TOM MERRY & CO. IN THE ROCKIES.

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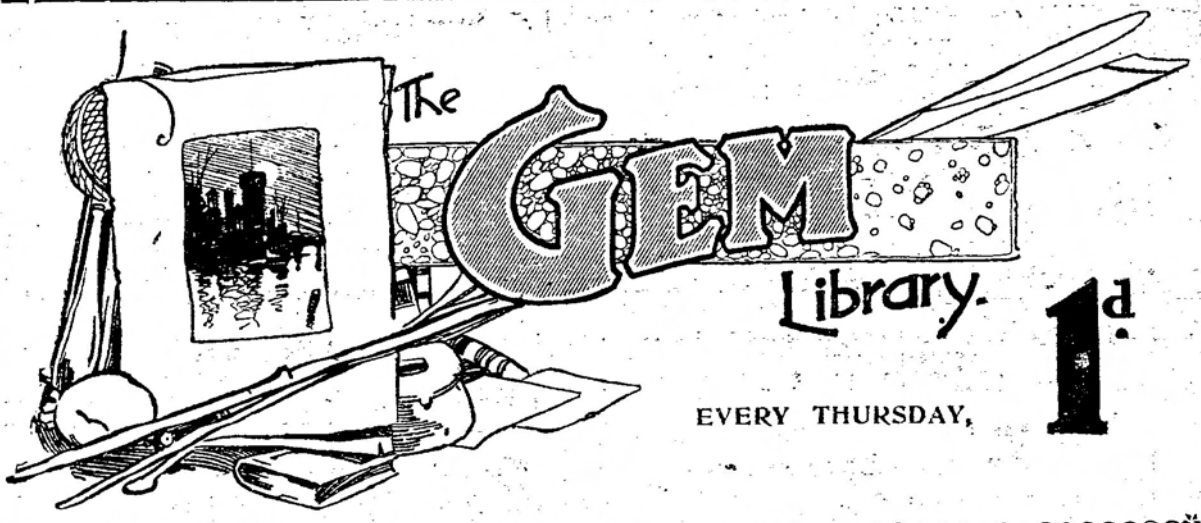
"UGH!" GRUNTED THE REDSKIN CHIEF. "BAI JOVE!" EXCLAIMED ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY.



Complete Stories for Everyone, and Every Story a Gem!

TOM MERRY IN THE ROCKIES.

A Splendid, Complete Tale of the Boys of St. Jim's.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.
The Rocky Mountain Railway.

"SNOW again!" said Tom Merry. "By Jove, how it's coming down!"

"Bai Jove, you're wight!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy put up his eyeglass, and took a survey of the country through which the train was rushing.

Tom Merry & Co. were still upon their travels, but they were, as Jack Blake expressed it, on the last lap. For some time past, the Rocky Mountains had been looming before them on the western horizon, and now the train was entering the rugged passes of the Rockies. Beyond lay the West—the real West, where the grizzly bear climbed the rocky spurs, and the coyote howled o' nights on the prairie, and the redskins still lived in skin wigwams, and daubed their faces with ochre for the warpath. And the juniors of St. Jim's felt their hearts beat faster at the thought of treading that wild land of romance.

The railway line ran here along the bottom of a vast canyon. Infinitesimal the train looked, crawling along at the foot of the steep bluffs. Wild, rocky steeps, arroyos choked with snow, frozen pines rustling in the wind surrounded the train, and met the gaze of the passengers on all sides.

"Awfully impwessive, don't you know," remarked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "It makes you feel the—the kind of

feeling which you—er—which you feel under these circumstances, you know. Don't you think so, Tom Mewwy?"

Tom Merry laughed.

"You've hit it exactly, Gussy."

"I have nevah seen such huge wocks in my life. They are weally gwand!" said Arthur Augustus. "Bai Jove! and there is something w'itten on some of them," he went on, a little excitedly. "I have heard of wock inscwiptions somewhere out here, near the dead cities of the Aztecs. I should like to stop and deciphah some of them. What are you gwinnin' at, Blake?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Jack Blake.

"Weally, Blake——"

"We're about a thousand miles or so from the dead cities of the Aztecs," yelled Blake; "and those inscriptions on the rocks are quite modern."

"Weally, I fail to see how the——"

"Look! There's one in big type," said Blake, as the train rushed past a huge face of rock that rose like the wall of a house for five hundred feet or more. "You can read that from the train, my pippin. Read it!"

D'Arcy turned his monocle upon the inscription on the great rock, and read:

"COBBLER'S MORNING NIPS!"

The swell of St. Jim's looked utterly bewildered.

He was prepared for all sorts of surprises in America, and his ideas had already been considerably enlarged since leaving St. Jim's and the shores of England. But a huge inscription in the Rocky Mountains on a flat surface, in letters five or six feet high, and painfully modern in design, flabbergasted him. And he hadn't the faintest idea what Cobbler's Morning Nips might be.

"Bai Jove! What does it mean, Tom Mewwy?"

"Ha, ha, ha! It's an advertisement!"

"A what?"

"An advertisement! You'll find lots of them along the line. That's a whisky ad. There's a soap one next."

A steep slope of rock rose near the railway track, with a roaring torrent at its base. From the summit sang the wild pines in the mountain wind. The scene was wild, impressive. The sight of a hunter in buckskin, or a Red Indian in full warpaint would not have been startling. But there was neither hunter nor redskin to be seen. Across the great rock was a band of flaring white letters.

"PLUMSON'S SHAVING SOAP!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy dropped his eyeglass to the end of its cord.

"I wefuse to look at it," he said. "I wegard it as disgustin'. Fancy stickin' beastly vulgah advertisements in such a womantic spot? Wotten! Beastly!"

"It isn't what you'd call the very best taste," Tom Merry remarked thoughtfully. "Still, they advertise along the railway lines in England, you know. This seems to me carrying it a bit too far. It recalls Chicago in the midst of the Rocky Mountains. There's a lot more of them!"

On pretty nearly every available space advertisements were glaring forth from rock and pine.

The mountains were silent save for the wind and the whirr of the train. The canyon was vast, solitary. The passengers might have imagined themselves in a wilderness, untenanted by man, but for the advertisements. But the glaring inscriptions along the line reminded them at every turn that they were in modern America.

"Sweet are the uses of advertisement," grinned Jack Blake. "Hallo! There's one that looks familiar!"

It burst on their view as the train rounded a sharp bend.

"POTTS'S CANNED BEEF CAPS THE STACK!"

"That reminds me of Chicago," grinned Blake. "Speaking of canned beef, where is Pongo? Wally, are you looking after that mongrel of yours?"

D'Arcy minor came along the train with a grin on his smudgy face. He looked untidy, and a striking contrast to his elder brother, as he always did. Arthur Augustus put up his eyeglass again and surveyed the junior with disapproval.

"Pongo's all right," said D'Arcy minor. "He won't get loose again! He's an awfully intelligent dog, and I believe he knows what a narrow escape he had of being turned into canned beef or devilled kidneys in Chicago. He's stuck to me like a leech ever since we left Chicago."

"Wally, I wegard you as a disgwace to the family," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy sternly. "Your clothes are dusty, and your face is dirty."

"Is it?" said Wally, drawing his sleeve across his face, and making matters worse, for his sleeve was thick with dust. "That better?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry. "You've made your chivvy the colour of Pompey's now."

"Well, what's the matter with Pompey's complexion?" said Wally. "It will last, and stand the weather, anyway. I've been in the baggage car with the conductor, I guess, and I opine it was rather dusty. Some."

"I wefuse to allow you to speak in the Amewican language, Wally."

"Rats!" said Wally. "Come off, you know! I guess I can sing out any lingo I like, my son. Savvy?"

"It would be vewy painful for me to have to chastise you, Wally."

D'Arcy minor chuckled.

"You're right, Gus, it would, very painful."

"But, undah the circs——"

"Oh, don't you begin, Gus. The conductor's an awfully decent fellow. He's been telling me lots of things. He's telling Skimpole lots of things now, to put down in his book of travels. Skimpole is swallowing them all, and when I left them, he was taking notes of the last time the train was attacked by Indians."

"What? Trains are never attacked by Indians now."

"I know they're not; but Skimpole is getting it all from the conductor. He's going to put it in his book of travels. The engineer——"

"Do you mean the engine-dwivah, Wally?"

"No, I don't," said Wally obstinately. "I mean the engineer. The engineer was telling Skimmy this morning about a grizzly bear dropping on his engine from the branch of a tree, and how he brained him with the shovel."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Skimpole's book of travels will be a marvel," grinned Tom Merry. "By Jove, how the snow's coming down."

"Yes," said Wally, with a grin. "I heard the engineer say that very likely the line would be blocked if it keeps on like this much longer."

"Bai Jove!"

"We might get snowed up in the mountains," chuckled Wally. "Trains often are snowed up in the Rockies at this time of the year, you know. It would be ripping fun."

"Would it?" growled Blake. "It might mean being frozen or starved to death, you young ass."

"Shouldn't wonder!"

"Dinner's served, sah," said a cheerful voice, as a little darkey came out of the car and joined the juniors. "Dinner's served, Mass' Tom."

"Right you are, Pomp!"

And Tom Merry & Co. made their way to the dining-car.

CHAPTER 2.

Through the Snow-Drift!

COLONEL STALKER was already at table, and he grinned a welcome to his young charges. The colonel, who was a great friend of Tom Merry's uncle, Mr. Poinsett, had gone to Chicago to meet the boys on their journey west, and they were crossing the Rockies in his care.

But a change had come over the colonel since leaving Chicago. In the city of canned beef he had discarded his Western garb, and had appeared in "store clothes" and "plug" hat, an array in which he felt rather proud, but in which he was somewhat uneasy. On the journey west he had gradually changed. The plug hat had disappeared at St. Louis. Later on the coat went, and the colonel wore a loose and easy jacket in the place of it. "The "b'iled" shirt vanished, and a loose flannel one took its place, and the juniors suspected that the colonel's "suspenders," as he called his braces, had also been left behind somewhere between Chicago and the Rockies, as soon as they saw a big leather belt round his waist. As soon as the Rockies appeared in sight, the city trousers had finally gone, and the boots. The colonel now wore cowboy breeches, tucked into huge boots that reached to his knee.

And in the homely garb of the West the colonel seemed to feel comfortable at last, and his kindly nature expanded.

A flare of red—the colour of the worthy colonel's shirt—attracted the juniors to his table, and they joined him.

"Thunder!" said the colonel. "It's snowing, and no mistake. Looks as if it might be a block on the line. Guess I hope we get outer this canyon first."

"Would it be dangerous here?" asked Tom Merry.

"I reckon. Further on there's higher ground. Here we should be in the middle of a drift. But never mind the snow; here's dinner."

And they dined.

Skimpole, however, had one eye on the falling snow. He was thinking of his book of travels, and what a splendid chapter he would be able to get out of a snowing-up in the Rockies.

"Dear me!" said Skimpole. "It is ve y annoying to be captured like this! Yet I am glad it has occurred. This is certainly wild life in the Rockies!"

Most of the passengers in the train were keeping an anxious eye on the snow. Nobody but Skimpole and, perhaps, Wally wanted to be snowed up.

The railway line ran now between two high bluffs, which even at midday cast a shadow over the track. There was snow thick on the line, and drifting by the track, and it was coming down heavily. On the summit of the bluffs, where the frozen pines sagged to and fro, there were masses of snow, lodged in the trees, and seemingly suspended over the train as it rushed by.

"Dear me," said Skimpole. "It looks positively dangerous! I should like to have a photograph of that for my book of travels. Do you think you could take a photograph of it, Tom Merry? I remember Manners lent you his camera."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Well, a photograph at forty miles an hour, in the dusk, would not be a howling success, I should think," he remarked. "I don't think I'll try."

"It would be an alarming experience if that mass of snow should crash down on the train——"

"Ha, ha, ha! You'd have to put that in your last chapter, and write finis."

"Thunder! It's coming down!" said Colonel Stalker, emerging from the car.

Skimpole gave a start of affright.

"Goodness gracious! We are lost! Stop the train! Run for your lives!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry.

"Merry, it is no laughing matter. Your life is in danger."

"Rats!"

"Eh?" said the colonel. "What's the trouble?"

"Dear me," said Skimpole, blinking upward through his glasses. "It is not coming down. You were mistaken, my dear sir."

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked Jack Blake. "The colonel was speaking of the snow, ass, not the drift on top of the bluff, duffer!"

"By thunder, it's coming down!" repeated the colonel, looking at the thick falling flakes. "This means a block on the line, or you can call me a Greaser!"

"What on earth's a Greaser?" murmured Blake.

"Probably some curious animal that inhabits these western wildernesses," said Skimpole. "I must ask the colonel for particulars, and if possible obtain the photograph of the creature. Colonel Stalker——"

But the colonel was not listening.

There was a buzz among the passengers as the speed of the train was observed to slacken, and in the gathering dusk of night anxious faces looked from all the windows.

The gloom ahead in the pass was growing denser, and no one could see exactly what was the matter, but that something was wrong was clear enough.

"I guess it's the snow!" said Colonel Stalker. "You can

rely on old Stalky, my sons! It's a block of the snow."

The train came to a halt.

Immediately there was a rush of the passengers to alight, and to inquire what was the matter. The juniors of St. Jim's were among the first. Near the halted engine stood the engine-driver, the conductor, and several other men in earnest talk. A few words were sufficient to tell what the matter was. There was a drift of snow ahead on the line, and the train was stopped.

"Snowed up!" said Wally. "My hat!"

"Dear me!" murmured Skimpole. "I am very glad this has occurred!"

But every other face was serious.

"I guess it's a big drift," said the engineer. "But we can't stick here, I guess, unless we're forced. There's one chance of getting through."

"Take it!" said Colonel Stalker.

"I guess it's risky."

"I reckon it's not so risky as being frozen up in the pass."

"Correct. But——"

"But what's the chance?" asked a dozen voices.

"To charge the drift, and get through. There's clear ground beyond, and this is the end of the canyon."

A silence followed the engineer's words.

Trains beset by the snow sometimes cut their way through, but it is a risky proceeding, and in case of a very big drift might easily mean total wreck and disaster.

It depended on the extent of the drift; and without more ado the engineer and conductor went ahead with lanterns to examine the ground.

The passengers waited in tense anxiety. If the train were snowed up in the canyon, the provisions on board would not last long, and it might be many days before help could arrive over the snow-drifted hills. It might mean death by starvation.

If there were a chance of getting through the drift, all were willing to take it, though fully conscious of the risk they were running.

"I guess we'll try it," said Colonel Stalker. "Neck or nothing, I guess!"

And that was the general opinion.

The juniors of St. Jim's felt their hearts beat hard. This was their first experience of the real West, and it thrilled them. There was real danger at last—danger that might become terrible.

They waited anxiously. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy kept his eyeglass fixed upon the twinkling lights of the engineer and his companion ahead on the track. The swell of St. Jim's was as cool as anybody there.

"Bai Jove!" he remarked. "This will be wathah an expewience! Upon the whole, your baggage will come in useful at last, Tom Mewwy."

Tom Merry laughed, but less merrily than usual.

His old governess, Miss Priscilla Fawcett, had packed his trunks with winter clothing for his journey to Arizona, fully convinced that Arizona was a cold country. As the swell of St. Jim's remarked, his flannels and furs might come in useful now.

Almost every passenger had turned out of the train now, and among the crowd was a slim fellow with an aquiline nose, who seemed desirous of keeping as far away from the juniors of St. Jim's as possible. But it happened that the engineer, coming back, turned the light of his lantern full upon the man's face, and Arthur Augustus caught a clear view of it. And the swell of St. Jim's uttered a startled exclamation:

"Puntah!"

It was Captain Punter, the rascal who had kidnapped him in New York, and who had dogged the chums to Chicago. Since then they had not seen him till this moment.

Tom Merry and Blake turned quickly round.

"Punter! Where?"

"There—— Ah, he is gone! It was the wascal!"

"Rats! How could he be here?"

"I pwesume that I can believe the evidence of my own eyes, Blake?"

"I don't know. Your window-pane may have deceived you."

"Weally Blake——"

"Gentlemen, we shall make the attempt," said the engineer. "Take your seats, please!"

The passengers re-entered the train.

The engine was set in motion again, backing the train away, and the drift on the line vanished from sight. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy looked out of the window with a puzzled expression.

"Bai Jove, we are goin' back, Tom Mewwy!"

"That's only to gain room for getting up speed."

"Oh, I see! I nevah thought of that, you know."

The train backed away for a considerable distance. When the retrograde motion ceased the passengers drew deep breaths. The tug-of-war was coming! The train moved forward again—slowly at first, increasing in speed, till it was tearing down at a rate which bade fair to make it fly from the metals.

"Bai Jove, we are goin' it now!"

"I guess we're doing it slick!" remarked Wally.

"Wally, I wefuse to allow you to use those beastly Amewicanisms——"

"Oh, don't you begin, Gus!"

"At a moment when we are all in pewil of our lives, I should be sowwy to have to give you a feahful thwashin', but undah the circs.——"

"Peace," said Tom Merry—"peace, my children! The crash may come any minute now, and if Gussy's talking we sha'n't hear it."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"Sit tight!" said Colonel Stalker.

"Wight-ho, my deah sir!"

The juniors sat tight. Most of the passengers were pale, and one or two women passengers showed signs of hysterics. Pompey, the little darkey who had followed Tom Merry from Chicago, sat with chattering teeth close beside his master. Tom dropped a kindly hand on his shoulder.

"Not afraid, Pomp?"

"N-n-n-n-no," stammered Pomp, "I'se not afraid, Mass' Tom—I'se not afraid, only—only—only——"

"Keep a stiff upper lip."

"I'se do as you tell me, Mass' Tom."

And poor Pomp tried to keep a stiff upper lip, but with very indifferent success.

The train seemed to be flying now. At any moment might come the terrible bump of the engine into the snowdrift. And what then?

That remained to be seen.

Faster, faster!

Bump!

There was a terrific shock, and nearly everyone in the train was flung down. Bump!

CHAPTER 3.

Skimpole Looks for the Greaser—and Finds Him!

"BAI Jove, don't twead on my monocle!"

That was the first sound that was heard after the shock—the voice of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of St. Jim's.

D'Arcy was sprawling, with Skimpole sprawling across him, and Blake sitting on Skimpole. Tom Merry was reclining on the knees of Colonel Stalker, and Wally was on the floor with his feet on a seat. Pompey was standing up, frightened out of his wits, and gasping for breath. The passengers were lying or staggering about in all sorts of attitudes, and gasping, as they began to sort themselves out.

"Don't twead on my eyeglass! I've dwopped it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" gasped Tom Merry breathlessly.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, this is no time for cacklin'——"

"Nor for inquiring after a giddy eyeglass, Gussy."

"Wats! I have dwopped it, and I am afwaid some silly ass will twead on it. Pway get off my back, Blake, deah boy. I don't want to huwwy you, but you are a vewy heavy weight, you know, and I am feelin' wathah cwushed."

"How can I get off till this ass Skimpole gets off me?" grunted Blake.

"Pray don't disturb me for a moment," said Skimpole, groping for his notebook. "In a case like this I shall be glad to jot down my first impressions before stirring a limb—— I shall not detain you long——"

"That you won't!" agreed Blake, rising, and jerking the

genius of St. Jim's off, and sending him sprawling. "You're quite right there!"

"Really, Blake——"

"There's your window-pane, Gussy. Now the question is whether we've got through, or whether we've been killed?"

"Impossible, Blake!" said Skimpole, who was not blessed with a sense of humour. "A very little reflection should suffice to assure you that we are still in the land of the living. Consider——"

"We're going on, I guess," said Colonel Stalker.

There was no doubt about it. The train was rushing on. And, looking from the windows, the passengers could see huge banks of white on either side.

The charge of the locomotive had cleared the drift. The train was still dashing on at a great speed, but gradually slackening. The danger was over, the tension was gone, and the spirits of all rose. The passengers chatted over the incident as if it were an every-day one, as the train whirred between great banks of snow. The drift was passed, but the snow still lay thick on the line, and in great masses on either side.

Skimpole sat in a corner, and adjusted his spectacles, and started making notes. Tom Merry & Co. looked from the windows.

The night had quite fallen now, and through the darkness the flakes came steadily down, wrapping the Rockies in a winding-sheet.

The speed of the engine slackened more and more. The train was crossing higher ground now. Wally went to give Pongo his evening feed. Arthur Augustus was looking with great care at every passenger who passed up and down the car, in the hope of spotting Captain Punter. The captain had kept out of sight, but D'Arcy was quite convinced that he had really seen him, and that he was on the train.

Colonel Stalker shook his head when Tom mentioned the matter to him.

"I guess he wouldn't come," he said. "I gave him a lamming in Chicago, and he wouldn't want another in the Rockies."

And all but D'Arcy were inclined to agree with him. But Arthur Augustus remained of his own opinion. He took a stroll down the length of the train presently to see for himself, but he did not succeed in finding Captain Punter. But some of the passengers were reading newspapers, and some were asleep, and so the adventurer might easily have been there without the swell of St. Jim's discovering him. Arthur Augustus rejoined his friends unsuccessful, but none the less convinced.

Meanwhile, Skimpole had started investigating. He was curious to know what a Greaser was, in order to jot down the information in his notebook. He tapped the colonel on the arm.

"You were speaking of Greasers some time back, sir," he said mildly. "I should like to know——"

"Was I?" said the colonel.

"Yes, sir. Are we likely to see any Greasers?"

"I reckon! Arizona's full of them!"

"Dear me! That is very interesting! What are they like?"

"Yaller-skinned, ugly critters, mostly," said the colonel concisely. "You wanter keep cl'ar of them, I tell you."

"Certainly, sir. Are they savage?"

"That depends. They're savage if they get riled, though they ain't usually the pluck to stand up to a man."

"I suppose they are found in the prairie and the forest?"

The colonel stared.

"Ye-es, but they mostly live in the towns."

"Dear me! That is very remarkable!"

"Durned if I see anything remarkable in it," said Colonel Stalker. "Of course, there's a lot of them on the ranches, and you can see them on most any train."

"Is it possible that there are any on this train?" asked Skimpole, with great interest.

"I guess so! I saw one in the baggage car."

"Dear me! I shall certainly go and look at it. I suppose it will be quite safe for me to approach this Greaser?"

"I s'pose so," said the colonel.

"Then I shall certainly go."

