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A ROUSING TALE OF TOM MERRY & CO. OF ST. JIM'S—

The SECRET of the

BY
Martin Clifford.



DAUNTLESS SCHOOLBOYS, RECKLESS CROOKS, AND A POT OF FLOWERS, are all involved in a perfect mix-up of mystery, thrills, and adventure.

CHAPTER 1.

News for Tom Merry!

"GEE! I guess Tom Merry's going to see this!" Kit Wildrake spoke more to himself than to his study-mates, Mellish and Baggy Trimble.

But the sudden excitement in the Canadian junior's muttered words made them look at him. He was seated on the edge of the study table, and in his hand was a rather grubby half-sheet of newspaper. Obviously something in the paper had attracted Kit Wildrake's excited attention.

"What is it, Wildrake?" asked Mellish carelessly. "Something about cricket, I suppose?"

"I guess not, old tulip!"

"Then what—"

"It's something that'll make old Tommy sit up and take notice when he sees it!" said Wildrake crisply, his eyes glued to the newspaper again. "Gee! So that's it! I

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guess this'll put Tom Merry wise to what's wrong at Laurel Villa."

"Where and what the dickens is Laurel Villa?" grunted Mellish, staring.

"I say, I know," put in Baggy Trimble eagerly. "It's Tom Merry's home at Huckleberry Heath. I've been there! Look here, is there something in that paper about it, Wildrake?"

"I guess there is!"

"Then just gimme my paper, Wildrake!" said Trimble warmly. "Like your cheek to collar it like that!"

"Eh? Is it your paper, old fat man?"

"Of course it is! It came wrapped round my boots from the boot-repairers in Rylcombe!" said Trimble, whose eyes were gleaming now. "Look here, you beast—gimme my paper!"

"I guess not, old scout! You chucked it away, and now I'm going to show it to Tom Merry."

"Look here, you awful beast—"

"What's in the thumping paper, anyway?" demanded

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—THAT'LL MAKE YOU GASP AS YOU READ IT!

FLOWERPOT

Mellish curiously. "Something about that potty old frump, Tom Merry's guardian?"

"Tom Merry's guardian isn't a potty old frump, Mellish!" said Wildrake coolly. "And if you repeat that, old top, I'll punch your nose. I've met the old lady, and she's the dearest old girl in the world."

"Well, what's wrong anyway?" grunted Mellish.

"Wouldn't interest you?" said Kit frankly. "Other people's troubles never do, old bean. I guess I'll trot along to Tom—"

"I say, hold on, Wildrake!" snorted Trimble. "I know all about it! I heard Tom Merry talking about it yesterday. He's no end worried about things at home. He's been getting queer letters from Miss Fawcett, I believe—letters hinting at—at deadly perils and terrible crimes, or something at Laurel Villa, you know. I shouldn't be surprised if it's not Anarchists or Bolsheviks, or something."

"You fat ass" grinned Wildrake.

"It's a fact—I heard Tom Merry saying so myself! He's awfully cut up. I believe he's asked the Head if he can go home to see what's wrong!"

"Well, that's so, old fat man. Anyway—"

"Look here, you beast!" hissed Trimble, making a snatch at the newspaper. "Gimme my paper! It's mine, and I'm going to tell the news to my pal Tom—"

"To make capital out of the giddy news, I guess!" grinned Wildrake.

"You awful beast—"

"Bow-wow!"

Kit Wildrake folded the newspaper and slid down from the table. Then he started for the door, apparently to show the news—whatever it was—to Tom Merry. But he did not reach it.

Trimble, in fact, was desperate now. He was a very inquisitive youth indeed, and he was burning to know what it was in the paper which had made Wildrake so excited.

As Wildrake had so frankly said, he wanted to make capital out of it! He intended to sell the information at a price to Tom Merry. Something was gravely amiss at Laurel Villa, and knowing how fond

Tom Merry was of Miss Priscilla Fawcett, his guardian, and how deeply anxious Tom was to know what actually was wrong there, Trimble knew that he would stand a good chance of getting his price for the news.

And Wildrake had said plainly enough that the news would put Tom "wise" to what was wrong at home!

At all costs Baggy intended to get that paper from Kit Wildrake. A little scheme was forming in the fat mind of Baggy Trimble of the Fourth.

Not knowing this, even the keen-witted Wildrake was unprepared for what followed.

As Kit strode for the door, Baggy made a rush and fairly tore the folded news-sheet from his hand.

"Here! Why you rustling galoot! Come back! I guess I'll smash— Stop, you—"

Wildrake roared and leaped wrathfully after Baggy. That youth dodged him desperately, and rushed round the table, with Wildrake chasing him like a raging bull.

Mellish chuckled and as Trimble rushed past, stuck out a foot. Unfortunately—for Wildrake—he was a fraction of a second too late. Trimble missed the foot, being more fortunate in that respect than Kit Wildrake.

Crash!

"Varroooooop!"

Before Mellish could withdraw his foot, Wildrake went over it, sprawling in the fender with a terrific crash and a terrific howl.

Trimble hesitated a brief second in the doorway, while he changed the key from the inside to the outside, and then—

Slam! Click!

Wildrake and Mellish were locked in their study. Outside Trimble gave a breathless and fat chuckle. Then he opened the paper and blinked at it. He soon found what he was hunting for. It was only a small paragraph, and was headed "Mysterious Burglaries!" and ran as follows:

"The Hampshire police are investigating a series of mysterious burglaries at Laurel Villa, Huckleberry Heath. Last night, for the fourth time in a fortnight, the house was broken into and ransacked by burglars. The local police are completely mystified by the fact that the burglars apparently took nothing whatever of value, though they had ample opportunities of doing so. Laurel Villa, a small, pretty house standing in its own grounds, is occupied by Miss Priscilla Fawcett, an elderly lady, who lives there alone with her maid, a housekeeper, and the housekeeper's husband, Mr. William Dent, who acts as gardener—chauffeur. When our representative called at Laurel Villa this morning, Miss Fawcett was in a state of acute distress and apprehension, and she could give no feasible explanation of the strange mystery."

"M-mum-my hat!" breathed Baggy Trimble. "So that's it! Why the thump couldn't the old girl tell Tom Merry about this, anyway? Afraid to frighten dearest Tommy, I bet! He, he, he! Here goes, anyway!"

And Trimble hurried away to sell the news to Tom Merry—at his own price!

CHAPTER 2.

Trimble to Go!

TOM MERRY stood by the window of Study No. 10 and stared unseeing down into the sunny quadrangle. His brows were knitted, and there were signs of deep worry on his usually cheery face.

"No good worrying about it, Tom," said Manners, with a glance at Monty Lowther, who was also eyeing Tom Merry grimly. "After all, there may be nothing wrong at all—nothing worth worrying about, anyway. You know what Miss Fawcett is. She's a dear old lady, but—"

"But—" added Lowther, with a grim chuckle.

"Well, go on!" snapped Tom Merry, almost fiercely.

"But what?"

"Well, she's a bit—just a bit—well—"

"What?"

"Queer!" finished Lowther. "At least, a bit quaint, you know! Always worrying about little things. Look how she worries about your health, old chap! Always sending you cough mixture and chest protectors!"

And Lowther gave another soft chuckle.

Tom Merry glared, and flushed crimson. His kindly guardian's anxious fears regarding her ward's health was always a sore point with Tom Merry.

"Look here—" he began heatedly.

"Now don't get waxy, Tom!" said Manners soothingly. "We're only trying to make you stop worrying, old chap! If anything is wrong at Laurel Villa it can't be much. Perhaps old Fido's got distemper—"

"Or the parrot's got the pip!" suggested Lowther, just as anxious to allay his chum's fears. "Or perhaps old Hannah— isn't that the maid's name?—has given notice, or something! No good—"

"I tell you fellows that something's wrong!" said Tom Merry, almost angrily. "You've seen my guardian's letters. They were written by an old lady frightened out of her wits about something."

"Then why the thump doesn't she tell you what's wrong?" said Manners, becoming serious.

"Because she doesn't want to frighten and upset me, of course!" snapped Tom Merry. "I know her only too well. But she simply couldn't help showing in her letters that

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NOTE

"SKIMPOLE, THE SUPER-MAN!"

APPEARS NEXT WEEK.

something's amiss. She wants me to know, and at the same time she doesn't! I can read between the lines only too well."

"Well, it's queer!"

"I know it's queer—too queer for my liking," said Tom Merry, setting his teeth. "Somebody's frightening the old lady, or something. If only I knew what is the matter—"

"Write and ask her, or—"

"I have. She only answers vaguely, and hints at things. In her letter this morning she hints at the police being there. Isn't that enough to show it's serious, you fools?"

"Well, I suppose it is," admitted Manners, a trifle uneasily. "It's no end queer! Still, if the Head will let you run down there—"

"And take us with you!" said Lowther, with a faint grin.

"I'm afraid he won't," said Tom glumly. "If my guardian would ask for me it would be a different matter. Still, Railton was very decent when I asked him this morning, and there's a chance." He set his teeth. "But I'm going, whether the Head gives me permission or not!"

Trimble appeared at that moment and rolled into the study, with a fat, ingratiating grin on his podgy features.

"Oh, here you are, Tom, old fellow!" he observed cheerily.

"Just looking for you! About this affair at Laurel Villa!"

"Laurel Villa!" ejaculated Tom, staring. "What the dickens do you know about Laurel Villa, Trimble?"

"I know all about it, old chap—every little bit!"

"You fearful fibber!" Tom gasped, staring. "How the thump can you know what's happening at Laurel Villa? I don't know myself!"

"I know you don't!" gurgled Trimble breathlessly, adjusting his collar and tie. "But I jolly well do! I know just why Miss Fawcett's got the wind up, and I bet you'll have it when you hear the news! What's more, you'll rush off to Laurel Villa quickly enough, I can tell you!"

The Terrible Three were all staring at Trimble now.

"Well, of all the fat fibbers—" Manners began.

"Cough your giddy news up then, Baggy!" chuckled Lowther. "We'll give you ten seconds to spill it. After that we start in with our boots!"

"I'll tell Tom Merry presently," said Trimble. "You shut up, Lowther! The—the point is, I'm rather keen to run down there with you, Tom Merry. I rather fancy myself as a detective, you know, and the mystery appeals to me. The police are—"

"Police!" yelled Tom.

"I—I mean— Look here, are you going to take me with you or not, Tom Merry? I'll look after things, and protect—"

"Not!" said Tom, with a laugh. "You fat duffer, you're the last chap at St. Jim's I should think of taking!"

"Then I decline to tell you what the mystery is!" said Trimble. "Please yourself; I don't mind! Promise me I can come, and I'll tell you all that's been going on at Laurel Villa—the whole trouble there; and it's jolly serious, I can tell you! Just your word, old fellow—"

"You fat ass, I'll promise you a million pounds, if you like!" grinned Tom, wondering what wonderful yarn Trimble intended to spin. "And a steam-yacht and a Rolls-Royce as well, if you can tell me what's going on at Laurel Villa."

"I don't ask those things, because I know you can't give 'em!" grinned Trimble, his eyes glimmering a little. "All I want is the promise that you'll take me when you go."

"To Laurel Villa?"

"Yes, old chap."

"Well, I think I can safely promise that!" grinned Tom. "It's a hundred to one against me going, in any case!"

"You promise?" said Trimble eagerly.

"Yes, old fat man! Now cough up your wonderful yarn! If it isn't a good one, worthy of Edgar Wallace, I'm going

to boot you round the study before hoofing you out! Now cough it up!"

"You mean that—honour bright!"

"Certainly, Fatty!" chuckled Tom.

"Right!" said Trimble. "These chaps are witnesses, remember! What about that, then?"

As he spoke the crafty Baggy withdrew the folded news-sheet from his pocket and pointed out the paragraph to Tom Merry.

Tom took it curiously, but as he read the paragraph he jumped.

He was still staring blankly at Trimble, not knowing whether to hug the fat junior or to smite him on the spot for his trickery, when a tap came to the door.

It was Mr. Railton.

"Ah! You are here, Merry!" he exclaimed. "I have spoken to the headmaster regarding your request to go home, my boy. Your guardian has also wired for you!"

"Oh, sir!"

"In the circumstances Dr. Holmes will allow you to go home for two days!" said Mr. Railton, smiling a little. "You may also take the friends you mentioned to me with you, with the exception of Herries and Digby, who are working for the Latin Prize."

"Oh! Thank you very much, sir!" gasped Tom—it was more than he had hoped for.

Trimble gave a gasp.

"I—I say, sir, Tom Merry wants me to go awfully badly, sir," he said eagerly. "His aunt's very fond of me, you know—always wanting me to stay there! As Herries and Digby can't go—"

"You, Trimble?" exclaimed Mr. Railton, staring. "I was not aware that you were a chum of Merry's!"

"Oh, yes, sir—I spent the Christmas hols with him; in fact, I always spend my hols with Tom. He wants me to go badly—don't you, Tom, old fellow?"

"Y-e-e-s!" gasped Tom. "I—I'd like Trimble to come, sir—at least, I promised him I'd take him if—if you'd allow it, sir!"

Mr. Railton looked astonished.

But he nodded after a pause and a hard look at Baggy.

"Very well, Merry," he assented, though with obvious reluctance. "Trimble may accompany you as you appear to desire it. You have heard nothing further from your guardian—no letter by the noon post, I mean?"

"No, sir. But—"

Tom was about to show the paragraph to the Housemaster, when he paused. If the Head imagined they were going into any danger there was the likelihood of his cancelling his generous and kindly permission. Yet—

As Tom hesitated, Mr. Railton went on again.

"Very well, my boy! I trust you will find that nothing of a serious nature is worrying your guardian, and that all will be well at your home. You may catch an early train in the morning—"

"There's a good one to-night, sir—an express!" said Tom.

"May we take that? I'm anxious to get home—Miss Fawcett is upset, and the sooner I get home the better!"

"I see no reason why not, Merry," said Mr. Railton. "In that case you will be excused prep, of course. You had better pack necessities immediately after tea. But I will see you again before then."

"Very well, sir! And thank you ever so much!"

The Housemaster nodded and departed. Lowther grabbed Tom as the door closed and began to waltz him round the study.

"Chuck it, you ass!" gasped Tom, with a faint grin. "This is going to be serious work, chaps! Burglars, eh? We'll give the beggars burglars if they turn up while we're there!" snapped Tom, his face going hard and determined.

"Still, it's rather a lark!" grinned Lowther. "Poor old Herries and Dig! Won't they be sorry that they entered for the Latin now? There's only one fly in the ointment, though!"

"What's that, you ass?"

"Trimble!"

"Oh, really, Lowther—"

"Still, I'll admit you can't back out of your giddy promise now!" grinned Lowther. "We'll take Trimble! But that's no reason why we shouldn't put him through it for his wangling! Collar him!"

"What-ho!"

"Here—hold on! Leggo! Yarrooogh!"

Trimble howled and fairly flew round the table, and leaped for the door. Unfortunately, it flew open just then, and Wildrake rushed into the study.

Wildrake was looking for Trimble, and he found him even as he sent the door flying back.

Trimble ran right into Wildrake, and Wildrake ran right into Trimble. There was a crash, and howls from both of them as they sat down in the doorway violently.

But Trimble was up again first. He knew only too well

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What Wildrake was after. He remembered suddenly that he had left the key in the lock. Obviously somebody had let Wildrake out, and that raging junior was after his gore.

He leaped over Wildrake and fairly flew.

"Stop him—stop the galoot!" roared Wildrake. "I guess I'm going to smash him to little bits! I'll teach him to snatch my paper and lock me in my own study! I knew the fat galoot would be here telling Tom Merry the news—news that I'd found out! I guess—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Lowther, guessing at once what Wildrake meant. "So that's how Trimble got the news! I say, Wildrake—"

But Kit Wildrake had gone—he flew after Trimble, raging, but he did not catch him, nor did he see him again that day excepting in afternoon class. The Terrible Three did not see him even then, and they hoped for the best—they hoped they would not see Trimble until they returned from the visit to Laurel Villa.

But it was a vain hope. And when Tom Merry, Lowther,

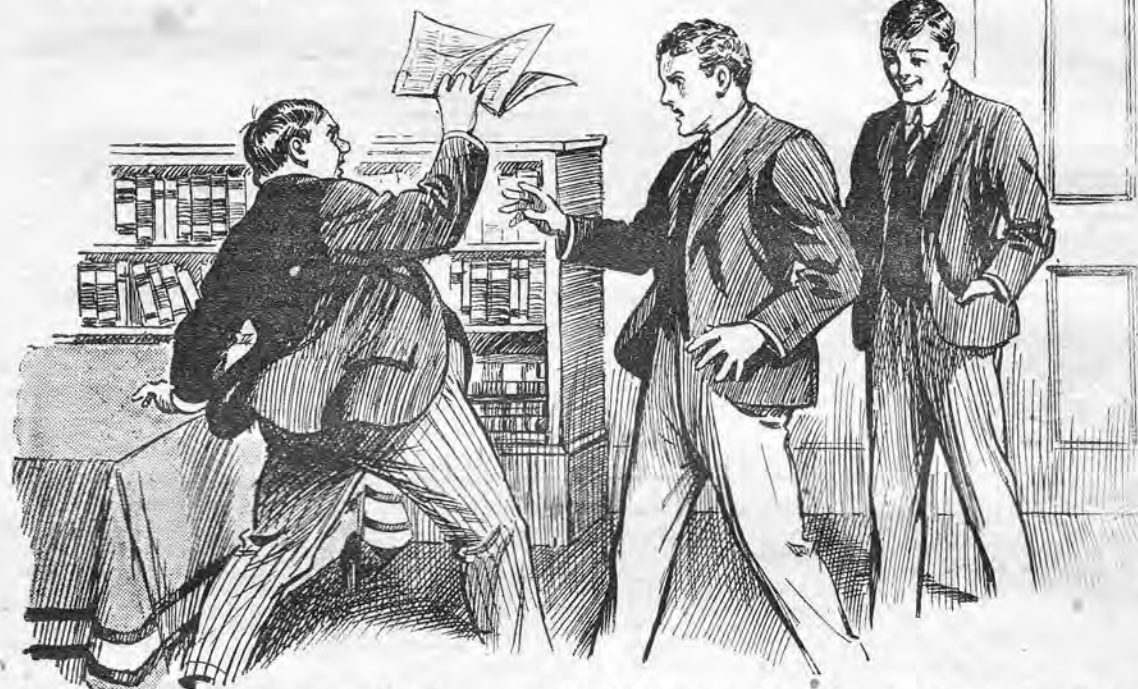
the local here—a matter of twenty minutes to Huckleberry, then! We can scoff the sandwiches on the platform—ten minutes before the local starts," he added, glancing at his watch.

