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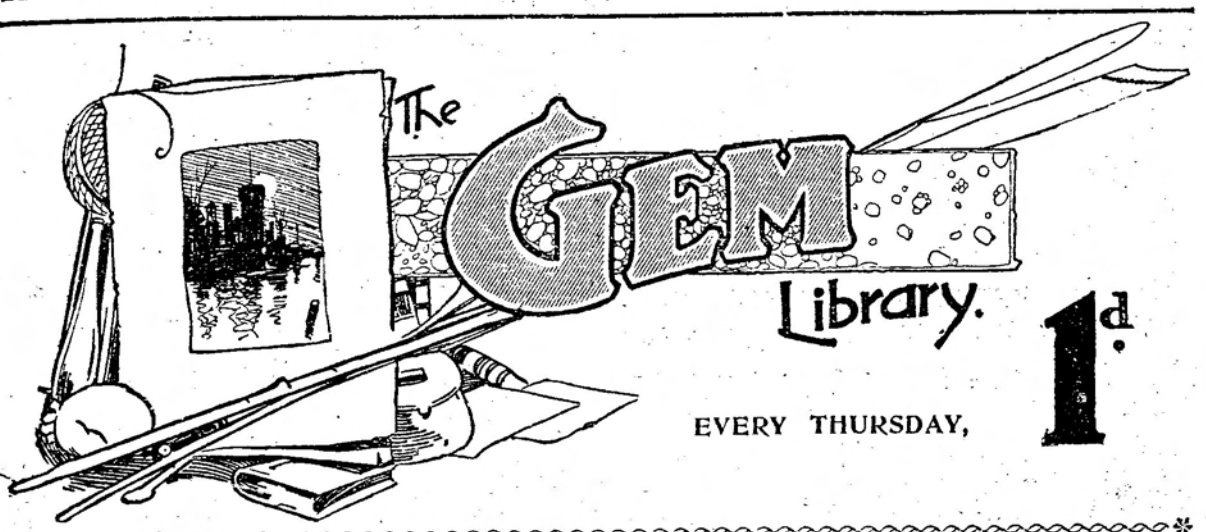

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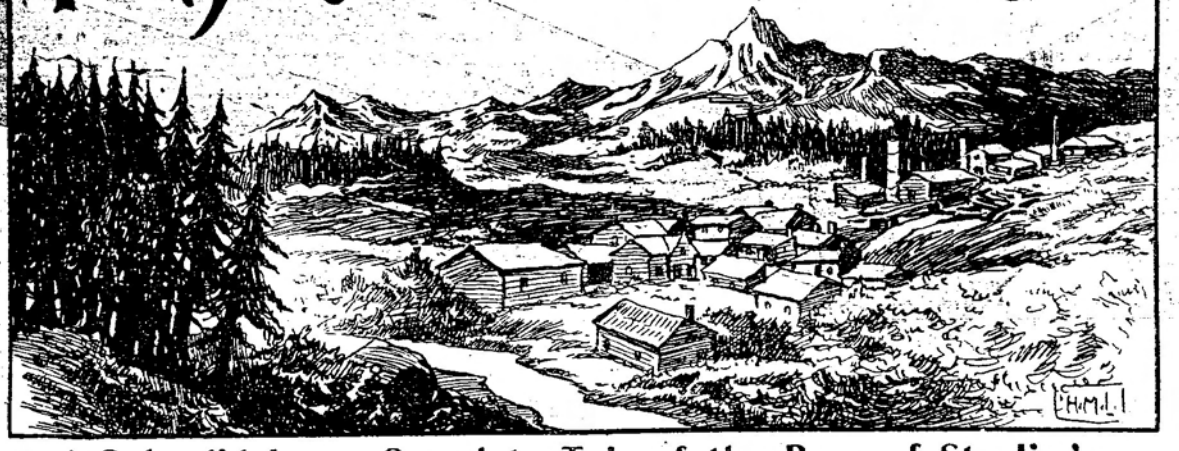


A Splendid Long, Complete Tale of the Boys of St. Jim's.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.

Tom Merry & Co. in Arizona.

"ALL aboard!" sang out the stage-driver.

He came out of the cabin where the horses were changed, wiping his beard with his sleeve. The stage was standing in the trail, and the four fresh horses had been put in. Tom Merry and Jack Blake were standing near the team, looking at them with great interest, while Skimpole was jotting down notes in his notebook. The novelty of travelling on the rough trails of the Far West in a stage-coach had not yet palled upon Tom Merry & Co., fresh as they were from England and an English school.

All was new to them—all keenly interesting. The stage-coach; the stage-driver; the four wiry horses; the log hut where the teams were changed, twenty miles from everywhere, and the dusky half-breed in charge of it; the long, long trail, thick with red dust that churned up under the horses' hoofs; the vast table-land, shut in by soaring peaks and blue sky, all formed a new world to the juniors from St. Jim's.

They had seen many things that surprised them in New York; in Chicago; in the Rocky Mountains; but Arizona—as Wally remarked, in his newly-learned American language—"capped the stack."

Tom Merry and Jack Blake were enjoying themselves to the utmost—they did not care if their travels lasted for ever. As for Wally, he was in his element—he had confided to his elder brother, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, that he didn't intend to go back to the Third Form at St. Jim's if he knew it. Even Skimpole, the genius, was deeply interested in this new country. He was filling huge notebooks with materials for the book of travels he was going to write when he got back to England, and, as he believed everything that was told him, he was gradually accumulating a large and varied store of surprising facts.

There was just a trifle of a shade on the face of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of St. Jim's, as he stood looking

at the stage-coach. He was wrapped so deeply in thought that he did not even notice the stage-driver's call of "All aboard!" as the Wild West Jehu came out of the cabin.

Tom Merry slapped him on the shoulder.

"Two cents for your thoughts, Gussy!"

Arthur Augustus started.

"Bai Jove, I was thinkin'——"

"Yes, I thought you were! Beginning new habits in a new country, old man?"

"Pway don't wot, Tom Mewwy! I am wathah wowwied!"

"Where do you feel the pain?" asked Tom Merry sympathetically.

"Pway be sewious! As you know, I do not appwove vewy much of this countwy at all," said D'Arcy; "and it is gettin' much wuffer the furthah we get west."

"Horrid!"

"I had my clothes wuined in the Wocky Mountains, but I was able to change when we wecovahed our luggage——"

"Baggage," said Wally, known in the Third Form at St. Jim's as D'Arcy minor. "Why can't you speak the language of the country, Gus?"

"Pway don't intewwupt your eldahs, you diswespectful young wascal! As I was sayin', Tom Mewwy, since leavin' the wailway I have not had an opportunity of changin' my clothes. The wuffness of the twail has pwactically wuined evewy article of attire I have on my person, and my silk toppah has nevah looked the same since Pongo wowwied it."

"No, it hasn't, for a fact," said Tom Merry, looking at D'Arcy's silk hat. "They'd never pass that in the quadrangle at St. Jim's."

"They won't pass it out West, either!" chuckled Jack Blake. "I hear that they shoot top-hats on sight in Arizona!"

"I should uttahly wefuse to have my hat shot on sight!" said D'Arcy. "You see, Tom Mewwy, I natuwally expected to find hotels along the woute. I am gwadually fallin' into a state of personal untidiness."

"Horrid!"

"I am glad you wealise the sewiousness of the mattah. I do not wegwet comin' out West to look aftah you fellows, but I must admit that I should like to stop short of wuffin' it to this feahful extent."

Tom Merry laughed.

"You'll get all your baggage at the ranch," he said; "then you'll be able to dress yourself to kill, you know, and astonish the natives."

Arthur Augustus brightened up a little.

"Yaas, wathah! In the meanwhile, I suppose I must make up my mind to wuff it philosophically, deah boy. What is that person shoutin' at us for?"

"Ha, ha! He wants us to get aboard."

Tom Merry and Jack Blake clambered on top of the coach. Arthur Augustus followed them. Colonel Stalker went inside, and so did Skimpole. The genius of St. Jim's sat down in a corner, and put a notebook on his knee, and jotted away contentedly. Wally whistled to Pongo, but Pongo had gone to investigate the burrow of a prairie dog and was not to be whistled back. Wally started in chase of him, and Pongo dodged in the long grass.

"All aboard!" repeated the stage-driver.

"Hold on," called out Wally; "I can't come without my dog!"

"Bu'st your dorg!"

And the driver gathered up his reins and cracked his whip. The team started, and the coach was in motion. Colonel Stalker, who was taking the boys to the Poinsett Ranch—the home of Tom Merry's uncle—leaned out of the window.

"Hold on, driver," he said, "there's one of my crowd behind."

"I guess I've got to get in to Gold Brick on time," said the driver. And he squirted a stream of tobacco-juice emphatically over the juniper that grew along the trail.

"I guess you'll wait," said the colonel calmly.

"I guess I won't," said the driver.

The colonel's hand came out of the window and his steely eye looked up at the driver. There was a six-shooter in his hand, and it glistened in the sun.

"I guess you'll wait," he repeated, with an intonation in his voice that made the driver look round.

The stage halted.

"You're playin' a full hand, pardner," said the driver, with a grin. "I guess you take the deck."

Wally came panting up, with Pongo under his arm. He slung the dog up to the roof for Arthur Augustus to catch, and, of course, Pongo plumped on D'Arcy's knees and fastened his teeth in the leg of his trousers. Arthur Augustus gave a wail of anguish.

"Ow! Take the howwid bwute off! He's wuinin' my twousahs!"

Wally clambered up.

"Oh, don't you begin, Gussy! As if Pongo'd hurt you! Come here, old Pongo—come here, you beast, or I guess I'll larrup you some!"

Pongo crouched at his master's feet and the stage rolled on. It bumped and jerked over a rough road.

Arthur Augustus dusted his trousers and looked at his cheerful younger brother with feelings too deep for words.

"My hat," said Blake, "this is what I call a rough road! It's been getting bumpier and bumpier ever since we left Tombstone!"

"Yaas, wathah! I wegard it as a beastly woad! It is difficult for a chap to keep his seat!"

"Oh, it's fun!" said Tom Merry, who always looked on the best side of everything. "Besides, it's good for the liver to be shaken up like this! So long as we don't go over it's all right!"

And the stage bumped on. The trail ran directly down to the low, rocky bank of a river, which gleamed wide in the rays of the southern sun. Arthur Augustus put up his monocle and looked up and down the river for any sign of a bridge, but there was nothing of the sort to be seen.

The stage-driver, chewing a fat Mexican cigar, drove straight on, without looking to right or left, apparently intending to plunge right into the river. The juniors from St. Jim's looked a little puzzled, and Arthur Augustus was decidedly alarmed. He reached out with his cane and gave the stage-driver a poke behind the shoulder. The burly driver jerked round his head.

"I want to know!" he exclaimed. "Thunder! Wot's the game?"

"Pway where are you dwivin' us, deah boy?"

"I reckon I'm driving you to the Gold Brick trail."

"But you are goin' into the wivah!"

"I calculate we cross the Santa Cruz every journey, sonny."

"But there is no bwidge!"

The stage-driver grinned.

"Do you mean to say you dwive thwough the watah?" asked Arthur Augustus.

"I kinder reckon."

And the stage-driver, without bothering himself to reply to any more questions, gave all his attention to his team. The horses evidently knew the way well, for they dashed straight on towards the water without a sign of alarm.

"Bai Jove, we shall all be dwowned!"

"Rats!" said Jack Blake. "If the coach crosses this stream on every journey, I suppose it can cross it this time all right!"

"My word," said Wally, "this is fun! We don't get anything of this sort over at St. Jim's, kids!"

"I am wathah glad we don't, Wally!"

"Yes, you're such an old fogey."

"I wefuse to be wegarded as an old fogey!"

"Then don't be one! Why, at St. Jim's now they're going in for lessons, and grinding Latin in the class-rooms, and we——"

"Well, I must say this beats Latin hollow!" said Tom Merry. "I don't know that I should care to settle here, but it's ripping for a holiday! Every chap ought to be able to rough it!"

"Yaas, wathah! I have no objection to wuffin' it, but I have a stwong disinclination to havin' my clothes wuined, you know! I have a feelin' that we shall be dweadfully splashed, even if we are not dwowned!"

"Hold on!" said the driver.

The juniors of St. Jim's held on. The coach was dashing down the bank and the horses took to the water. Although it could not be seen by a stranger to those parts, the water was shallow here, and there was a ford across the Santa Cruz. The horses went in to their breasts, and the water rose over the axles. The coach rocked and bumped on the sandy bed of the river.

Arthur Augustus was holding on desperately. Blake held on to the coach with one hand, and to D'Arcy's left ear with the other.

"Pway welease me, Blake," D'Arcy gasped; "you are weally hurtin' my beastly ear, you know!"

"Wait till we're safe! Do you want me to be drowned?"

"Certainly not, but——"

"Then ring off!"

"I wefuse to wing off! You are hurtin' my beastly ear! Ow!"

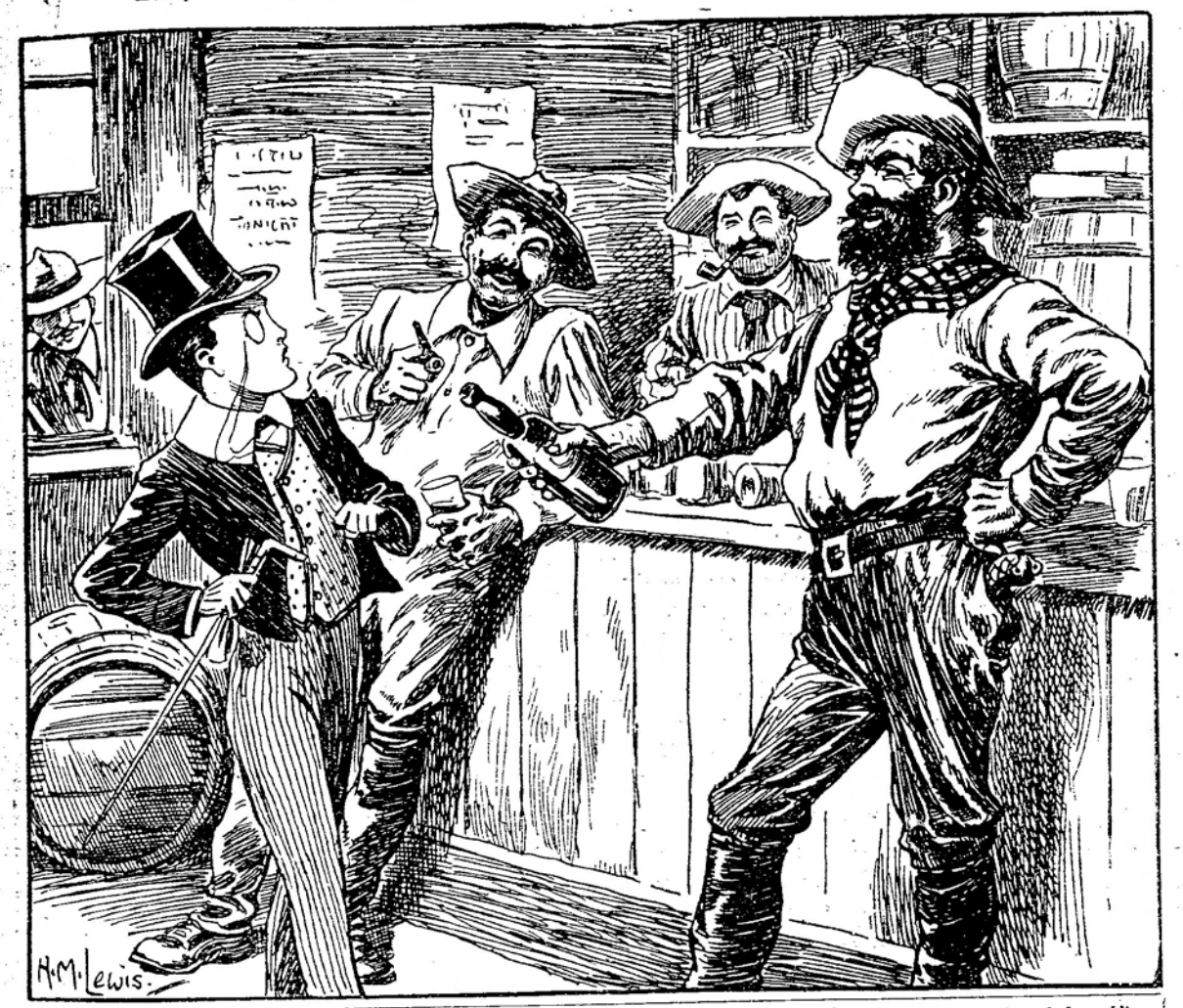
A lurch of the coach sent the swell of St. Jim's reeling, and tore his ear from Jack Blake's grip.