And Skimpole made his way to the baggage-car. It was in charge of a Mexican, a quiet, dark-complexioned fellow, who was very civil—much more civil than the average American baggage-man. But his black eyes had a gleam in them that showed that his Spanish blood might be easily aroused, quiet as he was.

Skimpole found him busy with his register, and attracted his attention by jabbing a bony forefinger into his ribs. The Mexican turned round.

"Excuse me," said Skimpole, blinking at him through his spectacles, "I hope I am not interrupting you?"

"It is nothing," said the Mexican. "What can I do for you, senorito?"

"I hear that there is a Greaser in this car," said Skimpole. "I want very much to see the beast."

The Mexican began to glare.

"You want to see the Greaser, senorito?" he asked, in a dangerously quiet tone. "You want to see the beast?"

"Yes, certainly. I am making some notes in this book, and I want to observe the brute's habits, and—— Ow!"

The Mexican rose, and gave Skimpole a right-hander on the chin that sent him spinning. Skimpole sat down on the floor of the car, and blinked at the baggage-man in blank amazement

"Wh-wh-what-at—what——" he stuttered.

"Have you completed your observations, senorito," asked the Mexican politely, "or would you like to learn something more of the Greaser?"

"I—I—I——"

Skimpole's remarks were not very lucid, and the Mexican cut them short by kicking him out of the car. The junior bolted, and rejoined his friends in a rather dishevelled state.

"Bai Jove, Skimmy's been in the wars!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy remarked. "Pway what's the beastly twouble, deah boy?"

Skimpole sank into a seat, gasping.

"I—I have had a dreadfully narrow escape from a dangerous maniac," he said. "I—I have been rudely and roughly assaulted by a person in the baggage-car. I went there to see the Greaser, and I saw a dark-complexioned person, the baggage-man, and told him I had come to see the beast, and he assaulted me in the most brutal and unprovoked way."

Colonel Stalker burst into a roar.

"Indeed, my dear sir," said Skimpole mildly. "It is not a laughing matter! The assault was so entirely unprovoked. This man——"

"But that was the Greaser!" roared the colonel.

"Wnat!"

"Ha, ha, ha! You are a tenderfoot, and no mistake! We call Mexicans Greasers, you see. That Mexican baggage-man is the Greaser I was speaking about."

"Oh, dear!"

"It's not a complimentary name, and they don't like it, and I'm not surprised he lit out for you! Ha, ha, ha!"

And the colonel laughed till the tears ran down his bronzed cheeks. The chums of St. Jim's joined in. But Skimpole did not laugh. He was too sore; and he resolved to be a little more careful when he resumed investigations into the manners and customs of the West. But, as he said, how on earth was he to know that the Greaser was a biped and a Mexican?

CHAPTER 4.

Stopped on the Line.

THE party from St. Jim's slept soundly enough that night, while the train rushed on through black darkness and falling snow. While they slept, they swept on to the south-west, and by morning they were far from the scene of the evening's adventure. The train made few stops; here the "depots" were few and far between. After breakfast in the morning, Tom Merry went out on the platform, and watched the landscape as the train rushed on. The snow had ceased to fall at dawn, but everything was white.

Tom heard several of the passengers talking in low, anxious tones, and he caught the words "suspension bridge" several times. The colonel came out with a big cigar between his lips, and Tom joined him.

"Have we to pass a suspension bridge, sir?" he asked.

Colonel Stalker nodded.

"Yes, sonny—about twenty miles on."

"Anything wrong with it, sir?"

"I guess not."

"Some of the passengers seem anxious."

"I guess so," said the conductor, joining in the conversation in the manner peculiar to Americans. "I guess there's reason, sir."

The colonel looked anxious, too.

"What's the matter with the bridge?" he asked.

"I kinder reckon the crick's rose."

The words meant nothing to the English lad, but they were evidently of great import to Colonel Stalker, whose brows became furrowed with thought.

"Thunder! The crick!"

"Yes, sir, I guess so!"

"And the bridge——"

"I kinder guess it's half-way to Texas by this time," said the conductor, grinning.

It was an American exaggeration, but Tom Merry understood that he feared that the bridge had been swept away.

"Where is the bridge, sir?" he asked the colonel.

"It's over the crick, sonny."

"But—but what is a crick?"

Colonel Stalker simply stared.

"Waal, carry me home to die!" he ejaculated. "You've been raised at a first-chop school, and they never taught you what a crick was!"

Tom Merry coloured.

"Yes, I'm afraid I haven't come across the word. Of course, I know what a crick in the neck is, but I suppose it's not that kind of a crick."

"No," laughed the colonel. "It's a crick—a river, you know."

"Oh! A creek!"

"Yes, that's it—a crick!"

Tom Merry could not help laughing. It was only a case of American pronunciation again. He knew what a creek was.

"It's Plum Crick," explained the colonel. "Theer's a suspension bridge over it, you see, and if the crick's rose, it ain't safe. You want to know."

"Is the creek very likely to have risen, then?"

"It always rises when there's a big fall of snow. It wouldn't be so bad if it was freezing now. But there's a thaw this morning."

"And the creek——"

"It has been at high water for weeks past," said the colonel. "Another melt in the sierra, and it will lay over the Rio Grande for size. I kinder reckon the bridge will be busted, slick."

"Then the train will have to stop?"

"I guess so."

"My hat! And we shall have to wade across, or swim?"

The colonel laughed.

"I guess not. You'll obsarve."

The juniors remained on the look-out for the bridge. There was a general exclaiming from the passengers an hour later. Ahead on the track could be seen the supports of the suspension bridge. But the bridge was not to be seen. The railway-track at this point crossed a deep and narrow canyon, at the bottom of which a stream crawled in the summer months, but which became a torrent in the winter, and when there was a melting of snow in the sierra, the waters of the divide came thundering down the course of the stream, and instead of a few feet deep, it was full to the brim, a depth of over a hundred. From the train the passengers could see the waters whirling past where the bridge had been, and flooding the railway-track. The bridge was gone, and had evidently been swept away in the night. The juniors gazed ahead as the train stopped, a good half-mile from the canyon. It was useless to go on.

"My hat!" said Tom Merry. "Here's a go!"

"Bai Jove, it is wathah wotten! We shall be stuck up here a feahfully long time!"

Skimpole's notebook came out at once.

"Dear me, I'm very glad this has occurred," he murmured.

"You utter ass!" growled Blake.

The male passengers crowded out on the track. The engineer was seen shrugging his shoulders hopelessly. It was a difficulty that could not surmount The train could not be made to jump the chasm. The bridge was gone, and the engineer could do nothing but back the train away, and return to the last depot. No train could pass again until the bridge had been repaired.

"And how long will that be?" Tom Merry asked the engineer.

"Days—or weeks," was the unsatisfactory reply.

"My hat! I wonder when we shall get to my uncle's ranch!" Tom Merry muttered. "He will give up expecting us, I think."

And the juniors of St. Jim's looked at one another.

Various delays had occurred since they had landed on the American continent In New York, and again in Chicago, there had been delay But this promised to be the greatest of all. What was to be done? The line would be blocked for days—perhaps for weeks. And the chums recalled the aspect of the last station—the dreary sheds and corrugated iron buildings, the rough-looking men and dismal women, and shuddered at the thought of passing days or weeks there waiting. Colonel Stalker was looking very thoughtful. He chewed his fat cigar, unlighted, and broke silence at last.

"I guess it means hoofing it," he said.

The juniors brightened up.

"Is there any way of getting forward, sir?" asked Tom Merry hopefully.

The colonel laughed.

"There's the chice of several, sonny," he remarked. "We can go back to the depot in the train, and get hosses there, and get to the line further east, and go on by way of Santa Fe. It will mean waste of time, and perhaps the trails are too thick with snow, and we may have to wait some days."

"Any other way?"

"Or we may hoof it up the sierra here, get across this crick in a safer spot, and strike the railway again on the other side.

"Good!"

"Mind, it will mean hard tramping, and at least a couple of days in the mountains, before we strike the railway again," said the colonel warningly.

"Bai Jove, I think I should like to wuff it for a couple of days in the siewwah!" said Arthur Augustus.

"Yes, rather!" said Wally, his eyes glistening. "I guess it will be ripping fun."

The colonel looked doubtfully at the boys.

"It means real roughing it," he said.

"We've come west to rough it," said Tom Merry brightly. "It won't be all lavender on the Arivaca ranch, will it, out in Arizona?"

"Waal, no," said the colonel, laughing. "It won't, I guess. If you reckon you can stand it, we'll try to work the riffle."

"Yaas, wathah! Pway back me up, my deah boys. I wegard this as a gwand opportunity of showin' our wespected fwiend the colonel how Bwitish boys can wuff it."

"Right-ho! We're game, sir."

"Good! Then we'll get what traps we want out of the train, and leave the rest of the baggage to be sent on."

"Good!"

"As for the coon, he's no good; he'd better stop in the train."

"I'se come wid Mass' Tom!" shrieked Pompey.

"Don't be a young burro," said the colonel. "You couldn't stand the snow. You get back into the train."

"I'se come wid Mass' Tom!"

Tom Merry looked perplexed. He had done the little darkey a trifling favour in Chicago, but Pompey's gratitude had known no bounds. He had insisted upon following Tom Merry, and Tom had said nay in vain. Dismissed at Chicago, Pomp had turned up at St. Louis, and then Tom Merry had given in, and the coon had constituted himself the English lad's body-servant, and come West with him. His attachment touched the junior; but certainly a coon was out of place in the snows of the Rockies.

"Mass' Tom, you no send me back."

"But you can't stand the cold, Pomp," said Tom Merry kindly. "You've been shivering ever since we crossed the Mississippi."

And indeed the little darkey was shivering at that moment. He had found it cold in Chicago, but in the mountains of the West he found it colder.

"I'se not afraid of de cold, Mass' Tom."

"But you may get buried in a snow-drift."

"I'se come wid Mass' Tom."

"You may get chawed up by a grizzly bear."

"I'se rader be chawed up dan Mass' Tom chawed up."

Tom Merry burst into a laugh. It was evidently of no use arguing with the devoted Pompey.

"May he come, sir?" he asked, turning to the colonel. The long-limbed rancher was laughing, too, good-humouredly.

"I guess so, if he likes," he said.

"Then you shall come, Pomp."

"I'se tank you, Mass' Tom. I'se come wid you to de end of de earth."

"Then come and help me get the traps ready," said the colonel.

"Good!" murmured Skimpole, as he followed the others upon the train. "Doubtless the colonel intends to use traps to catch wild animals for food. I shall be glad to note the exact way in which they are used, for my book of travels. I am really very glad that this has occurred."

CHAPTER 5.

The Blazed Trail.

MOST of the passengers regarded the colonel's idea as reckless, but no one argued with him. It was a free country, and a free America, could do as he liked. The colonel knew what he was about. He had spent an eventful life in the sierra and the plain, and he could rely upon himself. He had all that he wanted among his baggage, and it did not take him long to sort it out. He advised the boys what to take, and the "traps" were soon piled beside the track. They were made up in convenient bundles, seven in all, one for each of the party.

"Well, good luck to you!" said the engineer, grinning as he stepped aboard. "If you keep west for twenty miles, and strike the crick agin at Powder Gulch, you'll maybe git across. Look out for Reds."

"Reds!" said the colonel. "You don't mean to say——"

"Oh, no, it's not a raid, but Reds have been seen down thar, that's all, and your baggage may be worth their while, colonel."

"Help, deah boys!" came a faint voice from under the ruins of the tent. "I am being cwushed to death by some fearful ass, who is wolling on my beastly legs!"

The colonel smiled grimly.

"I guess they won't trouble my baggage."

"Waal, so-long!"

"So-long, sonny!"

The train backed away. The passengers lined the windows and the platforms to look back at the group of adventurers standing by the track. The juniors of St. Jim's looked at one another excitedly.

The engineer's words had gone to their hearts with a curious thri'l. Hitherto they had caught one or two distant glimpses of redskins, but they were "tame" Indians, as the Americans elegantly called them. The chance of falling in with the "wild" variety was distinctly exciting.

Redskins on the war-path, in that part of the continent, at all events, were quite out of date; yet they had learned that the Indians sometimes broke out of the reserves on isolated raids, and then it was dangerous for small parties to meet them in the sierras. As the engineer had tersely put it, the colonel's baggage might be worth while.

Wally held on to Pongo's chain, and Pongo barked cheerily at the train as it glided away. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy knelt by his trunk and fumbled with the straps. It was a handy little leathern trunk, not one of the larger variety of which D'Arcy had brought about a dozen to America.

"What are you up to?" demanded Colonel Stalker. "You don't want to unfasten that trunk now, I reckon."

D'Arcy looked round.

"I am goin' to get my wevolvah," he explained.

"Your what?"

"My twusty wevolvah. I may need it if we meet wedskins."

"You won't need it," said the colonel. "I've got a barker here that will scare off all the Reds in the Rockies, and I'm not going to have you shooting me in the back."

"Weally, you could not suspect me of intendin' to shoot you in the back, my deah sir," said D'Arcy.

"No; but I guess you'd do it without intending it."

"I am wathah a good shot with the gun, or with a woo wife. It is twue that I haven't used the wevolvah, but I could soon learn."

"You wait till you're quite alone before you start l'arnin', my son," said Colonel Stalker. "Old Stalky doesn't want to be plugged, you bet. Not old Stalk."

"Oh, vewy well," said the swell of St. Jim's resignedly; "I will leave my twusty wevolvah where it is for the pwesent."

"Take up your grips," said Colonel Stalker. "We've got to make a good paseo before we squat for lunch, sonnies."

"But where are the traps?" asked Skimpole. "I understood that we were to bring some traps with us."

"Here they are,' said the colonel.

"But I cannot see them."

"He means the baggage, ass," said Blake.

"Oh! I understood——"

"Rats! Don't you start pretending that you ever understood anything. Take up your baggage and walk."

"Really, Blake——"

"Oh, cheese it, and come on!"

The adventurers lifted their baggage, and started. Colonel Stalker had the heaviest load, having the folding tent in his possession; but his muscles were of iron, and his sinews of steel. He marched ahead without a word, and the juniors marched after him, very eager and excited.

The way lay along the bank of the "crick," which was about a hundred feet deep now, and certainly deserved to be called a river. Colonel Stalker evidently knew the way, for he turned from the creek and tramped by an apparently unmarked route into the pinewoods. The juniors followed, and the foaming torrent and the railway track vanished from sight.

There was very little snow round them now. The trees grew very thick, and there was a great deal of underbrush; but although no path was visible, it was clear that some kind of a track wound through the wood, for the colonel followed it without a halt.

Over and around the boys loomed and gloomed the huge pines, and in the deep shadow of the wood a gloom fell upon the spirits of the boys. It was a kind of not unpleasant melancholy, the chat and banter with which they had started the march dying away in silence as they tramped on.

"Blessed if I know how the colonel's finding the way!" Tom Merry remarked presently. "There isn't the faintest trace of a path. Look at that moss! It hasn't been disturbed by a foot for ages, I should say."

"Yaas, wathah! It's vewy wemarkable."

The colonel turned his head with a smile.

"The bark's blazed," he said briefly.

Skimpole looked interested.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed. "That must have been one of the terrible forest fires I have read about in the newspapers, you know. Where has the bark blazed, sir?"

Colonel Stalker grinned.

"The bark is blazed," he repeated—"blazed with an axe, you know. Look at the trunks as we pass them, and you'll see the notches."

"Blazed means cut, in American," explained Wally, proud of his knowledge of that difficu't language.

"Oh!" said Skimpole.

Tom Merry & Co. examined the trunks as they passed, and they saw how the colonel was guided on his way. At intervals the bark of a tree had been gashed with an axe, and to a woodman there was no difficulty in following those slight indications. It was a "blazed" trail, in Western parlance.

After some observation, the juniors got into the way of looking for the sign, and noting it, and they could soon have followed the path without their guide.

They came out of the wood at last, into a region of rock and ravine, where there was very little snow, but where a cold wind swept from the sierra. There the colonel announced that they would halt for rest and lunch, and a welcome halt it was to the juniors of St. Jim's. They gladly dumped down their baggage by the side of a clear mountain stream.

CHAPTER 6.

Arthur Augustus Lights the Fire.

TOM MERRY & CO. were tired with the tramp through the wood, but not too tired to carry out the colonel's directions in making the camp. Had he been alone, as he explained, he would not have bothered about a fire, but it was just as well for them to have some practice, as a fire would be necessary at night.

The juniors were set to gathering sticks and pine cones, and they soon had a heap.

Arthur Augustus was given the task of lighting the fire, while Colonel Stalker went along the stream with his rifle to look for something for lunch. The idea of actually lunching off game fresh shot for the purpose was exciting in itself.

Tom Merry and Blake sat down on a spur of rock jutting into the stream to try for fish, and succeeded in landing several fat specimens. Skimpole, sitting near them with his notebook on his knee, made up his notes of the day's travels. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy looked at the pile of fuel, and looked at his hands, and thought a great deal.

Tom Merry looked round at him.

"Haven't you started the fire yet, Gussy?"

"Not yet, deah boy."

"Better buck up. I heard the colonel's gun a few minutes ago, and if he's got something he may be back any minute."

"I was thinkin' of my hands."

"What's the matter with your hands?"

"Nothin', but if I light the fire——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I was quite willin' to face any wisks and dangahs in the Wocky Mountains," said Arthur Augustus, with dignity, "but I did not foresee that in wuffin' it I should have to spoil my hands. Howevah, I suppose I must face even that."

"You'd better, ass, or we'll come and warm you, duffer!"

"I wefuse to be called a duffah! Undah the circs——"

"Are you going to start that fire?" roared Blake.

"Yaas, wathah, when I've got my gloves out! I have an old pair which will come in vewy useful to use as housemaid's gloves, deah boys, but they are in my twunk. Do you know why the colonel asked me to light the fire, instead of that niggah?"

"He's taken Pomp with him to carry the game, hasn't he, ass?"

"I decline to be called an ass! I would wathah have cawwied game than lighted a fiah—though, as a mattah of fact, it would have been bettah for me to shoot the game and the colonel to cawwy it. I cannot help suspectin' that in givin' me this task the colonel has been actuated by a howwid spiwit of pwactical jokin'!"

"Never mind; go ahead."

"I am goin' ahead, Tom Mewwy, when I have found my old gloves."

It took Arthur Augustus some time to find his old gloves. He found them at last in the bottom of his trunk, and took the opportunity of taking out his revolver and putting it in the inner pocket of his coat. He had no cartridges for it, but he felt more safe in the heart of the Rockies with his trusty revolver knocking against his chest wherever he moved.

Even when Arthur Augustus's white hands were safely protected by the gloves the lighting of the fire took a long time. The wind was blowing keenly and the fire went out about a dozen times, till D'Arcy came to the end of his matches and his patience. He left off blowing at the obstinate pine-cones and sticks, and sat down on a rock to rest and recover his breath.

"Upon the whole, deah boys," he remarked, "I wathah think that it is a little bit weak-kneed to have to have a fiah whenevah you camp! Don't you think that to weally wuff it you ought to go without a camp-fiah?"

"Light that fire!" roared Blake.

"I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort. It has stwuck me vewy forcibly that it would be wuffin' it much more in the pwopah way if we camped without a beastly camp-fiah."

"Light that fire!"

"I decline to do so—undah the circs, I absolutely decline to do so. Besides, I have weached the end of my matches."

"Use a flint and steel then."

"But I haven't any flint or steel."

"There are plenty of rocks round you, and a knife will do for the steel."

"But I should wequire some tindah—and, besides, I wegard a fiah as superfluous, as we are supposed to be wuffin' it."

"Here, you come and fish, and I'll light the fire!" said Tom Merry; and he threw down his rod. "I knew you wouldn't be any good at it!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, if you look at it in that light, I shall insist upon lightin' the beastly fiah!"

"Well, I do look at it in that light."

"Then you may weturn to your fishin', and I will light the fiah," said D'Arcy, with dignity. "I wegard it as wathah weak-kneed of you chaps to want a fiah to camp by, but undah the circs I shall insist upon lightin' it. Wally, lend me a box of matches!"

"Here you are, old cock!"

"Ow! I didn't say thwow them at my head, you young wascal!"

And Arthur Augustus started again. Nothing succeeds like patience. By the time Colonel Stalker reappeared, followed by Pomp carrying a couple of birds, the fire was roaring away and casting a genial warmth over the camp.

CHAPTER 7.

A Rough March.

THE adventurers remained at the camp-fire for an hour or so, resting and eating their lunch. The keen mountain air had given them an edge to their appetites, and they ate heartily of roasted bird and broiled fish, and washed down the repast with draughts of water from the stream. Colonel Stalker added something else to the water from a flask he carried at his belt, but the juniors were satisfied with water. Colonel Stalker complimented D'Arcy upon the excellent fire he had lighted, and the swell of St. Jim's received his commendation with becoming modesty.

"As a mattah of fact," he explained, "I had some pwactice at campin'-out when I was at St. Jim's—our school in Sussex, you know, deah sir. We used to play Wed Indians in Wylcombe Wood; though at that time I nevah weally thought I should evah be campin'-out in the Wocky Mountains!"

"Times change, and we change with 'em," said Blake.

"I could say that in Latin——"

"Pway don't twouble!"

"Tempora mutantur," said Blake obstinately, "nos et mutamur in illis."

"Wats!"

"Things have changed, and no mistake!" said Tom Merry thoughtfully. "At home at St. Jim's now, they're going in to afternoon school——"

"Nothing of the sort!" said Skimpole, looking up. "American——"

"My dear Skimmy, it is two-thirty——"

"American——"

"I dare say Manners is putting away his films, and Lowther is cracking some ancient chestnut, and they're just going in to afternoon——"

"American time——"

"What are you buzzing about, Skimmy?"

"American time is behind English time. They have not had dinner yet at St. Jim's."

"My hat!"

"Bai Jove, I nevah thought of that, you know! Even a silly ass like Skimpole can give you a point at times!"

"I wonder what old Dig's doing?" said Blake pensively. "And whether Herries is keeping his bulldog in the study?"

"Yaas, wathah! I weally hope Hewwies is takin' advantage of the opportunity to keep his beastly bulldog in the study while we are away; I nevah can stand that bwute when I am there. He has not the slightest wespect for a fellah's twousahs."

"And Figgins & Co.," grinned Blake. "I wonder if the House rows are going on as usual between the School House and the New House?"

