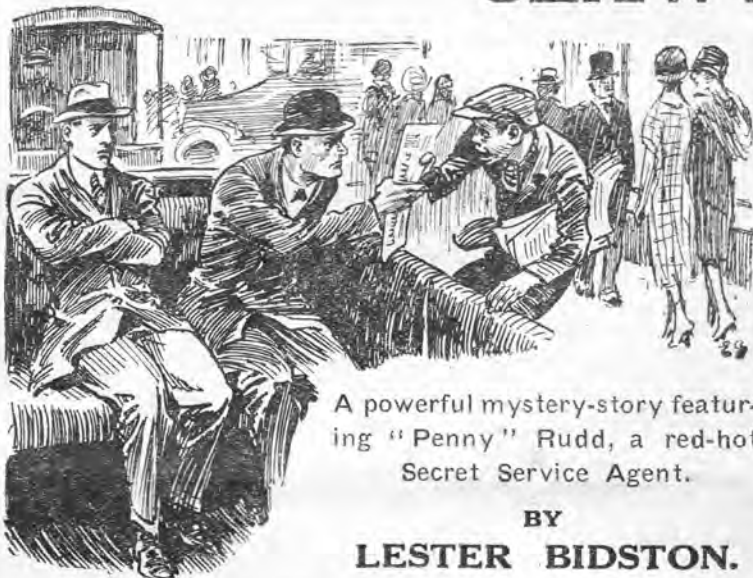
"Um—yes?" Pen murmured. He had little interest in any yellow hand except that of Yen How, though he hardly liked to impress the fact on Welbeck.

"Yes," the inspector continued, "the Chinese Embassy phoned us two hours ago, asking for a man to be sent across. When I arrived Dr. Si Foo, the ambassador, was rampaging because someone had been using his name and position for a purpose decidedly fishy."

Again he hesitated. He favoured Fan with a doubtful side-glance, as if uncertain how far he could be trusted. But Fan, quick to understand that appraising look, soon made his position clear.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 917.

THE CRIMSON CLAW!



A powerful mystery-story featuring
"Penny" Rudd, a red-hot
Secret Service Agent.

BY
LESTER BIDSTON.

"Here, inspector, I'm proud to be Rudd's humble helper," he said quietly, but in surprisingly good English. "In my own country, however, I am a favoured disciple of the Dalai Lama of Lasa, and one of many sworn to free China from those who are ruining it."

"All correct, Welbeck," Pen added quickly. "China's torn from end to end by robber chiefs, of whom How is the greatest. The lama class are dead against them, and have no time for crook activities at home or abroad." He laid a fond hand on Shen's shoulder. "Old Fanny's never let me down yet, and never will do. He knows that I work for China's good, as he does."

Welbeck nodded.

"One has to be careful," he said by way of apology. "Well, it appears Dr. Foo had two messages this morning, the one regretting that Tabasco had been unable to meet him, as arranged; the other from Elson Storr's wife, asking if her husband was still with the ambassador, as he hadn't been home all night. You'll understand Foo's feelings when I tell you that he'd never spoken to the men in his life, and had certainly not issued an invitation to either."

A startled look crept into Pen's eyes. Instinctively his hand crept to his breast-pocket, but he maintained silence until the tale was told.

"Being strangers to England, you fellows will hardly understand the importance of Storr and Tabasco," Welbeck continued. "You will, though, when I tell you that Storr is England's premier aero inventor, and that Tabasco is the great explosives man who produced 'malagnite.'"

"Even in China we marvel over Tabasco's terrible explosive," Fan admitted. "But how comes he to be in London, his home is Madrid?"

"He'd been attending the Science Conference that ended yesterday," Welbeck began. Then, seeing the doubt on Fan's face, he added: "The wise men of Europe hold an annual meeting to exchange ideas, London being the favoured spot this year." He turned again to Pen. "Phoning from the Embassy, Mrs. Storr told me her husband started off to meet Foo at the Grand Oriental—"

"And met Yen How instead!" Pen groaned.

"Rather a tall guess," Welbeck smiled.

"No guess at all," Pen answered bitterly. "I'm absolutely certain that whilst you were raking Limehouse last night How was working off the very plot that brought him to England."

Welbeck started. "I don't follow your line of reasoning," he answered shortly.

"Your mention of the scientific gathering told me all I wanted to know," Pen replied.

