

"THE WHITE GIANTS OF EL DORADO!" SUPER NEW
ST. FRANK'S STORY!

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BAD NEWS for
TOM MERRY!

"UP AGAINST IT!" FIRST GRIPPING YARN OF A GRAND
ST. JIM'S SERIES STARTS WITHIN!

TOM MERRY LEAVES ST. JIM'S! TROUBLE PILES ON TROUBLE—

UP AGAINST IT!



By
**Martin
Clifford.**

Ruined—penniless! Such is the crushing blow Fate suddenly deals Tom Merry, bringing his happy days at St. Jim's to a dramatic end! This stirring story of his fight against adversity is the first of a powerful series that cannot fail to appeal to every boy.

CHAPTER 1. Called Away!

"GOAL!"
"Goal!"
"Hurrah!"
"Bravo, Tom Merry!"

The crowd round the football ground at St. Jim's cheered themselves hoarse. Even some of the players shouted and clapped their hands.

It was, as Monty Lowther said, a ripping goal. The School House were playing the New House, and Fatty Wynn was keeping goal for the latter. Figgins, the New House junior skipper relied upon Fatty Wynn as a tower of strength; and the fat Fourth Former seldom failed to fulfil expectations.

Many times had the School House forwards brought the ball right up to the goal, only to have it kicked or fisted out by Fatty Wynn as fast as they sent it in, and several times Fatty, with a mighty kick, had transferred the play to the School House half.

But Tom Merry had beaten him this time.

Taking a centre from Jack Blake, Tom Merry had made a desperate dash for goal, with the New House players like wolves round him. With two of them fairly upon him, he had risked a desperate kick—his only chance—and the leather, just eluding the tips of Fatty's outstretched fingers, had sailed into the net.

The next instant, Tom Merry was sprawling, cannoned over by a charging back.

He came down with a mighty thump on the hard earth, and for the moment he was deaf to the cheering, deaf to

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the loud clapping of hands, and the green earth and blue sky that danced and swam about him.

"Goal!"
"Bravo, Tom Merry!"

"Goal! Hurrah!"

Monty Lowther dashed to his chum and raised him up. Tom Merry looked about him dazedly.

Kerr, the New House back, who had charged him over, bent over him anxiously.

"I say, old man, I hope I didn't hurt you!" he exclaimed. Tom Merry grinned faintly.

"You jolly well did, you boulder," he said; "but it was all fair, and I've got the goal! I'm all right, Kerr, old son."

And he staggered to his feet between Kerr and Lowther. Monty Lowther supported his chum, with a slightly anxious look; but Tom Merry was all right. He stood alone, breathing a little deeply.

He waved his hands to his friends in the crowd as a sign that he was not hurt, and there was a fresh burst of cheering.

Fatty Wynn threw the ball out with a curious expression upon his face. He was a demon goalkeeper, and the despair of the opposing forwards. However weak the New House attack might be, however faltering their defence, they were always sure of Fatty Wynn in goal. Whenever New House juniors played School House juniors, Fatty Wynn was always between the sticks for his House. Indeed, many fellows had been heard to say that Fatty Wynn was quite up to playing in senior matches, and that the Sixth might do worse than give him a trial in goal.

Fatty Wynn had saved many times till that shot from Tom Merry. The New House team had had the best of the

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—FOR THE HERO OF THE SHELL FORM, IN THIS DRAMATIC YARN.

game, however. Tom Merry's eleven were usually in good form, but just now it was hardly up to its usual strength. Jack Blake of the Fourth, usually a splendid forward in the side, was out of the team owing to a hurt, and Digby was not playing at half as usual. Herries, the right-back, was not in the eleven. Herries had a most important matter to attend to that afternoon—important to Herries, at least. His dog Towser was sick, and Herries was looking after him, and he had told Tom Merry to give another chap his place for the occasion. And as Herries was evidently too worried about Towser to play up well Tom Merry had consented.

With Blake, Digby, and Herries gone from the team, Tom Merry's eleven was well below its usual strength, and the New House fellows were quite in form. Hence the hope that was rising in the breasts of Figgins & Co. of snatching a victory. It could not be denied that the School House got the best of it as a rule. Figgins & Co. determined to alter all that.

The first half had been played out without a score. The second half wanted yet half an hour to time.

There was plenty of time to alter the score. The players lined up again, and the crowd of juniors round the ground watched them eagerly. There was not only juniors on the scene, either, but a good many seniors who thought the junior match was worth watching. Kildare, the captain of the school, had strolled down to look on, with Darrell and Monteith of the Sixth. The knowledge that they were playing under the eyes of the captain of St. Jim's nerved the juniors to greater efforts. Kildare had cheered as loudly as any when Tom Merry brought off that difficult goal.

"We'll lick 'em after all!" said Manners, as the School House fellows lined up again. "We'll lick 'em, Tommy, my son!"

Tom Merry nodded with a cheerful smile.

"Yes, rather!" he said. "But they're in ripping form, and Figgins means business. Play up, my sons!"

Figgins did, indeed, mean business. The long-legged chief of the New House juniors was determined to get through. And under his lead, the New House forwards did wonders. Again and again they brought the ball right up to the School House goal, but the defence was sound. But in the last line the School House side missed Herries more than ever. Figgins & Co. were pressing all the time, and whenever the ball was cleared it was brought back again, and at last a sure shot from Figgins found the corner of the net, giving the goalie no chance at all.

Then the New House fellows in the crowd cheered themselves hoarse.

"Hurrah!"

"Goal!"

"Good old Figgys!"

"Bravo!"

Figgins grinned gleefully. He liked to hear them shouting, and he made no secret of it. The score was level now, and there was a quarter of an hour more to play.

"We've got to get the odd goal," Figgins said to his men, as they went back to the centre.

"We've got to get the odd goal," Tom Merry remarked at the same time.

And both sides determined they would.

From the blast of the whistle the play was fast and furious. Hard and harder they pressed, and the changes in the scene was kaleidoscopic. Now the New House would be right up to Tom Merry's goal, pelting in the leather, and now the tide would sweep to the other end, and Fatty Wynn would be given plenty of work. But Fatty was equal to it. Fatty Wynn could save where another goalie would have lost, and again and again he tossed the leather out amid the roars of the New House crowd.

"Well saved!"

"Oh, well saved, sir!"

"Bravo, Fatty!"

"No good trying to pass Fatty," said Jack Blake, who was a looker on that day, limping from a late accidental kick on the ankle. "The blessed boulder nearly fills up the goal with himself, for one thing."

This was an exaggeration; but Fatty Wynn certainly was plump.

"Faith, and we're winning, Blake, my boy," Reilly remarked.

"It looks like it."

The School House forwards were pressing hard. The New House team had been for some minutes penned in their own area. Kerr had cleared twice with wonderful kicks, but each time the ball was promptly brought back. It looked as if that attack was to be driven home, and that all depended upon Fatty Wynn.

Just then a lad in uniform pressed his way through the crowd and stood on the edge of the field, waving a buff, coloured envelope in his hand.

"My hat!" ejaculated Blake. "It's a telegraph-boy, and he's got a telegram for one of the fellows playing!"

One of the linesmen ran up to the lad and spoke to him. Blake did not hear what was said. The ball went into touch, and in the pause that followed the linesman spoke to the referee, who happened to be Lefevre of the Fifth.

Lefevre nodded and held up his hand.

"Telegram for you, Tom Merry," he said. "Will you see it now, Merry, or leave it till after the match?"

Tom Merry looked round.

"Better see it, if I may," he said.

"Buck up!"

Tom Merry took the envelope from the boy and slit it open. Every eye was upon him, and the footballers, not sorry for the pause after a gruelling game, breathed deeply.

Tom Merry looked at the black-lettered strip he took from the envelope. An expression of astonishment came over his face.

"Great Scott!"

"Bad news?" asked Monty Lowther quickly.

"No. But—I must be off."

"What?"

"I must go!"

"Go!" gasped half a dozen voices blankly.

"Yes," said Tom Merry. He thrust the telegram into the pocket of his football knickers. "I—I must go! It's important. I'm sorry, old chaps! I shall have to get out!"

He looked so distressed that no one could doubt that he was cut up at having to leave the match unfinished.

The footballers looked blank.

"You'll captain the team, Monty," said Tom Merry hurriedly. "Pack the goal, and keep 'em off. I'm awfully sorry. If you chaps knew how it was, you'd excuse me, I know."

And without another word he ran off the field.

He left the footballers and spectators staring blankly.

What did it mean?

CHAPTER 2.

No Luck!

F IGGINS of the New House looked after the disappearing figure of Tom Merry and gave a grunt.

"Well, this beats the deck!" he exclaimed. "It's rotten!"

"All the better for us, in a way," remarked French. "We shall beat them hands down now."

Figgins sniffed.

"I don't want to beat a team a man short."

"A vewy pwopah wemark, Figgins, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the School House. "A decidedly pwopah wemark. It shows the sportsman."

"Oh, rats!" said Figgins.

"Get on the field!" said Lefevre. "School House are playing a man short. No need to waste more time. That's what I say. Get on!"

"Hold on!" said Figgins. "The score's level now."

"Yaas, wathah; but it won't wemain so, deah boy."

"I bet it won't, with you playing a man short!" growled Figgins. "You won't have an earthly against us."

"Weally, Figgins—"

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"We're going to play it out on equal terms, and lick 'em fair and square," said Figgins. "I'm going off."

"What!"

"Bai Jove!"

"I mean it!" said Figgins resolutely. "School House have lost their captain, and New House can do the same."

"Oh, rot!" said Fatty Wynn. "We can't win without you, Figg!"

"I know the School House can't win without Tom Merry, and against eleven men," said Figgins. "I'm going off. If we beat 'em, we beat 'em fair and square. This isn't a blessed League match, with the result of a giddy competition hanging on it. It's a friendly match, and we're sportsmen. I'm going off. You'll skipper the team, Kerr."

"But—"

"It's all right. Go ahead and lick them."

And Figgins walked off the field.

There was a buzz of amazement among the crowd.

"What's Figgins going off for?"

"What's the matter?"

"Faith, and ain't they going to finish?"

"Come back, Figgins!"

Figgins did not turn back. Blake and Reilly met him as he came off the ground.

"What's the matter, Figg?" they demanded together.

"Nothing," said Figgins cheerfully.

"What are you coming off for?"

"I'm out of the team."

"What for?"

"Make things level."

They stared at him blankly.

"Well, you ass!" exclaimed Blake.

Figgins laughed.

"Fair play's a jewel," he said. "Let 'em fight it out, man to man—ten to ten. We shall lick the School House, anyway."

To which Blake and Reilly responded with one voice:

"Rats!"

Lefevre blew the whistle. The two teams lined up a man short. Monty Lowther was captaining the School House and Kerr of the New House team. There was but little time more to play, and the two teams went at it ding-dong.

"You're an ass, Figg!" said Jack Blake, giving the New House leader a dig in the ribs, as Figgins pulled his coat about him. "But you're an ass of the right sort."

"Faith, and he is!" said Reilly.

"Rot!" said Figgins.

"Hullo! There they go!"

The New House forwards were away with the ball.

Figgins watched them eagerly.

Figgins had been very chivalrous in leaving only ten men of the New House to face the School House ten, but there were perhaps fellows in his House who would criticise the action in a very hostile spirit if the side lost. Figgins was very keen to see his men win.

And they looked like winning.

As a matter of fact, the School House side already was not up to its usual strength, and Tom Merry was a greater loss to his side than Figgins was to his.

The School House game was wholly defence now.

At the most they were able to keep the ball to midfield, and soon this was over, and they had to mass in to defend their goal.

The fast forwards of the New House kept up a rain of shots.

It seemed quite certain that sooner or later the ball would find the net, and Figgins looked on with a confident grin, while Blake watched very anxiously.

There was a sudden roar from the crowd:

"Goal!"

The leather was in.

The New House were one up!

Blake grunted.

"Done!" he said.

Figgins chuckled softly.

"What did I tell you?" he demanded.

"Oh, rats!"

The School House side had no chance to equalise. They played up to keep down the margin of winning goals, and that was all they could do. If the game had lasted longer the score would have gone up for the New House.

Lefevre blew the whistle at last.

The teams trooped off the field, with the score still at two for the New House, and one for their rivals.

Figgins' eyes were dancing. He clapped Kerr on the back, and punched Fatty Wynn in the ribs.

"Good old New House!" he exclaimed. "I knew we should do it!"

The School House fellows were glum enough.

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They did not like being beaten, and they felt that fortune had been unkind to them.

But for Tom Merry being called away, the New House would never have had that goal, they felt certain; in fact, the School House would probably have scored again. Tom Merry's telegram had done the business for them.

"It's rotten!" said Blake, who felt the disappointment just as keenly as if he had been playing. "It's simply rotten!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I wegard it as wotten, too, deah boy; but it cannot be helped."

Monty Lowther growled.

"What on earth has Tom Merry gone for?"

"Yes; that's the question," said Kangaroo. "What did he want to slope off for just at the ticklish point of the game?"

"Telegram," remarked Digby.

"Oh, blow the telegram!"

"Yaas, wathah! Blow the beastly telegwam!"

"It's rotten!"

"Utahly wotten, deah boy!"

"Blessed if Tom Merry oughtn't to be jolly well bumped for it!" Manners exclaimed in an exasperated tone. "I suppose he'll be bolting off in the middle of the Grammar School match next Saturday, too."

"He ought to be turned out of the team," said Gore.

"Oh, you shut up, Gore!" said half a dozen voices at once.

The fellows might go for Tom Merry themselves, but they weren't disposed to let the cad of the Shell run him down.

Gore scowled and walked away. Whenever he tried to get in a dig at Tom Merry, it seemed to turn out like this.

"We'll jolly well tell Tom Merry what we think of him when he comes back, anyway," said Clifton Dane.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"When is he coming back, I wonder?"

The fellows were wondering that for some time. Darkness fell, but Tom Merry had not returned. Manners and Lowther, who were Tom Merry's study-mates in the Shell passage, had the tea all ready at the usual time, but Tom Merry did not arrive to partake of it.

After waiting some time, Manners and Lowther had their tea, and they ate in silence. An uneasy feeling was beginning to seize upon them that something might have happened to Tom Merry.

"Where the dickens can he be?" Manners exclaimed at last, as he rose from the study tea-table.

Lowther shook his head.

"Blessed if I can guess."

"He said it wasn't bad news in the telegram; he can't have gone home," Manners went on. "If it had been from his old governess, Miss Fawcett, Tom would have said so."

"I think he would."

"Where can he be?"

"Give it up."

The chums of the Shell went downstairs. Blake & Co. were standing in the passage with a group of other juniors, all discussing the strange conduct of Tom Merry.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy turned his monocle upon Manners and Lowther as they joined the group.

"Have you heard anythin' of him, deah boys?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"Vewy curious that the duffah hasn't turned up yet."

"Can't make it out," said Monty Lowther. "I'm going down to the gate to wait for him."

Manners and Lowther went out into the dusky quadrangle. Half a dozen of the juniors followed them, all in a state of wonderment.

CHAPTER 3.

Tom Merry Declines to Explain!

MONTY LOWTHER looked out into the shadowed high road that ran in the direction of the village of Rylcombe. In the distance a dim lamp gleamed, but the road looked very dark.

Two or three of the juniors strolled back to the House after a time. The evening was cold, and the waiting at the gate was not enjoyable.

Monty Lowther and Manners were growing anxious. Blake and the other Fourth Formers were more inclined to be indignant as eight o'clock struck, and there was no sign of Tom Merry.

"It's silly," said Jack Blake. "He must be doing this on purpose. It's a jape!"

"Bai Jove! It's quite poss."

"Rats!" said Lowther. "It's not a jape."

"What is it, then?"

"Might be an accident."

"Well, it might be."



"Good-bye, Tom Mewwy!" said Gussy as he pressed Tom's hand. "And good luck!" "Jump out of the carriage, you ass!" exclaimed Blake. "The train's starting!" D'Arcy did! He made a hurried leap from the compartment, cannoned into Blake, and sent him flying!

"Yaas, wathah, deah boys! Accidents will happen, you know, in the best wegulated colls," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy sagely.

"I tell you what!" exclaimed Herries suddenly. "I've got a jolly good idea. Let's go and find him."

"How are we to find him, ass?" said Blake. "We don't even know in what direction he's gone, and we haven't the faintest idea where to look."

"We can follow his trail."

"Rats!"

"I'll put Towser on the track——"

"Towser!"

"Yes, rather—my bulldog, Towser. You know what a dab he is at following a trail," said Herries.

"Well, of all the asses——"

"Look here, Blake——"

"Blow Towser! I'm getting fed-up with Towser," said Blake crossly.

"You ass!"

"Weally, Hewwies, I agree with Blake. I decline to have Towsah introduced into the mattah at all," said Arthur Augustus. "That wotten dog has no respect what-eva for a fellow's twousahs!"

"Hallo!" exclaimed Monty Lowther, before Herries could reply. "Here comes somebody."

Footsteps sounded on the road.

The juniors looked out of the gateway eagerly.

A boyish, sturdy form loomed up in the dusk of the evening, under the shadows of the roadside trees.

"Tom Merry!"

Tom came on slowly towards the school. He appeared very fatigued, and his steps were slow and heavy.

He started a little as he saw the group of juniors in the school gateway, and nodded.

They stopped him as he came in, and a shower of questions descended upon him at once.

"Where have you been?"

"What's the row?"

"Who was that telegram from?"

"Speak up, duffer!"

"Make a clean breast of it, you ass!"

"Can't!"

Tom Merry uttered the monosyllable quietly, in a tired voice. It was clear that the hero of the Shell had been exerting himself, and the mud on his boots and on his trousers showed that he had been a great deal across country.

The juniors gave a sort of howl.

"Can't?" shouted Blake.

"Bai Jove! Can't?"

"You mean you won't!" said Lowther wrathfully.

Tom Merry looked distressed.

"Own up, you ass!" said Manners.

"Out with it!" roared Lowther.

"Look here, you chaps, I'm tired!" said Tom Merry. "Let's get in and get a rest before you jaw at me."

Lowthers and Manners melted at once. There was no doubt that Tom Merry was tired; his voice, his drooping eyes, and his heavy limbs showed that.

"Of course, Tommy!" said Lowther. "Come on! Do leave off worrying him, you Fourth Form duffers. Can't you see he's tired?"

"Well, I like that!" exclaimed Blake, in astonishment.

"It was you——"

"Oh, don't argue!"

"Why, you chump!"

"Come on, Tommy, and don't take any notice of these Fourth Form kids," said Manners loftily.

And Lowther and Manners marched Tom Merry off between them, leaving the Fourth Formers staring after them in wrath and indignation.

"Well, my only hat!" ejaculated Blake.

"Bai Jove!"

"The cheek of it!"
 "We'll jolly well make him own up!"
 "Yaas, wathah!"
 "To go off like that!" said Blake, in a tone of great exasperation. "To go off like—like a blessed gun, and never give a word of explanation, after making his House lose a footer match!"

"Howwid!"
 "We'll make him own up what it's all about, anyway."
 "Yaas, wathah!"
 And the exasperated Fourth Formers followed the chums of the Shell.