"Ow! I'm fallin' off!"

"Hold on, duffer!"

"I wefuse to—ow, ow!"

Skimpole put his head out of the window, disturbed by the rocking of the vehicle. He blinked round through his spectacles.



"Weally," said D'Arcy, "I do not dwink. I shall be pleased to join you in a lemonade or gingah-beer!"

"Dear me, it feels very rough just here; and that looks like water—ow-w-w-w!"

A big splash came up and swamped the genius of St. Jim's, and he popped back into the coach, gasping like a stranded fish.

"Dear me, I am quite wet! It is undoubtedly water!"

Tom Merry clutched Arthur Augustus by the collar and held him on. The passengers and the luggage were rocking about on top of the rocking coach, and Pongo was barking furiously. The team plunged on gallantly, and went dashing up the further side of the ford, and dragged the coach from the river. Then away merrily over the rough grass track to the west!

"Bai Jove," murmured Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, as he wiped splashes of yellow mud from his coat with his handkerchief; "Bai Jove, I wegard this as wotten! Tom Mewwy, I am beginnin' to think that a fellow can have too much of wuffin' it!"

But Tom Merry only laughed.

CHAPTER 2.

On the Prairie.

"WHOA, there!"

It was a couple of hours after the passage of the ford of the Santa Cruz. At a point where a huge ceiba-tree rose like a tower from the grass, the stage-driver pulled in his team.

The stage halted, and the juniors looked round them in wonder.

There was no sign of a habitation to be seen, and they could not guess why the vehicle had stopped in such a solitude.

Behind them the dusty trail lay back to the river. Far ahead, on the right, rose a low range of foothills. Ahead, to the left—the south-west—the grassy plain ran on, apparently limitless, streaked here and there with scrubby bushes.

"Hallo! What are you stopping here for?" asked Tom Merry.

"I guess you light down."

"Get down! Why?"

"It's the fork."

"The—the what?"

"The fork. Light down!"

Colonel Stalker stepped out of the coach. Skimpole followed him, and the colonel signed to the juniors on the roof to alight. They scrambled down in wonder. They did not know much about the stage trail, but they had imagined that they were going to some destination or other.

"Bai Jove," said Arthur Augustus, "if it's more campin'-out, I, for one, have no desire to wuff it! My clothes are wuined alweady!"

"Get the baggage down!" said the driver.

"Lend a hand!" said the colonel.

"I guess I'm paid to drive this coach!" the man on the box remarked casually.

"I guess you'll dump that baggage down!" said Colonel Stalker.

"I guess not!"

The colonel made a step towards the driver. The juniors had known only the kindly, good-natured side of Colonel Stalker, and the revelation of the hard aspect of his nature was a surprise to them.

The colonel slid his hand into his pocket, where he kept the six-shooter he had produced before. He did not show it. The driver met his eye squarely, and then stepped down without another word.

"I guess you can't lay over old Stalky!" said the colonel.

And the driver apparently "guessed" so, too, for he brought the baggage down off the roof of the coach without further argument.

The trunks were dumped into the grass, and then the stage-driver remounted his box, and cracked his whip.

"I reckon I'll give 'em the news in Gold Brick," he said. "They'll like to know that there's a dude around. I guess so, some!"

And he drove off towards the foothills.

Tom Merry looked puzzled.

"Are we staying here, sir?" he asked.

"Looks like it, sonny!" said Colonel Stalker, laughing. "The Tombstone stage-line doesn't come further our way than this. The hearse is going on to Gold Brick. The trail forks here."

"Oh, I see!"

"That trail goes down south to the ranch."

Tom Merry & Co. looked in the direction of the colonel's outstretched finger.

A brown line of juniper marked the trail to the south-west, which had previously escaped their notice.

"Bai Jove! Have we to walk that?" asked Arthur Augustus, in alarm.

"You can walk," said Tom Merry.

"Yaas; but I can't cawwy my twunks!"

"They can be left here."

"I should uttahly wefuse to leave them here! I have alweady left more than half my baggage at Gwavestone——"

"Tombstone, ass!" said Blake.

"I weally do not care a wap whethah it is Tombstone or Gwavestone! I have left ovah half my twaps there, to come on by waggon, and I should absolutely wefuse to leave the west in this wild spot!"

"There's a waggon from the ranch coming," said Colonel Stalker.

"Oh, I see!"

"Blessed if I see it!" said Wally. "I kinder reckon that you're off your guess, sir! I don't opine there's any shebang paseying over here!"

"Weally, Wally, I wish you would talk English!"

"Do you talk English when you're in a foreign country, ass?"

"This is not a foweign countwy. I wefuse to wegard it as anythin' of the sort! You could be understood if you talked English, and I think you should show a good example to the natives."

"Rats, old son! What's the matter with good American? I kinder guess I can talk the language some! I'm pretty hefty at picking up a lingo!"

"Where is the waggon, sir?" asked Tom Merry.

Colonel Stalker grinned.

"It mayn't be in sight for a few hours. You see, the stage passes this spot every third day, going on to Gold Brick. Mr. Poinsett arranged to have the waggon meet it each time, so as to catch us when we came. He couldn't be certain within a few days when we should get here. This isn't New York, you know, with elevated railroads to travel on."

"Oh!"

"Well, I shall be glad of a west, aftah knockin' about in that wotten old wattletwap," said D'Arcy. "I wathah think I will sit down. But pway, deah sir, what is the Gold Bwick you were alludin' to?"

"It's a camp."

"Oh! Some fellows campin'-out here?"

"It's a permanent camp—been in existence three or four years," explained the colonel. "It's a mining-camp, you see. Fellows found gold there, and staked out claims, and camped. If the claims peter out, they'll vamoose. If the place keeps on paying, the camp will grow into a town, I guess. That's how it's done in Arizony."

"Bai Jove, how intewestin'! I should awfully like to have a look at the camp while we are out West."

"You would find a lot of rough galoots there."

"I suppose they wouldn't hurt me?" said D'Arcy, with dignity. "Of course, I should wefuse to put up with any nonsense!"

The colonel laughed, and did not pursue the subject. Arthur Augustus looked for a soft spot to sit down and rest. He chose one, and sat down. He remained in a sitting posture while one could have counted the thousandth part of a second, and then jumped up with a terrific yell.

"What on earth's the matter?" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Ow! Ow!"

"Thunder!" exclaimed the colonel, in alarm. "Is it a tarantula?"

"Ow! Ow!"

"Is it snake-bite?"

"Ow! I have sat on a wotten thorn, or somethin'!"

Jack Blake burst into a roar.

"Ha, ha, ha! He's sat on a prickly plant! It's all right, Gus; there's no danger; it's only the pain! You're all right!"

"Am I all wight?" shrieked the unfortunate swell of St. Jim's. "I wegard you as a beast, Blake! I wegard you as an uttah beast! I am sewiously hurt!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"This laughtah is in the vewy worst of taste, Tom Mewwy——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ow! Wally, if you cackle at your eldah bwothah, you will get a fearful thwashin', so I warn you!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Even Skimpole was laughing, and Pongo was barking. The colonel joined in the merriment.

"Thank your stars it wasn't a bite!" he said. "You want to look out for snakes, I guess, and for the poison spiders. You're all right."

But Arthur Augustus did not feel all right, and it was a considerable time before he ceased to growl.

CHAPTER 3.

D'Arcy Changes His Clothes.

COLONEL STALKER produced cornecake and cheese and dried meat from his wallet, and the juniors sat on trunks and boxes and ate a hearty lunch. They were hungry in the keen, exhilarating air of the Arizona uplands. As they ate, their eyes searched the rolling plain to the south for some signs of the waggon from the Poinsett Ranch.

Tom Merry's brow was very thoughtful.

He was thinking of his uncle, and the destination he was now so near to. Gabriel Poinsett was a millionaire of the West, and he had cabled to England for Tom Merry to come out to the ranch. Instead of beginning the new term at St. Jim's, Tom had sailed for America.

He was enjoying the scamper across half the world hugely. He would have many tales of adventure to tell when he returned home, to interested circles in the junior studies at St. Jim's. But there was a serious side to his journey.

His uncle was very rich and very eccentric. His eccentricity was sufficiently shown by a cable to England which had cost fifty pounds or more. If he liked his sister's son, he intended to make Tom Merry his heir. If he did not take a fancy to the boy, Tom Merry's expenses were to be paid, and he was to go back to England.

Tom Merry was the last fellow in the world to become a fortune-hunter, and he did not give much thought to the financial side of the matter.

At the same time, he was anxious about the impression he would make upon Mr. Poinsett.

There was something very curious in being sent for to be looked at, like a parcel of goods on approval, as it were.

And Tom Merry wondered, too, what his uncle was like. He had not seen him since he was a little child, and they would meet as complete strangers.

And so Tom, in spite of his coolness, was feeling just a little nervous about his first meeting with Gabriel Poinsett.

He thought over the coming meeting as he ate his lunch. The meal was finished, and still the waggon from the ranch had not come in sight. Blake inquired the distance, with the thought of walking it, but was discouraged by the information that it was ten or twelve miles.

Ten or twelve miles on an English road was a good walk; it was a giant's task on the rough ground of the prairie.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was not thinking of walking. He was thinking of the first impression he would make at the ranch, and feeling extremely worried about the state of his clothes.

As they evidently had some time to wait, D'Arcy thought of a really brilliant idea, and he began to unstrap one of his trunks.

"What are you up to?" called out Blake.

"I am going to change my clothes, deah boy!"

"What! You are going to what your which?"

"Change my clothes! I feel extwemely untidy, and I wathah considah it would be bettah to make a decent appeawance at the wanch, you know."

"Well, of all the duffers!"

"Pway do not addwess me as a duffah, Blake! I have no time to thwash you now!"

Blake grunted. Arthur Augustus unfastened the trunk, and proceeded to remove his outer garments.

Colonel Stalker smoked his big Mexican cigar and grinned. But the swell of St. Jim's was in earnest.

He unfolded a beautiful pair of trousers, and laid out jacket and waistcoat ready, and brushed a new silk hat.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Wally suddenly. "Is that a girl coming up the trail?"

Arthur Augustus, who had nothing but his elegant underwear upon his person at that moment, uttered a cry of alarm.

"Bai Jove!"

He dodged behind the pile of baggage in a second, and peeped anxiously round the corner.

"I say, deah boys, stop that idiotic cacklin', you wottahs! Pway tell me when she has gone by."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Of course, I nevah expected a girl to pass on a lonely twail like this," said the swell of St. Jim's. "It is most unfortunate."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Pway tell me when she has passed."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You fearful wottahs! Is she comin' this way?"

"It's all right, Gus," shrieked Wally. "Now I look again, I can see that it is a man."

"You feahful young wascal!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus came out from behind the baggage, and resumed his toilet. He looked down the trail, and found that it was a big-limbed man in a red shirt who was coming along, and he was still half a mile away.

He dressed himself with silent dignity, taking no notice of the chuckles of the juniors. Gradually he assumed the elegant appearance the others were accustomed to see, when the swell of St. Jim's sauntered in the quadrangle at the old school. His trousers had a beautiful crease, and his waistcoat contained all the hues of the rainbow and a few more. His jacket was cut by a genius, and fitted him like a glove. His gold watchchain was of the most elegant design, his collar was high and white, and his necktie tied as only he could tie it. His silk hat was glimmering in the sun, and his new boots rivalled it in brightness. His gloves, of lavender kid, seemed hardly the thing for the Arizona prairie, but there was no doubt that they looked very nice.

"So you're back, cunnel?"

"I guess so, Long Jim."

"I kinder reckon I'll have a bead on the plug hat, cunnel."

"I kinder reckon I'll have a bead on you if you do, Long Jim."

"No offence, cunnel," said the big miner, with perfect good humour. "But—but—but— is that—that dude Mr. Poinsett's nevvy?"

"I guess not."

"I kinder reckoned he couldn't be," said Long Jim. "I kinder reckoned he wasn't the nevvy of Old Gabe. Is the nevvy hyer?"

The colonel jerked a finger towards Tom Merry.

"I am Mr. Poinsett's nephew," said Tom quietly.

Long Jim looked him over.

"I guess you'll do," he remarked.

"Thank you," said Tom, laughing.

The big pilgrim picked up his belongings, and marched on.

"So long, gents," he said, and tramped on up the trail. But the juniors, looking after him, could see that he was still laughing.

D'Arcy with his monocle screwed in his eye, looked after Long Jim, and then looked at his chums.

"If this is a specimen of the Awizonian mannahs, I cannot say I think vewy much of the countwy," he remarked.

"And if you're a specimen of England, I dare say Long Jim doesn't think much of our show," remarked Jack Blake.

"Weally, Blake——"

The colonel rose to his feet.

"Here's the waggon!"

D'Arcy surveyed himself in a pocket mirror, when he had finished, and appeared to be satisfied with the result. Except for the slight sunburn on his face, he was the swell of St. Jim's again.

He breathed a sigh of relief.

"Bai Jove! It does one good to feel clean and well-dwessed again," he exclaimed.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A deeper laugh joined in the merry laugh of the juniors. The man in the red shirt was coming along the trail, and he seemed struck by D'Arcy's appearance.

"Haw, haw, haw!"

Arthur Augustus put up his monocle, and surveyed the big fellow calmly.

The eyeglass seemed to tickle the stranger still more.

He threw down the bundle he was carrying, and fairly doubled himself up with laughter.

D'Arcy surveyed him disdainfully.

"Pway, my deah sir, what is the cause of your mewwiment?"

"Haw, haw, haw!"

"I wegard you as an ass!"

The long-limbed miner—for such he evidently was, from his bundle and the spade and pick tied to it—straightened up at last, grinning breathlessly.

"Waal, carry me hum to die!" he gasped.

D'Arcy looked at him scornfully.

"It's alive, too!" gasped the miner. "It's alive, that's the best of it! Oh, if they could see him in Gold Brick! Haw, haw, haw!"

"I wegard your obstwepewous mewwiment as impertinent, sir."

"Haw, haw, haw! I really must have a bead on the plug hat," said the red-shirted pilgrim, groping at his belt for a revolver.

"I guess not!" said Colonel Stalker.

The big miner looked round, and perceived the colonel for the first time. His expression changed, and he doffed his broad, ragged hat

CHAPTER 4.

Tom Merry Meets His Uncle!

THE waggon had arrived.

A vehicle with a broad, low body, set on thick, strong wheels, and drawn by a couple of stout horses, rolled and creaked into view from the bushes by the trail.

A lad of about fifteen had charge of the horses, and he drove them carelessly enough, like one accustomed to them.

He was a rather curious-looking lad. His form was somewhat spare, his face thin, and his forehead a little wrinkled. He was hardly the full size for a boy of his age, but his manner was "all there." He was dressed in leather trousers, tucked into huge boots, and a red shirt, with a belt, from which was suspended a holster. Whether the latter contained a revolver or not the juniors could not see.

This interesting youth brought the waggon to a halt with a flourish, and doffed his ragged, broad-rimmed hat to Colonel Stalker.

"Glad to see you back, cunnel."

"How's things at the ranch, Buck?"

"Serene."

Then the eyes of the youthful Arizonian fell upon Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, as the swell of St. Jim's came into view from behind the trunks.

He stared. He gasped. He grinned. The elegantly-clad junior would have attracted an admiring glance in Bond Street or Piccadilly. On the dusty plains of Arizona, he struck the observer with amazement.