"The coup of the 'Crimson Claw'!" Fan whispered. Before the inspector could voice his impatience Pen drew a crushed paper from his pocket.

"Listen to this, Welbeck," he said, his face drawn and haggard. "These ten devils have all the knowledge we want. When that knowledge is ours, then will the 'Crimson Claw' bare its talons and the world bend its knee to its master. Chang Fu but waits the word at the 'Kiss of Joy'!"

"Where did you get that? Why didn't I know about it earlier?" Welbeck demanded harshly.

Briefly Pen told of the powdering of Forshaw's writing pad and that which followed.

"When we reached the Yard you were missing, of course," he concluded. "I did mention it to Sir William, but we were both thinking more of finding you than the enigma of this 'Claw' record."

"Anyway, what could we have done?" Welbeck asked with a shrug. "There's no names mentioned, and we've thousands of brainy men in Europe. I'll have the paper, all the same, to add to the Vidoc records."

"It mentions ten 'devils,'" Fan pointed out quietly. "They've got two, and how many more, I wonder?"

Welbeck's frown deepened as he jumped for the door.

"You're right, Shen," he nodded. "I'm off to the Oriental, to find out if the spurious Dr. Foo really did meet Storr."

"And we're with you," Pen said quickly.

But they were not to reach the famous hotel in peace. Fleet Street had heard a whisper, and had been amazingly quick in letting all London know about it.

A racing, howling newsboy recognised Welbeck in Piccadilly. Grinning wickedly, he jumped on the footboard at the risk of his neck, and thrust a damp sheet into the face of the inspector.

"Ere y'are, Mr. 'Ome Sieritary!" he yelled. "'Orrid body-snatchin' affair in Wes' End! Piper, sir?"

Tossing the urchin a shilling for his cheek, Welbeck opened the paper and stared sourly at the black scare-lines:

KIDNAPPED?

Elson Storr Vanishes!
Alleged Outrage in London!

Then followed the highly-coloured suggestion that a jealous European Power had aimed a shrewd blow at England by stealing the famous aero expert.

As the car drew up at the Oriental's entrance Welbeck dropped the paper with a gesture of annoyance. His temper, frayed by the knowledge that publicity must now hamper every move he made, was not improved by the sight of half a dozen reporters eagerly questioning Manager Jules Picton.

"I vaire sorry, mon-sieurs," Jules was saying. "It ees nothing to do with the Orientale. Ze men you mention, and others, left here after a quiet dinner. It ees noddings. Ze maire's nest, eet ees."

Welbeck shouldered his way through the group, then turned and faced them with a wry grin.

"You'll get out, boys," he said. "If M. Picton has anything to say, he'll say it to me first. Now, run away! If there's any stuff in it for your rags, I'll see you get it—at the right time."

Until the disconsolate reporters were out of ear-shot he maintained a sour silence. Then, explaining his companions' connection with the affair, he asked bluntly for full details of Elson Storr's visit to the hotel.

"He arrive at ze eight o'clock and left before

ten," Jules answered. "Also, Monsieur le Prefect, I tell not ze ink-slingers of it, but he was one of eight who came at ze hour asking for Dr. Foo of the Embassy."

"Oh, you were expecting Foo?" Welbeck asked sharply.

"I was not, but in he walked about eight-fifteen," Jules answered. "He ordered ze private salon, and dinner, quickly."

"You're sure it was Dr. Foo?" Welbeck demanded.

"But, yes," Jules shrugged. "Ze good Foo vaire often 'onour ze Orientale."

"You'll be interested to hear," Welbeck answered slowly, "that Dr. Foo was the guest of honour at a Chinese Republic gathering last night."

"But he was here!" Jules protested. "He spoke to me! I accompanied him to ze private room!"

"You accompanied someone, but not Foo," Welbeck asserted. "Well, what next?"

"Vaire leetle," Jules replied. "Ze dinner was ordinaire, vaire soon over. Ze alias Foo's guests left between ten and ten-ten."

"In a bunch?" Pen asked quietly.

"But no; zay go in ones, twos, go-as-you-please," Jules answered surprisingly. "Ze Dr. Foo left by his lonesome, soon after."

The three detectives exchanged glances of amazement. It all seemed so ordinary, so utterly commonplace, that it was impossible to suspect anything sinister, except the mysterious impersonation of Dr. Foo.

"But what happened at the dinner?" Welbeck asked impatiently.

"We will ask Henri, ze waiter in charge," Jules replied.