Tom Merry entered the School House with his chums, and found fellows anxious to know the history of the mystery, so to speak, at nearly every step.

To all of them he returned the same answer.
 He had nothing to say, and he was too tired to talk, anyway.

The Terrible Three went up to their study to get out of the questioning. Monty Lowther glanced back from the landing, and saw Blake & Co. coming upstairs, looking very businesslike and determined.

"Those blessed Fourth Form bounders are following us!" he exclaimed. "They mean to come to the study."

Tom Merry grinned.
 "Let's lock the door," he said.
 "Ha, ha, ha!"

The Terrible Three ran into their study, and Monty Lowther slammed the door and turned the key in the lock.

The next minute there came a hammering at the outside of the door. The Fourth Formers had arrived.

Tom Merry sank into an armchair to rest, breathing heavily. Manners and Lowther stood just within the door and grinned.

Bang, bang, bang!
 "Open this door!" roared Jack Blake, through the key-hole.

"Rats!"
 "We'll bust it in!"
 "Bust away!"
 "You—you Shell bounders! We're going to ask Tom Merry questions!" yelled Digby.

"Yaas, wathah!"
 "Ask 'em through the keyhole!" grinned Lowther.

"Will he answer them, then?"
 "Oh, no!"
 Bang, bang, bang!
 "Open this door!"
 "Go it, my sons! The door's as hard as your own head, and you know how hard it is to get through that!" chuckled Lowther.

There was an answering chuckle from the passage.
 "Bai Jove, I wegard that as wathah funny!"
 Jack Blake stared frigidly at his elegant chum.

"You ass—"
 "Weally, Blake—"
 "You frabjous chump—"
 "I wefuse to be chawactewised as a fwabjous chump!" said Arthur Augustus, with dignity. "I wegard the expwession as oppwobvious."

Blake snorted, and turned to the door again. He delivered a kick on the lower panels that made the door ring, and made him give a gasp of pain himself.

"Will you open this door?" he yelled.
 "Not this evening."
 "Will you open—"
 "Some other evening!"
 Bang! Kick! Thump! Bang!

The voice of a prefect was heard shouting up the stairs, and the attack on the study door ceased suddenly. Scuttling footsteps were heard as the Fourth Formers fled.

"They're gone!" chuckled Monty Lowther, turning towards Tom Merry. "It's all right, Tommy—all serene!"

"How did the match go?" asked Tom Merry.
 "New House won."

"Oh!"
 "We went to pieces after you left," said Manners. "Like your cheek to go in the middle of a game, I think. But I suppose it was something awfully important."

Tom Merry nodded.
 "You're not going to confide it to all those Fourth Form kids, I suppose?"

"No, I can't."
 "It's a secret?"
 "Well, yes."

"Good!" said Monty Lowther. "We'll help you keep it. Now we're here comfy by ourselves you can tell us."

"Yes, rather!" said Manners.
 Tom Merry coloured uncomfortably.

"I'm sorry," he said; "but—"
 "But what?" demanded the chums of the Shell together.
 "But I can't tell you anything."

CHAPTER 4.

The Secret!

THERE was a deep silence in the study.
 Manners and Lowther stared steadily at Tom Merry.

The hero of the Shell met their combined gaze for some seconds, and then his glance dropped, and his eyes sank to the floor.

He coloured with embarrassment; but the lines of his mouth were very firm and did not falter.

The silence lasted a full minute. Wrath was gathering in the faces of Lowther and Manners; discomfort and distress in Tom Merry's.

Monty Lowther broke the silence at last.
 "You can't tell us anything?" he exclaimed.

Tom Merry shook his head.
 "Not the Fourth Form kids, mind you," said Lowther, "but the chums of your own study—chaps who never have secrets from you; in fact, us!"

Tom Merry's colour deepened.

"I'm sorry, Monty, old man. But—but it's impossible!"

"Are you going to show us the telegram?"

"No, Monty."

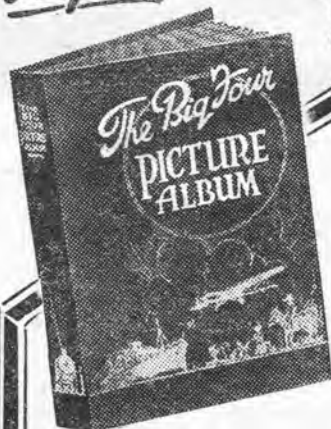
"Are you going to tell us anything about the matter at all?"

"No."

"Why not?"

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"It's a secret."
 "I've already offered to help you keep the giddy secret," said Monty Lowther.
 Tom Merry smiled faintly.
 "That's no good, Lowther. I can't tell you—I can't, really! If I could I would, honour bright!"
 "Not much good our staying here, Manners, as far as I can see," Monty Lowther remarked abruptly. "We may as well leave Tom Merry the whole study to keep his giddy secret in."
 "Certainly!" said Manners.
 Tom Merry rose quickly from his chair.
 "Look here, you fellows, don't be cads!" he exclaimed.
 "You can see that I'm worried about it, can't you?"
 "What's worrying you?"
 "The—the affair, you know."
 "The affair that took you away from the school this afternoon and made you throw away a House match?"
 "Yes."
 "And you can't tell us what it is?"
 "No."
 Monty Lowther went towards the door. Then he came back again, and stood in front of Tom Merry, looking at him steadily.
 "Tom, old man," he said quietly, "what is the matter?"
 Tom Merry flushed.
 "Nothing, Monty."
 "You're not in any trouble?"
 "I? Oh, no!"
 "Somebody you know is?"
 Tom Merry was silent.
 "Now, look here, Tommy, I'm not an inquisitive chap. You know I never go around prying into secrets. There's nothing about me like Mellish, I hope. But don't you think we're entitled to an explanation? You went off and lost us the match, and the whole House will want to know the reason. It's only to be expected, Tom. You can't expect them to take it without a word."
 "I can't help it."
 "You don't mean to give any explanation?"
 "I can't."
 "Not to us—your own chums?"
 "I can't, Monty."

Monty Lowther was silent for some moments. He looked at Manners, but Manners had no suggestions to offer; he only gave a grunt, which might have meant anything or nothing.

"Very well," said Lowther, at last, "I won't ask you any more questions, Tommy. The rest of the House will, I expect."

Tom Merry's face brightened.
 "Hang the rest of the House, Monty, so long as you two don't mind! Goodness knows I'd tell you if I could; but—the secret's not mine. I know I could trust you; but—a word might get outside. Besides, I've promised!"
 "You're speaking as if something serious were the matter, Tom."

"I don't mean exactly that."

"Well, let it drop," said Monty Lowther. "Look here, you're tired, and you must be hungry. We waited tea for you a jolly long time, but as you didn't come we had it. We'll get you some more."

"You're jolly good, old chap!"
 "Oh, rats!"

Lowther stirred up the fire and placed the kettle upon the glowing coals. Manners made toast and buttered it.

Tom Merry dropped into the armchair again, and sat, moody and pensive, gazing into the fire.

His chums gazed at him several times, but did not speak. They had asked him questions, and he did not wish to answer them. The matter was finished with, so far as they were concerned.

The tea and the toast were soon ready, with boiled eggs and bloater-paste to garnish the meal. Tom Merry ate heartily. He was hungry, and the secret he was keeping, whatever it was, evidently had no effect in diminishing his healthy appetite.

He had finished his tea, mostly in silence, when a tap came at the door.

"Oh, go away!" shouted Lowther.

"Eh? What's that?" came back, in the voice of Figgins.
 "Oh, is it you, Figgins?"

Lowther unlocked the door, and threw it open.
 Figgins of the New House grinned cheerfully into the study.

"I heard that Tom Merry had come in," he remarked. "I thought I'd run over and see him, and ask him what he left in the middle of the match for?"

Lowther gave a grunt. He knew in advance how Figgins' question was likely to be answered.

"Anything wrong, Tom Merry?" Figgins asked.

"No, thanks!" said Tom Merry uncomfortably.

"What did you bolt off like that for?"

"I had a telegram."
 Figgins grinned.
 "Yes, I know that," he said; "I saw it. I mean, what was it all about? Not a secret, is it?" added Figgins, a new thought striking him.
 "Well, yes, in a way, it is," said Tom Merry, turning very red.

Figgins stared at him in astonishment for a moment, and then ejaculated "Oh!" in a very expressive tone. Then he nodded to the chums of the Shell and walked away, whistling. He left an uncomfortable silence behind in Tom Merry's study.

CHAPTER 5. The Rumour!

"THIS won't do, deah boys!"
 Arthur Augustus D'Arcy made this statement. He was standing on the hearthrug in Study No. 6, with his back to the fire and his hands in his trousers pockets, laying down the law.

Blake, Herries, and Digby were at the table, and were supposed to be doing their prep—so was D'Arcy, for that matter—but they hadn't begun yet.

Blake was nibbling the handle of his pen; Digby was drumming on the table with his knuckles; Herries was staring at D'Arcy.

"It won't do!" repeated the swell of St. Jim's.

"Eh?" said Blake absently.

"I wepeat, Blake, that it won't do."

"What won't do?"

"This wot of Tom Mewwy's."

"Oh, Tom Merry!" said Blake, rousing himself from his gloomy abstraction. "That's just what I was thinking about, as a matter of fact."

"Same here," said Digby.

"And here," added Herries. "I was just trying to think if Towser would be of any use in the matter."

D'Arcy gave Herries a most expressive glance through his monocle and then resumed.

"Listen, deah boys! There is somethin' the mattah with our fwient Tom Mewwy—somethin' wathah sewious."

"Go hon!" said Blake. "As the whole school has known that for twenty-four hours, Gussy, you can't expect us to jump."

"Pway don't be an ass, Blake! That was only a remark to begin with—"

"Oh, a sort of preliminary canter!" suggested Digby.

"I wish you wouldn't intewwupt me. It throwes me into a fluttah. What I mean to say is that if Tom Mewwy is in twouble we've got to back him up like—like anythin'."

"Hear, hear!"

"Vewy good, deah boys! Of course, Tom Mewwy is a Shell chap, and the Shell are mostly swankin' boundahs who do not undahstand the pwopah posish of the Fourth Form in this school. But if Tom Mewwy is in twouble, I suggest ovahlookin' that, and standin' by him like—like—"

"Like Britons!" said Digby.

"Yaas, wathah! Like Bwitions! We'll stick to the old chap like—like—"

"Glue?"

"Weally, Dig—"

"Well, sealing-wax, then?"

"I wufuse to take notice of remarks made in a fwivolous spiwit. Now, deah boys, Tom Mewwy has been goin' about lookin' like a cheap mourner at a funewal evah since he had that beastlay telegwam."

"And lost us the House match," remarked Herries.

"Nevah mind the House match now, Hewwies. Bothah

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the House match! If Tom Mewwy is in twouble, even footah will have to take a back seat."

"Yes, rather!" said Blake. "We'll forgive him the House match, but—"

"To wesume—"

"Is this a lecture, Gussy, or a penny reading?"

"To wesume," said Arthur Augustus, without heeding that question. "I wegard it as our duty to look into the mattah. Tom Mewwy may be a Shell boundah, but there's no denyin' that he's decent all through, and we like him, and if he's in twouble we're goin' to get him out of it somehow."

"Hear, hear!"

"I wefuse to allow him to wemain in twouble, in fact," said D'Arcy. "When I know the facts I shall bwing my bwaïn-powah to bear upon the mattah, and all will be—"

"Calm and bright," said Digby.

"Weally, you ass—"

"Gussy's idea is all right!" exclaimed Jack Blake, rising from the table. "Look here, you chaps, I feel worried about Tom Merry. Something serious has happened, there's no doubt about that, and he won't say a word about what it is. I think all his friends ought to insist upon his explaining, so that they can help him."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I'm blessed if I can stick at prep!" said Blake. "Let's risk a row in the morning and chuck it!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Now let's go and look for Tom Merry."

"I was about to suggest it, deah boys."

The four chums, somewhat relieved at having made up their minds to do something, quitted Study No. 6.

Gore and Mellish were in the passage, and they were talking, with grinning faces.

Blake grunted at the sight of them.

"Hallo! Here's somebody in bad luck, or these rotters wouldn't be looking so pleased!" he exclaimed. "What's the news, Mellish?"

The cad of the Fourth grinned.

"Haven't you heard?" he asked.

"No. Somebody going to be sacked, or flogged?" asked Blake sarcastically. "It must be something of the sort for you to be enjoying it like this."

"It's about Tom Merry," said Mellish.

"Oh, Tom Merry!"

"Yes," said Gore. "Of course, we don't know it for a fact. It's a rumour that got around. But considering what Tom Merry's been looking like ever since he got that telegram—"

"Why, it looks as if it were true, that's all," finished Mellish.

"Exactly!"

"But what is it?" demanded Blake.

"Yaas, wathah! What's the news, deah boys?"

"About Tom Merry."

"Well, what about him?" shouted Blake. "If you don't trot it out pretty soon, Mellish, you'll get a thick ear!"

Mellish smiled unpleasantly.

"Oh, there's not much in it!" he said. "Only the fellows are saying Tom Merry is ruined."

"Ruined!" exclaimed the four chums at once.

"That's it."

"Bai Jove!"

"What rot!" exclaimed Blake angrily. "How could he be ruined?"

"Well, that's what they say."

"Where did you chaps hear it?"

"Crooke told me."

"Where's Crooke?" demanded Blake abruptly.

"In the Common-room, I believe."

"Did he say how he knew?"

"He said he'd heard it."

"Oh, come on, you chaps!" said Blake. And he turned off towards the Common-room instead of going to Tom Merry's study.

Crooke was in the Junior Common-room, and there was a buzz of talk going on among the fellows there. Blake walked straight up to Gerald Crooke.

"What's this you've been saying about Tom Merry?" he exclaimed.

Crooke looked at him sneeringly.

"I? Nothing!"

"You said he was ruined."

"I said I'd heard so."

"Very well," said Blake. "And where did you hear it? I want to get hold of the chap who started the yarn and bump him!"

Crooke moved back a pace, but the chums of the Fourth were round him and he could not get away. He laughed a little uneasily.

"Come on!" said Blake. "Who told you?"

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"I forget."

"Oh, you forget, do you?"

"Weally, Cwooke, I am extremely sowwy to doubt anybody's word, you know, but I cannot believe that statement," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy emphatically.

"You can do as you choose about that," said Crooke, turning away.

But he was swung back again in a moment; Herries' muscular grip was upon him. He glared at Herries, but the burly Fourth Former was not scared.

"You'll stay here and speak up," said Herries. "My belief is that you invented the yarn yourself as one up against Tom Merry. I know you're a rotter. Towser always disliked you!"

"Look here—"

"Where did you get that yarn from?" asked Blake. "I may as well mention that, if you don't contrive to remember, we shall bump you hard!"

"Look here, I got it from no one."

"Then you made it up?"

"No, I didn't! It's true!"

"Even if it's true, how did you learn it? I'm jolly certain that Tom Merry never made any confidences to you."

"Faith, and you're roight!" said Reilly of the Fourth. "Sure, Crooke may have found it out by listening at a door!"

"Bai Jove! I wegard that as extremely poss."

"I did not!"

"How did you learn it, then?" demanded Blake relentlessly.

"Hang you!" said Crooke. "I've seen the telegram!"

CHAPTER 6.

Painful for Crooke!

THERE was a sudden silence.

Most of the fellows in the Common-room were listening to the altercation, and they heard what Crooke said.

"The telegram!"

All of them remembered, of course, that Tom Merry had received a sudden telegram which called him away from the House match the previous afternoon.

It had not occurred to anybody to look for the telegram. There were few fellows in the School House who would have gratified their curiosity by looking at another fellow's private correspondence. Mellish might have done so, if he had thought of it, and if he had had the courage to risk it. Crooke, evidently, had thought of it, and had risked it.

"The telegram!" repeated Blake.

"Yes!"

"Bai Jove! The telegwam! I nevah thought of that. You mean, that Tom Mewwy showed you the telegwam, Cwooke?" said D'Arcy.

Crooke was silent.

It had not occurred to Arthur Augustus that Crooke had spied upon the hero of the Shell, and read his telegram without permission; but it occurred to the other fellows quickly enough.

"Did Tom Merry show you the telegram?" asked Blake sternly.

"No!" said Crooke sullenly.

"Then how do you know what was on it?"

"I've seen it!"

"You've spied, you mean!"

Crooke shrugged his shoulders.

"I didn't see why we shouldn't know the facts. Tom Merry has been making a heap of mystery about it."

"So you found the telegram?"

"He put it in the pocket of his football bags. He never thought of taking it out again, I suppose. I found it there!"

"You looked in his clothes when he wasn't wearing them to find the telegram?"

"Yes!"

"And read it without asking permission?"

"Oh, rats! Yes!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Well, of all the mean cads," said Blake, "I think you take the biscuit, Crooke!"

"Blessed if he doesn't prance off with the whole biscuit factory!" growled Digby.

"Gweat Scott! Of all the mean wottahs—"

"You were anxious enough to hear what was on the telegram, anyway," said Crooke with a sneer.

"We wanted to get at the starter of the yarn," said Blake sternly, "and we've got him now."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"A fellow who would spy into another fellow's correspondence would tell lies about it afterwards!"

"Yaas, wathah!"
 "Faith, and ye're roight!"
 "So Crooke is most likely lying," said Blake. "Anyway, lying or not, he's going to be jolly well bumped for spying!"

"Look here——"
 "Collar him!"

Crooke made a desperate rush to escape. But a dozen pairs of hands fastened upon him, and he was dragged back, struggling and kicking furiously.

"Ow!" roared Kangaroo of the Shell, as he received a kick on the shin, and began to hop. "Ow! Yow! Squash him!"

And Crooke was promptly squashed. He rolled on the floor, with six or seven juniors rolling over him.

"Bai Jove!" gasped D'Arcy. "If the fellow had any decency, he wouldn't wesisit at all; he would be wathah glad to be bumped, as a warnin' not to be so wotten next time!"

Then he has an uncle in India who's rolling in money, so I've heard, anyway," Kangaroo remarked. "An old chap with lakhs and lakhs of rupees."

"Quite wight!"
 Monty Lowther and Manners had been present at the scene, but had taken no active part in it. They had seemed almost stunned by the information Crooke gave. Lowther now spoke for the first time.

"I hope there's nothing in it," he said.
 "There can't be," said Manners uneasily. "I should think Tom Merry would have told us."

"Oh, he might be keeping it dark!" said a boy called Clampe. "You see, he'll have to leave here if he can't pay his fees, and he'd naturally keep that secret as long as possible!"

"Wats!"
 "That's my opinion," said Clampe angrily.
 "Blow your opinion, deah boy!"

"Oh, it's true, I'm afraid," said Hancock. "You see,



Binks smiled and raised his cap politely as he came up the path towards Tom Merry and his governess. "Good-afternoon, Master Merry!" he exclaimed. "Hallo, Binks!" said Tom, as he held out his hand. "But I'm not Master Merry now. I'm leaving St. Jim's."