"Carry me home to die!" murmured Buck.

D'Arcy adjusted his eyeglass, and looked at the driver of the waggon.

"Did you addwess that uttahly meaningless wemark to me?" he asked frigidly.

"Ho, ho, ho!"

"I wegard you as a wude beast."

"He, he, he!"

"Cut that, Buck Finn!" said Colonel Stalker. "Is that how you usually greet your master's guests, you young galoot?"

Buck Finn tried to regain his gravity.

"I was kinder took by surprise," he said.

"Well, get them traps into the waggon, and look spry."

"I guess so, cunnel."

Buck Finn dismounted. Despite his somewhat frail appearance, he seemed to be strong enough by the way he dragged the heavy boxes about.

But the juniors of St. Jim's were not the fellows to stand idle while another lad was working. They lent a willing hand with the baggage. Jack Blake called to D'Arcy to join in, but D'Arcy shook his head.

"Pway excuse me, deah boy."

"Buck up, lazybones!"

"I object to the term lazybones. I cannot handle that luggage, as I am afwaid I should soil my gloves."

"Ho, ho, ho!" gurgled Buck Finn.

"I weally wish you would stop makin' that unpleasant noise, my lad."

"Ho, ho, ho!"

The baggage was packed into the waggon at last, and Pongo was persuaded to enter, and the juniors of St. Jim's followed.

Buck Finn mounted to his place again, and took the reins.

"I'll drive if you like, Finn," said Blake politely.

Buck Finn chuckled.

"Guess you couldn't handle my team."

"Rats! I think I can drive as well as any chap in America," said Blake warmly. "By the way, who may you be when you're at home? You've got enough nerve to be boss of the ranch."

"My popper's foreman of the ranch."

"My uncle's foreman?" said Tom Merry.

Buck Finn looked at him curiously.

"That's about the size of it," he said.

"Well, then, you can give me the reins," said Tom Merry. "I'd like to drive, and I can handle the horses all right."

"I guess——"

"Oh, hand them over!"

Buck Finn hesitated, and then he handed over the reins. Tom Merry took them, and began to drive. He had had enough of the nerve of Buck Finn, and it occurred to him that it was time that that young gentleman was put into his place.

The horses seemed to know that a new hand was on the reins, for they became restive at once, and turned from the roughly-marked trail to the open plain.

Tom Merry, who was a good driver, soon pulled them back.

"They're easy enough to handle," Jack Blake remarked.

"Yaas, wathah! I could dwive them easily enough, if I had my dwivin' gloves here," remarked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Let me take the ribbons," said Blake. "I think I could drive them without so much blessed bumping, Tom Merry."

"You're welcome to try."

Tom Merry handed the reins to Blake. Blake knew a great deal about horses, but, as a matter of fact, he did not drive so well as Tom Merry. The horses pulled the waggon from the trail into the deep grass, and all Blake's tugging and shouting and cracking of the whip would not pull them back.

The other juniors grinned.

"Go it, Blake!"

"On the ball, old chap!"

"Careful with that whip, deah boy. You nearly had my toppah off that time."

"Blow your toppah!" gasped Blake.

"Weally, Blake——"

"I—I can h-h-handle these horses as easily as anything," panted Blake. "I—I—I'm just giving them a little rope, that's all. It's as easy as anything to—— Ow!"

The off-wheel tilted into a deep gap in the prairie, and the waggon went over on one side.

There was a yell from the juniors, as they were flung over, and a crash as half the luggage went bumping to the earth. The horses were kicking and squealing frantically.

"Bai Jove!" gasped D'Arcy. "Where's my toppah?"

"Ow! I'm hurt!"

"Thunder! It's a yarthquake!" exclaimed Colonel Stalker.

Buck Finn gave a yell of derisive laughter.

"Is that the way you drive in the old country?"

"No," growled Blake, staggering to his feet. "It's the way you keep the roads in this benighted wilderness!"

"Ho, ho, ho!"

Buck Finn ran to the head of the leading horse, and dragged him to a standstill. The passengers all put their shoulders to the waggon, and heaved it out of the rut. Then the luggage was replaced.

"I'll get you along all right now," said Blake.

"I wefuse to entah that vehicle if Blake dwives," said Arthur Augustus, carefully brushing his topper, endeavouring to hide a dent in the side.

Jack turned on him wrathfully.

"Why, you ass, you don't mean to say that it was my fault the rotten show toppled over in the rotten rut?"

"I wefuse to be called an ass, and I don't mean to say anythin', except that I wefuse to entah that vehicle again if you dwive."

"Yes, rather," said Wally. "I don't often agree with Gus, but I do agree with him there. I've only got one neck, and it's got to last me all my life. I move that Blake is scragged if he tries to drive again."

"If you're looking for a thick ear, young Wally——"

"Wally's quite right," said Skimpole. "I am very glad this has occurred, as it will furnish an incident for my book of travels; but I think one accident is quite sufficient for that purpose."

Tom Merry laughed.

"The majority's against you, Blake."

Jack Blake grunted.

"Oh, I don't care! You're a lot of asses. If there were a sensible chap among you——"

"Wats! I would wathah be a live ass than a dead sensible chap!"

And it was Tom Merry who took the ribbons when the waggon restarted.

The driving was difficult enough, with two ill-tempered and uncertain animals over the roughest road Tom Merry had ever seen or heard of.

But the hero of the Shell at St. Jim's was quite equal to it.

He managed the team in a way that extorted the reluctant admiration even of Buck Finn, who was evidently inclined to regard the English boys with good-natured contempt.

The waggon rolled on. Above the level of the prairie ahead rose a column of smoke, and Buck Finn, in reply to a question, announced that it was the ranch.

The buildings came in sight soon afterwards.

Tom Merry had had a vague idea of some imposing structure something on the lines of an English farmhouse, but much larger.

What he saw was a frame house of imposing ugliness, with several smaller buildings still uglier scattered round it.

The stables and corrals were as ugly as the dwellings, and even the trees that grew round the ranch buildings hardly improved the general aspect of the place.

Near the ranch-house a big cowboy was washing himself under a pump. Several other fellows stood round a man who was examining the hind leg of a mustang, apparently on account of some injury.

A little man, with a pair of very old riding-breeches tucked into big boots, a soiled Mexican jacket, and a sombrero on the back of his head, with a face like mahogany, and two eyes like gimlets, stood at the door of the ranch-house, looking out over the plain.

His eyes lighted upon the approaching waggon, and he stepped forward to meet it.

Tom Merry drew the horses to a halt.

The little man in the riding-breeches looked at him, and slowly removed the cigar from his mouth.

"I guess you handle the hosses well for a tenderfoot," he said. "Who may you happen to be, youngster?"

Tom Merry looked at him.

"My name is Merry—Tom Merry. Is my uncle here?"

"I guess so."

"Where is he?"

"Right here."

And the little man held out his hand, with a smile that made his mahogany face very pleasant to look upon at that moment. And Tom Merry, overcome by surprise, mechanically grasped his hand.

It was his uncle at last!

CHAPTER 5.

Tom Merry's Uncle.

TOM MERRY'S uncle looked over the junior as he stepped down from the waggon. His keen eyes searched the boy's face and ran over his well-set, sturdy figure with satisfaction. It was easy to see that Mr. Poinsett was pleased with his first impression of his nephew.

Tom Merry coloured a little under the inspection.

He felt a great deal like a prize animal being looked over by the judges at a show, and the thought brought a smile to his lips.

Mr. Poinsett smiled, too.

"So you're Tom!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, sir, I'm Tom!"

"My sister's boy!" said the rancher, in a softer voice. "You're like her. I hope we shall pull together, Tom."

"I hope so, sir."

"You are not afraid of roughing it?"

"I like roughing it."

"Good! You can't be so much of a greenhorn, to handle those hosses. It was as much as Buck Finn could do, and he was brought up on a ranch."

"I guess——" began Buck Finn.

"Scat!" said the rancher unceremoniously, and Buck Finn scatted. "I guess you're the right sort, Tom, but we'll see. Hallo, old Stalky, I'm glad to see you again! Introduce your friends, Tom."

Tom Merry did so.

He hardly knew what to make of his uncle, and did not yet know whether he was pleased with him or not. The rancher's manner was curious, but Tom already knew that he was eccentric. He presented his chums. Not by the flicker of an eyelid did Mr. Poinsett show surprise when Arthur Augustus was introduced.

The appearance of the swell of St. Jim's must have struck the rancher as somewhat unique for the Arizona llanos, but he did not betray any surprise.

He greeted the juniors cordially enough, with a courtly manner that contrasted curiously with his rough attire.

"I guess you're ready to feed," he remarked. "Finn!"

He shouted out the word "Finn" so suddenly, that Arthur Augustus jumped, and murmured "Bai Jove!"

A long-limbed, loose-jointed man in a rough shirt and crackers came from the group round the horse, and nodded casually to the new-comers.

This was Mr. Finn, the foreman of the ranch, and the right-hand man of Gabriel Poinsett.

"I want to know," he remarked.

"Finn, pass the word to that lazy, dirty, low-down Greaser."

"I reckon," said Mr. Finn.

"Dear me," murmured Skimpole, "I am about to see another Greaser. I trust he will not be so violent as the Greaser I met on the train."

Mr. Finn crossed to one of the huts, and put his head in at the door, and bawled out at the top of his powerful voice:

"Tonio!"

"Si, senor."

"Grub."

"Si, senor."

"Ready?"

"Almost, senor."

"Hustle."

"Si, senor."

The unseen Antonio was heard bustling about. From the hut the smell of cooking proceeded, and the boys guessed that it was the kitchen of the ranch.

Mr. Poinsett led them into the main building, and though Tom Merry & Co. tried from politeness to conceal their disappointment, they did not wholly succeed in keeping a shade from their faces.

The place did not look like the residence of the Cattle King of Arizona.

The house was built almost wholly of wood with bare plank floors, with here and there a buffalo robe or a bear-skin.

The walls were unadorned, save by a few trophies of the chase, and a map of Arizona and another of the United States, showing the railway systems of the different states.

In the room, which was evidently dining-room, drawing-room, and smoke-room, all rolled into one, the walls were painted white, and the ceiling ditto, but smoke fumes and dust had sadly tarnished the paint.

There was a long table, and rough wooden chairs, a roll-top desk, and a pipe-rack, and very little else.

The rancher looked keenly at Tom Merry.

"Kinder surprised?" he remarked.

"Yes, sir," said Tom Merry, in his frank way.

Mr. Poinsett chuckled.

"You didn't expect to find us so rough and ready as this?"

"No."

"Well, you tell the truth, and make no bones about it, anyway," said Mr. Poinsett, with a grin of approval. "If you are afraid of a rough life——"

"I'm not."

"Then you'd like to live here for good?" said the rancher, looking him squarely in the face.

Tom Merry hesitated.

"Can't you speak?" asked his uncle.

"Yes," said Tom, with spirit. "I wouldn't like to live here for good."

"Not to go down in a will for five millions or so?"

"No."

The rancher gave his peculiar chuckle.

"Good! You wouldn't like to live with your old uncle for good. You've been brought up to be too soft-handed. That's the work of Miss Fawcett, I suppose. Of course, I knew you'd be spoiled. I could trust Miss Priscilla to spoil any boy's character, I guess."

Tom Merry's eyes flashed.

"If you are going to criticise my old governess, uncle,

"Weally, Tom Merry, this is past a joke," exclaimed D'Arcy. "Is it poss. that Mr. Poinsett expects us to use this absolutely howwid awwangement for washin'?"

you had better let me clear out," he said hotly. "You've no right to speak of her in that tone. Miss Fawcett is the best old soul in the world, and though she does try to coddle me, I can't see that I'm much worse for it. Anyway, it's only her kind heart makes her do it. I won't hear a word against her, so there! I'm willing to go straight back to England if you like."

His uncle looked at him with a curious expression.

Handsome Tom looked at that moment—handsome and resolute, with a flush in his cheeks and a flash in his eyes.

But the rancher did not seem angered by his plain speaking. He only chuckled in that curious way that Tom Merry did not understand, and turned to Antonio, without pursuing the conversation.

Antonio, a dark-skinned and greasy Mexican, was bringing in dishes on a tray, and setting them on the table.

"What have you got to-day, 'Tonio?" asked Mr. Poinsett.

"The stew, senor."

"Nothing else?"

"Did you not tell me, senor, not to serve the same as at the other house?"

"Get out!"

Antonio got out.

Mr. Poinsett was evidently a martinet on his ranch, and he certainly never had to give an order twice.

The juniors were hungry enough. Night was setting in, and they had travelled far in keen mountain air that day. They took the rough wooden chairs at the table, Arthur Augustus squirming a little uncomfortably.

The rancher uncovered the big earthenware dish containing the stew.

The smell was certainly most appetising, and the boys greeted it as the rancher ladled out the mess into the plates.

Skimpole had his notebook on the table, taking notes of the room, to insert some curious facts into his book of travels concerning the homely manners of the Western American millionaires.

The room was very dusky, and Mr. Poinsett, apparently remembering suddenly that night was coming on, rapped on the table with his knife, and roared:

"'Tonio!"

The Mexican skipped in at the open door.

"Si, senor."

"Lamps."

"Si, senor."

A couple of smoky lamps were brought. They aided the scent of the stew in thickening the atmosphere of the room. The light was about sufficient to eat by, but the juniors were hungry, and they made a hearty meal.

Tom Merry was beginning to feel a little ashamed of the warmth he had shown in last speaking to Mr. Poinsett.

He felt that he ought to have remembered that his uncle was an eccentric, and made allowance accordingly.

After the meal was over, when the rancher lighted his pipe, Tom Merry ventured to broach the subject again.

"I hope you will not think I intended to be impertinent just now, sir," he said, rather awkwardly; "but——"

"I guess it's all right," said the rancher, with a chuckle. "I'm not angry with you, sonny. Eh, Stalky?"

Colonel Stalker blinked through a thick cloud of cigar smoke.

"The youngster's all right," he said; "and this game is rough on him."

"Bosh! It's my way, Stalky!"

"I guess so, and I'm not interfering, Poinsett; but I opine——"

"Never mind what you opine, Stalky."

And Colonel Stalker smoked in silence.

The boys wondered what the two men were alluding to, but they had no idea. They were tired and sleepy, and ready for bed, and the rancher observed it.

He rapped on the table with his pipe.

"'Tonio!"

"Si, senor."

"Show these young gentlemen to their quarters."

"Si, senor."

"See that there are no poison spiders in the beds, or any panthers lurking in the room."

"My hat!" murmured Blake.

"Si, senor."

"Get out, you yellow-faced coyote!"

Antonio got out, and the boys bade the rancher and the colonel good-night, and followed him. The two men remained smoking, with their feet on the stove, and talking in low tones, and their talk was punctuated by frequent low chuckles.

CHAPTER 6.

Not Comfy Quarters.

TOM MERRY & CO. followed Antonio. They were glad to get out of the thick tobacco fumes into the passage, and gladder still to get out of that into the cool, clear air of the Arizona night.

Antonio led them straight out of the house, somewhat to their surprise.

"Bai Jove, I hope we're not to camp out!" murmured D'Arcy. "It's wathah cold weathah for campin' out, and I'm weally not in suitable attire."

"I suppose we're to sleep in one of those cabins," said Blake.

"Pongo—Pongo!"

"Let the brute go, kid. He can't come in with us."

"Can't he?" said Wally. "Do you think I'm going to have Pongo bitten by tarantulas, or chawed up by panthers or grizzly bears?"

"I don't believe there are any grizzly bears in this part of the country—or any panthers, either, for that matter."

"There are wolves, then, and poison spiders and snakes. Pongo's coming in with us. If anybody objects he had better take his jacket off at once, and have it over."

Tom Merry laughed.

"You had better bring the mongrel in."

"Pongo, Pongo, Pongo—you beast!"

But Pongo did not come at his master's call.

There was a sudden sound of snapping and snarling, and a yell in a voice that the juniors recognised as that of Buck Finn.

"Gee-whiz! Gerroff, you brute!"

Wally rushed to the rescue.