"Yes, rather!"

"Well, we shall be back in a few weeks," said Tom Merry. "We're going to see my uncle on his ranch in Arizona, and going back by way of Wyoming to call on Blake's uncle there, then Eastward Ho! for St. Jim's. Meanwhile, we're having a ripping time, and I wouldn't be anywhere but where I am for worlds!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

The colonel looked at the sky.

"Time to be moving, I guess," he remarked.

And they moved.

The way was growing more rough now. The woods had been left behind, and Tom Merry & Co. tramped over rough rocks, slippery with half-melted snow. An hour after leaving the camp they came upon a rough acclivity, up which the colonel tramped without a halt. Arthur Augustus stopped and looked at it, and laid down his bundle.

"Bai Jove, I don't see how we are going to get ovah that!" he remarked.

"Well, we can't fly," said Jack Blake; "perhaps we had better walk."

"Pway don't be funnay, Blake! I wegard it as impossible to get ovah that feahful ascent, and I weally think we ought to find some way wound!"

"Oh, come on!" said Tom Merry. "We are relying on you to keep us up to the mark! If Gussy fails us, where are we to look for encouragement?"

"Weally, if you put it like that, Tom Mewwy——"

"I do, my son; I put it exactly like that!" said Tom Merry solemnly.

"In that case," said the swell of St. Jim's heroically, "I will have a twy; though, weally, I find this sort of thing vewy exhaustin'!"

And he followed Tom Merry, clambering up the steep rock.

"Here," called out Blake; "you're leaving your baggage down here!"

"Bai Jove, so I am! I am sowwy to say that I cannot weturn for it now. Will one of you fellows bwing it up?"

"Yes—I don't think!"

"Pway, don't be selfish, Blake! You can give your bundle to Wally, and cawwy my little twunk. It is not heavy." And Arthur Augustus clambered on with Tom Merry.

Jack Blake looked after him speechlessly for some moments, and then he shouldered the little leather trunk and started. He found an easier place to ascend than the swell of St. Jim's, however.

"Bai Jove, we've done it!" gasped D'Arcy, when the stiffest part of the ascent was over. "I weally think I should have found it too exhaustin', but for the sake of encouwagin' you fellows!"

The colonel had tramped on without even looking back. The juniors hastened to overtake him. But the tall figure of Colonel Stalker had come to a halt at last, and he was standing still when they came up with him.

"I guess you'll have to be keerful hyer," said the colonel.

The juniors thought so too.

Right across the route extended a deep chasm, of an unknown depth. The verge was abrupt, and no one cared to go near enough to the edge to see how deep it was. Across the chasm, from side to side, extended the trunk of a tree, and by this dizzy bridge it was clear that the adventurers would have to proceed.

The juniors looked at one another.

That a fall into the abyss meant certain death was plain enough—and the tree-trunk, lodged across from rock to rock, appeared an exceedingly unreliable bridge. It was planted firmly enough, but it was narrow and rough, and offered a very insecure footing.

"Waal?" said the colonel, looking at them.

"Are we to cwoss that?" asked D'Arcy.

"I guess so—onless you can jump it, sonny!"

"It looks to me wathah dangewous."

"Yes, I reckon it is. I had forgot this when I made up my mind to come this way—you younkers wouldn't naturally have the nerve."

"Wats—sowwy, but weally, my deah sir, we have quite enough nerve for anythin'! It isn't that, but it certainly looks wathah wisky."

"Yes, it's risky. A lad belonging to these parts would think nothing of it, but you——"

"Oh, that's all right," said Tom Merry quickly; "where an American boy can go an English boy can follow! Here goes!"

"Hold on; I'm going first, I reckon!"

"Certainly, sir."

"Keep a steady nerve, and you're all right. You could walk along the trunk easily enough if it were lying on the ground here. It only wants nerve."

"That's all right!"

"Yaas, wathah! I should absolutely wefuse to baulk at anythin' that was done by a native of this countwy!"

Colonel Stalker stepped on the trunk and strode across. His steps were firm and rapid, and he crossed quite safely. Tom Merry followed him, and found it less dangerous than it looked. Then went Jack Blake, and then Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. Wally followed, and Pongo, loosed from his chain, followed his master. Skimpole was busy jotting down notes of the scene in his pocket-book. Pompey the darkey came next, and then they shouted to Skimpole.

"Buck up, Skimmy!"

Skimpole started, and looked up.

"Dear me!" he said. "You are all across! Excuse me for a few minutes while I finish making my notes."

"Ass! Come on!"

"I shall not detain you more than ten minutes."

"You won't detain us at all!" roared Tom Merry. "If you don't come on you will be left behind."

"Really, Merry——"

"Come on at once, you utter ass!"

"Oh, very well!"

Skimpole tucked away his notebook, and walked up to the trunk. He looked at the chasm, and he looked at the narrow bridge, and he looked across at his friends.

"It appears to me somewhat dangerous," he said.

"We've done it!"

"Yaas, wathah! Buck up, Skimmy!"

"Certainly; but I certainly regard it as foolhardy to walk across when there is a much safer method. Pray wait for me."

And Skimpole slid astride of the trunk, and commenced to work his way across.

The juniors watched him wrathfully.

Skimpole preferred his own way of crossing the chasm, as being slow but sure, and the young travellers waited a good ten minutes while he worked his way across.

He reached the further side at last, and Tom Merry gave him a helping hand to terra firma. Skimpole blinked round triumphantly.

"I have done it!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, you ass, and a long time you've kept us waiting."

"Slow and steady wins the race——"

"Wats! Come on!"

And they marched on.

CHAPTER 8.

D'Arcy Meets the Enemy.

As the afternoon waned, the adventurers tramped steadily on, rising higher and higher on the rocky sierra. The sun was setting in the west, gleaming red through the pine-trees. Tom Merry looked back at the path they had come by. Many a long mile lay between them and the chasm they had crossed by means of the tree-trunk. But in the clear mountain air Tom could see the spot, as he turned his field-glasses upon it. Through an opening of the woods he could follow the black line of the chasm, to the point where the trunk crossed it.

He uttered a sudden exclamation.

A man was in the act of crossing the tree-trunk from the other side of the chasm. He was too far off for Tom Merry to recognise him, but there seemed to be something familiar in his aspect.

He was only in sight for a moment; then he had crossed the trunk, and disappeared among the rocks.

"What is it?" asked Blake.

"Somebody crossing the tree where we crossed it."

"Bai Jove, I didn't know there was anybody else near us in this solitawy place," Arthur Augustus remarked. "Some huntah or Wed Indian, I pwesume?"

"He did not look like either."

"Bai Jove," exclaimed the swell of St. Jim's suddnelny, "I know who it is!"

"Blessed if I see how you can know," grunted Blake.

"Who is it, then?"

"Captain Puntah!"

"Punter! Rats!"

"If you say wats to me, Blake, I am afwaid that I shall have no alternative but to administah a feahful thwashin'," said Arthur Augustus, turning his eyeglass frigidly upon his chum. "I wegard it as extwemely pwob. that it is Puntah. The wascal followed us fwom New York to Chicago, and, as I told you, I saw him in the twain in the Wockies."

"And I told you you didn't!"

"I pwesume that I can cwedit the evidence of my own eyes?"

"As a mattah of fact, there seemed something familiar about that chap I just saw," Tom Merry remarked thoughtfully. "It might have been Punter. I only caught a glimpse of him. We'll keep a weather eye open, at all events."

Colonel Stalker smiled at the idea of the man being Punter, and still in pursuit of the juniors. But Arthur Augustus remained convinced that it really was the rascal. The adventurers tramped on, and the word to halt, when the colonel uttered it, was very welcome. The juniors were tired.

The camp was formed now more thoroughly than for the halt at noon. Colonel Stalker selected a spot by a rippling stream, sheltered by huge rocks from the mountain wind.

The tent was unpacked, and they erected it in the sheltered spot. Although there was no longer any sign of snow in the clear sky, the weather was cold, and there was no telling what weather might come with the night.

The march had fatigued the juniors, but they cheerfully set to work to prepare the camp. The tent was first raised, and the baggage unpacked in it. Wally gathered sticks and cones, and built the fire, and made a success of it at the first attempt. Arthur Augustus looked at it with an approving eye.

"I am vewy glad you have pwofited so much by what I showed you to-day, Wally," he remarked.

D'Arcy minor sniffed.

"Rats," he replied, "and many of 'em! I could have built that fire in two minutes."

"Weally, Wally——"

"You can't do things for toffee, Gus. You can fetch me some more pine cones if you like; that's about your mark!"

"I uttahly wefuse to fetch you some more pine cones," said D'Arcy, with dignity, "and I wegard your wemarks as——"

But Wally was gone for fuel, and Arthur Augustus had no opportunity of explaining how he regarded his remarks.

The fire was soon roaring, fanned by the wind. Colonel Stalker took his rifle and went along the valley looking for game in the failing light. Wally, with Pongo on a cord, followed his example. Arthur Augustus had a thoughtful expression on his face. The swell of St. Jim's rather fancied himself as a big game hunter, but though he had brought a splendid set of guns West, they were still among his baggage on the train. He opened his mind to his chums on the subject.

"I suppose you haven't any wevolvah cartwidges, Tom Mewwy?" he remarked.

Tom Merry stared.

"No; I don't usually carry such things in my pockets, Gussy."

"I pwesume you haven't any eithah, Blake?"

"Nix!"

"It is vewy unfortunate," said the swell of St. Jim's musingly. "I have my twusty wevolvah, but I haven't any cartwidges. I should like to go and look for some game."

Jack Blake looked puzzled.

"There can't be any game going on here. They don't play football in the Rocky Mountains."

"I was not wefewwin' to that sort of game."

"Do you mean chess, then—or cribbage?"

"I do not mean chess, or cwibbage, eithah. I mean game—big game—gwizzly beahs for instance, Blake."

"Oh, if you're going to hunt grizzly bears with a revolver, don't ask me to come. Skimpole had better come with his notebook, so as to get the particulars of how a donkey looks when he's providing a supper for a grizzly bear."

"Weally, Blake——"

"Better stick to the camp, old son. There may really be bears about here, and you don't want to be cut off in the bloom of your youth."

"I should uttahly wefuse—I mean, if I met a gwizzly beah I should wun like anythin', of course. If I had my guns, it would be all wight. Undah the pwesent circs., I should wun like anythin'."

"Better stick where you are."

"I decline to stick where I am. I feel called upon to pwovide somethin' towards suppah. I wish I had some cartwidges."

"Go and look for birds' eggs, then."

"Bai Jove, that's a wathah good ideah!"

And Arthur Augustus strolled away to look for birds' eggs. Tom Merry and Blake grinned at one another. The swell of St. Jim's was not likely to find many birds' eggs in the pine-trees in that wind-swept valley.

The swell of St. Jim's disappeared among the rocks, taking the direction opposite to that taken by the colonel. He had not much success with the birds' eggs—in fact, none at all. In the pines and the mesquite there was no trace of either bird or nest.

The junior was about half a mile from the camp, along the stream, when he decided to give it up. It was getting very dusky, and in all probability the colonel had returned with game for supper by that time.

Arthur Augustus had halted, and was debating in his mind whether to turn back, and had just decided to do so, when the sound of a footstep in the thicket startled him.

He drew a quick breath.

Someone was passing through the mesquite within a couple of yards of him, but in the dusk had evidently not observed him.

D'Arcy glanced quickly in the direction of the footsteps. He caught a dusky glimpse of a man in town clothes, evidently neither a mountain-man nor an Indian. The man's face was in shadow, but as he passed on, it turned a little, and the swell of St. Jim's saw the features.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus involuntarily.

The footsteps ceased.

The man turned, and looked full at D'Arcy. There was a startled look upon his face, and he groped in his breast as if for a weapon. But as his eyes fell upon the swell of St. Jim's he drew a quick breath, and a glitter of triumph shot into his eyes.

"You!"

"Yaas," drawled D'Arcy, "wathah!"

And then in silence, in the midst of the shadowy mesquite, the swell of St. Jim's and Captain Punter looked at one another

"Pray excuse me," said Skimpole, blinking at the Indian through his big spectacles, "I should like to have a few details, if possible. I am writing a book of travels, and I should like to put in some Indian manners and customs."

CHAPTER 9.

Arthur Augustus Holds the Drop.

CAPTAIN PUNTER was the first to break the silence. His eyes were glittering with triumph, and he came a step or two closer to the swell of St. Jim's. Arthur Augustus eyed him calmly.

"Fancy meeting you!" said the captain.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"An unexpected pleasure on both sides," grinned Punter. "You escaped me in New York, and robbed me of a thousand pounds——"

"I pwevented you fwom wobbin' my governah of a thousand pounds, you wascal!"

"I followed you to Chicago——"

"And there you weceived a horse-whippin' fwom my wespected fwiend, Colonel Stalkah. And weally, Puntah, if he had not administahed that horsewhippin', I should have given you a fearful thwashin' myself."

The captain grinned.

"And now I have found you again!" he said.

"Yaas, wathah! I knew you were on the twain, Puntah. I had a stwong suspish. that you left the twain and followed us here. I did not expect to wun acwoss you so suddenly."

"Are you ready?"

"Weady! Weady for what?"

"For a little walk? You are coming with me, you know."

"Quite a mistake, deah boy! I am not comin' with you!"

"Oh, yes, you are!" grinned the captain. "I haven't taken all this trouble for nothing. I hoped to catch you apart from the others, but I hardly expected this slice of luck. I have friends in this part of America, who will be glad to take care of you for a week or two, on condition of receiving a share of the dollars. I fancy Lord [illegible] will shell out when he hears that his son is a prisoner to a gang of rustlers in the Rocky Mountains."

"He will nevah hear anythin' of the sort."

"You are coming with me! Come, don't be a fool, boy. You will not match your strength against mine, I suppose?" said the captain impatiently.

"I wegard it as pwob. that you are stwongah than I am," assented the swell of St. Jim's. "You have the advantage of weight and size. But, all the same, I absolutely wefuse to be seen in your company anywhere. I wegard you with contempt."

"Are you coming?"

"Wathah not."

"Then I'll soon make you."

The captain stepped forward. As a matter of fact, Arthur Augustus, sturdy as he was, was no match physically for a full-grown man. He could not be, in the nature of things, and the captain naturally expected to have short work with him.

But D'Arcy's hand had slid into his breast, and as the captain stepped towards him it came out again, with the revolver in it—the famous revolver that he had bought in London, which had crossed the Atlantic at the bottom of his trunk, and which he had with difficulty been dissuaded from carrying about in New York and Chicago.

The captain gave a jump.

A revolver was about the last thing he expected to see in D'Arcy's possession, his impression of the swell of St. Jim's

a very erroneous one—being that Arthur Augustus was a kind of fellow to be afraid of the mere sight of firearms. D'Arcy levelled the revolver at the startled captain, and looked along the shining barrel through his eyeglass.

"Pway stand back, deah boy," he said calmly.

"You—you," gasped the captain, "put that down!"

"I have not the slightest intention of puttin' it down. If you venchah to appwoach me, I shall pull the twiggah."

"You—you——"

"As a mattah of fact, I have the dwop on you," said Arthur Augustus. "That, I believe, is the cowwect expwession. I have the drop on you, Puntah."

"You—you——"

"Pway keep your distance. I shall certainly pull the twiggah if you appwoach."

"You dare not!" hissed the captain, but keeping his distance all the same. "You know you dare not."

"Appwoach me and see, deah boy."

But the captain did not accept the invitation. He stood glaring furiously at the swell of St. Jim's, his hands clenching and unclenching, his breath coming in gasps.

"You—you whelp!" he snarled. "Put that pistol down. It might go off by accident."

"That is your wisk. You are not bound to wemain in fwont of it."

"Put it down!" roared the captain, hoping to frighten the boy by adopting a truculent tone. "Put that pistol down at once."

"Wats!"

"You whelp! I'll—I'll——"

"Pway modewate your expwessions. I wefuse to be called a whelp. I wegard you as a feahful blackguard, Puntah, and I am considewin' whethah to give you a feahful thwashin'."

"Put that——"

"Oh, pway don't keep on wepeatin' yourself, Puntah! Have like a gwamophone with only one wecord."

The captain could only glare. He hardly believed that D'Arcy would fire, and kill a human being, even to save himself from being kidnapped again. But in a struggle a revolver in the hands of a boy was extremely likely to go off, and the result might easily be fatal.

"I am waitin' for you to go, Puntah," said Arthur [illegible] "I wegard you as a wank outsidah, and I should [illegible] wefuse to accompany you anywhere. I shall be [illegible] you will kindly twavel."

"I will not go; I will——"

"My fingah is on the twiggah, as you see, and [illegible] have been holdin' my wevolvah some time, it is [illegible] to pwess the twiggah. You will have to take [illegible] chances yourself if you get your bwains blown out."

"Will you put that pistol down?"

"I wegard the wequest as unweasonable, and I wefuse to [illegible] As a mattah of fact, Puntah, I am bored [illegible] deah boy, and I insist upon your immediately [illegible] out. Pway go."

The captain ground his teeth. He dared not come on, [illegible] did not want to retreat. But the revolver looked [illegible] dangerous, and certainly the junior's finger was [illegible] beginning to tremble on the trigger. Captain Punter had handled revolvers in his time, and he knew how [illegible] trigger might be pressed by accident.

"[illegible] you!" he ground out at last. "Hang you! I'll—I'll [illegible] you smart for this when I catch you again."

D'Arcy smiled serenely.

"You will pwobably nevah have the chance, Puntah. As a mattah of fact, I am wathah inclined to take you pwisonah, and march you up to the camp," said D'Arcy. "Yaas, wathah, I think I'll make you march before me."

The captain gritted his teeth.

"I am going——"

"Yaas, you'd bettah. I wathah like the ideah of takin' you pwisonah. Pewwaps it would be bettah to call help and take you pwisonah." And Arthur Augustus raised his voice: "Help, deah boys! Wescue, St. Jim's!"

Rescue, St. Jim's! It was a curious call to go echoing through the mesquite thickets of a lonely valley in the Rocky Mountains.

But there were St. Jim's boys near to hear it. As D'Arcy had guessed might probably be the case, his chums had left the camp to look for him.

A shout rang back from the distance.

"Hallo! Where are you?"

"Here, deah boys! Come on!"

There was a crash in the thickets. Captain Punter gnawed his lip with rage. Before he could decide what to do, Tom Merry and Blake burst into view.

They uttered a simultaneous cry of amazement at the sight of the captain.

"Captain Punter!"

Arthur Augustus nodded languidly.

"Yaas, wathah! I was wight, you see. I have the dwop on the wascal. By the way, Puntah, put your hands up. That's the pwopah thing to do when a chap has the dwop on you. Hands up!"

The captain glared at D'Arcy, and then at Tom and Jack. Then, making up his mind to the defeat, he turned and plunged quickly into the mesquite, and disappeared.

"He's gone!" said D'Arcy. "I was debatin' in my mind whethah to take him a pwisonah to the camp. I think I had the dwop on him beautifully, deah boys."

"But the revolver isn't loaded!" shrieked Tom Merry.

"No; as a mattah of fact, the wevolvah is not loaded. But Captain Puntah was not aware of that. And as anothah mattah of fact," added D'Arcy thoughtfully, "it's wathah lucky for me that he didn't know it wasn't loaded."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Howevah, I had the dwop on him. He had the feahful impertinence to wish to kidnap me again, you know, and to keep me with a gang of wustlahs while he obtained a wansom. Of course, I absolutely wefused."

"And now you come back to the camp," grunted Blake, grasping the swell of St. Jim's by the shoulder. "We might never have seen you again if you hadn't frightened the rascal with an empty six-shooter."

"You will observe, Blake, that I was quite wight to take my twusty wevolvah about with me."

"Yes; and you'd be righter still to keep out of danger. Come along!"

"I would pwefer to weturn to the camp in a leisurely and dignified mannah, deah boys," expostulated D'Arcy, as Blake dragged him along.

"No time for that, my son; the grub's ready. Take his other shoulder, Tom."

"Right you are!" said Tom Merry cheerily.

"I wefuse—I object—I absolutely decline——"

"Bring him along!"

With an iron grip on either shoulder, the swell of St. Jim's had to go. He was run back to the camp at top speed, and arrived there in a very flustered and breathless condition. He was inclined to drop the acquaintance of Blake and Tom Merry on the spot, but the savoury smell of supper restored his good-humour, and he was all smiles again by the time they sat down round the camp-fire to enjoy the meal.

CHAPTER 10.

A Rough Night.

COLONEL STALKER smoked a pipe by the camp-fire after supper, and told the boys yarns of ranch life and hunting in the plains of the West. It is possible that the good colonel drew the long bow at times, but his stories of wild life were thrilling, and the juniors listened to him with eager attention, Skimpole making notes most of the time.

When the time came to turn in, Pompey banked up the fire with logs, and they adjourned to the tent. It was a close fit for seven, but there was room with squeezing, and they turned in. The night was very cold, the wintry wind rising and blowing harder over the exposed uplands, and they were glad of the shelter of the tent.

"My hat, how it's blowing!" muttered Tom Merry, as he rolled himself up in his blanket. "Sounds like a regular gale!"

"Yaas, wathah! I say, deah boys, don't you think that one of you had bettah keep watch?"

"You can keep watch if you like, Gussy."

"I do not like."

"I guess there's no danger, sonny," said the colonel sleepily from his blanket. "Besides, there's the dorg. The dorg will bark if anybody comes near the fire."

"I wasn't thinkin' of the dangah, my deah sir. I was considewin' that if one of these boundahs kept watch, I should have woom to stwetch my legs."

"Well, of all the cheek!" grunted Blake. "By the way, I want to stretch my legs."

And he did; and Arthur Augustus gave a howl.

"Careful, you feahful ass! You've jammed your boot under my beastly chin."

"I don't see why you wanted to have your beastly chin in the way of my boot."

"I wegard you as a wuff beast."

"I want to stretch my legs, too," yawned Tom Merry. "Hallo! What's that in the way of my boot?"

"Ow! It's my leg, you wottah!"

"Is it, really? I wish you wouldn't distribute your legs all over the place. Did I kick something just then?"

"Wow! That's my foot!"

"You oughtn't to have such big feet. If a chap has feet spreading all over the place, he oughtn't to try sleeping in a tent. I suggest that Gussy keeps watch outside."

"I decline to do anythin' of the sort."