"Collar him!"
 "Bump him!"
 "Bump the cad!"
 Crooke was dragged to his feet. Still struggling, he was bumped upon the hard floor, once, twice, thrice!

Then, rumpled and ruffled and very dusty, he was allowed to go.

Arthur Augustus pointed to the door.
 "Go, you uttah wottah!" he exclaimed. "I wegard you with feahful contempt!"

"Hang you!" muttered Crooke. "I——"
 "Get out!" roared the juniors.

There was a threatening movement towards Crooke again, and he got out. He left the Common-room, and passed Tom Merry in the passage, giving the hero of the Shell a bitter look that surprised him.

There was a buzz in the Common-room after Crooke had gone.

The news, however Crooke had obtained it, was generally believed by the juniors in the School House.

It accounted for the hitherto inexplicable conduct of Tom Merry, which had puzzled all his friends.

Blake held the opposite view, but the general impression was that Crooke had told the truth, and that he had read the telegram announcing Tom Merry's ruin.

"But it's all rot!" said Blake obstinately. "How can Tom Merry be ruined? We know Miss Fawcett is his guardian, and she's awfully rich."

Tom Merry must have some weight on his mind the way he's been looking. Then he had a telegram this morning, and a letter this afternoon."

"Well, chaps have had telegrams and letters before!"

"I know that, but——"
 "You are a duffah, deah boy!"

"Yes. I don't believe a word of it," said Blake determinedly. "Besides, didn't Tom Merry say it wasn't bad news when he received the telegram yesterday?"

"He said it wasn't exactly bad news," said Lowther thoughtfully.

"Well, being ruined wouldn't be exactly bad news, I suppose?"

"Perhaps it wasn't certain," Clifton Dane suggested. "He may have doubted it until he had some confirmation, you know!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"By George! And perhaps that's why he's not telling us till he knows!"

"Extwemely pwob, deah boy. In any case," said D'Arcy, "if Tom Mewwy is wuined, he'll always have some twusty chums to stand by him, you know!"

"Hear, hear!"

"In fact, I should uttally wefuse to let him be wuined, so long as I have a shot in the locker!"

"Same here!"

"Yes, rather!"

"In fact, we shall all stick to him like—like glue!"

said Digby. "But I jolly well hope it isn't so bad as that!"

"Yaas, wathah! But——"

"Oh, stuff!" said Clampe. "It's plain enough, I think! Tom Merry's ruined!"

As Clampe spoke, Tom Merry stepped into the Common-room. He heard the words and stopped short. There was a breathless hush. Tom Merry had heard Clampe say that he was ruined, and surely the truth must come to light now!

Tom Merry stood still for a moment, his face going red and white. Then he walked directly up to the Shell fellow.

"What did you say, Clampe?" he asked quietly.

Clampe gave him a look of defiance.

"I said I believe the rumour that you are ruined," he said.

"Who told you?"

"Everybody knows it."

Tom Merry glanced at Blake.

"Crooke has been spying into your telegram," said Blake, in explanation. "He says he read in it that you are ruined, Tommy. But, of course, we know it's a lie."

Tom Merry smiled in a constrained way.

"It's not a lie, Blake," he said.

"What?"

"It's true!"

CHAPTER 7.

Ruined!

"TRUE!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Tom!"

"Tom, old fellow!"

Tom Merry's friends were round him at once. Even the fellows there who did not like him—they were few in number—were silent. The strain in his face told how hard Tom Merry was tasked to keep his emotion in control.

"Ruined!"

It seemed scarcely possible. Tom Merry had always seemed to his friends a fellow specially favoured by fortune, a spoiled darling nursed in the lap of the gods.

He had always had money, he had always had good health and good looks, and he had always had good luck and true friends.

Life had seemed a primrose path opening before the hero of the Shell. It was as though black thunder clouds had blotted out the sunshine of a fair and calm summer's day.

"Tom! Ruined! Good heavens!" muttered Monty Lowther.

"Tom! Can't be so bad as that!"

"Bai Jove!" That was all D'Arcy could think to say. His looks showed how deeply sympathetic he was, but all he could think of saying was "Bai Jove!" And he said it several times.

Tom Merry nodded.

"It's true," he said.

"Ruined!" repeated Blake. "But—but how?"

"I'll tell you," said Tom Merry. "I intended to tell my own chums first, and let the other fellows know it later. I came here for Manners and Lowther. But you may as well all know it now. It won't be a secret much longer."

"Go ahead, Tommy!"

"That wire I had yesterday in the footer match," said Tom Merry, "was the first I heard of it—that anything was wrong. Here it is. You can read it out, Monty, if the fellows care to hear it."

If they cared to hear! The whole room was silent, and the juniors were pressing forward in an eager ring to hear.

The telegram was brief.

"My darling Tommy! We are ruined—quite ruined."

That was all. There was no signature.

"You see, it was handed in at Huckleberry Heath, where my old governess' house is," said Tom Merry quietly. "That, and the way it begins, would naturally make me think it was from my governess and guardian, Miss Fawcett. But as it was not signed, I suspected—hoped, at least—that it was a jape played on me by somebody. There are fellows at Huckleberry Heath I've had rows with, you know."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I couldn't say anything. I hoped it was a jape, and—and I had another suspicion I needn't mention," said Tom Merry, colouring a little. "Well, I left the footer match, and went to the village to wire an inquiry. I didn't want to alarm Miss Fawcett by telegraphing to Laurel Villa, in case it should be a hoax. If it had turned out to be one I should never have mentioned the matter to her."

"Then whom did you wire to?" asked Lowther.

"To Mr. Dodds, the curate of Huckleberry Heath. You

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remember the chap who came here to play cricket once. You fellows met him at Laurel Villa, too."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I sent him a wire to ask him to inquire for me, and let me know," said Tom Merry. "I waited at the post office, and tramped round the lanes while I was waiting for his answer. That's what kept me out so long."

"And——"

"And he replied. He had been to Laurel Villa to inquire for me, and he found that Miss Fawcett was too ill to see him. But as she was too ill to see him, he concluded that she could not have sent me the telegram, as Hannah, her maid, knew nothing about it; but he said he would inquire at the local post office and let me know."

"And he did?"

"I had a letter from him this morning," said Tom Merry. "A man was away from the post office, and when Mr. Dodds found him there was some difficulty in getting the information, but he learned that Miss Fawcett had sent a telegram to me—she had been to the post office and sent it—so that was settled."

"And then you knew that you were ruined?"

"Well, no. I thought there might be some mistake yet." Tom Merry coloured again. There was evidently more in his mind than he chose to utter before so many fellows. "But I've had a letter to-day that's settled it. All my money's gone, and my uncle——"

His voice faltered.

"Your uncle in India?" asked Blake.

"Yes, General Merry. He was on active service on the Afghan frontier, and he's disappeared. The Afghans have taken him."

"Oh!"

"He's a prisoner, or dead—nobody knows," said Tom Merry, his lip trembling. "Goodness knows if I shall ever see him again. It was the news of that that made them come down on my poor old governess."

The juniors stared at him blankly.

"Well, I'm done. All my money's gone, and I expect I shall have to leave St. Jim's."

"Leave St. Jim's?"

"Great Scott!"

"You—you can't! You shan't!"

The juniors looked at one another, and at the pale face of Tom Merry. Leave St. Jim's! What would St. Jim's be like without Tom Merry?

"Anyway, I'm going home for a time," said Tom Merry. "Whether I come back or not will depend on circumstances. Of course, you may be jolly well sure that I shall come back if I can."

"Bai Jove!"

"Wh-wh-when are you going?"

"I must go to-night."

"Have you seen the Head?"

"Yes."

"Then he knows it all?"

"I've told him everything."

"My hat, it's—it's rotten!" said Blake, and there was a suspicious shake in his voice. "Tom Merry, old son, I—I don't know what to say."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I've got a suggestion to make," said Herries, in his slow, practical way. "I think some tea in the study would buck Tom Merry up before he starts."

Tom Merry smiled faintly.

"Quite right," he said. "I haven't eaten anything since I had that letter. I'd like to have a talk with you chaps before I go."

"We'll have tea in Study No. 6!" exclaimed Blake eagerly. "A ripping feed, and then we'll come with you to Huckleberry Heath."

"Hear, hear!"

Tom Merry shook his head sadly.

"Thanks, old man, but it won't do. You couldn't help me there. My governess is ill, and the place is full of trouble. I shall have to stand it. I'll let you chaps know how I get on."

"Quite wight, pewwaps, as fah as Blake is concerned," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy slowly. "But in a case like this, Tom Mewwy, what you wequiah to have with you is a fellow of tact and judgment, you know. I weally think I had bettah come."

"Thanks, D'Arcy, but no."

"I weally think, undah the circs——"

"Come on, Gussy; let's get the grub in!" exclaimed Blake, dragging his elegant chum away by the arm.

"Weally, Blake——"

"Come on!"

"I was speakin' to Tom Mewwy——"

"Never mind; come on!"

And Blake rushed D'Arcy off. Herries and Digby hurried away to Study No. 6 to get the fire blazing and prepare for tea. Tom Merry, Manners, and Monty Lowther

followed him more slowly. The other fellows held back. They were mostly friends of Tom Merry's; but his own chums were with him now, and he wanted to talk to them, and the other fellows respected the more intimate claims of Manners and Lowther.

"I—I couldn't say before all the other fellows, you know," said Tom Merry, in a low voice; "but—but I had another reason for keeping the secret—a stronger one."

"I thought you had, Tommy."

"When I found that Miss Priscilla had really sent me a telegram—and one so incoherently—and was very ill, too, I—I was afraid that it wasn't a hoax, or true, either, but—but—" Tom Merry paused, and flushed. "Well, you know that Miss Fawcett is old, and I feared that some shock might have set her brain wandering, you know. It might happen. The thing seemed too fearful and unexpected to be true, and it might have been a—a hallucination, you know. I wouldn't say a word, you see, until it was quite confirmed one way or another, and if it had turned out to be a mere hallucination of Miss Fawcett's I should never have spoken about it at all."

"I quite understand, old chap," said Manners, pressing his arm. "You must excuse us for having asked you questions; it was only because we wanted to help you."

"I know that, old chap."

The Terrible Three turned their steps towards Study No. 6, and arrived there just as Jack Blake and D'Arcy came rushing in with their arms full of parcels.

CHAPTER 8.

The Last Feed!

JACK BLAKE slammed down a heap of bags and parcels on the table in Study No. 6. Digby already had the kettle boiling, and had warmed the teapot ready for brewing the tea. Herries was making mountains of toast.

The chums of Study No. 6 had only one idea in their minds. Tom Merry was in trouble, and there seemed to be no way of helping him out; but at least they could stand him one last big feed before he left the old school—perhaps for ever.

That was a practical way of showing their sympathy, at all events. And money had been clubbed up so quickly, and expended in a really imposing array of eatables. If Tom Merry had eaten a tenth part of what was provided for him he would certainly have needed to go to a hospital rather than to Laurel Villa.

The fragrant scent of the tea filled the study.

A fat face looked in at the door, and there was an appreciative sniff. The chums, looking round, saw Fatty Wynn of the New House.

"Hallo, Fatty!" exclaimed Blake. "Did you scent the feed from across the quad?"

Fatty Wynn glared with indignation.

"No, I did not!" he exclaimed. "I didn't know there was a feed. I came over because of a silly yarn I'd just heard about Tom Merry. Figgy and Kerr are here."

"Yes, here we are!" said Figgins, introducing his lengthy person into the study. "I'm glad the news isn't true."

"Yes, rather!" said Kerr. "I suppose if it were true you wouldn't be keeping it up in this way. Come on, Fatty; let's get off. We didn't really come to tea."

"Hold on!" said Blake. "What have you heard?"

"That Tom Merry's ruined—lost all his tin," said Figgins. "Of course, we don't believe a word of it. It's one of Mellish's lies."

"It's true," said Tom Merry.

"What!"

"Mellish has told the truth this time," said Blake. "Wonders will never cease, you know."

"By George!" said Figgins.

"True?" repeated Fatty Wynn. "Are you really done in, Tom Merry?"

"I'm afraid so."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm leaving St. Jim's this evening by the seven-thirty," Tom Merry explained. "The chaps are giving me a feed before I start. That's all. I hope you fellows will stay. I don't know if I shall be coming back, and it may be the last feed we shall have together."

"Oh, rotten!" said Figgins dismally.

"Yes, rather!" remarked Fatty Wynn. "I think each chap should make it a point, under the circumstances, to eat as much as possible, as it may be the last feed."

"Bai Jove!"

"Sit down, you chaps, where you can find room," said Blake cordially. "Tea's quite ready, and there's plenty."

"Yaas, wathah!"

The juniors clustered round the table. Fatty Wynn immediately proceeded to live up to his words, and ate as

(Continued on next page.)



Do you know a good joke? If so, send it to "THE GEM JESTER," 5, Carmelite Street, London, E.C.4 (Comp.). Fine footballs are awarded every week for the two best jokes received, and a half-a crown is paid for every other joke that appears in this column.

PITY THE POOR POET!

Poet: "And you think that I should put more fire into my verses?"

Editor: "Oh, no; quite the reverse!"

A football has been awarded to A. McCullum, 1a, Trafalgar Lane, Leith, Edinburgh.

THE BOSS' PRIVILEGE!

Boss: "What do you mean by arguing with me? Are you the boss here, or am I?"

Clerk: "I know I'm not."

Boss: "Then if you are not the boss, why do you talk like a fool?"

A football has been awarded to W. Salter, 3, Polar Place, Tredegar, Mon.

HELPFUL!

Lady: "I don't like the looks of that mackerel."

Fishmonger: "Well, madam, if it's looks you want, why don't you buy a goldfish?"

Half-a-crown has been awarded to D. Taylor, 27, Woodlands Terrace, Darlington, Durham.

THE HOWLER!

Tommy: "It says here, dad, that broadcasting has passed the infant stage."

Father (irritably): "I wish that infant next door had passed the broadcasting stage!"

Half-a-crown has been awarded to "A Reader," 26, Bideford Gardens, Low Fell, Co. Durham.

SNORE!

Lodger: "I slept like a log last night."

Landlady: "Umph! Sounded as though a saw was going through it!"

Half-a-crown has been awarded to L. Saunders, Braxholme Tasmania.

IT WAS THE FLOWER'S NAME!

Gardener: "This plant belongs to the begonia family."

Old Lady: "How kind of you to look after it for them!"

Half-a-crown has been awarded to H. Hitchman, Cross Lane, Braunston, near Rugby.

ONE FRIEND TO ANOTHER.

Brown: "I'm surprised at you refusing to lend me five shillings. One friend should always be willing to help the other."

Green: "I know—but you are always the other!"

Half-a-crown has been awarded to W. Swaine, 26, Cleveland Avenue, Siddal, Halifax, Yorkshire.

HE BEAT IT!

Guest: "I saw your family ghost last night."

Host: "It gave you a start, I'll bet."

Guest: "Believe me, I didn't need any start!"

Half-a-crown has been awarded to Miss G. Whereat, 42, Bibury Road, Gloucester.

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much as possible. Some of the juniors did not feel much like eating. Tom Merry, for once, had little appetite. But his chums reminded him that he had a long journey before him, and forced him to eat. And a good meal certainly bucked him up, and his face grew more coloured again and his eyes brighter.

"You can tell us as much as you like about it, or as little," Figgins remarked. "We're not curious, but, of course, we take an interest in the matter."

Tom Merry concisely explained.

"We're jolly sorry," said Figgins. "But look here—you must come back! If you can't raise the fees, we'll all club together and stand them amongst us."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Hear, hear!"

Tom Merry shook his head.

"Thanks awfully!" he said. "I knew you'd do it, but I couldn't have it, you know. If I've got no money, I shall have to look for something to do."

"Something to do?"

"Yes, I shall have to earn my living, you know."

"Bai Jove!"

Blake silently refilled Tom Merry's teacup. The juniors were silent. To most of the boys in England that question—to earn one's living—comes as a matter of course. But it had not presented itself to Tom Merry before. To earn his living—to make a way in the world for himself with his own hands—that, indeed, was a task that might well make a lad pause. Tom Merry was a splendid footballer, a fine cricketer; he was the head of his Form in classics; he could speak French well, and had a good knowledge of German. He could row, and box, and cycle, and swim, and run with anybody. He could construe Latin in a way that delighted his Form-master, and had made "swots" of the senior Form envy him. But when it came to earning his living—to finding a place in the world for himself and exacting his daily bread from a hard world, or perishing from want of it—Tom Merry was less fitted for the battle of life than the merest bootblack in the City street.

Binks, the page of the School House, had lately come into a fortune, and many of the fellows at St. Jim's had grinned at the way he spent his money. Binks had certainly made a duffer of himself. But it occurred to the fellows that Binks looked no more idiotic, suddenly becoming rich, than they would look if they suddenly became poor.

"Bai Jove!" said D'Arcy again, breaking the long silence at last. "That's—that's awful, you know! Fancy any chap havin' to earn his own livin', you know! It must be fearful! Lots of chaps do it, though."

Tom Merry smiled.

"I rather think the majority of chaps have to do it," he remarked.

"Yaas, I suppose so, when you come to think of it," said D'Arcy, slowly and thoughtfully. "I envy them, you know. They must be awfully clever."

"I hope we shall be awfully clever," said Tom Merry. "I shall have to do it."

"You'll always have your friends to stand by you, Tommy," said Lowther.

"I know that, Monty, but—but not to help me live in idleness," said Tom Merry. "I shall keep myself somehow. I'm not afraid to work, anyway. If a chap isn't willing to turn to and work when the time comes, it seems to me that he's not fit to live at all. I shall do it."

"But—but you simply must come back to St. Jim's."

Tom Merry was silent.

"Hold on!" said Kerr quietly. "The fees for the rest of this term will be paid, anyway, as fees here are paid in advance. You're all right till Christmas, Tommy."

"Yes, I'd forgotten that," said Tom Merry. "Christmas is jolly close, though. Still, you may be sure that I shall come back and finish out the term if I can." He looked at his watch. "I'm afraid I shall have to move soon."

"Have some more tea," said Herries.

"I think I've finished, thanks."

"Oh, one more cup!"

"Very well."

"And some more ham," said Blake.

"And a little cold chicken, deah boy," said D'Arcy persuasively.

"And you must really have a tart," added Manners.

"And some cake."

"And some of these ripping grapes."

Tom Merry laughed a laugh that sounded like his old laugh again. His face was quite like his old face for the moment.

"My dear chaps, you'll make me ill! I can't eat any more—I can't, really!"

"Bettah have this wing, deah boy."

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"No, thanks!"

"The ham, then?"

"Oh, no!"

"Twy the pie?"

"No."

"The cake, Tom Mewwy—I can wecommend the cake?"

"No."

"The gwapes?"

"Thanks, no!"

"Oh, vewy well! Pway shut up, Dig! I have wemarked more than once that it is bad form to keep on pwessin' a guest!" said Arthur Augustus severely.

Digby stared.

"Well, of all the cheek!" he began. "It was you, all the time!"

"Weally, Dig—"

"You ass—"

"I wufuse to be called an ass!"

