

BOYS! HERE'S A REAL HOLIDAY COMPANION!

THE GEM

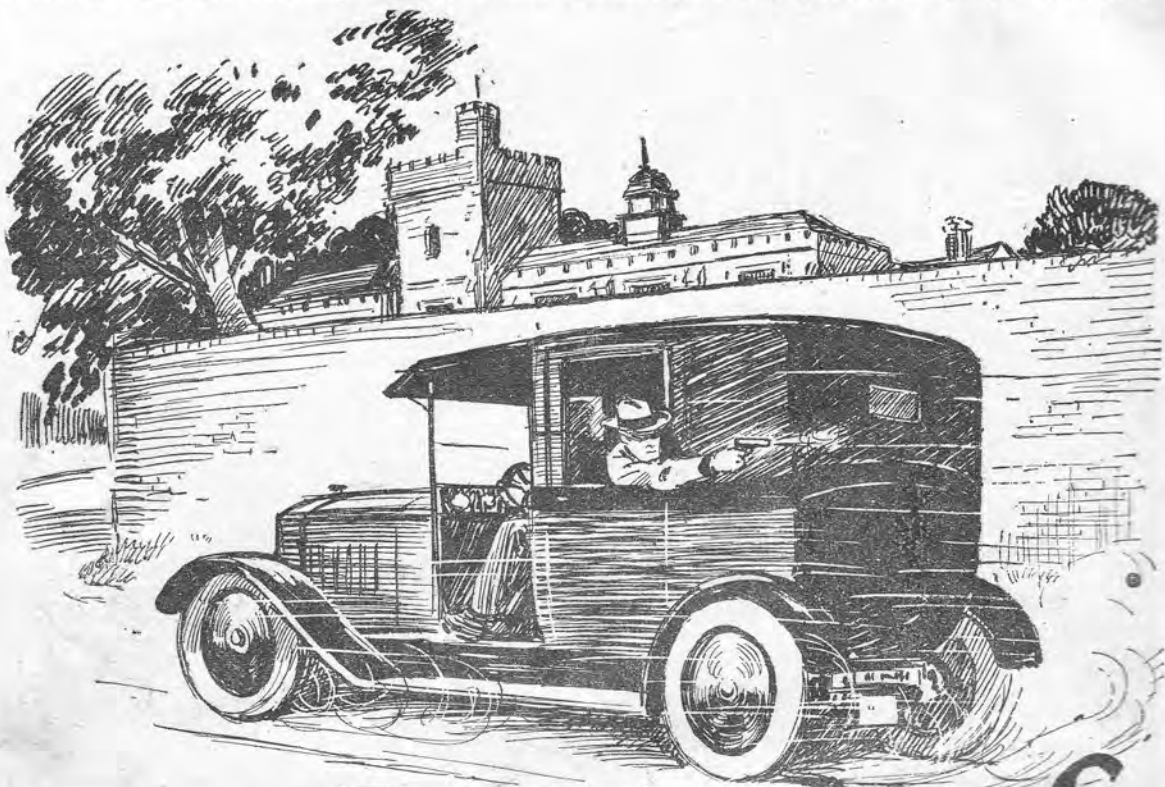
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EVERY
WEDNESDAY.

GUNMEN
AT
ST. JIM'S.



GREAT BOHUNKUS! THEY'VE KIDNAPPED HANDCOCK AGAIN!



CHAPTER 1.

The Mysterious American!

"HEAH we are again, bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of St. Jim's, made that remark.

Arthur Augustus was standing on the sunny platform of Wayland Junction, surveying through his gleaming monocle the swarms of fellows in St. Jim's caps who crowded the platform, waiting for the local train to take them on to Rylecombe, for the school.

It was the first day of the new term, and Blake & Co. and Tom Merry & Co. were back from their holidays.

There was a hum of cheery voices, a tremendous tramping of feet, and plenty of chaff and laughter flying to and fro. Blake & Co. and Tom Merry & Co., standing in a little group near the buffet, exchanged greetings cheerily with fellows they knew.

"Hallo, hallo! How's things, Tomm?"

"What-ho, Talbot, old hoss!"

"Why, there's Gussy, the one and only——"

"Bai Jove! Weally, Cardew——"

"Hallo, you School House asses!" sang out the cheery voice of George Figgins, the leader of the New House. "Don't mean to say you've brought Gussy back with you for another term? Couldn't you have lost him somewhere?"

"Bai Jove! Figgins, you uttah boundah——"

Plonk!

That sound was caused by a large walnut in impact with Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's shining topper. David Llewellyn Wynn, the New House junior from Wales, had a large bag of nuts in his hand, and he had flung one with unerring aim at Gussy's tile.

There was a roar of anguish from Arthur Augustus as his elegant topper sailed from his head, and, caught by the breeze, went bowling away along the platform among the feet of the crowd.

"Oh! Gweat Scott! You howwible wottahs——"

And, with a gasp of dismay and wrath, Arthur Augustus rushed in pursuit of his hat.

It had come to rest at the feet of Kangaroo, the Australian junior, who was standing near with Bernard Glyn, with whom he had been spending the holidays.

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**HANDS
UP,**

Kangaroo stared at the topper in surprise for a moment, then, just as Arthur Augustus was stooping to retrieve it, the Australian youngster lifted a boot and thoughtfully sent the topper sailing away over the heads of the next group.

"You—you wottah!" roared the swell of St. Jim's. "Bai Jove! Pway catch that toppah, somebody——"

"Certainly, Gussy!" grinned Kerraish of the Fourth.

He caught the errant topper—with his boot—and sent it bowling away again. With an anguished howl, Arthur Augustus dived in pursuit.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There were yells of mirth from the crowds of fellows on the platform as the swell of St. Jim's pursued his lost property, in and out of the legs of the chortling juniors. No sooner had the topper come to rest, however, than some grinning St. Jim's fellow sent it spinning away again with his boot.

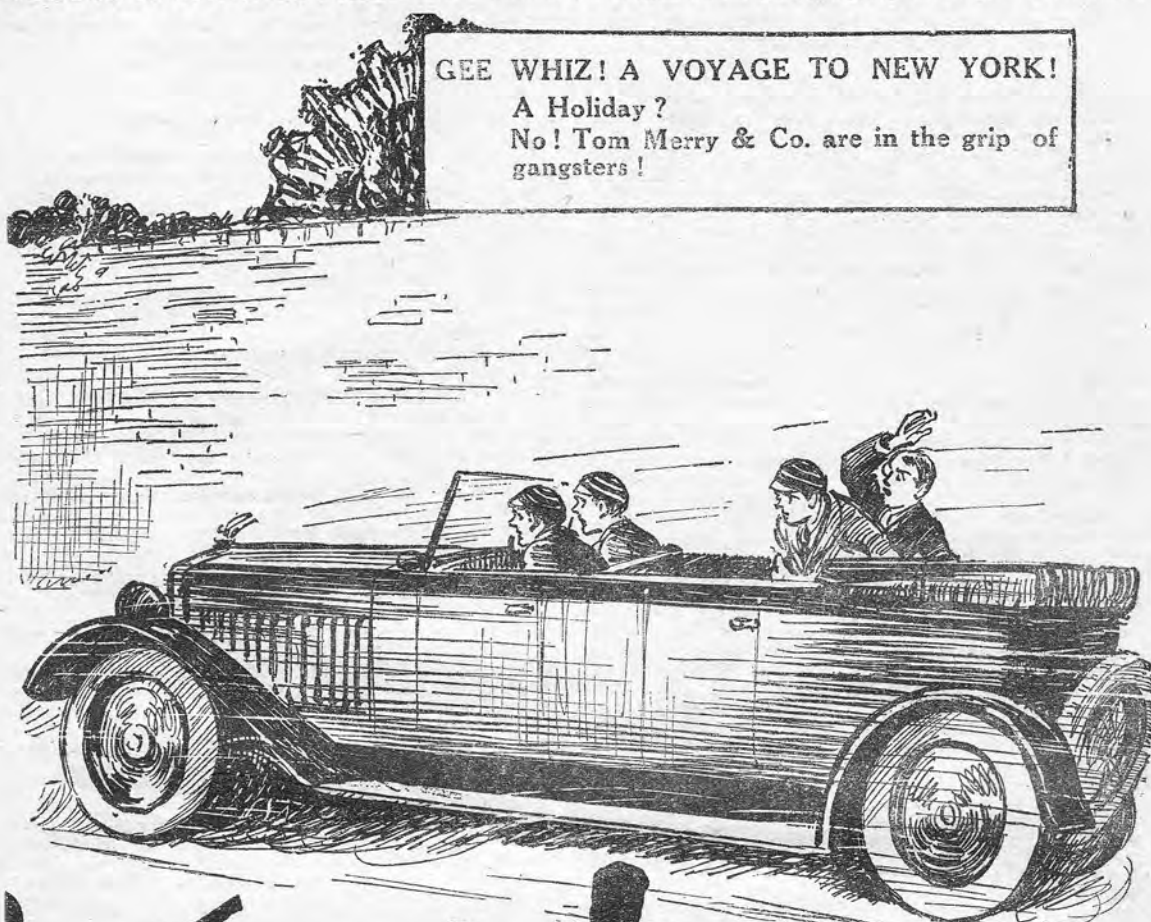
"Pass it on!"

"On the ball!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Levison of the Fourth passed the topper on to Grundy

TOM MERRY & CO. ARE ON THE TRAIL IN THIS THRILLING YARN!



ST. JIM'S!

A Splendid Long Complete School and Adventure Story by

MARTIN CLIFFORD.

of the Shell. George Alfred Grundy, with a mighty kick, sent it sailing on over the heads of the crowd, to land at the feet of Frederick Burkett, the gigantic bully of the Shell, who, in turn, passed it on to Crook, who passed it on to Mulvaney minor, who passed it on to Redfern of the New House.

"Well passed, there!"

"You uttah wottahs—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus breathless and perspiring, made another frantic dive for his ill-used hat.

Crash!

"Yawwoop!"

Hammond of the Fourth had stuck out a leg, and the swell of St. Jim's went sprawling over it. He landed in a heap full on the topper. There was a yell of laughter from all sides as he scrambled dazedly to his feet.

Gussy's topper, once so shiny and elegant, was no longer a thing of beauty and a joy for ever! It was as flat as a pancake.

Arthur Augustus stood panting, surveying his squashed topper with feelings too deep for words.

"Hard luck, Gussy!" chuckled Tom Merry.

"Going to play us a tune on it, Gussy?" grinned Monty Lowther of the Shell.

"A—a tune, deah boy?" gasped Arthur Augustus dazedly. "What on, Lowthah?"

"Why, on that concertina, of course!" grinned Monty Lowther, indicating the wrecked topper.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus surveyed the humorous Monty, crimson with indignation. Then he caught sight of Figgins & Co. in the crowd, and a very grim expression came into the swell of St. Jim's noble countenance. Pushing back his cuffs in a very business-like manner, he advanced upon the New House trio.

"I am goin' to administah a feahful thwashin'!" panted Arthur Augustus. "I considah—"

"Thrash away!" chuckled Figgins.

Jack Blake, grinning, caught hold of his noble chum by the arm.

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"Chuck it, Gussy, you ass! Can't scrap here! Wait till we get back to the school if you must give those giddy New House asses one of your 'feahful thwashin's!' Come into the buffet; I want some lemonade!"

"Wats! I—"

But with Blake on one side of him and Digby on the other, the protesting swell of St. Jim's was dragged into the buffet by his chums. Herries and Tom Merry & Co. followed them in, grinning.

A fat figure was standing by the counter, with a huge plateful of succulent-looking pastries in front of him.

It was Baggy Trimble.

For once in a way Baggy Trimble, the Falstaff of the Fourth, was returning to St. Jim's in funds! A handsome remittance from an elderly relation reposed in his pocket, and he was wasting no time in breaking into it. At the entry of Blake & Co. and Tom Merry & Co., however, Baggy blinked round, a distinctly nervous air replacing the satisfied smirk that had ornamented his greasy countenance a moment or two before.

Baggy owed nearly every junior at St. Jim's money—he was the most remorseless borrower in the school! As a borrower of money, Baggy was an absolute genius. Fellows who had sworn never to lend Baggy another penny found themselves, to their own amazement, lending him money despite all their grim resolves, under Baggy's magic touch.

Tom Merry & Co. and Study No. 6 were no exceptions to that rule. As Monty Lowther had once said, could all the little "loans" that Baggy had succeeded in extracting from them in past terms have been added together, they would have amounted to a sum sufficient to pay off the National Debt.

Hence Baggy's uneasiness at being discovered in funds.

"Hallo, porpoise!" said Blake.

"Great Scott! Baggy must be in funds!" exclaimed Manners, staring at the plateful of expensive delicacies in front of Baggy.

"My hat, yes!" grinned Herries. "What about that boodle you owe me, Baggy?"

"And me!" cut in Monty Lowther.

"And me!" grinned Digby and Blake and Tom Merry together.

Baggy grinned a sickly grin.

"Ahem! I—I—"

"Cash up!" ordered Manners.

He held out a hand. The others, grinning, followed suit. Baggy blinked in utter dismay at the ring of outstretched palms. And with one voice Blake & Co. and Tom Merry & Co. repeated:

"Cash up!"

"I—I say, you know, I can't!" squeaked Baggy. "I—I—"

"What about those pastries?" roared Blake indignantly.

"You can pay us instead of wolfing a lot of pastries, you fat fraud!"

"Oh, really, Blake! I—I've paid for the pastries!" mumbled Baggy. "I haven't any more money, you know! I—"

"Liar!" said Herries cheerfully.

"Oh, really, Herries! I hope you don't doubt my word!" said Baggy, in an injured tone. "The word of a Trimble is always to be trusted!"

"I don't think!" grinned Lowther. "Well, anyway, if you aren't going to pay up we'll take something on account with these giddy pastries—eh, you chaps?"

"Ha, ha, ha! Rather!"

"What-ho!"

"Pass 'em across!"

There was an indignant howl from Baggy as the piled-up plateful of delicious pastries that he had been about to devour was picked off the counter by Tom Merry and held out to the others.

"Leave 'em alone, you rotters!" panted Baggy.

He made a wild grab at the plate. But Tom Merry pushed him back.

"Hands off, porpoise!"

"But they're mine!" howled Baggy, dancing about in his helpless fury, as he saw the grinning chums tackling the numerous delicacies from his plate. "You—you rotten pirates! Yah! Gimme back my tuck, you beastly cads—"

"Rats!" said Tom Merry firmly. "You've borrowed our tin for goodness knows how long, and never paid back a penny! We're taking something on account, you fat toad!"

And with grinning faces Tom Merry & Co. and Blake & Co. waded into the good things, while Baggy danced and panted on the outskirts of the group.

But it was clearly useless to hope to save a single one of the precious pastries. They were disappearing rapidly—Tom Merry and his chums were seizing the chance of teaching Baggy a little lesson which he fully deserved! And with a last final snort, simmering with indignation, the Falstaff of the Fourth rolled from the buffet.

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"Yah, beasts!" he yelled back at them, then scurried hastily away along the platform.

Baggy had plenty of cash left from his remittance. And though he dared not show his wealth in the station buffet, there was a cafe in the street opposite the station where he could feed in private while waiting for the Rylcombe train.

Baggy rolled out of the station exit, grunting, and headed for the little cafe opposite.

As he went, he heard a train come steaming into the station. It was not the Rylcombe train, he knew, and he did not give it another thought.

But had Baggy only known, the train he heard as he rolled into the little cafe opposite the station was bringing a sinister figure into the lives of the juniors he had just left so disgustingly in the buffet; a man who was to be the cause of an amazing adventure for Tom Merry and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, and some of the other chums of the Shell and Fourth; a man on whose account those particular juniors would travel thousands of miles away from St. Jim's, to the other side of the world!

But in the buffet Tom Merry and his friends realised no more than Baggy Trimble what a momentous affair it was for them that the train now steaming to a standstill along the platform had arrived while they were at Wayland Junction!

Tom Merry had picked up a newspaper from the counter, and was glancing through the pages in search of the cricket news, while Manners ordered lemonade all round.

There was a sudden exclamation from Tom.

The captain of the Shell was staring wide-eyed at a paragraph of the paper in his hands.

"Great Scott!"

"What's up, deah boy?" ejaculated Arthur Augustus.

"Listen!" breathed Tom.

He read aloud the paragraph that had caused his sudden exclamation. It was to the effect that an escape had been effected from Loughton Convict Prison during a fog. The escaped man, so far as the newspaper correspondent had been able to ascertain, was said to be an American named Lessing.

"Lessing!" gasped Blake incredulously.

"My giddy aunt!" breathed Digby.

Leon Lessing, an American gangster from New York, had made his name well enough known at St. Jim's by his attempt—so nearly successful—to kidnap Cyrus K. Handcock, the American junior who had come to St. Jim's during the previous term.

Cyrus K. Handcock was the son of Hiram Q. Handcock, multi-millionaire and chewing-gum king, of New York City. Leon Lessing had been out for a ransom of half a million dollars—a hundred thousand pounds—which he would not doubt have been able to extract from Handcock's millionaire father had his rascally schemes been successful. Unfortunately for Leon Lessing, however, they had not been successful, and the American had been sentenced to a long term of imprisonment in an English gaol.

But now, apparently, he had managed to escape!

"Bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

The swell of St. Jim's snatched the paper from Tom Merry's hand, and scanned the exciting paragraph wide-eyed.

"It's that fellah Leon Lessin' all wight, deah boys!" he breathed. "Gweat Scott! Lessin' fwee again!"

"Oh, well, he's not likely to trouble St. Jim's any more, I suppose," put in Manners, with a shrug. "If he isn't caught, as I suppose he will be, he'll get out of England quick!"

"Sure to," nodded Tom Merry.

A sudden shout from the platform, where the train that had just arrived had come to a standstill, caused the juniors to turn their heads quickly, staring out through the open doorway on to the platform.

A man was leaning out of the window of one of the first-class compartments. He was a foreign-looking man with a thin, hooked nose and a wide felt hat on his head. He was shouting to a porter in a voice that was unmistakably a product of the U.S.A.

"Say! Quick, you! I guess my nephew's been taken sick! I gotta get him to the nearest hospital!" He jumped out on to the platform. A youngster's figure, lying on one of the seats of the compartment, could be seen dimly inside the shadowy carriage. "Get a taxi! Don't stand staring, you fool! I'll carry him out—"

The porter woke to life, and rushed off to procure a taxi. The tall, thin figure of the American turned back to the carriage, where the apparently senseless figure of the youngster lay.

"Great pip!" ejaculated Blake. "Wonder if we can help?"

The juniors in the buffet hurried out on to the platform.



The American emerged carrying an inert youngster, whose face was covered with a silk handkerchief.