"Good egg! I'm hungry, too!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

The juniors grabbed their coats and bags from the racks, and tumbled from the train as it stopped at the platform.

It was a late hour now, and the station was practically



As Wildrake strode to the door, Baggy Trimble made a rush and fairly tore the folded news-sheet from the Canadian junior's hand!

Manners, Blake, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy—the lucky five—started for the station that evening, en route for Huckleberry Heath, Baggy Trimble of the Fourth was with them to make an unlucky sixth!

Once again the wangler of the Fourth had tried it on—and it had come off!

CHAPTER 3.

Tricky Trimble Again!

"I'M hungry!"

Baggy Trimble mumbled that remark sleepily.

At Wayland the juniors had caught the night express, and for an hour and more the express had been roaring through the black night. Just after leaving Wayland it had started to rain, and it was still pelting fiercely against the carriage windows. Altogether, it was a dismal night.

Again and again during that seemingly endless journey into Hampshire, Tom Merry looked at his watch, feverishly anxious to reach home. And he gave a deep sigh of relief when at last the train slowed down and he glimpsed the lights of Hampton Junction through the blurred windows of the carriage.

It was the slowing down that wakened Baggy Trimble, and it was then he mumbled the words:

"I'm hungry!"

"We're all hungry!" said Tom Merry grimly. "Rouse up, you chaps! Here we are at Hampton. We change into

deserted. It was a small station, and there was only a light in the booking-office and waiting-rooms.

"Buffet closed, of course!" said Tom. "It always is, blow it! Thank goodness we brought the sandwiches! Now, Trimble, get a move on! We'll soon be having some grub, old fat man!"

"I—I say, I'm not hungry, you know! It's all right! I—I think I'll have a stroll round, you fellows!"

"Not hungry?" yelled Blake.

"Nunno! At least, I don't feel like sandwiches, you fellows!" gasped Trimble, blinking rather uneasily at the chums. "I think I'll take a stroll and stretch my legs, you know. A bit of chocolate from a machine will suit me. I'm not a greedy fellow, you know—not like some chaps I could name!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Well, my hat!"

"Wondahs will never cease, bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus, eyeing Trimble blankly through his monocle.

"You weally do not want any sandwiches, Twimble?"

"Nunno! I could do with a bit of chocolate, though—just a packet or two. The fact is, I don't feel like ham or beef! Train-sickness, I suppose—just a mild attack! A bit of choc might put me right. If you can loan me a bob in coppers, Gussy—just until we get back to St Jim's I'm expecting a cheque from the pater—"

"Bai Jove! Vewy well, Twimble, I will give you what pennies I have, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus, quite overcome. "Aftah all, there will be more sandwiches for us!"

"There'd have been none if Trimble had wanted some!" grinned Lowther. "Good man Trimble! Bless you and bless your giddy train-sickness!"

"He, he, he!"

Baggy giggled rather feebly, and Arthur Augustus handed over six pennies into his grubby paw. So kindly-disposed towards Trimble was Lowther that he added another couple of pennies, while the rest made up the twelve between them.

Trimble rolled away with his pennies—rather hurriedly, Tom Merry thought. But the juniors were very hungry, and they seated themselves in the empty waiting-room, where Tom opened the bag to take out the sandwiches which had been packed for them by the House dame.

"Trimble is always surprising us!" grinned Blake. "Did you ever! Fancy him not wanting any! Why, what's the matter, Tom?"

"They've gone!" gasped Tom.

"What have?" said Blake. "Not the—"

"The sandwiches!" yelled Tom, sudden light breaking in on him. "The thumping sandwiches have gone. I know I packed them in here—two packages; enough for us all. But how—"

"Trimble!" roared Blake.

And Tom Merry & Co. made tracks for the local, which had moved slowly to a stop before them a minute before. The guard was already blowing his whistle—there was no time to be lost.

There was a sudden shout.

"Here you are you fellows! Buck up! Jump in!"

A carriage door swung open, and a fat face blinked out.

It was Trimble.

"Got him!" yelled Blake. "Yes, we'll jump in, you fat spoofer! And we'll jump on you in a minute, you see if we don't!"

They rushed for the carriage, and piled in, eager to show Baggy Trimble just what they thought of his trickery. Trimble had had the sandwiches, and doubtless he had enjoyed them. But he was going to pay dearly for them now. With Baggy's fat person, they intended to raise the dust of that railway carriage as it had never been raised by carriage-cleaners, however zealous and keen on work they might be.

But apparently Baggy Trimble, as usual, had anticipated such an intention on their part.

They tumbled into the compartment with war-like yells, and then they halted. Baggy had dropped back comfortably into his corner seat. Opposite to him was a rather prim and severe old lady. Baggy, obviously, had known better than to select an empty compartment on this occasion.

Vengeance must wait! Meanwhile, Tom Merry & Co. felt hungry and very depressed. The blackness of the night and the driving rain alone were enough to make them feel unhappy. They were thankful when the slow local ran into Huckleberry Heath Station at last.

It was a small station—a very small station. And it was in darkness save for a few dim lights. They were the only passengers to alight, and they found themselves alone on the platform as the train rumbled on, its lights vanishing into the darkness.

"Well, it's a cheery hole, and no mistake!" growled Trimble. "A beastly hole, in fact! Look here, Tom Merry—"

"Oh, shut up!" growled Tom.

"Collar the fat nuisance!" snapped Blake. "He did us in the train, but we've got him now. Bump the—"

"Hold on, Blake!" said Tom sharply. "Never mind Trimble now! Let's get out of this! Dent should be waiting with the car! Let's hope he is, anyway, or we've a couple of miles and more through the rain to trudge!"

"Oh, bai Jove! I weally do hope that Dent is here, then, Tom Mewwy!"

There was a solitary porter on duty, and he took their tickets and started to turn the station lights low. Apparently the local was the last train expected that night!

The juniors followed Tom out into the roadway. The station was a mile from the village. All around them were fields and trees, with not a single light showing anywhere, save from the railway signals.

"Must be nearly twelve!" said Tom, staring about him. "Oh, my hat! No car here yet! I do hope—Hallo, what's that?"

It was a car—their eyes fell upon it now. It stood

outside the wicket gate of the station. They had come through the little booking-office.

But what struck them as strange was that the car stood there in the darkness, its lights extinguished.

"It's my guardian's car, I'm sure!" said Tom Merry, in astonishment. "Where's Dent?"

He ran towards the car and looked inside. It was empty.

Tom Merry caught his breath. Somehow, he could not help a strange feeling of fear, or foreboding, as he gazed blankly into the empty, deserted car.

"Can't have gone to an inn for a drink!" said Lowther, with a faint grin. "They're closed long ago. I say, why not ask the porter Johnny?"

Without answering, Tom hurried back to the station again. He returned a moment later, and shook his head.

"No go—the porter knows nothing excepting that he heard the car drive up about fifteen minutes ago! He's not even seen Dent!"

"Jolly queer!" said Blake, looking about him curiously. "Where the dickens has the fellow got to, then? You'd have thought the chap would have strolled on the station at least. In any case—"

"Perhaps gone to see someone at a house near here?" suggested Manners.

"Why shouldn't he take the car, then—in this rain?" said Tom, his voice low.

"There's no light in sight from a house, so that's unlikely. Let's hunt round a bit."

They hunted round the little station. It did not take them long. They gave it up at last. Wherever Dent was he certainly was not at the station itself—the porter also made that fact clear.

"We'll give him a few more minutes," said Tom Merry, as they got back to the dark car. "Might as well wait out of the rain, anyway! Get inside, chaps!"

They tumbled aboard the car, and Tom switched the lights on. It was the Laurel Villa car undoubtedly, and the mystery seemed to deepen. Dent had brought the car there, it seemed. But where was he now?

Almost in silence they waited, the rain pattering down on the hood of the car, the silence intense save for the beating rain. At last the porter appeared, and, having locked the doors, he mounted a bicycle and rode away. They were left alone in the rain and darkness.

"Well, this beats the band," said Lowther. "That chap Dent wants the sack, Tom. He must have brought the car here, and then walked off home forgetting the car and why he'd come."

"I wish I could feel that was only the reason, Lowther!" said Tom gloomily. "But I'm afraid it looks queer! Anyway, we'll wait no longer!"

And he let in the clutch, and the car moved forward into the rain and blackness of the sleeping countryside.

CHAPTER 4.

Alarming!

"ROTTEN show!"

"Rats!"

"And a rotten swizz!"

"Oh, dry up, Trimble!"

"And I'm hungry!"

"So are we!" snapped Jack Blake. "Blessed if I can see how you can be hungry, Trimble, after scoffing sandwiches made for six, and a bob's worth of chocolate, you fat toad!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I tell you it wasn't me who scoffed the sandwiches!" said Trimble. "It might have been Lowther, or even you, Gussy, but it wasn't me! Why should you think I scoffed them?" he demanded in an aggrieved tone. "In any case, they were only small ones—nippy ones with scarcely a bit of meat in 'em! Nasty taste with 'em, too!"

"You fat ass—"

"Bai Jove! If that is how Twimble denies a charge—"

"Oh, really, Gussy—"

"Do dry up, anyway!" snapped Tom Merry. "And stop grousing, Trimble or I'll stop the car and chuck you out. We didn't ask you to come, and if you're dissatisfied—"

"Well, if this is the way your aunt treats her guests—"

"Will you dry up!" hooted Blake.

"Why should I?" snorted Trimble. "Here we are—lost,

(Continued on page 8.)

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These are only a few—there are many others—and they're for you! All you have to do is to sign your name and address on the form provided below, and send it to "GEM GIFT SCHEME," 5, Carmelite Street, London, E.C.4. Then watch this page every week. If your name is published you simply fill in the special "CLAIM" FORM which you will find on page 16 of this issue, and send it to GEM "GIFT" CLAIM, 5, Carmelite Street, London, E.C.4. That done, you simply sit tight, for the GIFT will be dispatched to you without any delay.

What do you think of the idea, chums? Great, isn't it? What-ho! Get your pens ready, and then—SIGN!!!

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IF YOUR NAME IS IN THE LIST BELOW—You are Entitled
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All claims must be submitted before Thursday, May 8th, after which date the Gifts claimed will be forwarded and no further claims can be recognised!

"GEM" FREE GIFT REGISTRATION FORM.

PLEASE REGISTER MY NAME and address in your
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ADDRESS

Age
3-5-30.

The Secret of the Flowerpot!

(Continued from page 6.)

I bet! And the way Tom Merry is driving the blessed car—

"Shut up!" hissed Tom Merry. "It's difficult enough to drive in this darkness and rain without having a fat fool gassing in one's ear all the time! Do dry up, Trimble!"

"Well, I like that! Look here, Tom Merry, I shall refuse to come with you again—"

"Dry up!" snapped Tom, peering ahead through the blinding rain. "Hallo, the road's up ahead! Keep Trimble quiet, for goodness' sake!"

"That's all very well!" grumbled Trimble. "But I'm hungry, and I'm dashed tired! Look here, if your silly old trump of a guardian— Yarroooooop!"

"Hallo, look out! Oh, my hat!"

Exasperated by Trimble's grousing and his refusal to dry up, Blake had leaned forward and given the fat youth a resounding slap on the side of his fat head. Unfortunately, the sudden slap caused Baggy to barge against Tom Merry, and the unexpected charge sent Tom's hands sliding off the wheel.

More unfortunately still, though exceedingly fortunate, as it afterwards proved—the car was just up to the red lights that showed the road was under repair at that spot.

Crash!

The car swerved violently, and wild yells arose, followed by a resounding crash as the car struck the barricade across the road, sending four red lights, hanging from the pole, flying to right and left.

The next instant, just as the startled passengers were expecting to be flung headlong into an excavation or trench, the car pulled up with a jarring of brakes and a jerk.

"All right!" panted Tom Merry, who had been flung violently against the wheel. "Phew! That was a lucky escape! I was expecting the blessed car to go over into a hole or something. Let's get out and have a squint!"

"My fault!" groaned Jack Blake. "I was an idiot to biff Trimble just then, Tom! But—"

"Hallo!"

There was astonishment in Tom Merry's tone. He had grabbed one of the still burning lamps, and was holding it high.

In the dim red light they could glimpse the road directly before the car. It was smooth and untouched as far as they could see; there was no sign of a trench or road-repairing until—

Tom gave another cry—this time a startled cry—as he shone the light to the right, where the road had been clear.

The dim rays showed up a deep trench running into the blackness ahead—an ugly-looking excavation.

"My hat!" breathed Tom.

"Good heavens!"

"Gwreat Scott!"

The juniors eyed each other with white, set faces as the meaning of it became clear to them.

"This pole—this barricade we ran into," said Tom Merry, speaking in a grim tone, "is on the wrong side of the road. Some madman has shifted it—moved it to the side where the road is clear! If Trimble hadn't barged into me and made me lose control—"

"We should have gone into that trench for a cert!" said Blake, his voice husky. "By jingo! What a thumping narrow escape!"

"Yaas, wathah! Bai Jove, deah boys, the car would have been smashed up, and us, too!"

"I—I—I say, you fellows!" gasped Trimble, who was shaking like a fat jelly. "We should have been chucked out but for me—perhaps broken our necks! Good job I saw the danger in time—what?"

"You—you sus-saw the danger?" stuttered Blake.

"Exactly!" said Trimble, feeling he might as well improve the occasion. "I saw the danger and nudged Tom's arm, you know—I was really trying to grab the wheel!"

"You awful fibber!"

"Oh, really, Lowther— I say, you fellows, I think you ought to overlook the matter of those measly sandwiches after this. Not that I took 'em, of course!" added Trimble cautiously. "Nothing of the kind! Only I hate arguments, and I'm willing to overlook the matter if you fellows are. After saving your lives—"

"Dry up, you fat fool!" snapped Tom Merry, who was glancing about him grimly. "Look here, you fellows, this is jolly serious! That pole and the lamps were moved for some deep purpose, and I'm beginning to wonder if it's anything to do with us!"

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"Bai Jove!"

"There's some dirty work going on," went on Tom, still glancing about him in the blackness. "Where's Dent? What's happened to him? And now this!"

"You think this trap was set for us, Tom?" breathed Blake.

"I'm just wondering," answered Tom slowly.

"To—to stop us going to Laurel Villa?"

"To delay us, if not to stop us! This is a lonely place—scarcely a dozen cars pass this way in the daytime, much less night! If somebody wants to stop our getting to Laurel Villa—"

"You suspect Dent—"

"Nothing of the kind! Dent's a decent fellow—I know him well! He may have met with foul play—"

"Phew! It—it's beginning to look like it, Tom!"

"Bai Jove! What about the watchman, deah boys? They would leave the woad up without a watchman, you know!"

"My hat! I never thought of that!"

It was a wonder the others hadn't, also, for ahead of them showed glowing coals of a fire, dimly seen through the driving rain. Carrying the lantern, Tom led the way at a run towards the brazier, all the juniors shaking with excitement now. It was certainly foul play! Whoever had changed the position of the barricade and lamps was a criminal. It might have led to the death of some of them—certainly to grave injury—in addition to wrecking the car.

Did the watchman know anything about it? It seemed impossible that such a dangerous, criminal trick could have been played without his knowledge.

The sentry-box loomed up before them, dark and shadowy. Before it the fire glowed dully, just lighting up the interior with a dim, ruddy glow.

It showed a figure there—obviously the watchman—and he seemed to be asleep.

"The lazy slacker!" gasped Blake. "Here, my man—Great pip! He's gagged!"

"And bound hand and foot!" said Tom Merry quietly. "This is getting beyond the limit, chaps! Hold the lantern, Blake!"

Tom took out his pocket-knife and swiftly cut the bonds from the watchman, and removed the gag from his mouth. He was an elderly man, and he almost swooned on being released. It was several minutes before he recovered sufficiently to speak.

"What does this mean?" asked Tom Merry, at last. "Who tied you up like this?"

"I don't rightly know, master," was the husky response. "Only two men suddenly rushed at me just as I was puttin' fresh coal on this 'ere fire. They was both masked like, and I had no chance; in fact, I was that startled they 'ad me tied up afore I thought of doin' anythin'!"

"They did not tell you anything, or ask you anything?"

"Never said no word, both of 'em!" grunted the watchman, rubbing his arms and legs. "Jest came rushin' out of the darkness and 'ad me trussed up in 'ere afore you could say 'Jack Robinson'! But—"

"Phew! You know what they've done?" said Tom, eyeing the man keenly.

"What 'ave the scoundrels done?" demanded the man, with sudden alarm.

Tom told him, and the watchman grabbed up his lantern without a word and rushed out. They followed him, and helped him to put the barricade across the side of the road that was up, and to replace the red lamps into position. Then, telling the watchman they would let the police know by phone of the outrage, the juniors left him and looked to the car.

Fortunately, little damage was done. Tom had been driving cautiously just then, and only a buckled mudguard and a dented bonnet showed signs of the accident.

The juniors boarded the car and started off again. Tom letting the engine out for all it was worth the moment they were clear of the road repairs. The thought that the outrage had been committed in order to stop or delay their arrival at Laurel Villa had brought another, more alarming, thought.

Why had they tried to stop them arriving there? Was some evil design contemplated against Laurel Villa and its occupants?

Tom did not doubt it now.

With set teeth and hard features, he crouched over the wheel and drove at breakneck speed, heedless of skids and possible accident. With Dent at Laurel Villa, Tom had felt some little comfort. But if anything had happened to the gardener-chauffeur, then the timid, nervous old lady would be alone, save for the two women servants.

That ride through the darkness and pelting rain was a nightmare to Tom's chums, and worse than a nightmare to Baggy Trimble. He yelled to Tom again and again to slow down, but he yelled in vain.

Through the little, sleeping village of Huckleberry Heath the car roared at last, and about a mile beyond it turned off down a narrow lane, coming to a halt before the double gates of a house dimly seen through trees and shrubs.

Most of Tom's chums had been there before, and they recognised Laurel Villa at once.

"Tumble out—quick, you fellows!" said Tom, in a low voice that trembled a little. "No lights! See! I don't like the look of things!"

"But it's late—"

"My guardian would stay up for me all night if she knew I was coming!" snapped Tom Merry. "There's something wrong, I tell you! Haven't you already had enough evidence of that? We'll leave the car here! Come on!"

"Bai Jove! Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Come on!"