"And we'll ask in the room where the dinner was given," Pen suggested.

"Good! I'll phone the chief whilst you're finding Henri," Welbeck said briskly.

The room held no hint of mystery. Furnished in quiet taste, it was used solely for private dinner parties. Pen only asked one question during Welbeck's absence.

"The door yonder, M. Picton. Where does it lead to?" he asked.

"Ze office of ze head-waiter, and a store-room for ze wines ordinaire," Jules explained, opening the door with a flourish.

Pen and Fan glanced inside the place, but offered no comment. Then Welbeck bustled in, and, almost on his heels, the dapper little Frenchman who had "overseered" the serving of the dinner.

"Chief's been busy on the wires, and has confirmed the newspaper report," Welbeck announced. "Eight famous scientists have vanished, Rudd, and he's making the wires hum, I can tell you." He turned briskly to Henri. "Now, le petit Henri, let us hear about the feed you gave last night."

"Ze bill of faire—" Henri began.

"I don't want the bill of fare, or the wine list," Welbeck interrupted. "I want a list of the guests, and any scraps of conversation you remember."

Henri shook his head sorrowfully.

"Foo I knew, and one other, the great wireless man, Signor Enrico. They spoke of many things—wireless, warships, and the wisdom unfolded at the Science Conference."

"And Dr. Foo belittled all this Western wisdom?" Pen suggested suddenly.

"He politely sneered at European culture, saying that it was new and crude, and that China had forgotten more than Europe had yet learned?"

"He did," Henri admitted, wide-eyed. "I do not remember you at ze table, sare."

"When his guests smiled politely," Pen continued, "he let slip that he knew a bit of old Chinese wizardry. He offered to convince them that China's science was level, or ahead, of the best that Europe could produce?"

"He did, if they would question him one at a time," Henri agreed, in

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 becoming 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 Japshop, a haunt in the neighbourhood of Pennyfields.

Not long afterwards Penny Rudd and Fan Shen, backed up by the police, raid the place, and Forshaw and Welbeck, who have both sampled the extraordinary hypnotic powers of Yen How, are liberated. Yen How, however, escapes.

(Now read on.)

open admiration. "They agreed, then he turn ze staff out and lock ze door."

Welbeck did the same; at least, he politely hinted to Jules that they could now carry on alone.

Chang Goes Back!

A MAZINGLY lucky shots you've made, Rudd," Welbeck said grudgingly. "But I don't see—" "You would if you knew Yen How as we know him," Pen sighed. "This gathering of the world's brainy men has given him a glorious chance, and he's been quick to seize it. By ways that really don't matter, he has persuaded them to gather round this table, cunningly tempted them to dangerous solitary interviews in the room yonder, then simply stolen their will-power at his leisure!"

Welbeck smiled.

"And let them go an hour afterwards?" he asked.

"Why not?" Fan intervened. "Once he had subdued



The knife, venomously pointed, hovered for a split second within three inches of Chang's chest. Then came a swift movement as a leaping shadow clutched the wrist in a grip of iron.

their will to his they could leave here speaking and acting normally, yet be carrying out his wishes to the last thought."

"I don't get you!" Welbeck snapped.

"You'll admit they vanished," Pen said quickly. "Well, suppose he wanted to get them to—say Berlin. He would order one man to travel by aeroplane, using the name of Jones; another by train and steamer, under the name of Smith. In this case, I'm convinced that eight Europeans, apparently normal, are now on separate journeys that will all end in China, and that you have as much chance of stopping them as I have of—er—jumping over London."

"If I hadn't experienced something of that yellow ghoul's magic, I'd call you both daft!" Welbeck muttered. "Anyway, I'll wait until they don't get far without passports, even if they smuggle themselves out of England."

"How will have foreseen that difficulty?" Pen replied. "He has men and money by the million. He'll use none of the regulation routes for dodging back to China, I'm very certain."

"But what motive can he have?" Welbeck demanded. "Tell me the motive behind this fantastic body-snatching, and I'll begin to believe your theory."

"I tell you that Yen How is a yellow Napoleon, with all the magic of the East for added power," Pen answered. "He aims to dominate China, and perhaps far more than China. But he knows he can do nothing without modern machinery and European science; so, like the pirate he is, he's stolen the pick of the world's brains to forward his aims!"

Welbeck looked slightly amused, despite his worries. After all, China was a long way off, and he had troubles aplenty on his own doorstep.