"Then collect up some of your feet."

"There's something in my way, too," said Wally. "What's that I'm knocking my knuckles against now?"

"Ow! Stop thumpin' my head, you young villain!"

"Is that your head, Gussy? It felt quite hard."

"Weally, Wally——"

"Oh, go to sleep!" said Blake. "I think it's unreasonable of Gussy to keep on talking when a lot of tired fellows want to go to sleep."

"Weally, Blake——"

"That's Gussy's way," said Tom Merry disparagingly. "Some fellows begin, and some leave off, but Gussy goes on for ever."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"I vote that Gussy rings off."

"Seconded!"

"Thirded!"

"Passed nem. con."

"I wefuse to wing off! I absolutely decline to—— Ow—wow!"

"Well, nobody wants you to ow—wow!"

"I uttahed that ejaculation, Tom Mewwy, because some feahful beast pinched my beastly leg!"

"Oh, dear, more trouble! Did you pinch his leg, Blake?"

"No."

"Did you, Skimpole?"

"Certainly not."

"Did you, Wally?"

"I guess not."

"There you are, Gussy—you see, you must have been mistaken."

"As a mattah of fact, I believe it was you who pinched me, Tom Mewwy."

"Now I come to think of it, very likely you're right," agreed Tom Merry. "I pinched somebody, and nobody else remarked upon it, so I dare say you're about right."

"I wegard the action as wuffianly."

"What's a fellow to do if he's not allowed to go to sleep?" demanded Tom Merry. "A fellow who's not allowed to go to sleep must do something. I move that if Gussy doesn't leave off talking, we sit on him."

"Seconded!"

"Thirded!"

"Passed nem. con."

"Weally, deah boys, I should absolutely wefuse to be sat upon. I considah——"

Snore!

"I considah, Blake——"

Snore!

"I considah, Wally——"

Snore!

"I believe you are only wottin', you wottahs; but as I am wathah fatigued, in fact, exhausted, I will say no more. If you will stop that widiculous snowin', I will endeavah to take some wepose."

And there was peace at last; and the juniors of St. Jim's slept the sleep of the just.

They were tired enough to sleep soundly if artillery had been blazing away outside the tent, and so they did not wake, though the wind rose higher, and swept round the camp with loud howls, and roared in the pine-trees and the mesquite thickets.

It was a wild, rough night, but they slept through the roar of the wind and the crash of falling branches.

But Arthur Augustus awoke at last. He felt a cold wind blowing on his face, and as far as he remembered, there had been no wind blowing in the tent when he laid him down to woo repose in his blanket.

"Bai Jove!" murmured the swell of St. Jim's. "I wathah think some of the fastenings have come undone, or somethin' of the sort. I say, Tom Mewwy!"

But Tom Merry did not reply. He was in the land of dreams. Arthur Augustus sat up. There was certainly a keen wind blowing into the tent, and the canvas was rocking. The roar of the wind outside, and the crashing of the pines, was deafening, now that D'Arcy was awake and listening to it.

He listened, deafened by the sound, and shivered in the wind. His blanket had fallen from round him, and the wind was tearing in under the canvas, where one of the picket-pins had been torn out.

He groped for Tom Merry, to wake him.

"Tom Mewwy! Wake up! Pway wake up, deah boy!"

His groping hand came into contact with a face, and there was a grunt.

"Leggo!"

"Bai Jove, that's Wally! Wally, old boy, wake up! The beastly tent's bein' blown ovah!"

"Groo!"

"Wake up!"

"Gr-r-r-r-r-rooooh!"

"Tom Mewwy! Colonel Stalkah! I weally beg of you to wake up, or we shall all be blown to smitheweens, deah boys!"

And D'Arcy groped again for Tom Merry. This time he got hold of Blake's hair, and pulled it vigorously to wake whomsoever it belonged to.

"Ow!" grunted Blake. "Leggo! Cheese it! 'Tain't rising-bell! Leggo!"

"The tent will be blown ovah——"

"Lemme alone! I—— Groo——"

"Bai Jove! He's goin' to sleep again! I—— Oh! Oh!"

The catastrophe had come!

A terrible gust caught the tent, and tore it fairly loose from its fastenings. There was a crashing and a flapping, and the adventurers woke in earnest, with the dismantled tent sprawling over them, and flapping wildly in the wind.

CHAPTER 11.
A Night Alarm.

"OH!"

"Great Scott!"

"My hat!"

"Bai Jove, you know!"

The tent was fairly down. Legs and arms and heads were sticking out of it into the moonlight.

The camp was very light; the moon sailed in a pale grey sky, high above the roaring wind that had swept the clouds away.

"Thunder!" gasped Colonel Stalker.

Pongo, by the dying camp-fire was barking furiously. Amazed ejaculations proceeded from the unfortunate campers, as they struggled with the flapping canvas.

Jack Blake was the first to draw himself free. He rolled out of the flapping wreck, and nearly rolled into the camp-fire, and saved himself in time, and jumped up.

"Help, deah boys!" came a faint voice. "I am bein' cwushed to death by some feahful ass who is wollin' on my beastly legs!"

"Oh! Don't jam your hoofs at me, you dummy!" came the voice of Tom Merry from under the canvas.

"Gerrof my beastly legs, then!"

"Keep your beastly legs still, then!"

Blake seized Arthur Augustus by the shoulders, and dragged him out. Tom Merry rolled out after him. D'Arcy sat on a log, and gasped.

"Bai Jove, I have nevah had such a wotten expewience! I feel absolutely out of bweath! This would nevah have happened if you had woke up when I called you!"

"Oh, cackle, you blessed girl!" said Blake.

"I wefuse to allow that wemark to pass, Blake. I take it as a gweat compliment to be compared to a membah of the gentlah sex!"

"Oh, ring off!"

"I decline to wing off. I take it as an extremely gweat compliment to be compared with a membah of the gentlah sex, but I cannot help obsevin' that there was a dispawagin' tone in your wemark. I call upon you to withdwaw it."

"Oh, go and eat coke!"

"I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort. Unless you immediately withdwaw your dispawagin' wemark concernin' gals, I shall have no alternative but to administah a feahful thwashin'."

"Oh, cheese it, old chap!"

"I wefuse to cheese it! I am in feahful earnest on this subject."

"We've got to get the tent up——"

"That is not so important——"

"Pompey's suffocating under the tent," said Tom Merry, as a gasping voice was heard under the flapping canvas. "Lend a hand, all of you."

"I shall be vewy sowwy if the niggah suffocates, but I wefuse to lend a hand until Blake has withdwawn his dispawagin' wemark."

But Blake was grasping the canvas to help Tom Merry. D'Arcy grasped Blake and Jack elbowed him on the chest, and the swell of St. Jim's sat down in the dying embers of the camp-fire.

He gracefully reposed there for about the millionth part of a second, and then he jumped up with a terrific yell.

"Ow! Wow! I'm burnt!"

And, clasping both hands to the place where he felt the pain, the swell of St. Jim's danced about as if for a wager.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake. "Keep it up! Go it!"

"Ow! Wow! I am feahfully hurt! Wow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

They dragged away the canvas, and Pompey came into view. He was gasping, and his eyes were quite round with fright.

"I'se suffocate!" he gasped. "Mass' Tom sabe Pomp! I'se suffocate!"

"You're all right," said Tom Merry, laughing. He

dragged the little darkey to his feet. "You're not suffocated yet, Pompey! My hat! How the wind blows!"

"We sha'n't get that tent up again in a hurry, I guess," said Colonel Stalker ruefully. "It's a durned pity somebody didn't wake in time to see it going."

"I did wake, sir," said D'Arcy, ceasing his contortions as the pain subsided, and finding that he was not so very much hurt after all. "I did wake in time, Colonel Stalkah, and I twied to wake the othahs, but——"

"Why didn't you call us, then?" demanded Blake.

"I did twy to call you——"

"Then it was all Gussy's fault," said Tom Merry. "That being settled——"

"I wefuse to admit anythin' of the sort——"

"That being settled——"

"It is not settled—I wefuse to allow it to be settled! I woke up, and twied to call the west of you, and you——"

"It being settled that it is all Gussy's fault, the question is, what's to be done?" said Tom Merry, calmly ignoring D'Arcy's frantic expostulations. "As it is all Gussy's fault, it serves him right to have to stay in the open air, but what about us?"

"I wefuse to acknowledge——"

"We shall have to sleep round the fire," said Colonel Stalker, laughing. "Get your blankets out. It's no good trying to set the tent up again in this wind. It may drop later."

"Yaas, wathah! But weally——"

"Get your blanket, Gus, old man, and don't jaw!"

"But undah the circs——"

"Lend a hand here!"

And Arthur Augustus had simply no chance to explain. The blankets were dragged out. The tent was left where it was, and the adventurers rolled themselves up in their blankets with their feet to the fire. The fire was replenished with logs. The high wind fanned it to a flame, and drove the smoke along in clouds over the pines in the moonlight.

In spite of the shock of the falling of the tent, and the continued shrieking and roaring of the wind in the pines, the boys slept again. Half an hour after the fall of the tent the camp was again buried in slumber. Only Pongo was wakeful, gnawing a bone by the fire and growling at the noise of the pines. But Arthur Augustus was sleeping lightly; a louder growl than usual from the dog brought him out of the land of dreams.

"Bai Jove," murmured the swell of St. Jim's drowsily, "the beastly tent's comin' down again! No, it isn't! Bai Jove, what's that?"

He lifted his head from the blanket and looked round him. The wind had fallen somewhat, and there was a drift of clouds before the moon. The camp was plunged in gloom.

In the red glimmer of the burning logs Arthur Augustus could see Pongo. The dog had raised his head from the bone, and was staring into the blackness, growling.

A thrill ran through Arthur Augustus. It was evident that Pongo saw something. The swell of St. Jim's got up and groped for his revolver. It was still unloaded, but it had scared off a rascal once, and might do so again. The idea in his mind was that Captain Punter might be lurking near at hand among the rocks.

D'Arcy reached out, and grasped Blake by the hair, and gave a gentle jerk. Jack Blake muttered something indistinctly.

"Wake up, deah boy!" whispered D'Arcy.

Jack Blake woke up.

"What is it, Gussy?"

"There's somebody lurkin' in the wocks! Look at Pongo!"

Jack Blake looked at him. The dog was growling again, his eyes snapping as they were fastened upon the dark rocks close by the bank of the stream. Blake thrilled too, and rose cautiously to his knees.

"It may be a redskin, Gussy."

"More likely that wascal Puntah."

"True. We may as well look."

The juniors cautiously rose. If it were a hostile Indian lurking there in the shadows, an arrow might come singing from the rocks, and that thought sent a strange quiver through the hearts of the juniors. It was not fear; it was a kind of breathless, suppressed excitement, which caused their hearts to beat so quickly that they felt suffocated.

Blake had grasped a stick, and D'Arcy had hold of his revolver. Before waking the other sleepers, they determined to see what might be the cause of the dog's alarm. Blake made a sign to D'Arcy, and went round a big rock at the side of the camp to make a detour. It would not be prudent to advance directly upon the spot at which the alarmed dog was glaring. They would have been exposed in the ruddy glow of the camp-fire, while the enemy remained unseen.

The clouds were over the moon, and in the shadow of the rocks all was dark. Blake stepped on cautiously till he was near the spot, as he judged, where the concealed enemy was lurking; then he turned and nudged D'Arcy. Unfortunately the swell of St. Jim's, who could not see his chum in the dark and who was invisible to him, received the nudge on the nose, and took it for a blow from an enemy.

"Bai Jove! Hands up, you wottah!"

Blake felt a revolver thrust under his chin. He gave a jump, but he remembered that the revolver was not loaded.

"You ass——"

"Hands up, you wottah! I've got the dwop on him, Blake!"

"You dummy! Take that thing away!"

"Bai Jove! Is that you, Blake, deah boy?"

"Yes, object!"

"I wefuse to be called an object! I——"

"Shut up, and come on."

"I wefuse to shut up! Undah the circs——"

"You'll alarm the enemy."

"I should be vewy sowwy to alarm the enemy, but I cannot pass ovah your extwemely oppwobwious wemarks in silence! I considah——"

But Blake was gone. D'Arcy postponed his considerations for a future time, and followed him. Jack Blake had judged his route correctly, and he came out among the rocks at which Pongo was glaring; and, looking towards the fire, he could see the dog there in the same attitude.

The junior looked about him.

There was a rustle within a few feet of him, and his heart leaped into his mouth. A grey figure suddenly leaped into view, and darted away. It ran right towards D'Arcy, who swiped at it with his revolver; and it dodged, and ran back towards the fire. It came out into the ruddy light, and showed a lean, grey body and glistening eyes.

"My hat, it's a wolf!"

"Bai Jove, it's a dog!"

Colonel Stalker started up from slumber.

"Thunder, what's the row?"

Pongo, barking furiously, sprang upon the strange animal, and they rolled on the ground in combat. The colonel sprang up and groped for his revolver. The strange intruder tore itself loose from the dog and vanished into the shadows, and the colonel sent a revolver-shot after it in vain.

"What was it, sir?" asked Blake breathlessly.

"It was a dog!" said D'Arcy firmly.

"Rats! I believe it was a wolf!"

Colonel Stalker laughed.

"It was a coyote," he said; "something between a dog and a wolf, sonnies."

"Are they dangerous, sir?"

"Not much. He came nosing around after a bone, I s'pose."

And the colonel settled down to slumber again.

Jack Blake and D'Arcy looked a little sheepish. The alarm of the night had thrilled them to the core, and it wasn't exactly satisfactory to find that all their trouble had been taken over a kind of wild dog who had visited the camp in search of offal.

"Next time you wake me for nothing," remarked Blake, "you'll get a prize thick ear. That's a warning!"

"Weally, Blake——"

"Oh, go to sleep!"

"It might have been a wedskin!"

"Rats!"

And Blake returned to his blankets.

CHAPTER 12.

A Startling Meeting.

THE wind had fallen, but following the cessation of the wind came a fall of rain. It was Tom Merry who first felt the rain, and he awoke with large drops running over his face. He sat up and looked sleepily round. The rain was sputtering in the fire and running in little rivulets in the crevices of the rocks.

"Rain, by Jingo!"

"My hat," yawned Blake, "there's no rest for the wicked! We shall have to get the tent up again!"

He shook the colonel. The whole party were soon awake. It was evidently necessary to put up the tent, unless they were to be drenched; and as there was little wind now, the task was easy. The tent was up in quick time, and the adventurers bundled into it; and glad enough they were of the shelter.

Outside the rain dashed down, and they heard the camp-

"I regard it as foolhardy to walk across, when there is a much safer method. Pray wait for me," said Skimpole; and he slid astride of the tree-trunk, and commenced to work his way across.

fire sputter out and the trickling of the little channels full of water in the rocks.

"Bai Jove, it's a wotten night!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "I don't think I shall be able to sleep again!"

"Then perhaps you would not mind sitting up and holding a lantern while I write out my notes?" came the voice of Skimpole from the darkness. "I am sleepless myself, as I have a large quantity of water down my back, which renders me extremely uncomfortable. I am, however, very glad this has occurred, as it will make an excellent chapter in my book of travels. Will you sit up and hold the light, D'Arcy? I shall not keep you more than an hour or so!"

Gr-r-r-rooooo!

"Dear me, he is asleep; and he said he wouldn't be able to sleep again! I shall have to leave my notes till the morning." And Skimpole, in spite of the water down his back, was soon sleeping too.

But the comfort of the night's rest was gone, and at the earliest streak of dawn the campers were awake. Pomp turned out of the tent first to light the fire. The rain had ceased, and a gleam of sun was showing over the Rockies.

Colonel Stalker had carefully placed a quantity of fuel in shelter to start the fire in the morning, and so it was not difficult for Pomp to get it going. Once it was blazing up, he stacked wet logs and pine cones round it to dry, ready for burning.

"Bai Jove, I feel weady for bwekkah!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy remarked. "If you will lend me your gun, Colonel Stalkah, I shall have gweat pleasure in goin' out for some game!"

"Thank you!" said the colonel, with a grin. "I guess I'll take the gun, and you can look after the fire!" And the colonel, with his rifle in the hollow of his arm, went down the stream.

The sun, as it rose higher, gleamed cheerily on rock and mesquite, and the spirits of the juniors rose with it. Arthur Augustus, whose clothes were becoming somewhat damaged by the rough sojourn in the Rockies, sat down on a log to darn a hole in his trousers; while Tom Merry and Blake went to gather cones; and Wally followed Pongo, who had picked up the scent of some animal near the camp and was bent on tracking down the stranger; Skimpole sat in the tent, making up his notes.

The fire blazed cheerily in the shelter of the great rock by which the camp was pitched. Arthur Augustus contentedly darned, and did not look up when he heard a footstep. He imagined that it was one of the others coming back to the camp, and went on with his darning.

The footsteps ceased, but still D'Arcy did not look up.

"Ugh!"

It was an exclamation, or rather a grunt, and when it fell upon his ears, the swell of St. Jim's looked up fast enough.

Then he sprang to his feet in utter dismay.

Before him stood a redskin—an Indian in full array, with a coppery face and glittering black eyes, head-dress of coloured feathers, and a red and yellow blanket draping his massive form.

He was staring over the rock at D'Arcy, and D'Arcy stared back, utterly staggered by the unexpected sight.

"Bai Jove!"

"Ugh!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Ugh!"

After this dialogue, they stared at each other in silence.

Arthur Augustus thought of groping for his revolver. But he remembered it wasn't loaded, and the redskin did not look likely to be scared by a useless weapon. Besides, the Indian's look was not hostile. Something of a grim smile seemed to be playing over his coppery face.

Arthur Augustus felt for his eyeglass instead. He put it up and surveyed the Indian through it.

This proceeding excited the liveliest interest on the part of the stranger. His keen black eyes followed D'Arcy's movement, and he looked at the eyeglass with admiration and something like awe.

It was clear that the monocle was an unknown luxury among the tribe, whatever it was, to which the Indian belonged.

"Ugh!" he said again.

"Good-morning!" said D'Arcy, with a polite bow, recovering fully as he saw that the redskin had no hostile intentions. "Good-morning! Can you speak English, deah boy?"

"The Hawk speaks in the tongue of the palefaces," said the redskin, with dignity, and throwing his blanket across his chest with a gesture that greatly impressed Arthur Augustus. "The Hawk is the friend of the white chief with the glass eye."

"Ahem! I am vewy glad to see you, my fwiend," said Arthur Augustus. He cudgelled his brains for the proper expressions to use in addressing an Indian chief. "Will the gweat wed wawwiah sit by the camp-fiah of the palefaces?"

"Ugh!"

"Bai Jove, I wish I knew what he meant by that gwunt," murmured D'Arcy.

"Ugh!"

"We are just goin' to have bwekkah," said D'Arcy. "We should be delighted if you would join us, deah boy. I mean, the honah would be gweat if the gweat wed chief would deign to sit by the fiah and feed with his paleface bwothahs."

"Ugh!"

The great red chief accepted the invitation. He came over the rock, and sat on a log by the fire. D'Arcy could see now that his clothes were wet, and that he had evidently been unsheltered in the rain of the previous night. A slight steam rose from the Indian as he warmed himself, and his bronze face was turned to the fire, and he did not speak another word.

Arthur Augustus addressed one or two remarks to him, but the only reply he received was "Ugh!" And he gave it up, and resumed darning the hole in his trousers.

CHAPTER 13.

Skimpole Takes Notes.

"MY hat!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"What's the row?"

"Look there!"

"Mon seul chapeau!" said Blake. "A redskin!"

The juniors were coming back to the camp laden with fuel. The sight of the Indian sitting on the log by the fire was startling enough.

But he was evidently a friendly visitor, and Tom Merry and Blake came up without alarm, and deposited their fuel by the fire.

Arthur Augustus looked up.

"Pway allow me to pwesent my fwiend," he remarked. "This is the Hawk, the gweat chief of the—— Weally, I do not know of whom."

"Blackfoot," said the chief laconically.

He rose, and bowed with dignified grace to the juniors, draped in his blanket.

"Glad to see you," said Tom Merry.

"Right welcome," said Blake.

"The Hawk is of the people of the Blackfeet," said the Indian gravely. "He has travelled far from the lodges of his fathers. The Hawk is on a journey to the south to visit the white ranch chief, who is his friend. He will eat meat with the palefaces. I have spoken."

And the Blackfoot sat down again.

"Bai Jove!" murmured D'Arcy. "I wathah like his style, you know. I wathah think that our fwiend the Hawk is a gentleman, you know."

The redskin maintained a dignified silence, while the juniors prepared breakfast. Colonel Stalker came in with a small deer slung upon his gun, and he started at the sight of the redskin, and dropped the carcase to bring his gun into a handier position. The Hawk did not even look up.

"It's all wight, Colonel Stalkah," said D'Arcy. "This wed gentleman is our fwiend. I thought the posish was goin' to be doocid awkward at first, you know, but it appeahs that he is on his twavels, and is quite disposed to be chummy. I have invited him to bwekkah."

The colonel laughed.

"Good. I think I have seen him before."

The Indian looked up at the sound of the colonel's voice. Then he rose to his feet.

"The Hawk is glad to see the white chief," he said gravely. "He remembers his last meeting with the chief with whiskers."

"I guess I'm real glad to see you," said the colonel, grasping his hand. "What are you doing so far from the Blackfoot country?"

"The Hawk is on the trail to the south to visit his friend the ranch chief."

"Gabe Poinsett? That's where we're going, chief. We shall see you again."

"It is good."

"We are going to strike the railroad again, and go on to Santa Fe," explained the colonel. "Will you come with us?"

"The Hawk will travel with his white brothers as far as the railroad, but he will not come upon the waggons that go without horses," he replied. "The Hawk will travel to the south land as his fathers have travelled."

"As you like. Breakfast now."

The Indian drew a hunting-knife from his girdle. The juniors started a little at the sight of the clear steel; but the Blackfoot only intended to skin the deer.

Colonel Stalker relinquished the animal to him, and the Hawk skinned it with a celerity that showed long practice.

Tom Merry & Co. watched him with great interest.

His movements were almost too quick to be followed, and in a very few minutes the animal was skinned, and cut up for broiling.

A savoury smell of roasting meat soon pervaded the camp, and it was very welcome to the hungry juniors.

The Hawk ate with great dignity, using his fingers and a knife, the fork being a luxury apparently despised by the Blackfoot chief.