Tom Merry led the way down the dark drive, running

In his hand was a wicked-looking automatic, and his face was masked!

CHAPTER 5.

A Mystery!

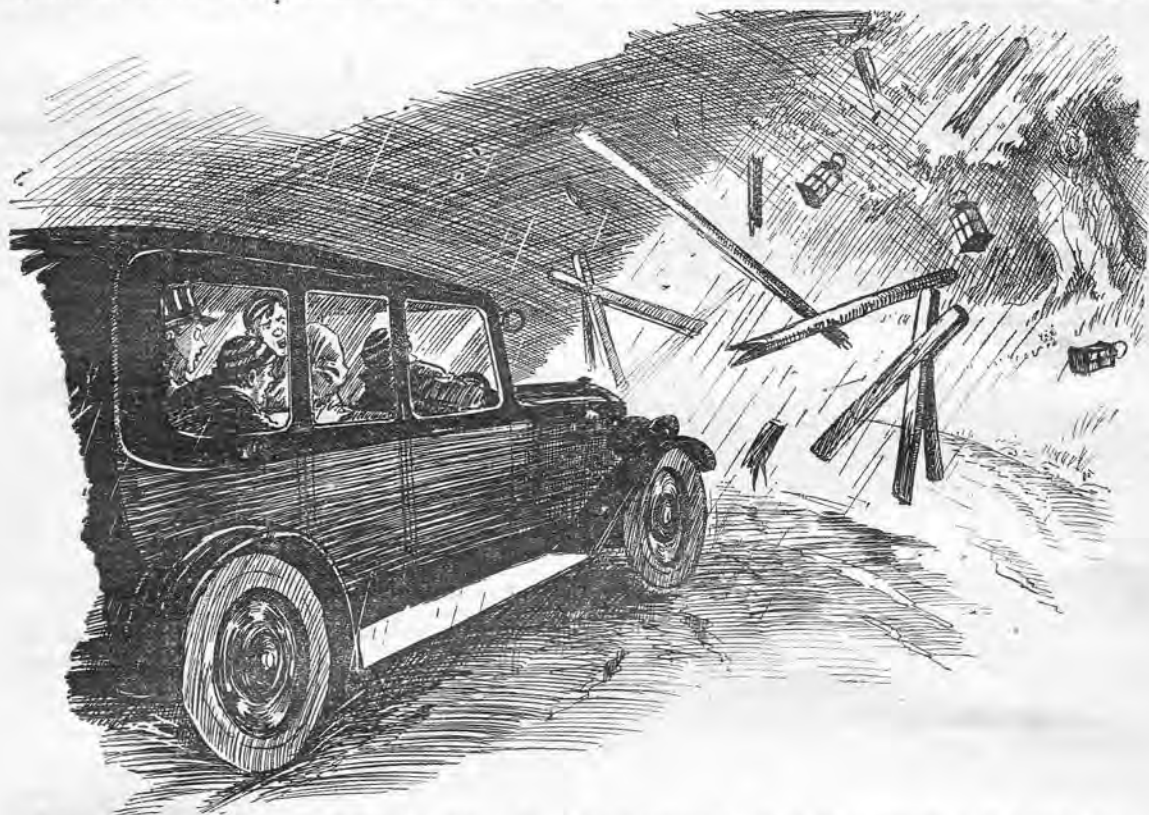
NOT a word escaped the juniors.

They were startled—too utterly dumbfounded to move or speak.

They just stared at the masked man, who stared back at them.

Then, quite abruptly, an oath escaped the man and he called back into the room.

"Look out, Brant! Here's them blamed kids, after all!" Hands up, confound you!" he added swiftly, turning again



The car swerved violently, and wild yells arose, followed by a resounding crash, as the car struck the barricade across the road!

softly and almost noiselessly. His chums followed, heedless, like Tom, of the rain, and with hearts thumping with excitement. The house loomed up clearer now, dark and shadowy. Not a light showed anywhere. The only sound was the dismal drip and patter of rain on the dark trees and shrubs, and the soft squelch of their footsteps on the soaked gravel drive.

From the distant village church tower came the solemn tones of twelve striking, and a sudden thrill took possession of the juniors.

Would all be well, or—

In view of recent happenings they could not help the chill fears that gripped them. Blake had tried to ease Tom's mind, but he also shared Tom's fear.

The drive was short, and they soon reached the front door. Tom ran up the steps and raised his hand to the bell. Instead of pressing it, however, he suddenly grasped the doorknob and twisted it.

The door opened at once, showing the dark hall beyond. Tom's heart leaped.

The door was left open—at that hour! His guardian had left it open, of course, as she was expecting them. But where was Dent, and why was the house not lit up?

With trembling fingers Tom groped for where he knew the electric switch was. He touched it at last, and the next moment the hall was lit up, and scarcely had the light flashed up when a door facing the hall opened and a tall, thick-set man stepped out.

and covering the startled juniors. "One of you move an inch, and I'll durn well blow—"

He broke off, with an oath, and then his automatic spat fire.

Crack!

Trimble shrieked, but the bullet went high, and splintered the glass over the doorway. The very next second Tom Merry's handbag, flung with all that junior's force, whirled through the air and sent the blue-nosed automatic spinning from the fellow's hand.

"At him!" yelled Tom recklessly. "Now, quick! Collar that gun, one of you!"

The next instant Tom was at grips with the cursing rascal. His chums were not an instant behind him, only the yelling Trimble hanging back.

With Tom Merry, Blake, and Lowther hurling themselves at him, the crook jumped back, yelling to someone inside the room he had left. And next second another man appeared swiftly—a masked man, with curiously tight lips and mouth.

An oath escaped him, and instantly he whipped out a gun and covered Tom Merry & Co.

"Stop! Drop that, you young hounds! Hands up, or—"

But his shout was unheeded, and next moment the fellow's accomplice was crashing down with the juniors swarming over him. With another oath, Brant—if that was the second

crook's name—sprang forward, clubbed his automatic, and struck out right and left viciously.

Blake collapsed, with a groan, and Lowther reeled away, his hand to his head. Tom Merry was sent spinning before the force of a vicious, slamming fist, but in an instant the man was on his feet again.

"Collar them!" yelled Manners.

But it was too late—indeed, it was questionable if the juniors could have held such burly, ruthless ruffians had they "collared" them. It was certainly just as well that they got no chance to do so, at all events.

They were free from the clutching fingers and racing for the hall door. Trimble shrieked and jumped back through it. Brant turned in the doorway, and his automatic spat fire. Crack!

A bullet crashed into the door above the juniors' heads.

Then Brant was gone after his accomplice. From outside came another shriek from Baggy Trimble, followed by a bumping sound.

The juniors gathered their scattered wits and rushed through the doorway, heedless of the deadly peril of the automatic.

The two men had vanished into the blackness of the night. At the bottom of the steps a fat form was just scrambling up, and Trimble came rushing up the steps again, yelling murder at the top of his fat voice.

Tom grabbed him and shook him.

"Stop that row, you fat idiot! You're not hurt! I suppose one of the brutes sent you rolling down the steps."

"Yes. Oh dear! Yarroogh! Help! Murder! Yah! Gug-gug-gug!"

Trimble's yelling ended in a gurgling as Tom clapped a hand over his mouth. He knew that if his guardian was still in the house the sound of the firing would terrify her, let alone Trimble's howling.

"Stop it, you fat fool!" hissed Tom. "You're not hurt; and you're safe enough. Now, you fellows, never mind those brutes! They've gone, and it's hopeless to go after them. Hunt through the house for Miss Fawcett and the servants—quick!"

Tom's face was white, and terrible fears clutched at his heart. His forebodings had not been unfounded, then! It was as he had feared—or, at least, he had suspected something of the sort. That his guardian was still somewhere in the dark, silent house he felt assured.

Very soon he knew he was right.

Scarcely had the juniors started to search when a noise upstairs sent Tom up there with flying feet. And he found Miss Priscilla Fawcett locked in a bed-room—the shrill yapping of a dog and the banging on a door soon directed him aright.

In the bed-room was his guardian, her kindly old face white, and she was trembling with dread and excitement. With her was Mrs. Dent, the housekeeper, and old Hannah, the housemaid, who seemed to be on the verge of hysterics.

"Tommy—darling Tommy!"

At any other time Tom's chums would have hidden grins behind their hands, for Miss Priscilla always addressed Tom like that. But now they eyed the old lady in deep concern.

"We're all right, aunty!" panted Tom, rushing up to the old lady and embracing her fondly. "We're safe and sound—not one of us hurt; or, at least, not much! And you—what has happened, dear?"

"Oh, oh! Thank Heaven you are safe, dearest Tommy! Thank Heaven you are all safe—that those terrible, wicked burglars have not harmed you! It is terrible! Good gracious, that boy is injured! Blake, my poor, dear boy, your head is bleeding!"

And Miss Priscilla rushed at Blake, who was mopping a rather nasty cut on his temple.

"Oh, crumbs!" Blake wriggled back as Miss Priscilla grabbed at him. "It's all right, ma'am—right as rain. One of the brutes tapped me with his gun—just a tap! Nothing to worry about!"

But it was more than a tap, as all could see, and Blake's face was white and drawn. In a moment the kindly old lady had forgotten her fears in her deep concern for the juniors. She roused Hannah and Mrs. Dent from their half-dazed and hysterical state, and soon had them bustling round, nor would she speak of other matters until Blake's head was bathed and bandaged.

Then she led the excited juniors downstairs, while Tom got on the phone to the local police and told of the attack. He soon rejoined the excited party in the dining-room.

"They're coming here at once, aunty!" announced breathlessly. "The thumping inspector would scarcely believe me at first! Now, tell us all about it, dear! You've had such a terrible time. But it's over now, and we'll soon deal with those merchants if they come again!"

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"My darling Tommy, how brave you are, and how thankful I am to have you home to protect and advise me!" gasped Miss Fawcett, whose kindly features showed the strain she had been through of late. "Those stupid police will not listen to me! They think those terrible men are merely after my few valuables. Of course, they are not, you know! This is the fifth time they have broken into the house, dear, and I've only missed one thing—my gold watch. Other things that had been left lying about—ever several Treasury notes—were not touched! One of the burglars must have taken my watch, of course! But I am sure they are not trying to steal my few, poor bits of jewellery!"

"I—I'm sure they can't be, aunty!" said Tom, wrinkling his brows. "But they must be after something, dear! What on earth can it be? Look, they've been ransacking this room—at least, they've shifted everything by the look of things!"

"But they haven't touched the drawers of my bureau, or anything like that," said Miss Priscilla, shaking her old-fashioned, ringed curls. "Let us go and see, Tommy!"

They followed her curiously into the drawing-room. There were plenty of signs of ruthless searching, but no drawers had been touched—only heavy furniture moved about, and a big, corner cupboard broken open. Two rings that stood on the mantelpiece gave further proof—if proof were needed—that the burglars were not after Miss Fawcett's jewellery!

"It's amazing!" gasped Tom Merry, at last, after they had made a hurried inspection of the house. "But what on earth can they be after, aunty?"

"My chrysanthemum plant!" said Miss Fawcett, in an impressive voice.

"Your—your what?" gasped Tom.

"My precious chrysanthemum plant!" repeated the dear old lady, in a hushed sort of voice. "That is what the terrible men are trying to steal, Tommy dear! Inspector Bower was most rude when I told him what it was they wanted—he actually laughed in my face."

"Oh! Oh, did he?" gasped Tom.

Like Inspector Bower, Tom very nearly did laugh in his guardian's kind face. Tom's chums hid grins behind their hands—only just in time. A faint sort of splutter came from behind Monty Lowther's hand. That the ruthless, merciless ruffians, who had gone little short of murder already, were taking such risks for the sake of a pot of chrysanthemums—precious to Miss Fawcett or not—was ludicrous on the face of it. But the juniors—fortunately—had had some experience of the quaint old lady before, and they were not quite so astonished as they might have been.

Tom Merry recovered himself with an effort.

"But—but, dear, that's impossible!" he could not help saying. "Men of that stamp wouldn't risk their liberty for a—pot of chrysanthemums! What do you mean, aunty?"

"What I am saying, dearest!" said Miss Fawcett, looking a trifle disappointed at Tom. "Don't you understand, Tommy? The first time the burglars came I caught them at work, and one of them was just taking away the pot in his hands, the villain!"

"Wha-what?"

"I screamed, and shouted for Dent, and then dear, brave old Fido rushed at the terrible man and attacked him, making him drop the plant. Then Dent came up and the men ran away!" said Miss Priscilla simply. "So they must have been trying to steal that, mustn't they?"

"H'm! Ahem! But, dear, they must have just been moving it out of the way, or something—"

"Yaas, wathah! Weally, Miss Fawcett—"

"But I am quite sure, dears, that they were trying to steal my precious plant!" insisted Miss Fawcett. "And I would not lose it for the world. It was given to me by my dearest friend, Major Truscott's wife—I think you have met her, Tommy! You are quite, quite sure those terrible men have gone, dear?"

"Quite sure, dear aunty!" said Tom, frowning horribly at his grinning chums. "They won't come again—not to-night, at all events. And the police will soon be here—"

"Then I will show you where I hide it!" said Miss Fawcett, speaking in a low, cautious voice. "Come with me, boys!"

She led the way into the hall. In a dark corner stood an old grandfather's clock, and Miss Priscilla paused before it, and opened the long door below the face.

"It stopped some time ago," she explained, "and I have not had the clock seen to since, Tommy. But look! Isn't that a splendid hiding-place? They will never find it here, will they?"

And Miss Priscilla, with another cautious look about her, pointed inside the clock body. It was a wide, deep

body, and inside was a rather large pot of chrysanthemums!

The chums gasped as they saw it. They wanted to howl at the sheer absurdity of the dangerous gunmen wanting such a thing, but they held their hilarity in check, and looked as solemn as they could.

Miss Fawcett closed the door again carefully.

"I got Dent to repot the plant, and I hid it in there in case they came again, Tommy!" she explained. "And wasn't it a good thing, dear, that I did? They did come again! But I have foiled the bad men, and they will never find it there, will they? But, Tommy! Good gracious, I am forgetting your supper, dear boys! Please tell Dent! Dear me! Where is Dent, Tommy? Is he still housing the car?"

CHAPTER 6.

Where is Dent?

TOM MERRY jumped. Like his chums, he had forgotten all about Miss Fawcett's manservant in the exciting incidents of the past few minutes. They had almost expected—had hoped, indeed—to find Dent safe at Laurel Villa,

"Trimble got in the way of my foot, I think—awfully careless of him! Hallo, that sounds like the bobbies!"

There was the sound of a powerful car outside on the drive, and the next moment a thunderous knock came at the front door.

Tom Merry opened it, and a police-sergeant and two constables came in at his invitation. Tom led them into the dining-room, and soon he was relating what had happened.

The sergeant appeared to be quite dazed.

"Again!" he gasped. "This here looks like being a serious business, Miss Fawcett! They were the same men, you say, ma'am?"

"Certainly—I'm sure they were, though both wore masks!" said Miss Fawcett. "It is terrible! But they did not succeed in their object, I am thankful to say. The pot of chrysanthemums—"

"Yes, yes, ma'am!" said the sergeant hastily, frowning at one of the constables who was trying to hide a sudden grin. "Of course! But about this man, Dent, ma'am!" he added, his face full of suspicion. "I saw that chap when I was here yesterday. Now he's gone, you say?"

"Yes, it is terrible! Poor Mrs. Dent is terribly distressed. You must make every effort to find him—you must! He is a loyal servant, and both he and his wife are

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This sounds nonsense. Believe me, I'm not joking! How you can run a car, or a train, plane, or speed-boat, is explained in our Grand Free Gift Scheme, which you will find clearly outlined on page 7 of this issue.

In this scheme, model "Silver Bullets" (that's Kay Don's racing monster), model Bowman engines, Schneider planes, Army Tanks, Speed-boats, etc., are to be given away absolutely free.

All these wonderful gifts work—they are amazing models of the real thing, and will provide hours and hours of enjoyment for every boy and girl.

PEN AND INK.

All you have to do to qualify for one of these magnificent Free Gifts is to sign the registration form especially provided on page 7. It isn't much to do, now, is it? And look what you stand to gain!

If you haven't got a pen and ink—borrow one!

If your name is published in the list on page 7, sign the "CLAIM FORM" on page 16.

NEW FEATURES!

In three weeks' time I shall be making some changes in the programme of the jolly old GEM. No. Don't get



excited, or agitated! These changes will not mean that you will be losing anything in the present programme—you will, in fact, be gaining!

In the new programme you will find some topping new features. What they are I shall tell you later; that they are the real goods you can rest assured!

FOR NEXT WEEK!

Just a word about next Wednesday's topping stories. There will be the long complete tale of Tom Merry & Co., of St. Jim's. This story, to which I made reference last week, is a winner. Talk about thrills, and unexpected moments! Why, all the way through the chapters of "SKIMPOLE, THE SUPER-MAN!" you will be gripped in a whirlpool of 'em!

Next on the list comes the serial. In next week's instalment of "CHICK CHANCE, ADVENTURER!" we find our daring trio braving many fearful perils in the heart of the great African Continent.

Of course, there's the Oracle's special corner! Why, I wouldn't leave this loyal old member of the GEM staff out for anything! He's a real wonder, he is!

And last, there will be another long list of readers' names and addresses in connection with our grand Free Gift Scheme. **Cheerio, YOUR EDITOR.**

though how to account for the car being at the station in such case they had not stopped to wonder.

Now Miss Fawcett reminded them.

They stared at each other—their fears redoubled now.

"D-Dent!" stammered Tom. "Dent—Dent is not here, aunty?"

"Of course not, Tommy! He came back with you in the car, I— Tommy, why do you look like that? Surely, Dent—"

"I—I don't want to frighten you, aunt," stammered Tom, "but Dent was not at the station! We found the car there in darkness, dear! We waited, but as he did not turn up, and we could not find him about the station, we came home ourselves. I drove the car!"

"Good gracious!"

The old lady's face paled again. It was on the tip of Tom's tongue to tell of the treacherous, criminal trick played with the barricade on the roadway, but the sudden thought that it would only terrify the old lady still more bade him pause. Trimble was about to open his mouth also, but Blake hacked his shin, and he howled.

"Dear me! What is the matter with—"

"It's all right, Miss Fawcett!" said Blake hastily.

devoted to us here!" stammered the old lady in great distress. "I would rather those men had taken my precious plant than to have anything like this happen!"