"Bah! He'll never get near China, with or without his victims!" he snorted contemptuously. "You forget he's now up against European organisation, not the thousand-year-old ideas of China!"

"Im smilin' so far, allee same," Fan lisped cuttingly.

"So far; but it'll be a short laugh, laddie," Welbeck answered. "I'm going back to the Chief now, and within the hour the net'll spread all over Europe. You fellows had better accompany me."

"No; we'll leave you that glory," Pen smiled. "We're more at home in Chinatown, and we're going back there, if you'll answer one question first."

"Go ahead," Welbeck invited.

"I want to know your intentions regarding Chang Fu," Pen said quietly. "You hold him for the Vidoc crime, but you know he had no real part in that affair."

"How d'you know?" Welbeck demanded.

"It was openly stated in the 'Joyshop' that his knife was clean," Pen answered. "You can't convict him. But what will you do with him?"

"Hold him, in the hope that he'll weaken and put us on the track of the guilty party," the inspector replied.

"He'll never do that," Pen said; adding quickly: "I've a use for Mr. Chang, and if I've done anything to help you

"You've saved me from becoming How's catspaw, for one thing," Welbeck admitted gratefully. "Carry on, Rudd."

And carry on Rudd did. At first the C.I.D. man bluntly refused; then, as the scheme became clearer, he frowned, hesitated, and finally consented, if the great "Nabobs" of the Yard would permit.

A tall, hard-bitten Chinaman paused at the corner of Poppy Lane, and stared reflectively up and down the India Dock Road. Face impassive, movements unhurried, he lazily resumed his slouch along the ill-lit street—a bland Oriental taking a late stroll on a particularly wretched night.

Yet, during the momentary pause, the slat eyes had quested every visible inch of the gloomy road, and the ears had tensed to aching pitch, for Chang Fu was sorely puzzled. Even now, he could hardly believe that these white mandarins had been fools enough to let him go.

He had the feelings of a lamb unexpectedly released from the jaws of a hungry panther. Arrested for murder forty-eight hours back, he had maintained a stubborn silence. It eventually reduced his interrogators to such vicious temper that he looked for nothing less than decapitation.

Instead, he had been brought before them an hour ago, sourly told that his unstained knife proved his innocence, and ordered to clear out of the station—and out of England. And gladly he would go—once his work was done. Inwardly he smiled at the thoughts of that work and what the "foreign devils" would think of it.

Meanwhile, he hoped that his assistant, Lin Lim, had been discreet in his management of the "Joyshop." The place



Address all letters: The Editor, The "Gem" Library, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Write me, you can be sure of an answer in return.

A MEETING!

IN the course of my travels to and from the office I often see GEM readers with the familiar red and blue cover of the old paper sticking out of their pockets. Sometimes, too, I stop and speak to them and ask for their opinion of the GEM. By this method I am often able to pick up useful tit-bits of information. The other day there was an enthusiastic reader sitting next to me in the train. No doubt he saw me, or rather felt my eyes upon him, for we began to talk. And he was full of the GEM! "You seem deeply interested in that paper," I observed. "Rather!" came his emphatic reply. "It's the best boys' paper going." I coughed. Being a modest person, I felt that words were not necessary. Apparently my reader chum thought that the cough signified disapproval, for he glared at me—I like to think of that glare now—as much as to say that I wasn't possessed of enough intelligence to know a good thing when I saw it. I drew him out, however, and the cough was forgotten. He's just crazy with delight because the GEM yarns are longer. We talked for the remainder of the journey, and the nice things he said about "his Editor" were enough to send me post haste to a hatter's for a new bowler. Little did he know that "his Editor" was the fellow who had chatted with him for half an hour or more, and really I had let him trot out all those nice things so long that I hadn't the face to tell him who I was when we parted. But he'll know now! But what struck me most during that meeting was his loyalty to the old paper. I like to think all Gemites are like that, for loyalty is a fine thing.

MAKING IT UP!