Pongo was rolling over and over in fierce combat with a dog twice his size, and a bone on the ground showed the cause of the conflict. Buck Finch was kicking both dogs impartially with his big boots to separate them.

"Hold on!" gasped Wally.

"I guess I'll stop them," said Buck Finn.

"Don't you kick my dog."

"Oh, come off!"

"You'll jolly well get a thick ear if you kick Pongo again!"

Buck Finn grinned. He was not a big youth, but he was bigger than the hero of the Third Form of St. Jim's.

Tom Merry dragged the warlike Wally back in time.

"Cheese it!" he said.

"He's not going to kick Pongo!"

Wally dragged Pongo away, and Buck Finn chuckled.

"I guess I wasn't hurtin' him," he said. "I wouldn't hurt a dorg. It's all right; but if any of you sons of John Bull want a scrimmage, you've only got to say the word."

"Right-ho!" said Jack Blake instantly. Jack Blake hailed from Yorkshire, a county whose natives are popularly supposed to bite alive or dead, and he had never been known to refuse a challenge.

He was whipping off his jacket when Arthur Augustus restrained him.

"Weally, Blake——"

"Oh, ring off, Gussy! Don't bother now."

"I wefuse to wing off, undah the circs. You cannot fight this wude person without gweat diswespect to our host, to say nothin' of Tom Mewwy, who has bwought us here, and is wesponsible for our behaviour."

Jack let his coat slip back into its place.

"Right you are, Gussy; I forgot that."

"I am glad to see you so weasonable, Blake."

"Come on," said Tom Merry. "Bring that mongrel, Wally, and do keep an eye on him. It would be rotten to start rowing here the first night."

"This way, senors," said Antonio.

The juniors followed him to one of the cabins, in which a candle burned. Mr. Finn, the foreman of the ranch, and father of the youthful Buck, met them near the door, and grinned at them.

"I reckon you find it rough quarters, after the old country," he said.

"That's all right," said Tom Merry cheerfully. "We are not grumbling."

Mr. Finn chuckled.

"No, but it's rough."

"It is wathah wuff, but we wegard it in the light of an adventure," explained Arthur Augustus, "and weally Mr. Poinsett is a most hospitable old gentleman."

"I calculate he's all right. You've met my boy, Buck?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"You like him?"

The juniors looked at one another, and were silent.

"He's all right," said Tom Merry at last. "We haven't seen much of him, so far."

"He's got nerve," said the proud father, with a chuckle. "Buck may not be much to look at, but he's got nerve. He's all there, pards."

"Yaas, I nevah noticed that any of his limbs were missin'."

"I mean, he's up to snuff. I guess he would make his way in the old country. He'd wake 'em up!"

Tom Merry laughed.

"I guess you came from a big swagger school in the old country," said Mr. Finn.

"Pretty decent," said Blake.

"Yaas, watnah! St. Jim's was certainly select, not to say swaggah."

"I guess my boy, Buck, would get on there."

The juniors stared.

The idea of Buck Finn, of Poinsett Ranch, going to St. Jim's, struck them with amazement. They concluded that Mr. Finn was joking.

"Ha, ha, ha!" said Blake, feeling that somebody was expected to laugh.

"Any joke on?" asked Mr. Finn pleasantly. "I guess my boy, Buck, would get ahead. He knows everything about hosses and dogs, and a chap like that could soon tackle Latin and Greek, I guess."

Tom Merry did not exactly see the connection between horses and dogs and Latin and Greek, but he did not wish to wound the proud father of the hopeful Buck.

"I shouldn't wonder," he remarked.

"I reckon Buck's going," said Mr. Finn. "I've been making the dollars since Mr. Poinsett—your uncle, sir—took me into pardnership. I kinder reckoned all along I'd give Buck a first-chop English education. I guess an English public school can lay over anything in New York or Boston for style, eh?"

"Yaas, that is extwemely pwobable."

"I guess it's the place for Buck. He'll get on. I guess he's going. Good-night, sirs!"

"Good-night, Mr. Finn."

And the foreman of the ranch passed on, leaving the juniors wondering whether he had been joking or not.

"This is the place, senors," said Antonio.

The juniors entered the hut, which was to serve as their sleeping-quarters at the Poinsett Ranch. There was a lurking grin upon the dark face of Antonio, as if he were amused at his thoughts. Perhaps the expression upon the face of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was also amusing to the Mexican.

"Thank you," said Tom Merry.

The Mexican withdrew, and closed the door.

The juniors looked round them.

The single candle glimmered upon the beds, which were made up on the plank floor. There were no bedsteads in the place. The toilet necessaries were of the scantiest description. There was not a single looking-glass to be seen, Arthur Augustus noting that important omission at once.

"Bai Jove, deah boys!" ejaculated the swell of St. Jim's, as he looked round. Further words failed him, and he could only repeat feebly, "Bai Jove!"

Tom Merry's face was a study.

He looked apologetically at his comrades, and the colour began to glow in his cheeks.

"I say, you chaps, I'm awfully sorry! I've got you into this. Of course, I had no idea it would be anything like this here."

"It is rather thick," agreed Blake.

Arthur Augustus looked at him reprovingly.

"Pway don't be a wottah, Blake. Tom Mewwy natuwally feels wathah wotten, and we ought to twy to help him bear up."

"It's all right," said Wally. "Pongo likes the place."

"I am very glad this has occurred," said Skimpole, looking at the beds on the floor. "This will be a very interesting item in my book of travels——"

Tom Merry was red and uncomfortable.

"Well, I can only say I'm sorry," he said.

"Pway don't wefer to it, Tom Mewwy. You natuwally couldn't foresee anythin' of this sort; and, besides, we are pwepared to wuff it. And in my case, deah boy, I could nevah have consented to allow you to come out here alone. I should have felt too anxious about you."

Blake grinned.

"Don't worry, Tommy, old son!" he said, slapping Tom on the shoulder. "We're all right. It's a bit of a surprise for all of us. But we can go through with it, and it will be awfully good fun."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Well, I'm glad you chaps take it so decently," said Tom Merry. "I don't mind for myself. My uncle seems to be a queer old fish, but I believe his heart's in the right place. I don't like you fellows to have to stand this, that's all."

"Oh, it's ripping!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

And the juniors, who were in fact tired enough to sleep on the floor or on the roof, for that matter, turned in, and were soon fast asleep.

CHAPTER 7.

Roughing It.

THE morning sun glimmered in at the windows of the cabin, but the juniors of St. Jim's were still sleeping soundly. There were various noises from the ranch—the barking of dogs, the neighing and squealing of horses, the deep voices of men—but the sounds did not disturb the tired boys.

Skimpole was the first to awake.

He sat up in bed, and groped for his spectacles and put them on, and looked about him. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was the nearest to him, and the swell of St. Jim's was still fast asleep. Skimpole blinked at him, and then blinked again with renewed interest.

"Dear me!" he murmured. "This is distinctly interesting."

From the ceiling of the hut a huge spider was dropping on the end of his line, and he seemed to have made up his mind to drop right into the mouth of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

Slowly, but steadily, the spider was descending, and Skimpole watched him.

Arthur Augustus had turned over in his sleep into a somewhat uncomfortable position, which had caused his mouth to come a little open, and whether the spider was intending it or not, D'Arcy's open mouth was his destination.

Skimpole had never seen quite so large a spider before. He groped for his notebook. The spider was getting closer and closer.

"Dear me!" murmured Skimpole. "I must make a note of the habits of this enormous spider. I really hope D'Arcy will not wake and disturb him before I have made my notes!"

And he wetted his pencil.

Jack Blake awoke, and sat up with a yawn.

"Hallo! Awake, Skimpy?"

"Yes," said Skimpole. "Pray do not make a noise, Blake, or you will disturb this enormous spider. I wish to take some notes before he escapes."

Blake stared at the spider, which was now within six inches of D'Arcy's mouth.

"You—you utter idiot!" he gasped. "Why don't you call Gussy?"

"I wish to make some notes——"

"Gussy! Gussy! Wake up!"

"Really, Blake——"

"Gussy! Wake up, old man!"

"Pray be silent, Blake! You will scare the spider away, and——"

"Wake up!" roared Blake.

Arthur Augustus started up in alarm.

"Bai Jove! What's the mattah, deah boys?"

"There's—— Ha, ha! You've done it now!"

Arthur Augustus had, of course, biffed the spider with his head in starting up. The spider squirmed away into his hair.

"What is it, Blake? What's the mattah?"

"There's a spider on your head."

"A—a—a spidah! Ow!"

"Dear me! You might have remained still a few moments longer," said Skimpole, shutting up his notebook with an air of vexation. "Do you remember how many legs that spider had, Blake?"

"Ha, ha! No. But Gussy will be able to tell you. How many legs are crawling over you now, Gussy?"

"Ow! Ow! Oh!"

Arthur Augustus bounded out of bed.

The spider ran down the back of his neck, and Arthur Augustus tore frantically at his pyjamas.

"Ow! Ow! Oh!"

"Can you feel how many legs it has, D'Arcy?"

"Ow! You ass! Blake, Tom Merry, pway assist me!"

"There he goes!" gasped Blake, as the spider dropped from D'Arcy's garments, and skimmed away and disappeared. "He's gone!"

"Bai Jove! Ow! I feel cwawly all ovah!"

"It had six or eight or ten legs——"

"Ow! I feel absolutely howwid!"

"But I can't remember which. If you had remained quiet a few moments longer, D'Arcy——"

"Wats!"

And Arthur Augustus did not return to bed. He had had enough of beds on the floor and spiders.

There was a knock at the door, and it opened, and the greasy, grinning face of Antonio the Mexican appeared.

"Will the senoritos wash?"

"Yaas, wathah! I was kept in a place in New York where I was not allowed to wash, but I pwesume things are not as bad as that here," said D'Arcy. "Pway have my bath pwepared."

The Mexican stared, but he made his usual reply.

"Si, senor!"

"That means yes, sir," explained Wally. "The Mexicans talk Spanish, you know. But this chap understands American."

"I pwefer my watah vewy warm," said D'Arcy, "and pway have some soft soap weady."

"Si, senor!"

The Mexican disappeared.

Tom Merry was first out of the hut, and he was heard to chuckle.

Arthur Augustus followed him out, wrapped in a big bath-towel, and looked round.

In the open air, on a bench, a wash-basin was set, with a chunk of brown-coloured soap beside it. Tom Merry was grinning.

D'Arcy looked at the basin, and looked at the cold water in it, and then at Tom Merry, and then at several cattlemen who were grinning in the distance.

"Bai Jove!"

"Go it, Gussy! Your turn first with the bath!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, this is past a joke. Is it poss. that Mr. Poinsett expects us to use this absolutely howwid awwangement?"

Tom Merry laughed.

"It looks like it, Gussy."

"I—I suppose I must use it," said D'Arcy. "It is impos. to go dirty. I will convey it into the hut and take a sponge bath. I have not had an opportunity of washing myself all ovah for two days, and I feel vewy wotten."

"Jolly dirty galoot you must be to want so much washing," Buck Finn remarked.

"I wefuse to discuss the mattah with you, young person."

"Ho, ho, ho!"

"Pway wetire. I——"

"You can have a dip in the crick if you like," said Buck Finn. "That's what I humped along to tell you."

And he walked away whistling shrilly.

D'Arcy's face cleared.

"It's wathah cold to have a dip in the cweek," he remarked. "But anythin' is bettah than uncleanliness. Pway come on, deah boys."

The creek certainly was cold, but the dip in the clear, clean water was welcome enough to the boys. Skimpole was the only one who declined it. He contented himself with the wash-basin, and then he took its dimensions, and made a note of the colour of the soap for his book of travels. By the time he had finished the juniors had done their bathing, and dressed themselves.

Mr. Poinsett came out of the ranch house and gave them a cheery good-morning. Colonel Stalker was not to be seen.

"Ready for breakfast, I guess," said Mr. Poinsett.

"Yaas, wathah! We are extwemely peckish, as a mattah of fact, my deah sir."

"Good! Come in!"

"Isn't Colonel Stalker about yet, sir?" asked Tom Merry.

The rancher chuckled.

"He's gone," he replied. "He's got business in Gold Brick. He will be there a couple of days, so you may see him if you run over to see the camp."

The juniors brightened up.

The prospect of visiting and exploring a real Wild West mining camp was a fascinating one to them, as it would have been to most boys.

"Bai Jove, I should like to go awfully, sir!"

"Then I'll let you drive over with Buck to-morrow," said the rancher. "You'll have a look round the ranch to-day."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"How did you sleep last night?"

"Sound as a top, sir," said Blake.

"Good! Here's breakfast. 'Tonio!"

"Si, senor!"

"Hustle, you yellow villain!"

And the Mexican grinned and hustled.

Breakfast was of a rough-and-ready but solid description, and the St. Jim's juniors, who had remarkably good appetites that morning, did their duty nobly at the table.

When the meal was over, the rancher rose to his feet, and they adjourned to the open air. It was a keen, fresh morning, and the sun was shining cheerily on the grass.

"I guess I'll show you over the ranch," said Mr. Poinsett.

And the juniors followed Tom Merry's uncle upon a tour of inspection.

CHAPTER 8.

The Buck-jumper.

MR. POINSETT played the part of cicerone admirably. He showed the boys everything there was of interest to be seen, and explained things to them in his short, abrupt way. The immense corrals were of great interest to the boys. The herds of cattle on the ranch lands seemed endless.

The sight of the cowboys, on their rough ponies, frequently without saddle or bridle even, interested the juniors. The cowboys of Arizona were not exactly the picturesque figures the boys had expected to see. They were rough, long-limbed fellows, with unshaven chins and long hair, and were dressed in shirt and trousers and huge boots, all of them very much worn and extremely soiled. They cracked their whips with cracks like pistol-shots, and shouted in a voice of thunder, as it seemed to Arthur Augustus at least. And the way they managed their half-tamed mustangs was admirable. D'Arcy had an eye for the good points of a horse or a rider, and he noted the horsemanship of the cattlemen at once

"Bai Jove, you have some good widahs here, sir!" he remarked.

Mr. Poinsett laughed.

"Yee, I guess the men can handle horseflesh," he replied.

Buck Finn came up, touching his hat to the rancher, and grinning on one side of his lean face at the juniors at St. Jim's.

"Colorado's very wild, sir."

Mr. Poinsett grunted.

"Can't your popper handle him?"

"He guesses he'd better leave him alone."

"Oh, well, turn him into the corral for the present."

"I guess I'll tell him, sir."

And Buck Finn walked away.

"Is Colowado a horse, sir?" asked Arthur Augustus, his eye beginning to glisten behind his eyeglass.

"I guess so."

"One of the buck-jumpahs we hear about so much, I pwesume, sir?"

"Yes. No man on the ranch can ride him, but Finn ought to be able to break him in," grunted Mr. Poinsett. "Finn can handle most hosses. But he's a demon, and no mistake. I reckon I shall have to have him shot."

"I should like to see him, sir."

"Buck will take you to his corral, if you like. I must run away for an hour now, but Buck will show you round."

And the rancher went into the house.

Buck Finn stopped for the juniors to come up, and walked with them to the home corral. Half a dozen ranch hands were standing by the bar of the corral with lariats in their hands, and Mr. Finn was with them, looking decidedly gloomy.

"I guess he ought to be shot," he said.

Arthur Augustus put up his eyeglass, and surveyed the animal enclosed in the fence.

It was a splendid Mexican mustang, with a dash of the "States" horse in him, as his powerful limbs testified.

His beautifully-shaped head and his bright black eyes seemed to express wickedness itself.

"Bai Jove," exclaimed D'Arcy, "what a horse!"

Mr. Finn looked at him surlily.

"What do you know about hosses?" he grunted.

"Pway don't be watty, my dear sir," said Arthur Augustus mildly. "I wegard that as a wippin' animal, that is all."

"Like to ride him, I guess," grinned Mr. Finn; and the cattlemen standing round burst into a loud guffaw.

"Dear me!" murmered Skimpole. "I must make a note of the habits of this enormous spider. I really hope D'Arcy will not wake and disturb him before I have made my notes!"