"It's queer, ma'am—mighty queer!" said the sergeant grimly, closing his notebook at last. "But we'll find him!" he added meaningfully—"yes, we'll find the fellow all right; don't you fear! As for them scoundrels, they won't turn up again to-night. You look done up, ma'am, and I'd advise you all to get to bed, if I might make so bold. I'll leave a constable here until morning. I think. He'll look after the house all right!"

He spoke to one of the constables, and then he took his departure with the other man. Tom hurried out after them and told the sergeant of the adventure on the road. The sergeant whistled and nodded.

"Yes, the watchman stopped us when we were coming here, and told us he'd been attacked!" he snapped. "And so you were the young gent's as released him? By James! And you think it was done just to stop you coming here, sir?"

"We do!" said Tom.

"Well, it all beats me hollow," said the sergeant, biting

his moustache in perplexity. "The old lady ain't herself, of course—she keeps on as it's that pot of flowers as they're after! But, seriously, young gent, this beats me! If there ain't no valuables in the house—and Miss Fawcett swears as there ain't—then what's it mean, I want to know?"

"So do I!" said Tom. "And, what's more, I intend to find out what it means, sergeant! You'll look us up to-morrow, then?"

"Yes, sir."

"And Dent—what about Dent? You'll get men out searching—"

"I'll report to the inspector, and he's bound to do that!" said the sergeant, a grimness in his tone that did not escape Tom. "It's mighty queer about that fellow disappearing just now—mighty queer! We shall have some questions to ask him when he does turn up! Well, good-night, young sir! I fancy you'll have no more alarms to-night!"

And with that the sergeant boarded the car with his man, and the car sped away up the drive into the rainy night.

The constable was on guard in the hallway, and Tom went back into the dining-room. He found Hannah laying the table for supper, and Tom protested to his guardian.

"You go to bed, aunty!" he pleaded. "The sergeant was right—you look worn-out, dear! We'll be all right—we don't need any supper! We can wait until breakfast, easily enough!"

"Yaas, wathah! Bai Jove! Where is Twimble, deah boys?"

"Trimble will want supper, I am quite sure," said Miss Fawcett, smiling. "I insist upon your having supper, and I refuse to go to bed until you have had supper, my dear boys! You cannot have had much in the train."

"Hallo, Monty's up early!" exclaimed Blake, with a chuckle.

"Gone down to see if any news is to be had," said Tom, frowning in a worried way as he thought of Dent.

"More likely up to some lark," grinned Blake, nodding towards the bed where Baggy Trimble still slumbered noisily. "You know what a joker he is! Wake up, Trimble, old fat man!"

"Oh, let the fat ass sleep on—the longer the better!" said Tom Merry. "He'll be out of the way here, anyway! We've got to be busy this morning, Blake. I vote we have a good hunt round for poor old Dent!"

"You still feel he's met with foul play, Tom?"

"Sure of it! Heaven knows what those scoundrels are after! But it's clear they mean to stick at nothing."

"But—but the sergeant seemed to suspect Dent—" began Blake hesitatingly.

"I know! They're barking up the wrong tree, though!" said Tom emphatically. "I know Dent only too well! Dent's a good sort!"

"They may have got at him—bribery, you know, to keep him out of the way?" suggested Blake. "They don't seem to care twopence for the police!"

"That's so!" admitted Tom, his brow troubled. "The more I think over the business the more stumped I am—like the police! My guardian isn't wealthy—far from it! She can possess nothing that would make those dastardly crooks go to such lengths. I simply can't understand it. But if we can get on the trail of Dent we may find out something."

"It's no end queer!" said Blake. "The police—"

Blake paused. Tom Merry jumped. For just then the bed-room door opened and a figure entered—a figure that made the juniors stare.

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"We didn't, but Trimble did!" chuckled Lowther. "Just a little snack—about thirty sandwiches and a dozen packets of chocolate."

"Good gracious!" gasped Miss Fawcett, holding up her hands in horror. "The poor boy will be ill—terribly ill! He must have no supper, and I will give him a good dose of physic, and he must see the doctor in the morning!"

"Oh crumbs!"

There was a sudden gasp in the doorway—it was Baggy Trimble, and he had obviously overheard Miss Fawcett's intention. He blinked round at the grinning juniors.

"No supper for you, Fatty!" grinned Blake. "Only a dose of physic—Miss Fawcett says so! And you're to see the doctor in the morning!"

"Oh, really, Blake!" said Trimble, his fat features shiny, but a trifle disappointed now. "Well, as it happens, I'm not keen about supper!"

"Not keen?" almost yelled Blake. "You—My hat!"

"Not a bit keen!" said Trimble, gazing severely at Tom Merry & Co. "The fact is, you fellows, I don't think it's right to bother Miss Fawcett about supper at a time like this! Rather mean of you chaps, if I may say so!"

They were all "for bed" after that exciting, strenuous day, and after supper and a brief talk with the constable Tom Merry followed his chums upstairs. And soon the house of mystery was silent and asleep save for the police officer keeping watch and ward downstairs.

CHAPTER 7. Naughty Boy!

THE rain had ceased when the juniors opened their eyes the following morning, and the spring sunshine was streaming in at their bed-room windows at Laurel Villa. Outside birds were singing blithely, and the foliage of trees and shrubs glimmered and sparkled as the morning sun caught the raindrops that still lingered.

Tom Merry, Blake, Lowther, and Trimble had a big bed-room to themselves, and despite the hour they had retired. The first two were up bright and early.

They soon saw that they were not the earliest, however, for the gem showed that Lowther's single bed was empty.

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He was a short man, wearing a long, heavy overcoat that seemed several sizes too big for him, and a silk hat also several sizes too big; it came down over his eyes and ears, and almost hid his face—a deeply-lined face it appeared to be, clean-shaven and very solemn.

In his hand the man carried a handbag. He came in without knocking, with a brisk, alert step.

"Ah! Good-morning, boys!" he exclaimed, in a deep, throaty voice. "Is our patient asleep still? Ah! Hum! Yes, I see he is!" he added, with a glance at Baggy Trimble's fat form in the bed. "Well, well!"

He dropped his bag on a side-table, still keeping his hat on.

Tom Merry fairly blinked at him. He remembered his guardian mentioning that Trimble must have a doctor in the morning, but—but this seedy-looking individual who hadn't the manners to remove his hat, even, was certainly not the local medical man.

"Look here!" he began. "Who—what—Oh, my hat!"

Tom halted. Quite suddenly he noticed the bag, which bore the initials "M. L." and seemed familiar to him. Moreover, something about the face and form seemed familiar also. Then he noted that the deep lines on the face looked suspiciously like soot, or some such stuff.

He understood then.

"Monty, you awful ass!" he gasped.

"My hat! Lowther!" gurgled Blake, understanding.

"Shush!" murmured Lowther, his eye on the sleeping form of Baggy Trimble. "Miss Fawcett's orders must be obeyed. I will wake the patient!"

He gave the patient a tremendous dig in the ribs that brought Trimble up in bed with a jerk, wide awake.

"Yarroooooo!"

"Ah! Our patient is awake," said the little medical man, in his deep, throaty voice. "Well, and how do you feel this morning, my boy?"

"Yow-ow! Oh, you awful beast! Gerraway! Who the dickens are you?" hooted Trimble, glowering at him in wrath.

"A bit feverish—yes, a bit feverish!" murmured the doctor. "I must feel his pulse!"

"Yarroooooo!"

Trimble yelped as the doctor grabbed his wrist and gave it a hefty pinch.

"Very bad! A very serious case!" said the medical man gravely. "Not had his medicine yet? No? Right! Just hold the patient's nose a moment, my boy!"

"Certainly!" chuckled Blake.

He grabbed Trimble's little nose and held on. The doctor opened his bag and took out a big bottle. He withdrew the cork.

"Yarrugh!" howled Trimble. "Go away, you beast! I don't need a rotten doctor! Go away! Gug-gug-gug!" The doctor rammed the neck of the big bottle into Trimble's wide-open mouth, and Trimble's protesting yells ended in a terrific spluttering gurgle.

Baggy struggled, but he struggled in vain. Blake held on to his little nose, and the doctor held on to the bottle.

He laid it down at last. The bottle was empty. Baggy choked, struggled, gasped, and spluttered, a whitish liquid, looking suspiciously like soapy water, trickling from his mouth.

"Very serious!" remarked the doctor, frowning at Baggy's crimson puffed-out cheeks. "High blood-pressure, I fear! Blood-letting is obviously indicated. Hold the patient, my boys, while I let out a little blood!"

"Oh, yes, sir!"

"Certainly, sir!"

Manners had strolled into the room now, and with his aid Blake managed to hold the yelling, shrieking Trimble. The doctor produced from his bag a rusty meat-saw, an iron chisel, a hammer, and several other articles.

Trimble shrieked as he sighted those fearful-looking instruments.

"Hold the patient down—that's right! No; turn him over face-downwards on the bed. Before operating I must restore the circulation a little. One's circulation slows down during sleep, as probably you are aware. That slipper—Ah! Thanks, my boy!"

Tom Merry smilingly handed over the slipper from the floor. Trimble certainly deserved to have his circulation improved, at all events. The next moment it was being improved.

Whack, whack, whack, whack!

The doctor brought the slipper down with zealous and hefty swipes on Trimble's tightly-stretched pyjamas.

Trimble howled and howled.

"There, I think that will do!" observed the doctor, dropping the slipper and grasping the meat-saw. "Now, if you will kindly hold the patient firmly I shall be obliged. In a grave operation of this nature the slightest slip may cause death. If he should move while the leg is being amputated—"

"Yaroooooocoooooh! Murder! Help! Police! Yaroooooop!"

Trimble struggled with the desperation of despair now, and his struggles were rewarded. One fat fist took Manners in the left eye, and another fat fist punched home on the doctor's nose as he bent over him.

The next moment the patient was free.

He leaped from the bed like a jack-in-the-box, sent Blake sprawling backwards over the doctor's bag, and then he tore the door open and flew for his fat life.

There came a sudden yell from outside the door, and then a crash, and still more yells. Rushing out, Tom Merry, nearly helpless with laughter, saw that Trimble had charged full-tilt into Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, just as that elegant junior was emerging from the bath-room, clad in a gorgeous dressing-gown and pink pyjamas.

Both were seated on the floor now, panting and blinking dazedly at each other. Scattered over the floor was a tube of tooth-paste, a toothbrush, a towel, and a tablet of soap.

"Gwoooogh!" gasped Gussy. "Ow-wow! Twimble, you feahful idiot! Bai Jove! I will thwack you!"

Thump, thump, thump, thump!

Trimble shrieked again as the raging Arthur Augustus started to punch him as if his dearest desire was to make a pancake of Baggy Trimble.

Trimble's shrieks were ear-splitting, and very soon brought Miss Priscilla Fawcett and old Hannah to the spot.

"Chuck it, Gussy!" gasped Tom Merry, who had rushed down the stairs. "Chuck it, you ass!"

But Gussy went on, and it was only when Miss Fawcett grasped his arm that he realised she was present and stopped, his face red with wrath.

"G-good gracious!" gasped Miss Priscilla, giving the hapless Arthur Augustus a scolding glance. "I am surprised at you, Arthur! How could you strike that poor boy like that!"

"Oh, bai Jove!"

"I must repeat, I am surprised at you, Arthur!" said Miss Fawcett, with kindly severity. "I hate bullies!"

"B-bub-bullies!" mumbled Gussy.

"Yes, bullies, Arthur. I am surprised and disappointed in you. How could you thump that poor, inoffensive boy

like that?" said Miss Fawcett reproachfully. "I really must punish you for your thoughtless behaviour, Arthur."

"Oh deah! Oh, bai Jove!"

The rest of the juniors chuckled softly. Like Gussy, they knew what the dear old lady's punishments usually were. She would insist upon treating Tom and all of them as little boys. They remembered that when spending holidays at Laurel Villa she had started a system of punishments to keep them "good." Now—

Gussy shuddered, and his chums grinned.

"You are a naughty boy, and must be punished accordingly, for your own good," resumed the old lady, with kindly firmness. "When dearest Tommy is naughty, I always make him stand in the corner for a time. You, Arthur, will stand in the corner for half an hour immediately you have finished your breakfast."

"Oh cwikey!"

"Now hurry upstairs and finish your dressing, Arthur. Breakfast is already laid in the dining-room, Tommy."

"We're ready now, dear," smiled Tom Merry.

And while the luckless Arthur Augustus limped dismally upstairs, Tom led his chums into the dining-room for breakfast, all of them chuckling explosively.

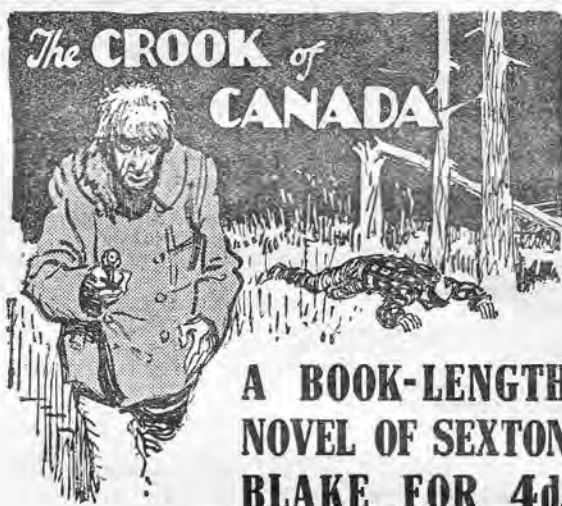
CHAPTER 8.

A Daylight Raid!

"If you fellows are ready, we'll get off," said Tom Merry.

Tom Merry, Blake, Lowther, and Manners had finished breakfast. Arthur Augustus had only just started, while Trimble had been going strong for ten minutes, and looked like going strong for another twenty.

(Continued on next page.)



"That night 200,000 dollars worth of cocaine went over the New York State border. Frenchy, the viper of the lumberwoods, disappeared from Canadian territory; the body of a man rolled sluggishly against the shore of Lake Champlain; and five dead hi-jackers sprawled on the roadside close to the Quebec line, while seven more lay hidden in a wooded gully licking their wounds." An extract from "The Crook of Canada," a sensational detective novel of dope-running and adventure out West, in which Sexton Blake plays a prominent part. Get this amazing volume TO-DAY!

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Arthur Augustus was in a state of mind that was tragic, and there was no remedy for it so far as he could see. He could scarcely tell the facts to Miss Fawcett. Indeed, Arthur Augustus was quite unaware of the full facts as yet, and did not know what had made Baggy come rushing out of his bed-room as he had done.

He sat at the table and toyed with his morning egg moodily, and glowered at Baggy Trimble, who was too busy even to grin back at him. But he dare not go beyond glowering with Miss Fawcett seated at the table.

As Tom and his chums rose Miss Fawcett also rose, and, with apologies to the guests, went off to arrange about breakfast for the constable before he went off duty. Another constable had already arrived to relieve him. The inspector had decided to keep the house under close observation—a very wise precaution, as all agreed.

Before going Miss Fawcett had reminded Gussy of his punishment, and the swell of the Fourth was crimson with dismay.

"You—you feahful wottah, Twimble!" he stammered. "I have a vewy good mind to give you a most feahful thwashin', heah and now!"

"Better not, Gussy," grinned Blake. "Miss Fawcett will make it an hour in the corner if you do, old sport. Take it smiling, like a good little man."

"He, he, he!" giggled Trimble. "I say, if you touch me, I shall yell blue murder, Gussy."

"You feahful fat villain—"

"I say, you fellows, I'm not coming out, you know. Catch me tramping through mud and wet grass," said Trimble, blinking at Tom Merry. "Look here, what's a fellow to do in a hole like this? I'm fed-up already."

"You must be, after the grub you've scoffed," said Tom. "Anyway, you do what you like, old fat man. You're certainly not coming with us. Come on, you fellows."

"Bai Jove! You must wait for me, deah boys," said Gussy, in sudden alarm.

"But you've got to stand in a corner for half an hour yet," grinned Tom. "Nothing doing, old chap. Shouldn't be a naughty boy, Gussy."

"Bai Jove! Weally, you fellows—"

"You've not finished breakfast, and half an hour in the corner, and another hour to get your hair brushed again, your tie adjusted correctly, and to put your hat and your spats and your giddy coat on will make it ten o'clock, at least," said Tom gravely. "Can't wait, old chap. We want to get on the trail while the grass and mud show tracks. Cheerio!"

The juniors left the dining-room, and, after a chat with the constable, got their caps and coats and went out.

Silence followed for several minutes after that. Upstairs Gussy could hear sounds of beds being moved, and he realised the servants were making the beds. Miss Fawcett, he knew, had gone to lie down for an hour in her bed-room. He was tempted to disobey the old lady and rush after the others, but he resisted the temptation.

More minutes passed, and then, quite suddenly, a sound made Gussy start. It came from the partly-opened french window behind him.

He turned round, and then his heart throbbed, and his mouth suddenly went dry.

The glass was darkened, and then two men stepped softly into the room. He recognised them in a flash, though both wore black masks over their gleaming eyes.

It was Brant and his accomplice—the burglars again!

Gussy did not move or speak. He stood rooted to the floor. The two rascals did not see him; he was in the far corner in the shadows. They came in swiftly, and Brant spoke.

"Dodged that fool, all right!" he snapped. "Now get busy, Kane! We've got to find it this time. The police are getting nasty. We shan't p'raps get another chance."

Still Gussy did not move. He was stunned. That the men had dared to raid the house in broad daylight was amazing. Especially so as they obviously knew the police were guarding the house. Brant's remark about dodging that "fool" told Gussy that. He had referred to the constable.

"Search the house from cellars to attics," grinned Brant. "If there's trouble, don't hesitate to shoot—but not unless. The darned thing must be somewhere. It ain't in the greenhouse, or the sheds. Where can that old fool of a woman have put it. I'll stay and watch that—"

It was then Brant suddenly sighted Arthur Augustus.

He muttered an oath, and in a flash his gun was out and covering the scared junior.

"Only a kid, I'll see to him. Get busy, Kane."

Unconsciously Arthur Augustus had put his hands up—there was nothing else for it. He knew the men were utterly ruthless, and to resist was folly.

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Kane crept from the room with the stealth of a cat, and vanished through the half-open door.

Out in the hall the man paused, listening.

As he listened his eyes scanned the hall as if he almost hoped to see there what he was searching for. And quite abruptly a muttered exclamation left his thin lips, and his eyes glittered behind the mask.

They were fixed, as if unbelievably, upon the grandfather clock.

The long door below the face was hanging open. Inside showed the plant—the precious chrysanthemum plant that Miss Fawcett had so carefully hidden there.