Tom Merry rose.

"I shall have to buzz off now, you chaps. I can't lose that train—it catches the express at Wayland Junction."

The other fellows rose, too.

"Oh, we're all coming!" said Blake. "I'll cut off and get a pass from Kildare while you're getting your coat."

"I shall have to go to say good-bye to the Head."

"I'll have the pass ready by the time you come back."

"Good!"

And Tom Merry left Study No. 6 and made his way to the Head's study.

CHAPTER 9.

Tom Merry Leaves St. Jim's!

DR. HOLMES was standing before the fire in his study with a decidedly troubled expression upon his kindly face. He was thinking about Tom Merry, when the hero of the Shell tapped at the door of the study.

"Come in, my dear boy," said the Head. "You are going?"

"Yes, sir. I'm just starting for the station. I—I came to say good-bye, sir, in case I do not return."

The Head's troubled look intensified.

"Come, Merry, you must not speak like that!" he exclaimed. "I hope that the matter will not prove so serious as all that."

"You have seen Mr. Dodds' last letter, sir."

"Yes; and it certainly looks very bad, Merry. You must go home certainly; your presence means everything to Miss Fawcett now."

"I know it, sir."

"But you will come back, Merry. Listen to me! If matters prove to be quite as bad as you fear, you will always have a friend in your old headmaster. You shall return to St. Jim's at my expense."

Tom Merry's eyes were moist.

"You are very, very kind, sir. I would accept your offer willingly, only—"

"Only what, Merry?"

"If things come to the worst, sir, I shall have to work. I shall have to earn money. If I have to do that, the sooner I start the better. And—and I could not live in idleness and be kept by anybody, sir. I feel that if I have no money it's my duty to work. But I shall always remember your kindness, sir."

"Well, well, I hope it will not prove to be so bad as that," said the Head. "It would be a shame to spoil your career here, Merry. You are one of the most promising pupils in the school, and I had hopes of seeing you in the Sixth Form in time to come. And captain of the school, before you leave. However matters go, Merry, you must come back here to see me and let me take counsel with you and give you what advice I can."

"I shall certainly do that, sir, and with all my heart."

"And now, Merry, have you sufficient money for your immediate needs?"

"Oh, yes, sir, thank you!" said Tom Merry. "I have nearly a pound, and I shall have something left over after buying my railway ticket. I really don't want any money."

"If you do, let me know at once, Merry. And now, good-bye, my dear boy, and good fortune!"

And Dr. Holmes shook hands with Tom Merry, and the hero of the Shell left the study.

There was a lump in Tom Merry's throat as he went down the passage. Everyone was so kind at the old school. Now that he was leaving, perhaps for ever, he felt that he loved the old place more than he had ever realised.

Manners and Lowther were waiting in the passage.

(Continued on page 14.)

MORE NEWS AND VIEWS FROM—



Let the Editor be your pal! Write to him to-day, addressing your letters: The Editor, The GEM, The Amalgamated Press, Ltd., Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.

HALLO, chums! How do you like your second set of coloured pictures? Ripping, aren't they? I think that picture of the old "tea-clipper," the Cutty Sark, makes a splendid subject for our cover picture. This famous old windjammer, by the way, is still in existence. It is now, I believe, anchored in Falmouth Harbour.

Next week eight more topping pictures will be given free, which brings the total presented up to twenty-five. Stick the pictures in their proper positions in the album as you get them each week, for you don't want to spoil your collection by losing one or more. They're safer in the album.

Don't forget, chums, about the Companion Papers' magnificent offer of an Album Cover. Full details of it appear on page 6, and if you will take my advice, send for yours right away. That grand picture of the Cutty Sark, being on the cover, is likely to get soiled with handling. This Album Cover makes a handsome protection for all your collection. And if you are collecting the pictures being given with "The Magnet," "The Ranger," and "The Modern Boy," you can keep them all safely in the one Album Cover.

"RALLYING ROUND TOM MERRY!"

This is the title of the second splendid yarn in the powerful series dealing with the stirring adventures of popular Tom Merry. Troubles have a nasty habit of coming one on top of the other, and poor old Tom has certainly had more than his share. His chums of St. Jim's are very anxious to help him, and in next Wednesday's story Gussy gets a brain-wave which he hopes will enable him to give Tom monetary assistance without wounding his pride. It is a very noble effort—but at the same time it is very funny. You'll thoroughly enjoy reading about Gussy's scheme for rallying round Tom Merry.

Mr. E. S. Brooks' great new serial-story

"THE WHITE GIANTS OF EL DORADO!"

wants some beating for thrills, doesn't it? It was a great idea of his—and a big surprise—to introduce the super criminal, Professor Cyrus Zingrave. To many readers he will be an entirely new character, but the stories in which he has previously figured were always exceedingly popular. And it is in response to many requests for his reappearance that he is once more fighting against his old enemies, the St. Frank's boys and Nelson Lee. In next week's gripping chapters the St. Frank's party make a daring attempt to escape from Zingrave's clutches, and their thrilling adventures will hold you breathless.

As usual there's another exciting set of pictures of Mountie Mick's adventures, a batch of readers' prize-winning jokes, and your Editor will be in the chair again.

To Irish Free State Readers.

Readers in the Irish Free State are requested to note that when free gifts are offered with the GEM, they can only be supplied when the article is of a non-dutiable character.

THE CHAMP!

Hats off to Basilica! Full name, Brampton Basilica, of Ontario, Canada. Why should we remove our hats to her? Well, in the first place she's a lady, and in the second place she is the Jersey cow who has just broken the world's record for milk production! In 365 days Basilica produced no less than 19,012 pounds of milk, beating the previous record by more than 50 pounds. The

previous holder was Wagga Gladys, of Australia. I regret to say that I have not yet been able to interview Gladys, but no doubt she intends to stage a comeback!

THE FIREMAN FOOTBALLER.

Fireman Keeble, of the Rayleigh Brigade, was in a charabanc on his way to play in a football match. On the way he saw his fellow firemen putting out a fire, so he immediately stopped the coach and got out to help them, despite the fact that he was attired only in football kit. After the fire had been put out he completed his journey, arrived just in time to play, and his team won by five goals to one!

THE SWIMMING HORSE.

This is the story of a horse that decided to go for a swim. The horse belongs to a Deal laundry, and one day it was grazing in a field at Sandwich. The field was on the banks of the River Stour, and the horse entered the water. Efforts to persuade it to come ashore were unavailing, and going into midstream it proceeded to swim towards the sea. It passed under the toll bridge at Sandwich, watched by crowds of people. At Pearson's Wharf the horse left the river for a short space, and scrambled up on to the beach, but almost immediately it plunged back into the water and swam out to sea, holly pursued by men in rowing boats.

The animal continued on its way, went across the mud flats in the bay and made for North Foreland cliffs. Nightfall found it swimming steadily out to sea. When daylight came it was decided to continue the search, and imagine the amazement of the searchers when they saw their quarry standing calmly in shallow water admiring the view. As soon as they attempted to reach it, however, the horse took to swimming again and entered Ramsgate Harbour. The pursuers tried in vain to catch it, and the horse turned once more and swam out towards the Goodwins. Later it changed course yet again and swam straight into the harbour, pursued by motor and rowing boats, with people trying vainly to lasso it!

The horse, however, was too spry to be caught, and again swam out to sea, where the harbour-master of Sandwich Haven, who was out fishing in a fast motor-boat, after failing to lasso it, drove it back towards the shore. Eventually, after being chased for three miles through shallow waters in Pegwell Bay, it was surrounded. It was none the worse for its little trip, and it has been ascertained that it swam at least twenty miles, apart from any swimming it did at night!

A rumour that the horse is to attempt to swim the Channel next summer has not yet been confirmed!

THE EDITOR.

PEN PALS

A free feature which brings together readers all over the world for the purpose of exchanging topics of interest to each other. If you want a pen pal post your notice to The GEM LIBRARY, Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.

Miss Marjorie Champion, 126, High Street, Queenborough, Kent, wants girl correspondents overseas, ages 12-16.

Ronald Townsend, 117, Main Street, Strand, Cape Province, South Africa, wants correspondents in India and China, ages 13-14.

Miss V. Hever, 82, Carter Street, Walworth, London, S.E.17, wants girl correspondents overseas, ages 13-16.

Miss V. Day, 59, Comber House, Comber Grove, Blucher Road, Walworth, London, S.E.17, wants girl correspondents overseas, ages 13-16.

Kenneth Ashforth, 272, Abbeyfield Road, Sheffield, 4, wants

correspondents, ages 14-16; interested in sports, stamps, and snaps.

James W. Phillip, 30, Pittfour Street, Dundee, Angus, Scotland, wants correspondents interested in cricket.

Alfred Forrest, c/o Bunyan, 53, London Road, Glasgow, C.1, wants a correspondent overseas, age 14-16.

Secretary, Invincible Boys' Club, 41, Loughborough Road, Brixton, S.W.9, wants to hear from a reader in Hollywood, U.S.A., or Australia.

Miss D. Sparrow, 14, Boston Road, Edgware, Middlesex, wants girl correspondents overseas, ages 15-17.

Fred J. Humphreys, 30, Moat Road, Benchill Estate, Wythen-shawe, Manchester, wants to hear from readers keen on the old stories.

Miss Joyce Champion, 8, Stanley Villas, Queenborough, Kent, wants girl correspondents, ages 12-16.

Ken Mason, 72, Kenelm Road, Small Heath, Birmingham, wants correspondents in all parts of the world.

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Up Against It!

(Continued from page 12.)

They took him upstairs and helped him on with his things for the journey. Manners had, in his thoughtful way, already packed a bag for him with all the things he would be likely to want.

"If I don't come back, you'll look after my things," said Tom Merry. "But—but I expect I shall pay a visit here, in any case, and we'll hope for the best."

"I wish we were going with you," muttered Lowther.

"I wish you were, Monty, old chap."

Tom Merry had his coat on, and took the bag in his hand. They went downstairs and looked in the Hall for the other fellows.

But Blake & Co. were not to be seen for the moment. Jack Blake had called the chums into a class-room.

"Look here," he exclaimed, "I just thought if Tom Merry's done in, as it looks, he'll be short of tin."

"Yass, wathah!"

"Well, we'll make a collection," said Blake. "Every chap can hand out all he has on a special occasion like this."

"Pewwaps he won't take it."

"Oh, we'll make him take it!"

"Good!" said Herries.

And the juniors fumbled in their pockets. They were only too glad to subscribe their spare cash for Tom Merry's benefit, and they would have given the boots off their feet if that would have done their chum any good.

Jack Blake produced a ten-shilling note, a recent tip from his uncle. Figgins and Kerr found nearly five shillings each. Shillings were contributed by Fatty Wynn and Herries and Digby. Arthur Augustus had a few coppers and a brand new five-pound note, a tip from his governor. He placed it in Blake's cap without hesitation. Jack gave a little whistle.

"Oh, that's too strong, Gussy!"

"Wats, deah boy!"

"When I said all we had, I didn't mean up to fivers," Blake explained.

D'Arcy adjusted his eyeglass and looked round at the juniors.

"If you fellows wogard a largah contribution than yours as anythin' approachin' swank, I am willin' to with-draw that fivah!" he remarked. "But I am offewin' it in the spiwit of friendship, and I would much wathah leave it there!"

Blake gave him a slap on the back.

"And you shall leave it there, then, Gussy."

"You are suah you do not considah it swank?"

"Yes, ass!"

"Vewy good! But, stay a moment, Blake, deah boy. I should pwefer not to be called an ass, you know!"

"Well, duffer, then!"

"Weally, Blake—"

But Blake was not listening. He was tying the cash up in a handkerchief, and he wrapped the handkerchief in paper, and then he went to look for Tom Merry. Fatty Wynn hurried after him.

"Look here, Blake, we'd better get Tom Merry something to eat in the train!" he exclaimed. "He's bound to get hungry before he gets to Huckleberry Heath, and we don't want him to spend his tin at the railway buffets; and, besides, you know what railway grub is like."

"Good egg, Fatty!"

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On the track of fur robbers in the Frozen North, Mick Ray, of the R.C.M.P., falls into



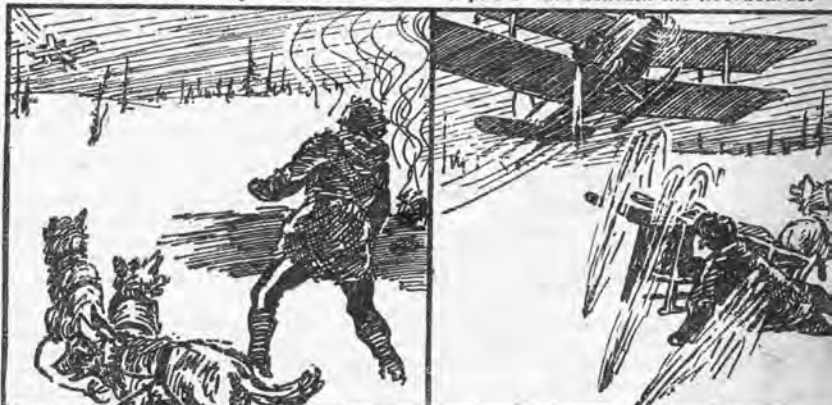
The wolves, gaunt with hunger, drew nearer to Mick, surrounding him in a howling, snarling circle. There seemed no hope for the Mountie—until suddenly he saw a sledge approaching from the distance.

But the leader of the pack had scented the newcomer, and now it launched itself at Mick's throat. Crack! Even as the wolf sprang, there was a rifle report, and the animal collapsed to the ground.



"We go to fur robbers' hut," said Eagle Eye, as he raced the dogs over the snow. They arrived at the hut, and while Mick, now recovered, fetched his sledge, Eagle Eye forced a way into the cabin.

A careful search of the shack revealed two discoveries. From a scrap of paper Mick learned that the fur robber had gone to Fort Murdock, while Eagle Eye found a pile of furs beneath the floorboards.



"This, too, is the work of the fur robbers," muttered Mick—and then gave a sudden start as he heard a roar above him. Out of the sky zoomed an aeroplane, flying low, coming straight towards him.

Ratatatat! A machine-gun opened fire, and a hail of bullets hissed around Mick—but just in time he flung himself behind his sledge. The machine roared away and disappeared into the distance.

(Mick's in peril again! See

HE MOUNTED!

RE-STORY OF THE WILD WEST!

into the hands of one of the gang. He is then tied to a tree and left to the mercy of the wolves!



"It's Eagle Eye!" gasped Mick. Once more his Indian chum had come to the rescue, appearing in his usual uncanny way. With clubbed rifle, the Indian sprang among the wolves, fighting his way towards Mick.

A few slashes with a knife and Mick was free. But the Mountie was half-frozen and unable to stand, so Eagle Eye slung him over his shoulder and, with the wolves now cowed and afraid to attack, staggered towards his sledge.



Leaving Eagle Eye at the hut, Mick started for Murdock. En route he discovered the body of a trapper. "Killed by the fur robbers!" decided Mick, seeing marks made by an aeroplane's skis.

After burying the trapper, Mick decided to return to the hut. There was a vague fear clutching at his heart—a fear well founded, for he arrived to find the hut in flames. What had happened to Eagle Eye?



fire, Mick was unhurt, but all his dogs had been killed. "Guess I'll have to abandon the sledge," said Mick ruefully. With a pack on his back, he started to trudge towards Murdock.

The wind began to whine, and the snow to fall. In a few minutes a terrible blizzard was raging. On and on through the whirling flakes stumbled Mick—hopelessly lost!

See what happens to him next week.)

"I'll get it ready in a jiffy!" And Fatty Wynn rushed off to Study No. 6.

The other juniors joined the Terrible Three in the Hall. Blake did not present Tom Merry with the subscription at once. He did not mean to run any risk of it being refused.

"All ready?" asked Monty Lowther.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Fatty's not here," said Kerr. "Oh, here he is! Hurry up, Fatty!"

"Here you are!" panted Fatty Wynn, rushing up with a lunch-basket in his hand that seemed heavy from the way he carried it. "Here you are, Tom Merry, old man!"

"What's that?"

"Grub for the train."

"Trust Fatty to think of that!" grinned Manners.

"Well, it's jolly important, I suppose," said Fatty Wynn. "I know how jolly hungry I get in this winter weather. I've had quite an appetite lately."

"Only lately?"

"Look here, Lowther—"

"That's a nobby little basket—"

"Yes, I found it in the study, Figgy. I think it's Gussy's."

"Yaas, wathah! I am vewy glad to contwibute it towards the comfort of Tom Mewwy. I wish I could do more than that."

"Don't let Fatty carry that basket," said Lowther. "It will be empty by the time we get to the station!"

"You ass—"

"I'll carry it," said Figgins. "Prevention is better than cure." And he lifted the basket out of the fat Fourth Former's hand.

Fatty Wynn snorted.

"Well, let's get off, or we shall lose that train," said Kerr.

"We're ready."

As Tom Merry stood in the Hall, with his coat and cap on, fellows came crowding round on all sides to shake hands with him and wish him well. Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, had given the pass willingly for Tom Merry's chums to go down to the station with him, and he came out to shake hands. So did Darrell and Rushden, and Lefevre of the Fifth, and Monteith, the head prefect of the New House, and so did crowds of juniors. Half the School House marched down to the gates with Tom Merry, and there Mr. Railton shook hands with him and wished him good fortune.

When at last he left the gates and tramped into the lane Tom Merry's eyes were wet with tears.

CHAPTER 10.

"Good-bye!"

DOWN the shadowed lane the juniors of St. Jim's tramped towards the village of Rylcombe.

Lowther was carrying Tom Merry's bag, and Manners his travelling-rug. Figgins bore the lunch-basket. There had been an early fall of snow, and it powdered white under the feet of the juniors as they tramped along.

Tom Merry looked back from the corner of the lane.

There was a glimmer of stars on the old tower of St. Jim's, now gleaming up against the sky in its cloak of snow. Tom Merry looked at it with dim eyes.

What was to happen before he would see that old tower again? What would be his position then? Would he, indeed, ever behold it again?

He tramped on in silence.

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The juniors talked little. The sadness of the parting, and of the uncertain prospects of their chums, weighed heavily upon their spirits. The lights of the village had come into sight when there was a sound of tramping feet in the lane, and a crowd of dim figures loomed up. There was a yell from the darkness. "St. Jim's bounders!" Blake gave a shout. "Grammarians cads!" "Rush them!" yelled a voice. It was Gordon Gay's. "Hold on!" shouted Blake. "Pax!" "Rats!"

"Pax, I say! It's pax! Don't be an ass, Gay! We're catching a train, and it's jolly important."

Gordon Gay, chief of the Grammar School juniors, came peering through the gloom towards them.

He uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Why, there's the whole blessed family of you!" he exclaimed.

The Grammarians chuckled. There were six of them with Gordon Gay—the two Woottons, Frank Monk, Lane, Carboy, and Tadpole. But the odds would have been heavily against them if they had charged.

"Weally, Gay, considewin' what has happened, I wegard any bweach of the peace on your part as bein' in the worst of taste," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, turning his monodle upon the leader of the Grammarians.