Already a number of other St. Jim's fellows were crowding up to offer their services.

Apparently they were not welcome! The American turned on them with a snarl.

"Keep back, hang you! Out of the light, you college boys! I can manage this."

"If you want help in carrying him—" began the quiet tones of Eric Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, who had come striding up.

"I don't!" growled the American. "Mind your own business!"

Kildare flushed. But he bit his lip and said nothing, checking the indignant retort that had risen to his lips. After all, the captain was telling himself, it was no doubt due to his anxiety over the illness of the youngster in the carriage—his nephew—that the man with the hook nose was behaving with such extraordinary rudeness to his would-be helpers.

The porter came hurrying back to say that a taxi was waiting.

With a mutter of satisfaction the American jumped into the compartment, emerging with an inert figure in his arms. The unconscious youngster's face was covered with a big silk handkerchief, apparently to protect his head from the strong sunlight. The juniors fell back quickly, making a lane to the exit for the man carrying him.

The American vanished with his burden through the booking hall.

"Wonder what's the matter with the poor chap?" muttered Tom Merry sympathetically.

"Wotten luck, gettin' taken badly ill in a twain, deah boys," murmured Arthur Augustus.

The train that had brought the American and his sick nephew steamed out again. A question to one of the porters informed Tom Merry that it had come to Wayland from Southampton.

"Southampton, eh?" exclaimed Monty Lowther. "I wonder if old Hancock turned up on it, then?"

"Haven't seen him," said Tom, shaking his head.

The juniors glanced up and down the platform. They knew that Cyrus K. Hancock, their new American study-

mate, who had been over to New York for the holidays, had been landing in England that morning at Southampton, and he might well have been on the train that had just come from there.

But there was no sign of the American junior. And the shrill whistle of an approaching train told them a few moments later that their own train was coming in at last.

"Come on!" exclaimed Blake eagerly. "Keep those New House bounders out of the best carriages! School House for ever!"

"Hurrah!"

"Wathah, bai Jove!"

Tom Merry & Co. and Blake & Co. linked arms and sailed through the crowd in a solid body. There were yells and gasps and indignant shouts.

"Don't shove, you School House cads!"

"Keep back, blow you!"

"Ha, ha, ha! Out of the light, Figgy!" grinned Tom Merry.

But Figgins did not get out of the light. Consequently, he was shoved—and he sat down on the platform with a crash and a yell.

"Yooop!" gasped Figgins.

"Back up, New House!" panted Fatty Wynn.

New House stalwarts came hurrying up at the first sign of a good "House" row. But they were outnumbered by the School House fellows, and in the wild scramble that ensued, as the train entered the station, Figgins & Co. were strewn right and left on the platform! The victorious School House juniors joyfully collared all the empty carriages, leaving only odd seats in compartments half-filled with country people for their unfortunate rivals!

In the little cafe opposite the station, Baggy Trimble, busy standing himself a handsome feed, safe from his numerous creditors, had heard the train steam in.

With desperate speed, the Falstaff of the Fourth crammed the last remaining bun into his mouth and jumped to his feet. He had already paid for his meal. Red and greasy of countenance, Baggy rolled heavily from the

tuckshop and started across the station yard to the entrance of the booking hall.

A taxi was drawn up there, and a tall, American-looking man, carrying an inert figure, drew Baggy's astonished attention.

"My hat!" breathed Baggy, in great surprise. "What on earth—"

"Young gent been taken ill!" explained a fat porter, who was standing near and seemed to think that the remark had been addressed to him. "That's his uncle—takin' 'im to the 'orspital!"

Baggy would have passed on; but at that moment a gust of wind came and raised the handkerchief that had been spread over the senseless youngster's face.

Baggy Trimble froze motionless where he stood. His jaw dropped, and his eyes seemed to pop out of his bullet head.

For the white face of the unconscious youngster had been revealed as that of Cyrus K. Hancock, the American junior of St. Jim's.

"M-m-my hat!" gasped Baggy.

Already Hancock's inert figure had been deposited in the interior of the taxi, and the tall American with the hook nose was climbing swiftly in after him.

Baggy rolled rapidly towards the door of the taxi.

Not for a moment did he suspect foul play.

It was simply natural curiosity, a trait with which Baggy was uncommonly well supplied, that induced the fat Fourth-Former to roll eagerly forward and peer in.

"I say!" squeaked Baggy excitedly. "What's the matter with Hancock, sir? I—"

Baggy broke off as he stared into the taxi.

Hancock, propped up in the farther corner, deathly white, had opened his eyes. His lips moved, and, faint and blurred though his voice was, there was no mistaking the word he was muttering—

"Help!"

Baggy jumped.

He could scarcely believe his ears. In a flash he knew that things were by no means so straightforward as they appeared! The memory of the previous attempt to kidnap the son of the New York multi-millionaire was too recent in the mind of every junior at St. Jim's for Baggy not to realise at once, now, that there was foul play afoot!

"M-m-my hat!"

The next moment a push in the chest had sent Baggy Trimble staggering backwards. He sat down on the hard, unsympathetic ground with a bump and a yell—and the taxi door slammed. The vehicle leapt forward, and swung out of the station yard into the road, with the fat figure of Baggy Trimble seated on the ground, gasping, goggling after it.

CHAPTER 2. In Hot Pursuit!

"SCHOOL House for ever!"

"Yaas, wathah, bai Jove!"

"What-ho!"

Tom Merry & Co., Blake & Co., Talbot, and Bernard Glyn and Kangaroo and one or two other School House stalwarts had all crowded into the same compartment. As many of them as could find room at the window were leaning out enjoying the discomfiture of the New House fellows as the latter sought for seats farther down the train, having given their rivals of the School House best in the struggle for the empty carriages.

The guard had the whistle half-way to his lips when a sudden excited yell from the direction of the booking hall drew the attention of the fellows at the window of Tom Merry's compartment.

It was Baggy Trimble.

Baggy was gesticulating wildly, and perspiring freely as he waved his fat little arms.

"What on earth's the matter with Baggy?" exclaimed Manners in astonishment.

"The fat ass will miss the giddy train if he doesn't look out!" grinned Blake.

"Buck up, Baggy!" yelled Herries.

"Want to get left, porpoise?"

"Half a jiff!" cut in Tom Merry sharply. "What's he yelling? Listen! Something about Hancock—"

The buzz of talk in the crowded compartment stopped. Baggy's shrill, excited tones came to the ears of Tom Merry & Co. at last, almost delirious with excitement.

"Quick!" yelled Baggy, fairly spluttering his words in his haste. "Help! Fire! Murder! They're kidnapping Hancock! Ooooooh! Help!"

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"My giddy aunt!" gasped Monty Lowther. "What the merry dickens! He's potty!"

"Baggy's mad!"

"Trying to pull our legs!" grinned Herries doubtfully.

But there was something in Baggy's face that convinced Tom Merry that something really serious was afoot.

Already the guard was blowing his whistle. There was no time to be lost!

Tom swung open the door and jumped out on to the platform. The train began to move at that moment, and there was an angry shout from a porter at the end of the platform. But Manners, Talbot, and Kangaroo scrambled out after Tom, and they were followed by Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. They had jumped out after Tom instinctively rather than because they yet realised the truth. Blake and some of the others would have followed, but the train was travelling fast now, and it would have been madness to take the risk.

The train thundered out of Wayland on its way to Rylcombe, crammed with noisy crowds of St. Jim's fellows, who for the most part had heard nothing of Baggy's excited yells, and were thoroughly astonished at seeing Tom Merry and the little group with him left behind on the platform.

Tom Merry raced across to the Falstaff of the Fourth, and seized him by the shoulders.

"Baggy—what's happened?"

"Hancock!" gasped Baggy, fairly dancing with excitement. "He's been carried off in a taxi! I tell you, he's been kidnapped—"

"B-b-bai Jove!"

"When, where, you fat ass?" ejaculated Tom, shaking Baggy by the shoulder. "Don't keep telling us he's been kidnapped! Explain something!"

"Ow! Stop it!" gasped Baggy. He blinked at Tom in a discontented way as Tom ceased shaking him. "Oh, really, Merry! I am telling you as fast as I can, aren't I?"

Tom breathed hard. But there was evidently no hurrying Baggy.

"There was a chap with a hooked nose!" explained Baggy, beginning to feel very important at being the centre of such terrific interest. "He pretended Hancock was his nephew—said he was ill, and—"

"Great Scott!" breathed Tom Merry.

Now he understood!

It had seemed queer to him at the time of the arrival of the Southampton train that an unconscious person should have a handkerchief laid over his face. Now he knew why—it had been to prevent anyone recognising Hancock!

The kidnapers were at work again!

Whether the recent escape of Leon Lessing from prison had anything to do with it Tom did not know. But it looked like it. His face was grim and set as he grasped Baggy by the shoulder again, cutting in on the fat Fourthite's words as Baggy rambled on excitedly.

"Hancock was taken off in a taxi?" rapped out Tom.

"Yow! Yes. Leggo my shoulder!"

"Describe it!" snapped Tom fiercely.

"Oh, really, Merry! Don't be so beastly rough!" sniffed Baggy indignantly. "It was a dark green taxi, and it turned off along the London road—that jolly well shows it wasn't going to the hospital!" he added triumphantly. "If you ask me, the chap driving it was an accomplice, or something, although he was dressed like a taxi-driver. I jolly well—"

But Baggy got no further.

There was not really very much use in going on. Tom Merry had left him standing where he was, and the others had raced after him, rushing out through the booking hall into the station yard.

Baggy blinked after them, with his mouth open.

"Of—of all the rude rotters!" gasped Baggy. "Rushing off like that while I'm in the middle of telling 'em all about it! Yah!"

In the station yard, the first thing that met Tom Merry's eyes was an open four-seater car, long and low and fast-looking, painted a vivid scarlet. There was no sign of its owner.

He stared up the London road. Vanishing in the distance at the top of the long hill could be seen a speeding vehicle—probably the green taxi!

"Come on!" panted Tom. "We've got to commandeer this!"

And he sprang into the red four-seater.

Manners and Talbot, Kangaroo and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy scrambled in after him. Tom pressed the self-starter, and the engine roared to life. He let in the clutch and swung out of the station yard, turning along the London road in pursuit of the now-vanishing taxi.

It was quite clear, from what Baggy had told them of Hancock's feeble cry for help, that there was foul play,

The flickering torchlight stabbed the gloom as Figgins sent the SOS!



apart from the fact that the man who had professed to be taking him to the hospital had not driven in the direction of the hospital at all! And in the circumstances, Tom Merry felt justified in borrowing the car he was now driving to pursue the kidnappers before it was too late.

"After 'em!" panted Talbot. "The hounds! Hancock must have been attacked and chloroformed in the train!"

"Step on the juice, deah boy!" breathed Arthur Augustus, at Tom's side.

Tom Merry nodded, with a grim smile, and "stepped on the juice" hard. Like a live thing the scarlet car roared away up the long hill. It swept over the crest, and in the distance the five St. Jim's juniors could see their quarry speeding on along the wide, straight road.

Tom Merry realised that already they were beginning to overhaul it.

His foot shoved the accelerator down to the limit, and, with the wind streaming past them, they flew on at Brooklands speed in pursuit of the speeding car ahead.

CHAPTER 3.

Crashed!

"WE'RE catching 'em up!"

It was Manners who gave that breathless exclamation.

They had covered nearly a couple of miles in pursuit of the green taxi, through open moorland country that was now giving place to woods and hills. It could not be very long now before their quarry realised that they were being followed, for the juniors were steadily overhauling the car in front. By now only a hundred yards separated the two flying cars.

"Look!" cried Kangaroo.

The Australian junior had caught sight of a head protruding from the window of the closed taxi speeding along at breakneck speed in front of them. The man in it—the tall American with the hooked nose—was staring back at them.

"He's twigged!" muttered Talbot.

"Gweat Scott—look!" gasped Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

The American's hand had appeared through the open window, and in it was held an automatic that glinted dully in the sunlight as he raised it.

"Look out!" yelled Manners.

But there was no need for the shouted warning. Tom Merry had already realised the man's intention. As the bullet came, Tom swerved the car, and the lead ricocheted off the road harmlessly, instead of blowing a hole in their front off tyre, as the man with the automatic had intended.

Crack!

A second bullet came humming. There was a look of contorted fury on the face staring back at them—a sinister face, if ever there was one, it seemed to Tom Merry, with his thin, hooked nose and twisted lips and glittering black eyes.

The second bullet had missed their wheel by a hair's-breadth, thanks to another wild swerve of the car, under Tom's skilful handling. They roared on—only fifty yards behind the green taxi now!

If they could succeed in passing it, they would be able to block the road, and force it to a standstill. And, though they were up against two grown men—it was quite evident that the driver of the green taxi was an accomplice of the other crook's—there were, at any rate, five of the juniors, and as athletic a five as could be found at St. Jim's!

And even the fact that the rogues were armed was not going to frighten off Tom Merry and his companions now.

They meant to rescue Cyrus K. Hancock, the American schoolboy, at any cost!

With roaring exhaust, the scarlet car thundered on, hot on the heels of the taxi.

The road had grown narrow now, and dangerous. They swept up a hill, pursuers and pursued, and down another. At the foot of the slope could be seen a gleaming river, with an old stone bridge spanning it, set on a bend.

The green taxi flew down the hill at breakneck speed, and some sixth sense seemed to warn Tom Merry of disaster! He slowed down, treading on the powerful foot-brake. It was lucky that he did! For disaster came—for the green taxi.

It swung on to the bridge at top speed, and the racing wheels skidded. The back of the car swung round, utterly out of control, and there was a ghastly crash as it struck the low stone parapet of the bridge.

"Good heavens!" panted Manners, his face suddenly deathly white.

"Oh, gweat Scott!"

The ancient parapet had given way on the impact, and

the wide-eyed juniors saw the car go hurtling into the gliding waters of the river beneath.

Tom Merry gave a breathless cry. He dragged on the handbrake, and, with both brakes at work, brought the scarlet car to a standstill within a few yards of the bridge. The juniors leapt out.

The car they had been chasing had vanished beneath the weed-choked water, but for part of the roof. A figure was swimming near it, striking out for the farther bank—a man, with a peaked cap on his head, who was evidently the driver. As the juniors rushed to the water's edge, they saw him scramble out of the water, and turn, staring back.

"Look!" cried Manners hoarsely.

Two other figures had appeared near the submerged car. One they had no difficulty in recognising as the hook-nosed American. He was swimming for the farther bank with long, powerful strokes. But the other figure was being whirled away downstream, and sank from sight as they watched.

Handcock, evidently still stupefied with the chloroform, or whatever had been administered to him in the train, was being carried helplessly away on the current, to sink and drown among the treacherous, entangling weeds!

The tall American clambered out of the water on to the opposite bank. It was clear that he was white and unnerved from the shock of the accident, as any man would have been. He turned a snarling, evil countenance towards the group of St. Jim's juniors—then dived out of sight into the woods that lined the river on the farther side, together with his accomplice, the bogus taxi-driver.

To attempt to follow them would be a waste of time—worse than useless, Tom realised.

Besides, it was of Handcock that he and the others were thinking now, to the exclusion of all else.

Cyrus K. Handcock had not been long at St. Jim's, but he had already succeeded in making himself one of the most popular juniors in the Shell, with his cheery manner and amusing American ways. Tom Merry felt that one of his closest chums was in the deadly danger that threatened the son of the New York millionaire.

He raced along the bank to the spot where Handcock had disappeared beneath the surface of the water, and tore off his coat as he ran.

"I'm going in for him!" he panted.

"Let me go!" cried Manners, following Tom's example, and peeling off his coat.

"I'll go, deah boys! I—"

"Can't all go!" snapped Talbot. "Let Tommy go—he's the best swimmer of the lot of us!"

Tom Merry kicked off his shoes. His eyes were riveted upon the spot where Handcock had gone down, twenty yards or so from the spot where the swift current rippled round the roof of the submerged wreck of the green taxi.

"Stand by, you chaps," muttered the captain of the Shell hoarsely. "May need a hand if the weeds get me."

"Wight-ho, deah boy!"

The swell of St. Jim's was very pale.

Tom Merry dived!

CHAPTER 4.

A Fight for Life!

CLEAVING the water like an otter, Tom Merry struck out strongly for the spot where the American youngster had last been seen.

The river was fairly deep just there, and the current was very powerful. It was all Tom could do to

prevent himself from being carried away downstream. His clothes hampered him, and it needed every ounce of his strength to battle out to the middle of the river, and gain the spot towards which he was fighting.

From the bank Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, Talbot, Kangaroo, and Manners watched in anxious suspense.

They knew only too well that there was not only one life at stake, but two; not only Handcock's, but Tom Merry's as well!

But Tom was not thinking of his own danger as he came at last to the spot where Handcock had gone down.

It was thick with weeds at that point, that could be seen dimly, green and dark, waving in the shadowy depths as the current dragged through them. For a moment Tom felt his ankle caught among it, but he kicked clear, and dived.

The four straining pairs of eyes on the bank were incredibly anxious as they saw their chum disappear. It seemed a long while before Tom's head rose once more above the surface.

"He—he hasn't found him," muttered Manners hoarsely.

Again Tom dived into the weed-choked waters, watched by the white-faced group. Manners could stand the strain no longer.

"I'm going out to him!" he said thickly, and whipped off his jacket and kicked off his shoes.

Manners leapt in, and struck out grimly towards the spot in mid-stream where Tom Merry was searching desperately for the senseless form of Handcock, entangled, without a doubt, somewhere among the weeds. Talbot made a movement as if to follow, but Kangaroo caught his arm.

"Better wait here!" snapped the junior from down-under.

"But, hang it—"

"Rats! We can go in if we're wanted; better keep fresh in the meantime. If we all get tired out hunting in the weeds, we shan't be much use in an emergency," said Kangaroo quietly.

There was a good deal of sense in that, as Talbot and Arthur Augustus both realised. Talbot nodded, and stayed where he was, his eyes riveted on the place where Tom had last dived.

Manners was well out towards the spot when Tom's head bobbed into sight again. A moment later a second head appeared beside him.

"He's got him, bai Jove!" panted Arthur Augustus, with shining eyes.

Handcock's face was white as chalk, his eyes closed. Tom had found him held under a mass of weeds, and it had been all he could do to get him clear and bring him to the surface. But he had managed it somehow! And with his hands grasping the senseless form, Tom Merry kicked out for the bank.

He was almost exhausted himself now, it was clear.

"I'll take him!"

Manners' voice in his ear came as a shock to Tom, who had not realised that his chum was in the water. His haggard face lit up faintly as he saw Manners' head near him.