Skimpole was observing the Indian with keen interest.

The first sight of him had been startling to the genius of St. Jim's, but now he was only eager to get down details in his notebook. His book of travels, which was to be let loose upon a long-suffering public on his return to England, would not be complete without a chapter on the Red Indians. And here was an opportunity of getting his information first-hand.

The breakfast finished, the travellers rose, and while the juniors were making up the packs for the trail, Skimpole came over to the Blackfoot chief, notebook and pencil in hand. The Hawk eyed him curiously.

"Pray excuse me," said Skimpole, blinking at the Indian through his big spectacles. "I should like to have a few details, if possible. I am writing a book of travels, and I should like to put in some Indian manners and customs."

"Ugh!"

"As a redskin yourself, of course you know all about it. Would you mind answering a few questions?"

"Ugh!"

"In the first place——"

"Ugh!"

Colonel Stalker looked round with a grin. He spoke a few words to the Indian in a language the boys did not understand, and a grin of comprehension for a moment flickered on the coppery face of the Blackfoot.

"I guess you can go ahead, sonny," said the colonel.

"Thank you, sir. You understand, Mr. Hawk——"

"The red chief understands. The young white brave with the four eyes wishes to spread his fame to the white people who dwell in wigwams of stone far beyond the big sea water."

Skimpole blinked.

"Ye-es, that's it."

"He wishes to tell of the fame of the Hawk and of his great deeds in war, that the stories may be related to the papooses of the white people, to teach them to grow up into great warriors."

"Yee-e-es."

"He would hear the red chief recount some of his great deeds on the warpath and on the trail of the bear and the bison."

"Exactly. In the first place——"

"It is well. The Hawk will speak."

"Thank you very much. You are—er—a Blackfoot, I believe?"

"The Hawk is the great chief of the Blackfeet."

"You—er—live in wigwams, I think?"

"The Blackfoot people dwell in wigwams of skins, taken from the buffalo, the elk, and the bear, and painted with the deeds of their warriors."

"Good. Do you ever go on the warpath now?"

"It is many moons since the Hawk has raised the scalps of his enemies."

Skimpole shuddered.

"Do you mean to say that you have scalped anybody, Mr. Hawk?"

"The Hawk is a great chief. The pole of his wigwam in the valley of the Rocky Mountains is adorned with the scalps of his enemies."

"Dear me! Have you any scalps about you at the present moment—beside your own, I mean, of course?"

"The Hawk does not cary the trophies of war on the trail of peace."

"Ah, yes, my mistake! Could you——" Skimpole's eyes glistened. "Could you describe to me one of these scenes, when you have scalped somebody, so that I can put in a really realistic account in my book?"

"The Hawk will tell the story of his fighting."

"Excellent. Go ahead."

And Skimpole wetted the point of his pencil, and stood ready to take down details.

The Blackfoot threw his blanket round him with a dignified movement and raised his right hand, and began to speak. As the picturesque words rolled out in a deep and musical voice, all the juniors ceased their occupations to listen to him.

"It was the time when the snow fell on the mountain, and the leaves of the trees were gone, and the branches were bare," said the Hawk. "In the lodges of the Blackfeet was a cruel guest. Famine sat at the door of the wigwam, and the braves were hungry, and the squaws wailed in the lodges, and the papooses cried for meat."

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus.

"The Hawk had hunted many a moon, and nothing fell to his arrow. The bears were hiding like cowards in the rocks, the deer were gone to the south, the birds no longer flew over the frozen woods. The bear, the panther, the elk, dared not face the arrow of the Hawk. He was a great chief."

"Dear me!"

"But the wailing of the squaws and the papooses sent the Hawk forth to hunt once more, and in the valley he found the tracks of the deer. He followed them. The Hawk is a great tracker. His eye never fails; and so his people have named him the Hawk. He followed the track of the deer through the frozen mesquite, under the big trees, and through the pines that wailed in the wind, till he came upon the carcase of the deer, and there was an arrow in the side of the deer, and by the deer knelt a brave of the Sioux tribe, who had slain it."

The Hawk was growing excited now; in the keen recollection of that exciting adventure, the Blackfoot's gravity and reserve were gone. He spoke with the freedom of a brave relating an adventure in his own lodge, and the juniors watched him and listened almost spellbound.

"The Hawk could have struck his enemy to the ground ere he looked up, but the Hawk is a great warrior. He called to his enemy, and the Sioux was on his guard."

"I wegard that as cwicket."

"Then he drew his knife, and the Hawk drew his knife," said the Blackfoot, his eyes gleaming, and he brought a long knife out of his girdle with a flourish that made Skimpole jump, "and we closed in fight."

"Dear me!"

"He rushed forward, and the Hawk sprang upon him—thus!" The Blackfoot made a sudden spring at Skimpole, and grasped the spectacled junior round the neck with his left arm, and brandished the knife before his eyes with the right. "And the Hawk bent him back—thus, and thus, and raised his knife—thus, and plunged it into the heart of his enemy—thus——"

"Help!" shrieked Skimpole.

Tom Merry and Blake dragged off the Indian. It really seemed that in his excitement he would carry the illustration too far, and Skimpole had already given himself up for lost.

"Draw it mild!" gasped Blake.

"Hold on!" shouted Tom Merry.

The Blackfoot straightened up. Skimpole gasped for breath, and put his spectacles straight.

"Dear me! I—I——"

"Ugh!"

The Indian shook himself loose, and draped his blanket round his powerful form. He sheathed the hunting-knife.

"Thus the Hawk slew his enemy, and carried home the deer to the wigwams of the Blackfoot braves. I have spoken!"

And he swung away.

"Th-th-thank you very much!" gasped Skimpole. "I—I shall be delighted to put that in my book! Dear me, I feel quite bewildered!"

CHAPTER 14.

Two in Trouble.

THE juniors shouldered their packs, and the march was resumed. Hawk, the Blackfoot, strode along with the travellers. The juniors had learned with great interest that the "ranch chief" whom he was going to visit in the south was Mr. Poinsett, Tom Merry's uncle in Arizona. The Blackfoot, too, was surprised when he learned that Tom Merry was the nephew of the old comrade with whom he had hunted in the mountains of Colorado and Dakota. It was Colonel Stalker who gave him the information. When he received it, the Blackfoot halted, and turned towards Tom Merry.

"The young chief is of the blood of the Hawk's old comrade," he said simply. "Many moons ago we hunted the bear together in the mountain passes. The young chief is the brother of the Hawk in life and death."

And he held out a bronze hand to the junior.

Tom Merry grasped it.

The Hawk said no more—he was evidently a man of few words. But he glanced at Tom Merry often during the morning's march, and many a time he gave the lad a helping hand in a difficult place.

It was nearly noon when the adventurers came in sight of the spot where they were to cross the river which, many miles back, had carried away the suspension bridge. Here, nearer its source, it was quieter and shallower, and ran in a narrow channel, from which great rocks jutted up as if purposely formed by Nature to be stepping-stones.

Crossing was not likely to be an easy task, and the colonel decided to leave it till after rest and lunch.

A sufficient quantity of the deer meat had been brought along for the meal, and a fire was lighted to cook it. The Hawk was cook on this occasion, and he did the work well. The travellers ate a hearty meal, and then they rested. But Skimpole, though not generally active, was not in the mood for resting. The next morning, at the latest, they expected to strike the railway again, and, meanwhile, he was anxious to take as many notes as possible of wild life in the Rockies.

While the others were resting, Skimpole rose, and stretched himself. Round the camp rose the great rocks, with ever-higher and higher peaks in the background, shadowed here and there by pines and thickets of sassafras.

Arthur Augustus glanced at the genius of St. Jim's.

"Where are you goin', Skimmy?"

"I am going to take a few notes," replied Skimpole. "If I am fortunate I may meet with a grizzly bear or some wild Indians, and be able to jot down details."

"You will pwobably get into some dangah."

"A traveller who wishes to produce a really good book of travels cannot afford to think of danger, D'Arcy."

"Yaas, but if you get eaten by a gwizzly beah, we shall have to waste a lot of time lookin' for you."

"Really, D'Arcy, that is rather a heartless way of putting it."

"Upon the whole, I had bettah come with you and see that you don't get into twouble," said Arthur Augustus.

"I shall be very glad to have you with me, D'Arcy. You will be able to carry any geological specimens I may collect."

The swell of St. Jim's sniffed.

"Yaas, wathah! I can see myself cawwyin' your wotten geological specimens!" he remarked.

And they left the camp.

The two juniors soon disappeared among the rocks, the others hardly noticing their departure. Skimpole blinked on all sides as they went on, jotting down notes, and here and there picking up some fragment of rock and dropping it into his pocket. Arthur Augustus uttered a sudden exclamation.

"Bai Jove! Look there!"

They were about half a mile from the camp. As they came out of a wood, a sudden sight burst upon their eyes, that was startling enough!

Ahead of them, close by the border of the wood, lay an Indian encampment.

There were tents, with the poles sticking out from the tops of the stretched skins, and the outsides were daubed with curious devices in red and yellow paint. A campfire roared near by the tents, and several copper-complexioned women were cooking there. Little papooses, nearly naked in spite of the cold weather, were toddling about the wigwams, or snatching pieces of meat from the cooking-pots.

"Bai Jove!"

"Dear me, this is a real Indian scene at last!" said Skimpole. "The Hawk is all very well, but he is a tame Indian, and there was no trace of blood upon him anywhere, so far as I could observe. These are evidently real savages."

"Bettah not go too close, deah boy. I weally have a stwong objection to bein' scalped."

"For the sake of getting accurate information for my book of travels——"

"I wefuse to be scalped for the sake of gettin' accuwate information for a book of twavels."

"Yes, but you see——".

"I wefuse to see anythin' of the sort."

"Very well, you can go back if you are nervous, D'Arcy; but I shall certainly not leave this spot till I have taken my notes. I——"

"If you insinuate that I am nervous, Skimmy, I shall have no alternative but to give you a feahful thwashin'."

"Pray do not interrupt me when I am taking notes. I am, unfortunately, too short-sighted to see very clearly at this distance. I think I must go nearer."

"You uttah ass——"

"Really, D'Arcy——"

"I insist upon—— Oh! Ow! My only hat!"

There was a sudden rush of feet from the trees, and a blood-curdling yell. A crowd of redskins surrounded the two boys. Skimpole's notebook went flying one way, and his pencil another, and he was dragged by rough hands towards the Indian encampment. Arthur Augustus thrust his hand into his chest for his famous revolver, but recollected that he had taken it out to clean, and left it lying on a log at the camp. He was seized the next moment, and dragged after Skimpole.

A dozen or more Red Indians had captured the boys, and they were yelling with excitement as they dragged them towards the encampment.

It was useless for the juniors to struggle against such odds, and they did not attempt it. Arthur Augustus expostulated, but his expostulations passed unheeded.

"Pway don't be so wuff!" he gasped. "You are wumplin' my waistcoat cwuelly, and my twousahs will be smothahed in mud. I pwotest! Pway don't be such cads, you know."

But they yelled and dragged him on.

Near the camp they released the juniors, who went rolling on the ground. Skimpole sat up and adjusted his spectacles, and gasped for breath.

"Dear me! This is very annoying! Yet I am glad it has occurred. This is certainly wild life in the Rockies."

"You uttah duffah!" groaned Arthur Augustus. "We shall pwobably be murdahed, and my twousahs are wuined in any case."

They staggered to their feet. They would have been glad of a chance to cut and run, but the savages were round them. The redskins encircled the two scared juniors, with excited looks and yells. They were evidently greatly elated with their capture, though what their ultimate intentions were it was hard to tell.

Arthur Augustus was greatly alarmed, as was natural, but his pluck did not fail him. If the worst came to the worst, he was prepared to meet his fate like a D'Arcy and a Briton, as he would have expressed it. The redskins were not of the appearance of Hawk the Blackfoot. They evidently belonged to another race, their features were more brutal, their colour darker, their clothing ragged and greasy.

They circled round the juniors in a wild dance of triumph, with wild yells and gestures, brandishing their tomahawks as they danced.

Every moment the boys feared that one of the weapons would come whirling towards them, but the catastrophe did not happen.

The perspiration bedewed the brow of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Bai Jove! I weally wish we had stayed in camp!" he murmured. "This is worse than meeting that wascal Puntah! I wegard the posish as doocid awkward."

There was a sudden shout from the wood, and the Hawk came in sight, with Colonel Stalker by his side, running swiftly towards the ring of dancing savages. And the wild dance suddenly stopped.

CHAPTER 15.

A Redskin Fight.

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS drew a breath of relief. The redskins ceased to dance, and drew together in a group round the boys, grasping their tomahawks, and casting lowering glances towards the new-comers.

Their leader, a man of massive form, dressed in buckskin leggings, with a blanket of brilliant hues, jabbered to the rest in some strange dialect the boys did not understand, and the redskins responded to his words with a low growl. The leader had a red deer daubed upon his brawny chest, and Arthur Augustus had read enough of the customs of Indians to know that it was his totem, and signified the name he went by in his tribe.

The Red Deer glared defiance at the new-comers, and stood with his tomahawk grasped in his hand, his braves behind him ready to back him up, at the same time keeping sharp eyes on their prisoners.

A curious thrill ran through the swell of St. Jim's. It looked as if there would be bloodshed, and D'Arcy realised what grim and savage warfare might be like in the lonely passes of the Rockies. Colonel Stalker, as he came on, held his rifle ready for use, and the Blackfoot had his tomahawk in his hand.

They halted, and for some moments the two parties looked at one another. Then from the wood came the juniors of St. Jim's—Tom Merry and Blake and Wally, each with a weapon of some kind in his hand, and looking very startled and disquieted, but showing no trace of fear.

The yells of the savages had reached the camp by the river, and alarmed the campers. They had come to the rescue, divining that something had happened to D'Arcy and Skimpole, and fearing something worse than the reality.

"My hat!" muttered Tom Merry. "This looks like—like——"

"Business," said Blake.

"My only Aunt Jane!" murmured Wally. "I never expected anything like this when I left St. Jim's. But—but I don't care! We're in for it. What idiot said that redskins don't go on the warpath now? I never saw a more savage-looking chap than that specimen with the red deer chalked on his chest."

Colonel Stalker looked the Red Deer full in the face, and made a significant motion with his rifle.

"You have our friends there," he said. "Let them go."

The Red Deer made a gesture of negation.

"Red Deer take prisoner," he replied, in broken English. "Red Deer keep. The Red Deer is a great brave. I have spoken."

"Ugh!" grunted Hawk. "The Red Deer is a squaw. He makes war on boys. The Red Deer has cold words on his tongue, and water in his veins."

The Indian flushed under his coppery skin. He made a savage gesture with his tomahawk, his black eyes glaring at the chief.

"My brother is a Blackfoot," he said sarcastically. "I know his tribe; they are great boasters. The Blackfeet fight like squaws, and run like papooses from the knives of the Cheyennes. Let the Blackfoot measure his tomahawk with the tomahawk of the Cheyenne."

"It is good!" And the Hawk sprang forward.

In a moment more the two redskins, Blackfoot and Cheyenne, would have been dealing murderous blows; but Colonel Stalker thrust his rifle between.

"I guess you'll go slow," he drawled. "Keep your wool on, Hawk, my boy. As for you, you Cheyenne thief, remember that you're not far enough from Uncle's Sam's forts to play a game like this. Give up my friends."

"Red Deer take prisoners; he keep." And the Cheyenne braves yelled approval.

Colonel Stalker was silent for a moment. The situation was a critical one, and he knew it. The Cheyennes were evidently a party seeking some new encampment, probably having left their old hunting-grounds in search of new quarters from famine. They were a ragged crew, and, as the engineer had warned him at parting, they might easily be tempted to some desperate deed by the prospect of plunder. They were in the majority here, and there was no help at hand. If they chose to be obstinate, the rescue of the two juniors would not be accomplished without bloodshed. And if blood once were spilt, the odds were on the side of the redskins, and the matter might easily end in a massacre. Such things had occurred in the lonely valleys of the Rocky Mountains, even in the sober days of the twentieth century.

The Red Deer looked at the colonel with a sardonic grin on his face. In the white men's town he would have carried himself with becoming humility. In the pine forests and the rocky canyons he was master.

"You must give up those boys," said the colonel at last. "Come, they are no use to you. I will give you tobacco for them."

The redskin's eyes sparkled.

"Fire-water, too," he said.

Colonel Stalker shook his head.

"I have no fire-water to give, and I guess I wouldn't give a Red liquor if I had it, and that's flat."

"How much tobacco?" asked Red Deer, with a look of disappointment, which told plainly how much he would have been pleased with a gift of fire-water. Intoxicating liquor, the most fatal gift of the white man, is always tempting to the redskin, in spite of the havoc it has caused.

The colonel drew a big leather pouch from his pocket.

"I will give you that, I reckon."

The Red Deer shook his head.

"Not enough."

"You can have that or nothing," said the colonel, throwing the pouch to the ground. "I guess I want to save trouble if I can. But you are going to give up those boys. Take that or fight—as you choose. I don't care which."

And Colonel Stalker lifted his rifle and put his finger to the trigger.

The Cheyenne hesitated. Although the force on his side made him confident and boastful, he did not wish to precipitate a conflict, in which he was pretty certain that he would get the colonel's first bullet through his own body.

He stooped and picked up the leather pouch, and weighed it in his hand.

"Red Deer take tobacco."

"Good!" said the colonel. "Send those young galoots over here."

Red Deer spoke to his companions, and they opened to allow D'Arcy and Skimpole to pass. Gladly enough the two juniors hurried out of the greasy circle of savages, and joined their friends. The colonel drew a breath of relief. It had looked like being very serious trouble, and he was glad it was over.

"I guess it's all serene," he said. "Let's git."

The Red Deer waved his hand towards the Hawk.

"Let the Blackfoot dog go in safety," he said. "Let him beware of meeting the Cheyenne again, or he may not go safely away."

The Hawk's eyes blazed. He strode towards the Cheyenne.

"Let the Cheyenne chief make good his words," he exclaimed.

"Ugh! It is good."

"Hold on!" said the colonel. "We don't want trouble here, Hawk. Let's git."

"You may go," said the Blackfoot proudly. "The Hawk stays here to punish the insolence of the Cheyenne dog."

"But I tell you——"

"The Hawk will not go."

"Then I guess I'll stand by you and see fair play," said the colonel.

"Ugh! It is good."

The Red Deer spoke to his companions in the dialect of the Dog Indians, and they drew back to allow room for the single combat. The two chiefs faced one another, grasping their tomahawks. The juniors, as they looked on, caught their breath. Their faces were very pale.

"Colonel, can't you stop them?" muttered Tom Merry.

Colonel Stalker shook his head.

"Let 'em rip!" he said tersely

"But—but this is—is murder!"

The colonel shrugged his shoulders.

"That's their funeral."

"Bai Jove, I wegard this as howwid! I weally wish they could be westwained."

But the Redskins were already fighting. They rushed at one another savagely, with whirling tomahawks, and there was a crash of meeting weapons. Then they went at it furiously, with movements so quick that the eye could scarcely follow them.

The juniors gazed on spellbound. They knew that at any moment they might see one of the combatants fall weltering in his blood, and the thought almost froze them with horror.

Suddenly the Blackfoot was seen to spring backwards. There was a crash on the rocks as his tomahawk flew away. He was disarmed, and a savage glare of triumph was in the coppery face of the Cheyenne.

He sprang forward, and his weapon whirled aloft. Tom Merry gave a cry. But the Blackfoot eluded the blow, and closed with the Cheyenne. The Red Deer's arm was twisted, and he dropped his tomahawk, and went backwards on the rocks with a crash.

They were down—weaponless—the Blackfoot on top!

There was a savage growl from the Cheyennes, and a forward movement; but Colonel Stalker's rifle was levelled, and his intention of shooting if necessary was so plain that the redskins hung back from interfering.

And it all passed in a few seconds.

The Cheyenne was crushed on the rocks, and the Hawk groped for his knife, and drew it, and the clear steel glittered in the sun as he threw up his hand to strike.

Tom Merry sprang forward and grasped the descending arm. The knife clinked on the rocks, and jerked out of the hand of the Blackfoot. He turned a furious glance upon the boy, but recognising Tom Merry, his expression changed.

"Ugh! Why does the little chief stop my hand?"

"Do not kill him!"

"The Cheyenne dog should die."

"Do not kill him!"

The Hawk rose to his feet. Red Deer scrambled up, his face dark with rage and mortification, yet evidently glad to escape with his life. He threw his cloak round him, and stood with sullen dignity, silent.

The Blackfoot picked up his knife, and returned it to his belt.

"Let him live," he said briefly. "Let him live, the dog, if the little chief wishes it." And he strode away.

The rest of the party followed him into the wood, glad enough to be well out of the adventure, and the Red Deer was left standing with sullen brows gazing after them.

CHAPTER 16.

The Hawk Keeps Watch.

THEY crossed the river by means of the great rocks jutting up in the channel, and took up the trail to the nearest railroad depot. The Blackfoot chief marched with them, and carried his share of the baggage. Tom Merry felt a little constrained towards the red chief. He knew that the Blackfoot must have a great regard for him, on account of his relationship to Mr. Poinsett, or he would never have stayed his hand. And he felt that in interfering with the Hawk he had taken advantage of that. The horror of bloodshed had actuated him, yet he could not expect the Blackfoot to understand his feelings on the subject.

In his usual frank way, he spoke on the matter to the Hawk as soon as he had thought it out. He was walking beside the tall, silent Indian over the rough, rocky track.

"I hope you are not angry with me, Hawk," he said frankly. "It was like my cheek to interfere with you, I know, but I could not let you kill him."

"Yaas, wathah! Undah the circs., Tom Mewwy, you certainly owe our wed fwiend an apology."

The Hawk looked at Tom Merry.

"Ugh! It is well! The Hawk's heart is glad that the little chief stayed his hand. The Hawk is a Christian."

"Bai Jove! Are you weally?"

"Ugh! Many moons ago the Hawk was taught the white man's religion by a great Bible chief," said the Blackfoot. "It is many moons since the Hawk has taken the scalps of his enemies. It is good! Ugh! I have spoken."

And the Blackfoot stalked on in silence.

The adventurers camped that evening within ten miles of the railroad, as the sun sank down to its bed in the far Pacific.