D'Arcy turned his monocle calmly upon the foreman of the ranch.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Haw, haw, haw!" roared Mr. Finn.

"Ho, ho, ho!" shrieked Buck.

And the cattlemen roared.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy turned his eyeglass from one to another, with a red spot coming into either cheek, and a glimmer into his eyes.

"Pewwaps you imagine that I could not wide that horse?" he said.

"Haw, haw, haw!" yelled Mr. Finn, going off into a fresh explosion. "Haw, haw, haw! Carry me hum to die!"

"Ho, ho, ho!" screamed Buck Finn. "Him ride Colorado! Ho, ho, ho!"

"I wathah think I could wide that horse."

"Oh, don't!" beseeched Mr. Finn. "Don't say it any more, sir! You gimme a pain in my ribs. I guess!"

"Vewy well," said D'Arcy quietly. "I will show you, deah boys. I am now wesolved to wide that horse."

"Haw, haw, haw!"

Blake caught the swell of St. Jim's by the arm.

"Don't be an ass, Gussy! The brute might kill you. Look at his eyes."

"I wathah think I could wide him."

"Don't try," said Tom Merry. "Let those asses cackle, Gussy This critter is a bit different from Badger, the horse you rode in the steeplechase. Badger was a beast. But this mustang is a fiend. Look at his ears."

"Yaas; but I wathah think I could wide him."

"You'll spoil your clothes," urged Blake, with a sinking heart, as he realised that the swell of St. Jim's had made up his mind. In his mind's eye Blake saw his elegant chum rolling on the plain with the savage horse stamping over him, and the thought sickened him. D'Arcy had boundless pluck, and he would have been killed a dozen times over rather than have backed down before the grinning cowboys; but the appeal made by Blake was directed to his tenderest spot. If the ordeal would spoil his clothes——

But Arthur Augustus only smiled.

"I shall change my clothes, of course, deah boy," he remarked.

"Oh!" said Blake.

"I should hardly be likely to wide a buck-jumpah in these clothes and a toppah!" said D'Arcy. "I will go and change immediately into my widin' clothes."

"But——"

"Pway don't argue, deah boy; it is a question of dig. with me now; and it is absolutely imposs. for me to wetweat."

And Arthur Augustus walked away towards the house to change into his riding-clothes. The foreman of the ranch and the cattlemen looked after him, in doubt and wonder.

"He—he doesn't mean it!" gasped Mr. Finn.

"He does," growled Tom Merry. "He'll ride Colorado now, hang you!"

"He's all right," said Wally. "Gussy hasn't the faintest idea how to get on with a younger brother, but he knows everything about clothes and horses. You can rely on him to judge a pair of trousers or a horse any day. He'll ride Colorado."

"Scat!" said Mr Finn. "Why, I tell you I can't ride him!"

"I dare say you can't," assented Wally, looking over the corral fence at the horse. "I shouldn't imagine for a moment that you could, I guess."

Mr. Finn turned pink.

"You cheeky young son of John Bull! I——"

"Oh, come off!" said Wally, in the charming way that made him the hero of the Third Form at St. Jim's. "None of your rot, you know. I suppose you don't reckon you can ride like my brother Gus!"

Mr. Finn stared at Wally, and if Wally had not been Mr. Poinsett's guest, it is extremely probable that Mr. Finn's quirt would have lashed round his legs.

As it was, the foreman of the ranch looked at him grimly, and then turned away and spoke to the cattlemen.

"Rope him in!"

Buck Finn uttered an exclamation.

"Pop! You'll never sit the brute!"

"Hold your tongue, Buck! Bring out the hoss!"

The cattlemen crowded round the fence of the corral, lariat in hand.

The corral was a small one, communicating by a barred gate with the larger corral. In the smaller enclosure, the mustang was within reach of the lassoes flung from outside the stake fence. There was not a man there who would hav ventured inside the fence while the horse was at liberty. And they were not cowards, either.

But Colorado, the mustang, was, as they expressed it in the breezy language of the llano, a "devil." He had half killed a former master, and Mr. Poinsett had bought him thinking that Mr. Finn would be able to manage him. He was a splendid horse, if once his temper came under control. But Mr. Finn had tried, and failed.

The evident determination of Arthur Augustus to tackle the buck-jumper had spurred on the foreman of the ranch to make a fresh attempt.

The mustang was as watchful as a cat. Again and again the cowboys flung the ropes, and again and again the wily brute eluded them. Confined as he was in a narrow enclosure, he had little room to dodge, yet he contrived to elude the whirling loops continually.

Tom Merry's eyes sparkled as he looked on.

It was not so very long since the juniors at St Jim's had taken up the boy scout idea, and Tom Merry & Co. had taken up lassoing as a part of their training.

Tom Merry, more than any of the others, had become expert in the use of the lariat, and as he looked on now, it came into his mind to try his skill upon Colorado.

The fear of failure, and of looking ridiculous in the eyes of men born to the use of the riata, held him back for a time.

But the repeated failures of the cowboys encouraged him.

Buck Finn, as his lasso slid from the glossy neck of the mustang and dropped on the grass, jerked it back, and threw it to the ground with a gesture of anger.

"It can't be did, I guess," he growled.

Tom Merry picked up the lasso.

"Let me try," he said.

Buck Finn grinned.

"What do you reckon you can do with a rope, kid?"

"Nothing, perhaps," said Tom Merry quietly. "But you don't seem to be able to do much, and I can't do worse than miss him, I suppose."

"Ho, ho, ho!"

There was a roar of laughter from the ranch hands.

"Let him try!"

"Let the Britisher lasso Colorado."

And they desisted from their attempts, and left a clear field to Tom Merry.

A flush came into the cheeks of the hero of St Jim's, and his eyes gleamed. He felt that he was being regarded in a spirit of somewhat malicious mockery, and the feeling spurred him on to do his best.

Colorado glared round, apparently surprised by the cessation of the attack, and tossed up his head and trotted round the corral.

The rope flew from Tom Merry's hand.

There was undoubtedly some luck in it, but there was skill and quickness of judgment, too, for Tom Merry had made the cast impulsively as the mustang tossed his head, and the moment was the most favourable possible.

The loop settled over the neck of the mustang, and tightened.

Tom Merry hardly knew that he had succeeded until he felt the rope dragging through his fingers, and then he clutched at it hard.

He would have been dragged over the fence into the corral, but several of the ranch hands rushed to his aid and dragged on the rope.

The lassoed mustang kicked and reared and wriggled, and rolled over on the earth in a transport of fury.

But brawny arms were dragging on the rope, and he was dragged up to the fence, and jammed there a prisoner.

Jack Blake gave a whoop, and slapped Tom on the back with a force that made him stagger.

"Hurrah! Roped in, by gum!"

"Bravo!" yelled Wally, tossing his sombrero in the air. "Hurrah!"

"Dear me!" said Skimpole, pulling out his notebook. "This is really very good, and I must make a note of it. It will make a remarkable incident in my book of travels."

Mr. Finn came towards the horse, with a curious expression upon his bearded face.

"Well done, sonny!" he said.

The horse was still struggling. But the ropes held him fast. He was still saddled and bridled from Mr. Finn's previous attempt. The foreman of the ranch clambered on the fence of the corral, and dropped into the saddle and grasped the reins.

"Leggo!"

The cattlemen let the horse go, and the next moment the foreman of the ranch was fighting his hardest with the most savage buck-jumper in Arizona.

CHAPTER 9.

Unmastered.

TOM MERRY & CO. watched spellbound.

The cattlemen stood round with keenly-interested faces, watching the struggle between man and horse breathlessly.

It was a terrible, yet a fascinating sight.

The mustang bounded and reared, almost foaming at the mouth in fury as it felt a rider on its back.

But Mr. Finn was a good horseman, and he sat the animal well.

He had a good seat, and a tight hold, and his grip on the rein was hard and steady. His face was white and set hard. His teeth were clenched. All that he knew of horsemanship, all that he had in him of strength and determination, were thrown into that struggle with the savage mustang.

But it seemed to Tom Merry, as he watched, that the horse would win.

Mr. Finn was on his mettle, but he was not up to all the tricks of the mustang, and he was not light and active enough for the work.

Colorado was certainly what the cattlemen called him—a very devil! He reared on his hind legs, and instead of coming down again, rolled backwards and crashed to the earth.

There was a cry of horror from the cowboys.

It seemed impossible for the foreman to avoid being crushed to death under the weight of the brute.

But Mr. Finn sprang aside in time, and the horse missed him.

But he was dismounted now.

The mustang required only a second or two to be up and at him with gnashing jaws. Mr. Finn did not stay to try conclusions. He made a bound for the corral fence, and was clambering over it in a twinkling.

There was a savage squeal behind him. The foreman of the ranch rolled over the fence and dropped in a gasping heap, and the teeth of Colorado gnashed on the rim of the fence. Then the brute, disappointed of his prey, "cavorted" about in the corral, with flaming eyes, and the sweat running down his powerful limbs.

Mr. Finn picked himself up, with the assistance of the dutiful Buck, and gasped for breath, and wiped his streaming forehead with a red handkerchief.

"I swow!" he gasped. "What a hoss!"

"He'll hev to be shot, sir!"

"I guess he will, Dave Tutt. And it's a durned pity, too."

"Pway don't be in a huwwy, deah boys."

It was the voice of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

The swell of St. Jim's had returned to the spot, having by this time changed into his riding-clothes, and a very handsome and elegant figure he made in them.

"Oh, not so much chin-music," said Mr. Finn. "I've backed that brute agin, and he's thrown me. Me!"

"Yaas, wathah! I saw him!"

"I guess he'll have to be shot."

"I am about to wide him."

"Will you stop that nonsense?" shouted Mr. Finn, exasperated. "I tell you I can't ride him."

"I dare say that is vewy twue; but I fail to see what beawin' it has upon the mattah," said D'Arcy.

"It has this bearing upon the matter, you young chump; you sha'n't go near that hoss!"

"I wefuse to be called a chump."

"Dummy, then," said Mr. Finn grimly. "Silly idiot! Dude!"

"I wegard those expwessions as oppwobwious, and I certainly should give you a feahful thwashin', but you are pwobably exaspewated by your failure, so I can afford to ovahlook your impertinence," said the swell of St. Jim's magnanimously.

"Well, I swow!" gasped Mr. Finn.

"But now, my deah sir, pway let your men lasso the cwittah, and I will wide him."

"I tell you you won't!"

"But I shall insist," said D'Arcy; evidently regarding that as a clincher.

Mr. Finn snorted.

"You can insist till you're black in the face, my son, but you won't ride that hoss. I'm not going to have greenhorns killed in my corrals. No, sir! I guess not! Boyees, you're not to rope in Colorado."

"Right, Mr. Finn," said Dave Tutt.

And the foreman of the ranch stalked away.

Arthur Augustus put up his eyeglass and glanced after him, and then turned to the grinning cattlemen.

"I should be sowwy to induce you to disobey ordahs," he said. "I should pwefer the horse to be woped in; but nevah mind."

He walked towards the gate of the corral.

"Come back!" yelled Blake.

Tom Merry caught the swell of St. Jim's by the arm.

"You young ass! Come back!"

"I wefuse to be called an ass."

"If you're determined to ride him, we'll rope him in for you."

"It is weally hardly worth the bothah. I wathah think I can manage him. What you wequire for a job of this sort is a fellow of tact and judgment, you know."

"Hold on, I tell you! I'll get a lasso and rope him in."

And Tom Merry ran towards the rope that was lying on the grass. Blake picked up another. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, while they were thus engaged, calmly walked to the gate of the corral and unbarred it.

"He's going in!" yelled Dave Tutt.

Tom Merry spun round.

"Gussy! Come back! Come back!"

"Wats!" said Gussy cheerfully, without even turning his head.

Tom Merry and Blake dashed wildly after him, to drag him away by the hair of his head, if need be. But D'Arcy was in the corral now, and they could only gaze spellbound, their hearts thumping with fear for him.

Wally and Skimpole were calm enough. Wally, in spite of his disrespectful attitude towards his elder brother, had heaps of faith in Arthur Augustus when it came to managing a horse. Skimpole was thinking of his book of travels. Probably, when he came to think of it, he would have been sorry to see the swell of St. Jim's killed. But at present he was only thinking of an exciting incident for his book of travels.

Colorado seemed not to be aware for a moment or two that a biped had had the unparalleled nerve to enter his corral.

But when he saw the swell of St. Jim's calmly advancing upon him, he faced the junior, and laid back his ears, and a murderous gleam came into his eyes.

Tom Merry saw it, and his very heart sickened within him.

"Good heavens! Gussy will be killed!"

Blake gave a groan.

"Get a gun, somebody. But it's no good—the fiend is at him now!"

Wally's voice rang out clear and sharp:

"Go it, Gus!"

And from the swell of St. Jim's came the reply, without a trace of fear in the tones:

"Yaas, wathah!"

Colorado had started at the junior, with his ears back, motionless for some seconds. Then he had suddenly bolted forward at him.

Tom Merry grasped the fence of the corral.

He closed his eyes for a second. He opened them again with terror, fully expecting to see D'Arcy on the ground, and the savage mustang trampling over him.

Tom rubbed his eyes.

Arthur Augustus had met that savage charge without turning a hair. How he did it no eye was quick enough to see; but he eluded the rush, closed up on the mustang, and was in the saddle as the baffled animal went rushing on.

The mustang did not realise it for some moments. He slowed down, and glared round in search of the junior, and then suddenly realised that the intended victim was on his back.

A squeal of mad fury broke from the animal, and then commenced a scene of buck-jumping to which the experience of Mr. Finn was as child's play.

The animal seemed to be mad with wrath and excitement.

He dashed to and fro, scraped himself against the corral fence, reared on his hind legs, plunged forward on his fore legs, and raced round the corral, and rolled on the ground.

But at every trick he found the swell of St. Jim's was his master.

D'Arcy jumped off when the brute rolled over, but he was on again in a twinkling as the mustang rose.

His grip on the reins was like iron. The lashing hoofs, the tearing jaws, had no terrors for him.

With a wrist of iron, and a heart that knew no fear, a steady eye that never failed him, D'Arcy was master of the situation.

The spectators looked on, almost petrified by the sight.

There was a sudden yell.

"Look out!"

The mustang had seen at last the open gate of the corral, by which D'Arcy had entered. He dashed towards it, Tom Merry sprang out of the way in time, and the frantic animal rushed through.

CHAPTER 10.

The Mustang Finds His Master.

CLATTER, clatter, clatter!

The hoofs of the enraged mustang beat a furious tattoo upon the hard ground. Arthur Augustus dragged him to a halt outside the corral, and the cattlemen crowded back from the lashing hoofs.

Skimpole blinked excitedly, as he took down his notes. Even the Indians in the Rocky Mountains would not make so exciting an incident as this for his book of travels. But in his keen interest in his notebook Skimmy forgot that he was in a dangerous position.

"Look out!" yelled Tom Merry.

"Stand back, thar!"

Skimpole blinked round.

"Were you addressing—— Ow!"

The lashing hoof struck Skimpole's notebook fair and square, and sent it flying from his hand.

Skimmy gave a gasp, and collapsed upon the grass.

"Dear me!"

The mustang was plunging forward in a frantic endeavour to unseat his rider, but it was in vain.

Backwards and forwards the brute went, plunging and rearing, but D'Arcy, though it seemed every moment that he must go flying over the horse's head or tail, kept his seat as if he were a part of the horse.

"I swow!" exclaimed Mr. Finn, coming back towards the corral, attracted by the noise there. "Carry me home to die! I swow!"

And he gazed at D'Arcy in blank amazement.

Wally grinned at him.

"You can trust Gus with a horse," he remarked. "What did I tell you, old cock? I guess I was giving you straight goods."

Mr. Poinsett came out of the house.

The noise at the corral had reached his ears, too. He looked as amazed as Mr. Finn when he saw the savage mustang outside the corral with D'Arcy "up."

"Thunder!" he exclaimed.

Tom Merry and Blake were grinning now with satisfaction. The time for uneasiness had passed. D'Arcy was evidently the mustang's master, and the contest now was only one of endurance. If D'Arcy's strength held out, he would subdue the savage brute.