"Good man!" he gasped. "I'm about done—"

He relinquished his hold on the unconscious American, and Manners took charge of the half-drowned figure. Side by side, the two chums fought towards the bank, the deadly current dragging them downstream all the while.

There was still the danger of being caught among the weeds. But luck was with them! A few minutes later, Tom Merry and Manners were being pulled from the water on to the grassy bank, together with the inert form of Handcock.

Potts, The Office Boy



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Something very like a sob of relief broke from Talbot. "Good man!" he breathed hoarsely.

There was a sudden shout from the bridge. Tom Merry glanced round.

A policeman with a bicycle had appeared on the bridge, staring from the submerged car to the group of youngsters on the bank. He came running towards them.

He was a young, efficient constable, luckily, and he took charge at once, administering artificial respiration energetically to the half-drowned youngster. As he worked, he asked curt questions. The St. Jim's juniors explained exactly what had happened.

"Kidnappers, eh?" growled the constable. "And they got away into the woods? That's a pity—difficult to find them now."

He glanced at Manners.

"You're pretty wet! Go straight along the road there to the village—it's not far. Tell your story to the sergeant at the police station—lucky he's there to-day! We may catch these men yet. You'd better run along with your pal," he added, turning to Tom Merry. "You can both get your clothes dried at the station. If you wait around here, you'll get your deaths of cold! I'll look after this fellow!"

Even as he spoke, Hancock's eyes fluttered open—only to close again almost at once.

"He's comin' wound," muttered Arthur Augustus.

Manners and Tom Merry obeyed the constable's instructions. They realised that in their wet clothes they had got to get moving, or run the risk of serious consequences. And if they could inform the police in time, there was yet a chance that the hook-nosed American and his accomplice might be caught.

They had not gone long when Hancock opened his eyes again.

He lay still, staring up dazedly at Arthur Augustus, Kangaroo, and Reginald Talbot, and at the blue-helmeted figure of the policeman kneeling over him. A faint twisted grin appeared at last on his face. He sat up, Talbot supporting him.

"Great Bohunkus!" muttered Cyrus K. Hancock, in his decidedly transatlantic voice. "The auto took a high dive, I guess!"

He passed a hand dazedly across his eyes. The horn-rimmed glasses that he usually wore were somewhere at the bottom of the river now.

"Feelin' bettah, old chap?"

"Why, hallo, Percy!" Hancock had a little habit of forgetting—or seeming to forget—the swell of St. Jim's correct name. "I—I guess I was chloroformed, wasn't I? What happened? Where's Santelli?"

"Santelli?" echoed Talbot quickly.

Hancock nodded. He was quickly recovering now.

"Sure! That guy with the nose like a parrot! He's Al Santelli! A big stiff from Chicago. Come over from the other side to kidnap me, I guess. I recognised his ugly map when he held me down in the railroad coach, and stuck that chloroform pad over my nose. Where is he?"

"He got away!" snapped Kangaroo grimly. "But they may catch him yet."

"I guess not!" grinned Cyrus K. Hancock. "He's a cute bird, is Santelli; they won't catch him in a hurry! He'll make a getaway O.K., you can betcher sweet life!"

"Is he a pal of that wottah Lessing?" queried Arthur Augustus excitedly.

"Yeah, I believe so," nodded Hancock. "Well, that

guy Lessing is in quod, and maybe Santelli will follow him there, with luck—"

"Lessing isn't in quod any longer!" cut in Talbot in a grim tone. "He escaped the other day! He's free again!"

"Staggering starfish!" gasped Hancock. "Whadyer know about that?"

He stared from face to face in semi-comical dismay.

"For the love of Mike!" he breathed, as he rose to his feet in his dripping garments, supported by Kangaroo and the constable. "Lessing free—Santelli in England! I guess there's gonna be some fun! Those two guys mean business, whether they're working in together or separately—and I'm their oyster!"

CHAPTER 5.

Visitors for the Head!

"I GUESS it's the limit!"

It was a good many hours later that Cyrus K. Hancock made that disgusted remark.

Hancock was seated in Study No. 10 of the Shell. Tom Merry & Co. and Blake & Co. and Kangaroo were in the study, too. They surveyed Cyrus K. Hancock sympathetically.

"Hard luck!" said Jack Blake.

"I guess it's the outside edge!" growled Hancock.

It certainly was hard luck; there was no doubt about that. It was scarcely surprising, therefore, that the usually cheery face of the American junior was anything but cheery as he glanced at the others and snorted.

The trouble was that Dr. Holmes, the headmaster of St. Jim's, had put his foot down. On the belated arrival of Hancock, Tom Merry, Manners, Gussy, Talbot, and Kangaroo at the school that evening, the Head had already learned by telephone of the amazing reason for their lateness. And he had issued his uncompromising edict!

Cyrus K. Hancock was not to go out of gates until the man named Santelli and Leon Lessing, the other big gangster, recently escaped from prison, were both either arrested or known to have fled from the country to escape from the police search that was in progress.

The Head was taking no risks of the son of the chewing-gum millionaire being kidnapped again—a proceeding which would cost Hiram Q. Hancock, of New York City, half a million dollars, without a doubt, if it were successful. Multi-millionaire though Hancock's "pop" might be, he would be fairly certain to wax exceeding wroth at being forcibly parted from that sum of money; and it was equally certain that he would want to know why the Head had allowed it to happen.

Hancock himself, on the other hand, would have been quite ready to run the risk. He would far have preferred the chance of being kidnapped to the prospect of remaining within gates for a good many days to come.

But the Head had put his majestic foot down, and there was no arguing with the headmaster of St. Jim's!

"It's tough!" groaned Hancock gloomily. "Gee, it's tough, buddies!"

"Twightfullay wuff luck!" agreed Arthur Augustus. "It's wotten!"

"Let's hope the police catch the rotters soon!" put in Monty Lowther hopefully.

"I guess they won't," said Hancock. "They're slick guys—"

What's in a Letter?



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He broke off as there came a tap on the door. The tall figure of Eric Kildare appeared, looking into the study.

"Bed-time, kids!" He glanced at Handcock. "You understand that you must not go out of gates in any circumstances, Handcock?" added the captain. "The Head has told the prefects to see that you don't, too! So no monkey business, you know!"

"Aw, hire a hall!" pleaded Handcock in an exasperated tone. "I guess that'd give you more room to let loose some hot air about it!"

The juniors grinned. Cyrus K. Handcock could never quite grasp that, as a St. Jim's junior, he was not supposed to "get fresh" with the prefects—let alone Kildare, the captain of the school.

"Don't be impertinent, Handcock!" said Kildare sharply. "Impertinent?" echoed Handcock. He grinned. "Oh, sorry, buddy! I guess I kinder forgot you were the big chief of this outfit!"

Despite himself, Kildare smiled.

"Well, you understand that you've got to stay within gates until you have the Head's permission to go out?" he said. "You know, there are disadvantages sometimes, as well as advantages, in being the son of a millionaire, young 'un!" he added good-naturedly.

"I guess there are!" grinned Handcock ruefully. "But O.K., chief! I'll do as the president wants."

By the "president," Handcock presumably referred to Dr. Holmes. Kildare smiled, and departed.

But Handcock's face was very long as he went upstairs with his chums to the Shell dormitory.

As Kildare had said, it was not all honey being the son of a multi-millionaire.

"Come in!"

Dr. Holmes called out the summons, in answer to a knock on the door of his private sanctum, in a voice that was a trifle irritable.

It was Saturday morning—two days later—and the scholarly old Head was busy at his desk working upon his newest treatise upon some of the more abstruse passages in Virgil's famous *Æneid*, and he did not like being interrupted. Amazing though it might seem, to the learned headmaster of St. Jim's Virgil's *Æneid* was as fascinating a study as were stamps or cigarette-cards or white mice to the fags in the Third.

The cheery face of Toby, the page-boy, appeared.

Toby was carrying a tray on which reposed a visiting-card.

"Two gentlemen to see you, sir," announced Toby—"American gentlemen, I think, sir!"

The Head gave vent to an exclamation that sounded like "Tchh!"—which, with the Head, was equivalent to a hearty "Oh, blow!"

He glanced at the card with a majestic frown. The name of his visitor, it appeared, was Elmer J. Codd, of Troy, N.Y., U.S.A.

The Head, wishing inwardly that Mr. Elmer J. Codd were at the bottom of the Atlantic, which he had apparently crossed simply to interrupt him in his fascinating work upon the *Æneid*, sighed, said "Tchh!" again, and told Toby to show the visitors in.

There was no doubt that Mr. Elmer J. Codd was an American, right enough, when he came striding into the study. He was a tall man, with a prominent nose, a little "Uncle Sam" beard, and enormous black-rimmed spectacles. His clothes, too, and his voice fairly shrieked of the U.S.A.

A second man followed him into the study, also very American right enough, when he came striding into the study with a swarthy complexion. He, too, wore heavy spectacles, and had a tuft of beard sprouting from his chin.

"Good-afternoon, gentlemen!" said the Head, with a last regretful glance at the papers on his desk, as he rose to his feet. "And what can I have the pleasure of doing for you?"

"Afternoon, sir!" said the taller of the two, extending a long arm, to grasp the Head's hand with a grip that caused that dignified old gentleman to gasp. "Glad to meet you! Dr. Holmes, I reckon?"

"Exactly!" said the Head. "Mr.—ah—Codd?"

"Sure! This is my friend, Mr. Smith. We're over in Yurup on a vacation, and we've heard so much about your English colleges that we're both fixing to send our own youngers over here for the edication. We wanta see over this hyer college, sir, and if it's O.K., we're reckoning to put our sons in the college at St. Jim's!"

"Sure!" nodded the swarthy individual beside him.

"I—I understand you wish to see over the school, then, Mr.—er—Herring?" answered the Head rather uncertainly.

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"Mr. Codd," corrected the other. "Yeah, that's the size of the situation!"

"Sure!" murmured his companion.

The Head's heart sank.

He had hoped that the interview would prove to be a brief one. But if these two transatlantic gentlemen wished to see over St. Jim's, with the purpose of approving of it as a school for their sons, it meant that he was saddled with them for quite a long time. Classes were in progress, so he could not delegate Mr. Railton or one of the other masters, or even a prefect, to "do the honours." He would have to show them round himself.

"Tchh!" said the Head, but under his breath, so that his visitors failed to hear it. "Very well, Mr.—er—Herring!"

"Codd, sir."

"I beg your pardon—Mr. Codd! I shall be—'hem—delighted to show you round the old school in person!"

"That's swell!" returned Mr. Codd cordially.

"Sure!" murmured his companion.

"This way, Mr. Fish—"

"Codd, sir."

"I beg your pardon—Mr. Codd! This way, Mr. Codd!" And, with rustling gown, the Head led his visitors majestically from the room.

It was quite evident that there was to be no more Virgil for him that morning!

Had he only known it, there was to be a staggering shock for the learned old Head, instead, before the morning was much older!

CHAPTER 6.

The Hold-Up!

"AND these are the cloisters!" The Head indicated the cloisters with a majestic sweep of his arm. It was quarter of an hour later, and since he could not avoid the task, Dr. Holmes was warning to his work.

He began a scholarly disquisition upon the subject of the old school cloisters. Architectural terms and ancient dates flowed from him eloquently. In the middle of it all, Mr. Elmer J. Codd touched him on the arm.

"Say!"

The Head broke off sharply. He frowned slightly, for he did not like being interrupted.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Trout!"

"Codd, sir. Say, I reckon this is mighty interesting, sir, mighty interesting! But we can't stay here all morning. It's the life of the college we want to see, not all the dead stuff! We wanna see the youngers in class, see how they learn, sir, see 'em at work!"

"Sure!" nodded his swarthy companion.

"Oh! Very well," said the Head, a trifle offended at having his long oration upon the history of the cloisters broken short. "Certainly, if you wish it, we will go round the class-rooms, and you shall see the boys at their various—er—tasks, Mr. Spratt—"

"Codd, sir."

"Exactly—Mr. Codd! This way, gentlemen!"

The Head rustled from the cloisters, across the quad, and up the School House steps, with the two gentlemen from U.S.A. at his side.

"By the way," said the Head, struck with a sudden thought, "you will possibly be interested to learn that there is already one American boy a pupil here. A boy named Handcock; the son of a gentleman in New York who is well-known, I am given to understand, on account of his large business in the manufacture of—er—chewing-gum!" The Head said that last word as though he were speaking of some rare article that his listeners had probably never even heard of. "Chewing-gum, I believe, is popular in the United States; one—er—chews it, I am informed, without actually devouring the substance. A curious, and perhaps not very cleanly habit, Mr. Whale—"

"Codd."

"I beg your pardon—Mr. Codd."

The Head paused outside the door of the Fourth Form room and knocked upon it. The voice of Mr. Lathom answered the knock, and Dr. Holmes rustled in, followed by his visitors, who stared round at the crowded desks.

"This is the Fourth Form at work, gentlemen!" beamed the Head. "I am just showing these gentlemen round the school, Mr. Lathom. Mr.—er—let me see—Sole—"

"Codd."

"Of course—Mr. Codd. Mr. Codd is contemplating sending his son to St. Jim's, Mr. Lathom!"

"Indeed, sir?" murmured Mr. Lathom civilly.

The Fourth were surveying the two bearded visitors with interest.

"Rum-looking couple," muttered Blako, to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Americans, for a cert!"

"You will perceive, gentlemen," went on the Head proudly, "how well lighted and aired this class-room is. The boys each monopolise a separate desk, and—"

"That's bully," broke in Mr. Codd. "But I reckon we've had our eyeful. Let's look at another!"

"Oh, certainly!"

The Head rustled out, followed by his companions. They turned towards the Shell Form room, where at that moment Mr. Linton was busy, in rather an acid mood, instructing his Form in algebra. The Shell fellows were mostly thinking far more about the half-holiday ahead of them that day. In consequence, lines were falling thickly in the Shell Form room when the Head arrived at the door.

"This, gentlemen, is the Shell!" murmured the Head, as he swung the door open in reply to Mr. Linton's summons, and motioned to his visitors to enter. "It may interest you to know, Mr. Pike—"

"Codd, sir."

"Codd, to be sure! It may interest you to know, Mr. Codd, that this is the Form in which the American boy Handcock is a pupil!"

"Now, is that so?" murmured Mr. Elmer J. Codd, with evident interest. "Hear that?" he added, turning to his companion.

"Sure!" nodded that individual.

They strode into the Form-room.

Curious stares greeted them as they entered with the majestic figure of the Head. It was not often that visitors were shown in the Form-room while work was in progress, and the break was a welcome one to the Shell fellows.

To Grundy, in particular, their entry was a relief. Grundy was on his feet, being "put through it" by Mr. Linton, as they arrived, and Mr. Linton had clearly been warming up to awarding him a few hundred lines for his utter ignorance of everything he was supposed to know about the lesson. George Alfred Grundy and Frederick Burkett, the hefty bully of the Shell, were the dunces of the Form. But at the unexpected interruption, Mr. Linton signed to Grundy to sit down—which the great George Alfred did with considerable relief.

"Bit of luck for you!" whispered George Gore. "You didn't get a blessed answer right!"

"Rats!" growled Grundy. "The fact is, I know a jolly

sight more algebra than old Linton ever will if he lives to be a hundred. He doesn't know when I jolly well am right, that's the trouble!"

"My hat!" gasped Gore faintly.

The Head closed the Form-room door, and beamed across the heads of the Shell at Mr. Linton, whose acid expression had altered in a moment to one of kindly interest.

"These gentlemen are interested to see the boys at their tasks, Mr. Linton!" explained the Head. "Perhaps you will be so good as to continue the lesson as though we were not present for a few minutes, that they may observe the—ah—English methods of education. I believe that Grundy was being questioned. Pray allow Grundy to continue his—ah—no doubt learned application to the intricacies of algebra!"

The Head laughed jovially at his little joke. The Shell fellows chuckled, too—for a different reason. The idea of Grundy being picked upon to show off the smartness of the Form was rich.

"Certainly, Dr. Holmes!" stammered Mr. Linton. "But—er—not Grundy, perhaps. Merry, kindly stand up!"

Tom Merry rose, grinning, to his feet, at his desk between Monty Lowther's and Cyrus K. Handcock's.

"To resume the subject of factorisation, Merry—" began Mr. Linton, in a jaunty tone, with a slightly self-conscious glance at the Head and the two visitors. "I—"

The master of the Shell got no further.

His words seemed suddenly to stick in his throat.

He was staring past Tom Merry at the group by the door, and if the Head had suddenly broken into a clog-dance Mr. Linton could not possibly have been looking more astonished. His jaw had dropped, and his eyes seemed to stick inches out of their sockets. An incoherent gurgle escaped him.

In utter amazement Tom Merry turned his head to see the cause of Mr. Linton's extraordinary expression.

It was evident enough.

Each of the two bespectacled, bearded Americans had produced a snub-nosed automatic pistol, with which they were covering the occupants of the Form-room.

From the taller of the two there came a strident command—

"Hands up, the lotta you! And not a sound!"

(Continued on next page.)

DOUBLE POWER



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HANDS UP, ST. JIM'S!

(Continued from previous page.)

Most of the Shell had leapt to their feet. From Cyrus K. Handcock there broke a breathless gasp.

"Santelli!"

One by one, white-faced and dazed with astonishment, the Shell fellows and Mr. Linton and Dr. Holmes raised their arms above their heads, and stood staring with incredibly startled eyes at the two armed men.

CHAPTER 7

Captured!

"B-BLESS my soul!"

Dr. Holmes was surveying the sinister figures of his visitors as though he simply could not believe his senses.

There was, perhaps, some excuse for his dazed astonishment. It is fairly seldom that men armed with automatics invade the junior Form-rooms in English schools.

It was scarcely surprising that the headmaster of St. Jim's was thunderstruck!

Mr. Linton was little less flabbergasted. As for the juniors, they stared dumbly.

But the eyes of Tom Merry and some of the others were gleaming in a way that was grim rather than scared. Tom, Manners, Talbot, and Kangaroo had been up against the man Santelli before! Like Handcock, they recognised him now, despite the disguise of horn-rimmed spectacles, effectively concealing his eyes, and the tufted "beard" he was wearing.

Monty Lowther, Bernard Glyn, and Clifton Dane had recovered from their first dazed astonishment, too. But Grundy, Burkett, Crooke and Gore and Skimpole were still goggling at the two figures by the closed door, like so many sheep. The rest of the Shell were little less taken aback than they!

"Goodness gracious!" panted the Head feebly. "Do my eyes deceive me, Mr. Fish?"

"I guess not," answered Santelli dryly. "The name was Codd, anyway," he added, with grim jocularity.

With a quick movement he removed the spectacles from his face and jerked away the false tuft of beard. The other man followed suit, and there was a gasp from Talbot. "Lessing!"