Tom Merry's handbag, flung with all the junior's force, whirled through the air and sent the automatic spinning from the crook's hand.

For a long instant Kane's glittering eyes gazed at it, and then with a sort of snarl of triumph the man pounced upon it. His hands went inside, and he hauled out the heavy plant-pot.

Almost at a run he rushed into the dining-room with it. "I've got it, Brant!" he hissed, his voice trembling with excited triumph. "I've got it! The darned thing was hid in that grandfather clock. No wonder we couldn't find it. Look! If that ain't the one—"

"It is," Brant's voice was almost wolfish.

He leaped across the room, Arthur Augustus forgotten. Together the men tore at the plant, trying to drag it from the pot.

Arthur Augustus was absolutely astounded at the sight. But before he could take advantage of the position—had he even wanted to—something happened.

There sounded a sudden commotion from beyond the hall somewhere—a sudden, terrified yelling in Trimble's familiar voice, and the angry yapping of a dog.

Then followed the patter of running feet, and the next moment the door flew wide open, and Trimble rushed in, with Fido, Miss Fawcett's old pet, yapping at his heels.

Gussy guessed in a flash what had happened. Fido had taken a dislike to Trimble already, and he had evidently found Trimble raiding the kitchen regions, and had gone for him. Fido had scarcely any teeth, but he was a plucky old dog, and Trimble was not the fellow to wait to see if he could bite.

He had flown for his life, with Fido after him.

At all events, here he was, and the next moment wild confusion reigned in the dining-room. Trimble all but barged into Kane as he rushed in, and then he fell over the flower-pot with a terrific crash and a howl.

But as he fell Trimble caught a brief glimpse of the masked men, and the next moment his shrieks were echoing through the house.

"Yarooogh! Help! Police! Murder! Help! Yarooogh!"

With a muttered oath Brant dragged out his gun again. And just as he did so Fido recognised the men as old enemies, and he turned his attention to them in a flash.

His teeth—what teeth he had—met in Brant's leg, and a still more furious oath escaped the crook, and he raised his automatic.

"Hold on! Don't shoot, you fool!" snarled Kane; but he was an instant too late.

Crack!

The gun spat viciously, but luckily the aim was wild, and the bullet missed Fido, and dug a hole in the carpet. And just then Arthur Augustus got a glimpse of a figure in blue tearing across the green lawn outside, and that settled the matter.

Grabbing a book from a side-table, Gussy sent it whirling at Kane, and then he rushed into action gallantly.

The book had sent the automatic spinning from Kane's hand, and as he leaped to recover it Gussy charged and butted him even as he bent.



Brant was kicking savagely at Fido, giving vent to a stream of oaths as he did so, and Kane lurched right into him under Gussy's charge. And then Gussy piled in with a will.

For a moment confusion reigned, and then a fist, hard as iron, sent Gussy reeling away, to collapse with a groan into the fender.

"Hook it!" yelled Kane, scrambling up and sighting the constable as he loomed up in the french windows.

He gave Fido a brutal kick and dashed for the door. Brant had made a sudden grab for the plant on the floor, but the darkening of the window caused him also to look up swiftly.

He sighted the constable, swore furiously, and lashed out with his automatic gripped by the barrel.

It was a wild blow, but the constable was just springing at him, and the blow went home.

The constable reeled, half-stunned, and in that second Brant had dodged past him, and was through the open french window.

"Bai Jove!"

Gussy was on his feet now, but Brant was gone—he just got a glimpse of the man vanishing amid the laurels of the shrubbery.

"Bai Jove! Gweat Scott!"

Trimble had vanished, and Fido had chased after Kane. The dazed constable and the equally dazed Arthur Augustus blinked at each other. Then the officer seemed to recover his scattered wits, and with a muttered exclamation, he darted out through the french windows again.

When he came back a few moments later his face was grim. He found that Miss Fawcett and the two women servants were in the dining-room with Arthur Augustus, who was dismally nursing a bruised and swollen forehead.

Once again the burglars had been, and had got safely away. But once again they had failed in their lawless quest.

CHAPTER 9.

Gussy on the Trail!

THERE was no little confusion for a time in the dining-room.

Miss Fawcett was agitated and alarmed, and the two women servants were shaking with terror. The shots alone had been enough to tell them what was amiss.

But the crooks had gone now—though had they known that only one constable was there and that Tom Merry and the rest were away they might have remained to fight it out. It was fortunate indeed that the armed and ruthless rascals did not know that.

Before anything else was done, Miss Fawcett insisted upon attending to the nasty wound on the constable's temple, and the bruise on Gussy's aristocratic forehead.

This done, Arthur Augustus breathlessly explained what had happened.

"But how did they know the plant was hidden in the clock?" faltered Miss Fawcett, in great distress. "Now I shall have to find another hiding-place! Good gracious! Why should the heartless villains try to steal my chrysanthemum?"

The constable scratched his head. The matter of the pot of chrysanthemums had been rather a good joke to the local police. Miss Priscilla Fawcett was well known as a quaint, if good-hearted old lady, and to soothe her the officers had smiled and politely listened to her claims that it was the plant the men were after.

But among themselves the police force had chuckled and even roared at the joke.

Yet now the constable was puzzled—more than puzzled. Here was the precious plant pot, upset on the floor. And after Gussy's story, and after seeing Brant with his own eyes grabbing at the pot, the officer could not help wondering.

What was the strange mystery?

He examined the plant. There was nothing unusual about it. The plant itself, with the soil and roots, had been dragged from the big pot. The constable examined the soil, poking his fingers amid the roots, despite Miss Fawcett's agitated warnings not to damage them!

He gave it up at last, and scratched his head again.

"Well, it beats me, ma'am!" he exclaimed, rubbing his nose for a change. "There ain't nothin' in the pot, nor in the plant. I did wonder for a minute if something was hidden in it—a diamond or something like that. But there ain't nothing! It beats me hollow, and that's a fact!"

"I almost wish they had taken it, the wicked men!" faltered Miss Fawcett weakly. "I am afraid—afraid that they will kill some of us yet! Poor, brave old Fido has also been injured—he is limping terribly! I must run away now and see to him."

The old lady hurried away to see Fido, who was resting after his exciting adventures on a couple of cushions in the kitchen, apparently forgetting her precious plant in her fears for Fido.

Hannah and Mrs. Dent, who was looking pale and worn, also vanished, and the constable blinked at the pot of chrysanthemums.

"Better shove this thing away again, young gent!" he said, frowning. "I'll just get on the phone to the sergeant and then get on watch outside again. How them blokes got past beats me!"

He hurried out through the french window, and Arthur Augustus stared at the plant, wondering what to do with it. He grinned a little as his eyes fell on a large heating lamp standing in the corner, however.

The lamp had been used to supplement the heat from the fire at breakfast, for the dining-room was a large one and a sudden idea had occurred to Gussy.

He lifted the upper part of the stove back on

hinges, and then lifted out the lamp itself. Then, taking up the heavy plant pot, he placed it inside.

The pot itself fitted perfectly, and after a struggle Gussy, by squeezing and pushing the plant itself sideways, managed to get the upper part of the stove back into position over it.

The plant was now hidden completely, and Gussy imagined that no crook on earth would dream of looking for it there.

"Wathah a bwright ideah!" murmured Arthur Augustus, very pleased indeed with himself. "Now I must get wid of the w'etched lamp and wash my hands!"

Arthur Augustus hid the lamp in a cupboard under the stairs, and washed his elegant hands in the bath-room. He had just descended the stairs again when Trimble rolled up to him. His face was still white, and he blinked apprehensively at Gussy.

"I—I say, Gussy!" he stammered. "Have those awful men really gone?"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Gussy, giving Trimble a deadly look. "You little weptile, Twimble! I wefuse to soil my hands with you heah, as I do not wish to annoy Miss Fawcett again. But I intend to give you the most feahful thwashin' you have evah had when we return to St. Jim's!"

"Oh, deah! I—I say, Gussy!" pleaded Trimble. "It was not my fault! Those beasts were after me—at least, Lowther was!"

It was nearly eleven o'clock, and Gussy knew his chums were not likely to be back early, unless they got on the trail.

For several minutes Gussy wandered about. He chatted with the constable on guard, and then he was about to go indoors again when the great idea came to him.

Why not do a bit of tracking on his own accord? He was a Scout, and he had a very good opinion of his tracking abilities. It would be a score over his chums if he did meet with success.

"Bai Jove! That is a vewy bwright ideah!" he murmured. "Yaas, wathah! I will get on the twail of these wuffians, and twy to find out where the wascals hang out!"

Having decided thus D'Arcy left the house.

He remembered the spot where he had seen Brant vanish in the shrubbery, and almost at once he picked up their tracks. The grass was still drenched and trampled, and their footprints showed clearly in the muddy soil.

Without troubling to go back for his coat, Arthur Augustus followed up the tracks, his eye gleaming with excitement behind his monocle.

Tom Merry and the others had gone to hunt for Dent, but he felt sure they had not thought of getting on the crook's trail. Enthusiasm gripped the swell of the Fourth as the footprints led him out from the grounds of Laurel Villa into a field at the back.

He was a trained Scout, but if he had not been trained to follow a trail he could scarcely have gone wrong on a trail like this. The ground was in an ideal state for his purpose, and the crooks had made no effort to cover their tracks in any sort of way. Obviously, they had little respect or fear of the local police.

From the field the tracks led across a narrow lane, and then along the hedge of a ploughed field. Then on through two more fields and into a wood.

In the wood the trail was a trifle more difficult, and more than once Arthur Augustus was fogged for a time. But he persevered doggedly, and each time he picked up the trail again farther on. Trampled ferns and grass, broken twigs—all told their tale. Once he was at a loss when the trail led at the edge of a woodland stream. But some yards on his sharp eyes spotted a cigarette-end, and it was

Had it been wet Gussy would have ignored it. But it was dry, showing it had been dropped there that morning—very recently, in fact.

A moment later Gussy picked up the footprints again, and scarcely a minute later he came out of the wood on the edge of a wide river.

Then Gussy halted.

Before him the trees and bushes ran down right to the edge of the water. There was no path either to left or right, and he thrilled as he felt certain that his trail was ended. For out on the water, tethered by rotting ropes to the bank, was an ancient houseboat, ruined and desolate. All the windows were smashed, and the rails from the top deck had vanished for the most part.

It was little more than a wreck, and obviously had been there, deserted, for years. Yet it floated, though obviously water-logged, the lower deck being nearly flush with the rippling water that flowed by it and gurgled round its rotting timbers.

Gussy stared at it, and then he gave a sudden start.

For he was not alone. Scarcely a dozen yards from him was a man, and he was seated on a tree-trunk, smoking a cigarette. He was a short, ordinary-looking man, young and shabby, and he had a curiously flattened nose.

Both sighted each other at the same moment, and the young man got up slowly from the fallen tree and threw away his cigarette-end.

"Good-mornin'!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus politely.

He was disappointed, especially on sighting the cigarette. Had he been on the wrong trail, after all? But the little man might help him, and Gussy treated him to a smile.

"Good-mornin'!" said the young fellow.

He seemed a trifle dazzled, possibly by Gussy's gleaming silk hat.

"I wondah if you have seen two men pass this way?" inquired Arthur Augustus gracefully.

"Two men?" echoed the young man, buttoning his jacket.

"Yaas!"

"What sort of blokes, young gent?"

"Two wathah big men, weawin'—"

Arthur Augustus paused. It was unlikely the two crooks would be wearing their masks still. Moreover, he did not wish to alarm the flat-nosed young

man. "Weawin'—well, weawin' just ordinawy clothes, you know! One had wathah a stwong, square jaw. Two wathah unpleasant-lookin' men, I should say!"

"What you want 'em for?"

"Well, nothin' weally, deah boy! At least—" Arthur Augustus paused again. Then, in a burst of confidence: "To be quite fwank, you know, I was twackin' them down! They are wotten cwooks, and the police are vewy anxious to know just where the wascals hang out!"

And Arthur Augustus eyed the ordinary-looking young man a trifle anxiously. If the young fellow had not seen Brant and Kane then he was stumped!

"So you're trackin' them two blokes down, are you, kid?" said the young man, eyeing Gussy fixedly. "I seed 'em—yes! Ain't you one of them school kids as is staying at Laurel Villa?"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Gussy innocently, supposing he was talking to a villager. "Bai Jove! If you have weally seen the wascals—"

"Yes, I've seen 'em; and, what's more, I'll take you to 'em! I reckon as they'll be glad to see you, young 'un!"

Saying which the flat-nosed young man suddenly kicked Gussy's feet from under him. Then he pounced upon him like a tiger, and, ramming a knee into Gussy's chest, clapped a hand like a vice over the junior's mouth.

Gussy struggled, but he struggled in vain. Only a gurgle came from his astonished, gagged mouth. The young man's

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Ask two chums, to whom you have shown your name in this list, to sign in the space provided below.

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Name

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Witnesses automatically become eligible for a Free Gift.

"Here, I say, where are you fellows going?" he snorted.

"Out, old fat man! Good-bye!"

"Look here, wait for me!" gasped Trimble. "I say, I'm not jolly well going to stop in this house again by myself, you beasts! I've had enough! Hold on! I'm coming with you!"

"Rats!"

The chums vanished.

Trimble gasped. It was bad enough with Arthur Augustus to keep him company, but since Gussy had gone Trimble had been in a state of quaking terror, and had haunted the policeman on guard for the rest of the morning.

But even with the constable, Trimble had not felt safe. The crooks had evaded him once, and might do so again. And what was one constable against two armed and dangerous criminals? Much as he jeered at Tom Merry & Co., it was surprising what faith Baggy had in them—Tom Merry especially. Constables or no constables, he felt safer in the company of Tom Merry & Co.

To be left alone again in that house of mystery, with only three women for company, filled the fat youth with dread. He guessed Arthur Augustus had hidden the plant somewhere, and he felt sure the scoundrelly crooks would make another desperate bid for it.

As the chums vanished through the front doorway, Baggy yelped and rushed to get his cap and coat. He soon got them, and then he raced in pursuit of Tom Merry & Co., regardless of the fact that he had been eating most of the morning, and had wound up with lunch enough for half a dozen fellows.

But it was amazing how much Baggy could carry without discomfort, and he soon caught the trackers up. They had easily found the crook's footprints and the discovery of smaller ones settled the matter for them. Gussy had undoubtedly got on the rascals' trail. Here was proof! There was no mistaking those footprints!

"They're Gussy's right enough!" breathed Tom Merry.

"He's shown sense—more sense than we did. But—but—"

"What's happened to him?" muttered Blake. "Hallo!

Oh, here's that fat ass!"

Trimble came up, panting.

"Wait for me, you beasts!" he gasped.

"You fat ass! Go back!" ordered Tom Merry. "You'll be no use on this job. And there may be danger—danger for all of us!"

"I don't care!" grunted Trimble. "I'm not jolly well staying at that beastly house! This is all your fault, Tom Merry!"

"Eh? My fault?"

"Dragging me down to this beastly house!" said Trimble warmly. "Bringing a fellow into all this fearful danger! I'm fed-up with it! Rotten grub! Rotten show! Rotten treatment! Look here, chuck this rotten game, and let's get back to St. Jim's, Tom Merry!"

JUST A MOMENT!

So sorry to interrupt you at this most exciting part,
BUT HAVE YOU SIGNED THAT COUPON ON
PAGE 7 YET?

"You—you fat ass!" gasped Tom. "You shoved yourself in, though you knew you weren't wanted! You must make the best of it now, my fat pippin! Now get back—sharp!"

"Shan't! I'm coming with you beasts!" groaned Trimble. "Look here, you fat fool, we're trailing those men! They're dangerous customers, as you know already! If they catch us—"

"They won't!" said Trimble, with a sniff. "Fat chance you chaps have of trailing them! Yah! In any case, it's safer than at that awful house! While you chaps are wasting time like this they'll be raiding the house again, I bet! If you're going on I'm jolly well coming, too, anyway!"

"You fat ass—" Blake was beginning.

"Oh, let him rip!" snapped Tom. "It's his own funeral, anyway! Come on!"

He was eager to be going on—to follow up the trail. He blamed himself bitterly for not having thought of getting on the rascals' trail in the morning, instead of wasting time trying to find Dent. He felt tolerably certain now that the trail would lead them to the missing chauffeur.

The juniors pushed on, Trimble trudging behind, dismal and sulky. It was clear that he had no faith in their ever

tracking down the crooks. Had he had any faith he would, doubtless enough, have taken himself elsewhere!

But he plodded on over ploughed fields, through meadows, and then into the woods.

Tom Merry's eyes were gleaming brightly now, and excitement was growing among the chums. They knew only too well that they were not only on Gussy's trail, but on the trail of the crooks.

How and where would it end?

They were deep in the wood now, and quite suddenly Tom Merry gave a warning hiss.

"Down! Look! Ahead there!"

They looked, and saw two burly figures ahead through the trees. The two men were coming in their direction, and they knew who they were in a flash.

"Brant and Kane!" hissed Tom. "Down, you—"

But it was too late; the rascals had obviously seen the juniors.

They stood as if undecided for a moment, and then both turned tail and bolted back the way they had come.

Knowing the characters of the two men, Tom was not a little astonished; he had expected them to attack furiously. Instead, they had bolted like frightened rabbits!

"After them!" yelled Blake.

He started off with a rush in pursuit, and against his better sense Tom followed after a moment's hesitation, as Manners and Lowther also took to their heels, with triumphant yells.

Trimble was plodding and lagging behind, fagged and fuming, and he gave a yell as he saw his companions suddenly break into a spurt for no reason at all so far as he could see.

"Here, hold on! Wait for me, you beasts! Why, you—"

Trimble fairly spluttered with wrath and broke into a trot in pursuit. Not having seen the men ahead, he imagined the chums were trying to shake him off for some reason of their own. He plunged on blindly, the crashing ahead guiding his footsteps through the tangled, muddy depths of the wood.

The men ahead had already vanished from sight, and Tom Merry was just about to call his men to a halt, fearing a trap, when suddenly the trees and bushes ended, and they came out on the wooded banks of the river.

They halted, breathless, and stared at them, all of them suspicious and alert. Then they sighted the houseboat. "Gone on that old hulk, I bet!" panted Blake. "Come on! We'll jolly soon rout 'em out, guns or no guns!"

"Hold on, Blake!" said Tom sharply, glancing about him keenly. "Those brutes aren't afraid of us, you fool! We don't want to run into a trap!"