"Is that—that the—the dude?" gasped Mr. Poinsett.

Tom Merry laughed.

"That's Gussy, uncle."

"My body and boots!" ejaculated the rancher. "What a nerve! What a wrist! What a seat! Good!"

"I guess Gussy's all there!" said Wally. "He can lay over any bullwhacker in Arizona, siree!"

The rancher chuckled.

"He's a good rider—and I took him for a lisping ass!"

The tattoo of Colorado's feet was growing slacker. Slowly but surely the horse yielded, with many a burst of savage passion, but each burst weaker than the last. And at last he stood still, in the midst of a wondering circle of cattlemen, and acknowledged his defeat.

"Waal, I swow!" said Mr. Finn; and even Buck Finn looked at Arthur Augustus D'Arcy with great admiration.

D'Arcy slipped from the horse's back and patted his head, and, to the amazement of all the beholders, Colorado snuggled his muzzle against the swell of St. Jim's, and D'Arcy stroked him gently.

"Good old horse!" murmured D'Arcy, in a caressing tone.

He looked round through his eyeglass. The wondering and admiring looks of the cowboys were a tribute the swell of St. Jim's could appreciate.

"I wathah think you will find the horse quiet now," he remarked.

"By Jove," cried Mr. Poinsett; "the horse is yours, young 'un, if you care to take him at a gift!"

D'Arcy's eyes sparkled.

"Bai Jove, sir, but it would be wobbin' you! He is the

best horse I have evah widden, with the exception of one or two!"

"He's yours," said the rancher, "with the best set of trappings money can buy in Arizona! I guess you've won him fairly!"

"I guess so!" said Mr. Finn. "Twice I've backed that horse, and twice I've had to pass in the game; and now this kid—waal, I swow!"

"Thank you," said D'Arcy; "thank you vewy much, sir! I shall accept the horse with gweat pleasure, and I hope to wide him in England with the D'Arcy colours, and I will let you know if he does you cwedit, sir!"

And from that moment Arthur Augustus was the hero of the cowboys. They had misjudged him on his appearance—and certainly it had to be admitted that the silk hat and spotless garments of the swell of St. Jim's were a little out of place on a rough-and-ready Western ranch—but since he had ridden Colorado they were able to judge him better. A hero's heart, a nerve of iron, boundless pluck lay under the calm and aristocratic exterior of the swell of St. Jim's.

And as D'Arcy walked away from the scene of the contest with the buck-jumper, the cattlemen gave him a ringing cheer, to which the swell of St. Jim's replied by gracefully raising his sombero.

CHAPTER 11.

Among the Steers.

"YOU'D like to help the cattlemen?" Mr. Poinsett asked, a little later. "I can get you all good mounts, if you'd care to take a hand in the herding for the experience."

Tom Merry's eyes sparkled.

"Yes, rather, sir—that's just what we'd like!"

"I should say so!" remarked Jack Blake.

"Yaas, wathah! It will be what I wegard as wippin'!"

"First chop!" said Wally. "I guess Skimmy can stay here and look after Pongo. Skimmy isn't much of a rider."

"I am not so sure of that, D'Arcy minor," said Skimpole, blinking at him. "I should certainly not say that I cannot ride a mustang until I have tried to do so."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There is certainly nothing to cackle at in that remark, D'Arcy minor. I think it extremely probable that I could ride a mustang on scientific principles, without any previous experience of horsemanship. But upon the whole I shall stay in, I think, and make up my notebook. There is a very comfortable seat under this tree, and I will remain here."

Skimpole was left under the tree with his notebook, and the four other juniors mounted and joined the cowboys on the plain.

It was not the time of the regular "round up," which would have been exciting enough; but a certain number of cattle had to be driven off to the nearest railway depot, to be despatched East on the cattle-cars, and Mr. Finn had orders to round up two thousand head of steers.

A dozen cowboys were employed on the task, and with them went the juniors of St. Jim's. Mr. Finn himself was in charge of the party, and there was a whispered talk between him and his employer before he mounted his horse.

"Put him through it!" the rancher concluded.

"I guess he's white!" said Mr. Finn. "From what I have seen of him, I guess he's white all through!"

"Put him through it all the same! No nincompoop from a public school is going to have my money when I'm gone, I guess!"

"You saw the way he tooled that waggon hum!"

"You bet! But put him through it!"

And Mr. Finn nodded and rode away. The rancher chuckled and went indoors. The cowboys dashed at a smart gallop over the plain in the afternoon sunlight.

"Where are we going, Mr. Finn?" asked Tom Merry, as they rode over the rolling prairie towards the red and glowing west.

"'Bout ten miles from hyer," said Mr. Finn.

Tom Merry's eyes opened.

"Is it all my uncle's land?"

The foreman of the ranch laughed.

"I guess Mr. Poinsett's land runs straight on past Arivaca trail, and that's a good hundred miles," he said.

"Bai Jove, what a wippin' wanch! Mr. Poinsett must be a vewy wich man! Do you know, deah boys, I wathah think I should like to be a wanchah when I gwow up!"

Mr. Finn grinned. Perhaps the idea of Arthur Augustus as a rancher struck him in a comical light. Dave Tutt suddenly halted and stared towards a straggling patch of bushes that grew to the right.

"I guess it's Injuns," he said.

Mr. Finn stared at the bushes

"I swow! Who'll ride over thar and see if thar's Injuns ambushed? We've got to pass that bush within bowshot. Will you go, Master Merry?"

"Certainly." And, without a moment's hesitation, Tom Merry turned his horse from the track they were following and dashed towards the bushes.

As a matter of fact, Tom Merry regarded this as an extremely reckless and risky proceeding—as indeed it was if hostile Indians had been ambushed there. An arrow from the bushes would have found him defenceless. But Mr. Finn had made the request in such a matter-of-fact way—as if he would just as soon have asked anybody else in the party, that Tom never thought of refusing. He knew that the ranchmen were looking out for any sign of pusillanimity on the part of the English boys, and he was determined that they should see that an Englishman would venture wherever an Arizona cowboy would go, even if the venture were reckless and foolhardy.

Mr. Finn looked after him as the group of horsemen halted on the prairie. Jack Blake and D'Arcy and Wally exchanged glances, and left the group and rode after Tom.

"Come back!" called out Mr. Finn.

"Wats!" replied Arthur Augustus cheerily.

Mr. Finn grinned at Buck.

"They're the right stuff, you see!"

"I guess so," said Buck. "But they don't tumble. I guess they've got a lot to l'arn yet, popper!"

The juniors of St. Jim's rode into the bushes. The bushes were deserted, and there was no sign whatever of Indians. Tom Merry & Co. rode back, and there was a slight wrinkle on Tom Merry's forehead. He saw that the cowboys were all grinning, and he guessed that he had been "done."

"I suppose that was a little joke of yours, Mr. Finn?" he said quietly.

"Not exactly," said Mr. Finn. "I guess I wanted to try your nerve."

Tom Merry's eyes flashed.

"You had no right to do anything of the sort. If you were a fellow of my own age I'd jolly soon give you a lesson on the subject, too!"

"Yaas, wathah! If Mr. Finn were a young man, I should wegard it impewative to give him a feahful thwashin'. As it is, I wegard him with gweat contempt!"

"Waal, I swow!" said Mr. Finn.

"In England," said Tom Merry, "we call it caddish to work off a trick like that on a stranger; that's all." And he rode on again.

Mr. Finn hesitated for a moment, and then pushed his mustang alongside Tom's. He gave the junior a poke with the butt of his quirt.

"I guess I'm real sorry," he said. "I had a reason for putting you to the test, but never mind that. I'm sorry, sonny!"

Tom Merry's face cleared at once.

"That's all right," he said.

"Yaas, wathah! I wegard an apology fwom Mr. Finn as settlin' the mattah in the most satisfactowy way poss!"

"Only don't do it again," said Wally. "I kinder guess it riles me to have a galoot ring in a cold deck on me; and when my dander's riz you want to look out!" And Mr. Finn laughed.

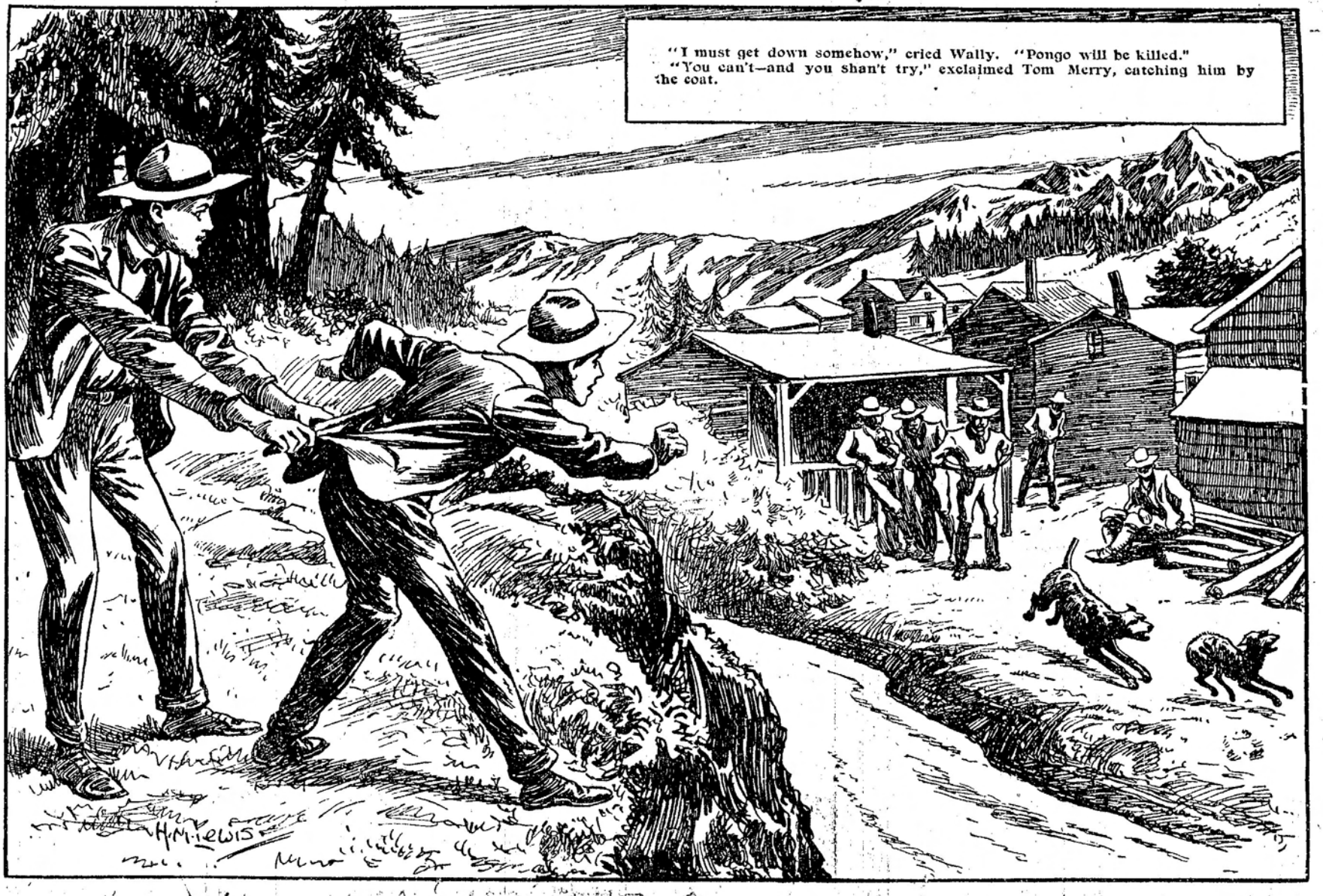
They rode on at a good pace, and entered a hollow where a shallow stream ran half-hidden in the rushes and the long grass. Here a herd of cattle browsed, some of them looking up lazily as the horsemen came up.

Mr. Finn rapped out his orders sharply. The cowboys separated, and, in a semicircle, bore down upon the herd, waving and cracking their long whips. They came at the herd from the opposite side to that in which they wished to drive them, of course. The cattle slowly and sulkily left their pasture, and were gradually driven out of the hollow up to the plain.

Mr. Finn was running his eye over the herd in a business-like way. He shouted more orders, and a couple of cowboys dashed recklessly into the heart of the herd to separate those that were required from the rest. Some of the steers were obstinate enough, and they lowed and bellowed savagely; but gradually the herd was separated, and the animals not wanted were driven back into the hollow, where they went contentedly enough.

But with the rest it was different. Not being blessed with reasoning powers, the animals had no idea that they were being driven away to the railroad cars—their ultimate destination being the canning factories at Chicago—but they knew they were leaving a green pasture for a dusty plain, and they "bucked" against it.

The cowboys cracked their whips and shouted, plunging recklessly among the herd, and more than one obstinate steer had to be driven back with repeated blows into the path he was required to follow.


"I must get down somehow," cried Wally. "Pongo will be killed."
"You can't—and you shan't try," exclaimed Tom Merry, catching him by the coat.
H.M. LEWIS

"Look out!" yelled Mr. Finn suddenly.

A determined old bull was making a break for the open prairie, and he was followed by a number of others at top speed. It was the beginning of a stampede if it was not checked in time, and the ranchmen threw themselves recklessly in the way of the rushing steers, brandishing their whips and dealing terrible blows with them.

The juniors of St. Jim's were not slow to back them up. Tom Merry and Blake were in the midst of the cattle at once, and D'Arcy was only a moment later; and then Wally dashed to help. Then there was a wild cry from Buck Finn.

Tom Merry looked round.

The bull, who was the original leader of the outbreak, had gored the young cowboy's mustang savagely, and the animal was gasping on the ground. To fall, amid that sea of thudding hoofs, was death. The luckless mustang was trampled to death in a few seconds. Buck Finn would have shared its fate if he had fallen, too. But he was clinging wildly to the back of a steer, tossed to and fro like a cork upon the waters.

Tom Merry's face went white for a moment. The peril of Buck Finn was terrible, and none of the cattlemen was near enough to lend him a helping hand.

Tom Merry spurred his mustang on furiously, and fairly drove a path through the excited herd, his horse shouldering its way through, amid a sea of rolling eyes and tossing horns and tails. But he could not reach Buck Finn.

The steers were too thick, and thoroughly excited now, they were rushing blindly on, and Tom could only ride with the herd and gradually work his way towards Buck. But by that means he could not reach him in time.

It was evident by the expression of Buck's face that he had been hurt when his horse was knocked over, and his strength, sorely taxed by the wild tossing of the steer, was giving out.

Tom Merry set his teeth hard. He had made up his mind what to do. He quitted his mustang, and jumped astride of a steer that was rushing on alongside of him. In a minute more he had passed to another steer, and another, and reached the one to which Buck Finn was clinging.

The animals were so closely packed that the work was not hard, to one who had boundless courage and a nerve of iron.

Buck Finn's eyes were wide with astonishment as Tom Merry reached him.

"Waal, bust my boots!" he murmured.

Tom Merry sat astride of the steer. If he had slipped down beside him he would have had only a few seconds to live. But his nerve was steady, his movements sure.

He was firmly astride of the astonished steer, and he gripped Buck Finn with one hand and dragged him up to a sitting posture. Riding the steer as if it were a horse, he kept a tight seat, and held Buck Finn tightly, and so dashed on with the herd.

The shouting cowboys were rounding in the runaways now, and the steer to which Tom Merry and Buck were clinging was separated from the rest, and Dave Tutt roped it in.

As the lassoed steer rolled on the prairie Tom Merry sprang clear, and fell with Buck Finn into the long grass. He was up again in a second, and helping Buck to his feet.

The young cowboy was gasping for breath, and he stood with a limp. He had had a twist in the leg when his horse went down.

He grinned curiously at Tom Merry.

"You saved my life, I guess," he remarked.

Mr. Finn came up and jumped off his horse, and grasped Tom Merry's hand and wrung it like a vice.

"You saved Buck's life! You're white all through, you are."

Tom Merry laughed breathlessly.