The Hawk built the fire, and brought in game for the supper, and as the night was fine and still, the tent was not erected. The campers, rolled in their blankets, slept with their feet to the fire. When Tom Merry nodded off, he noticed that the Blackfoot was still sitting erect upon a log, his eyes watching the fire, and it struck him that the chief was keeping watch.

There was a possibility that the Cheyennes might have tracked the party, for plunder or revenge, and doubtless the Blackfoot's precaution was well taken, though Wally would have backed Pongo against anybody for keeping watch.

About midnight Tom Merry awoke. He could hardly tell what it was awoke him. Doubtless the Blackfoot had made some movement.

The Hawk was still sitting in the same posture, as if he had not moved. The fire was lower, burning redly in the blackness of the night.

The Blackfoot was sitting still, but Tom Merry, as his glance fell upon him, saw that his head was bent, as if he were listening intently.

A thrill ran through the boy. There was something in the attitude of the listening Indian that smote him with a vague sense of danger.

The Blackfoot suddenly moved. He rose to his feet, and stood for a moment erect, still listening, his black shadow falling across Tom Merry from the fire.

Then, with stealthy and noiseless step, he left the camp, and disappeared into the shadows of the night.

Tom Merry lay still, his heart throbbing. What did it mean? Why had the Blackfoot left the camp so cautiously, with such tense earnestness in his manner?

Was it danger?

The junior lay still and listened. There was no sound from the wood that shadowed the camp on one side, and shut off the light of the moon. It was into the wood that the Indian had disappeared. Where was he gone? Did he intend to return?

Tom Merry sat up, with beating heart, feeling that he could no longer endure the suspense. His movement woke up Blake, who looked at him in the ruddy glow of the fire with a sleepy yawn.

"Hallo! What are you sitting up for?"

"There's something up!"

"Yes; I can see you are. Anything else?"

"The Blackfoot has just left the camp, and he was looking as if he heard an enemy. I can hear nothing."

Jack Blake promptly rose to his feet. Tom Merry followed

his example; and they strained their eyes after the Indian without making anything out in the shadows. On one side of the camp the moonlight lay, but on the other side, where the wood was, all was dark.

"I can hear nothing," whispered Blake.

Tom Merry nodded.

"Neither can I."

"Hark!"

They were listening with all their ears. In the dim wood there was a sound of rustling and crackling, as if men were struggling there in the darkness. It looked as if the Blackfoot had found a foe.

Was it the Cheyennes, or another foe? In any case the brave Blackfoot should not be left to encounter him alone. Tom Merry seized a billet of wood, and rushed from the camp, and Blake was after him like a shot.

But their aid was not needed. The struggle in the wood ceased as abruptly as it had begun, and then there was a sound as of a body being dragged through the thickets. The sound was coming towards the camp.

Tom Merry and Blake stopped and looked at one another with sickly faces. The same thought was in both minds: Had a man been done to death there under the dark trees?

Colonel Stalker was on his feet now, gun in hand. Pongo was barking furiously. The Blackfoot emerged from the wood, dragging a man by the collar—a man who writhed and struggled vainly. Tom Merry's heart gave a bound. The man was captured, whoever he was, but no blood had been spilt.

There was a grim smile on the Blackfoot's bronzed face. He flung his prisoner down in the camp in the ruddy glow of the fire.

There was an ejaculation of amazement from Arthur Augustus D'Arcy:

"Bai Jove, it's that wascal Puntah!"

CHAPTER 17.

Punter's Plight—The End of the Journey.

CAPTAIN PUNTER it was, and in a sorry plight. He had been pretty roughly handled by the Indian. But that was not the worst. He had evidently been in the wars before he fell into the hands of the Hawk.

He was dressed in an ancient pair of Indian leggings and a ragged blanket and a tattered jacket. His head and feet were bare, and the latter muddy and stained with blood, where the rocks had wounded them.

He had no weapons, and the look on his face showed that he was famished and desperate. He lay in the ruddy light of the camp-fire, blinking, and showing his teeth at his captor like a savage dog.

The redskin stood erect, looking down upon him, ready to pin him immediately if he should attempt to escape.

"Punter!" exclaimed the colonel in amazement. "That pesky scallywag again! Waal, carry me home to die!"

"My only Aunt Jane!" said Wally. "Some chaps never know when they've had enough, I calculate."

The captain muttered an oath.

"The Hawk hear him in wood," said the Blackfoot sententiously. "The Hawk look for him, and find him. It is good!"

"Hang you!"

"Ugh! The Hawk will raise the scalp of the white thief!" said the Blackfoot, drawing his knife, and stepping towards the prisoner.

Captain Punter gasped with terror, and made a bound to escape. Instantly the redskin had pinned him down, and the knife circled over his head.

Tom Merry ran forward. But on the side of Hawk's bronzed face that was turned away from the prisoner, there appeared a most decided wink—a sign that Tom had never suspected the grave Indian of being capable of making.

And the hero of St. Jim's understood that the Hawk was only playing on the fears of the prisoner to punish him for his rascality.

"Mercy!" shrieked Punter, who fully believed that the redskin was in earnest. "Drag him off! Save me!"

"The white thief must die!"

"Oh, ow! Help! Colonel Stalker, help!"

"I guess I'm not going to interfere," drawled the colonel.

"Help! Murder! Master D'Arcy——"

Tom Merry pulled the swell of St. Jim's back, and whispered to him. A grin overspread the aristocratic face of Arthur Augustus.

"Did you addwess me, Puntah?" he asked.

"Yes—yes! Help—save me!"

"I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort."

"The villain is going to murder me! Help!"

"Undah the circs., Puntah, I must decline to help you. The wedskin is a gentleman, and evewy gentleman has a wight to do as he likes without any interfewence fwom any other gentleman. You are in a doocid awkward posish., but I wegard it as entirely your own fault. If you would like to send any message to your fwiends and welations in any English or Amewican pwison, Skimpole will take it down in his notebook."

"Certainly!" blinked Skimpole, coming forward with his notebook. "I shall be very pleased to render any small service to a dying man. I am very glad this has occurred, as it will make a most exciting incident in my book of travels."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you beasts!" gasped Captain Punter, enlightened as to the true state of affairs by the roar of laughter. "I—I—I—— Oh, hang you!"

The Blackfoot, with a solemn grin, released the captain, and he rose to his feet, looking a sorry object in the light of the camp-fire.

"Hang you!" he gasped. "I—I was only hanging about the camp to—to see if I could pick up something to eat. Hang you!"

"The wottah looks wathah hungwy."

"I am starving!"

Tom Merry opened the buckskin bag in which reposed the remains of the supper. The eyes of the captain glistened. It was evidently a long time since he had eaten.

"How did you get in this state?" asked Colonel Stalker.

Captain Punter snapped his teeth.

"I fell in with a gang of redskins," he snarled—"a gang of Cheyennes."

"Bai Jove! Our fwiend Wed Deer!"

"They stripped and robbed me—hang them!—and sent me adrift like this!" snarled the captain. "I'm famished!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake. "Serve you jolly well right, too!"

"Hang you!"

"Here you are," said Tom Merry.

He handed the food to the rascal, who ate eagerly. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy brought him a can of water, and the colonel added a dash of whisky to it from his flask.

Punter ate and drank ravenously. The campers stood round him, watching him in silence. He was plainly in great want, and though he had brought it upon himself by his rascality, they were somewhat touched. The colonel groped in his baggage, and produced a pair of leather "crackers" and an old coat.

"I guess you can have them," he remarked.

"Thank you, sir," said Punter. "I—I didn't expect that."

"You're ten miles from the railroad," said the colonel. "There's enough to pay your fare back to the East—if you've sense enough to go."

Captain Punter pocketed the money. He finished the food, and rose to go. He looked much better for his meal.

"I guess it'd pay you to run a straight course in the future, sonny," said the colonel. "If we see any more of you, you will get something you won't enjoy, and I promise you that down in Arizony we deal with toughs of your stamp in a way you would dislike. You had better light out while you've got the chance. Git!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Your pwesent state pwevents me fwom givin' you a feahful thwashin', as it would be beneath my dig. to stwike a man who is down, but I warn you that if you twouble me again I shall lose my tempah, and you will get sewiously hurt."

Captain Punter did not reply. Without a word he turned and plunged into the wood, and disappeared.

The campers returned to their blankets, and the remainder of the night passed undisturbed. Whether Captain Punter had taken the colonel's advice, and gone East, they could not tell, but neither that night nor on the following morning did they see any trace of him.

In the morning they resumed the march, and reached the depot, where they bade farewell to the Blackfoot chief.

The Hawk was going on to the Poinsett Ranch in Arizona, but he preferred to go his own way, as his fathers had travelled before him—on foot or on horseback through the sierra passes.

Colonel Stalker and his proteges boarded their train, and were soon again speeding on to the south-westward. They were none the worse for their tramp in the Rockies, but they were glad to be once more speeding on the iron track, and drawing every hour visibly nearer to their destination.

The scream of the engine rang through the lonely hills of New Mexico, and at last the colonel, pointing from the windows of the car, uttered the long-expected word:

"Arizona!"

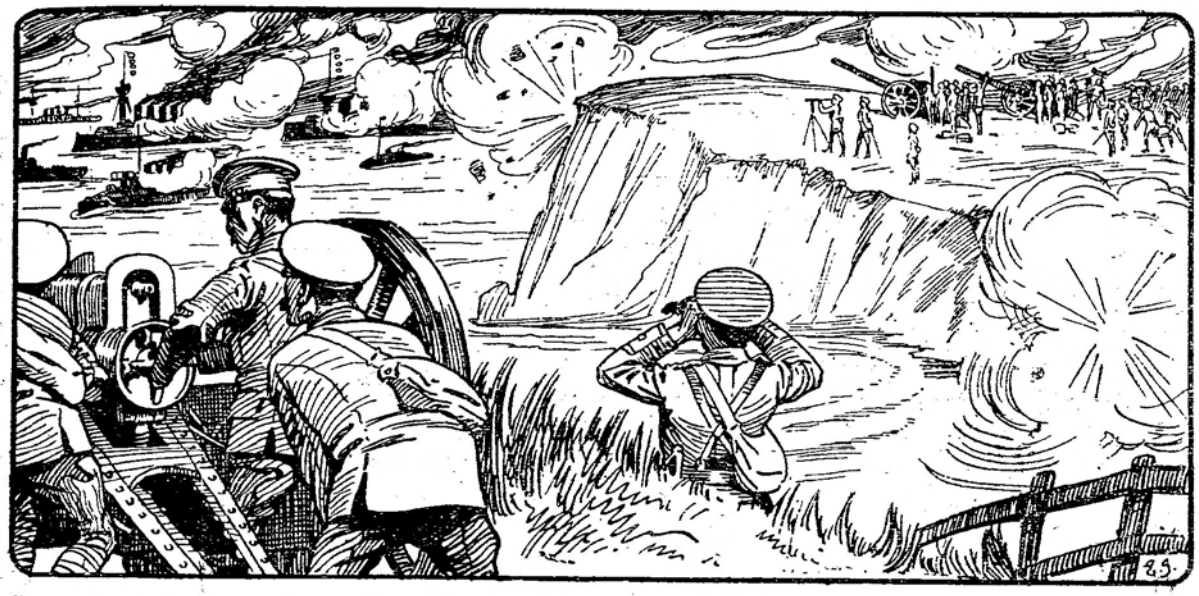
Arizona at last!

THE END.

("Tom Merry & Co. Out West" is the title of next week's splendid, long, complete tale. Please order your copy of "The Gem" Library in advance. Price One Penny.)

Please tell your Friends about this Story.—Ed.

BRITAIN INVADED!



A Powerful and Stirring War Story.

THE FIRST CHAPTERS.

The Greyfriars School Cadet Corps, commanded by Captain Sam Villiers, scout, are standing about in small groups, talking anxiously, when the clattering of hoofs is heard, and a young farmer from one of the homesteads on the cliffs comes galloping in on a sweating horse, and reins up hastily.

"The furriners are on us!"

he cries. "There's a whole fleet o' tugs an' barges an' ships o' war headin' in for Frinton Gap, wi' thousands o' men aboard! They're Germans, an' they're goin' to land!"

Captain Sam Villiers was at his side in a moment.

"How far off are they?"

"Four mile out when I left, an' comin' in fast. I seed the men aboard 'em wi' my owd telescope, an' the sun glintin' on their helmets; an' I've tried to send messages at the telegraph-offices, but none can't get through. They tells me all the wires is cut. Let me go! I must push on!"

. . . . . .

Nearly all the boys are killed or captured when the first German column attack and capture the school.

However, Sam Villiers and his brother, Steve, manage to escape and gain the Colchester garrison, who have turned out and entrenched themselves for the defence while the main forces come up.

The boy scouts tell their story to the British general, and, after a good sleep, go out and reconnoitre.

Sam Villiers is able to capture the German plans, and thus saves the British forces from a terrible defeat.

General Sir Sholto Nugent retires with his men, and manages for a time to keep the Germans in check.

Hearing that their home, mother and sisters, are in danger, the two boy scouts hasten with all speed to Cotehall Towers. Helped by a fisherman named Ned, they manage to rescue the women.

At last Sir Sholto Nugent has enough men to fight a decisive battle, and Sam and Stephen lay in wait with the White Hussars; who are stationed in such a position as to be able to see the whole battle.

(Now go on with the Story.)

The Charge of the White Hussars!

"The Berkshires have reached the first trenches!" exclaimed the major of the White Hussars to Sam and Steve, his glasses to his eyes. "Well done—well done! Now they're giving 'em blazes!"

The brown battalions hurled themselves upon the trenches, and the deadly hand-to-hand struggle raged on the hillside. The Germans seemed to spring up from the earth, and the two cadets saw the flash of steel twinkle viciously, as bayonet met bayonet. The first cheer came floating across the distance as the Berkshires engaged, and the rest was hard, savage fighting. For several minutes it was impossible to say who had the advantage, till the flood of khaki was seen to slowly pour through, and overwhelm the German lines, who seemed to be stamped into the earth and swallowed up.

"Got 'em!" muttered the major. "Mopped 'em up—wiped 'em out! Good for the old line—the finest infantry in the world! It was true when Napoleon said it, and it's true to-day!"

The boys wanted to cheer, but somehow, at this, the first homethrust of the battle, their throats choked them. It was only a little section of the two great forces. Away to the centre the great mass of the Hanover and Prussian infantry were facing the main British attack, and a huge struggle was in progress. The guns had ceased firing, for the forces were now too close.

Beyond, two British regiments—the Norfolks and Lincolns—who had lost terribly from the entrenched rifle-fire and machine-guns, were suddenly seen forming squares. A brigade of Prussian cavalry came thundering down in a desperate effort to break the ranks.

But the German commander had mistaken the quality of the two line regiments. Heavy as their losses had been, they were unshaken. The squares were formed in time, and no cavalry, the Kaiser owns can break a solid square of the British line. They dashed themselves to pieces on those compact bricks of riflemen, and a hundred saddles were emptied before the first shock came.

"Give it 'em! Let 'em have it!" gasped Stephen, as though the distant Lincolns could hear, clutching his horse's

mane in his excitement. "They can't smash us, Sam; we're standing firm as rocks!"

Round and round the squares raged the cavalry, like a tide-race foaming among rocks. They drew off, and charged again singly at each square, only to be beaten off. And each time they fell back there were more riderless horses galloping frantically abroad, and more prone bodies lying on the reddened turf. In a few minutes the bugles rang to call the baffled cavalry off, and as they drew swiftly away to the right a squadron of British Dragoon Guards suddenly swept round the breast of the slope, and dashed into the disordered mass of Prussian horsemen, scattering them with heavy loss.

"Good, man!" cried the major, gripping his horse with his knees as though he were in the thick of the fight. "Cuthbert's leadin' 'em! Got 'em at the right moment, an' the beggars are cooked! The Lancers are there, too!"

"What beastly luck their gettin' the fun while we're in reserve!" growled the subaltern, itching with impatience.

"Our turn will come," said the major grimly, "an' we shall get the cream of it. By Jove, the Bedfords are trapped!"

A thrill passed through all those who had glasses as they saw what was happening on the extreme left. The Bedfords and Cheshires, advancing smartly in the face of a sharp rifle-fire, were suddenly opened on by a masked battery of field-guns, and the fire from a line of hidden trenches on their flank.

The foremost men began to go down like corn before the reaper; but the Bedfords had an old score to wipe out, and, fearful as the punishment was, not a man flinched. They were instantly flung out in open order, and lay down to pour in a heavy rifle-fire; but their position was a deadly one. Those on the hilltop who saw held their breath as they watched the appalling havoc the German guns were making, when suddenly three of Nugent's batteries opened with a rattle and a crash. Under the hail these poured in the German guns slackened, and gradually ceased, and two battalions of Hampshires, hurrying across to back the stricken British regiments, all surged forward with a cheer once more, and, smarting from their punishment, they flung themselves on the German trenches ahead.

"It's hanging in the balance now!" muttered Sam, his fingers gripping the bridle-rein as he watched. "Whoever takes the first step back loses the day."

With breathless anxiety they saw the full force of the two hosts meet at last. In one place the rifle-fire was blazing and crackling, in another steel met steel. Briton and German were in the throes of the final struggle. Such work as this was hardly reckoned on by the Kaiser's hosts. Long-range fighting and science was what they expected, but there had been science enough. Nugent's troops had been brought skilfully to the close encounter at great sacrifice, and now the strategy was at its end, and the word was the old British motto: "Go for 'em!" That, and nothing more. It was in every man's heart, and on the lips of many—the cheer as they hurled themselves on the enemy was like the roaring of a torrent.

With bayonet and butt, each man to his own fancy, as it always has been with our men in close fighting, they drove the invaders back. No defence could stand against that fierce rush of the islanders, when every man was striking for his home and country. Bullets at long range, or big guns might have done it, but flesh and blood had to give way, and the Germans, already shaken by their defeat in the marshes the day before, were borne down and trodden under.

"They're giving way!" shouted Sam, rising in his stirrups. "We've got 'em now!"

A sharp order was heard along the cavalry lines, the bugles rang out with a sound that thrilled every man to his boots, and away cantered the White Hussars, with the rest of the horsed regiments behind them.

Down the slope they went, faster and faster, swinging out in a long curve, so as to come round the extreme right of the fighting-line. The boys rode stirrup to stirrup beside the troop-sergeant with the first squadron, and the roar of the battle grew louder as they flew over the ground.

"Have they loosed us at last?" cried Stephen.

"It wasn't the charge that was sounded. We're cultin' out to take our place away to the right, to dash into 'em when the call comes," said Sam. "It won't be long now. Sit tight, an' keep your beast fresh for the last. Is that carbine all the weapon you've got? You'd better keep out of the charge, then, Steve!"

"I'm going to ride with the White Hussars if I've only my bare hands!" cried Stephen mutinously. "You can't talk; you've no weapon at all!"

"I've got a revolver I pinched from the transport column before we started," replied Sam, slapping the holster that was buckled to his belt. "The gunners that Jenkins wiped out got my old one. Rein up! There's the call to halt."

The squadron swung round and halted on the crest of a small, low hill, not five hundred yards to the right of the fight. As they did so a troop of khaki-clad Yeomanry galloped past them, their rifles at the "carry."

"It's father's troop!" cried Stephen. "There he is! Hi, dad!"

Captain Villiers, who was riding his great iron-grey at the head of the troop, turned his head and looked with astonishment at his sons as he galloped by. There was not a moment for greeting or inquiry, and, with a grim smile, he raised his sword in salute to the boys, and was gone.

"That's his little joke," grinned Sam. "Yeomanry must salute the swells of the White Hussars. What-ho! We——"

"Look—look at the Hanover Infantry!" cried Stephen; and a cheer broke from his lips. "Don't rot now, Sam, of all times. See them give back! Who's cuttin' the German Eagle's spurs?"

The great onslaught of the British regiments was now in full view of the waiting cavalry, and cheer after cheer rose from the troopers, which no one tried to check.

Stubbornly, savagely, the Germans contested every foot. The ground and trenches were strewed and heaped with dead. Before that resistless tide of men Von Adler's columns bent, and when once the first backward step was taken the end followed swiftly.

The Hanovers broke. The Prussians broke. The colours beyond them went down in a whirlpool of men that were fighting belt to belt. The two Mecklenburg regiments that held the extreme left fell slowly back before the thirsty bayonets of the Bedfords and Hampshires. So well-timed was the attack, and so shaken the German troops, that when once the back of the resistance was broken they were beyond the power to hold on. Three more regiments of the British line came up on their flank, and after five short minutes of fearful strife the Germans were flying, broken and disordered. Yet even now they were not beyond rallying, if their officers could hold them.

Loud and clear rang the bugles all down the cavalry lines, and the cry echoed from throat to throat of the troop commanders:

"Charge!"

"Sit tight!" cried Sam in his brother's ear, as their horses sprang forward. "It's death or glory now!"

It was the moment of a lifetime. The wind screamed in their ears as they flew along, and the thunder of the squadrons' hoofs drowned all else save the first sharp cheer that burst from the men's throats. On every side the grim, fierce faces bent their gaze ahead, and the sabres were hitched well to hand.

It seemed but a few seconds, while the turf rolled away underfoot, before they found themselves upon the enemy. There were enough armed men in that hurrying host to have covered the cavalry four times over, but they had already felt the teeth of the British Lion, and were flying from his wrath. A desperate attempt to form fours and meet the cavalry was made, but the huge German force was now a disorderly mob, every man for himself, and before there was time to think the troopers were upon them.

The White Hussars dashed into the fray like a whirlwind, and the sabres flashed and swept and bit home with awful swiftness. Sam and Stephen scarcely knew what happened, or how they came to be in that raging cataract of men and horses. They saw the mass of troops turn to face the attack, and the next moment were upon them.

Stephen felt his horse rear and squeal as a bayonet laid open his shoulder, and put up his carbine with both hands to try and guard a swinging down-cut that a German subaltern made at him with his sword. The blade bit deep into the dock and bolt, and the striker went down and was trampled underfoot as the horse's shoulder struck him. Clubbing his light carbine, Stephen struck out blindly as his mount bore him on, and as he made a wild attempt to club down a Prussian on the near side who was about to spike his horse, another on the right swung up his bayonet to drive it home in the boy's body.

Sam's revolver banged in the man's face, and he fell forward limply, the horses passing over him. How many of these incidents there were in the ride Stephen could not tell. They all passed in the wink of an eyelid; and as the cavalry came fairly into the midst of the Germans the thundering hoofs and flashing sabres scattered them like wolves flying before the charge of a tiger.