He stepped down to the water's edge and examined the old wooden plank that gave admittance to the deck of the hulk. His eyes gleamed as he saw the wet, muddy footprints.

For a moment he hesitated, his eyes searching first the hulk and then the bank on either side. He suspected a trap. Yet the wet footprints on the plank made him feel certain the men were on the hulk. Moreover, he was eager—desperately eager—to discover what secret the old hulk hid. That he would find Dent a prisoner there—possibly Gussy also—made him over eager, in fact.

"We'll risk it, Blake!" he muttered, as no sound reached their ears. "Lowther, you remain here and keep your eyes peeled. Those brutes may be a mile away by this, but—but I doubt it. If anything happens to us on the hulk, don't be a fool and come to our aid. Just cut off as hard as you can pelt and get help. Understand?"

"Yes," said Lowther, not very enthusiastically; he also was eager to explore the old hulk.

But he did not argue. He remained alert and watchful as Tom, Manners, and Blake crept cautiously aboard the hulk. It was not like Tom Merry to act rashly. Yet he knew himself as they crept on board over the plank bridge that they were acting rashly—foolishly.

CHAPTER 11.

rapped!

NO sound came from the houseboat; all was silent, save for the gurgle of water alongside. A glance back ashore showed Tom that Lowther was watching them keenly.

Tom felt a chill as he stood and looked about him. Not a soul was in sight anywhere. The river stretched away—cold, silvery, and deserted. Dark woods edged the river on both sides. It was a lonely spot. He knew there was little hope of help from anywhere, and he shivered as he suddenly remembered that the crooks were armed, and ruthless, desperate men who would stick at nothing.

Already he was regretting his rashness in boarding the

hulk with only two chums at his heels. Yet Lowther was watching from the shore, and if anything happened—

He pulled himself together and began to look about him. He peered cautiously through the shattered window-frames of the saloon—or what had once been a saloon. It was empty, only the broken and rotting woodwork remaining. He was about to go up on the upper deck when he sighted the hatch on the forepeak.

His keen eyes noted at once that it was secured, and that the peg of wood that served for a padlock was new—recently cut wood.

His heart leaped.

"We're on the right track, Blake!" he breathed. "Look at the peg there! Why should the hatch be secured at all—and with a new peg of wood?"

He looked about him again, the silence giving him a feeling of safety. If the men wanted to trap them they would have acted before this, he told himself.

"You stay on guard, Manners," he muttered. "If you hear the slightest sound, or see anything, give a yell. Come on, Blake; we're going to find out why that hatch is secured like that. I fancy I can guess."

He worked at the peg with his fingers, listening with all his ears as he did so. It came out at last, and together Blake and he raised the heavy hatch cover. The sunlight streamed down into the murky, evil-smelling cabin below, making a bright patch of sunlight on the damp floor. Beyond the square of sunlight, in the deep shadows, Tom glimpsed a movement; then, as his eyes saw more clearly, he caught a glimpse of two forms. One of them wriggled strangely, and a gurgling sound came up to him.

Tom's heart throbbed, and he gave a gasping cry.

"They're here, Blake—they're here! Prisoners! Stay on guard, Manners! Don't follow us!"

He almost hurled himself down the rickety, mouldy ladder. Blake followed him, breathless with excitement.

"Gussy!" panted Tom.

He peered into the shadows, and then he recognised the bound and gagged form of his chum. Tom tugged out his pocket-knife, and, dark as it was, began to hack at the cords, while Blake dragged out his own knife and turned to the second bound form. He could scarcely see the face, but he knew it must be Dent, the missing gardener-chauffeur.

"Is it Gussy?" called down Manners breathlessly.

Tom looked up in sudden alarm.

"Yes, Manners, you ass, keep watch—we'll see to this! You—"

He was interrupted.

From the shore came Lowther's voice—abrupt and almost in a shriek.

"Look out! Look out, Manners! Quick!"

Manners jerked upright—but too late!

A dark shadow seemed to cover the trapdoor, and then Manners gave a strangled yell as a man, who had obviously been lying flat on the upper deck of the houseboat, leaped down full upon him.

The junior crashed down, falling half over the trapdoor, the burly figure on top of him. His breath was almost pounded from his body, and he lay stunned and helpless. Then, before he could even move, rough hands gripped him, and he was sent headlong in a sprawling heap down the ladder.

Tom Merry, in sudden alarm, had jumped to the foot of the ladder, and Manners' full weight fell on top of him, and they crashed to the rotting floor of the cabin. Then, before Blake could even grasp the tragedy that had taken place, the trapdoor above them was slammed down.

Pitch darkness fell on them. They were trapped! Yet even as he realised it, Tom felt a thrill of thankfulness that Lowther was ashore, and would know what to do. He had been rash, but he had shown caution in leaving Lowther on guard ashore at all events!

But Tom was soon to know that he had not been cautious enough even in that respect.

After seeing the fate that had befallen his chums, Lowther stood motionless for a brief instant, his heart throbbing. Should he obey Tom, or should he rush to their aid?



Manners gave a strangled yell as a man, who had been lying flat on the upper deck of the house-boat, leaped down full upon him!

Just then the question was decided for him.

From the bushes scarcely a couple of yards from where he was standing a man suddenly leaped with the swiftness of a tiger.

It was the flat-nosed young man.

He brought Lowther crashing to earth, and he held him down with a grip like steel. Two men were visible on the deck of the houseboat, and having rammed the peg of wood home, Brant and Kane dashed ashore to the aid of their accomplice.

"Neatly done, chief!" grinned the flat-nosed young man. "Walked inter the trap like mice arter cheese!"

"Shut up!" snarled Brant. "You needn't crow yet, blame you, Nosey! What about that other kid? There was another—that fat young fool! He's taken fright and bolted back—"

But Trimble hadn't. For even as the crook spoke, he arrived on the scene with a rush.

Not dreaming that the crooks were within miles of the spot, Baggy Trimble, panting and almost at his last gasp, came ambling out from the trees, his eyes glittering with wrath against Tom Merry & Co. But the next moment he would have given worlds to see their faces.

He pulled up short, and fairly shrieked in terror as his eyes fell upon the three men. Lowther got a glimpse of him, and he yelled:

"Run for it, Trimble—quick!"

Trimble shrieked again and turned to bolt. But Kane leaped in front of him, barring his retreat. Desperate now, terrified out of his fat wits, Baggy wheeled round,

and, seeing Brant making a grab at him, ducked his head and butted him full in the waistcoat.

Brant yelled, and sat down hard on the muddy ground.

Before Trimble now was the river, the houseboat, and the plank leading on to it. Baggy just glimpsed it, and made a rush for that—anything to get away from the desperate, cursing ruffians.

His fat legs fairly twinkled as he tore over the plank. And then, for once, Baggy had a brain-wave.

Reaching the deck, he wheeled round, and grabbed the end of the plank, just as Kane reached it and thudded one foot on the shore end.

It was now or never.

Baggy grasped the plank, and tugged at it with the strength of desperation. Kane's foot slid off as it twisted under him, and then—

Splash!

Kane was in, and a huge spout of water shot up as he plunged headlong into the river with a wild yell.

Then the heavy plank dropped from Trimble's grasp, and splashed in also.

Trimble almost fainted with relief.

But his relief was short-lived.

"The ropes, Kane!" roared Brant, rushing down to the water's edge, and grabbing one of the mooring ropes tethered to stakes on the bank. "Quick, you fool!"

Kane scrambled ashore, drenched and spouting oaths.

He grabbed at the rope, and together the two crooks pulled viciously, obviously attempting to pull the heavy houseboat near enough for them to jump aboard.

It was a hopeless task—the lumbering craft scarcely moved an inch inshore, and suddenly the rotten rope snapped, and Brant and Kane fell backwards in a sprawling heap.

But Trimble had recovered his wits by now, and he was taking no chances. With a gasp, he dragged out his pocket-knife, and began to hack at the nearest of the two remaining ropes.

A couple of desperate slashes did it, and the houseboat began almost immediately to move outwards by the stern as the stream gripped her. But Trimble did not realise it—he had jumped towards the other rope, and was hacking at that.



Boy Scouts in the Congo

Now then, the Popoiaki Patrol! Number off from the right! There's Lyn Strong, Fatty Page, Smut, Pip, and Stacpoole—and, of course, Bobo, the African Chief. And the adventures they go through in the Congo will make you gasp as you read them. You simply must get acquainted with them in

THE
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Every Tuesday. Don't miss this week's issue!

Another snap, and that parted. Ashore the ruffians raved helplessly as the lumbering houseboat moved away slowly, fairly in the grip of the current. For the first time for long years the old houseboat was really afloat, moving downstream.

Trimble almost grinned as he blinked, panting and gasping, at the helpless, cursing men ashore.

He had done it—had turned the tables neatly on the gang. They still had Lowther, certainly—Trimble could see him struggling helplessly in the grasp of the flat-nosed young man.

With his heart thumping madly against his fat ribs, Trimble turned and glanced downstream. The old houseboat, her timbers creaking and groaning, was moving at quite a good speed now, for the current was strong. Why it was moving so swiftly Trimble did not stop to think—until a sullen, distant roar brought the truth to him.

It was the sound of a weir—far away yet, but a deadly peril to the houseboat and those upon it. As yet Trimble had not guessed that anyone might be aboard it besides himself. He was only concerned with his own fat skin!

And truly the prospect was not a pleasant one. Even Trimble's fat mind realised the danger. He began to shriek for help, and then quite suddenly he sighted something ahead that gave him hope.

Jutting out into the river was a long, broken wooden jetty, scarcely anything but the jagged piles standing up from the water. The sight gave Trimble hope, and he wondered whether he dare risk a leap on to it.

The houseboat, indeed, seemed to be drifting right down upon it. Trimble watched it fascinated, and then he became aware of a smothered yelling that came to him. Quite suddenly he realised that it came from the hatchway close to where he stood.

"G-good lor!" gasped Trimble.

In a flash he understood what it meant. Somebody beside himself was aboard—fastened down beneath the hatch. He guessed at once that it could only be his school-fellows. And he was standing in stunned indecision, quite forgetting about his own danger, when there came a sudden terrific crash.

The drifting houseboat had crashed full into the piles of the jetty with terrific force.

Trimble was sent headlong to the deck with a crash, and he only just saved himself from going overboard. Then the boat moved on again.

But more sluggishly than ever now. The lumbering craft was listing strangely, and Trimble never guessed why. But down below the prisoners had guessed.

The sudden collision had sent all of them sprawling in the deep darkness, and it was some moments before they could sort themselves out.

Both Gussy and Dent were free from their bonds by this time, and Dent suddenly gave a startled yell as a flood of water surged over his legs.

"Good heavens! The boat's sinking, lads!" he yelled.

"We're done for unless we can get out of this!"

"Good heavens!"

"Oh, bai Jove!"

The juniors balanced themselves in the deep gloom as best they could. They realised in a flash that it was true enough. The water was over their ankles already—black, surging, evil-smelling water. They had known the boat was afloat on the stream soon enough. Then had come that crash; and now they knew only too well that they were face to face with a horrible death—trapped in a sinking ship.

Even Tom Merry's stout heart failed him in that terrible moment. But only for a moment. He was the first to regain his courage, and the next moment he was scrambling up the ladder, beating frenziedly at the trapdoor, and yelling at the top of his voice.

He had heard Trimble's terrified yells for aid, and he felt there was hope yet.

All depended upon Baggy Trimble!

CHAPTER 12.

Baggy Plays Up!

"O H dear! Oh good heavens!" wailed Baggy.

He blinked helplessly ahead, and he blinked to right and left, hoping against hope to see help of some kind. But not a soul was in sight.

He knew that the ancient, rotting craft was sinking—that that terrific crash must have crushed a huge hole in the side of the houseboat. The deck was now at a perilous angle, and he could almost feel it sinking under him.

(Continued at foot of next page.)



Why is a negro in the street like a bandy-legged man? Because the "knee grows" out! Ha, ha, ha! (Don't take any notice of him, he's barmy.—Ed.)

John, having built it, found that it was such a long way to Tipperary that he gave up going there, and the Irishmen round about took all the bricks to throw at each other.

Q.—What is the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes?

A.—Your chum, Gordon Scott, of Inverary, was quite mistaken in thinking that this was a place at which you were handed 10,000 cigarettes as you went through the turnstile. This valley you are asking about is a very interesting place for people who go in for studying volcanoes, and things of that sort. It didn't exist in its present state until 1912, when Mt. Katmai in Alaska went into eruption. The floor of the valley was covered with white-hot sand, and the trees were turned to charcoal, while millions of jets of steam hissed out of the floor of the valley. These jets of steam were hot enough to melt zinc and set alight a stick held in them. The ash that poured out of the volcano covered Kodiak Island, which is 100 miles away, with a blanket a foot deep, and the fumes actually tarnished brasswork in Victoria, 1,500 miles distant! The dust thrown into the air lowered the temperature of the North Temperate Zone by ten degrees in the summer of 1912. Some volcano! Nobody lost their lives during this terrific eruption, as the valley was uninhabited. The valley, now known as the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes, is said to be a wonderful sight. It was discovered by Robert Griggs, between 1915 and 1919, and the whole district is now known as the Katmai National Monument.

Q.—Are Nasturtiums poisonous?

A. Not the least bit, Sam Loveday, of Stoke Newington. The flowers of the nasturtium are sometimes used in salads, and the seeds are often pickled in vinegar, to take the place of capers. Mind you, chum, too much of anything's bad for a chap, even too much Christmas pudding, stickjaw, and apple-tart. And several plates of nasturtiums, eaten consecutively, so to speak, one after the other, might produce strange and uncomfortable feelings under the waistcoat. So if you've a fancy for that kind of food, just go steady, Sam. One flower-bed a day should be enough for anybody. Another name for the nasturtium, by the way, is Indian cress.

Q.—Can Letters be Stamped by Machinery?

A.—The reader who submits this question signs himself "Weary Willie." I gather from that that he has a job of work sticking stamps on letters, and like my Office Boy, he yawns so much while he's doing it that he's in danger of swallowing the stamps instead of sticking them on the envelopes. The last time my O.B. sent out a batch of correspondence from the office, he finished up with so many stamps sticking to his person, that I thought of posting him home with a label marked "Fragile. Please burn." But we couldn't afford to waste all the stamps that had managed to adhere to his face, hands, hair, legs, etc., so we put him in a bath of hot water and soaked them off. There are machines, right enough, William, that do the job. They're rather elaborate affairs, cost a lot of money, and if I had one in my office, and sacked the Office Boy, I wouldn't have anybody left to swap the flies that settle on my cranium in the summertime. Take my tip, Weary One. Stick to your job and the stamps will stick to you.

Q.—What is an Olifant?

A.—Kid Lever, who lives Caterham way, is fond of reading stories of the jolly old Middle Ages when knights were bold and cabbies wore high hats. And in the course of his reading he has come across this word, sometimes spelt "Oliphant." He thinks it was some kind of a trumpet or bugle. To be absolutely exact, Kid, it was a horn, made from the tusk of an elephant—you see the connection in the name. It was carried by knights and men of high degree when they went into battle, and the loss of one of them was reckoned as bad as losing a sword or banner.

Q.—What were the Troglodytes?

A.—This was a name given to "cave-dwellers," Sandy Herd. According to the old historians who knew everything, and like myself, had whiskers down to their toenails, these troglodyte tribes lived in Africa, some by the Red Sea and the Nile, and others in more remote parts of the country. They were said to live on lizards and make noises like the screeching of owls, and as they rode horses, and were very short, like dwarfs, they are supposed to have been the original Pygmies that we read of in story-books. No doubt they were very good chaps, but I don't fancy filleted lizard for lunch myself.

Q.—What is a Load Line?

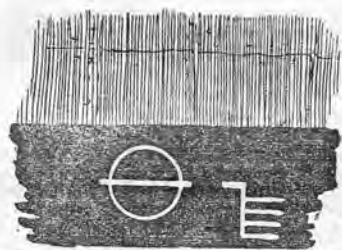
A.—The name should give you an idea, Cornelius Cook. The load line on the side of a ship consists of a circular disk with a horizontal line passing through its centre, and its purpose is to show the limit of loading for the vessel when going into the open sea. The disk through which the line runs is 12 inches in diameter.

Q.—When was Charlie Chaplin born?

A.—April 16th, 1889. He went to the United States twenty years ago.

Q.—Is there a Castle at Tipperary?

A.—Not now, Harry Walker, but there was once. King John built a castle at Tip. (I haven't the slightest idea why, but he did.) No trace of the castle remains to-day. Henry III. founded a monastery there, too, but that, likewise, has practically disappeared. The only thing I can think of to account for the disappearance of the castle is that King



No water is allowed above this load line!



The result of a few platesful of nasturtiums.

He wanted to plunge overboard, but he could not swim, and he dare not. Yet death was before him, he knew; it would be a race as to whether the boat would sink before the hungry weir claimed it!

He had hoped that the boat might drift ashore, but the current was too strong, and the craft kept in the middle of the river, drifting sluggishly—sinking as it lumbered down—towards the weir.

The fat youth could see the weir now; it was distant still, but the sight made him tremble from head to foot. Then again the sound of yelling came to his ears, accompanied by a terrific banging.

"Oh dear!" groaned Baggy. What should he do? To delay diving over and taking his chance meant death was nearer every second that passed. He knew that! But—

He glanced at the closed and fastened hatch, terror in his eyes. And then Baggy seemed to get a grip of himself, and, sighting a bar of iron—it was a length of rusted rail from the upper deck—he started to bring it crashing down on the hatch.

It was quite possible that Baggy was only thinking of his own fat skin still; possibly he realised that by saving Tom Merry & Co. he would stand a better chance of being saved himself as he could not swim! Afterwards, however, the fat youth claimed that his motive was unselfish, and that he was only thinking of the prisoners.

At all events he acted, bringing the bar down again and again on the hatch. He had been doing this some seconds before he realised that only a peg of wood secured the hatch.

Dropping the bar, he tore at the peg with trembling fingers.

It came out at last, and the trapdoor flew up, and the prisoners poured out, nearly all of them wet through, their faces deathly white, showing the strain of those dreadful few minutes.

"Thank Heaven!" panted Tom Merry faintly, taking in a deep gulp of fresh air. "Good man, Trimble!"

There was no time for more. Tom glanced downstream, and then he gave a yell:

"Dive for it! It's our only chance! Quick!"

"Yarooogh! Wait for me!" shrieked Trimble.

"Come on, Fatty!"