There was scarcely a junior present who did not remember the face that, free of its disguise, now grinned swarthily round at them; Leon Lessing, the rogue who had escaped from prison—the man who had entered the Shell dormitory one night soon after Handcock's arrival at St. Jim's, in a previous attempt to kidnap the son of the multi-millionaire.

"Great Bohunkus!" breathed Cyrus K. Handcock coolly.

"Both of 'em!"

"Sure—both of us!" snarled Lessing. "And it's you we've come for!"

"You don't say?" answered Handcock ironically.

His coolness was amazing.

The Head found his voice again.

"This is monstrous—monstrous!" he gasped in a faint tone. "I—I insist upon being permitted to lower my arms, you scoundrels!"

"Got a gun?" demanded Lessing fiercely.

"A—a gun? Dear me—no! Decidedly not!"

"O.K., then!" growled Lessing. "The old guy can lower his fins; but no one else, by thunder!"

Evidently the crooks were not going to risk a rush being made at them on the part of the Shell fellows. They had both learned from bitter experience what some of the St. Jim's juniors were made of!

Skimpole, who had been tentatively lowering his skinny arms, jerked them up again with a frightened squeak.

The Head lowered his arms with a gasp of relief. He passed a hand dazedly across his lofty brow. The situation was quite beyond him.

"I—I protest!" he panted. "I consider this an outrage—a criminal outrage. I—I order you both to leave the premises!"

Despite the grimness of the situation, Tom Merry, Handcock, and one or two others grinned. The Head's indignant command was scarcely likely to be obeyed.

"At once!" gasped the Head. "Leave the premises, you ruffians! I refuse to permit—"

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"Aw, put a sock in it!" snapped Santelli.

"A—a—a sock?" echoed the Head faintly. "I—I fail to comprehend your meaning, sir!"

"Shut up!" snarled Lessing. "That's what he means, you old sap!"

The Head—who had never been called a sap in his life before—realised the wisdom of obeying the injunction. He relapsed into flabbergasted silence, while the man named Santelli strode towards the desk where Handcock was standing with raised arms. He thrust the nose of his automatic into the American youngster's ribs.

"Come on, you!"

"O.K.," nodded Handcock. "I guess I won't argue with a cannon that size!"

"Not so much of the sassy come-backs!" snarled Lessing viciously. "March!"

While Al Santelli kept the roomful of juniors covered, his swarthy companion forced Handcock towards the door.

There was a sudden faint sigh from Herbert Skimpole. He sank over his desk in a heap.

The freak of the Shell had fainted.

Lessing thrust the Head aside, and cautiously opened the door. The hall was deserted. With the nose of his gun pressed tight against Handcock's side, he marched his captive from the Form-room, and Santelli closed it behind him.

"Stay where you are, you guys!" he snarled menacingly, the dark circle of his automatic sweeping threateningly round the room, from the Head to Mr. Linton, at the far corner. "Not a sound, either! I ain't afraid to shoot, as you'll find if any of youse starts sunthin'!"

There was a deathly silence. Not a sound broke the quiet of the Shell Form room as the scoundrel stood with his back to the door, his evil face, with its hooked nose and glistening black eyes, surveying his captives watchfully.

Tom Merry was breathing hard.

His eyes were blazing. The coolness of that daring hold-up, there in a Form-room of a peaceful English school, was staggering. Had there been the slightest chance of overpowering the rogue Tom would have been the first to lead a rush. But Santelli was close to the door; he could have escaped in a moment—and, meanwhile, undoubtedly, someone would get shot!

"You hound!" panted the captain of the Shell.

"Quit that!" snarled Santelli venomously, his glittering eyes darting towards Tom. "I guess I told you kids to keep dumb!"

But the Head, at any rate, was not going to keep dumb! Dr. Holmes was a kindly and perhaps very innocent old gentleman; but he was no coward.

"You villain!" he said, in tones that quivered with passion. "So you are the scoundrel who attempted to kidnap Handcock from the train! I can, at any rate, describe you very minutely to the police!"

But Santelli was not listening to the Head. His eyes had darted to the window.

Tom Merry glanced quickly in that direction. Through the window could be seen the figure of Leon Lessing and Cyrus K. Handcock crossing the quad towards a big closed motor-car that was standing near the gates. There was nothing unusual in their appearance. Had he not known that Lessing was holding an automatic against the American youngster's ribs, Tom would never have guessed the fact. Lessing was keeping it well hidden.

Old Taggles was sweeping in the quad. But it was evident that he did not suspect for a moment that there was anything particularly out of the ordinary afoot. He imagined, no doubt, that Handcock was going out with some relation from the States, having been given special leave from morning classes.

"Great Scott!" breathed Manners. "The hounds have won this time!"

They saw Handcock climb into the waiting car, and Leon Lessing step in after him. Instantly there was an exclamation of satisfaction from Santelli. It was the moment he had been waiting for.

With his back to the wall, he moved along towards the window. A quick movement of his free hand raised the lower sash.

"So long, folks!" he grinned evilly.

The next moment he had swung out of the window and dropped into the quad, and gone racing across towards the stationary car. Old Taggles gave a gasp of astonishment at sight of that unexpected apparition from the window of the Form-room, and promptly dropped his broom.

"My heye!" gasped Taggles. "What the—"

Already Santelli was leaping into the driving-seat of the waiting motor-car.

Tom Merry, rushing to the window, heard the purring engine roar out noisily. The car leapt towards the gates and was gone, even as Tom, Manners and Lowther, Talbot and Bernard Glyn tumbled through the open window into the quad in instinctive pursuit.

"Gone!" panted the Head. "Goodness gracious—they have gone! And they have taken Hancock with them!"

With Tom Merry & Co. in the lead, the Shell fellows poured across towards the gates from the Form room window. On all sides windows were opening, and excited, bewildered faces stared out. From the window of the Sixth Form room a startled group of prefects watched the stream of Shell fellows tumbling out of their Form-room window, and tearing for the gates in utter amazement.

Tom Merry came to a breathless halt at the gates, and stared along the road.

There was no sign of the car that had carried Cyrus K. Hancock captive from St. Jim's.

The kidnappers had won at last! They had got clear away—and with them, the prize that they had striven for so long; the son of the multi-millionaire chewing-gum king!

CHAPTER 8.

The Handkerchief Clue I

THERE was very little work done in the Shell Form room during the rest of that morning!

The Head had ordered the juniors back to their room, and the agitated Mr. Linton had tried valiantly to carry on as if nothing in the least unusual had occurred—but it was a poor effort. And in the other Form-rooms, too, somehow the whole story of the hold-up in the Shell was known in no time; with the result that Mr. Lathom in the Fourth, and Mr. Selby in the Third, and Mr. Horace Ratcliff in the Fifth, even, had a difficult hour before the bell finally signalled the finish of classes for the day.

By that time a police-inspector had arrived at the school, and was deep in confab with Dr. Holmes and Mr. Railton, in the Head's study.

At dinner in Hall Hancock's vacant place was a vivid reminder of the amazing happening that had so thrilled St. Jim's that morning!

Where was he now?

That was the question that Tom Merry & Co. and Blake & Co., and everyone else, from the Third to the Head himself, was wondering!

"Hallo, you School House bounders!"

George Figgins, the lanky leader of the New House, gave that cheery greeting.

It was after dinner, and Tom Merry & Co. and Blake & Co. were crossing the quad in the direction of the gates. They were going to walk over to Spalding Hall, the school for girls near Wayland where Ethel Cleveland & Co. were pupils, to see their girl chums for the first time after the holidays.

The fact of Cyrus K. Hancock's kidnapping that morning was thrilling enough to fill their minds to the exclusion of nearly everything else; but it was no reason why they should change their plans regarding their visit to Spalding Hall.

"Whither away?" grinned Figgy. He eyed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's gorgeous appearance; the swell of St. Jim's was particularly well turned out that afternoon, as always when bound for Spalding Hall. "Off to see the girls, I'll bet!"

"Right on the bullseye first shot," chuckled Lowther.

"Which will you have—a cigar or a coconut?"

"Good!" said Figgins. "I'll come with you!"

"Bai Jove! Weally, Figgay—"

Arthur Augustus adjusted his gleaming monocle and eyed Figgins with strong disapproval.

Despite House rivalries, Tom Merry and his chums all liked George Figgins. But when it came to the little matter of Ethel Cleveland, Arthur Augustus was up in arms! The swell of St. Jim's had a strong admiration for his pretty cousin; so had Figgins. Arthur Augustus professed to consider it a "feahful cheek" for a "New House boundah" to dare to be friendly with Ethel—and the fact that Ethel liked Figgins very much indeed was rather like adding insult to injury, in the opinion of Arthur Augustus.

"Weally, Figgins, deah boy! You have not been invited to join the partay, and I considah—"

"Yes, I have," chuckled Figgins.

"Bai Jove! Who asked you?" ejaculated the swell of St. Jim's, his face falling.

"I asked myself, old top," grinned Figgins. "And I accepted my kind invitation, too."

And Figgins fell in with the School House party as they passed out of gates.

Tom Merry & Co. chuckled. Arthur Augustus snorted, and sniffed, and grunted something about New House "boundahs," and relapsed into a chilly silence.

There was no doubt that Gussy was decidedly jealous of the lanky, cheery, rugged-faced New House leader; no possible doubt whatever!

Tom Merry and the others, however, were quite willing to have Figgy's company. Outside gates, House rivalry was less strong than inside.

The little party took the road over Wayland Moor. The talk had already turned to the subject of Cyrus K. Hancock and his daring kidnappers, and the ransom they hoped to get.

"Looks as if they've pulled it off this time, too," said Figgins bluntly. "This'll cost old man Hancock half a million dollars or so, I suppose! That's a hundred thousand giddy quid in real money! Phew!"

"Rotten luck!" grunted Herries.

"Lucky he can afford it!" grinned Monty Lowther.

"I'll bet the Head's sick," said Blake grimly. "He—"

"Hallo!" ejaculated Manners suddenly. "What's this?"

There were low brambles on either side of the moorland road along which the juniors were tramping. It was something caught on the brambles that had attracted Manners' attention. He came to an abrupt standstill.

"Look, you chaps!"

A fluttering handkerchief, caught on the brambles, was the cause of Manners' interest—for the reason that there was some rough lettering inked upon it.

LENK COVE.

"Rummy!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Lenk Cove—what does that mean?"

He picked up the handkerchief from the bush on which it gaily fluttered. The next instant a breathless cry broke from his lips.

All St. Jim's articles for laundry had a special mark, and this handkerchief bore it. In addition there was plainly marked in one corner—C. K. Hancock!

"Great pip!" breathed Blake, staring down at the handkerchief in Tom's hand. "Hancock's hanky!"

Tom Merry's eyes were gleaming, as he glanced round from face to face.

"My hat!" he said in a voice quivering with excitement. "Don't you see? Hancock threw this out of the car he was being carried off in! It's a message from him! He must have managed to mark those words on it with his fountain-pen unseen by those two scoundrels. Lenk Cove! It's a message—but what the dickens does it mean?"

"Bai Jove!" Arthur Augustus gazed down excitedly through his gleaming monocle at the roughly inked lettering. "Lenk Cove! Sounds like the name of a place at the seaside, deah boys!"

"That's it!" yelled Blake. "They're taking him to the coast, to a place called Lenk Cove! He heard them talking and twigged that—and threw this out to be a clue, so that he could be followed—"

"Great pip!" breathed Manners. "That must be it, Blake!"

"I've got a pocket-map," said Digby excitedly, and dragged it out, unfolding it. "A map of the county! If Lenk Cove is in Sussex, perhaps it shows it on the map!"

The juniors gathered eagerly round the map. Monty Lowther gave a quick exclamation almost instantly.

"There it is!"

Lowther put his finger on what was evidently a lonely spot on the coast, judging from the absence of towns or villages marked on the map in its vicinity. A swift reference to the scale of distances showed Tom Merry that it was about twenty miles from St. Jim's.

The captain of the Shell glanced round the ring of excited faces with gleaming eyes.

"Not a giddy minute to lose!" he rapped out. "If they are taking him to the sea, it means they're going to stick old Hancock on board a ship or something, almost certainly; and that means they're getting him out of the country—or trying to. Why, they may even be reckoning on smuggling him across to America—"

"Bai Jove, deah boy!"

"It's up to us!" went on Tom fiercely. "Those hounds shan't get away with it if we can help it!"

"Rather not!" gasped Herries.

"Right-ho, then! Some of us must get a car and follow to Lenk Cove right away. We may be in time to queer their pitch, before the Wayland police can get on the trail. And somebody must buzz back to the school and tell the Head, I suppose."

No one spoke. Every junior there wanted to be among those who followed to Lenk Cove!

But it was clear that only a few could go. Tom glanced round at his companions quickly.

"Four of us is the best number!" he said shortly. "Don't want too many! Monty, what about you, for one? And

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you, Gussy? You've had experience of tackling that chap Lessing!"

Tom glanced at Manners. But Manners had sprained a finger in a beginning-of-term dormitory rag the night before, and if it came to a hand-to-hand fight, as it might very easily, he would be at a disadvantage. Tom's eyes fell on Figgins' broad shoulders and knotted fists.

"What about you, Figgy?"

"Count me in!" grinned Figgins grimly.

"Right, then! The garage at Rylcombe is the nearest place where we can hire a car. We four'll buzz along there and get off to Lenk Cove. Two of you other chaps can bunk on into Wayland and tell the police all about it, eh? And the other two let the Head know as soon as possible!"

Manners, Blake, Herries, and Digby assented. Tom thrust Digby's map into his pocket.

"I'll borrow this if I may, old hoss! Come on, you chaps!"

Tom and Lowther, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, and George Figgins of the New House, turned and set off in the direction of Rylcombe village at the double.

It did not take them long to reach the garage there. A few minutes later they were driving off along the road to the coast at nearer sixty miles an hour than fifty, with Tom Merry at the wheel.

CHAPTER 9.

New York Bound!

"LENK COVE— 1 mile."

The signpost with that inscription upon it stood at the top of a narrow side-road that dropped steeply down through woods to the sea.

Tom Merry swung the car into it.

It was half an hour later—they had averaged forty miles per hour from Rylcombe!

"Neahly there, deah boys!" breathed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, his monocle gleaming excitedly as he peered through the windscreen down the winding hill, as they sped down it.

"Look out for squalls when we get to the cove, if we find the hounds still there!" grunted Figgins.

"What-ho!" grinned Monty Lowther. "I'd enjoy a good scrap with those rotters!"

"It would be all right if they weren't armed!" put in Tom grimly. "It's their guns that are the trouble! It won't do us or Hancock any good getting shot, you chaps, so look out!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Look!" cried Figgins suddenly, flinging out a pointing arm.

The car, as it sped on down the narrow, hilly lane, had come to a stretch where it overlooked the sea. They could see a little, rocky cove below, with the waves washing oily and smooth against the base of the high headlands on either side.

Lenk Cove!

Riding at anchor on the green waters of the cove was a black-painted steam-yacht—a big, ocean-going vessel, with smoke curling from its thick smoke-stack.

"Gweat Scott!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus, as Tom brought the car to a standstill; and the juniors stared down at the sinister-looking vessel. "I wondah if that can be those scoundwels' yacht?"

"You bet it is!" rapped out Tom Merry. "It's the only vessel here. And why should Lessing and Santelli bring Hancock to this lonely cove if not to ship him on board some tub or other?"

He stared down to where the yacht rode at anchor on the gentle swell, with shadowed eyes. His lips were tight.

They were not too late, it seemed. But what were they to do now?

It was evident that the yacht was ready for sailing. The smoke curling up from its funnel in thick black clouds showed that steam was up. And, without doubt, Cyrus K. Hancock was already a prisoner on board!

In that utterly lonely spot, without a village, or even a house for miles, as far as they could see, they were certainly faced with a ticklish problem if they were to save Hancock from being carried away on board the mysterious vessel.

"Better leave the car here!" muttered Tom. "If we run it down to the beach they may see us from the yacht. We'll get down on foot. There may be a boat of some sort on the beach—"

"Come on, then!" nodded Monty Lowther.

The juniors jumped out, and set off at a run down the lane. They came out in a few hundred yards upon a shingly beach, where the water lapped over the white stones. A rowing-boat and a yacht's dinghy, the latter fitted with an outboard motor, were drawn up above the water-line.

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"Bai Jove! What about gettin' out to the yacht and tacklin' the boundahs outwight?" exclaimed Arthur Augustus eagerly.

"I'm game!" put in Figgins gruffly.

"It's the only thing to do," breathed Monty Lowther, with gleaming eyes. "They've got up steam, and the tide's on the ebb; they'll be sneaking off at any minute!"

Tom Merry hesitated. As leader of the little band of reckless would-be rescuers, he could not help but face the fact that to board the yacht in an attempt to rescue the American youngster, whom they knew to be a prisoner on board, would be nothing short of foolhardy. What could they, who were only schoolboys, do against a gang of armed scoundrels?

But he was saved from the necessity of making a decision.

The road down which they had come twisted away up the opposite hillside through thick woods. A sudden sound on the shingle near them caused them all to turn their heads swiftly. A man had appeared from the tree-hidden lane—was surveying them with astonished eyes.

"Santelli!" gasped Monty Lowther.

Two other men came into view, and halted beside him, staring at the St. Jim's youngsters. They were carrying big, brown-papered packages. Evidently they had been visiting some little village shop in the neighbourhood for some supplies they wanted for the yacht.

"Thunder!" gasped Santelli hoarsely.

His eyes glittered blackly at the four unexpected figures of the juniors from St. Jim's. To Santelli, it must have seemed some kind of miracle that had brought them there,



As Tom Merry dived into the water, the guard

knowing nothing, of course, of the message on the handkerchief that Cyrus K. Hancock had succeeded in throwing from the car on the way to the cove.

The other two men, stocky ruffians, obviously American, glanced swiftly at their tall leader. But it was Tom Merry who acted first.

"Rush 'em!" he panted. "Come on, St. Jim's!"

And, with the captain of the Shell in the lead, the four juniors hurled themselves at the startled scoundrels.

Santelli's hand leapt to his hip-pocket. But before he could snatch out the automatic that reposed there, Tom Merry's fist had crashed on to his jaw. The man with the hooked nose went staggering backwards, lost his balance, and crashed over on to the shingle.

Figgins had sent another of the three spinning with a

terrific uppercut. But the third man had jumped backwards with a hoarse shout, as the juniors rushed, and dragged out a heavy revolver.

"Keep back!" he snarled ferociously.

Monty Lowther, who had been about to hurl himself at the man, recoiled before that menacing weapon. But Tom Merry snatched up a heavy stick that was lying at his feet among the driftwood on the shingle, and hurled it. It struck the revolver and the fingers of the man who held it, sending the weapon flying from the scoundrel's grasp.