Through and back again went the White Hussars, dashing among the bristling bayonets and snapping rifles, a hundred of their saddles empty; but four times the number of Germans were down. The mass of them were driven far and wide and ridden over, while half a battalion, finding themselves hemmed in a field, flung down their arms and

surrendered as the troopers charged. They were given quarter at once. Their arms were piled, and a troop of Yeomanry that came up took charge of them.

All along the line the rout was the same. So complete a defeat had not been seen since Jena was fought. So swiftly had the British regiments pushed round the flanks that they caught the flying Germans and drove the remnants of the scattered battalions to fight or surrender.

As the Hussars came dashing out from their final charge, Stephen, wild with excitement, hurled his carbine at a man who was taking a deliberate shot at him, as if he were in a shooting-gallery, and a rough outburst of laughter broke out as the butt took the man in the belt and sent him sprawling, the rifle flying into the air. At the same moment Stephen's horse, that had been wounded in the fight, came down heavily and rolled over, the boy just managing to throw himself out of its way.

Sam dashed after a riderless horse of the Hussars as it cantered by, neighing for its dead master, and, catching it by the bridle, he brought it up to his brother.

"Hurt, Steve?" he cried. "Jump up, then, and keep mounted, whatever you do. We've broken their last stand!"

"Hurrah!" yelled Stephen, as he flung himself into the saddle and galloped away, the stirrups, which were too long for him, banging and swinging like flails. Gripping with his knees, he got hold of the leathers each in turn, and managed to shorten them up three holes. Then, jamming his feet home, he flew over the trampled field to where he saw a great mass of men, in khaki and in green, striving furiously together, four hundred yards away, their bayonets flashing and thrusting.

Several warning voices yelled to him to turn, but he paid no heed, and went on alone. What the trouble was ahead, or what he meant to do, he scarcely knew. He was mad with excitement, and all he saw was the colours of the crack Hanover regiment surging and waving in the midst of the fight, where the Germans had rallied to a stand against the Lincolns.

Straight into the fray dashed Stephen, through friend and foe. He had no weapon, but the great troop-horse flew on like a thunderbolt, and in a few seconds he was up to the centre, where the reddened swords were flashing round the Hanover colours.

Stephen seized the staff, and with the sheer weight of his rush tore it from its holder. A crimson blade whizzed past his back and bit into the cantle of the saddle; another shaved through the thick staff as he held it up to guard himself, and wounded him slightly in the chest, and the great horse, with no hand on the bridle, blundered away to the left before its young rider could be struck down, and a mighty cheer rose as the colours were seen to fall.

Stephen trailed the broken staff behind him, nearly losing it after it was cut in two, and from that moment the Germans, who were superior in numbers to their attackers, began to give way. The Lincolns pressed on with redoubled fury, and in two minutes the First Hanovers broke and fled, leaving two-thirds of their number dead or prisoners.

Stephen hardly waited to see the end of it; he flew back as fast as his horse could cover the ground to join the troopers again. But the White Hussars had already made a circuit round to catch the retreating Hanovers, and Sam was out of sight, too. Then Stephen caught sight of his old friends the Fusiliers resting on their arms, a third of them missing, and nearly every man showing the stains of the great fight they had been through. Devine, the adjutant, was with them, and Stephen galloped up, shouting wildly, waving the Hanover colours above his head.

A mighty cheer arose, and every man who had any headgear left hoisted it on his bayonet.

"What colours are those?" shouted Devine.

"The First Hanovers!" cried Stephen.

"Then, by Jove, youngster, you've captured the best fringe of the day!"

"Well done, Steve!" called Sam, who came cantering up at the same moment. "You've got 'em, then? I saw you going for 'em, an' I made sure it'd be your finish. What price Weary Wilhelm now? Are you hurt?"

"Only a bit of a cut over the ribs," said Stephen, tumbling off his horse and throwing himself down, for the strain had been tremendous—"hardly a flesh-wound even. We've got off cheap. There's a lot of poor fellows will never answer the roll-call again."

"Yes, hundreds," said Devine, "and hundreds more. Can't score victories for nothing. You may get shot in the first skirmish, or go through twenty battles without a scratch; it's all luck. We've clipped the Eagle's wings this time."

"Will it settle the Invasion?" asked Stephen eagerly.

"It may even do that, if our other forces have checked the four German army corps to the north, between Ipswich an' Norwich. We've saved London from the worst danger that threatened it. Now, if the rest goes as well, the Germans 'll be shedding tears for their happy Fatherland. The old Grey Fox has done his work well."

As they rested, leaving the flying squadrons to scatter and pursue the last of the routed foe, news came in from all sides. They had over four thousand prisoners. The Germans had lost nearly half their men on the field itself. Only the Uhlan and cavalry regiments had got away with anything like their former strength, and a whole regiment of Cuirassiers had been wiped out.

As for the guns, only a single battery was saved, and that was sure to be taken before long. Surrenders were still going on wholesale, for the Germans had nowhere to retreat to. On each side were deep, salt rivers, and behind lay the marshes and the sea. It was true they had ten miles of country behind them, but it was a mere pocket, hemmed in by water on three sides and the British on the fourth.

"We're goin' to get the whole lot of 'em!" cried a Yeomanry corporal, cantering up to beg a drink of water. "We've pretty nearly done it already. There aren't a lot left, but they've scattered 'emselves so much that it's like rounding up a drove of pigs. The ones who are retreatin' are cut clean in two halves, goin' north an' south. Their army's done for, an' Von Adler is making a dash for it with his staff, for he's cut right off, an' afraid he'll be captured. He's makin' for the north, to try an' cross the Blackwater, 'cause he's barred on this side by our cavalry."

"By gum, is he?" cried Sam, jumping up. "Which way did he go?"

"They saw him in the distance ridin' out from Tillingham for Steeple Creek, where it's likely the Germans have got some boats. It's the only place he could go for, an' as he started early he's half-way there by now. He'll be across to Goldhanger before dark."

"Will he?" cried Sam, springing to his horse. "Why, he's got the marshes to cross, an' we could get to Steeple in front of him with fast horses from here, by a good ten minutes."

"What, capture Von Adler!" exclaimed the corporal, in surprise.

"Why not?" returned Sam, springing into his saddle. "He's left his broken force an' running north with his staff. What mischief mayn't he do yet? He's one o' the first of the Kaiser's generals. By gum, here's father and his troop!" cried Sam, clapping his heels to his horse.

The squad of Yeomanry had returned, after helping to head off and capture a battalion of Prussians, and now were returning, with the loss of eight or ten men. Sam reined up sharply in front of Captain Villiers and saluted.

"It's reported General Von Adler is making for Steeple Creek to escape, sir. Won't you come an' cut him off? All our light cavalry are ahead after the enemy."

"Cut him off, Aubrey!" exclaimed his father, while every trooper pricked his ears eagerly. "Why, how can we get there in time?"

"I can show you a way to get there five minutes before him, if we start at once and ride hard," said Sam.

"Then let us start!" cried the captain. "I rely on you, Sam! Threes about, there—gallop!"

How the Yeomen Captured Von Adler.

Stephen swerved in on the other side of his father, and away went the troop, straight across the stricken field and out to the northward. There was no time to make reports or seek orders, if it were to be done it must be done at once.

"Capture a brigade-marshal and his staff!" muttered Captain Villiers as he rode. "Such a thing hasn't been done, barring wholesale surrenders, since Napoleon's first war!"

"That's no reason why it shouldn't be, is it, dad?" said Sam, shortening his rein. "Why, it's a sure gain of two miles the way I'm going, while Von Adler's blunderin' over the dykes. An' those fellows behind were goin' to sit still an' let him go!"

"It isn't everybody knows the Essex marshes like you do, Aubrey," said his father. "More's the pity, for we need it now. An artillery major told me yesterday he'd never heard of the River Crouch before. Think of it! But you're right, if we can get hold of Von Adler—which I doubt—it will be a tremendous score. He's a man worth capturing."

"You needn't doubt, dad," said Sam, "for I can put you where you can get at him, and you'll do the rest. If there's time I can ambush you, so he won't get wind of us and hook off somewhere else. He's a heavy man, but I doubt he rides hard."

"What do you know of him?"

"It was once my painful duty to give him one under the

jaw," chuckled Sam, "when Nugent sent me to his tent for those despatches. You can't miss him when he turns up—a big, fierce old johnny, with a red face and white moustaches. I don't know how many he'll have with him."

"His staff and guard—say, eight or ten," said Captain Villiers, running his eye over his men. "We're a round dozen. We lost eight in that last scrimmage."

"Push along, or we shall be too late," said Sam. "That's Steeple village on the hill. We've got to go round the foot. Steve, ride up the hill and see if you can spot anything of Von Adler or any other Germans. Pull out here to the left, dad, an' round behind the farm. If we're seen now the game's up. We've got to make for those two small coppices on the way to the creek."

"Why?"

"Because Von Adler's bound to pass either between 'em or close to 'em."

"Then I'll have half my men in each!" exclaimed Villiers. And, quickly dividing the troop, he sent six to the nearer coppice, with orders to lie low and watch, while he took Sam and the rest of the men to the farther one. In a couple of minutes it was done, and the two divisions of horsemen were waiting silently under cover of the two little groves.

"Quick work!" said Sam. "You've got your men in smart order, dad."

"Pleased to have the approval of an old war-dog like yourself," said the captain grimly. "Aubrey, it's many a year since I spanked you across my knee, but if you've led me and my troop here on a fool's errand I'll do it again!"

"I think it'll be all right," grinned Aubrey; "but, of course, one can't tell, and if Von Adler got wind of your clumsy troopers gallopin' along here he'd go another——"

"Here comes one!" said Villiers, as a horseman came swiftly galloping down from the hill and right round the back by the hedges.

"It's Steve!" said Sam. "The young rip takes cover well, even on horseback. He'll join us from the rear, so as not to be seen, and by the way he's riding he should have some news."

In a couple of minutes Stephen came through the coppice from behind, and, reining up quietly beside the leaders, he nodded to Sam.

"There's a party of about ten horsemen ridin' like Old Harry up from the marshes," he said, "an' a pretty mess they're in. I should think they've left a few behind in the dykes. They're making this way."

"Well done!" muttered Villiers. "You were right, Sam."

"There they are!" said Sam, pointing quickly through the trees as a distant squad of mounted men appeared. "It's Von Adler, right enough," he added, borrowing a pair of looted field-glasses that Stephen handed him; "the big chap on the right. He looks mighty savage."

"So would you if your giddy invasion went up in smoke," said Stephen. "He's thinkin' of gettin' more men and havin' his revenge. That's where we come in."

"Shut up!" whispered Sam.

Not another word was said as the horsemen rapidly approached. Their horses were in a lather, mud-stained, and panting, showing how mercilessly they had been pushed in the ride from Tillingham, which was really riding back towards the British forces. But Nugent's light cavalry were already between them and Bradwell Quay, and Steeple was the only place where the fugitives could be sure of getting a boat.

Von Adler's fierce, brick-red face could be seen with the naked eye as the staff rode up. Right between the two coppices they came, as fast as they could spur.

A shrill whistle arose, and there was a shout of warning from the Germans as the two halves of Villiers' troop suddenly dashed out from the coppices. Away went the two boys on either side of their father, the troopers thundering behind, and they heard Captain Villiers' ringing shout as he called on the Germans to surrender. The answer was a couple of hastily-fired revolver-shots, and before there was time to think the two parties were into each other.

So sudden was the charge, delivered sideways on both flanks, that the Germans, on their lighter horses, went down like ninepins by the mere shock of the collision. Taken by surprise by the burly Yeomen, who struck out lustily, the German staff, whose weapons were not even drawn, were simply bowled over with very little bloodshed, save for four who drew revolvers and were cut down, while one of the Yeomen was killed and another wounded.

Sam rode close at Stephen's bridle-hand, and it seemed to the boys like an old-fashioned Rugby charge. They were both nearly unseated when their horses crashed into those of the Germans, and a revolver-shot singed Sam's hair and stung his face with powder-grains; but when the first shock was over the lightly-horsed staff were mostly sprawling on the ground.

"Where's Von Adler?" cried Sam, wiping his smarting cheek, and half blinded by the burnt powder.

"Great Scott! Look at dad!" shouted Stephen, pulling his horse round.

Captain Villiers had gone to the attack with his eyes fixed on but one person. Von Adler was riding on the near side, and when he saw the troop cutting off all chance of escape for his escort he rammed his spurs home and made a wild dash to cut across and escape by the rear.

But for Captain Villiers, he would have succeeded. The master of Cotehall was the only one in the way, and he rode straight at the German general to intercept him.

Villiers had not as much as drawn his sword, and he paid no heed to Von Adler's revolver as the two men dashed at each other. It cracked once as the giant Britisher spurred his great grey horse forward, the two met at a gallop, and Villiers, throwing his huge arms round Von Adler, fairly plucked him from the saddle, revolver and all, while the German general's horse went galloping wildly on without its rider.

A ringing shout went up as the troopers saw the encounter, and even the floored Germans stared with amazement as Villiers cantered up with their general across his saddle-bow. The Yeomen had flung themselves from their mounts, and beat the weapons from the hands of the Germans before they could rise; and Villiers, disarming his prisoner of the pistol, at once set him down.

"Bid your men surrender, general!" he cried. "No use shedding blood needlessly!"

The staff were for fighting still, but Von Adler gave his command hoarsely, and they ceased, to the relief of the Yeomen, who did not want to use their blades against outnumbered men who had no chance.

"Your parole, general?" said Villiers, turning to his prisoner.

"You had best shoot me!" muttered Von Adler hoarsely, biting his white moustache. "My day is ended. I will give no parole!"

"It is not the custom of the British to shoot unarmed prisoners," said Villiers.

"After defeat and flight, caught riding for my life like a cursed scout," said Von Adler hoarsely, his eyes red and savage, "what does it matter what happens to me?"

"I understand your feelings," said Villiers, who felt pity for the old warrior standing there disarmed and helpless; "but we know well enough the flight was bitter to you, and that you did it not for your own sake, but that you might yet be of service to your country. It will be less painful for us both if you give your word. I have no wish to herd a brave man into camp at the end of a pistol," he added.

"I have fallen into the hands of a gentleman, at least!" said the German general, with a gulp. "I give my parole. Let us get it over."

"Trooper Scott, catch General Von Adler's horse," said Villiers, taking off his jacket. "Aubrey, come here and tear out the lining of my coat."

"Are you hurt, father? Did he hit you?" exclaimed Sam anxiously, hurrying forward.

"Got me through the shoulder," said Villiers, who had taken no more notice of Von Adler's revolver than if it had been a pea-shooter. "Must tie it up, or I shall lose too much blood on the ride back. Bind it crossways, Aubrey, and make the knot as tight as you know how."

He did not even wince under his son's rough surgery, and the flow of blood being stopped, he put on his coat again and stood to his horse.

"I regret having wounded you," said Von Adler, with a courtly bow.

"I have the lesser hurt," replied Villiers, swinging into the saddle, "and you the greater. Are you ready, gentlemen?" he said to the staff. "I presume you will also give your paroles?"

They gave it gloomily enough, and the cortege started back towards Cold Norton. Little was said on the way, though the boys talked admiringly of their father's feat, and no prouder warriors came into camp that day after the great fight than Villiers' troop. The infantry were all returned, and were bivouacking round the camp-fires awaiting their evening meal, and General Nugent had pitched his headquarters' tent on the summit of the hill, where the heliograph was winking and the field-telegraph clicking to tell the great news to those awaiting it so anxiously.

The troops greeted Villiers' men as they entered the camp, but nobody realised at the moment that the prisoners brought in were of any especial importance. The captain rode straight up before the headquarters' tent, and, dismounting, asked to see the general.

"I am extremely busy, and can only attend to matters of the first importance!" said Sir Sholto's voice sharply inside the tent when the message was taken to him. "Captain Villiers, did you say?" He strode to the tent door himself. "What is it, captain?"

"I have to present a prisoner, sir," said Villiers, saluting—"General Von Adler."

"What?" exclaimed Sir Sholto, his face flushing; and he lowered his voice. "Enter, captain, and bring your prisoner."

Villiers and his chief captive entered, the boys following unbidden, for Stephen nudged his brother and passed in behind the shelter of his father's huge frame. The British and the German generals looked at each other for a moment in silence, and Sir Sholto bowed slightly.

"I congratulate you on your victory," said Von Adler, in a hoarse voice. "It is I who am defeated."

"You've fought a gallant fight, and deserve as much honour as the victors," said Nugent rather grimly.

"You owe my presence here to your Yeomanry captain," said Von Adler, chewing his moustache. "But for him I might have met you later on with a different result."

"Possibly!" said Sir Sholto coldly; and he turned to Villiers. "This service will not be forgotten, captain. I will speak with you shortly," he added.

"My son showed me the route, sir. He got us there just in time," put in Captain Villiers, as he saluted and turned to go. "Why, there he is! Who the dence told you to come in here?" he said sharply.

"Let them stop. I know them pretty well, and they know me," said Sir Sholto, with a smile. "Young demons! We grow good material over here, you see, General Von Adler. You owe your capture, it seems, mainly to that youngster."

Von Adler started as he looked at Sam, whom he had not troubled to notice before.

"Himmel!" he gasped. "It is the cadet who looted those despatches from me the day after we landed!"

"Yes, I sent him," said Sir Sholto. "His speciality is knowing the country, and one or two other little things: indeed, perhaps we all owe him rather more than we think."

Von Adler shrugged his shoulders, and looked moodily at Sam.

"It is Fate," he said—"the fortune of war. Well, general, I am your prisoner, and I do not care what you do with me. A firing-party would be the best turn you could do me. My Kaiser has little use for surrendered men."

"You will, of course, be conveyed to whatever quarters are reserved for officers of distinction who fall into our hands. We do not shoot them," said Nugent slyly.

"I wish you did!" said Von Adler fiercely. "And I wish we did, too! Am I to bear polite imprisonment, and my surrender be advertised in the newspapers?"

"You have brought fire and sword into a peaceful country, and must bear the consequences," said Sir Sholto coldly. "You are fortunate that they are not a great deal worse. Sentry, pass the word for an escort here! The other prisoners will be received by Colonel Meredith." He turned to Captain Villiers and the boys with a kindly smile. "I am well served," he said, "while I have such men under me as you and your sons."

Tidings of Disaster.

Little did the boys—or anyone else—think as they left the general's tent after that crowning triumph what the night had in store for them. Their father bid them a warm au revoir, for he had to go back to his troop and see to their needs.

The two cadets returned to their friends, the Fusiliers, for the White Hussars were bivouacked a long way to the eastward after their hunt for the scattered enemy.

The news of Von Adler's capture had spread through the camp like wildfire, and the Yeomen were cheered to the echo as they passed to water their horses.

Sam and Stephen found themselves the heroes of the hour, but the Fusiliers found them anxious for nothing so much as a big meal and a long rest.

"I feel as if I'd got a horse under me all the time," said Sam, stitching up a cut in his riding-breeches when he had finished his third portion. "Hi, orderly! More beef an' coffee, unless you want to see me corpsed with starvation. We ain't on rations now, thank goodness!"

"The troops have earned a square feed, an' you more than most, kids," said Devine, as they stretched themselves round the camp-fire. "You've done a rare good spell to-day. The public schools keep a fellow fit. We older birds knock ourselves about too much sometimes, playin' the fool in town. Feel better now?" he added, as Sam loosened his belt. "You're lucky to get grub like this after a big fight, I can tell you."

"Plenty of cattle an' stock round here," said a young officer. "The simple natives have rounded up whole herds for us. They know they get fat payment-orders on the Government for it."

"Don't you poke any fun at the Essex folk," said Sam. "I haven't paid for a meal or a feed for my horse all the time I was scoutin'; they wouldn't let me. They're trumps, right enough. Good old Essex!"

"You're a bit of a dook around here, aren't you?" said Devine. "No, there's nothing amiss with the British farmer when the Old Country's in danger. Your father's troop is made up of 'em, for that matter—good, burly chaps of the old stock, on thumping shire-bred horses—an' yet they cut off Von Adler, an' cut his comb for him for good. I expect he's feeling sick."

"A jolly good thing, too, for he's been shootin' any amount of chaps on flimsy pretexts, because they were suspected of givin' help to the Regulars," said the young lieutenant. "Never gave 'em a chance, but stuck 'em against a wall an' shot 'em."

"He's a merciless sort of beggar," said Sam, "though, all the same, I'm not sure it ain't best to treat war as war, an' not as a tea-party. It shortens the time, an' saves lives in the end. We're gettin' too squeamish, I think."

"I'll bet some o' the London papers are abusin' our men for their brutality to the poor Germans now," said Stephen. "If we caught a spy tryin' to stab Nugent in his tent to-night, an' shot him, there'd be people to raise a howl about it. The blessed Governments are always scared of that. I wish Von Adler had got hold of a few of those folks before we caught him. But he's a hard sort of beggar, no doubt."

"Not so hard as Von Krantz, the commander-in-chief," said Devine. "Wonder how he's gettin' on?"

"This smash will pretty well cripple him, won't it?" said Stephen.

"If he's met with a reverse, too, he won't have much more chance. But he's got the chief German force with him, an' it all depends on whether Lord Gethin an' Ripley have checked him in the north, for he can't be far off Colchester now."

"Well, let's hope they've given him socks!" said Stephen, yawning. "Gosh, I can't keep awake any longer! An' don't want to," he added, dropping off to sleep where he lay, his head pillowed on his arm.

Sam followed his example within thirty seconds, and the two cadets slept like the dead who lay in the filled-in trenches, save only that they dreamed again of the charge of the White Hussars and the fluttering Hanover colours. But even dreams left them soon, and they rested peacefully among the sleeping Fusiliers.

The hours of the night passed slowly, marked only by the watchful patrols and the numberless sentries, who relieved each other turn by turn, this latter duty being chiefly done by the Reservists, who had been hurried to the front, and arrived after the battle was fought.

The fires burned low towards the last hours of the night, and still the boys slept.

They were awakened by the shrill call of the bugle sounding the "Reveille," which was immediately taken up from regiment to regiment. It was quickly followed by the call of the "Assembly."