I received a letter two days ago from a loyal reader up in Sheffield who seems fed up because he has quarrelled with his chum. Apparently they have been real pals for three years, and this is their first serious quarrel. I must confess I can't see quite where the blame lay in this particular tiff—more like six of one and half a dozen of the other. But the trouble is that these fellows are each too proud to be the first to shake hands and be good friends again. My correspondent is waiting for "X" to come

forward and make it up, and vice versa. Now this is where the solution comes in. By the next mail I received a letter from "X"—also asking for advice. Extraordinary, wasn't it? Putting the two letters together, I was able to see at a glance that both the principals in this affair wanted to make it up quickly. "What should they do?" Your Editor solved the difficulty. Each of these reader chums of mine received a letter from me in which he was instructed to meet at a certain spot in their locality at a certain time. I urged them both to be punctual. When they met they were to extend their right and left hands respectively and shake—then talk! Thus the difficulty of being the first to come forward, of being the first to sink his pride, was got over. Sounds a peculiar way of "meddling with other people's affairs," doesn't it? But it worked. For by the first post this morning I received a letter from each of those readers thanking me for putting matters right diplomatically. Of course it isn't always possible to work the oracle like that, and really it isn't necessary. Good friends must quarrel sometimes, and there should never be any hesitancy to make it up. There's no loss of pride in being the first to come forward; there's no loss of dignity if one of you, aware of a mistake you have made, apologise in a manly way. Rather is there dignity gained! Friends are scarce—don't lose them over silly misunderstandings!

THE HOLIDAY ANNUAL!

This bumper budget of stories is Now on Sale at all newsagents, and will sell like hot cakes. See to it, chums, that you bag a copy before it's too late. "Never put off till to-morrow that which you can do to-day" is a good motto. Trot round to your newsagent now!

NEXT WEEK'S PROGRAMME.

"THE BOY WITH A SECRET!"

By Martin Clifford.

That's the title of next week's St. Jim's yarn. You'll enjoy every word of it, take it from me.

"THE CRIMSON CLAW!"

By Lester Bidston.

There is another magnificent instalment of this amazing mystery and adventure story next week. Don't miss it!

"GUSSY!"

Dear old Arthur Augustus D'Arcy figures in next Wednesday's "Jingles." Our rhymster talks of Gussy's taste in ties and fancy waistcoats, also his prowess on the playing-fields. You'll like this jingle—it rattles along in swinging style. Make sure of all these treats by ordering your GEM now! Cheerio, chums!

Your Editor.

"THE CRIMSON CLAW!"

(Continued from previous page.)

had certain secrets, and Lim was somewhat free of tongue and temper unless ably controlled.

At that moment Chang's heart missed a beat. Here was his "Joyshop." Its doors should have been closed, its windows darkened an hour since. Instead, the place was lighted in every room; the door stood invitingly open, with two uniformed policemen on the threshold and two more chums near the alleyway into which he had almost blundered.

But, to the watchful constables, he never seemed to look at the place. His pace never paused nor varied an inch, his expression continued hopelessly wooden, yet his nimble mind was sourly pondering the problem, and he had already decided to make for Wong's bed-house. There he was known, and there, if anywhere, he would hear the truth of Lim's foolishness.

Wong's doss-house stood at the far end of the lane, and when Chang Fu slouched into the feeding-room it was already crowded with two score of coloured sailor-men—a place stifling with coarse tobacco-smoke, yet orderly, and open to all comers.

Seating himself at a table against the wall, Chang's half-closed eyes searched the faces of those present, seeking Lin Lim, or those who had visited his dope-shop in the past.

But he searched in vain for Lim or his "Joy-shop" patrons; for they, as we know, were pondering their miseries in a Limehouse lock-up. Instead, he saw a stranger staring at him intently, a stranger whose peaked, yellow face was set in cold, wolfish anger.

The fellow crossed quickly to Chang's table and leaned forward, malevolent and challenging.

"You the bangshop keeper?" he asked in Cantonese. "You're Chang Fu, aren't you? Lily-livered Fu, who sold his pals to save his own skin—eh?"

"Friend, you lie!" Chang answered, unmoved by the insult. "Chang came here to ask why the police-mandarins are in his 'Joyshop.'"

The stranger's lips twisted in a wry sneer. "Lily-livered hound, you know!" he whispered hotly. "Yesterday the police held you safe, last night they raided your poppy-house, and to-night you are free! You sold your friends, I say again, to save your own skin!" He leaned forward, his slit eyes pin-points of green flame, his mouth trap-like in its grimness. "And, amongst others, you sold my venerable father, you—you unhallowed pig!"

With that last word, the fellow's hand lifted above table-level, and a long, thin knife flashed at Chang's breast.

A Dangerous Hazard!

ASSUREDLY, Chang thought his evil course was run in that tense second. He was unarmed—the police had seen to that—and never a chance was there for dodging in that confined space.