"Lucky for both of us it turned out so well," he said.

"Bai Jove!" said D'Arcy, coming up. "That was weally wippin', Tom Mewwy. I could not have done that bettah mayself, you know."

"Go hon!"

"I am speakin' sewiously, deah boy. I wegard it as an extwemely gallant action, and I weally considah that you take the bun."

And the way the cowboys looked at Tom Merry showed that they fully concurred in the opinion of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

CHAPTER 12.

Pongo Again!

THE cattle were driven off to the railroad depot, and the cowboys rode back to the Poinsett Ranch. It was a long ride after a hard day, but the wiry men of the plains did not seem to feel it, and the juniors of St. Jim's, who were getting hardened to fatigue, stood it very well. They were pretty tired when they got in, however, with ravenous appetites, and they ate a supper that would have made Fatty Wynn, of the New House at St. Jim's in far-off England, green with envy.

Mr. Poinsett was not there, and Tom Merry asked Antonio where he was. The grinning Mexican grinned more than ever at the question, as if he had some joke up his sleeve.

"The senor is at the other place, senorito," he said.

"What other place?"

"The other place, senor."

"Yes, ass, but where is the other place?"

"Up the Santa Cruz river, senorito."

"But what is it—why is it—how is it?" demanded Blake.

"The other ranch, senor."

"My hat! How many ranches has Mr. Poinsett?" demanded Tom Merry. "I have never heard of another ranch till this moment."

The Mexican looked alarmed.

"I speak too much, senores; you no tell Mr. Poinsett, or I am kicked."

"So you ought to be kicked, confound you, if you've been letting out something against your master's orders."

"Si, senor."

And the Mexican grinned and disappeared.

Tom Merry looked very puzzled. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, too, seemed to be thinking something out.

"Blessed if I make it out!" growled Blake. "Pass the beef!"

"I wegard Mr. Poinsett as a vewy cuwious old gentleman," said D'Arcy thoughtfully. "He has a vewy peculiah chuckle. Is it poss. that he has been workin' off a little jape on persons whom he would natuwally wegard as tendah-feet."

Tom Merry flushed.

"Oh, my uncle wouldn't do that!" he said.

"No, it would certainly be wotten bad form, but he is such a vewy cuwious old gentleman in some wespects."

Tom Merry was feeling a little uneasy when he went to bed that night. His uncle was so eccentric, that there was no telling what curious schemes he might have in his mind, and Tom could not help observing that almost everyone about the ranch had a manner as if there were a joke of some kind in the air. But he was too tired to think much about it, and he was soon sleeping the sleep of the fagged, as Blake would have put it.

The next morning the juniors were awakened by a thumping at the door, and Buck Finn looked into the cabin. He grinned very amiably at Tom Merry as the hero of St. Jim's looked up from his rough blankets.

"Coming to Gold Brick?" he asked.

Tom Merry jumped up immediately.

"Yes, rather! Are you starting?"

"I'm taking the waggon to the fork of the trail. You will have to hoof it from there. I meet the returning coach from Gold Brick with some goods for Tombstone."

"I see. When do you start?"

"Half an hour."

"We'll be ready."

And the juniors were ready. When Buck Finn hitched in his horses, the juniors entered the waggon, Skimpole taking a fresh notebook with him. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of course, was dressed to kill. He might have been going out for a walk on Sunday afternoon with Cousin Ethel, from the pains he took with his attire.

Tom Merry & Co. did not remonstrate. The swell of St. Jim's was determined that the inhabitants of Gold Brick should see that a Britisher could dress well, and there was no arguing with him.

Wally whistled to Pongo as the waggon started, and the dog raced after them. They bumped along merrily to the fork in the trail, and there they left the waggon. Buck Finn pointed northward with his whip.

"That's the trail! Camp's not far."

"Thank you! So long!"

And the juniors started off. They passed the coach a little later, and the driver gave them a shout and a grin. Then they tramped on towards the distant mining-camp. They expected to see Colonel Stalker there, and at all events the excursion was full of excitement to them.

"Pongo! Pongo!"

"Pway don't whistle in that howwibly shwill way, Wally."

"Oh, don't you begin, Gus. Pongo's gone after a prairie-rabbit."

"Let the bwute go, then!"

"No fear!"

And Wally left the trail in search of Pongo.

"Pway go aftah the young wascal, Tom Mewwy," said Arthur Augustus, in distress. "I am afwaid he will get into twouble, and I shall spoil my clothes if I go scwamblin' ovah that wocky gwound."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Right you are; join you in the camp."

And D'Arcy and Blake walked on, while Tom Merry hurried after Wally. The scamp of the Third Form at St. Jim's gave him a cool nod and a grin.

"Can't see the brute," he said. "He's a little demon, you know. Not one of those rotten tame brutes who are always slinking at their master's heels."

"Well, he certainly isn't a tame brute; he's a troublesome beast!"

"Oh, rats! Pongo's all right. I can't see him."

"I can't, either. Let's keep on."

They kept on; but Pongo was not to be seen.

Smoke rising ahead showed them that they were drawing near to the mining-camp, though not by the regular trail.

There was a sudden sound of snapping and snarling. Wally pricked up his ears and ran on, looking back excitedly at Tom Merry.

"That's Pongo! I know his yap!"

"Look where you're going!" yelled Tom Merry.

"My only Aunt Jane! It's all right, though."

Wally was running out upon a bluff that overlooked a sudden drop in the ground ahead. He pulled up in time, and went forward more cautiously. Tom Merry ran after him. The sounds of conflict were louder and fiercer, and loud laughs could be heard. They looked down from the bluff, and saw the mining-camp below—and Pongo. How he had got there they did not know; he usually turned up in unexpected places. He was pouncing again upon a shaggy, yellow dog that had just escaped his clutches, two or three roughly-clad fellows cheering on the dogs. The yellow cur curled up round Pongo like a panther, and the combat was furiously renewed.

Wally glared down the bluff.

He could not possibly get down to the scene of the combat, and Pongo, now, was getting the worst of it. The yellow dog was on top, and Pongo was suffering. Wally glared desperately about.

"My only aunt! I must get down somehow."

Tom Merry caught him by the coat.

"You can't, and you sha'n't try."

"Lemme go!"

"Rats! Hallo, Pong's off!"

Pongo had suddenly torn himself away, and was racing up the rugged street, with the yellow dog in hot pursuit.

CHAPTER 13.

D'Arcy Does Not Drink.

TOM MERRY and Wally found a way down round the bluff, and they came down into the trail. But Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and Blake were not to be seen. They had evidently already entered Gold Brick.

The juniors walked into the camp.

Many of the dwellers of Gold Brick were away up in the gulches working on their claims, but there were a good many fellows in the town. In the street of Gold Brick almost every other house was a liquor saloon, and several of them were doing a good trade, even in the morning. The camp depended for its existence as much upon the cattlemen from the neighbouring ranches with their wages to spend, as upon the miners. Cowboys in huge boots and spurs, and miners in red shirts were in the street, and more than one copper-coloured Indian, Navajo or Apache.

Jack Blake came along the street and ran into Tom Merry and Wally and stopped.

"Seen Gussy or Skimpole?" he asked.

"No. I expect Skimmy's taking notes."

"Colonel Stalker's at the Gold Brick Hotel—I've found him there. And the redskin's with him—the chap we met in the Rockies, you know—the Blackfoot."

"The Hawk? I shall be glad to see him again!"

"We're to go there to lunch. Hallo, there's Skimmy! I'll go and collect him while you look round for the other ass." And Blake rushed off.

A loud roar of laughter was proceeding from a saloon near at hand as Tom Merry and Wally paused and looked about them, but they did not connect it with D'Arcy until a well-known voice was heard proceeding from the place.

"I should be sowwy to hurt the feelin's of any gentleman pwesent, but undah the circs I must uttahly and absolutely wefuse!"

Tom Merry and Wally looked at one another expressively, and D'Arcy minor grinned.

"It's Gus; he's in there!"

"The young ass! What on earth did he enter a place like that for?"

Tom Merry looked up at the saloon. There was a row of lamps in the front—unlighted now, of course—and on each lamp was daubed in red paint the name of the place, "The Full Hand." That title, of course, was borrowed from the great game of poker, the national card-game of the States. Why the swell of St. Jim's should enter the Full Hand was a mystery to Tom Merry, but it was evident that D'Arcy was in trouble of some kind, and Tom and Wally looked in at the door.

"Weally, deah boys, I assuah you that I do not dwink!"

It was the voice of Arthur Augustus in polite expostulation. Tom Merry could not help grinning as he looked into the saloon—the swell of St. Jim's seemed so extremely out of place amid his rough surroundings.

There were several rough miners in the saloon, and a bar-keeper with a red face leaning on the bar. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was facing Long Jim, the big miner whom the boys had met on the trail a few days previously. Long Jim seemed to be hugely enjoying the joke, and the miners round were laughing and chuckling.

"Drink it up," said Long Jim; "it'll do you good, I guess!"

D'Arcy shook his head decidedly. Long Jim was offering him a drink, and the swell of St. Jim's had not the slightest intention of taking it. He did not like whisky under any circumstances, and the fearful and wonderful concoction which went by the name of whisky in the Full Hand Saloon was undoubtedly much worse than the genuine article.

"Weally, I do not dwink!" he repeated. "I should be vewy pleased to join you in a lemonade or gingah-beer!"

"Haw, haw, haw!" roared Long Jim; and the spectators shrieked.

The idea of drinking lemonade or ginger-beer seemed to strike them all in an extremely comical light.

"Haw, haw, haw! Carry me hum to die!" said Long Jim. "Now, you've had your little joke, young galoot—now drink the whisky!"

"I am sowwy, but it is quite imposs."

Long Jim's brow darkened.

"I dessay," he remarked, in measured tones; "I dessay you don't know the customs of this hyer country!"

"Quite poss; I am weally a stwangah heah, you know."

"It's a custom in Arizony to take a drink when it's offered," said Long Jim. "You kain't refuse to drink with a gentleman without insultin' him."

"I should be extwemely sowwy to insult any gentleman pwesent, but I must absolutely wefuse to dwink intoxicatin' liquah."

"You'll take that drink," said Long Jim.

"Nothin' of the sort."

"Then I guess I shall be kinder insulted."

"I am sowwy. As you seem bent upon pickin' a quawwel with me," said D'Arcy, with dignity, "I weally think I had bettah wetire." And he made a movement to go.

"Stand where you are!" roared Long Jim.

D'Arcy looked at him through his eyeglass.

"I am not accustomed to bein' addwessed in that tone," he said. "I wegard you as a wuff and wude person. I uttahly wefuse to dwink with you. I came into this place in search of a little light wefweshment——"

"He asked me for ginger-beer, he did," said the bar-keeper. "He asked me—me for ginger-beer, he did."

"I am sowwy that I appeah to have entahed the w'ong sort of establishment," said D'Arcy. "I meant no offence to any gentleman pwesent. I will wetire——"

"Stand where you are!"

"I wefuse to do so."

"Stand where you are!" repeated Long Jim, dragging at the revolver in his belt. "Now, then, hands up!"

The revolver was levelled.

Arthur Augustus looked startled. He could not believe that Long Jim would shoot—but the man had been drinking, and D'Arcy had read a great deal about the reckless shooting in Western mining-camps. The swell of St. Jim's turned pale for a moment.

"I twust," he said calmly, and with dignity, "that you will not act like a murdewous wuffian! I am unarmed, havin' unfortunately left my twusty wevolvah at the wanch. I weally considah——"

"Hands up!"

Tom Merry dashed forward. He could not tell what the man meant to do, but he was naturally alarmed.

"Hold on!" he exclaimed. "Gussy, come along! I——"

"What are you chippin' in for?" said Long Jim. "Stand back!"

"Rats!" said Tom Merry.

"Hold him, pards!"

Two burly fellows grasped hold of Tom Merry and Wally

in a moment, and dragged them back. It was in vain for the juniors to struggle—they were as infants in the grasp of the brawny miners.

Long Jim grinned at them.

"I guess you can keep your fingers outer this deal," he remarked. "I'm kinder runnin' this hyer show."

He turned back to Arthur Augustus. The swell of St. Jim's was making a movement to go to the aid of his friends, but the revolver of Long Jim looked him fairly in the face. The miners round were serious enough now. The matter might be a joke, but when firearms entered into a joke in a drinking-saloon, the possibility of reckless shooting was always present—the comedy might become a tragedy at any moment.

"Hands up!" said Long Jim sharply.

Arthur Augustus did not move his hands.

"I wefuse to obey a wequest made in such a tone," he replied; "it would be an infwaction of my dig to do so."

Long Jim looked at him steadily. He had started ragging the dude, anticipating from D'Arcy's personal appearance that he had a lisping lah-di-dah to deal with, who would be frightened almost out of his wits by a levelled revolver. But the swell of St. Jim's was made of sterner stuff than that.

The big miner pointed with his disengaged hand at the glass of whisky still standing on the bar.

"I guess you'll drink that," he said.

"I have alweady declined to do so."

"You'll drink that."

"I wefuse to dwink it."

"You'll drink it," said Long Jim, "or I pull trigger. Take your ch'ice."

"You may do as you like," said Arthur Augustus. "You have the advantage of me at the pwesent moment, and I can only say that I considah you no gentleman. I wefuse to dwink that whiskay!"

Crack!

Long Jim had kept his word. The revolver rang out, and Arthur Augustus uttered a sharp cry and staggered back.

CHAPTER 14.

Pongo Has a Narrow Escape.

TOM MERRY gave a cry, and struggled desperately to get loose. For a moment he believed that the swell of St. Jim's had been shot. But the next moment he was reassured. It was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's silk hat that had received the bullet, and it had been carried off his head by the impact. The silk hat crashed on the floor, and D'Arcy staggered with the shock. The miners burst into a roar of laughter.

Long Jim was grinning.

"I guess I'm a galoot of my word," he remarked. "I said I'd pull trigger. You'll want a new topper, I guess, young galoot!"

D'Arcy looked dazed for a moment. He had faced death, but it was only a grim joke, and it was only his silk hat that had been in danger. He looked at the perforated topper.

"You wuffian!" he murmured. "You feahful beast! ou have uttahly wuined my hat!"

"Haw, haw, haw!"

Tom Merry and Wally gasped with relief. Arthur Augustus picked up his hat, and Long Jim returned the revolver to his belt. The juniors of St. Jim's were released. Long Jim picked up the glass of whisky that D'Arcy had refused.

"I guess he's a plucked 'un, though he's a dude!" he remarked. "Hyer's to you, young galoot, anyway!" And he tossed off the whisky.

"Thank you," said D'Arcy. "I wegard this as a wathah wuff joke, but I am glad you are not such a feahful cad as I had imagined." And he walked out of the saloon with Tom Merry and Wally, leaving the miners shouting with laughter.

Tom Merry gripped the swell of St. Jim's by the arm as he hurried him up the street.

"You young ass!" he growled. "If you go into a place like that again, I'll jump on your neck!"

"I was in want of a little light wefweshment——"

"Suppose that duffer's aim had been bad?" said Wally. "He meant to pot your hat, but he might easily have potted your brain-box by mistake! He couldn't have blown out your brains, as you haven't any, of course!"

"Weally, Wally——"

"Hallo, here's the Gold Brick Hotel! We're to go in to lunch here with Colonel Stalker. The Hawk is here, too."

The boys entered the hotel—a rough-board shanty dignified with that name—and found Blake and Skimpole there with the colonel. There was an addition to the party in the person of Hawk the Blackfoot, whom the juniors had encountered in the Rocky Mountains, on his way south to visit the Poinsett Ranch.

"Jolly glad to see you, Hawk!" said Tom Merry, shaking hands with the chief.

"The heart of the Hawk is glad as the wild birds in summer to see the young white chief once more!" said the Blackfoot.

And then they had lunch. It was a solid lunch, and the juniors did full justice to it. After the meal was over they went out to see something more of the mining-camp. It is needless to say that D'Arcy's appearance attracted some attention, but the presence of Colonel Stalker prevented any further attempt at ragging on the part of the Gold Brick miners. The colonel was well-known and respected in the camp—and, besides, he had a reputation as a man who was not to be "fooled" with.