Gordon Gay stared at him.

"Eh? What's happened?" he asked.

"Weally, you know—"

"Gay doesn't know what's happened," said Tom Merry.

"Bai Jove, you know, I nevah thought of that!"

"Why, what is it?" asked Gordon Gay quickly. "I hope there's nothing wrong, you fellows."

"I'm catching a train," said Tom Merry.

"Anything wrong at home?"

"Well, yes."

"Miss Fawcett ill?"

"Yes."

"I'm awfully sorry," said Gordon Gay.

"Yes, rather!" exclaimed Monk.

"Dear me," said Tadpole, "it's very sad. I hope it is not serious, Tom Merry."

"I hope not. But that's not all. You may as well know the lot," said Tom abruptly. "I don't suppose I'm coming back to St. Jim's, and I'm glad to see you chaps, to say good-bye to you."

"Not coming back!" echoed Gordon Gay.

"I fear not."

"What's happened?"

"Oh, bad luck in some way!"

"I understand," said Gay quietly. "I'm awfully sorry. Can we come to the station with you and see you off, Tom Merry?"

"Do, if you can stay out."

"Oh, we don't mind fines for once!"

"Certainly not," said Tadpole, who was a keen amateur artist. "And it's too dark for me to go on with the splendid picture I was painting of the Sack of Rome by the Goths. If Mr. Adams is down on me for staying out, I shall not argue the point with him."

"Cheese it, Taddy, and get a move on!"

"Really, Gay—"

"Rats!"

The juniors marched on to the station. Although a few minutes before the Grammarians had nearly charged the Saints, they mingled on perfectly good terms now. There never was any real ill-feeling between them. They arrived at the station, and found themselves five minutes in advance of the train.

The whole body of them went on the platform. Fatty Wynn went through his pockets for pennies, and attacked the automatic sweet machine.

The click clank of the automatic machine kept up like an accompaniment to the talk of the juniors, as they waited for the train. Fatty Wynn was stuffing packet after packet into the small space left unoccupied in the lunch-basket.

The train came in.

Tom Merry stepped into a carriage, and his rug and the lunch-basket were handed in, and D'Arcy stepped in to arrange his property for him.

Blake pressed a little packet into Tom Merry's hand.

"What is it?" asked Tom Merry.

"A little present from the lot of us," said Blake. "Open it when you're gone. Now, Gussy, jump out, if you're not going, too."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Jump out, you ass! The train's starting!"

"I wefuse to be called an ass—"

"Will you jump out?" roared Blake.

"I wefuse—"

"Stand back, there!"

"Gussy—"

"Good-bye, Tom Mewwy, and good luck!"

D'Arcy pressed Tom Merry's hand, and made a hurried leap from the carriage. He cannoned into Blake, and sent him flying. Blake rolled on the platform among the legs of the juniors, and brought down Manners and Gordon Gay. The guard came up and slammed the door.

"Good-bye, Tom!"

Tom Merry leaned from the window and waved his hand.

"Good-bye, good-bye!" he cried.

The juniors waved their hats after him. Blake sat upon the platform, gasping and waving, and D'Arcy groped for his eyeglass with one hand, and waved with the other.

The train pulled out of the station, bearing Tom Merry into the darkness of the winter night.

Tom Merry had the carriage to himself. He was glad of it, but it made him feel his sudden solitude the more.

He looked out of the window.

Rylcombe had vanished in the misty night. He remained at the window, looking out. Darkness had swallowed up the old familiar scenes. He knew every foot of ground along that line, but he saw nothing now but dim spectres of trees and whirling flakes.

He sank back into his seat. He was alone.

His heart was heavy. When would he see his chums again? What awaited him at his old home?

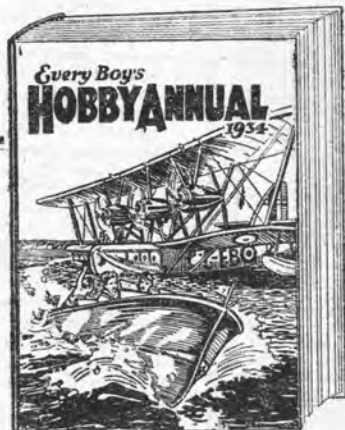
Gloomy thoughts passed through the mind of the lad, whose life had hitherto been one long success, whose troubles had been only temporary, only heavy enough to throw into brighter relief his more numerous days of good fortune and happiness.

What was his future to be?

And that was not all. It was not only of himself that he felt. He might be going forth into the world, to face life in grim earnest, but he was yet a schoolboy. He could not help thinking of the school he was leaving—of how the junior team would get on under a new skipper, and what sort of a team the Saints would put into the field against the Grammar School at the next footer match.

He thought, too, of his old governess, his guardian and

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loving friend, Miss Priscilla Fawcett, struck down into sickness by the blow that had fallen upon her.

Of the details of the matter he knew little; only what his kind friend Mr. Dodds had been able to gather and tell him in his letter.

But it was clear that he was ruined.

It was clear that Miss Fawcett had been the prey of unscrupulous men; that she had foolishly invested her money and her ward's in an enterprise that had utterly failed.

The whole was swept away.

Miss Fawcett and a score of others had been ruined, and with Miss Fawcett, her ward.

Tom Merry's money—how much there was he did not know, but he knew it had been absolutely in Miss Fawcett's hands.

In her younger days Miss Fawcett had had a keen business instinct, and she had had the advice, too, of her brother Frank—Uncle Frank, as the St. Jim's juniors had called him.

Tom Merry's father—long since dead—had trusted everything to her.

But now she was old, and her brother was abroad, and no longer able to advise her.

Uncle Frank's whereabouts were not even known. He was an old globe-trotter, and sometimes disappeared for years at a time, and would turn up unexpectedly from Kamschatka or the Cannibal Islands without an hour's notice.

It was clear that the old lady had been induced by some plausible scoundrel to invest her money in some rotten concern—some scoundrel whose rascality was carried on under the forms of law, and who could not be touched.

And now all was gone.

Not a thought of reproach was in Tom Merry's mind. Well he knew that if Miss Fawcett had tried to increase her store it was for his sake—that it was in the hope of leaving her darling rich that she had lost everything.

Reproach, repining, would have been of little avail.

The thing was done.

What remained was to save as much as possible from the wreck, and to face the future with a brave heart.

Tom Merry had received much from fortune. It was time now to take courage in both hands, to face the world, and to take care of the kind old soul who had always taken care of him.

And that he would do. He would prove that, in fair weather or foul, he was the same Tom Merry; that he was no fair-weather sailor who could not face a storm.

He changed trains at Wayland Junction, and then the western express carried him on at a greater speed through the winter night.

To his hurried and troubled thoughts the rush and the whir of the express kept company.

Faster and faster the train sped through the night, but it seemed slow to Tom Merry's eager mind.

He was anxious to know the worst.

Lights appeared and vanished again and again, and the time passed slowly, but it passed. At last the train drew up in the station for Huckleberry Heath.

Tom Merry gladly jumped out of the carriage.

He decided to walk to Huckleberry Heath, and a few minutes later he was striding through the wind and the dark, with his bag in his hand.

It was necessary to save money now, and even the price of the ticket on the local train from the junction was worth considering.

A clink from his pocket as he walked warned him he had forgotten Blake's parting gift, and he hastily took it from his pocket and opened it in the light of a lamp in the lane.

A lump rose in his throat as he saw the odd collection of coins wrapped up in Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's banknote.

He thrust the packet back into his coat and strode on. Had ever a fellow such friends as his? he thought. What should he repine for, when Heaven's mercy had left him that true friendship, that gift greater than the greatest store of gold, and far above rubies?

He strode on with a lighter heart.

He entered the village of Huckleberry Heath, and then his pace slackened a little, and he reflected.

Should he visit Mr. Dodds, or go straight to Laurel Villa? Mr. Dodds might be able to tell him something more, and to advise him, but—

But he was anxious to see Miss Fawcett. During the journey it had been borne more and more upon his mind how much his coming would mean to her. She had not asked him to come. Since that first hysterical telegram, which had called him away from the House match, he had not had a line from her. But he knew how the sight of him would gladden her heart.

He strode on directly to Laurel Villa.

He passed through the old High Street.

The few shops there were mostly closed, and the houses

blinded. But there were a few passers-by in the street who knew him and greeted him.

They greeted him kindly, and with a note of compassion in their voices that told him all was known. Doubtless the misfortunes of Miss Fawcett were the talk of the village, where anything of interest seldom happened.

He reached the gate of Laurel Villa.

As he went up the garden path he saw that the whole house was in darkness, save for a glimmering light from one window, which he knew to be that of his old governess' room.

He knocked at the door.

It was not opened.

He knocked and rang again, gently, for fear of disturbing Miss Fawcett if she should be asleep, and then the door was quietly opened.

From the dark hall came the glimmer of a candle. He made out the face of Hannah in the gloom.

"Master Tom!" exclaimed the old servant.

Tom Merry stepped into the hall. There was snow upon his shoulders and upon his cap. His face was pale and excited, and Hannah's face was pale as she looked at him.

A sudden dread smote to Tom Merry's heart.

He grasped Hannah's arm.

"Hannah!" he muttered thickly. "How is she? How is Miss Fawcett?"

CHAPTER 11.

Home Again!

"GOODNESS gracious, Master Tom!" Tom Merry's grasp tightened on the old servant's arm.

"Hannah, how is she? Not worse?"

"No."

Tom Merry drew a deep, deep breath of relief.

"I—I was frightened for a moment," he muttered. "I thought that—" He did not finish. "Is she awake now, Hannah?"

"Yes, Master Tom."

"And no worse—you are sure?"

"Only worrying, Master Tom."

"About the—what has happened?"

"About you."

Tom Merry closed the door. In the shadowy hall the glimmering candle flickered upon two pale faces.

"About me, Hannah?" said the boy. "Why?"

"Because—because she thinks she has ruined you, the poor soul," said Hannah, with tears in her eyes. "Master Tom, before I take you up to her you'll promise me—"

"What, Hannah?"

"Not to—to—"

"Well?"

"Not to reproach her, Master Tom," said Hannah, laying her hand on Tom Merry's shoulder. "She has lost all your money, Master Tom, but—but it was the doing of wicked men. She meant all for the best. And—and you won't say—"

Tom Merry coloured.

"You surely don't think I should say anything to add to her trouble, Hannah," he said reproachfully. "I'm not likely to, I hope."

"That's right, my dear Master Tom," said Hannah. "I—I knew how you'd take it. I was sure you would be my own noble boy."

The old servant, with her eyes wet with tears, led the way upstairs.

Tom Merry followed her in silence.

The changed aspect of the old house struck him with a chill.

Laurel Villa had never been a pretentious place, but there had always been an air of homely plenty and comfort about it. Many a happy holiday had Tom Merry spent there with his chums from St. Jim's.

It was changed now.

The chill of the house struck through his thick winter coat, and the darkness was everywhere. There was no sound round the many rooms; no light below stairs. The servants evidently were gone—everyone excepting Hannah, who would not be likely to leave her old mistress—more her friend than her mistress.

The house was deserted, save for Miss Priscilla and Hannah. Tom Merry understood that at once.

"But why are you all in the dark, Hannah?" he asked, as they paused for a moment on the landing, the old servant breathing hard after climbing the stairs.

"There is no money, Master Tom."

"Is it so bad as that?"

"Miss Fawcett says it is all gone. She will not be able to pay the gas bill, she fears, and since—since it happened, she has not allowed a burner to be lighted in the house. There is only one candle in her bed-room."

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Tom Merry felt a choking sensation.

It was so like his old governess—to be ruthlessly cheated herself, and yet in the poverty it had brought her to, to preserve unimpaired the strict honesty that had always characterised her own dealings.

"And the other maids, Hannah—"

"All gone, Master Tom. Miss Fawcett paid them up and sent them away at once. There was nothing to feed them on without going into debt."

"But the tradespeople surely—"

"They would have trusted Miss Fawcett with anything. But she would not allow it, because there would be no money to pay."

Tom Merry asked no more.

He followed Hannah into Miss Fawcett's room.

He left his snowy overcoat and cap outside, and then entered. Hannah entered first to prepare Miss Fawcett for his coming.

The room was dimly lighted with a single candle. A low fire burned in the wide, old-fashioned grate. Miss Fawcett, wrapped in shawls, was sitting in her deep arm-chair by the fire. Two or three bottles with labels, on a little table near her, gave the room the aspect of a sick-room.

The old lady half rose as Tom Merry came in.

Her face was white, her eyes had dark rings under them, and her old hands were trembling.

She tried to speak, but for the moment no words would come; only a low, hoarse murmur.

Tom Merry ran to her at once.

"Dear!" he said, as he put his arms round the fragile old form, and hugged her. "I'm here, dear!"

"Tom," murmured Miss Priscilla.

"It's all right, dear."

"We're ruined, Tom."

"I know."

"I've lost all your money that was left in my hands by your dead father."

"Never mind that now."

"Tom, my darling boy, can you forgive me?"

"Nonsense!" said Tom Merry, kissing her. "Don't bother about it, dear. Buck up and get well. Suppose I had lost you, dear, instead of the rotten money? What should I have done then?"

Miss Priscilla could not reply. The tears were running thickly down her pale old cheeks.

Tom Merry stayed up to a late hour that night talking to his old governess. Miss Priscilla had much to tell him, and he listened to all, kindly and patiently, and spoke only words of comfort.

It was easy to see that what weighed mostly upon Miss Fawcett's mind was the thought that she had ruined her darling boy, while intending to benefit him. Tom Merry was penniless—there was no disguising that. But Tom's kind affection was so evidently unchanged by what had happened that Miss Priscilla could not fail to take comfort. She soon found herself trying to point out to Tom Merry how serious the situation really was. Tom Merry understood it only too well; but he kept up an unalterable cheerfulness.

"It is all gone, Tommy darling—all gone," Miss Fawcett said, more than once. "I—I am afraid you will have to leave school, my dear."

"I've thought of that," said Tom. "After all, it's time I did something."

"My dear boy; but your education!"

"I've heard people say that work is an education," said Tom Merry, smiling. "After all, life can't be all fun and footer, dear."

"I—I don't know how the accounts are exactly," said Miss Fawcett, pressing her hand to her forehead. "I—I've got confused, somehow. We'll go over them together in the morning, Tommy."

"Yes, indeed."

"There is a bill of sale on the furniture," said Miss Fawcett. "That will all be taken. But the house is my property, and we shall be able to let it. Then perhaps we can live in some small cottage on the rent, Tommy."

"Yes, perhaps," said Tom Merry cheerfully.

"My darling boy," wailed Miss Priscilla, "I don't care, so long as you forgive me; but—but to see you in poverty is—"

"Oh, never mind that!" said Tom. "I can face that, dear. I suppose a chap who has any pluck can face that."

"And it was all so plausible," said Miss Fawcett, a little incoherently. "The company was paying eight per cent, you know, and Mr. Crooke simply laughed when I remarked that the investment might not be safe."

Tom Merry started.

"Mr. Crooke?"

"Yes, dear, the famous financier."

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"He was in it, was he?"

"Yes; though I understand that he has not lost any money. He sold out all his shares before the smash came. It was very fortunate for him, Tom, and I am glad he did not suffer as I have done."

Tom Merry gritted his teeth.

He was not surprised to hear that the name of Crooke was connected with the concern that had ruined Miss Fawcett, and a dozen others. He remembered Crooke of the Shell at St. Jim's. Crooke of the Shell was a son of the great financier. Crooke had lately been bragging about a great sum that his father had made—a sum that turned the already rich magnate into a millionaire. Tom Merry understood now where the money had come from. Miss Fawcett's little fortune and his own had gone to swell the bloated opulence of the City cormorant.

It was useless to say anything to Miss Fawcett. She could hardly realise yet that she had been wickedly cheated.

"And my brother Frank used to say that a railway was a safe investment," Miss Fawcett said sadly.

"He didn't mean a South American railway," said Tom, with a faint smile. "I wish you had asked Mr. Dodds' advice."

"Oh, Mr. Dodds is such a young man, and he would not have known!"

"He would have known that Crooke & Co. were a set of rascals," Tom Merry thought to himself. But he did not say so. What was the use?

What had happened had to be accepted, and it was useless to think of how it had come about, and how it might have been avoided.

It was late when Tom Merry went to bed that night, and when he went he did not sleep.

He lay and heard the hour of midnight toll out from Huckleberry village, and after that the deep stroke of one. Then a fitful slumber came to him.

He slept then till morning.

He was awakened by Hannah, as the first pale rays of the winter sun came in through the windows.

He sat up in bed and shivered.

"There's a fire in the breakfast-room, and I'm getting your breakfast, Master Tom," said Hannah. "And perhaps you will be able to persuade Miss Fawcett to eat something. She is coming down this morning because you have come home."

"I'll be down in a jiffy," said Tom Merry.

He was soon down.

There was a bright fire blazing in the breakfast-room, and a cheery scent of bacon and tea. Miss Fawcett was already down.

The old lady was dressed in her oldest clothes, and Tom had already learned from Hannah that she had set aside all her more expensive clothes to be sold to meet her liabilities.

"How are you feeling this morning, my darling?" Miss Priscilla asked anxiously.

"Ripping!" said Tom Merry.

"You are not suffering from your long journey?"

"Not a bit."

"You are sure you did not get your feet wet last night?"

Tom Merry smiled.

"No, dear."

"We are going over the accounts this morning," said Miss Priscilla. "Mr. Dodds has promised to come in to help."

"Good!"

"I hope you are hungry, darling."

"Famished!" said Tom.

And he ate a good breakfast, and induced Miss Fawcett to do the same. The old lady was already looking much more bright and cheerful.

Mr. Dodds arrived soon after breakfast, and shook hands very warmly with Tom Merry. He was an old friend of Tom's. They plunged into business that morning, hindered rather than assisted by Miss Fawcett's aid.

The old lady seemed to be still in a somewhat dazed mental state from the blow that had fallen upon her, and, excepting in the household accounts, her idea of business was very hazy.

Miss Fawcett's lawyer came in later in the morning and lent his assistance. Miss Fawcett's latest investments had been made without his approval, but the old gentleman refrained from pressing that point now.

It was a weary and dreary day to Tom Merry.

The weather was crisp and snowy, and, under other circumstances, he would have longed to be out of doors, breathing in the keen winter air.

Now he was too busy with papers and figures and puzzling worries to think of anything of that sort.

Bills were piling in at Huckleberry Heath.

Everyone to whom any money was due seemed to have taken the alarm, and to be determined that, whoever lost, he would not be the one. Every post brought a demand,



"Tom, you must have courage!" said Cousin Ethel as Tom Merry sank into a seat, his face buried in his hand. "Miss Fawcett's illness cannot be so bad." "I can stand anything else," said the unhappy junior, choking back a sob. "But she is in danger—and if it should be— Oh, Ethel!"

and during the day knocking and ringing was almost continual.

Tom Merry, in spite of his worries, slept soundly that night. He was tired out, and could hardly keep his eyes open when he went to bed.

Two or three days passed in the same way.

Matters were getting into order, and what emerged clearest from the confusion was the fact that when the liabilities were all met, there would be little or nothing left.