"'Reveille' in the middle of the night!" exclaimed Sam, as he sat up, refreshed by his sleep, but wondering to see the Fusiliers busily hurrying to quarters. "They're movin' 'em jolly early after the fight! What's it for?"

"'Assembly,' too!" said Stephen, rising to his feet. "What is it—a forced march? What can Nugent be up to?"

They saw Devine come hurrying through the lines with a very grave face, and it was some minutes before they could get a word with him.

"What is it, Devine? Any news?"

"News? The very worst!" said Devine grimly. "Gethin an' Ripley have had an awful smash. The whole German force have got them cornered, an' they've been defeated with great losses. Von Krantz has broken through them, an' is pushing on for London!"

"Good heavens!" muttered Sam; and for the moment he felt physically sick.

"There are no details yet. Sir Sholto has the news," said Devine, hurrying on. "I can't stop to talk to you!"

The brothers looked at each other aghast.

"Defeat!" muttered Stephen. "We know the worst now!"

"Let's sneak round by headquarters an' see if we can learn anything about it," said Sam, gloomily stalking off.

They made their way towards Sir Sholto Nugent's tent, where despatch-bearers and messengers were hastening to and fro, but they did not dare go in at such a time.

They had cheek enough to pass through the tent-ropes and approach the door, however, but even Stephen's nerve failed him as he thought of General Nugent's wrath.

"We'd better clear out. It's no business of ours to get in the way, an' we're no use," he muttered to Sam.

"Shut up! I want to find out what's happened!" whispered his brother.

Just then Sir Sholto himself strode to the open tent-flies, a young Lancer subaltern, whom Sam knew for an Essex man, and one of the best light riders in the Service, hurrying before him.

"You will have to change horses at Witham," said the general sharply. "You will find Lord Gethin's forces beyond Layer Marney, and those despatches must be handed to him before six at any cost."

"I shall get there, if I am alive, without fail, sir," said the subaltern, hurrying to his horse; and in a few minutes he had disappeared into the night.

At the same time Sam stepped forward before the general could turn.

"The quickest way is across the Blackwater, sir, and straight to Marney," said Sam.

Sir Sholto turned on him with an angry frown, but as he saw who it was his face relaxed, for he had learned to trust Sam.

"Of course it is, Villiers, if one had wings," he said sharply. "But the German forces at Maldon hold the river-banks, and the boats, if there are any."

"I would undertake to get through, sir, and raise a boat as well," said Sam, "and possibly even a horse on the other side. It will save two hours, if I get through alive. Your messenger will have to go right round by Witham."

"By Jove, you shall try it, then," said Sir Sholto, stepping back into the tent, "though your chance is small enough! I will give you duplicate despatches, and it will be a race between you and Carey, who has just gone. Joslin, take down quickly!" he said to his secretary.

"Two sets, sir, an' if I don't get through, my brother will," ventured Sam; and the general nodded, as he went on dictating.

With carbon copying-sheets under the paper, two sets of the despatches were struck off swiftly.

"If anybody else proposed to try this, I should not listen to him," said Sir Sholto, as he gave Sam the despatches; "but I give you the chance, because I know what you can do, though I fear it will lead you to your death. If you get through, these are for the hands of Lord Gethin only, and he is at Layer Marney. If you live, you will reach him——"

"By four o'clock, sir," said Sam, saluting.

"Then go, my boy, and keep a stout heart. The fate of London may depend on you!"

In the Hands of the Rabble.

As Sam and his brother ran swiftly back past the camp-fire, they found an orderly cantering up with their horses, which had been fetched by Devine's orders.

"You're goin' to try it, then!" said the young adjutant. "I saw Nugent give you the despatches, so I sent for your mounts."

"You're a brick, Devine, if ever there was one!" exclaimed Sam, swiftly tightening his horse's girths and springing into the saddle. "Here, Steve, up with you! Take these papers, an' freeze on to them like glue!"

"Are you goin' to try an' cross?" said Devine, as Stephen thrust the copied despatches into his breast. "Look out for the scattered Prussians up that way. They're out of hand, an' they'll be worse than ten Von Adlers if they get hold of you."

"Ready, Sam?" said Stephen, thrusting his feet home in the stirrups.

"Shake, kids," said Devine, "for I don't think it's likely we shall see you again. You've been a pair of good 'un's, anyhow, an' I think it's a bit thick of the Grey Fox to chuck you away like this."

"Where are you bound?" said Sam, as they gripped hands hurriedly.

"A forced march to try an' stop Von Krantz; but it'll depend a lot on you or the other messenger gettin' through whether we can join with Gethin. So-long!"

Away dashed the two horses, fresh after their feed and rest, and in five minutes the buzzing camp and assembling battalions were left behind, and the boys were riding swiftly along a grassy lane, with the night wind in their faces.

"It don't take the Grey Fox long to get his men going," said Sam. "He's got his advance-guard away already, an' the scouts a mile out. He'll be away in no time."

"What a ghastly thing it is, though, this defeat!" said Stephen. "It's the worst thing that's happened, far and away. An' how is it we depend on messengers to get word to Lord Gethin?"

"Why, our field-telegraph don't connect with him, of course. The Germans still hold Maldon with a big force, an' that's in between. All the ordinary wires are cut long ago, an' this smash has upset everything."

"Where are you goin' to make for?"

"Lawling Creek is our best tip. It runs right up towards us from the Blackwater, as you know, an' we can strike it below Mundon, a mile from here, an' pull down to the river. There's an old boat at one of the marshmen's houses on the creek—it's so rotten the Germans ain't likely to have commandeered it, but it'll get us across if we've luck. The tide 'll be high in the creek."

"We'll have to abandon the horses, then."

"Yes; an' before we reach Mundon, too. It's useless to try an' ride over the marshes at night—quicker to go a-foot."

"Right-ho! I don't care how soon I get rid of this White Hussar troop-horse of mine," said Stephen; "he's a rough-gaited brute! It's hard luck about your old black Uhlan, though. What's that light ahead?"

"Looks like the inn an' village," said Sam, watching the distant glow. "I hardly thought there'd be any signs of life there. We've got to pass pretty close to it; there isn't time to go all the way round. It's time we got down an' did a stalk."

The brothers pulled up and sprang down from their horses. Stephen's mount at once went through a gap in the hedge and departed, horse and rider both glad to be quit of each other. Sam looped his reins on the neck of the black Uhlan charger, and fixed the stirrups under the saddle-flaps.

He pulled the black's head round, and gave it a light slap on the flank. The horse seemed to know the time had come for parting. He threw his head in the air, sniffed the wind, and, with a low whinny, cantered quietly away into the darkness.

"Sharp's the word!" said Sam to his brother, feeling the parting with his fourfooted friend more than he cared to show. "We've only an hour to get across the Blackwater."

They set out at a fast pace, and the lights of the village were soon close upon them. Making only a small circuit, they passed round the allotment gardens beyond the nearest houses, and Sam took a short trip on his own account to see if any dangers were to be passed. In less than a minute he rejoined his brother.

"No sentries or patrols about, but there are Germans there, an' somebody's kicking up the dickens of a row," he said. "I can't make out why the inn's lit up at this hour of the morning; there's something up. But it's no business of ours to look into that now; we've got to get on. There are more men on the roads to east an' west of the village than here, an' right forward's our best tip."

"But is it all clear ahead?" said Stephen, as they hurried forward across a field. "What's that row in front?"

"Sounds like Germans singing," replied Sam laconically.

"What the dickens have you got to sing about?" said Stephen, as a hoarse chorus and the sound of heavy feet was heard in front.

"Drunk, I expect. They've been playin' Old Harry in the village, as far as I can see. We'll nip over the road behind the heels of that lot as soon as they've passed. Keep quiet, now!"

The noisy crew passed by as the boys reached the lane, which was dark as pitch. Sam parted the bushes of the hedge, glanced back and forward, and took a quick leap down into the lane.

A smothered howl was borne upon the night air, as Sam landed on something soft and yielding, that heaved violently under him. He was thrown right off his balance, and came down heavily, to be gripped at once by a pair of clumsy hands, both he and the unseen assailant rolling over together in the dust.

The road at once became alive with the shouts of German soldiers, behind and before, as the mob that had passed came blundering back again. Sam needed no telling what had happened. In the inky darkness he had jumped slap on to a prostrate German who had been lying under the hedge overcome with liquor.

To rid himself of the man, who had grabbed at him in tipsy wrath as they fell, was no hard matter. Sam hit him full between the eyes, and struggled to his feet as the German suddenly let go, but the short delay had been fatal, and the moment he was clear, three or four forms leaped at him, and a crowd of others closed in.

Sam was unable even to draw his revolver. It was less like a fight than an avalanche of men, for his assailants jumped on him in spread-eagle fashion, and bore him bodily down, falling on top of him in a mass.

"An Englander!" shouted one hoarsely. "A soldier, too!"

"He was trying to kill Karl! Put a bayonet through him!" yelled another.

"Nay, bring him along to the beer-house, and we'll have some sport. Ach! There's another! Catch him!"

Stephen, in despair at Sam's capture, and scarcely knowing what was going on, sprang down into the lane with a shout. He fired his revolver point-blank at one of the men who jumped on his brother, but a rifle-butt was swung at him at the same time, and though he put up his arm to guard it, he was knocked off his legs and pinned down by two or three men.

By the hoarse, raucous cries of the men and the smell of liquor, Sam knew his captors were all more or less tipsy, but there were several of them quite sober enough to secure him, and against such numbers he had no chance. In fact, it was the dead weight of the drunken rush that bore him down, and kept him there; and he could have groaned with mortification to think that these muzzy Prussian infantry had captured him by accident, when they could not have done it had they been sober. But for the tragic side, it would have been funny.

So Sam, held down by a mountain of flesh, and with the breath nearly squeezed out of him, was disarmed, and then hauled to his feet as the Germans scrambled up.

"A youngster!" hiccoughed one man. "Not a hair on his face!"

"What are they going to do with us?" panted Stephen, as the two captives were dragged roughly along.

"Goodness knows! Play the deuce with us, I expect, and anyhow they'll finish us. They seem to have broken loose, an' they're like a set of wild beasts," said Sam moodily. "They're all drunk, an' they're lookin' forward to some revenge, it seems to me."

"An ugly look-out for us, then," muttered Stephen; "and the despatches to Gethin won't get through, either."

"It comes of havin' a lot of brutes loose an' under no control," said Sam savagely. "Sentries an' scouts an' patrols, one can lay plans for an' dodge. But a drunken private under a hedge, an' a mob of half-tipsy infantry fallin' on you by accident, an' there you are! Bad luck will upset anything."

"It's been good, so far. I s'pose it couldn't last," sighed Stephen. "We've been countin' on it too much. Shall we get taken to the officer of the company, or the——"

"Officer!" growled Sam. "If there'd been any officer the sweeps wouldn't be out on the loose like this. We've got nothing to hope for in that. They'll do as they please with us, an'——"

"Silence!" said one of his captors harshly; and a rifle-butt struck Sam in the side. "No talking between prisoners!"

It was soon evident that what he had told Stephen was right—there were no officers about, nor anyone in authority. The Germans were a remnant of Von Adler's broken and scattered force; they had fled northward to the Blackwater shore, and were now out of reach of both British and German rule for the time being. There were men from five or six different corps in the village, and the noise and riot were tremendous.

"Good heavens! Have they butchered the villagers?" thought Sam, knowing what horrors drunken soldiery can commit after a defeat.

Luckily, however, most of the villagers had fled at the approach of the armed mob, and left their homes at the mercy of the Prussians. The women and children and the older men retreated in time, and many were hiding in the woods around. It was only a small hamlet, and not forty people inhabited it. Those who had remained and tried to make a stand had fared badly, for they had no chance, and Sam saw the body of a young villager, with an old gun beside him, lying in the road as the Germans hustled the brothers into the village.

The sight made Sam's blood boil, but he was hurried onwards to the small inn on the village green, from which a perfect uproar emerged. A few moments later the boys were dragged into the open tap-room of the inn.

The scene that met their eyes was enough to make a savage shrink back. Round the benches sat or sprawled a dozen or more Germans, flushed and bloated with drink: some of them roaring guttural songs, others fighting among themselves, and yet others prostrate and past speech under the benches.

In the middle of the room, on a stool, was a barrel of spirits that had been hauled up from the cellar and broached. The top was knocked out, and the company were dipping the raw liquor with cups and pint pots, and gulping it down. The old innkeeper and his wife, white and trembling, were forced to wait on the soldiers, and bring them whatever they called for, receiving many a cuff and oath when they were not quick enough.

The uproar redoubled as Sam and Stephen were brought in, and those who were sober enough to understand the capture glared at the boys. The old couple, seizing the opportunity, managed to slip out by the back door and escape.

"Britishers!" roared a big, tow-headed Prussian Guardsman, staggering up to the barrel. "Where did you get them, Fritz?"

"Down the lane," said one of those who were holding Sam. "They're brats from Nugent's army, and we've brought them for a bit of sport!"

"Pig-dogs!" hiccoughed four or five of the riflemen, starting up. "Bring them here! Let's get at them!"

"Pin them to the door with a bayonet, like cockchafers!" cried the big Prussian, reaching unsteadily for his carbine, and falling flat on his face in the process.

"Dip them in the rum, and put a match to them!" gurgled an Uhlan, pushing his way towards the boys.

"Let me get a drink first, and then we'll deal with them," said Sam's chief captor truculently, loosening his hold on the boy, and snatching up a pewter-pot. "You pigs have been swilling down the stuff while we hunted for the villagers!"

With a despairing wrench, Sam tore his arm free as the man loosed him, and grabbed the big glass paraffin lamp from the table. At the same moment he kicked with all his force, sending the barrel and stool rolling over, and dashed the lamp at it before anybody could stop him.

There was a loud hiss and a rush of flame, that leaped to the ceiling as the splashing spirit caught fire, and the flare of it scorched Sam's face like a furnace.

The Germans staggered back, yelling, as the burning rum splashed up over them. In a moment the whole room was a mass of blue flame, and everybody made a dash for his own safety.

The instant he was released, Sam grabbed his brother by the arm and sprang right through the blazing rum in a couple of jumps, making for the back door by which the innkeeper had escaped. In this way he was clear of the flames in less than two seconds, and, with singed hair and eyebrows, he darted through the door.

Most of the Germans were bellowing and fighting to get out of the main entrance, by which they had brought in their prisoners; but the boys did not cast a glance back. They found themselves in a small kitchen, through which they dashed into the back yard, and sprinted round across the green, trying to shake off the flaming spirits that clung to their boots.

The door of the inn burst open, and the Prussians poured out, tumbling over each other, and from all directions odd men came running up to see what was afoot.

But the boys sped along like the wind, easily eluding one or two who tried to stop them in the open, and, avoiding the dark lane, they vaulted a fence and raced away over the meadows, rapidly leaving behind a couple of muzzy pursuers who tried to follow.

"One thing the beery brutes can't do, an' that's run!" said Sam. "Are you all right, Steve?"

"Yes; I'm not hurt. Gum! What a bit of luck! An' how smartly you did it! Aren't you burnt?"

"I don't reckon I've got any eyelashes left, but I haven't taken any harm," said his brother. "I hardly thought we'd get away. But I didn't care what happened as long as they got it hot. We'd have had a ghastly bad time of it if we'd stayed in their hands. Down to the left here—there's the creek!"

The shimmer of the salt flood in the long muddy inlet, that they had come so far to reach, gleamed just ahead of them, and they ran along the grassy embankment that bordered it as hard as they could go, till a marshland house on the bank came in sight, and Sam pulled up and went along the foot of the bank in the darkness.

He soon found what he sought—a tarry old boat tied to a post, with a couple of oars lashed to her thwarts.

"In with you!" he said to Steve, jumping aboard and cutting the oars free. "Cast off that line! You sit aft, and I'll take the oars!"

"My eye! Away at last!" said Steve joyfully, as his brother pulled swiftly away down the creek, out of which the tide was running fast. "Have we time to get those despatches through to Gethin, after all?"

"We shall do it yet,' said his brother, "if we have luck, an' nothing delays us. Have you got yours?"

"Yes; it's next my skin. They only disarmed me, and emptied my pockets."

"I've mine, too. They were too drunk to think about searchin' us for anything important. Not that they'd have cared."

"The inn's blazing away like a haystack, by the look of it!" said Stephen, glancing back and noting the fierce red glow in the distance behind them. "Our late captors are havin' a time! Think they'll want any more rum?"

"They can frizzle into sausage-stew, for all I care!" said Sam. "But I'll pay the old host for the loss of his inn if he an' I are alive when the war's over. Tell me how I'm steerin', for I can't see ahead."

"We're openin' into the main creek, an' I can see the Blackwater beyond in the starlight," said Stephen. "We're all clear of trouble, I should say, unless we find any Germans on the north bank of the estuary."

"We sha'n't. There are none of 'em there since Nugent drove the army south after the burnin' of Colchester. We're clear of Germans now till we reach Gethin."

"Good thing, too, for we haven't a weapon between us bar your pocket-knife, which wouldn't be much good. What's this my feet are tangled up in?"

"Old blast-rope off an eel-set. Coil it up tidily, or it'll get in the way."

Sam made the boat fly along as Stephen set to his task. There was nothing to be gained by taking an oar each, for the boat had only a pair of thwarts, and did not trim well with two rowers. Moreover, the oars were none too sound, and would hardly have stood a double hand on each.

"I say, the boat's leakin'!" said Stephen suddenly, when he had coiled up the rope. "It's nearly over my boots!"

"Funny thing if it wasn't," said Sam grimly. "You'll find a bailer somewhere, an' it'll keep you busy."

Stephen groped round hastily and found the usual old tin can under the stern-sheets. He began to bail lustily, and found he could keep the water from gaining, but not much more.

"Out we go!" murmured Sam, as the crazy craft left the creek at last, and shot out on to the wide-spreading Blackwater, just about the east end of Osea Island.

There was a row of well over two miles in front of them before the opposite bank was reached at Goldhanger, and none too much time to do it in before the water left the flats. Now the tide was up, the Blackwater looked like an inland sea, and the low, farther shore a mere black line.

The ebb-tide was now beginning to set them down below Osea Island, and Sam rowed along in silence, well out in the deep-water channel.

Another couple of minutes passed, and Stephen, pausing, raised his head.

"Get on with that bailing, or we shall fill!" grunted Sam.

"Half a tick! Don't you hear something?" replied Stephen, listening intently. "Sounds like a screw."

Sam rested for a second on his oars, and the beat of a propeller was plainly heard; moreover, it seemed to be going as fast as the throbs of a motor. Then a low, black object was suddenly descried, with a dab of white foam at its bows, and a dull glow from a funnel above. It seemed to leap out of the darkness, and bore down on them with surprising speed.

"What on earth's travellin' that pace at this time of night?" exclaimed Stephen.

Sam pulled with all his might at the oars, and Stephen held his breath. The boat was drawing quickly out of the strange vessel's track, and would have cleared her; but just then the stranger sheered slightly in her course, and before there was time to speak or move the sharp black bow was upon them.

It struck the extreme stern of the boat with a crack like a branch breaking, and the shock sent Stephen flying clean out of her as she was knocked aside and the quarter cut off her. The next moment the huge wave of the vessel's wash swamped right over the boat, and both boys found themselves in the water, with the broken waves and foam hissing round them.

Sam, in the swamped boat, was only too glad to tumble out of her as she lurched under the next wave; for what he most had to fear was getting entangled in her gear.

He had a flying glimpse of the vessel that had cut them down, speeding on her way, not knowing or caring what she had done, and in that moment he saw what she was.

But it was no time to speculate on her. They were far out in the tideway, with the ebb carrying them down, and the first thing Sam saw was his brother's head bobbing over the crest of a wave ten yards away.

"Hurt, Steve?" cried Sam.

"No," replied the boy, spluttering.

"This way, then! Get hold of the gun'nel an' tread water."

The boat, although swamped, with a piece cut clean out of her, had not sunk, for there was no ballast or dead weight in her. Full to the brim, with her gunwales just a-washed, she floated, waterlogged.

There was no getting into her, of course; but, by resting their hands on her gunwale, one on each side of her, the boys were able to keep themselves up.

"Did you see her?" exclaimed Sam. "It was a torpedo-boat!"

"Gosh! I thought that's what she was. A German, eh?"

"Must be. Their ships hold the mouth of the river. She's goin' up to Maldon."

"What, at that pace?"

"The channel's straight here. She'll slow when she comes to the difficult part just beyond. Sink her!" said Sam savagely. "She's done for our job, anyway. We can never get the despatches to Gethin in time now!"

"This ain't our lucky night," said Stephen dismally. "Except I s'pose we ought to be thankful the torpedo-boat didn't slaughter us."

"I'd nearly as soon she had," said Sam desperately, "as fail in a mission like this! But here we are; an' to swim two miles across this tide is as useless as tryin' to fly! We should get swept down to Mersea before we could land. Besides, you couldn't do it."

"Don't mind me, old chap. Go ahead if it's any good!"

"It isn't. We could only just have done it with the boat, an' raisin' a horse somewhere on the other side as well. As far as that goes, it'll be impossible to get ashore at all on the north side, for by the time we could swim over, the mud'll be left bare by the tide, an' it's so rotten that there's no walkin' over it without gettin' logged. We'll be able to land at Mersea about slack-water time, p'r'aps, if we're not spotted an' shot. Carey'll reach Gethin three hours before us, at the least. We're done!" said Sam bitterly.

"Well, cheer up, old boy! We've done our best, an' nothing but an accident scuppered us."

"Cheer up," said Sam viciously, spitting out some salt water, "when we've been an' failed in a job like this! Why, I——"

"Easy!" said Stephen, in a lower tone. "Here's something coming up the river. A vessel!"

"Not another beastly torpedo-boat?" said Sam, in disgust.

He strained his eyes, and saw through the gloom a dark shape approaching. It was much higher than the torpedo-boat, and though evidently a steamer—for they could hear the beat of the screw—was travelling much more slowly—in fact, crawling along.

"Looks like a yacht," said Sam wonderingly, as it came nearer. "She's white, with an overhung bow. An' the engines are goin' half-speed."

"Could we get a lift, after all?" exclaimed Stephen.

"From a German vessel! A lift into the next world easy enough!" growled Sam.

"Sure she's German?"

"What else could she be in here?" Sam thought for a minute. "I tell you what it is—she's bound up to Maldon, an' that torpedo-boat was her escort, an' has gone ahead to see if the way's all clear. That's about the size of it!"

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