"Good man, Tommy!" panted Lowther, and, like a flash,



the guard turned and fired.

he had got possession of the fallen weapon. He swung round, covering the three, as Santelli and the third man scrambled to their feet.

"Hands up!" said Monty Lowther, between his teeth.

There was an incoherent gasp of fury from Santelli. But he raised his arms, as did the others. Monty Lowther chuckled.

"Oh, wipin'!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus, producing a gorgeous silk handkerchief from his pocket to mop his noble brow. "Now, what about it, you boundahs?"

Figgins hurried forward, and ran his hands over the pockets of the second unknown ruffian, to remove his weapon if he had one. But the man was apparently unarmed. Tom stepped towards Santelli with the same intention, smiling grimly.

"Let's have that pocket cannon of yours, Santelli!" he said dryly.

He reached out a hand to the man's hip-pocket. For the moment he was off his guard. With Santelli closely covered by Lowther, Tom had not imagined that the tall scoundrel would take any chances.

He had underestimated Santelli!

As Tom's hand dived into the man's pocket for the automatic that reposed there, the tall American leapt round, seizing Tom by the waist, and dragging him between himself and Monty Lowther. Tom had no time to struggle. The next instant Santelli had hurled him at Lowther, and Tom Merry and his startled chum fell in a struggling heap.

"Look out!" yelled Figgins.

"Oh, gweat Scott—"

Santelli had leapt forward like a panther, snatching the revolver from Lowther's hand as the youngster fell, with Tom on top of him. With his other hand, the American jerked out his own weapon, and, with a pistol in each fist, he stood breathing fiercely, covering the four youngsters.

In a moment the tables had been turned!

There was a savage chuckle from one of the other men.

"Good work, Chief!" he barked.

Tom and Lowther scrambled up.

"Stay where you are!" commanded Santelli harshly.

"You kids think you're mighty clever, I guess! Waal, you're sold now!"

He glanced at his two underlings. A vicious grin appeared on his thin face.

"We'll take these younkens with us!" he rasped. "Can't leave 'em here to spill the beans about the yacht. An' we're short-handed, anyhow. They'll sure be useful on board! And who knows but there's a ransom hanging on to them as well? Never know your luck!"

"Sure! Bring 'em along, Al!" grinned one of the others.

Tom Merry glanced round desperately. But in that lonely cove, shut in by woods and high cliffs, they were utterly at the mercy of their captors.

"Guess we'd better truss 'em up," snarled Santelli.

"You've gotten some cord, Deitsche!"

"O. K.!" grinned the man addressed as Deitsche.

He pulled a length of cord from his pocket, and one by one the juniors' arms were lashed behind them, while Santelli kept a watchful eye on the road. The four were hustled to the waiting dinghy and pushed on board.

A minute later the little boat was speeding out over the swell to where the black yacht was lying.

Santelli surveyed his captives with a grin.

"Yeah!" he taunted. "I guess you can work a passage across, with your pal Hancock!"

"You uttah hound!" panted Arthur Augustus, wriggling his lashed arms. "You howwible wuffian—"

"Cut it out!" snarled Santelli. Again he grinned evilly. "I guess you younkens 'ull like to see the world! Noo Yark's a fine city, I guess—"

"New York?" cried Tom Merry hoarsely.

"Sure!" chuckled the kidnapper. "That's where this byar vessel is bound for. Noo Yark City!"

CHAPTER 10.

In Mid-Atlantic!

"G WOOOOUGH!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gave that unhappy groan.

It was two days later, and night had fallen. Till then the Sea Witch, as the wealthy gangster's yacht was called, had been steaming westward over oily waters. But that evening a wind had risen, beating up from the south-west, and with it the sea had grown rough and stormy.

The Sea Witch rolled and staggered as she battled on through the angry Atlantic wastes.

"Oh deah!"

Arthur Augustus was decidedly green of countenance, where he lay in a narrow bunk by the ladder of the little fo'c'sle, which was the juniors' quarters during their enforced voyage across the Atlantic.

They were free enough while on board—escape being, of course, impossible. But they were made to work; and, with the exception of Arthur Augustus, they were at present sleeping soundly, after a tiring day helping the scoundrelly crew.

Hancock had never been quite so surprised in his life as when Tom Merry, Monty Lowther, Figgins, and the swell of St. Jim's had been pitched into the fo'c'sle, where he was lying a prisoner, before the Sea Witch had sailed from Lenk Cove. He had certainly not expected such a prompt, or such a disastrous result, from the vague message he had managed to throw from the car.

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"Gwoooogh!"

Arthur Augustus sat up in his bunk, and gave a gasp as he banged his aristocratic cranium upon the bunk above. The juniors' quarters were anything but roomy.

"Yawwoop!" ejaculated the swell of St. Jim's. "Ow!"

There was a stirring sound from the bunk above.

"Say, Clarence! What's the moan?" inquired the voice of the transatlantic junior from the top of the bunk.

His face dimly appeared, peering down.

"Weally, Hancock! My name is not Clawence!" retorted the swell of St. Jim's with asperity. "I considah—oh! Gwooooh! Mum-m-mmmm!"

Arthur Augustus broke off as the ship lurched heavily, to the great discomfort of his rebellious interior.

"That's what you consider, is it, Archibald?" chuckled Hancock. "Great Bohunkus! Look!" he added breathlessly, a moment later, flinging out a pointing hand towards the dim circle of the bolted porthole.

Through the wet, green glass could be seen the gleaming lights of a great liner, passing the Sea Witch, bound for England.

In an instant Hancock had swung out of his bunk and dropped to the floor. He stood clinging to the bunk nearest the porthole, peering out excitedly.

"Gee!" he breathed. "That's the Majestic, for a dead snip! She's due in at Southampton to-morrow, I know. If we could signal—"

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus scrambled from his bunk and joined the American junior at the porthole. Hancock turned to him with gleaming eyes.

"We gotta try!" he snapped. "Quick, wake the others!"

It was the work of a moment to rouse Tom and Lowther and Figgins. Swiftly Hancock explained the situation.

"My hat!" gasped Tom excitedly. "If only we could! That torch you collared this morning out of Lessing's cabin, Figgy. It's not very powerful, but it might do the trick!"

Figgins nodded and darted back to his bunk, unearthing from beneath the narrow mattress an electric torch.

"If only this port wasn't clamped up!" muttered Hancock ruefully. "But it's no good trying to signal through that thick glass. Up on deck, quick!"

Led by Tom Merry, the five excited juniors scrambled up the swaying iron ladder, emerging on to the little, wind-swept foredeck.

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The Sea Witch was nosing her way slowly through the great grey seas that swept over her bows every time she pitched. In a few moments the juniors were drenched with salt water as they clung to the rail.

Across the dark, raging waters the huge shape of the lighted liner was ploughing swiftly on its way eastward, like a great, floating hotel, its port-light riding like a red, unwinking eye at the end of the bridge. It seemed absurdly near; almost a stone's throw. But the juniors realised that it was a lot farther away than it appeared.

"Now, Figgy!" muttered Tom Merry. "You know Morse code, old hoss."

"Do your stuff, buddy," breathed Cyrus K. Hancock, with a rapid, anxious glance at the bridge of the yacht.

As yet their presence on the deck had not been noticed, evidently. It was a dark night, and the flying spray that hissed past them, stinging their faces, helped to veil them from the eyes of the look-out on the bridge. With the other four standing between him and the man on watch, Figgins had every chance of flashing out his signal without the light of the torch being seen by anyone on board the Sea Witch.

But would the tiny light be seen on board the liner, and its message read?

Figgins had slipped on his jacket before leaving the fo'c'sle; with the corner of it held over the glass, he switched on the torch. By whipping his coat off and on, he could easily flash out letters in Morse.

S O S!

The flickering torchlight stabbed the gloom, across the foaming waves.

"Prisoners on board," was what Figgins intended to send out next. But on the last letter of the S O S there was a sudden shout from amidships.

The big figure of Leon Lessing had appeared on deck, a cigar clenched between his teeth. He had caught sight of the shadowy group by the bows.

"What in thunder—"

Tom Merry almost groaned.

Lessing came striding along towards them. The nearness of the great liner had aroused his suspicions at finding the juniors on deck, it was quite clear.

Figgins hastily snapped out the torch. But Lessing, as he halted near them, clinging to the rail as the ship plunged and reeled, had caught sight of it. A grim smile appeared on his swarthy face in the gloom.

"So that's the game, eh?" Before Figgins could prevent him the man jumped forward and snatched the torch from his fingers. "Signalling to that ship out there?"

His face took on a very vicious look. With a muttered exclamation he tossed the torch overboard. It vanished into the surging waves.

"Get below!" hissed Lessing.

He turned and stared anxiously across towards the great shape of the liner; but there was no flickering answering light. It was clear that the juniors' message had not been noticed, short and faint as it had been.

Lessing gave a guffaw of laughter, chewing his cigar.

"Nuthin' doin'!" he jeered. "Get below!"

"Anything to oblige!" said Monty Lowther bitterly.

But, like the others, he was sick at heart. Their desperate hope had gone!

There was nothing to be gained by having words with Lessing! In fact, the less the juniors had to do with the scoundrel during their enforced voyage, the better they would like it! Without a word, Tom Merry and his companions turned and went below.

Across the intervening waves, the great, glittering liner swept on through the night, swiftly increasing the distance between herself and the dark shape of the Sea Witch, as the black yacht plunged westward with throbbing engines—steadily on through the surging, grey Atlantic towards far-off New York.

CHAPTER 11.

The House on the Sound!

IT was on a dark, misty night more than a week later that the Sea Witch crept into the western end of Long Island Sound, and dropped anchor with a faint splash in a lonely wooded bay of the mainland. Not a light showed on board her.

Almost at once, the shadowy shape of an electric launch came gliding alongside, also in utter darkness.

There were low voices in the darkness. Five figures, their arms bound behind them, their mouths gagged, were embarked on the launch, which glided away into the darkness at once with its helpless human cargo.

The kidnapped St. Jim's juniors were being landed on American soil at last, there to await the payment of the ransoms that were to release them.

Cyrus K. Hancock had come home again—considerably

sooner than he had expected when leaving his native land for the new term at St. Jim's.

The launch nosed its way into a narrow creek, at a point more than two miles from where the Sea Witch had dropped anchor, and was now innocently ablaze with lights.

A rotting landing-stage jutted out into the creek some distance up, and the juniors were landed.

Three dark closed cars were waiting there, and they were bundled into them—Handcock into the first, Tom and Figgins into another, and Monty Lowther and the swell of St. Jim's into the third.

Then they were driven rapidly away into the darkness!

The prison to which the kidnapped juniors were to be confined during their captivity was an old wooden waterside house overlooking the Sound, shut in on the landward side by thick maple woods. It was a lonely, desolate, dreary spot, which Leon Lessing and Al Santelli had long used as one of their headquarters for their various nefarious activities.

It was near enough to New York City to be very useful, but utterly lonely into the bargain—an ideal place for the chiefs of one of New York's best-known gangs.

The place had once been the premises occupied by a long-dead yacht club, and the room in which Handcock and his British chums were confined overlooked the water, which washed in little dirty waves through the piles on which that wing of the building stood.

An armed guard was always stationed outside the locked door of the room, and to have attempted to escape by diving the height of three storeys to the water below the window would have been useless; another guard was always stationed on a veranda beneath their window, too.

In fact, the juniors soon realised that the whole building was ringed with guards day and night; not for their benefit, but because the Lessing-Santelli gang feared the possibility of attacks by rival gangs from New York's underworld.

"I guess these gangsters wouldn't be happy if they hadn't got a few feuds on with other gangs!" grinned Handcock on the second evening of their captivity.

The juniors had just finished their supper. They were being fed well enough by their captors, and five quite comfortable mattresses were spread on the floor at one end of the long room for them to sleep on, together with pillows and blankets.

"It's not discomfort, deah boys, that will be the twouble," sighed Arthur Augustus, glancing round the room. "It's goin' to be frightfully borwin'—that's the thing!"

"What about starting a competition for guessing the number of coloured spots on old Gussy's fancy waistcoat?" suggested Monty Lowther gravely.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! Pway do not be an uttah ass, Lowthah!"

Tom Merry had turned from the table to the window, and was standing staring across the darkening Sound to the green shores of Long Island. He glanced at his watch.

"Nearly nine o'clock, American time," he said quietly. "Funny to think that over there the chaps are fast asleep in the dormitories at St. Jim's!"

Figgins grunted.

"Wonder what the chaps think about our giddy vanishing trick?" he grinned ruefully. "I'll bet there was some excitement about it!"

"There sure must have been!" agreed Cyrus K. Handcock dryly. "They'll have gone to Lenk Cove, of course, and found that hired auto all lonesome there—and that's all! It'll be clear enough we've been taken a ride on some kinder vessel, but who's to figure out where we've been taken?"

"I don't suppose they'll guess for a moment that we've been taken bang across the Atlantic!" said Tom Merry, with a shrug.

"Well, Lessing and Santelli have written to Handcock's pater, telling him, by now," cut in Monty Lowther. "As soon as he gets that letter demanding the giddy ransom, I expect he'll cable across to the Head and tell him."

"Sure to," nodded Figgins. "So it won't be any surprise to the Head when he hears from the rotters, too, asking for a blessed ransom for our release. Wonder how much he values us at?"

"He knows Gussy's pater is a giddy earl, anyway!" said Monty Lowther, with a snort. "That'll put the price up for Gussy right away! Tactless of you, Gussy, being the son of a giddy belted earl, you ass—"

"Weally, Lowthah! I considah—"

"Still, Handcock is the star turn," smiled Tom Merry. "We know what they are asking for him—half a million dollars!"

"Yeah—this is going to be an expensive break for the pop!" agreed Cyrus K. Handcock gloomily. He rose restlessly to his feet. "Gee! It's mighty queer to think that the pop isn't much more than ten miles away now. I can just see his face when he gets that letter asking for that half million bucks!"

The American youngster shrugged.

"Waal, I guess he'll have to pay up! It's rough on the pop!"

Outside the door they could hear the footsteps of the gunman on guard in the passage as he strolled to and fro. It was growing dark in the big room. The juniors were not allowed lights; the electric globes had all been removed, to prevent any chance of their signalling by that means to some passing yacht in the Sound.

"Better turn in!" said Tom Merry.

"O.K.!" yawned Handcock.

The juniors moved towards their mattresses. Tom Merry, beginning to peel off his jacket, gave a sudden breathless exclamation.

The silence of the evening had been broken by the sound of a shot.

"B-bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus. "Heah that?"

The juniors stared at one another.

The first shot was followed by three more in quick succession—then a perfect volley. They seemed to come from the far side of the house.

They could hear running feet below them—excited shouts. Monty Lowther gripped Tom Merry's arm.

"My giddy aunt!" he breathed. "What the dickens does it mean?"

They heard the guard outside the door run to the top of the stairs, and yell an excited question. They heard the answer, in Lessing's savage voice:

"It's the Fulton gang, of course, you fool! I thought they'd try an' beat us up, after we bumped off Sullivan! You stay where you are! See those boys don't try for a getaway!"

"O.K., chief!"

A confused rattle of firing, and the noise of running feet in the rooms below, came muffled and vague to the ears of the five St. Jim's juniors as they stood staring at one another in the darkening room.

"My giddy aunt!" gasped Figgins. "We're in the middle of a gang scrap!"

"The Fulton gang—I guess I've heard of them," muttered Cyrus K. Handcock coolly. "They're a tough bunch from Brooklyn."

"Gweat Scott!" The swell of St. Jim's adjusted his monocle and stared round at the other four wonderingly. "Whatevah is going to happen now, deah boys?"

But that was a question which the "deah boys" could not answer.

CHAPTER 12.

A Bid for Freedom!

"WHATEVAH is going to happen?" repeated the swell of St. Jim's in breathless tones.

Cyrus K. Handcock chuckled.

"Waal, I guess there's gonna be some fun, Clarence!" he observed laconically.

"Weally, deah boy, pway wemembah that my name is not Clarence—"

"Listen!" muttered Tom Merry.

The staccato rattle of gun-play had ceased for a brief while, only to break out again afresh louder than ever, more savage in intensity.

It was quite evident that the Fulton gang had gained an entry into the building, and that a desperate battle was in progress between the rival groups of gangsters somewhere in the big house.

There was a crashing blow on the door from the fist of the guard outside.

"Youse kids needn't think you can try any funny stuff!" came a voice with a thick Bowery accent. "I'm stayin' right on the spot out hyer, sonnies—jest to look after youse!"

"That's a pity," muttered Handcock dryly. "If only that guy out there had gone off to join in the rough party we might have smashed the lock and got clear!"

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Tom Merry stepped quickly to the window and peered out.

But the guard on the veranda of the room beneath was still at his post, sitting on the veranda rail with a cigar between his teeth. He glanced up sharply as Tom's head appeared from the window above. An ugly grin appeared on his face.

"Nuthin' doin'!" he grinned. "I'm stayin' right here, sonny! You ain't gonna get away—you can bet on that! This Fulton bunch are gonna be sorry they paid us a visit, too," he added informatively. "They sure are! We're gonna beat 'em up O.K."

Tom turned back from the window.

"No go!" he said briefly. "I thought that chap down there might have buzzed off to join the scrap; but he hasn't. Looks as if we're just as much prisoners as ever. This fight isn't going to help us at all, that I can see!"

"Well, even if the Fulton gang win we shan't be any better off with them than with Lessing and Santelli," growled Figgins. "We'd be out of the frying-pan into the fire!"

"You're sure right!" nodded Hancock grimly.

The juniors stood listening. The sound of the battle between the rival gangs echoed through the house. Intermittent gun-play, and now and then a cry or a savage shout, came to their straining ears.

Which way the struggle was going it was impossible for them to tell. The man on the veranda seemed confident that the Lessing-Santelli gang would win.

But so far as the juniors could tell, it would not matter very much to them either way!

Tom Merry's face was set in grim lines.

Surely there was some way in which the attack upon the building could be turned to their advantage?

The hearts of all five of them were beating swiftly as they listened to the confused noises from below.

"I say, deah boys, this is wathah excitin'!" murmured Arthur Augustus, with gleaming eyes. "I wish we could see what was goin' on!"

"It sure sounds a rough party!" grinned Hancock.

Again Tom Merry turned restlessly to the window, and peered out. The man with the cigar was still sitting on the rail of the veranda below, with an automatic in his hand. He, too, was evidently listening eagerly to the sound of the struggle in the front of the building. He did not notice Tom Merry peering down at him.

And suddenly Tom Merry made up his mind to take a desperate chance.