Laurel Villa would remain, and that was all. It would remain without furniture in it, and without a five-pound note in cash.

That was how matters stood, and that was what Tom Merry had to face.

He faced it quite bravely.

"We must leave—quickly," said Miss Fawcett. "The furniture will be taken away. We shall have to let the house, Tommy darling."

"That's right!" said Tom.

"And we can take a little cottage in the village, I think," Miss Fawcett remarked. "There we can stay till the house is let, Tommy, and then I shall get a situation."

Tom Merry jumped.

"You get a situation!" he exclaimed.

"Yes," said Miss Fawcett bravely. "You know, I was poor in my young days, Tommy, and I was glad to take a post as governess. I shall be able to get another, I hope, and earn enough for both of us."

"Do you think I would let you keep me, you stupid dear?" said Tom Merry.

"But your education must be continued, Tommy."

"I shall leave St. Jim's."

"But—"

"And I shall get employment of some sort," said Tom Merry steadily. "It's no good blinking the facts, dear. Even if anybody were willing to keep me, I couldn't sponge on anybody."

Miss Fawcett looked very distressed.

"Oh, Tommy, and if it is all my fault!"

"That's all over, dear," said Tom Merry. "No good thinking of the past. Let's keep our minds on the future."

And a day later they moved out of Laurel Villa, and the house was left empty—TO LET!

CHAPTER 12.

Binks Looks In!

TOM MERRY had been in communication with his chums all the time he was up to the eyes in work at Laurel Villa.

Fellows at St. Jim's had written to him, and he had replied briefly enough, having no time for more than a few lines. But they had been kept well posted as to his position, and their hopes of seeing him back amongst them was growing fainter.

Tom Merry had had a sympathetic letter, too, from Cousin Ethel, who had also written to Miss Fawcett. The girl's sympathy was deep and sincere, and her letter was a comfort to Tom Merry.

More than one offer of a home, a home where all would be kindness and consideration, had been made to Miss Fawcett, and to Tom Merry, too.

But the offers had not been accepted.

Miss Fawcett had a pride as strong as her ward's, and neither of them were disposed to eat the bread of idleness. Indeed, in her reduced circumstances, the old lady was inclined to look upon any offer of friendship as charity disguised, and she would not accept any invitation even to pass a week or a few days with any of her friends.

Tom Merry felt much the same.

D'Arcy's father, Lord Eastwood, had heard from his son about Tom Merry's misfortune. He had promptly written to offer to pay Tom Merry's fees at St. Jim's, to continue him there. But Tom Merry felt that it was impossible to accept the offer, kind and gracious as it was.

Kind as it was, it was charity. No! To begin that would be to run the very great risk of growing to depend upon others, of looking to kindness and pity for his daily bread; and the thought of growing an idler and a sponger made

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Tom Merry shudder. It was a wise old maxim that said: "Resist the beginnings."

He was poor now, and he meant to accept the fact manfully.

Blake's last gift he had not refused. It would have been ungracious to do so. But he had made it quite clear that no more was to be sent. He could not take money from his chums.

The cottage to which Miss Fawcett had removed was at a considerable distance from Huckleberry Heath.

The old lady had a natural desire not to live too near her former acquaintances, now that she was reduced to poverty.

It was a tiny place, with a kitchen and a parlour, and three bed-rooms—one for the faithful Hannah, who refused to leave her mistress.

Both Tom Merry and his old guardian urged upon Hannah the advisability of looking out for herself.

"You know, my dear child," said Miss Fawcett—Hannah was forty-five, but Miss Fawcett still regarded her as a child—"you know, I cannot pay you any more wages."

"I don't want any wages, mum," said Hannah.

"But you cannot work for nothing."

"I can, mum."

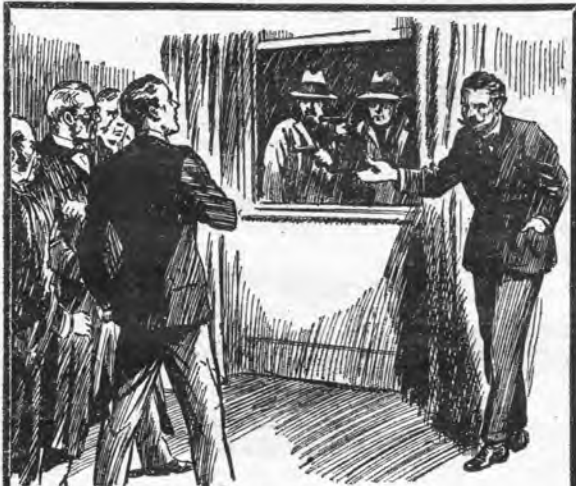
"But, really, Hannah, we—we are so poor, and so short of money, that you will not have enough to eat."

"I have some money of my hown, mum," said Hannah.

"My dear child—"

"And I can spend my hown money how I please, mum," said Hannah steadily. "I shan't be a burden on you, mum. Don't send me away, mum. Besides, Master Tom will want somebody to look after him when you're ill, mum."

That last argument prevailed more than any other with Miss Priscilla; so Hannah remained. Probably she would have refused to go, however, under any circumstances.



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Tom Merry had promised to return to St. Jim's to see the Head once more, even if he was not able to return to his old place in the school.

This promise he intended, of course, to keep; but he was in no hurry to do so. He wanted, if he could, to get Laurel Villa let, so that there would be a steady income, however small, to support Miss Fawcett while he looked out for himself.

But Laurel Villa did not seem likely to let soon. It was not a favourable season for attempting to let a house in the country, and Tom, of course, had little money for advertisement.

Meanwhile, Miss Fawcett was also thinking of employment. Unknown to Tom, she scanned the papers every day in search of a suitable post.

The idea of the frail old lady going to work made Tom Merry feel inclined to laugh and cry at the same time; but the idea had firmly taken possession of the mind of Miss Priscilla.

Some days after the cottage had been taken, Tom Merry was startled, just as his frugal dinner was finished, by a loud toot-toot of a motor-horn.

Tom Merry glanced out of the little window.

A big, somewhat gaudily decorated car was standing in the road, and a diminutive but somewhat stout figure in a fur coat was getting out. The chauffeur kept his place.

Tom Merry thought there was something familiar about the figure as it came up the garden path.

"A visitor," said Miss Fawcett from within.

"Looks like it, dear," said Tom Merry. "Who is it?"

"I don't know yet."

"Why, yes! My only hat! It's Binks!"

"Binks!"

"Yes; the boot chap in the School House at St. Jim's, you know. I told you he had become a giddy millionaire."

"I trust not giddy," said Miss Fawcett. "I hope he will remain steady, in spite of his wealth, Tommy darling."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Oh, he's steady enough! Binks is as good as gold. I expect he'll come to St. Jim's as a pupil; the Head has consented."

Binks raised his cap.

He blushed and grinned at Tom Merry.

The one-time page at the School House at St. Jim's was in very high feather indeed. His clothes were of the most expensive kind, and they were well cut, for while he had stayed a few days at St. Jim's, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had taken him to a tailor and superintended his outfit.

Under D'Arcy's eyes there was certain to be good material and a good cut; and, so far as Binks' figure could be well dressed, he was well dressed.

The gorgeous fur-collared coat was not of D'Arcy's choosing, and in that Binks had let himself go a little.

"Good-afternoon, Master Merry!" he exclaimed.

"Hallo, old chap!" said Tom Merry, as he held out his hand.

Binks, after a little hesitation, took it in his own and gave it a hard shake.

"Not Master Merry now, Binks, old man," said Tom cheerfully. "I'm leaving St. Jim's."

Binks looked dismayed.

"Leaving St. Jim's, Master Merry?"

"Yes; I shall have to."

"Lummy!" said Binks.

"Come in, old man. This is Binks, dear."

Miss Fawcett had seen Binks in his "boots" days on duty in the School House. There was just a little stateliness in Miss Fawcett's manner as she greeted the new millionaire. It was only a hint of it.

"I am very glad to see you, Binks," she said. "Won't you sit down?"

Bink fumbled his cap in his hands.

"Thank you kindly, ma'am," he said.

Tom Merry pushed him into a chair.

"There you are, old chap."

"Thank you, Master Merry." Binks looked at Miss Fawcett. "Master Merry is still Master to me, ma'am, poor or rich."

"A very proper remark," said Miss Priscilla.

"Why, stuff!" said Tom Merry. "Binks is rolling in money, and I'm looking for a job at a pound a week."

"Money ain't everythin'," said Binks. "I've found that hout."

"No," said Tom Merry, with a smile. "Kind hearts are more than coronets."

"They is," said Binks.

"And you've got a good heart, Binks, old son," said Tom Merry. "You've heard about my bad luck, and that's why you've come?"

"Yes, Master Merry."

"Well, I knew you would be sorry, Binks."

"I ham sorry," said Binks, adding recklessly to his

aspirates to lend emphasis to his statement. "I ham awfully sorry, Master Merry."

"Thanks!"

"But that ain't all," said Binks.

"No?"

"I want to 'elp you, Master Merry," said Binks eagerly.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"Sorry, Binks, old man, but it can't be did."

"But—"

"You're awfully kind, Binks, and I'm really grateful, but it can't be managed," said Tom Merry.

"You know, I've got 'caps and 'caps of money!" said Binks.

"Yes, I know."

"I ain't allowed to spend it all, but I can 'andle thousands and thousands," said Binks. "I want you to let me 'and you some, Master Merry, just to 'elp you out."

"Thanks, old son, but it won't do. I couldn't take it!"

"But as a loan," said Binks.

"I could never repay it."

"I shouldn't press you, Master Merry."

"I know you wouldn't, Binks. You want to give me money and call it a loan," said Tom Merry, smiling. "If I were going to take a gift, I'd call it a gift. But I can't take anything."

Binks' face fell.

"You mean you couldn't because I ain't one of your friends?" he asked. "You'd take it from Master Lowther or Blake."

Tom Merry shook his head again.

"I wouldn't take it from anybody, Binks. I'd as soon take it from you as from one of the fellows at St. Jim's."

Binks brightened up again.

"Would you really, Master Merry?"

"Of course I would!"

"But I'm a-rolling in spondulics!" said Binks. "It seems a shame that I can't 'elp you, Master Merry, when you're down on your luck. Many's the time you bin kind to me."

"My darling boy is kind to everyone," said Miss Fawcett, with a fond look at Tom. "I'm sure we're both very grateful to you, Binks."

"And you won't let me 'elp you?"

"We cannot."

"I dare say I ain't put it very tactful," said Binks, rising to his feet. "I dare say I ain't put it the right way. But you know what I mean, Master Merry, and I ain't never goin' to forget how kind you was to me. I'm always goin' to be your friend if you'll let me be."

"I'll be jolly glad to let you, Binks."

Binks shook hands again, and with Miss Fawcett this time, and returned slowly to the big motor-car.

The hum of the car sounded over the snowy countryside as it buzzed on its way.

The next morning Tom Merry went over to see Mr. Dobbs. When he returned, his old governess had gone out. Hannah did not know where she was gone. Miss Fawcett had slipped out mysteriously while Hannah was busy making the beds.

Tom was in the garden, looking out into the road, wondering anxiously what had become of Miss Fawcett, when a car drove up. It was driven by Mr. Hobbs, a butcher in Heath End, a small village some four miles away. Seated by him, looking very ill, was Miss Fawcett.

Tom uttered an exclamation, and ran out to meet his old governess.

"Dear, where have you been? How cold you look?"

He helped her to alight, and thanked Mr. Hobbs for bringing her home; then the Heath End butcher drove away.

Miss Fawcett was seized with a fit of trembling as Tom assisted her into the cottage.

"Where have you been?" asked Tom Merry.

"My darling! I have been looking for work."

"Oh dear!" gasped Tom Merry.

"I—I was not strong enough for the place," faltered Miss Fawcett, "and the butcher kindly gave me a lift home in his car. It was exceedingly kind of him."

Tom Merry felt inclined to laugh and cry at once.

Hannah came running in.

"You are ill!" she exclaimed. "You have caught cold! You must go to bed at once."

"My dear child—"

"Off to bed at once!" said Hannah determinedly. And she had her way, and off to bed Miss Priscilla Fawcett went.

CHAPTER 13.

Dark Days!

MISS FAWCETT did not soon leave the bed to which Hannah had hurried her. She had caught a chill during her search for work in Heath End, and that, added to what she had already suffered, was more than sufficient to lay her up. She remained in bed, and before the day was out, Tom Merry knew that his old governess was seriously ill.

Tom Merry had no money in the house but the parting gift Jack Blake had pressed into his hand at the station at Rylcombe. That he had not yet touched, but he had no resource but to use now.

A doctor had to be sent for, and the medical gentleman immediately proceeded to give orders for necessities for Miss Fawcett. Those necessities used up the greater part of the fiver that Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had added to Blake's collection.

Tom Merry was bitterly anxious.

He knew how much Miss Fawcett must have suffered mentally, for weeks, if not months, before the crash came, before she sent that hysterical telegram to St. Jim's—the fatal telegram which had marked the end of his happy days at the old school.

He knew that since her ruin she had been almost starving herself to effect economy, and all his remonstrances had been useless. Little economies that made but a very slight difference to their means were quite enough to affect the health of an already delicate old lady.

Now the malady which had been lying in wait for her, as it were, had swooped down upon her, and she was lying a helpless victim to it.

At times she was feverish, and lost her knowledge of faces, and did not know Tom Merry when he was standing by her bedside.

She talked of happenings of her early youth, and called Frank, as if Tom had been her brother, and her brother a boy again.

Yet all the time she was the same kind and gentle soul, and never at one moment did a word of complaint pass her lips.

Mr. Dodds came over several times on his bicycle from Huckleberry Heath to visit them, but he was the only visitor they had.

The curate could do little.

He was poor himself, but he would willingly have helped out of what little he had, but Tom Merry would accept nothing while there was, as he said, a shot in the locker.

If his money were all gone, and Miss Fawcett needed what he could not give, then he would accept even charity.

But it had not come to that yet.

He did not let his chums at St. Jim's know in what bitter need he was.

They could not have helped him, and he had a natural desire to avoid worrying his friends with his troubles.

As he sat in the little room below the sick-room, or tramped in the desolate wintry garden, passing weary hours, Tom Merry wondered sometimes what his friends were doing, and how they were getting on at St. Jim's.

It seemed strange to think of life at the old school going on just the same without him; of fellows turning up in the Form-room at the usual time, of little Mr. Latham coming blinking down the passage, and Mr. Linton blowing his nose with a loud blast, in his usual way, as he came into the Shell class-room.

What were the fellows doing? Had they beaten the Grammar School in the footer match?

A letter from Blake enlightened him about that.

"Dear old son," ran the letter, "we haven't heard from you for some days, and we're getting anxious about you. How are you getting on? We've postponed the footer match, with Gordon Gay's team, so as to play it when you're back at St. Jim's, if possible. Gay was quite willing; and, in fact, the Grammarian bounders are as anxious about you as we are."

"Write and tell us how things are going. Gussy says if you are short of tin he's had a fiver from his governor and isn't going to break into it. He's keeping it in case you

(Continued on the next page.)

TELL FATHER—



about the wonderful times you and your chums can have at home with a Riley Billiard Table. E/- down brings delivery on 7 days' free trial. Balance monthly. Write for art list. E. J. RILEY, LTD., Raleigh Works, ACCRINGTON. or Dept. 32, 147, Aldersgate Street, London, E.C.1

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want it, and as he won't spend it, he says you may as well have it. I think so, too. Gussy is a good sort, though an awful ass. Good-bye, old chap!

"JACK BLAKE."

There was a footnote, in the unmistakable handwriting of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Quite right, excepting about being an ass. Blake is the ass."

Tom Merry smiled over the letter.

It brought back to his mind the chums of St. Jim's, the jolly times in the old studies, the genial fellowship of the junior Form-rooms.

All that was never to be for him again!

He thrust the letter back into his pocket as the doctor drove up.

The medical man looked very grave when he descended from Miss Priscilla's room.

Tom Merry caught his breath as he fixed his anxious eyes upon the medical man's face.

"Worse?" he breathed.

The doctor nodded.

"I'm afraid so, my lad."

"But not—not—not—" Tom Merry could hardly articulate the words. "But not in—in danger, sir?"

"We must hope for the best."

"But—but—" stammered Tom Merry.

"You must bear up, my lad," said the doctor kindly. "It is not the worst, by any means."

He went out. Tom Merry did not move. The doctor's natty little figure was assuming strange proportions in his eyes, through the blinding mist of tears that was filling them.

"Tom!"

Tom Merry started.

A girlish figure and a bright face, framed in furs, appeared in the doorway, and Tom Merry stared at it in amazement. The tears that had been blinding his eyes were running down his cheeks now.

"Ethel!"

Cousin Ethel came in quickly.

"Yes, Tom!"

"Cousin Ethel! You here?"

The girl looked at him.

She had never seen tears upon Tom Merry's face before, and the sight of them there startled and alarmed her.

"Tom!" she breathed quickly, catching at his arm.

"There is no bad news! Miss Fawcett—"

"The doctor's just been!"

"Yes, I saw him! What is it, Tom?"

"He says danger!"

Tom Merry groaned out the word.

"Oh!" cried Ethel.

"I—I— Don't look at me; I know I'm a fool!" said Tom Merry, dashing away his tears with the back of his hand. "I—I can't help it, Ethel. She—she was so kind and so good—and now— Oh, and I can't help her!"

His voice broke in a sob.

Ethel's eyes were moist.

"Tom! You must be brave!"

"I—I can't, Ethel! I can stand anything else. But—but if it should be— Oh, Ethel!"

"It will not be so bad as that, Tom! It cannot be!"

Tom Merry sank into a chair, his face buried in his hands.

The girl bent over him as he sobbed.

"Tom! You must have courage! Don't—don't cry; I can't bear to see it."

Tom Merry choked back a sob between his teeth.

"I won't, Ethel. You think me a coward!"

"I don't, Tom. Oh, Tom, it cannot be so bad. Tom, I've come down to look after Miss Fawcett. I heard from Mr. Dodds that she was ill, and I came at once."

"You are a good girl, Ethel, but—"

"But what, Tom? Don't say that you don't want me," said Ethel in a tremulous smile.

"Oh, Ethel! But—but we've got no money," said Tom desperately. "You don't want to freeze and starve with us—"

She put a little hand over his mouth.

"You mustn't speak like that, Tom. While Miss Fawcett is in need, at least you must allow your friends to help you."

"Oh, Ethel!"

"My uncle knows I am here, and he has given me plenty of money," said Ethel, trying to smile. "I am going to keep house for Miss Fawcett, Tom, and I shall not allow you to interfere with me."

Hannah came downstairs. She was surprised and delighted at the sight of Ethel.

"I'll take you up at once, miss," she said. "The sight of you will do her good. Come this way, miss."

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And Ethel followed her into the sick-room.

Tom Merry tramped about aimlessly below, waiting till Miss Priscilla should ask, and should be fit, to see him.

He saw her a little later.

He saw her face was very white and pinched, and there was a look in it that Tom Merry had not noticed there before—a look that made his heart stand still.