Tom Merry grabbed Trimble, and knowing he would never dive in of his own accord, he fairly hurled him overboard. Then he dived after him, and a moment later his grasp was on the yelling fat youth. The rest were already in the water, swimming strongly for the bank.

Fortunately, Dent was a good swimmer, and he immediately came to Tom's aid, as did the others, though their aid was scarcely needed. As yet the current was not powerful, and they all reached the nearest bank after a struggle.

Baggy Trimble was hauled ashore, and the juniors and Dent dropped on the bank, gasping and panting hoarsely. They soon realised that it had been a close call—a very close call.

Their eyes immediately followed the drifting houseboat, now low down in the water. Tom had just opened his mouth to speak when the boat gave a lurch, and then, with a terrific gurgling sound, sank from sight, and the surging waters flowed and bubbled over it.

"Good gad!" gasped Dent. "Just in time, lads! Thank Heaven!"

"Good old Trimble!"

They looked in not a little amazement at the fat youth as he sat and gurgled and gasped.

"Grooogh!" gasped Baggy. "Ow-ow-ow! I say, you fellows, I—grooogh!—saved your bacon that time, didn't I?"

"Phew! You did, old fat man!"

"Good man, Trimble!"

"Not many fellows would have done it!" panted Trimble. "The temptation to dive over and swim ashore and save myself did come to me, I'll admit! But, though I knew I was practically throwing away my last chance of life, I resisted it! Of course, I knew the boat was sinking when I rushed aboard it after I'd knocked down those crooks. They tried to prevent me, you know, but I fought like—"

"Yes, we've heard about that lion before, Baggy!" chuckled Tom Merry, scrambling to his feet and squeezing water from his clothes. "Anyway, you've saved us, and that's good enough! We won't give you that licking we promised you after this!"

"Oh, really, Tom Merry—"

"But the sooner we get going the better—in more ways than one! Those brutes mean to make another attack on Laurel Villa, for a pension, Dent!" said Tom, with sudden alarm. "Do you know of a short cut? I mean—"

"I'll get you there before those brutes, Master Merry!" said Dent, an ugly look on his usually pleasant face. "I've a score to settle with those precious crooks. And—and there's the mistress and my wife! I've told you how they trapped me at the station—gagged me, dragged me from the car, and brought me here. But come on, lads!"

He led the way with a rush, and they pelted after him, even Trimble managing to put quite a good speed on, though he protested at the top of his fat voice all the way to Laurel Villa.

Trimble wanted to lengthen, not to shorten, the distance between the crooks and himself.

But he had no say in the matter, despite his recent heroism!

They arrived at Laurel Villa fairly steaming, and in a surprisingly short time. They found a police car on the drive, and the inspector, the sergeant, and a couple of constables were talking together before the front door.

They stared in astonishment as the drenched juniors and Dent came thudding down the drive, their wet clothes flapping about them.

"Master Merry—"

"Have they been again—the crooks, I mean?" panted Tom.

"This morning—" began the sergeant.

"I mean, this afternoon—within the last fifteen minutes!" panted Tom. Then, realising they hadn't, he gasped in relief. "Thank goodness, we're in time, chaps!"

A moment later, between them, they were telling what had happened at the riverside and on the river. The inspector listened with his mouth open, and then he stared at Dent, and nodded grimly.

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"Right! And you think they'll have another go?" he added, addressing Tom with new respect.

"I'm absolutely certain they will!"

"But if they're after that—that plant—"

"They are; they'll stop at nothing, not even murder, to get it!" said Dent hoarsely. "They're ruthless and dangerous men, inspector!"

"But the plant's gone!" snapped the police officer tartly.

"We've searched the house for it!"

"Bai Jove! Have you looked in the oil-stove in the dinin'-room, inspectah?" inquired Arthur Augustus.

"Eh? Oil-stove! What—"

"That is where I hid the plant before I started out to twack the wascals down," explained Gussy innocently. "I took the lamp out and hid it there, you know!"

"Gad! Did you, indeed?" stuttered the inspector.

"Right! I'm anxious to examine that plant, but it can wait until we've made preparations for our expected visitors. Sergeant, get your men round the house. You and I will wait for them in the dining-room. That french window seems to attract them!"

The inspector hurried into the house. He seemed to have dismissed the juniors and Dent from his mind. Possibly he expected them to hide themselves before the serious business started.

"We're in this, chaps!" said Tom Merry, grinning faintly. "Never mind our wet things; we'll soon get warmed up! I've got an idea!"

He whispered to his chums and Dent, and Dent grinned and nodded. Then he led the way at a run for the toolshed. There was no time to be wasted. Though the run down the towing-path had saved more than a mile, the crooks could scarcely be long now. Tom Merry was only worried about Lowther, yet he felt certain the crooks would not harm him unless he actually attacked them.

Dent soon found what Tom wanted in the shed. It was a long tennis-net! To this Dent also added another long, wide length of netting.

"That's the stuff!" grinned Tom. "While the bobbies are waiting for 'em in the dining-room, we'll catch the giddy birds!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"They're bound to make for the french window from the shrubbery," said Tom. "We'll nab 'em if they do. Mind the giddy inspector doesn't spot any of us if he happens to be watching out, or he'll spoil the fun."

And a moment later the juniors, helped by Dent, were busy at work in the shrubbery, setting their little trap for the "birds." Only Trimble was not helping. He had gone indoors to tell Dent's wife the good news that Dent was found. And after all was ready, the juniors crouched down on both sides of the shrubbery to watch and wait.

CHAPTER 13.

Caught!

THEY had not long to wait.

The sharp crackle of a breaking twig in the trees behind the shrubbery made Tom Merry give a warning hiss.

The raiders were abroad again.

With palpitating hearts the daring juniors crouched, each of them with a cord in his hand—a cord that was attached to either end of the netting at various points.

They knew the terrible risk they were running well enough. With the danger of capture before them the crooks would not hesitate to shoot; they had already more than proved that. But the rather supercilious and lofty attitude of the inspector had nettled the juniors, and they were determined to do him a kind action by catching his men for him—if they could!

Another crackling amid the trees.

"Get ready!" murmured Tom breathlessly. "Hallo! I spotted one then!"

"Phew! All three of them this time!" whispered Blake, catching a glimpse of three crouching forms moving stealthily through the shrubbery in which they hid.

All doubts were set at rest now—the scoundrels were here. They were risking all in a final, desperate raid. Breathlessly the juniors and Dent waited, and then Dent gave the signal even as the three creeping, ominous forms started out with a rush from cover.

"Now, lads!"

The rushing crooks never reached the french window; they scarcely covered a yard of lawn. For as Dent gave the signal, he and the juniors dragged hard on their cords.

Brant, Kane, and Nosey ran right into a net that suddenly seemed to leap up before them like a ghostly shadow.

It tightened, and with wild, furious, and startled oaths the three ruffians were fairly wrenched off their feet, struggling desperately amid the clinging folds of the netting.

"Now, chaps," yelled Tom Merry, "on the ball!"

They rushed up, and before the crooks realised what was happening the netting was being whirled and wound round them as they rolled, cursing and fighting, on the ground in a confused heap.

Only one of the three managed to get a gun out, and the crack of the automatic brought the inspector, the sergeant, and three constables rushing from the french window, the inspector with a whistle to his lips.

"Gad!" ejaculated the inspector, rushing up, his plump features full of amazement. "What—who—what—"

"Your giddy prisoners, inspector," grinned Tom. "I'm afraid you'll have to unwrap 'em before you can get the darbies on. I thought we'd save you the trouble of catching them."

The inspector frowned, but he looked not a little relieved as he picked up an automatic from the ground and pocketed it, with a grunt. Then, leaving his men to attend to the prisoners, he followed Tom Merry & Co. into the house.

"That was rather a neat idea," he said grudgingly. "Whose was it?"

"Mine," said Tom cheerfully. "It was a risk, but it came off."

"It was a risk you should have left to us, my lad," said the police officer sternly. "However, you did have amazing luck."

"Just a little," assented Tom. "And wasn't it lucky for you? I fancy there'd have been more than one vacancy in the Force by this but for my little wheeze. Now what about that giddy pot of chrysanthemums, Gussy?"

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus opened the oil-stove, and lifted out the pot of chrysanthemums. There was a chuckle.

"Good wheeze, Gussy!"

"And that's what all the fuss is about—hey?" snorted the inspector. "What's it mean? My man says that there was nothing hidden in the pot!"

"You can't help us, Dent, I suppose?" asked Tom. "You heard nothing—"

"They vowed there was something hidden in the plant," said Dent, rather doggedly. "And they threatened—"

"Hold on!" snapped Tom. "You repotted the plant once. I think, Dent?"

"Yes, in the potting-shed, Master Merry!"

"Is it the same pot?"

"No; it was cracked, the old one: I got a new—"

He halted, as if something had just occurred to him.

"Hold on!" he said. "Now I come to think on it, there was something among the soil in that pot!"

"There was?" hooted the inspector.

"Yes—a folded piece of paper it was, dirty and crumpled. I've just got a sort of recollection about it. I think I chucked it into the furnace grate, or else under the bench. I remember half starting to look at it, and then chucking it away, like, thinking it was nothing of any good! It may have been a letter for all I know!"

"Phew! Come on!" said Tom excitedly. "It may be anything—a plan or a formula, worth lots of money for all we know! I've read of such things!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

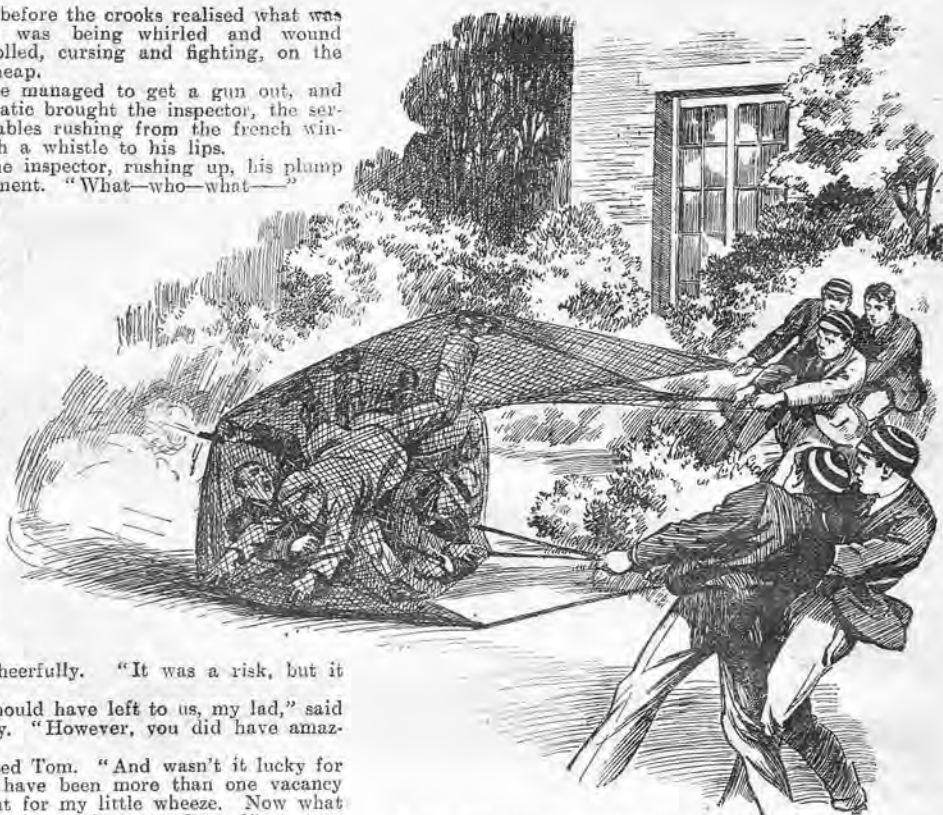
The inspector grunted, but he followed on none the less. It was plain he half-suspected Dent of something! They reached the potting-shed, and Dent began to hunt for the paper he had flung away. He found it at last under the bench. Fortunately, he had had no necessity to brush the shed out for ages, and it was still there.

And it proved to be not only a letter, but in code!

"It may be important, and it may not," said the inspector. "I've got a man at the office who will decipher this quickly enough. He makes a hobby of it, and is a smart young chap! If you don't mind, I'll take charge of this, Master Merry!"

Later that evening the inspector motored over again. By that time Lowther had been found and fetched to Laurel Villa by his chums.

The inspector soon cleared up the mystery. His smart



The net seemed to leap up before the men, and the next moment they found themselves struggling in its clinging folds. "Now, on the ball!" yelled Tom Merry.

young man at the office had deciphered the code easily enough as it happened.

There was nothing very romantic about it, after all.

It had started some weeks before—when Miss Fawcett was staying with her friend, Mrs. Truscott, at the Truscotts' home in Surrey.

While there, burglars had broken into the house, and had been surprised at work by Major Truscott himself, a gallant retired Army officer. He had held them up at the point of his revolver, and had locked them, with hands bound, in a room whilst he telephoned for the police.

Scarcely had he hurried away when one of the crooks—none other than Brant—had suddenly remembered that in his pocket was a letter—an incriminating letter—from a former accomplice, threatening blackmail. The letter was in the gang's own code, but in it were not only names and haunts of members of the gang, but statements proving that Brant and the other man had been the burglars who broke into a large house and killed a footman some months before, an unsolved mystery to the police.

Realising in sudden dread that the police would search him and find the letter, and that the hangman's rope hung over them both, Brant, desperate, had suddenly heard the major returning from the phone.

Acting on sudden impulse, he had managed to get the letter from his pocket, bound though his hands were; and, crumpling it into a ball, he had plunged it in a blind panic into the nearest thing to hand.

It proved to be a big pot of chrysanthemums, standing on the floor!

His hurried fingers scooped out a hole, the rolled-up letter was crammed down, and the soil replaced over it. Just in time, for next moment Major Truscott had returned, and ordered them out, locking them in a safer room, and putting a manservant on guard!

On the way to the station, Prant—ever a desperate and powerful ruffian—had attacked his police guard and had escaped. Later, he had burgled the major's house again, this time being after the incriminating letter. Obviously it had not been found in the plant—not yet, or the police would have acted!

(Continued on page 27.)

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IT TAKES MORE THAN A DETACHMENT OF NATIVE SOLDIERS TO STOP OUR THREE DIEHARDS FROM
Getting Clear of a Tight Corner!

CHICK CHANCE *Adventurer!*

The Alarm!

REGARDLESS of snakes, or any other lurking dangers of the forest, Chick and Barron regained the narrow trail, and hurried back the way they had come. There were no further shots, or any sounds of alarm or disturbance. Chick was the first to reach the clearing, where the big monoplane stood gleaming in the light of the oil-flares. Horace came hurrying towards them, a rifle tucked under his arm, and a rueful expression on his face.

"What's wrong?" jerked Chick anxiously. "Did you fire those shots? Where's Herbert? Where's the other prisoner?"

"Gone!" groaned Horace disgustedly. "I'm mighty sorry, Chick, old son, but the beggar gave us the slip. He managed to get his hands free, and when Herbert wasn't looking he ripped him up and made a dash for the forest."

"And where's Herbert?"

"Gone after him. I stayed here, and fired three shots to let you know things had gone wrong."

At that moment the missing Herbert appeared, limping, woebegone, and alone. He looked as though he had been pulled head first through a barbed-wire entanglement. His face was scratched, and his clothes hung in shreds and tatters.

"Here's a nice state of affairs!" he cried gloomily. "I've been bitten by a snake, clawed by a tiger, and trampled flat by a rhinoceros! The blessed jungle's simply alive with animals. And that slippery skunk's got away in your car, Barron. I heard him start the engine and go pelting back to Lakola as though he had the whole Zoological Gardens after him!"

Barron's face fell, but it was not the loss of the car that worried him.

"This is a bad business," he said gravely. "I suppose that fellow will go straight back to Lakola, and give the alarm. They'll search for Roxcoe, and as soon as they find him we'll have the whole gang chasing out here—Major Vigon and his native troops as well probably."

Chick groaned as he glanced at his watch.

"And it won't be properly daylight for another three hours! If the worst comes to the worst, I shall have to risk taking-off in the dark, without even a test flight to make sure the plane is O.K. If we crash, well, we crash, and that'll be the end of the whole business."

"And it's all our fault!" Horace and Herbert looked on the verge of tears. Their faces were so comically miserable that Chick had to smile despite the gravity of the situation.

"Can't be helped. We're not beaten yet," he said, stripping off his jacket and rolling up his shirt-sleeves. "You fellows get busy, and get all that stuff loaded aboard the plane. I'll run the rule over the old crate, and see that she's sound in wind and limb."

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By
**ROBERT
MURRAY.**

The big Donor-Rapley monoplane was constructed to hold eight persons, including the pilot and mechanic, who sat side by side in front of the roomy saloon. There was ample space in the tail for stores and supplies. The machine was fitted with a five-hundred horse-power motor, that gave it a cruising speed of over a hundred miles per hour, with moderate petrol consumption, and a climb of fifteen hundred feet a minute.

Chick was in his element. Peril was forgotten, and he actually whistled contentedly under his breath as he examined every vital part of the graceful monoplane, and finally concentrated on the powerful motor. He could find nothing wrong. It ran as smooth and as true as a gyroscope. He ran his eye over the instrument-board, that was equipped with all the latest adjuncts to aerial navigation—gadgets that made night flying as safe and as practicable as driving a bus along Piccadilly in broad daylight.

The petrol-gauge registered maximum capacity, including the emergency-tank. The controls responded to the slightest touch. In the map-holder, Chick placed the map Frank Barron had given him. On it was traced a distinct red line, that indicated the approximate route that Eustace Latimer had intended following when he had left Lakola on his last expedition into the heart of unknown Africa.

Taking one of the oil-flares, that was suspended from a bamboo post, Chick walked methodically to the farther end of the open space from which the plane would have to take off. It was less than six hundred yards in length; the ground was rough, and none too firm, and there was a towering barrier of trees to be cleared.

"It's going to be a close thing," mused Chick, as he dug the bamboo-stick in the earth, and left the flare to mark the full extent of the ground. "If I can't get the old crate off the ground in three hundred yards, she'll never clear those trees with the heavy load she'll be carrying. I hope to goodness nothing will happen to force me to take off before daylight comes!"

He knew that death would be resting on his shoulder from the moment the chocks were pulled away from beneath the landing-wheels of the plane. There were many dangers

to be feared. The machine might collapse beneath the tremendous weight of petrol it was carrying. Again, the landing-wheels might sink into the soft ground, tipping the plane forward on its nose, wrecking motor and propeller as well. Or it might fail to rise, and crash headlong into the wall of trees, to burst into flame, and carry all in it to destruction.