He knew that in ordinary circumstances it would have been utter madness to have attempted to dive from that high window into the dark waters that washed below in an effort to escape. With the guard on the veranda watching the window like a cat watching a mouse-hole, he would probably have been shot even while climbing out on to the narrow sill to make the desperate dive; and even had he succeeded in reaching the water safely, he would have been utterly at the mercy of the man on the veranda, who could have shot him as he swam, if there seemed any likelihood of his escaping capture from a boat.

But now, with the man off his guard, intent upon the struggle between his gang and its enemies, there was a bare chance that escape was possible!

At any rate, Tom Merry meant to make the attempt.

He drew back swiftly from the window, swinging round towards his chums.

"Listen, you chaps!" he muttered. "I'm going to try a dive out of this giddy window! That chap down there isn't on the look-out, and I might do it!"

"Tom!"

The cry that broke from Monty Lowther was breathless with dismay. But he was too late to stop Tom Merry. Already the captain of the Shell was swinging out of the window on to the narrow wooden sill.

The man on the veranda beneath was peering along the back of the old house towards the dark trees on the bank, as if suspicious that enemies were hidden there. The faint sound of the washing waves below, and the rattle of gun-play from within the building effectively drowned to his ears any noise that Tom Merry might have made as he climbed out on to the sill above the gangster's head.

"Gweat Scott!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "Tom, deah boy—"

"Great Bohunkus!" Cyrus K. Hancock gave a startled ejaculation. "Come back, you crazy nut! You'll get plunked!"

Figgins and Monty Lowther both rushed towards the window in an instinctive effort to drag Tom back into the room. Their faces, like the faces of Hancock and the swell of St. Jim's, were white and horrified.

Not for a moment did any of the four believe that Tom could win through in that desperate break for freedom!

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Tom glanced back into the room as he raised himself on the sill, clinging to the window-sash.

"If I get through I'll get help!" they heard him breathe.

Then, as Figgins and Lowther reached out clutching hands to grasp him, Tom Merry dived!

Clearing the veranda beneath by a yard, he shot down towards the tumbling water. There was a hoarse shout from the guard as he suddenly realised what was taking place.

Tom took the water with scarcely a splash. For a few moments there was no sign of him to the eyes of those staring down from above—the gangster on the veranda and the four white-faced juniors peering from the little window on the top floor. Then his head appeared to view.

Instantly the man on the veranda whipped up his automatic and fired two shots in swift succession.

The four St. Jim's juniors saw Tom half lift himself from the water in a strange stagger.

"He's got him!" panted Lowther, in a voice sick with horror. "Oh, heavens—he's hit!"

Tom Merry sank from their sight. A faint trace of crimson stained the dark surface of the water where he had gone down.

A choking sob broke from Monty Lowther. He turned away from the window, covering his face with his hands.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gave a low groan and turned away, too. Figgins and Hancock, staring down, dazed with horror, saw the scoundrel on the veranda peering watchfully at the swirling water. But there was no further sign of the reckless youngster who had taken his life in his hands in a desperate bid for freedom. From the gangster there broke a savage laugh.

He glanced up and snarled hideously at the white faces of Figgins and Hancock.

"That's bumped him off," he said in a low, savage tone. "The crazy young fool! He won't bring you any help now!"

The noise of the gang battle was less insistent now. It sounded as though the Fulton gang were being driven off, for all the noise seemed to be outside in the front of the building, instead of in the rooms below.

But Monty Lowther, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, Figgins, and Hancock scarcely heard or cared.

The one ghastly thought that filled their minds was that Tom Merry had risked his life—and lost! They could never hope to see their chum again.

CHAPTER 13. In Fifth Avenue.

CRASH!

The door of the room where the St. Jim's juniors were imprisoned flew open noisily. The tall figure of Al Santelli strode in, followed by Leon Lessing.

It was the following morning, and sunlight was streaming into the little room overlooking Long Island Sound.

Till then, the four juniors had been sleeping deeply. They had not succeeded in getting to sleep till the small hours, and they were tired out. But they had known before falling asleep that the Fulton gang had been driven off, leaving Santelli and Lessing triumphant!

They opened their eyes now and sat up. The faces of all four were haggard.

Santelli and Lessing surveyed them with grim smiles. Santelli held an open letter in his hand.

"Thought you youngers might like to hear we've had a letter from old Hancock," he chuckled evilly. "He's goin' to come across with the dough O.K.—an' he knows that if he tries any funny business he'll never see his bright boy alive again. Oh, he won't dare try anythin'! He'll pay up!"

"You bet he will!" growled Lessing. "We've told him to leave the dough in a special hidin' hole where we pick it up. As soon as that's fixed you can go off to your pop, kid!" he added mockingly, with his eyes on Hancock.

Hancock said nothing. But from Monty Lowther there broke a low, hoarse cry.

"You murderers!"

Santelli's eyes glittered.

"Your pal asked for all he got!" he said fiercely. "Think we were gonna let him get away and bring the cops here? Not on your sweet life!"

He grinned round the four.

"Waal," he drawled, "we jest thought you might like to hear the noos."

There was no answer from any of the juniors. The two scoundrels turned and strolled from the room, locking the door behind them.

"There is no help for it, Somers."

It was Hiram Q. Hancock, the famous multi-millionaire and chewing-gum king, who spoke.

Hancock's father was pacing restlessly to and fro in a palatial room of his Fifth Avenue home, a deep frown on his strong face, with its steely eyes and granite-like jaw. A long cigar was clamped between his teeth, but it was not lighted.

Somers, his secretary—a young American with a keen face and horn-rimmed spectacles—watched his employer in sympathetic silence. It was nine o'clock in the morning—the morning following the attack by the rival gangsters upon the old house on Long Island Sound.

Hiram Q. Hancock came to a halt at last, staring out of the window at the thronging traffic of Fifth Avenue, and the dried-up grass of Central Park across the road. Outside the window a New York policeman was swinging his club as he strolled jauntily along the sidewalk.

"I've got to pay!" snapped the multi-millionaire fiercely. "But, by thunder, it goes against the grain."

He jerked his cigar from one side of his mouth to the other.

"These scoundrels, Lessing and Santelli, have been after Cyrus for a mighty long while," he went on bitterly. "I guess they've won at last. I ought to have known they would—even with the boy in England. Half a million dollars, Somers! What do you know about that?"

"It's very unfortunate, sir," murmured Somers glumly.

"It's worse than that!" snapped the chewing-gum king. "And I daren't try to trap them, either. They stick at nothing, those guys! If I tried to lay a trap for 'em when they collect the cash, it would mean that I'd never see young Cyrus alive again. That's what they've threatened, and that's what they'd do."

He shrugged his broad shoulders, and lit his cigar fiercely.

"Well, you'd better get along with the money," he said shortly. "You understand just where they want it taken?"

"Perfectly."

"Then get busy!"

The secretary nodded, and turned to go from the room. But as he crossed towards the door it opened. The figure of Mr. Hancock's butler stepped into the room.

"There is a young gentleman to see you, sir," he said in rather an odd voice. "He would not give his name—said you would know it. He appears somewhat excited, sir, and is in a very unkempt condition, if I may say so. I—"

The butler got no further.

A figure had appeared in the hall behind him—a youngster with his arm in a sling and a deathly-white face. He pushed feverishly past the portly butler, and staggered into the room. His burning eyes fastened upon the multi-millionaire.

"Are you Mr. Hancock?" he panted.

"Sure," nodded the chewing-gum king in astonishment. "But—"

"My name is Tom Merry—I'm a chum of your son's! I—I got away from Santelli and Lessing, and I've come to tell you where—"

He broke off weakly, reeling where he stood.

Somers, the secretary, jumped to his side, supporting him. Hiram Q. Hancock drew a hissing breath between his strong teeth.

"Great Jupiter!" he breathed.

"Your son and—the others—they're being kept prisoner in a house on Long Island Sound!" went on Tom Merry thickly. "I can lead you to it, I think. I—I managed to get away last night. I got shot in the shoulder when I was swimming clear, and they think I'm dead, I believe. I dived after they shot, you see, and—swam under the water as far as I could—"

He broke off again, leaning weakly against Somers. A faint, twisted grin appeared on his face.

"I've lost a good deal of blood, sir," he apologised, "or I'd have got here long ago. And I had to find my way through the woods to the city—got lost. But a chap found me on the road this morning, just about finished, and gave me a lift straight here. I—I thought I'd better come to you first, to save you paying the ransom—"

Again Tom Merry's voice trailed off. His eyes closed, and in another moment he had collapsed utterly into the arms of the young man holding him.

"He's fainted!" breathed Somers. "I guess he's an English kid—"

"Sure!" snapped the chewing-gum king. "And, say, Somers, I had thought after this of bringing Cyrus home to a college in the States! But if this is the kind of youngster he has for a chum in England, I guess he stays at St. Jim's, after all!"

Tom Merry was carried to a sofa and laid upon it. By the millionaire's command, the portly butler hurried—as fast as he was capable of hurrying—for water, and after some of it had been dashed into Tom's face, the youngster opened his eyes again.

"Sorry I—went off!" he muttered. "I'll be all right soon, though."

"Don't you worry, kid!" said Hiram Q. Hancock cheerfully. "What you want is some sleep, I guess, and some food, and maybe a doctor had better go over you. Plunked you in the shoulder, did they, the hounds? Gee, you must be pretty chuck-full of grit, my lad!"

He turned to the secretary.

"Go and telephone to Captain Horler, of the Police Department!" he snapped. "We'll show these rough-neck gangsters a thing or two! There ain't goin' to be half a million bucks for them—no, not a solitary dime!"

Food and sleep did wonders with Tom Merry. Though he had lost a lot of blood from the wound in his shoulder, it was only a superficial injury. And in a few hours' time, with his arm in a neat doctor's sling instead of the rough sling that the man who had driven him into New York had given him, Tom Merry was pale, but more or less recovered.

With six motor-car loads of police with them, Tom and Hancock's father drove out of the city to the house on Long Island Sound as dusk was falling. The police were in force and heavily armed; they were not risking failure in rounding up Lessing and Santelli. The two notorious gangsters had been a thorn in their flesh too long for them to fail now that they were at last on their track.

And where the Fulton gang had failed, the police succeeded hands down. There was scarcely a fight. The gangsters, seeing that the game was up, surrendered, firing scarcely a shot.

To Cyrus K. Hancock, the swell of St. Jim's, Figgins, and Monty Lowther, their rescue was not half as surprising as the discovery that Tom Merry was with the rescue party. And they had none of them known such wonderful relief and happiness as that fact brought them.

There was a very cheery supper-party at the Handcocks' magnificent home on famous Fifth Avenue that night. And when Arthur Augustus D'Arcy began wondering aloud about the sailings for England, the chewing-gum king put his foot down. The juniors were not going back to England until they had stayed in New York as his guests for at least a week, he declared.

And the cable from the headmaster of St. Jim's, granting all five permission to stay for that week, arrived next day, and was hailed with almost delirious delight by the juniors.

That week, as guests of Hancock's father in his Fifth Avenue home, in the city of skyscrapers, was one which Cyrus K. Hancock's British chums were never likely to forget. They had a glorious time of it, and they were thoroughly sorry when their sailing day came at last; and from the promenade deck of the Mauretania they saw the skyscrapers and the statue of Liberty fading into the distance behind them.

"Bai Jove!" Arthur Augustus adjusted his eyeglass and surveyed New York Harbour, with its crowded shipping and background of skyscrapers, regretfully. "A pity we've got to go back home already! New York is wathah a wippin' spot!"

"And how!" grinned Cyrus K. Hancock. "Still, I guess I'm just as crazy about St. Jim's. I don't mind going back."

And, with the British flag flying bravely at the stern, the great liner passed out of the harbour into the wide Atlantic—homeward bound!

(Another sparkling long complete yarn of the chums of St. Jim's, next week, entitled: "Grundy, the Channel Swimmer!" Order your GEM early.)

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DANDY COMPLETE HIGHWAYMAN YARN!

Nick o' the Highway!



By Cecil Fanshaw.

CHAPTER 1. The Duel!

"**F**AIITH, cullies," Swift Nick laughed gaily, "'twould be a right merry venture, with promise o' much plunder to boot; but methinks there's a flaw i' the plan, and I and my pal Roy are not for running our heads into nooses!"

At that gasps and grunts of anger ran round the assembled company of highwaymen, and fierce glances were flung at Nick and his young pal Roy.

"How now, Nick?" barked Timbersides Burton, a grizzled, broad-shouldered tobyman. "I lay you are not scared o' t' Runners!"

"Surely Nick will not fail us!" snapped another fellow.

"Zounds! Have I gained news about a coachload o' guineas for nothing?" fiercely growled highwayman Joe Hind, making to rise. "A coach carrying a month's pay for t' redcoats in London barracks! Rat me, cullies, if Nick is not with us, we'll pull t' job without him, choke me if we won't!"

At that there was uproar in the dim-lit panelled parlour of the Spaniard's Inn, Hampstead. Fists pounded on the table. Hands sought to shove Joe Hind back in his seat. Voices declared that the hold-up of the well-guarded coach would fail without Swift Nick's and Roy's help.

There were no less than six highwaymen assembled in the old inn parlour, this warm summer evening in the year 1740. Six doughty rascals, all with a price on their heads, all hard riders, all used to snatching a living at the pistol's point. And the greatest daredevil of the lot was Swift Nick, hence the exclamations at Nick's protests.

The parlour was ill-lit by an oil-lamp suspended from the oak-beamed ceiling; and the six reckless knaves sat round a table, booted and spurred, with swords at their sides, and pistol-butts projecting from the pockets of their riding-coats.

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Great news indeed had caused this rallying of tobymen. Fox-faced Joe Hind had learnt that a coach would shortly be crossing Hampstead Heath, carrying pay for soldiers in London barracks. Of course, the coach would be well-guarded, but what did that matter to six bold highwaymen? Scenting rich plunder, crafty Joe had quickly gathered this reckless party.

"And I claim leadership!" he snarled at Nick. "And therefore a double portion o' the spoils!"

Nick sprang to his feet.

"Nay, Joe Hind!" he cried. "Faith, the fact is I mistrust you, and would rather not have you with us at all. We'll pay for your news and ride without you. 'Tis rumoured you ha' sold comrades ere now!"

"Liar!" bellowed Hind, and out came his sword.

At that the uproar broke out afresh, the highwaymen shouting that nothing would be done if they scrapped amongst themselves. Some dragged at Hind's coat-tails; others cried to Nick to sit down.

But Swift Nick felt sure that Hind was untrustworthy, and was playing some dark game of his own, for he had met the fellow before, and knew his treacherous nature. Fighting mad at the imputations, Hind rushed on Nick.

"Have at you, dog!" he roared. "We'll fight for leadership."

"That will I!" Nick cried stoutly. "And again I warn your cullies against you!"

And their swords crossed.

Yells of anger and dismay burst from the other tobymen, but there was no stopping the conflict now.

Crash! Over went the table. Chairs were hulled in all directions, thudding against the panelled walls.

Clash, clash! The blades met, locked, became disengaged again. Joe Hind hurled himself forward impetuously, a mocking grin on his thin features. He made at Nick with a storm of thrusts, and forced him to give ground.

THE BATTLE OF HAMPSTEAD HEATH!

Swift Nick leads his cullies in terrific fight with soldiers.

But Nick, smiling grimly, parried every lightning thrust with quick turns of his wrist. Nobly he danced and leapt aside, causing Joe Hind to bare his teeth and snarl in fury.

Faster and faster the weapons whirled, steel striking sparks from steel. There sounded gasps and the thud of feet as the contestants glared at each other. Aghast, the other highwaymen stood against the walls, hoping the duel would end without serious injury to either.

It was plain that Joe Hind was the stronger swordsman. Although Nick fought skilfully, the other's point darted again and again at his throat, tearing his lace neckcloth, then ripping the collar of his blue riding-coat.

Roy gasped in dismay, seeing sweat run down Nick's face, blood trickle from his cheek. Then he whooped aloud, for a jagged rent appeared in the bottle-green coat of Joe Hind.

Now the inn parlour was in an uproar, all the highwaymen shouting together. In the midst of the racket the tubby landlord looked in, white of face, to beg his guests to make less noise. But Timbersides shoved him out and slammed the door.

The fight continued more fiercely under the dim oil lamp, with thrust, parry, and counter-thrust. Never before had Joe Hind met such fierce resistance. He was surprised, and attacked the more recklessly.

"They'll kill each other!" barked old Timbersides.

"'Tis all up!" croaked Jerry Bones, as Hind's point flickered about Nick's face. "Whichever wins, there won't be enough of us left to rob t' coach!"

But that instant the fight ended in surprising fashion.

There was a desperate whirling of steel, glittering in the yellow lamplight. There was a sudden flash and a clatter. Then all gasped, for there stood Joe Hind, disarmed, with the skirts of his torn green coat flapping about him.

Joe Hind's sword was stuck quivering in a panel of the wall, flicked there by Nick, with a sudden deft twist of sword-play. Cleverly had Nick ended the duel without serious injury to either, and shouts of relief burst from the audience.

"How now, Joe?" Swift Nick laughed grimly. "Shall we continue, or shall I be leader in this night's venture?"

Joe Hind's foxy face was white and glistening with sweat. From under his bushy brows he glared at Nick, speechless with hate and fury, feeling a fool, disarmed, and with his green coat sliced to ribbons by Nick's sword. But all at once his features relaxed, and he laughed shortly, as though in resignation.

"Zounds, the best man has won, Nick!" he said, though his eyes glittered spitefully. "You had best be leader. I've had enough."

"Let him ride with us, Nick," boomed old Timbersides. "We must not be short-handed."

"Agreed, cullies, since you insist," Nick laughed shortly, snatching Hind's sword from the wall and returning it to its owner. "But I must be leader, and choose the place of ambush, and give all signals."

"P' faith, you shall, Nick!" boomed Timbersides.

The other tobymen applauded in relief. The hold-up of the Government coach would be carried out without a hitch, after all, it seemed. Swift Nick and Roy alone felt dissatisfaction at Hind being of the party. But even they did not yet know what an utter blackguard the fellow was.

Very soon the party of rascals clattered away from the Spaniard's Inn, to the vast relief of the tubby landlord, who reckoned them a riotous party of bucks. He little guessed who they really were.

Once clear of the inn they donned their black masks, then trotted briskly across the dreary, moonlit heath. They were only six all told, out to rob a well-guarded coach, carrying a month's pay for the soldiers in London barracks.

But what a six! Old Timbersides, the terror of the district; Jerry Bones, the crack shot; Nat Teach, a tobyman of renown; Joe Hind, a downright crafty villain; young Roy, as stout-hearted as any; and last, but most reckless and skilful of all, Swift Nick himself!