Was it possible? Was he, to crown all his misfortunes, to lose his oldest and kindest friend—for ever?

He thought of the pale, worn face, of the thin, cold hands, and an unspeakable terror gripped him by the heart.

Was it to be? Could Fate be so cruel?

Ethel pressed his hand.

"Be brave!" she whispered.

The days that followed were never forgotten by Tom Merry. Always they stood out as black and terrible in his memory.

The weather was cold, and bitter winds lashed round the cottage and made the doors and windows rattle. Snow piled up in the garden and on the roof, and every morning Tom Merry had to wield his spade to cut a path to the gate.

In the sick-room a battle was waged with grim death—life against death.

There never was a more devoted nurse than Ethel. She seemed to anticipate the wants of the invalid, and her eyes seemed never to close. Her fair face grew paler, and her eyes heavy, but she never faltered. When the crisis came it found Ethel steady and calm, ready to sacrifice herself to the end.

They were dark and terrible days.

How Tom Merry lived through the week he hardly knew. It was still more wonderful how Cousin Ethel bore it all, and remained so calm, so patient, and so kind.

But a turn for the better came at last.

Miss Priscilla was out of danger, and her recovery now was only a matter of time; and when Ethel brought in the news, Tom Merry almost broke down.

"Heaven bless you, Ethel!" he faltered. "Heaven bless you! You've done it! Heaven bless you!"

And Ethel's voice was too shaky for her to reply.

In a few more days Miss Priscilla was well enough to come downstairs into the tiny parlour. And then a new thought came to Tom Merry.

"I suppose you'll be leaving us now?" he exclaimed, with such dismay in his face that Ethel smiled.

"Not yet," she said; "not till Miss Fawcett is quite well enough to be moved."

"To be moved!" repeated Tom Merry.

"I am going to take Miss Fawcett away with me, Tom. She wants care, and I am going to give it to her. I have persuaded her to agree."

"Heaven bless you, Ethel. I—I can stand things if she's all right!" said Tom, in a shaky voice.

"I know, Tom. And—and I wish you would accept my uncle's offer to return to St. Jim's," said Ethel.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"I can't, Ethel! I can't sponge even on Lord Eastwood, a kind friend as he is. I must work!"

"But what work will you find?"

"I shall find some. I shall go and stay with Mr. Dodds for a day or two, I think. I hear that he is already in negotiation with a tenant for Laurel Villa, and when that's settled, I shall get a job of some sort."

"I—I suppose you are right," said Ethel slowly.

There were some happy days at the little cottage before Miss Fawcett left.

The old lady had consented at last to be taken to Lord Eastwood's house until further arrangements should be made.

Then the day of parting came.

Lord Eastwood's motor-car came for Cousin Ethel and Miss Priscilla, and Hannah, and they were warmly packed into it, and Tom Merry stood by the car to say good-bye. He was to go to the rectory at Huckleberry Heath when his friends were gone, for a few days, and then—then the world was before him.

Tom Merry stood, cap in hand, his eyes on the car till it turned a corner and vanished.

Tom Merry glanced back at the dark, silent cottage. Then he looked after the car again—his friends were gone. With a heavy heart he stepped out and tramped away in the direction of Huckleberry Heath.

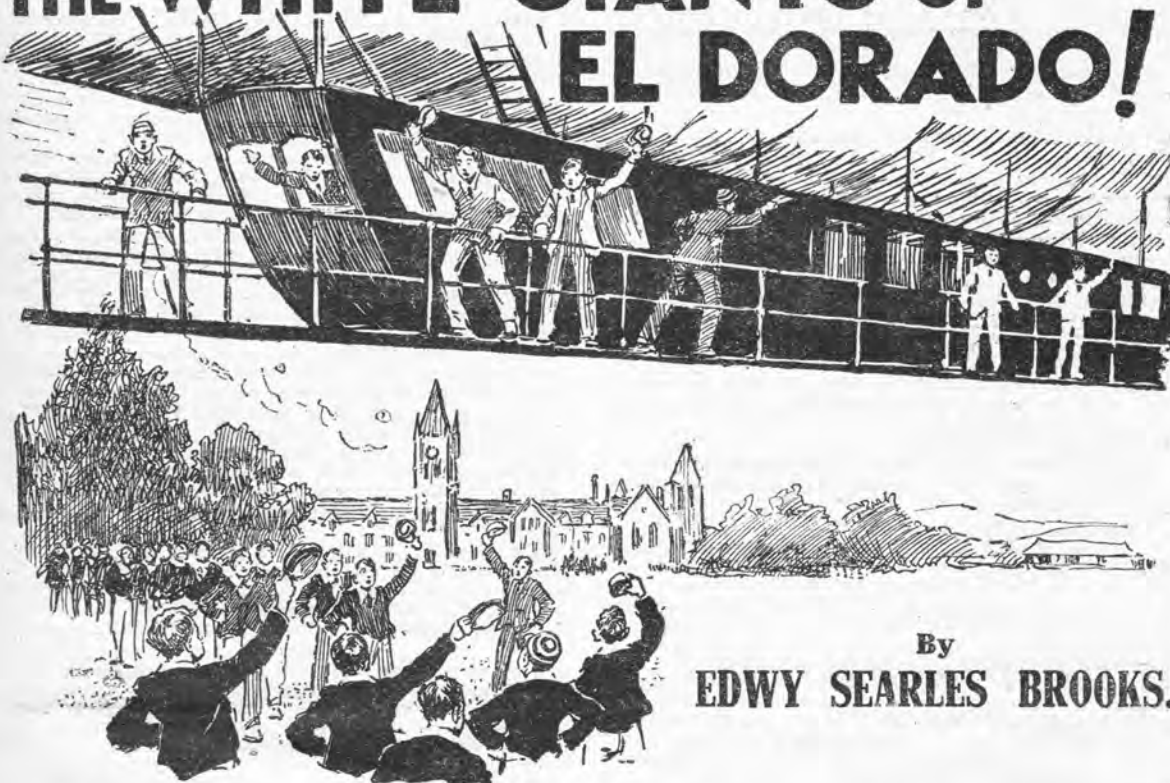
But his face grew brighter, his steps grew firmer, as he walked on. The worst trial of all had been spared him. He was young, he was strong, he was brave; he had courage to face the world. And Tom Merry's shoulders came erect, and he held up his head, looking all the world fearlessly in the face.

THE END.

Read all about Gussy's great idea for helping poor old Tom, in next week's magnificent yarn "RALLYING ROUND TOM MERRY!" And don't forget—there will be another EIGHT PICTURES for your Album.)

THE ST. FRANK'S BOYS MEET AN OLD ENEMY IN THE KING OF THE ARZACS!

THE WHITE GIANTS OF EL DORADO!



By
EDWY SEARLES BROOKS.

THE OPENING CHAPTERS.

In a super airship, the Sky Wanderer, a big party of St. Frank's fellows, under Nelson Lee and three other masters, set off on an educational tour of the world. With the party also is Lord Dorrimore and his black friend, Umlosi. The airship is following a course over the wilds of Brazil when suddenly a burning ray strikes upwards from El Dorado, the fabulous city of gold, in Arzacland! Damaged by the ray, the Sky Wanderer is forced to descend for repairs, but before these can be effected the St. Frank's party and the airship crew are made prisoners by the Arzaes, a race of White Giants!

King Yoga I

NELSON LEE, his face revealing nothing of the alarm within him, faced the situation calmly. It was a moment for quick thinking. Lee, as headmaster of the airship school, was responsible for the safety of the boys. So suddenly had the White Giants swept upon the party, after the narrow escape from the charging herd of mastodons, that there had been no time to get hold of the rifles and other weapons which Lord Dorrimore declared were packed somewhere in the Sky Wanderer's hull.

"You are mistaken, I think," said Nelson Lee easily, as he stood dwarfed before the immense height of the Arzac officer. "We come to your country as friends, and you tell us to regard ourselves as your prisoners."

"You offer resistance, we kill," said the officer, in a cold even voice.

"But why should we resist?" laughed Lee. "You can see that most members of the party are schoolboys. We will go to your king with pleasure."

He turned to Sir Hobart, and, unseen by the Arzac officer, gave him a hard, meaning look.

"For the time being, Manners, we must part company," he said. "You had better take your officers and crew back into the airship. I will get in touch with you again as soon as possible."

"Wait!" broke in the giant officer, on whose face there was a strained expression, as though he had some difficulty in following Lee's words. "I am Captain Oss!" He smote his chest. "Me!"

Nelson Lee bowed.

"We are at your service, Captain Oss!" he replied smoothly.

"You talk much," said Captain Oss. "You talk of leaving men in ship." He pointed upwards at the great hull and shook his head. "No—no men stay! You all come to El Dorado. You refuse, we kill!"

"And that's that!" murmured Lord Dorrimore, with a shrug.

Nelson Lee had done his best, but it was obvious that Captain Oss was determined. He had his orders, and he meant to carry them out. When Nelson Lee looked round he saw that the columns of White Giants had closed in, so encircling the airship party that any attempt to reach the ladders would have been doomed to failure.

Captain Oss now shouted his orders, using a strange language. The orders were repeated by minor officers, and the immense Arzac soldiers formed a complete square, hemming in the airship party so that there was no avenue of escape. Schoolboys, schoolmasters, airship officers and men—all were surrounded.

"You march!" said Captain Oss briefly.

He raised his voice again. The human square moved forward, and the prisoners were compelled to move with it.

"This is disastrous, Dorrie," muttered Lee. "What will happen to the airship?"

Lord Dorrimore glanced round.

"Well, she won't be left to the mercy of the mastodons," he replied. "A platoon of these supermen is standing by. It's an awkward situation, Lee, but if we put on a bold front there'll be nothing to fear. When we left the White Giants, on that former occasion, they were our friends. Why should they change now?"

"Thou art a man of wondrous faith, N'Kose," rumbled Umlosi. "Hast thou not learned in thy wandering life that the hearts of men are like unto the four seasons of the year?"

"Yes, I have learned that, old friend," replied Dorrie. "But there's no apparent reason why the hearts of the Arzaes should have changed."

"Yet perchance a reason will reveal itself," replied Umlosi. "My snake tells me that we go forward into peril—into a land which seethes with hatred."

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The prisoners were marched out of the valley, taking a route through a broad belt of the forest. And Nipper and Handforth and many of the other boys took a last glance backwards at the mighty, magnificent Sky Wanderer. There she rested, virtually unscathed, in all her majesty, an immense silver monster with the sunlight shimmering on her hull. And beneath stood a strong bodyguard of the White Giants, impassive, motionless. Then the scene was hidden as the trees closed round.

"By George!" said Handforth, his eyes sparkling, his rugged face aglow with excitement. "What an adventure, you chaps!"

"Think we shall ever see the airship again?" asked Church.

"Of course we shall, fathead!" retorted Handforth, with fine confidence. "Wait until Dorrie and Mr. Lee come face to face with this King Yo Yo!"

"Yoga!" said Nipper.

"Yoga, then. What's the difference?" asked Edward Oswald. "Wait until Mr. Lee has a talk with him! Prisoners, eh? Prisoners my foot! We shall soon be the honoured guests of El Dorado!"

"Let us trust that Brother Handforth is a reliable prophet," sighed William Napoleon Browne. "Judging from his past performances, however, it cannot be truthfully said that the outlook is sunny—without wishing to harp on a note of pessimism. Why do you jump a yard into the air, Brother Horace?"

"Look!" gasped Stevens of the Fifth. "Look over there!"

Browne looked, and even his characteristic imperturbability was shattered.

"Holy Moses!" he ejaculated.

A chorus of exclamations went up from the other boys—and from the men, too. The greensward stretched for a full half-mile ahead, widening, and in the distance a white road could be seen—a road which was all of two hundred feet wide. On it, in line, stood three enormous and extraordinary wheeled vehicles. They were shaped something like chariots, with high sides curving towards the front but dropping away at the rear. They were coloured a vivid, glistening red, and their sides were emblazoned with ornate decorations of beaten gold. Each vehicle had at least twenty wheels, and these, too, were ornamented with gold.

But the most astonishing feature of all was the nature of the steeds which were harnessed to the mighty chariots. They were vast, scaly creatures, all of thirty feet high and proportionately long—formidable brutes with enormous horns. Just behind the horns, affixed to the wide neck, were structures which contained numbers of men.

"As I live, the beggars use brontosauri instead of horses!" said Lord Dorrimore.

"No, Dorrie, these creatures are triceratops," corrected Nelson Lee. "What an amazing sight!"

"But—but the things are tame!" said Sir Hobart, in amazement.

"Why not?" asked Lee. "Does size really matter? For centuries elephants have been tamed in India, and yet a wild elephant is a very formidable and dangerous animal. The Arzaacs, having no horses and similar small animals in their country, have evidently brought these great monsters into domestic use."

It was a thrilling experience. When the road was reached the prisoners were briefly ordered to take their places in the central chariot. So large was this vehicle that it easily accommodated them all. They stood in a great crowd, with the high sides of the vehicle towering around them. The White Giants then raised a great flap at the rear of the chariot. At a word of command the Arzaacs boarded the other two vehicles and the procession started forward.

In spite of the apparent ungainliness of the triceratops, they moved with surprising speed. At a gait which was something between a walk and a trot they lumbered on.

"It's a dirty trick!" said Handforth complainingly.

"These high sides prevent us from seeing the country."

"And they prevent us from escaping, too," said Nipper.

"My only hat! What a size this chariot is. And we must be doing twenty-five miles an hour at least."

Nelson Lee said little, and he strove hard to prevent his inward anxiety from reflecting itself upon his face. This world trip had started so successfully; in New Zealand great preparations were being made for the Sky Wanderer's reception. As things looked now she would never arrive! She stood helpless, guarded only by a number of White Giants, who were utterly incapable of handling her. Everything would depend upon the decision of King Yoga. If Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore could establish friendly relations, then everything would be all right. But deep in Lee's heart he had grave qualms. Like Umlosi, he had a foreboding of evil—of danger.

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The monster chariots rumbled on. In spite of their gorgeous appearance, they were clumsy, crude things, and the prisoners were jolted sickeningly.

After an hour's journey they came upon a great wall—a wall which towered for one or two hundred feet into the air.

Doors of incredible size and thickness were opened, operated entirely by man-power. The procession rumbled through. The doors were closed immediately, and no other pause was made in the journey.

Although the captives could see very little of the country-side, its aspect was now completely different. The wall, apparently, was a dividing line—built, no doubt, as a protection against the prehistoric monsters which roamed the forest-lands. Within this "inner country" there were cultivated fields on all sides, and at times the chariots would rumble through isolated towns and villages.

A halt was called at the very gates of El Dorado. These gates appeared to be of wrought gold, and they stood wide open. The rear flap of the chariot was lowered, and the prisoners were briefly ordered to form into a double line. The rest of the journey was accomplished on foot.

They went marching into the wonder city, with towering columns of White Giants on either side, in advance, and in the rear. And all along the wide streets, with the gold-edged pavements, people were standing in silent crowds.

"It's not the same, Lee," said Lord Dorrimore. "There is something infernally wrong here. The people do not smile—even the women and children just stare—stolidly, indifferently. They look sullen. My recollection of the Arzaacs is that they were happy, friendly people."

"No doubt we shall soon learn the full truth," said Nelson Lee.

The boys forgot the danger of their position in their admiration of the city and its marvellous buildings. The streets were of imposing width, and the buildings appeared to be made of solid gold—although, no doubt, the gleaming yellow metal was only veneered upon the hidden stonework or marble.

The party came at length to the central square, which was of imposing aspect. Nearly a quarter of a mile across, it was surrounded by the most imposing buildings of all; and in the centre, encircled by wonderful gardens, stood a gold building like a skyscraper. It towered up incredibly; and the captives, staring towards the summit, knew that the mysterious destruction ray had emanated from there.

Straight across the square the party went; steps of gold were mounted; they passed through arched openings, and thus penetrated the palace of King Yoga.

Through halls of marble and gold, where giant soldiers stood like statues; where ornamental pillars rose toweringly to the vast gold-encrusted ceilings. And so, finally, into a chamber of surpassing magnificence—a wonderful hall of immense size, where even the floor was of gold. At one end there were some golden steps, leading up to a raised platform. Here stood the exquisitely-wrought golden throne, and upon it sat King Yoga. The prisoners, surrounded by their guards, were taken to the foot of the golden steps, and here they were brought to a halt.

So far, not a word had been spoken. Every member of the airship party stared in wonder—even in bewilderment—at the figure which sat upon the throne. They had expected to see a White Giant—a man, perhaps, of even greater stature than his fellows. Instead, they saw a tiny man, dressed in simple shimmering robes. He could have been no more than five feet four in height; his hair was as white as driven snow, and his long beard matched his hair. He had the air of a patriarch. He raised a slender white hand.

"Let the prisoners Lee and Nipper and Dorrimore advance," he said, in a soft, silky voice which, although low spoken, sounded astonishingly clearly in the tense silence. There was a stir. Lee and Dorrie glanced at one another. Nipper stared at his school chums around him. How was it possible for King Yoga to know their names?

But the three who had been named stood forward; they were allowed to mount the golden steps. And so, at last, they stood face to face with the King of Arzaaland.

"Your Majesty—" began Lord Dorrimore.

"Wait!" cut in Lee, and his voice was sharp with dreadful understanding.

He was looking full into the eyes of King Yoga—eyes which were aglow with a mocking, triumphant light. By his eyes alone, the great detective recognised this man. And he felt a sudden tremor, for he knew that he and all his companions were doomed.

"The recognition, my dear Lee, is mutual?" asked King Yoga silkily. "You know me, then?"

"I know you," replied Nelson Lee in a hard voice, "You are Professor Cyrus Zingrave!"



As Nelson Lee, Lord Dorrimore, and Nipper stood face to face with the King of Arzacland, a sudden tremor went through Lee, for he was looking full into the eyes of a master criminal and his greatest enemy! "I know you," said Lee. "You are Professor Cyrus Zingrave!"

The Cavern of Torture!

EVERY one of the St. Frank's boys heard Nelson Lee's words, and many were the exclamations of consternation which arose. For that name brought back grim memories of dark and evil happenings in far-off England.

Professor Cyrus Zingrave!

The scientist-genius who had, for years, been the ruling brain of the greatest criminal organisation the world had ever known—the notorious League of the Green Triangle! Nelson Lee, by his brilliance, by his relentlessness, had shattered the criminal league. Ruthlessly he had wiped it out; he had stripped Professor Zingrave of his wicked power, and sent him into the wilderness of the world, a fugitive.

For years, in fact, this evil genius had been incarcerated in one of England's convict prisons; he had escaped, and again he had attempted to reorganise the League of the Green Triangle. But once more Nelson Lee had crushed him; and since then the world had heard nothing of Zingrave. It was believed, in many official quarters, that he was dead.

But here he was—a ruler still, and, apparently, with greater power than ever before.

"Your eyesight, I perceive, has lost none of its keenness, Lee," said King Yoga in that soft, refined voice which was so well known to the detective. "You find me in strange circumstances, my friend?"