"And even if we get safely away," thought Chick. "What does the future hold for us? Hallo, Lobula, you're just the fellow I wanted to see."

Like a shadow the native had suddenly appeared by his side. He was a fine-looking man, with his flashing eyes and teeth, and regular, coal-black features, that held nothing of the negroid type.

"I do not fear to soar into the sky with the white bird-man," said Lobula simply. "I alone can guide him to where his friends were taken captive by the giant warriors of the Black City. It is far beyond the Forest of the Zuga, the place of Roaring Waters, and the Mountain of the Lion. There will be safety in the air, far above the death that lurks below."

"Let's hope you're right, old-timer," thought Chick. He knew that he could trust this faithful native, who had fought his way back through hundreds of miles of swamp, forest, and jungle to bring news of Eustace Latimer.

Everything had been stowed away aboard the monoplane; guns, ammunition, food supplies, surgical equipment, and a spare propeller. Herbert was busily engaged bolting one of the machine-guns to the swivel-mounting that was fixed to one side of the cockpit.

Horace, rifle in hand, was watching the mouth of the dark trail that led back through the forest to Lakola.

"Perhaps Roscoe realises he's beaten, and has chucked up the sponge," suggested Herbert. "I wish it would hurry up and get light, Chick. We're all fit to hop off, right away."

"It won't be light for another hour," said Chick, glancing at his watch. "How will you stand over this affair, Barron? Will Major Vigon try to hang something on to you for helping us to escape?"

"He won't dare. You needn't worry about me," assured the trader. "I only wish I was coming with you, Chick."

There was an atmosphere of strained suspense. Each moment seemed like an hour. Chick lit a cigarette, and glanced anxiously to the east. The moon had waned, but there was no sign of the dawn as yet. The oil-flare burned feebly at the far end of the field. In the dim light the edge of the forest loomed like a towering, black wall.

Crack! A single rifle-shot suddenly split the silence! It was followed by a chorus of fierce yells as a score or more native soldiers swarmed into the open, and came charging down upon the waiting plane!

At their head was Major Vigon. Close beside him ran the tall figure of Burk Roscoe!

The Defeat of Roscoe!

THE sudden appearance of Burk Roscoe and the squad of native soldiers, under the command of Major Vigon, was an eventuality that had not been overlooked.

But it came at a moment when Chick Chance and his companions had relaxed beneath the strain of waiting, and were thinking only of the approach of dawn that would enable them to start their long delayed flight.

The monoplane was turned broadside on to the advancing soldiers, its nose pointing towards the dimly-burning oil-flare that marked the farther end of the field. The soldiers had deployed from the mouth of the narrow forest trail, and were advancing in open order, spreading out in an encircling movement that was designed to surround the plane on all sides.

"By heavens, you've left it too late! The game's up now, Chance!" groaned Frank Barron despairingly. "You'll never be able to get away now."

Major Vigon was evidently of the same opinion as he stood well back in the shadows, in company with Burk Roscoe.

"Surrender, you dogs!" he shouted triumphantly. "Resistance is useless. Put up your hands, or I will give the order to fire!"

"Shoot, in any case," advised Roscoe callously. "Dead men tell no tales, my friend. They are escaped prisoners. And you can easily say they were killed resisting arrest."

The situation certainly seemed hopeless; but to Chick Chance there was no such thing as a hopeless situation, otherwise he would not have been alive at that moment. His jaw tightened as he watched the slinking figures of the black soldiers closing in on them, eyes gleaming, and rifles at the alert. But the nearest was still a good fifty yards away, just within the radius of the light from the sizzling oil-flares.

Chick's brain was busy with lightning calculations that speedily convinced him that he and his companions would fall riddled with bullets long before they could hope to achieve the desperate task of getting the plane in the air.

There was the prop to be swung, the engine to be warmed, the wheel-chocks to be removed, and then the perilously-short run to the frowning barrier of trees at the farther end of the ground.

"Put up your hands!" bellowed Major Vigon again. This time he lifted his revolver and fired. The bullet whistled over Chick's head, and slapped through the fuselage of the plane.

With a derisive gesture the first flaring spears of the rising sun stabbed across the eastern sky. Too late!

It was Herbert who saved the situation. He sat alone in the cockpit, a piece of cotton-waste in one hand, and an unlighted cigarette in the other. Within inches of him was the machine-gun he had only just finished bolting in position.

It was the report of Vigon's revolver that stung Herbert to action. Quick as thought he reached for one of the drums of ammunition which was clipped to the side of the cockpit, and slipped it into the empty tray. Around came the blunt muzzle of the gun, and flick went his thumbs on the trigger.

Rat-tat-tat-tat!

The death-dealing chatter of the machine-gun beat a fiendish clamour on the night, and a hail of bullets hissed and spat over the heads of the advancing soldiers.

The moral effect was too much for the half-trained natives. Bawling and yelling, they dropped to the ground, and on hands and knees scuttled desperately for the friendly shelter of the distant trees.

Round swung the gun, spraying its leaden hail in a wide arc that scattered the attackers as one man. Purposely Herbert was aiming high. Just as deliberately he sent a bullet so close to Major Vigon that the latter jumped two feet in the air, and dived headlong into a clump of thorn-bush.

"Dogs! Cowards! Black scum!" howled the infuriated officer. "Fire! Charge! Shoot them down, you cowards!"

"Now's your chance!" yelled Herbert, craning his head over the edge of the cockpit. "Jump to it, me lads! Get ready to swing that prop, Horace!"

Chick uttered a whoop of excitement. Grabbing the bewildered Lobula by his stern part he bundled him head first through the door of the saloon. A ragged fire spluttered from the edge of the forest, but the bullets were flying wide.

"Shoot that tall fellow!" shouted the voice of Burk Roscoe. "A hundred pounds to the man who brings him down! Rally your men, Vigon! Are you going to allow those curs to get away?"

A burst from the machine-gun reduced Roscoe to temporary silence.

Prepared to clamber up into the cockpit, Chick Chance turned and clutched Frank Barron by the shoulder.

"You'd better hop aboard, Barron!" he jerked. "Not safe for you to remain here!"

"You needn't worry about me," assured the trader, with a grim smile, and a warm handclasp. "Off you go, and the best of luck, Chance! I'm going to stop right here and pull those wheel-chocks away for you. Give me the signal when you're ready."

There was a lump in Chick's throat as he turned away and sprang up into the cockpit.

"Keep on with the good work, Herbert," he encouraged, as he sank into the pilot's seat, and dropped his feet on the rudder-bar. One hand reached to switch on. "Are you ready, Horace? Contact!"

Horace swung the prop with all his might, but there was no answering roar from the powerful engine. Again he swung, and winced as a bullet tore through the sleeve of his shirt. The soldiers were advancing to the attack again, firing as they came. Night had fled like a shadow. The east was a blaze of golden light.

HOW THE STORY STARTED.

CHICK CHANCE, late Flight-Commander Chichester Chance, R.A.F., V.C., D.S.O., is rescued after a crash by Herbert and Horace, late air-mechanic and pilot-sergeant of Chick's old squadron. Later, they meet Howard Paige, who asks Chick if he will fly to Central Africa to look for a Professor Latimer, who has come into a fortune of half a million pounds, but does not know it. If Latimer does not return within three months, the money is to go to Burk Roscoe, an ardent scoundrel. Chick agrees to go, and to take Herbert and Horace with him. Reaching Lakola, the three chums are arrested, thanks to Roscoe, on a charge of gun-running, and their plane is confiscated. They manage to escape, however, and find Frank Barron, a trader Chick is supposed to meet, from whom they learn the whereabouts of the plane. The machine is duly captured from Roscoe's men, after which Chick goes into the jungle in search of Lobula, a native guide. He finds him lashed to a tree in the last stages of exhaustion, and barely succeeds in releasing him, when he hears a warning signal from the others.

(Now read on.)

The engine caught at last. Chick gave her the throttle, and the propeller spun like a thundering flame. A hail of bullets pattered against the wings and fuselage of the big plane.

"Shoot the pilot!" roared Roscoe, busy stuffing fresh cartridges into his revolver. "Rush the machine! Get under the wings! The machine-gun can't reach you there!"

Which was true enough. Herbert realised this as he slid a fresh drum of ammunition into the tray. Horace rushed around to the side of the plane. A bullet ripped the heel from his boot as he jumped up and slithered through the door into the saloon.

"All aboard for Africa!" he shouted. "Let her rip, Chick!"

Tight-lipped and dark-eyed, Chick sat staring at the slowly-climbing needle of the tachometer. He knew only too well the danger of attempting to lift the heavily-loaded machine off the ground until the engine had developed at least fifteen hundred revolutions per minute. Calmly he delayed for another fifteen seconds ere he lifted a hand, and waved it over the side of the cockpit.

It was the signal Frank Barron had been waiting for. Stretched flat on the ground the plucky trader jerked vigorously on the ropes which were attached to the chocks wedged beneath the landing-wheels.

For a moment the big machine shivered and vibrated from nose to tail. Swaying and bumping, it lumbered forward, rapidly gathering speed on the rough ground. Right in its path were a number of native soldiers, who wildly discharged their rifles, and fled, howling, to right and left.

One man alone did not move. It was Burk Roscoe. Maddened with rage and desperation he deliberately stood his ground, aiming his revolver just above the gleaming boss of the spinning propeller.

For a fraction of a second Chick Chance closed his eyes. If the bullet struck the wooden-bladed screw, he knew it would shatter it, and the machine would pitch forward to certain destruction.

If the bullet missed the blades it was almost certain to catch him full between the eyes.

Like some huge winged monster, the monoplane swooped down upon Roscoe. He pressed the trigger of his revolver, and a sharp click told him that the hammer had fallen on a discharged cartridge. The gun was empty!

Roscoe had no time to run. With a muttered curse he flung himself face forward to the ground, expelling all the air from his lungs, and sprawling his limbs like an extended starfish.

He felt the mighty forceful swish of the propeller as it passed over him, and the crunch of the huge landing-wheels as they rolled wide on either side of him.

Then came a terrific jar that jolted and racked every bone in Burk Roscoe's body, and an iron hand seemed to grip him between the shoulders and yank him up into the air.

Chick Chance saw Roscoe fling his useless revolver to one side, and drop out of sight beneath the fuselage of the plane. He had no time to dwell upon the fact that for some reason or other the man's gun had failed to explode. The next few seconds were to decide the fate of himself and his companions.

Would the machine rise? Would it rise in time, and with sufficient climbing speed to clear the edge of the forest that now loomed dangerously close?

He pushed the stick as far forward as it would go, and immediately sensed that the tail had left the ground. Gradually and steadily he brought the stick back again. One bump that jarred the plane from end to end! A second bump, less vigorous this time, and then a delightful sense of smoothness and stability.

The plane had left the ground, and was climbing speedily. The crest of the barrier of trees dropped majestically like an Atlantic roller beneath the rising bows of an ocean liner.

They were up! They were over, with no more than a few yards to spare!

"By gosh! That was a near thing!" shouted Herbert, his face unusually white. "But we've done it, Chick! We're off! We're actually off at last!"

Chick felt weak for a moment. The reaction was almost painful. He kicked the left rudder-bar, and brought the machine round in a graceful, climbing curve. Altitude was all he wanted for the moment.

"Look at 'em down below! Hopping about like a lot of blessed fleas!" chuckled Horace, as he glanced over the edge of the cockpit. "I'll bet they're mad enough to bite themselves!"

Chick threw a glance over the side. The clearing in the

forest was four hundred feet beneath them, and looked no bigger than a tennis-court. The native soldiers were gathered in a bunch, staring up at the machine, pointing and gesticulating excitedly. Chick could distinguish the figure of Major Viron, and he fancied that he could also see Frank Barron, but he looked in vain for the white-clad form of Burk Roscoe.

"Wonder why they're staring and pointing like that?" puzzled Herbert. "My stars, you don't think we lost our landing gear when we cleared those trees, Chick?"

"Not a hope," declared Chick confidently. "We should have felt the jar. I shall be glad when we've covered a few hundred miles and got rid of some of our petrol. The old crate is overloaded. She feels a bit lopsided on the right wing. Hop inside and see if that stuff you loaded aboard is evenly distributed."

Herbert slewed round in his seat, and disappeared through the narrow door that led into the saloon.

The blazing sun was now well above the horizon, and a wonderful awe-inspiring view was revealed to Chick Chance as the big monoplane mounted higher and higher in the clear blue sky. Away to the west was the open sea, and the far-stretching coastline. Lakola Bay—a semi-circle of blue, edged with a rim of yellow sand—looked like a bite out of the landscape.

It was to the eastward that Chick gazed with fascinated interest. The rolling vista of dark forest, rugged mountain ranges, and matted jungle-land, was indescribably colourful and mysterious.

Now it was wrapped in a haze of steaming mist that the fierce rays of the sun were sucking up from the dank, rotting vegetation, marshes, and fever swamps.

Here was a country where the magical speed of aerial travel was never more strikingly exemplified. There were no great roadways or navigable rivers for the benefit of those wishing to penetrate to the heart of the little-known Congo. Progress had to be literally hewn through the prolific barriers of Nature—progress that was attended and retarded by the perils of disease, wild animals, poisonous reptiles, and tribes of hostile savages.

An aeroplane could cover as much territory in one day as no other means of transportation could accomplish in six months. But the risks of the airman were infinitely greater. The slightest mishap to the machine meant a forced landing and almost certain death.

And it was into the heart of this grim, savage country that Eustace Latimer had disappeared; drawn by the lure of adventure and the causes of science which were so dear to him. His whereabouts could be only roughly conjectured. In the hazardous task he had undertaken, Chick Chance had to rely entirely on a roughly-marked map, and the guidance of an ignorant native, who, from the air, might never distinguish the landmarks upon which he was dependent to find his way back to the spot where he had last seen Eustace Latimer!

Chick glanced at the altimeter, and levelled the monoplane at a height of three thousand feet. The other instruments showed him that temperature, oil-pressure, and flying speed were just as they should be. The engine was ticking over like a clock.

He glanced at the map in front of him, and set his course by the gyro-compass.

There was only one thing that puzzled the young airman. The machine certainly was lopsided. Every time he neutralised the controls the right wing gradually dropped, and he continually had to use the aileron to counteract this fault.

Herbert returned to report there was nothing in the way the cargo had been disposed to upset the equilibrium of the plane. He had even shifted some of the cases and heavier articles to the left side of the fuselage; but the right wing still dropped.

"Can't understand it," muttered Chick. "Perhaps one of the feed-pipes from the petrol-tanks in the right wing has choked. This will mean a landing sooner or later."

They were now a hundred miles from Lakola, and following the course of a river that ran almost due east. Chick handed over the controls to Horace, and left the two inseparables together while he stepped back into the saloon where Lobula sat staring stolidly out of one of the windows. The novelty of air travel did not seem to have impressed him in the least. He was more enraptured with the pair of shorts and khaki shirt that Horace had presented to him and which now adorned his massive, ebony-black frame.

His first remark was one that occasioned Chick no little surprise and bewilderment.

"Master," he said grave, "why is it that the voice of

the bad man who sought to kill me in the forest is still to be heard, even here in the air?"

Chick stared blankly at the native. He guessed that he was referring to Burk Roscoe.

"You must have pretty good hearing, old son," he smiled. "The fellow who played that dirty trick on you is back in Lakola, and that's a long way from here."

"Then why can I hear his voice?" asked Lobula patiently. "Is it more of the white man's magic, like the boxes that speak, the pictures that move, and these huts that fly in the air? Hark! I can hear it even now."

"My hat, the beggar's got the willies!" thought Chick. The next moment he was not so certain. In fact, he could have sworn that he had heard a faint shout that was just audible above the steady throbbing of the motor.

Lobula pointed to the floor beneath his feet.

"It comes from there," he stated positively.

Chick shook his head. Then he suddenly remembered the observation-window of thick plate glass that was set in the bottom of the fuselage. Half ashamed of his own credulity, he kicked the strip of matting to one side, and lifted the hinged wooden flap.

Less than six feet from his astounded eyes was the huddled figure of a man, who lay stretched along one of the wooden landing-floors that comprised a part of the undercarriage of the big monoplane!

The man was clad in soiled, tattered white ducks. With the aid of his leather belt he had strapped himself to one of the stout metal struts, and thus prevented himself from being swept into space by the fierce rush of air.

The man suddenly raised his head. It was the pale, haggard face of Burk Roscoe that stared appealingly up at Chick Chance!

"It is as I said," remarked Lobula blandly. "Not only could I hear the white man, but now he is to be seen as well!"

(The very last person our adventurous chums wanted with them on their last trip has turned up like the proverbial bad penny. What's Chick going to do with him? Throw him off or— See next week's pulsating instalment, boys.)

THE SECRET of the FLOWERPOT!

(Continued from page 23.)

But the plant-pot was gone!

Major Truscott's wife had given it to her friend, Miss Priscilla Fawcett, who happened to have admired it, and Miss Fawcett had taken it back with her to Laurel Villa, little dreaming of the terrible secret it held.

But from a talkative servant Brant had soon learned where it had gone. And the rest was obvious. Desperate, fearing every day that the letter would be found and taken to the police, and knowing they would soon read the code, Brant and his accomplices had risked all in their determined attempts to save their lives and liberty by getting back the plant in order to destroy the letter.

And they had failed.

"Well, I think that if any crook deserves to be hanged that chap Brant does!" said Lowther quietly. "He was absolutely ruthless, and he would have killed us all to gain his ends! I'm not sorry he's collared at last, and that we did it!"

"Wathah not!" said Arthur Augustus, thinking of that terrible few minutes in the sinking hulk. "But for Twimble—"

Gussy's incautious admission was enough. Trimble took it up at once, and for the rest of that evening he was reminding them of his gallant and self-sacrificing act. Indeed, he was still reminding them of it when they got back to St. Jim's, and for some days after—until the chums started to boot him every time he reminded them of it.

Which was very ungrateful, but the only way to stop Trimble!

THE END.

(There will be another rattling fine story of Tom Merry & Co. in next week's GEM, entitled: "SKIMPOLE, THE SUPER-MAN!" If you miss this, boys, you'll be missing the treat of the week.)

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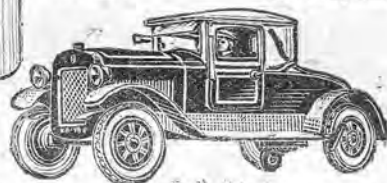
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