All seemed in mighty good mood as they cantered forward in a body, eyes flashing through mask-slits, three-cornered hats pulled down, bits jingling, hoofs thudding on turf. Jerry Bones grumbled about the moon in his harsh, croaking tones; but the others laughed and joked, and young Roy's nerves tingled with excitement.

Even Foxy Hind seemed merry at the prospect of enormous plunder. But Swift Nick reined black Sultan back alongside Roy and whispered his doubts.

"By thunder, Roy," he breathed, "I mislike any job in which Joe Hind has a hand! He's a scurvy knave!"

"But what harm can he do?" gasped Roy, glancing at the fox-faced highwayman in green.

"Hanged if I know!" muttered Nick. "For now that I am leader I will choose the place of ambush. Joe Hind ha' picked some spot where he has a gang of footpads in hiding!"

"To attack us?" snapped Roy.

"Ay, to attack the survivors, after we'd held up the coach and overcome the guards for him!" Swift Nick laughed grimly. "But I've spoilt any game o' that sort. No, no! Joe Hind cannot play any tricks now!"

In fact, it seemed that Hind must play fair with his brother highwaymen, since he rode in their midst and had placed himself under Swift Nick's orders. Nick learnt from him the hour when the coach was expected to cross the heath, and on rode the party of merry rascals, seeing bushes and thickets loom up about them.

Of a sudden Nick spotted a big clump of dark trees overhanging the road.

"We'll wait here, cullies," he exclaimed.

"There's a better spot two mile on!" quoth Joe Hind. "At t' bottom of a hill. The coach horses must go slow to breast it."

"This spot will serve our purpose," Swift Nick replied dryly. "Rein back into cover, cullies!"

All the formidable six reined into the shadow of the trees, pulled their cocked hats down to their masks, drew bell-mouthed pistols from their pockets, and saw to flint, charge, and priming. Then they sat their horses motionless, straining eyes and ears for the sound of wheels and horses.

Roy tingled in every nerve with excitement as he peered from cover up the moonlit road, then across the dim rolling expanse of heath, dotted with thickets. Hardly could he see his black-masked companions, who sat rigid in their saddles, almost invisible in the darkness. The only sounds in his ears were hissing whispers, the snorts of a horse.

But all at once, from afar, came a dull rumbling sound.

"The coach comes, cullies!" snapped Swift Nick. "Be ready!"

CHAPTER 2.

No Quarter!

RAPIDLY the dull rumbling increased in violence. It became a roar of wheels, mingled with the drumming of hoof-beats.

Roy felt his heart hammer against his ribs as he stared through his mask-slits up the road, to see the yellow glimmer of coach-lamps, swiftly increasing to bright beams of light, cleaving mist and murk. Never before, the lad told himself, had he taken part in such a desperate venture, promising so much plunder.

"Not a shot or sound till I give t' signal, cullies!" Swift Nick rapped out.

Came grunts of assent, and the party sat tense.

In a few minutes a couple of outriders could be seen—men in cocked hats and cloaks, riding one on either side of the coach. Then could be seen four men sitting on the box with the coachman, armed with muskets, and two more there were standing on a step at the rear.

There could be no doubt about it. Here came the Government coach, carrying a heap of money for the pay of soldiers in London barracks.

It was drawn by four spanking grey horses, which came thundering towards the highwaymen's hiding-place at full gallop. As he deftly handled the ribbons the coachman chatted and laughed with the guards perched up alongside of him.

"This heath's a fine place for tobymen!" he grinned. "And a fine lot o' boodle we carry if they tried for it; vich none ain't got the heart to!"

That very instant Swift Nick spurred forth from the shadows of the overhanging trees.

"Stand and deliver!" roared he loudly.

Nick's challenge rang above the din of hoofs and wheels as he reined up Sultan in the moonlit road, to bar the way.

Instantly burst forth a terrific clamour. The coach-horses shied violently, instinctively pulling up with a pounding of hoofs and rattle of harness. Arose roars of amazement from the coachman and guards.

"A tobyman!" yelled the coachman. "Vot a fool! He must be mad!"

In fact, it seemed madness for a single highwayman to try to hold up the Government coach, guarded as it was. The men on the box were, in fact, soldiers, as Swift Nick could now see, and the two outriders were mounted dragoons. All roared in surprise at Nick's seeming foolhardiness; muskets were whipped up, and the dragoons spurred forward, snatching out pistols.

"Mad is he!" guffawed one grimly. "Faith, his crazy brains are best scattered!"

And he drew trigger.

Bang! The dragoon's pistol belched smoke and flame, but Nick ducked as a bullet buzzed past his ear like a flying beetle. Then he fired in reply, heard a roar of pain, and saw the dragoon swaying in his saddle.

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At that the soldiers on the box yelled in fury, and four muskets were levelled at Nick. But before a shot could be fired howls sounded from the shadows, and out spurred Nat Teach, Jerry Bones, old Timbersides, and Roy. Black-masked and grim-looking, they rode at the coach, brandishing their barkers.

"An ambush!" roared the coachman. "A nest o' toby-men!"

"Surrender!" thundered Nick.

"Never!" roared the soldiers. "To blazes with ye, ye varmint!"

Crash! Muskets flamed in the night, and bullets whistled in all directions. But the band of highwaymen were ready, and their barkers cracked a fierce reply, then the battle was on in earnest.

"Let 'em have it, cullies!" Nick shouted grimly. "They won't take quarter."

Then all was din and confusion on the moonlit road. A glimpse Nick got of the soldiers on the box, in their scarlet tunics, three-cornered hats, and powdered wigs. Another he got of his cullies as they surrounded the coach, whooping, shouting, and blazing upwards.

Bang! Crack! Bang! Shouts of pain and anger mingled with deafening reports. Nick felt a bullet rip through his collar as he spurred at the plunging coach horses, meaning to wheel them off the road into a thicket.

But that instant the surviving dragoon was at Nick, who saw the fellow loom up against the stars, with pistol levelled. Came a flash and a roar from the darkness, however, then down crashed the dragoon's horse kicking in the road.

Again a pistol cracked from beneath the overhanging trees, and this time it was the coachman who collapsed on his box. Vainly had the plucky fellow been trying to control his horses and send them thundering forward.

The shot from the darkness sent him sprawling backwards, his cocked hat falling from his head and blood flowing from his chest.

Instantly a triumphant voice yelled above the din:

"I've got the coachman, cullies! Rat me, I've plugged his liver! We'll ha' t' redcoats' guineas!"

"Come on out, Joe Hind!" roared Nick, recognising the hoarse tones of the fox-faced highwayman. "Show yourself! Give 'em fair play. Yon was a foul shot!"

But whether Hind came out or not, Nick was unaware owing to the wild racket and confusion. Horses were rearing and plunging, men fired, and shouted with all the strength of their lungs.

With a gasp, Nick rode at the coach horses, seized the leaders' bridles, then swung them round as he spurred Sultan. There was a wild pounding of hoofs, then the laden coach came lumbering across the road, with men fighting all round it, to crash into a thicket. There it stood practically anchored, just as Nick intended, the maddened horses vainly trying to drag it through on to the heath.

"Hurrah! Now we've got 'em, cullies!" Swift Nick shouted, and charged into the fray.

But that instant he saw the dismounted dragoon wrestling with old Timbersides. He could see the dim figures of the fighting pair, old Timbersides, black-masked and striking down with a clubbed pistol, the dragoon hacking and thrusting with his sword.

"I'm with you, Timbersides!" bawled Nick.

But Sultan stumbled over the dragoon's dead horse, to come smack down on his knees, hurling Nick over his head. Nick felt himself flying through the air, to land thud on the ground, all the breath knocked out of his body, to lose both his pistols.

Even as he fell, Nick saw the dragoon's sword flash in the gloom, to come whistling down on old Timbersides' neck. It was a fearful blow, cleaving the rascally old highwayman through the shoulder almost to the breastbone, and down he crashed to the dust, stone-dead, his brown riding-coat dark with blood.

Now, it was plain the highwaymen were not having things their own way after all. In fact, it seemed they had bitten off more than they could chew. Nick lay winded; old Timbersides was dead; and down from the coach-top came the furious soldiers, roaring and brandishing their muskets.

"Have at t' toby-men!" they roared. "Smash 'em, lads! No quarter!"

"Faith, none is asked for!" Nick shouted, scrambling to his feet. "Death or plunder, cullies!"

He wondered where on earth Roy was, but could not see his young pal in the midst of the struggling men. He glimpsed tough Jerry Bones smiting at two redcoats who gripped his horse's bridle; saw Nat Teach laugh grimly as he ducked aside from a musket, then spurred forward, to discharge his barker in a redcoat's face.

That soldier seemed to vanish into space. Actually his head was almost blown to pieces, and down he went in the welter of blood and dust, amidst the pounding hoofs. Nick, with his sword out, leapt over a fallen horse, and flew at the dragoon who had finished Timbersides.

The latter, gasping as he stood across the old tobyman, was about to attack Nat Teach, but he whirled at sound of Nick's shout and hurrying footfalls.

"Ha!" roared he. "T' tobyman who stopped us! T' leader of t' gang!"

"That same, lobster!" Nick laughed grimly, and their blades crossed.

Clash, clash! It was now steel against steel. The moon vanished that instant behind black banks of cloud, but Nick could see dimly his scarlet-clad opponent, with powdered wig wildly dishevelled, and made at him, lunging and thrusting.

The big dragoon parried Nick's thrusts and replied with a storm of cuts. All about the fighting pair the battle raged on, with blows, yells, and deafening reports; and red flashes stabbed the gloom. Neither side would surrender.

Suddenly, however, Nick ran his point through the dragoon's heart. Then on he leapt with a cheer, glimpsing Roy, Jerry Bones, and Nat Teach still fighting furiously.

But that moment stocky Jerry Bones was shot down. Remained only Nat Teach and Roy on their feet, as far as Nick could see in the smoke-filled gloom, and still there were three soldiers. It seemed hardly a man would survive. A bad job, after all, seemed highwayman Joe Hind's scheme to hold up the Government coach.

"Hold on, cullies!" Nick yelled, racing forward; then to himself: "Where t' plague is Hind? I vow the cur left us i' the lurch, seeing things go wrong!"

He dashed on, and suddenly uttered a shout of dismay, seeing Roy beaten to his knees. The masked lad had been felled by a soldier, was trying to guard his head with his

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Sultan stumbled over the dragoon's dead horse and sent Nick flying!

arm from the fellow's blows. And gaunt Nat Teach, grimed and bleeding, was wrestling with two others.

"Faith! Roy's down!" Nick yelled in fury.

As the shout burst from Nick's lips, young Roy was struck to the ground, to roll over, then sprawl motionless in the moonlit road. Nick heard a shot, saw Nat Teach put a ball through one of his assailants even as he dashed at the soldier who had settled Roy.

But that moment a surprising thing happened. From out of the gloom darted two stabs of flame, and there sounded two cracking reports.

Nick staggered. A burning pain shot through his right shoulder. As in a dream he saw Roy's assailant go down, and, even as he reeled, he heard quick footsteps behind him. Then—

Crash! Something descended on Nick's head, a million thunders rattled in his brain, and down in the dust he flopped, oblivion sweeping over him.

CHAPTER 3. The Tables Turned.

"WHAT the plague has happened?" gritted Swift Nick.

He had been unconscious barely five minutes, and came round to find himself unable to move hand or foot. His head ached abominably, but he struggled to rise, then realised he was securely trussed with stirrup-leathers.

All was now quiet. Nick could see the great coach, anchored in the thicket at the roadside, could see fallen men and horses about him. Memory returned in a flash, and Nick ground his teeth at thought of his comrades' end, at recollection of seeing young Roy struck down.

So the soldiers had won, after all! Nat Teach and Roy must have been killed, as well as old Timbersides and Jerry Bones! But where were the surviving redcoats?

"Faith! Have they abandoned me an' t' coach?" Swift Nick gasped in bewilderment.

"Nay, cully! They are all dead!" broke in a rasping voice.

Nick gasped, then twisted his head round. Then a fierce exclamation burst from his lips, for, standing over him, he saw the fox-faced Joe Hind, in his torn green coat, with his wolfish mouth exposed under his black mask.

"Zounds!" barked Nick hoarsely. "So you've come back, Joe, you poltroon! Unfasten me!"

"Nay, pal!" leered Hind. "'Twas I who trussed you up!"

"What?" Nick exploded, hardly able to believe his ears. "I shot t' redcoat you were making at, cully!" Hind explained, with a fiendish leer. "And, also, I shot Nat Teach, and put a ball through his last opponent. I merely winged you, then clubbed you. The others"—he grinned, indicating the grim battle scene—"all died fighting. But you'll hang, Nick! And so I'll get square for t' insults you put on me in yon Spaniard's Inn. Ho, ho!"

Nick became speechless with rage. Now all was clear. The last two shots had been fired by Joe Hind, who, in fact, had wounded Nick, then dashed up to club him from behind. Joe Hind had been keeping to the fringe of the dark trees throughout the fight, potting at soldiers and highwaymen alike.

"You scurvy knave!" snapped Nick. "I warned the others to have naught to do with you, you treacherous dog. Faith, I guessed you were playing some dark game of your own."

"But you failed to scupper it, Nick," jeered Hind. "Didst think I meant to risk my skin? Nay, cully, I let all the numbskulls fight the soldiers, and now—I'll have the guineas! But I'll hand you over to the Runners, by thunder!"

With a menacing leer, fox-faced Joe Hind swung away towards the coach.

Helpless lay Swift Nick, struggling in vain with his tight bonds, his wounded shoulder paining.

It was plain that, from the first, Joe Hind had somehow intended to grab all the plunder for himself. He had desired leadership of the band of highwaymen, merely because he feared that Swift Nick, as leader, would have him cast out of it.

"Would that I had!" Nick gritted to himself. "But t'others wanted him in. I knew he was a villain, but not such a villain. And now Roy is dead—t' result of Hind's scurvy schemes. Hind could ha' come in and saved him, but the dog wanted us all dead. If I could avenge Roy—"

"Art ready for your last journey, Nick?" leered Joe Hind, returning. "Dost know how I'll hand you over to t' Runners without risk to myself?"

"To blazes with you, traitor!" Nick barked hoarsely. "I am going to drive you in yon coach, cully," grinned Hind. "I shall hide the plunder at a spot I know of, then drive you on. And I shall abandon the coach with you in it near t' London barracks. By thunder, I should like to see the soldiers when they find the coach empty, save for you lying bound inside it. Maybe they will hang you, and save judge and jury a job!"

Nick struggled with fury, as the treacherous Joe Hind explained his plan for grabbing all the plunder and getting vengeance on Nick for his defeat in the Spaniard's Inn.

But Nick struggled in vain. He was helpless in his bonds; and Joe Hind heaved him across his shoulder and carried him to the coach, then shot him inside head foremost.

Followed the sound of shouts and pawing of hoofs. As he lay bound in darkness, Nick realised that Hind was backing the coach-horses to get the coach out of the thicket and back on to the road.

This job did not take the treacherous highwayman long. Then he scrambled up on to the box of the coach, pushed the dead coachman out on to the road, then caught up the reins.

"Forward, my beauties!" Joe Hind whooped triumphantly to the horses, and off rumbled the coach.

And inside it lay Swift Nick, bound, amidst all the brass-bound boxes containing the pay for the soldiers in London barracks.

Nick's aching brain was like a furnace.

In his ears was the rumble of wheels and roar of hoofs as Hind drove the coach on across Hampstead Heath. Soon he would hide the plunder, then drive on, to abandon Swift Nick and the coach near the London barracks.

"The cur!" gritted Nick, seeing trees and thickets swim past through the coach windows. "Would I could avenge Roy and the others!"

Suddenly the coach stopped. Nick saw it had stopped near a large clump of trees. He heard Joe Hind jump to the ground, then saw him open the coach door and leer inside.

"Now to hide the plunder, Swift Nick!" leered Hind. "Then I'll—"

Joe Hind broke off with a gasp. Something had caught him a tremendous blow on the ear, and down in the dust dropped the traitor, and lay still.

"By my life, 'tis Roy!" yelled Nick delightedly. "And I thought you dead, lad!"

It was young Roy who had suddenly appeared from nowhere. And it was his pistol-butt which had knocked out the treacherous Hind.

"Bully for you, lad!" whooped Nick. "But haste and untie me, before yon cur comes round."

Speedily Roy slashed Nick's bonds, then out of the coach staggered Nick, and together the two pals soon trussed Joe Hind and heaved him into the coach. Joe Hind came round, to find the tables completely turned, to rage in vain.

"But how came you here, Roy?" laughed Nick.

"On the back step of the coach, cully!" grinned Roy. "I came round in time to see what yon knave was doing with you. Ay, the redcoat only stunned me. But I could not find my feet before Hind drove off, then I jumped for it."

"To good purpose, cully!" cried Nick gleefully. "And to think yon knave was bringing you along all the time and did not know it!"

"What shall we do with him?" grinned Roy.

"Faith, serve him as he meant to serve us!" Swift Nick laughed grimly. "We'll leave him in this coach near London barracks. But first to hide yon plunder."

With that, the delighted pals dumped all the boxes of money in the very clump of trees which Joe Hind had selected for his hiding-place.

Then they clambered to the box of the coach, to drive some distance towards London, where they abandoned it

with the raging Joe Hind inside. Afterwards they returned to the trees to fill their pockets with plunder, to leave the remainder hidden until they could remove it.

Next they made their way towards the scene of the fight to recover black Sultan and Roy's horse, which they found wandering on the heath.

"By my life you saved me from Tyburn, Roy," Nick cried, as they swung to their saddles. "And now, thanks to yon dog Hind, we are rich for life!"

"But we'll stick to the High Toby!" cried Roy.

"Faith, that we will," laughed Nick; then his eyes clouded at the thought of their comrades' fate. "Would that our cullies had not wished to keep Hind with us! But at least the cur will get his deserts!"

And Joe Hind did get his deserts, for amazed soldiers found the plundered, abandoned coach with the furious traitor inside it. They could not imagine how he came by his plight, but his face was recognised, and he was handed over to Bow Street Runners.

As for Swift Nick and Roy, they gaily continued their career on the High Toby, and they knew of certain plunder snug-hidden on Hampstead Heath which they could always draw from if they needed it.

THE END.

(You'll like "BUCK OF THE BROKEN K!"—the first story of a grand new series of the Wild West. Don't miss it next week.)



Joe Hind broke off with a roar of pain as someone caught him a blow on the ear!

CORKING YARN OF THE ROYAL NAVY!



THE START OF THE STORY.