For a moment Lee did not reply. He was tortured by dreadful thoughts. He was thinking of the many boys who had come so eagerly on this trip. To be captured by White Giants was serious enough; but for the party to find itself in the hands of this super criminal was well-nigh terrifying. Zingrave had a long memory, and now that he had his former enemies in his power, it was certain that he would exact a diabolical vengeance. Nelson Lee thought not of himself, but of his young charges.

"We have met in strange places before, Zingrave, and in peculiar circumstances," he said quietly. "But never have we met so strangely as this!"

"Or with the balance of power so completely on one side," added Zingrave purring. "My friend, I am enjoying myself—which, I imagine, is more than you are doing. This is my hour—an hour for which I have long awaited. It has come unexpectedly, and because of that, my gratification is proportionately greater!"

"Well, what are your intentions?" demanded Lord Dorrimore in his blunt, direct way.

Zingrave turned his eyes upon Dorrie, and they were alight with a smile so sinister that Dorrie felt suddenly cold.

"My intentions are frankly devilish," said Zingrave smoothly. "Do I sound melodramatic? If so, I apologise. Yet it affords me pleasure to tell you that you will soon be suffering the tortures of the condemned!"

"You're mad!" said Dorrie briefly.

"Is your memory so short?" retorted the self-styled King Yoga. "On more than one occasion you throw your strength and wealth into Lee's campaign against me. Yes, and many of those schoolboys, too," he added, pointing with long, delicate finger. "I remember them all. They shall suffer just as you will suffer. As for the rest—the officers and crew of the airship—there is work for them here in this new El Dorado!"

"I still think you are mad," said Dorrie. "But the discovery of your identity has solved at least one riddle. We know now how the Sky Wanderer was crippled. That infernal ray, no doubt, is one of your own scientific inventions?"

"There, my good Lord Dorrimore, you are wrong," replied Zingrave. "The ray is a centuries old invention of the Arzaes themselves—although, I must, with due modesty, claim that I have improved it almost out of recognition. The ray, as you call it, is merely a shaft of concentrated sunlight."

He turned to Nelson Lee.

"Centuries ago, the Arzaes designed a crude sun-harnessing apparatus, with burnished gold as the reflecting medium—as a weapon of defence against flying monsters. It was never very effective. An ingenious gentleman named the Comte de Plessigny was the first to make improvements; he constructed a really ambitious apparatus!"

"De Plessigny!" exclaimed Lee. "So that scoundrel is here, too?"

"Oh, yes, he is here—but buried under six feet of earth," replied Zingrave silkily. "It was De Plessigny's apparatus which disabled my aeroplane and brought it down. You see, after my flight from England I heard rumours of the fabulous gold in this region, and I flew over it on a preliminary exploration survey. But the ingenious count brought me down, and I've been here ever since. I built the great tower in the city's centre, and on the top of it I erected a sun-harnessing machine, which so concentrates the sun's rays that the beam, such is its intensity, can melt hard metal at a touch. Any aircraft which ventures over this lost land is inevitably lost, too. I have already brought down two world fliers—and your airship is my third victim."

"And if the sun fails to shine?" asked Nelson Lee. "What of your magic ray then?"

"It is, I admit, a flaw in an otherwise perfect system," replied Zingrave. "But the sun shines very persistently."

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here; and when it doesn't the clouds come so low that no flier would catch even a glimpse of Arzacland. We have our rainy season; but what airman, except a madman, would fly over an unknown forest and swamp region in cloudy and rainy weather conditions?"

"Did you kill De Plessigny?" asked Lee bluntly.

"He became troublesome, so I had him executed as a traitor," explained Zingrave, with a shrug. "You see, when I first arrived De Plessigny was struggling to reconstruct this land of the Arzaacs after it had been wrecked by a cataclysm of earthquakes. I think you were here at the time. The death list was smaller than might have been expected. De Plessigny survived, and with an enthusiasm which was entirely admirable, he set about the work of restoration. But his methods were crude. He possessed no organising genius. I was the man for that job, and within a period of weeks I usurped the unfortunate count, and as he irritated me by his petty jealousies, I got rid of him."

"In a word, you usurped his throne?" asked Lee.

"You put it very neatly, my friend," nodded Zingrave. "That is exactly what I did do. I made myself supreme ruler of the White Giants. I threw all my vital energy and magnetism into the cause of the Arzaacs. It was I who planned the new El Dorado with such magnificence; it was my brain which organised everything. There is gold in unlimited quantities here; it is as commonplace in Arzacland as sheet iron is in England. During your journey through the city you no doubt saw the outcome of my enterprise."

"And these giant people allow you—you to govern them?" asked Lord Dorrimore incredulously.

"I take note of your emphasis," purred Zingrave, nodding. "You think, because I am insignificant in stature, that I am unfit to sit upon this magnificent throne? But it is brains which count, my friend—not brawn. I have one of the most unique brains in the world. It was I who built and ruled the mighty League of the Green Triangle."

"But it was a greater brain than yours which crushed it," said Dorrie.

Zingrave's eyes glittered like a snake's.

"But Lee can do nothing now," he replied. "He is my prisoner, and even his super brain will find no outlet for its inventive genius. Here, in Arzacland, I am the king—the monarch of all. My power is greater than it has ever been. No living man can reach this country on foot, since the poisonous swamps provide an impassable barrier. And if men come by air I bring them down. Five such men—two in one machine, three in another—are now working for me; they have been placed in charge of the scientific workshops which I have established. They can never escape."

He spoke quietly, confidently; but a change was coming over him. He was losing his imperturbable calm, and he gripped the great arms of his throne as he leaned slightly forward, his hypnotic gaze centred upon Nelson Lee.

"Here, in this little kingdom, I am a modern Nero," he said. "All men who venture here from the outer world are my prisoners. I am establishing the English language in Arzacland; my laws are always obeyed, for those who defy me die! The governing principles of my once-famous League have been reproduced in El Dorado. My new power is a hundred times greater than my old power, for here I work openly, with no interference or fear of interference!"

He rose to his feet in the sudden passion which swept over him.

"For years, Lee, you hunted me like a dog; you drove me from pillar to post!" he continued passionately. "I became a fugitive, with the constant fear of capture hanging over my head. And life without power is useless to me. Fate has placed you in my hands, and my hour of vengeance has come!"

There was a tense, vibrant silence, broken, after a moment, by Edward Oswald Handforth's celebrated whisper, which was like any other fellow's normal voice.

"Crumbs!" he said. "I believe the old devil is going to put us to death!"

The interruption, so incongruous, restored Professor Cyrus Zingrave to his normal calm.

"Forgive me for displaying such ill-mannered emotion," he

said silkily. "The boy is wrong. To put you to death would be a mistake. Death would be but a paltry vengeance. I shall watch you suffer, year after year. The boys will grow up as my slaves. You, Lee, will be the most degraded slave of all. You are my prisoners for ever! Do not imagine that you can escape by air, for at this very moment your wonder ship, the Sky Wanderer, is in process of being broken up. The aircraft I previously brought down have been destroyed."

"You wouldn't dare!" shouted Sir Hobart Manners, striding forward in sudden fury. "You cold-blooded fiend! If you damage the Sky Wanderer—"

"Remember, my friend, you are addressing the king!" interrupted Zingrave. "At a single word from me my men will cut off your right hand or slash out your tongue."

Sir Hobart recoiled.

"Yes, I can indulge in such little pleasantries here," continued Zingrave mockingly. "For there is none to say me nay. Your airship is to be destroyed. I will allow no aircraft to exist in Arzacland—since aircraft would assist the escape of my slaves in the event of revolt. But enough!" he added crisply. "I must think; I must decide just how you shall be distributed, how you shall begin your suffering. Until I have made such decisions you will be taken to a place of safety."

He stood up, raised a hand, and spoke rapidly in the Arzac tongue. A group of officers, hitherto stolidly indifferent, sprang to attention. Nelson Lee and the others were quietly but firmly seized and led back to the main body of prisoners. It was useless to resist the White Giants.

Once again the column was formed, and the captives were marched out of the golden chamber. Their going was very different from their coming. They had entered full of hope, full of confidence that King Yoga would be friendly. They made their exit in grim despair. Fortunately, most of the St. Frank's fellows were too excited and bewildered to appreciate the dreadful nature of their position. But Nelson Lee knew. Better than any other, he knew Professor Zingrave, and the knowledge of Zingrave's present supremacy appalled him.

"Thou art ill in thy heart, Umtagati," rumbled Umlosi, who marched on one side of Lee.

"Have I cause to be otherwise, old friend?" asked Lee bitterly. "If we had kept to our original route across the Caribbean and the Straits of Panama—"

"Thou art indeed ill in thy heart, my master," interrupted Umlosi. "Otherwise such words would not come from thee. For thou hast learned, in thy wisdom, that it is idle to speculate on what might have been. We are here, in this wondrous land, and we are the captives of the great-small man. Yet might not our situation have been worse? We are still one company, and in unity there is strength."

"I deserve your rebuke, Umlosi," said Lee quietly. "Yes, we have that to be thankful for, old friend. Zingrave has not separated us, as he might. And perhaps—"

But Nelson Lee did not dare to let his thoughts run on.

They were outside the palace now, marching under the hot sunshine across the mighty square.

"Wonder what's in store for us?" asked Reggie Pitt, with a grimace. "Something hot, I'll bet!"

"Oh, rot!" protested Fullwood. "That white-bearded old chump doesn't really mean to do us any harm."

Bernard Forrest, who was just in the rear, overheard the words.

"Oh, doesn't he?" he said unpleasantly. "He's Zingrave—and he means mischief! Mr. Lee and Dorrie were fools to bring the airship over this rotten country!"

"We shall all be killed!" wailed Gulliver.

"Who's that snivelling?" demanded Handforth, glancing back down the column. "Forrest and his pals. I might have known it. Do you think it'll do any good to show the white feather? It's not the first time we've been in a mess, and we'll get out of it, too."

"Good old Handy!" said Nipper. "That's the spirit."

"Oh, rather!" chimed in Archie Glenthorne, jamming his monocle into his eye and gazing about him with interest. It's all frightfully priceless. I mean to say, a bit of a bore, all this dashing hither and thither. But there's no denying we're seeing life—what?"

Nelson Lee, hearing a few of these comments, felt proud of the boys. He knew they were fully alive to the perils of the situation, and some of them were behaving splendidly.

Another surprise was quickly forthcoming.

Instead of being marched right across the square, the captive-column was now marshalled into a wide opening which yawned in the marble paving; a steep descent which was like the yawning mouth of a subway. Great numbers of the Arzac soldiers stood on guard at either side to avoid any possible breakaway of the prisoners. More of the soldiers led the way down into the mysterious depths.

**St.
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WHO'S
WHO**



Lord Dorrimore. Umlosi. W. N. Browne.
(Three more portraits next week.)

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The sunshine was left behind; the column plunged deeper and deeper underground, now walking down a steep, straight slope. Presently it became a stairway, with wide, shallow steps.

Down and down! The sunshine had long been left behind, and, except for a strange glow, which seemed to come from nowhere, the underground passage was dark. It was as wide as a road, and the walls and roof, only dimly seen, were of hard, solid rock.

Straight down the stairway led, plunging deeper and deeper, apparently, into the very bowels of the earth. And the farther the party progressed, the hotter became the atmosphere. Soon it was stifling—an acrid, dry, insufferable heat. It was as though they were walking down into a colossal furnace.

Already the perspiration was streaming from them, and their shirts were wringing wet, and yet the heat grew more pronounced; and the extraordinary subway continued on and on.

They must have penetrated for a full half-mile, with the columns of silent White Giants on either side, before there was a change. Now a strange, lurid glow filled the atmosphere ahead, and the heat came billowing up the stairway in suffocating waves.

"What devil's hole are we bein' taken to?" muttered Dorrie. "This heat will soon be unendurable."

"Yet it is staggering to realise how great a temperature the human body can stand," replied Lee grimly. "Zin-grave knows it, and this, I imagine, is to be our first sample of his torture methods."

The stairway had ended, and they were on level rock

floor. On this island there was a squat, stone building, obviously man made. It had no windows, but there was the dark opening of a doorway.

"Look!" gasped Tommy Watson, clutching at Nipper's arm.

He had seen something else. Just near where the Arzac soldiers had halted there was a long, metal structure. It was flat, and, although not more than three feet wide, it was seventy or eighty feet in length. At a word of command from an officer, a number of the White Giants were pushing at the strange, metal gangway. It moved forward smoothly—on rollers, apparently, the end of it now extending over the chasm. Farther and farther across it went, until its end rested upon the solid rock of the island. It could not overbalance, because the gangway was double the length of the chasm. It was a crude device—a gangway that could be pushed forward, or drawn back.

But now the horrid gulf was bridged. And what a bridge! A thing not more than three feet wide, without any guard rail.

"You cross!" said an Arzac officer, looking at Nelson Lee, and pointing to the bridge. "You all go—one man, one boy. You go in that order. You understand?"

"I understand," said Lee quietly. "But this is next door to murder!" burst out Dorrie furiously. "The heat over that gap must be deadly, an' if any boy staggers—"

"He who staggers—dies!" replied the officer. "His Majesty the King has given order! You go! You go quietly, or we use force."

"It's no good, Dorrie, we've got to face it," said Lee.



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now, moving forward against a veritable blast of scorching heat. Thus they emerged from the subway suddenly, to find themselves in the Cavern of Torture.

The Gulf of Death!

THE scene was diabolical in its lurid horror. It was a scene so fantastic, so unreal, that the human mind boggled at the sight of it.

The rock cavern was of unbelievable size. It stretched away into the dim distance, and the roof was five or six hundred feet overhead. A reddish-golden glow, flickering strangely, filled the cavern to its farthest corners. The floor, perfectly level, was of rock, and the glow was coming from a great, circular chasm in the very centre of the cavern. The heat which arose from that luminous abyss caused the air to quiver weirdly.

"Where, in the name of Hades, are we?" muttered Sir Hobart Manners, speaking with difficulty.

"In Hades itself, by the look of it," granted Dorrie. "Ye gods! Did you see that?"

The glow had increased, and for a moment it had seemed to the prisoners that a fiery, molten mass had risen almost to the surface of the chasm, as though it would overflow. And then, in the same second, it subsided, and the air was full of a strange and hideous gurgling. A blast of heat, so fierce that many of the boys covered their faces with their hands, swept upon them like a solid wave.

Nelson Lee was horrified. He had seen something which, as yet, the others had missed. He knew that there was a great molten pool forming the central floor of the cavern; but in the very middle of that pool stood a little rock island, its level being slightly lower than that of the cavern

floor. His lordship looked about him, and his fists were clenched. But in a moment he saw that any kind of resistance would be madness. They were surrounded by dense masses of the Arzac soldiers, and if they started a fight they would be overwhelmed in less than a minute.

So the crossing commenced.

Lee himself went first; and it was Nipper who made certain of being by the detective's side, or, to be more exact, at his rear, for that bridge could be negotiated only in single file.

They went quickly, and they could feel the bridge swaying beneath them. Nipper saw, with horrified eyes, a sea of molten fire fifty or sixty feet below. The heat which arose from it was like a scorching torch. And even as Nipper crossed, the molten mass rose with a sudden, sullen surge. Up it came, higher and higher, until it seemed it would engulf the bridge. There came that gurgling sound again, accompanied by a deep, hollow roaring. Then Nipper felt himself on the solid rock again, and the heat was not so overpowering.

"We're over, guv'nor!" he panted.

Lee made no comment; he was watching the others, his eyes full of anxiety. And at the same time he was puzzled; for at first sight of the molten mass he had deemed it impossible that any human being could cross with safety. He could only conclude that there was some hidden outlet, like a giant flue-pipe, which drew off the hot gases, and prevented the death heat from entering the cavern. But for some such natural flue the rising heat waves would have been sufficient to roast a man alive before he could get half across.

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Lee had come to another conclusion, too. That scorching, bubbling mass below was gold—liquid gold! Gold which boiled and bubbled in molten waves. And here, in the centre of this pool, stood the isolated rock with its stone building. A scorching prison, indeed! For how could there be any escape from such a spot?

The captives came over—one man, one boy. And Lee was glad to see that in every case the man took the boy's hand. They came over, all of them—from Fenton of the Sixth down to Willy Handforth of the Third; and, intermingling, were Dorrie, Unloso, Sir Hobart, Mr. Wilkes, Mr. Stokes, Professor Tucker, and the airship's officers and crew. All were compelled to cross, and all, mercifully, crossed in safety. One or two of them staggered dizzily, and were on the point of a hideous death; but they were pulled back in the nick of time. One Third Former fainted outright, and had to be carried the rest of the way.

No sooner was the last prisoner across than the Argos seized the gangway bridge and pulled it back to its original position. There it rested, far out of reach.

Without a word, without a look, the White Giants marched away. Not even one man was left on guard. What need was there, indeed, for a guard? For how could there be any escape from such an island as this, surrounded as it was by a thirty foot chasm of molten gold?

A veritable gulf of death! Penetrating into the stone-building, the party found, to its immeasurable relief, that the heat was not so overpowering. There was just the one stone-chamber, the only light coming from the reflected glow through the doorway. Most of the boys had flung themselves down, gasping for breath, and many of them had divested themselves of most of their clothing.

"Twenty-four hours of this, and we shall be passable imitations of kippers. Brother Horace," said Browne, "It cannot be denied that Brother Zingrave has a pretty taste in the matter of torture."

"Water!" went up a cry from one of the other boys. "Here, quick! Here, you chaps! Mr. Lee! There's water."

"Don't touch it!" came Nelson Lee's sharp command. Knowing Zingrave as he did, he feared a diabolical trap. But he was wrong. Ranged along one of the prison walls there were over a dozen great earthenware vessels, each containing twenty or thirty gallons of water. It was fresh, but distinctly warm—it could even be called hot. But it was wet, and boys and men alike gulped that life-giving liquid down their throats.

This discovery led to another. In addition to the water there were earthenware platters containing loaves of dry, biscuit-like bread.

"Well, this proves that we weren't intended to die," said Dorrie, after he had taken a long drink. "By gad, Lee! What does it mean? What does Zingrave intend to do with us?"

"Heaven alone knows," replied Nelson Lee gravely. "But you can be sure of one thing—he is evil. And Fate has thrust us into his hands. He means to wipe off old scores. Dorrie, and this is the most desperate situation that you or I have ever been in."

"And the boys are with us," said Lord Dorrinore, with a sigh. "It's my fault, Lee, I brought them here."

"It was nobody's fault, old man!" interrupted Lee quietly. "Both Sir Hobart and I consented to the altered route. But how could we foretell the outcome?"

He went to the doorway, and there at his feet the abyss yawned. The molten, golden mass rose up from the depths until it almost reached the level of the rock. Then, gurgling and hissing, it subsided again. Every two minutes the liquid fire rose fifty feet to the surface, and then quickly subsided. And during the seconds, when the mass was at its highest the heat was deadly.

Alone! Cut off on that island in the cavern! Weaponless, defenceless, and at the mercy of Professor Cyrus Zingrave!

Yet soon Nelson Lee's despair was to be changed to vivid hope.

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