He saw the white gleam of steel thrusting straight for his heart, and he saw, as in a dream, two leaping shadows that clutched the thick, hairy wrist in grips of iron.

The knife, venomously pointed, hovered for a split second within three inches of his chest. Then came a jerk, a straining heave, a sudden explosion of movement. The assailant, balanced unsteadily on a rickety stool, was pitched backwards and away from Chang. And then, never pausing in his whirling movement, he wriggled two paces on hands and knees, leapt to his feet, and dashed for the door!

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 917.

It was over. Cries mingled with the breaking of glass, a table toppled, the heavy door slammed almost before the crowded room realised that trouble was abroad. But there was no attempt at street pursuit, for Limehouse settles its own troubles, hides its wounds from the eyes of the police.

Chang took it calmly enough. One lives or dies as the gods decide. He assured casual enquirers no harm was done, and—well, a bared knife is common enough round Poppy Lane!

But there was a faint gleam in his eyes, and the thin flicker of a grin on his lips when he turned to the fellows who had saved him.

"Whom the gods favour, they allow opportunity to prove worth," he murmured softly. "They favour you, indeed, for never have I seen quicker response to great need."

"He threatened you aloud, and that was a mistake," the youth replied modestly. "We heard him and were ready, for we had waited long, anxious hours to see the face of Chang Fu."

"You also?" Suspicion flickered in Chang's eyes for a moment. Then again he was blandly courteous and smiling. "But it is fitting the rescuers sup with the rescued. I go to see the meal ordered."

"Um! The sly old boulder wonders who we are, Fan," the quiet youth whispered. "He's gone to pump Wong, under pretence of getting us a feed."

"And when he finds we've been waiting about all day, 'im satisfied—eh, Penny?" the other whispered.

But Penny Rudd, rigged out as a travelling Chinese student, modestly dressed, and sporting clumsy horn spectacles, gave a doubtful frown.

"Don't know about being satisfied," he muttered. "Playing tricks with Chang is about as safe as bedding down with a hungry tiger. But it's our one chance of getting near How, if Nash and his merry men fail."

"You think 'im know the load How make 'im getaway?" Fan murmured.

"He knows, and we're out to convince him we know—if we're bright enough. Hush, Fan; he's returning!"

From the food counter Chang threaded a slow course back to their corner. His face was calm and unruffled, yet his first words showed that sly old Wong had given him news of the big police raid.

"So the Canton knife-man had a real grievance against me," he murmured. "The fellow wrongs me in thinking I

knew of the devil-police coming to my 'shop.' That is my sorrow."

"But we knew," Pen said softly. "We only escaped by inches, and it was nearly a real disaster for him we work with."

Chang looked at the youths reflectively, but until food and drink had been served he maintained silence. Then:

"You speak in riddles," he murmured. "I know of no reason why you should have been in my house, or why you should fear the police."

"We were waiting on the Son of Heaven," Pen answered, daringly using the old Chinese title for king. "We were with him a moment before the law men broke into the inner temple."

As he spoke he took from an inner pocket a crimson claw, left by How in his hurried retreat and at once hidden by Pen for future use.

Even then Chang refused to be drawn. He merely glanced at the sacred emblem of his society and calmly resumed his meal—an example necessarily followed by his guests.

"Those who steal, oft die violently," he murmured at last.

"But those given a trust take all risks, because that is their duty," Fan countered softly.

Chang gravely inclined his head.

"How should ignorant Chang recognise duty from treachery?" he asked mildly.

"How should we be expecting Chang, knowing the devil-mandarins had him in their grip?" Pen asked quietly.

"The devil-mandarins have tongues—it is possible they foretold of my just release," Chang answered slyly.

"Whilst Chang doubts, the Master works," Pen answered.

"Know, O doubter, that the Welbeck who arrested you has himself fallen beneath the magic mind power we know of. The Son of Heaven ordered him to free you, just as he ordered us to wait you here."

"My ears are open," Chang suggested, as Pen paused.

"Yet your mind is a wilderness of doubt," Fan sneered.

He spoke the words in the Yunnan tongue, a complete change from the Canton dialect they had so far used.

That shot struck home. For the first time, they saw the cautious Chink give a frown start—a sign that encouraged Pen to a decisive challenge.

(Will Penny Rudd be able to carry this deception through, or will Chang bowl him out? See next week's fine instalment, boys.)



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