Midshipman Ned Hardy, son of a line of sea captains, is waiting his appointment to a ship. Meanwhile, his brother, Ralph, is cashiered from the *Victorious* in connection with a robbery. Ned believes his brother innocent, but his father turns Ralph from the house. Ned gets his appointment—but to everyone's dismay, he is ordered to join the *Victorious*. In the ship Ned finds a chum in Jinks and an enemy in Sub-Lieutenant Grimsshaw. Ned is told to report to Lieutenant Buckley, but it is a leg-pull, and the officer tells the new middy he must teach him to be more wary.

(Now read on.)

Praise for Ned.

"TO impress the fact on you, since you have come, you may remain on duty for the remainder of the watch. Relieve Mr. Drayton below there on the boat-deck, and send him up to me."

Ned saluted without a word, and hastened down to the place appointed to him.

"Station there by the cutter, sir, please. You'll be called if you're wanted," said a warrant-officer.

Ned did not in the least mind being sold, and was glad enough to get away from the gun-room for a spell. He was all the better pleased to find himself with a job on deck.

Ned took in the great ship's perspective, and the swift, orderly business of her crew with a thirsty eye. What a beauty she was, and what power! The great 15-inch guns overhead looked as if they could smash a kingdom. He remembered that they had helped to do so once already.

But it was the boats that interested Ned most. Boats are a midshipman's business. For the next three years—the happiest in a Naval officer's life—the boats of the *Victorious* would be the chief field for Ned's endeavours. He would be put in charge of one of them, and it would be up to him to show that he was fit to command her and her crew.

"This is in my line," said Ned to himself. "Best outfit of any ship in the Fleet!"

He scanned the various craft with a critical eye. The *Victorious* was splendidly equipped. From the big, sixty foot launch of two hundred horse-power, down to the cutters, whale-boats, and gigs, there were enough craft to make a small fleet.

One of the cutters had already put off for the shore with two ward-room officers in her stern, her six oars aside making her fly through the water. A pinnace went off to the flagship in charge of a midshipman, to Ned's intense envy, and another middy presently brought back a whaler that had been away under orders. Ned did not think much of the way in which he brought his craft alongside the gangway.

At Dartmouth Ned had earned some distinction in handling boats. The knack of it seemed to be born in him, and he had left the college with the highest possible qualifications for boat-handling that a cadet can win.

The traffic at the gangway had ceased, when the voice of the officer of the day called out sharply from above:

"Who let that buoy go adrift? Are your eyes all in your boots? Away after it!"

A couple of hundred yards away, bobbing in the tide, was a target-buoy cruising down the Solent at its own sweet will. How it came adrift nobody knew, but the keen eye of Lieutenant Buckley lit on it, and his remarks were sour.

"Whaler's crew! Dig out and pick it up!" he ordered. "Man the whale-boat over the boom!"

"Look sharp there, youngster!" said a voice over the rail, as a warrant-officer passed the order.

The only boat available at that moment was the whale-boat, and she was lying off at the boom, the great spar

sticking far out from the ship's side for boats to make fast to when there is no room for them at the gangway ladder.

There was nobody in the whaler save her boat-keeper; but four men and a coxswain, almost before the order was out of the officer's mouth, were scuttling into her.

Ned, when he heard the voice overhead, made a dash for the whaler. It is no easy matter to man a boat from the boom, instead of letting her come to the gangway and board her there. But the order left no doubt in Ned's mind, and away he went. He reached the spar, ran along it like a monkey, and slid down the rope into the whale-boat in a twinkling.

"Give us the tiller!" said Ned to the surprised coxswain. "Out oars! Give way, men!"

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"MAN THE BOAT!"

Young Ned's away before the order's finished!

"Who on earth told that new snottie to go with her?" said Mr. Buckley to himself. "Why, it's the hopeful infant who came to me with the dud message!"

The smartness with which Ned manned the boat, and his nimbleness in getting away, so impressed the lieutenant that he watched without making any comment. The whale-boat was already dashing straight for the buoy. Ned brought her up to it, slowed down, and had it aboard in a twinkling. Then back he came to the ship.

The Victorious was swinging slowly to her anchor chains at the turn of the tide, and the boat had to approach the gangway head on, and sweep right round to come alongside.

"Steady! In port oars! Ready forward!" said Ned.

He brought the whaler neatly alongside the gangway with a single helm—that is, with one well-judged sweep of the tiller, instead of see-sawing it to and fro as the other boat's middy had done.

"Jove, that's a real smart infant!" said the officer of the day to himself, watching. "Knows how to handle a boat! Some of the older ones are not up to that form!"

He decided it was a pity to discourage Ned's keenness, though he had made a mistake in getting into the boat at all. Mr. Buckley passed the word for the new midshipman to be sent up to him as soon as the whaler was cleared. Ned came, looking rather nervous.

"That was not at all badly done, Mr. Hardy. You seem at home in a whaler."

Ned flushed to the ears with pleasure.

"In future, don't man a boat that is not in your charge without special orders, and report 'Boats' crew all present and correct, sir!" as soon as she is cleared again. I don't think you'll need much teaching in boat-work. You can go off duty now, and don't let yourself be hoaxed again. Off with you, sir."

Ned saluted and marched off, all his veins tingling with pleasure. He had actually been complimented. The officer of the day was a topping good sort, after all. Feeling thoroughly pleased with himself, on his way back to the gun-room, he nearly ran into a majestic figure in a gold-laced cap, with four broad rings on his sleeves.

It was Captain Raglan, C.B., who commanded the Victorious, and owed obedience to no man save his admiral and his king. Ned drew quickly to one side and halted to let him pass, saluting as he did so.

The captain of a great battle cruiser is a person of immense authority, living by himself in lonely splendour in his own cabin, and seeming almost superhuman to his junior officers, so great is he. But Captain Raglan had an eye for his midshipmen, and, seeing a new face, halted.

"Well, young gentleman," said the captain, "when did you join?"

"At four o'clock, sir," said Ned, inwardly quailing, for Captain Raglan had an eye that seemed to look clean through him.

"Your name?"

"Hardy, sir—Edwin Hardy."

"Hardy?" repeated the captain curiously. "Where is your home?"

"Briar's Hall, Hampshire, sir."

A shadow passed across the captain's face for an instant. He knew well enough now who Ned was. He looked searchingly at the boy's face.

"You have been just two hours in the King's service, Mr. Hardy," he said. "If you wish to become a credit to it, obey all orders smartly, and let the good of the ship and the Navy be your first thought. You may go below."

The captain walked on, with a not unkindly nod, but his face was very grim as he went forward, and presently the commander, his second-in-command, received a message, and entered the captain's cabin.

"Have you seen anything of the new midshipman who joined to-day—Edwin Hardy, by name?" asked the captain.

"No, sir," said Commander Langford, "but his arrival was reported to me."

"He is a brother of Ralph Hardy," said the captain.

"So I understand," said the commander, who was a genius at knowing instantly all that went on aboard the Victorious. "But why he has been sent here is beyond me, sir."

Captain Raglan drummed on the blotting-pad with his fingers, his brows knitted. The subject of the late court martial was a very sore one for him, for the good name of the ship was dearer to him than anything else.

"This is infernally awkward, Langford!" he said. "It is a blunder that this boy should have been sent to this ship of the whole Fleet. Most captains would apply to have him removed, but I strongly dislike raking up that abominable affair again."

"Quite so, sir."

"I like the look of the boy, I must say."

"He handles a boat well, sir, and seems a clean-bred youngster. But it is certainly awkward, as you say. There has been a row about it in the gun-room already, I hear. It seems Hardy came out of it rather well, and made a good impression."

"I shall take no steps for the present, in that case," said Captain Raglan, rising. "But, as you know, Langford, an affair like this can raise the very deuce on a ship like ours. Small as the business looks, it may do the ship some harm, or it may do her a great deal of good, and erase the stain on her name. It depends on the boy himself, and the ship he is made of—this one small junior midshipman. A bit of weight for his shoulders, eh?" Captain Raglan added grimly. "I'm afraid this lad has a bad time in front of him."

"I'm not so sure, sir, by what I hear of him," said Commander Langford, with a smile. "I believe he can keep his own end up. A tough-looking little chap!"

"Well," said the captain, "we shall see."

Ned's Chance!

"HALLO!" said Jinks, his grin spreading nearly across the sleeping-flat, as Ned came below. "I hear you've stood half a watch for chucking yourself at the officer of the day when you weren't wanted. Well, you're a cuckoo! Don't you know who it was that spoofed you?"

"Don't much care!" said Ned. "Tell him from me that I had a ripping time, and I'm much obliged!"

"No accounting for tastes. Hurry up and slip into your mess-kit. Dinner bugle goes in ten minutes. I've got you a place by me. Mind you sit tight, and don't talk, or you'll be fayed. The snotties aren't allowed to speak above a whisper at meals. That's because the subs talk such bilge that they don't like to hear anybody talking sense—like me. Makes them look so cheap. I say, you look rather a pet in that rig, don't you, Gertie?"

Ned certainly looked very well in the smart mess uniform. With its rows of tiny gilt buttons and shell jacket, it set his muscular figure off capitally. He preferred the working kit, none the less.

"Take my arm, dearest!" said Jinks. "And mind you don't crush my frock."

He led Ned into the gun-room, and five minutes later the novice sat down to his first mess dinner on the Victorious.

Grimshaw presided at the head of the table, and Ned got one glance from him as he came in that was as good as a danger-signal to the newcomer. However, the meal passed without incident. The discipline was strict enough—for the middies—though the sub-lieutenants had ample freedom. More midshipmen dropped in from time to time, as they came off duty, talking in whispers.

Ned enjoyed the novelty of it all—the free speech of the subs, and their pungent criticisms on everything and everybody, the plentiful, but plain bill of fare, the glass of Marsala wine—no middy was allowed more than one—and the deft waiting of the Marine stewards.

Ned drank his first King's toast. He heard the short yet heartfelt Naval grace for the first time when the sub-lieutenant rose, rapped the table with his knuckles, and said briefly: "Thank God!" Then the sub-lieutenants sat down and took out their cigar-cases and pipes—no middy under eighteen was allowed to smoke—and Grimshaw took up a large spoon.

"Time!" whispered Jinks, nudging Ned. "Be ready to bunk!"

Grimshaw struck the steel beam overhead three times sharply with the spoon, and before the ring of it had died away the midshipmen had all thrown themselves deftly out of their seats, and darted through the door.

"The giddy dukes want the place to themselves now," said Jinks. "But it's much cheerier in the school-room. Are you any hand at singing?"

Ned had a fair voice, but when it came to the point, he kept it quiet.

In the midst of an impromptu concert with two banjos and a comb, Acland sang a most scurrilous and libellous song which he had made up about Grimshaw. It went to the tune of "Jack's the Boy For Play," and it brought down the house.

Yet in the midst of it all Ned Hardy could not help feeling the cold shoulder. They were not uncivil to him, but there was a barrier between himself and his mess-mates—all save Jinks—that he could not break down. So he sat tight and said little till the watches were called.



Ned ran along the spar like a monkey, and slid down into the whale-boat.

and the evening's routine went on until it was time to turn in.

"They'll come round," said Ned to himself; "I'll make 'em!"

His heart was very full as he leaned on the rail of the main deck before going to the sleeping-flat, and looked out over the dark Solent, with the glare of Portsmouth to the north, and the nearer lights of the Fleet shining over the water. The Warner lightship winked and shut, winked and shut, throwing its revolving ray across, and a torpedo-boat went gliding by like a slim, black ghost.

"It's better than I thought it'd be—a lot better," he said to himself. "There's plenty here to keep a chap busy." Ned paused. "Wonder where poor old Ralph is to-night?"

Ten minutes later Ned was in his hammock under the steel deck, sleeping like the dead, wearied out by the longest and most adventurous day he had yet encountered. Nor did he worry himself with looking into the future. He knew nothing more till the marine's bugle-call sounded the "Reveille."

"Buck up, old son!" said Jinks, with a sounding slap with a strap under Ned's hammock, which the junior just escaped by swinging himself out. "How d'you feel now the dirk-sabard's had time to stiffen on you?"

"Fit as a flea!" said Ned briskly, though he was black and blue from the thrashing Grimshaw had given him. A sponge-down and a bear-fight with Jinks made him limber enough, however, and soon he was out in the sunshine, and saluting the quarter-deck, from which the men were washing the morning dew.

Instruction, prayers, and breakfast followed in due course, and in all the routine Jinks gave Ned the quick coaching and hints that only an old hand can give a new.

There was more school-room at nine o'clock, when the instructor drove into the middies' heads the principles of marine engines and afterwards those of navigation. This was too much like Dartmouth College for Ned, and he longed to get into the open air and feel the spray on his face.

He stood his first watch from twelve until four, however, and was full of pride of real officership, though all he had to do was to look after a windsail that let fresh air

into the dynamo-rooms that lay below decks. But he was not long at his task.

Mr. Buckley, who had been officer of the day previously, noticed him, and presently went to speak to the first lieutenant—who is always known to the whole ship as "Number One."

"That youngster over there is as smart a pup in the boat as you've got, sir," said Buckley. "I thought I'd just mention it, as you said you were changing the boats." He mentioned the incident of the day before.

The first lieutenant, whose name was Moreton, glanced at Ned.

"Did he, though?" he said, with some interest. "Thank you! I can do with a new boat-midshipman. Our lot want gingering up."

Number One believed in settling things himself, instead of making inquiries of the instructor or the warrant-officers. He sent for Ned himself and examined him.

"I hear you know what a tiller is, Mr. Hardy," he said. "What do you do when your cutter crosses the bows of the admiral's barge?"

"I shouldn't, sir; I would go astern of him," said Ned politely.

"Well, I hope you would, unless you were prepared to die," said Mr. Moreton dryly. And he forthwith put a number of questions to test Ned's knowledge of the proper salutes and marks of respect without which no middy can have charge of a boat.

Ned answered them all satisfactorily, as well as dodging several "catches" that were set for him, for yesterday's experience had made him wary.

"Very well," said the first lieutenant, who was noted for springing surprise tests on newcomers. "I will try you in the third cutter. Be ready to man your boat when I give the word."

Ned would not have changed places with the commander-in-chief at that moment. His heart thumped with joy as he obeyed his instructions. In a few minutes came the order:

"Man the third cutter!"

(Ned's got his chance! He's been put in charge of a boat. So don't miss the exciting sequel to his new appointment in next week's GEM!)

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,175.



Our Whiskery wiseacre is not feeling too good this week. Why? Read how his nephews played him up. But he's still unbeaten in the question market. Send him a stiff one, chum!

YOU wouldn't believe, chums, what a difference it makes having a nice, kind Editor, like I've got, to cheer you up when things are not going as they should. I wasn't feeling any too good when I reached the office this morning. I was, in fact, all of a doo-dah, as you might say. To tell the truth, I'd had a trying weekend, trying to keep some young nephews of mine out of mischief. But the only thing they ever seemed to be out of were handkerchiefs.

I haven't enough space in the old GEM to tell you one-half of the things they managed to think of during that weekend, but their brightest effort was when they set fire to my whiskers in the middle of a field by means of a magnifying-glass. Now, no sporty sort of uncle minds his whiskers being burnt every now and again; but the smoke that curled upwards when they set fire to my beard happened to hit a nest of wasps overhead, and, as you know, wasps don't like smoke a bit. Out they came accordingly like a well-like a swarm of wasps, only more so, it seemed to me.

I remembered just in time that a wasp-sting can kill a man, so I skeddaddled, leaving the boys to keep the foes at bay. When the villagers saw me rushing across the field with my whiskers alight, they thought there was

my soul, the lad's had a hair-cut and singe! How many birds'-nests and things did the barber find in your whiskers, sonny? Never mind. Sit down and help me answer this batch of queries from readers of the GEM. Fred Stubbs, who writes from Littlehampton, is curious to know whether the hands have always been used in Rugby football?

"Yes, sir. Until the year 1823, football was played more or less on Association lines, but in that year a Rugby schoolboy, whose name was William Webb Ellis, caught the ball and ran with it, and that is said to be the origin of Rugby football as now played. The game of Rugger wasn't recognised by clubs until about 1860, and the Rugby Union was not formed until 1871. It was this Union that made what was called 'hacking' illegal, hacking being a method of forcing through by kicking the other team on the shins."

"A reader asks if we can tell him what furniture polish is made of?"

"By dissolving beeswax in turpentine with the aid of steam heat. The liquid is poured into tins, and sets hard when it's cool. A useful polish for cleaning old and dirty furniture can be made by shaking together equal quantities of raw linseed oil, turpentine, and vinegar. That's a simple mixture that brings a nice polish on to the wood."

a prairie fire, and wrote postcards to the village fire brigade about it. And no doubt I would have been burnt to death if I hadn't tripped up and fallen plop into the local duck-pond.

No wonder I wasn't feeling my bright little self when I staggered into the jolly old sanctum this morning; but, as I've said, the Editor was just brimming over with sympathy.

"Come in Whiskers," he said. "Pon a singe! How many birds'-nests and things did the barber find in your whiskers, sonny? Never mind. Sit down and help me answer this batch of queries from readers of the GEM. Fred Stubbs, who writes from Littlehampton, is curious to know whether the hands have always been used in Rugby football?"

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"I've been thinking about my desk," said the Editor. "I was thinking of your venerable headpiece; it could do with a clean-up."

"If you'd been set alight, chased by wasps, and nearly drowned in a duck-pond—"

"Were you nearly drowned in a duck-pond?" asked the Editor.

"Yes, sir," said the Editor.

"What a pity! I mean, what a pity duck-ponds are so shallow! Now, my lad, just get busy and tell Sam Wise what a bandicoot is?"

"A bandicoot is a small animal that flourishes in Australia. The Australian farmers and gardeners wish that it didn't; believe me, for the bandicoots not only eat worms and insects, but ravages the fields and gardens."

"A Purley GEM-ITE wants to know what methods a fox uses to break its scent when hunted?"

"The fox is up to all sorts of dodges, and one of its favourites is to leap on to the back of a sheep, or on to the backs of a flock of sheep. This trick sometimes enables the old fox to get away."

"Fred Summers, of Farnborough, asks if a three-farthing piece has ever been in circulation?"

"Yes; a silver three-farthing piece was struck in the reign of Queen Elizabeth. In 1842 half-farthings came into circulation, and went out of it in 1869."

"What are the State Jewels worth?"

"Three million pounds."

"What are whitebait?"

"A name used in the fish trade for young sprats or herrings."

"Which is the largest city in Scotland?"

"Glasgow."

"A Teddington reader wants to learn conjuring, and asks for the name of a good book to study from."

"Tell him to get 'Sleight-of-Hand,' by Swift Palmer."

"Right-ho!" said the Ed. "You can go now; and next time, look for a better pond to fall into!"

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