The juniors inspected the claims along the river—the ditches and dams, and the cradles where the gold was washed out—with great interest.

It was growing dusk when they thought of home. Wally was looking a little anxious. He had not seen Pongo since witnessing the dog-fight from the bluff. He had expected to come across his favourite during the afternoon, but nothing had been seen of the dog.

The colonel glanced at the sun. It was setting in the west, towards the Rio Colorado and the mountains of California, in a blaze of purple and gold.

"I guess it's time we vamoosed!" he remarked.

"I haven't found Pongo," said Wally.

"Blow Pongo!" said Blake. "It's always Pongo! Toujours Pongo! Blow Pongo!"

"I'm not going without Pongo!"

They were standing in the street on Gold Brick, after their tour of inspection, when they spoke. Long Jim passed them, with his pick on his shoulder, evidently returning from his work up the gulch.

"I guess you want to look arter your dorg!" he remarked.

Wally turned to him quickly. Rough as his joke had been in the Full Hand Saloon, he was evidently a kindly and good-natured fellow.

"Have you seen him?" he asked eagerly.

Long Jim grinned.

"Gin Sling's got him."

"Gin Sling?" said Wally. He had heard of an American drink of that name, and Long Jim's words puzzled him.

The big miner chuckled.

"Gin Sling's the Chinee laundryman," he said. "He digs at the white cabin up the street thar. I just passed him, and he's got a dog in his cabin."

"What on earth can he want with the dog?" said Blake.

"Supper, I guess!" And Long Jim grinned and passed on.

Colonel Stalker chuckled a little, and a grim smile crossed the face of the Hawk, who had just joined the group.

"Ugh! Chinese eat dog," said the Blackfoot; "let us go!"

Wally was already tearing off towards the cabin pointed out by Long Jim. The others followed, but at a less hurried pace. They reached the cabin. The door was open, and the Chinese laundryman could be seen sitting within, cleaning his cooking utensils before a stove. Pongo lay on the floor, tied with a strong cord so that he could not move a limb. He was whining softly.

Wally burst furiously into the cabin.

"You scoundrel!" he roared. "Give me my dog!"

He jerked out his pocket-knife and began to cut Pongo loose. The Chinee jumped up so suddenly that his utensils went to the floor with a clatter. He glared excitedly at Wally.

"No takee!" he roared. "My dogee—me cookee!"

"It's my dog, you heathen beast!"

"Me findee—stlay dogee—me cookee for suppee!"

"I'll cook you if you bother me!" growled Wally. "Get off, you rotten heathen!"

He tore Pongo loose. The dog snuggled up gladly enough in his young master's arms. But the Chinaman was looking angry. He caught up a heavy saucepan and advanced upon D'Arcy minor.

"No takee dogee!" he exclaimed.

"Rats!"

"No takee! Me stlikee—me killee!"

"I guess you'll go slow," drawled Colonel Stalker, looking in at the door. The Chinaman turned towards him, and the sun glinted upon a levelled six-shooter. The heathen turned sickly in hue, and dropped on his knees.

"Ow—ow! No shootee—no shootee!" he wailed.

"I guess I ought to rub you out!" said the colonel, with a grin, which the terrified Celestial was too agitated to see.

"No shootee! Me good Chinee! No shootee!"

Wally brought Pongo out of the cabin. Gin Sling grovelled on the floor. The colonel returned his revolver to his belt.

"I guess I'll let you off, John," he remarked.

"Me tankee. Me good Chince."

And they left the cabin, leaving the unfortunate Celestial shaking like a jelly. Wally was careful to put Pongo's chain on now, and when the party returned to the Gold Brick Hotel, Pongo trotted after his master as quietly as a lamb.

"I guess we're going to ride hum," said the colonel, in response to a question from Tom Merry. "I've got hosses at the hotel hyer."

"Vewy good; I shall be glad to wide back to the wanch."

"We're not going back to that ranch."

"No," said Tom Merry. "Where are we going, then?"

"To Mr Poinsett's other ranch," said the colonel, who had just opened and read a note given him by the landlord. "This is from Mr. Poinsett. He wants us to go back to the other shebang. Your traps have been sent over, and you'll find the nigger there, too."

Tom Merry remembered what he had heard from Antonio. He was more mystified than ever.

"Then my uncle has another ranch?" he asked.

The colonel laughed.

"I guess so."

"But—but why—I did not know——"

"I reckon Mr. Poinsett will explain."

Tom's face set a little. He felt that he had been played with, to some extent, and he would want an explanation, too.

They mounted and rode out of Gold Brick in the dusk of the Arizona night. Tom Merry was thinking deeply. They followed the trail towards the ranch as far as the fork, and there they turned in a new direction. The route lay more to the southward, and many a long mile slipped under the feet of the tireless horses. A dark wood loomed up ahead in the glimmer of the moon.

Thick and dark the wood looked—ceiba and malva growing thickly, interlaced with Spanish moss and heavy llianas. The path that ran through the chapparrai seemed to have been hewn by an axe, as if the road-makers had been tunnelling through the chapparal as they might have tunnelled through solid rock. Overhead, as the riders entered the path, the thick branches and thicker creepers were interlaced, shutting out every ray of the moon.

There was the sound of a horse in the deep darkness. The colonel halted, and his companions followed his example.

"Who's there?" called out Colonel Stalker. And the Hawk grasped his knife. The juniors did not know it, but the dense chapparal was the haunt of many a "rustler" who would have been glad to demand the ready cash of the travellers at the muzzle of the revolver.

There was a chuckle from the gloom

"It's all right, old Stalky!"

"Hallo, Poinsett!"

"I've come out to meet you," said the rancher, his voice coming strangely from the darkness, where he was quite invisible. "Are you all there?"

"I guess so."

"You there Tom, my lad?"

"Yes, sir," said Tom Merry.

"Good! Come on; the ranch is ready. You ride beside me, Tom."

Tom pushed his mustang forward, and felt the rancher next to him. They rode on in darkness. It was impossible to guide the mustangs; but they knew the way well enough. The chapparral was left behind, and the riders came out upon a moonlit plain.

Tom Merry looked around him.

In the moonlight he could see in the distance vast herds of cattle on the plain, moving like shadows, or lying still in the grass.

Ahead was a gleam of light from a building.

"That's the ranch, Tom," said Mr. Poinsett.

As they drew nearer, Tom Merry could see that it was an imposing building—something of what he had first expected to see as his uncle's home. Round it were groves of trees, and on the flat roof could be seen palms waving their fronds in the night breeze.

The boy was more mystified than ever.

"Is this your house, uncle?" he asked, in a low voice.

"I guess so, lad."

"Then—then the other——"

The rancher chuckled.

"I reckon I'll explain as soon as we get in, sonny."

But Tom Merry's lips were set hard.

CHAPTER 15.

A Surprise for Tom Merry.

THEY dismounted at the door of the ranch, and men came forward to take the horses away. In the entrance Pompey the darkey was waiting, and he grinned with huge delight at the sight of Tom Merry, from whom he had been separated for several days. Tom Merry glanced about him, and gave Pomp a friendly thump on the shoulder.

"I'se glad to see Mass' Tom," said Pomp fervently—"I'se debblish glad. Mass' Tom looking berry well."

"Bai Jove, this is a bit diffewent fwom the othah place," murmured Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

The hall was paved, and led through into the courtyard in the centre of the block of buildings; the ranch, like many of the wealthier ranches of the south-west, being built in the style of the Mexican "hacienda."

In the centre court could be heard the tinkle of falling waters, where a fountain surrounded by leafy palms was at play.

The adobe walls of the house were covered with panelling or rich hangings, and the foot sank into deep carpets.

The air of wealth and comfort amazed the juniors, after what they had seen of the other establishment of the eccentric Mr. Poinsett.

Quiet and obedient peons—Mexican half-breed servants—showed the juniors to a large room, which was sumptuously furnished and provided with five beds.

Everything was in elegant and excellent style.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy smiled with satisfaction at the sight of the hip baths, and cans of hot water placed ready.

"Bai Jove, deah boys, this is just what I want!" he remarked. "Aftah our wuffin' it for so long, I shall simply wevel in a warm bath."

"Yes, rather!" said Wally. "I hope they're looking after Pongo all right. That grinning rascal Antonio is here, and he took my dog."

"We're in the land of plenty," said Blake. "I only want to be sure that it isn't all a dream, and that we shall not wake up presently in beds on the planks in the log cabin."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Dear me, this is really most surprising," said Skimpole. "I must make a few notes before I dress for dinner."

"Wats! The majah-domo said dinnah was at seven-thirty, and we have only half an hour to dwess," said D'Arcy severely. "I am surpwised at you, Skimpole."

"I must make a few notes——"

"Wats! Leave your wotten notes till aftahwards."

"It is most important——"

Blake flicked the notebook out of Skimmy's hand.

"You shall have this back after dinner," he remarked.

"Really, Blake——"

"Oh, ring off, duffer!"

"Bai Jove, here are our twunks!" said D'Arcy, with more and more satisfaction. "And here, bai Jove, is my evening attire, laid out all weady! Why, things aren't done bettah than this at Eastwood!"

"Rather not," said Wally. "I never thought they dressed for dinner on a ranch in Arizona, but it looks like it."

"What do you say, Merry?" asked Blake.

"Yes, rather!" said Tom.

Tom was still looking a little worried. The juniors dressed for dinner, and felt greatly refreshed after a bath and a change into fresh linen and clean clothes. They descended the stairs. The stairs led down through a covered way into the court. The juniors glanced about them in great admiration. The courtyard was a blaze of tropical vegetation. The fountain in the centre sparkled and shimmered in the moonlight.

They entered the dining-room. Mr. Poinsett, looking a very different kind of man in evening clothes, was standing before the fire.

The table was laid, with a gleaming of spotless cloth and bright silver.

The juniors were more and more amazed.

The house seemed more suitable for Park Lane in London or Fifth Avenue in New York, than for the wilds of Arizona. The expense of furnishing the ranch, at so great a distance from centres of civilisation, must have been enormous. It began to be evident that Mr. Poinsett was a man of taste, and that he stopped at no expense to gratify his taste.

The rancher looked at the juniors with a smile.

"Welcome to Poinsett Ranch," he said.

Tom Merry was silent. But Arthur Augustus D'Arcy asked questions.

"I am weally surpwised, if you will permit me to make the wemark, my dear sir," he said. "This is vewy diffewent from the othah wanch, sir."

Mr. Poinsett chuckled.

"Yes, I guess so. But dinner is served, young gentlemen."

They dined. Tom Merry was very quiet, but Mr. Poinsett, who seemed to be in boisterous spirits, did not notice it.

Colonel Stalker was in evening clothes down to his waist, but he wore breeches and big boots, and there was the butt of a revolver showing near his spotless shirt-front. He was laughing and talking with great hilarity, and the high spirits of the two ranchers infected the boys, and even the Hawk allowed a smile to glide over his bronze face.

Tom Merry was the only one who was at all silent.

After dinner, coffee was taken into the court, where Mr. Poinsett drew his nephew apart on a seat under a big ceiba-tree, while the others lounged among the tropical ferns and flowers.

Tom Merry sipped his coffee quietly, while the rancher lighted a big Mexican cigar. He chuckled quietly as he looked at his nephew.

"I guess I've surprised you, Tom"

"Yes, sir," said Tom Merry quietly.

"You must excuse a little harmless deception, Tom. You are my sister's son, and I wanted to put you in my will for all I die possessed of. But I didn't intend to leave my money to a ninny. I meant to make you come out here and rough it on a ranch, and prove yourself a man, before I left you my money. But it hasn't been necessary to put you through it for so long as I anticipated. You are true blue, and you've shown it at once."

"Thank you, sir!"

"I received you at the old ranch—on purpose. That was my ranch twenty years ago, when I was a struggling cattle-raiser, when I first came West. I let you rough it there, and I let Mr. Finn put you through a course of sprouts, as we say out West. You stood the test well."

Tom Merry was silent.

"When I saw how you handled horses, how you took the risks of the cowboys among the cattle, I felt that you were the right stuff; but I put you to the test all the same. But Mr Finn's report to me after rounding up the cattle yesterday was enough. You risked your life to save Buck Finn. You rode up to a bush to see if redskins were ambushed there. You couldn't do more. I knew then you were grit all through, and I made up my mind that you should be my heir, and that it was time the game was played out."

"I understand."

Mr. Poinsett, in his high spirits, did not notice the constraint in his nephew's manner. He went on contentedly.

"You are the heir of thirty thousand acres in Arizona, of a third part of Gold Brick Camp, and a fortune of over a million in cool cash. That's what's coming to you, Tom, when your old uncle passes in his checks."

Tom did not speak.

"I shall send you back to England to finish your education at St. Jim's. I want you to take Buck Finn back with you. His father is ambitious to have him educated at a first-class English school, and I know you'll lend him a hand, a bit, at first, Tom, like a brave lad as you are."

"I'll help him all I can," said Tom Merry.

"Good! And later, you'll come out West again and see your old uncle. What do you say, Tom? Do you like the prospect I've sketched out?"

"No."

Tom Merry made the reply in a low, but clear, voice. The rancher started, and dropped his cigar. He stared at Tom Merry.

"What did you say?"

Tom Merry stood up. He looked very handsome as he stood there in the moonlight, his face a little pale, but very resolute.

"I said 'No,'" he replied. "You have treated me badly. You deceived me; you allowed your cattlemen to make a fool of me. I've been fooled all along, and everybody, I suppose, has been grinning at my simplicity. If you had been the poorest hand on the ranch instead of a millionaire I should have felt the same towards you when I came out. I didn't come here as a fortune-hunter. I came, expecting to be treated fairly, and I wasn't treated fairly. You've made a fool of me, and you can't expect me to like it. That's all."

Mr. Poinsett's face was a study. He was so used to lording it over his thirty thousand acres, that opposition to his supreme will had never entered into his mind. He stared at his nephew for some moments, and then the thunderclap came.

"You impudent young scoundrel!" he roared. "Is this how you speak to your uncle, who's taken all this trouble to make a man of you? This is what comes of your being coddled by Priscilla Fawcett, I suppose?"

Tom's lips trembled.

"Don't you say a word against Miss Fawcett," he said. "I won't stand it, uncle or not! Another word like that, and I'll leave your house this minute, if I have to walk across the prairie to the railroad."

"You young jackanapes!"

Tom Merry set his lips and turned away. The rancher stared after him for a moment; the boy's determination was plain enough.

Mr. Poinsett started to his feet.

"Tom, don't go! You young fool, are you going to quarrel with thirty thousand acres and five million dollars?"

"Hang your acres and dollars!"

"You—you—you—— But you're quite right. Come back, Tom, and hang the acres and the dollars!" gasped the rancher. "Come back, my boy! Don't leave your old uncle."

The change in the rancher's voice melted Tom Merry's heart at once. He stopped, and looked back hesitatingly.

"Come back, Tom," said Mr. Poinsett. "Isn't it enough when your uncle admits he was wrong? You said the truth; I had no right to play that game on you. If I had known you I shouldn't have done it. I'm sorry, Tom."

"Oh, don't!" said Tom. "It's all right. Only I——"

"I guess you're the nephew I've been wanting," said the rancher, in a curiously soft voice. "Hang the dollars! No seeking after dead men's shoes about Tom Merry. I guess not! My lad, you shall do as you like—anything you like—only—only don't run away, my boy!"

"I won't," said Tom, laughing. "I—I'm sorry I lost my temper, only——"

"You were right, my boy—quite right. But it's all over now. We're friends—eh? You're not going to bully your old uncle any more?"

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus, coming along in time to hear the last remark. "I am surpwised at you, Tom Mewwy. If I had an uncle like this I should make it a particulah point to chewish him. If you are at all dissatisfied I have a couple of aunts I will swap for your uncle, deah boy."

And Mr. Poinsett roared. He was in a humour now to be pleased with anything. And the evening, after all, turned out to be the jolliest one the juniors had spent in Arizona.

. . . . . .

The secret was out, and Tom Merry was on the best of terms with his uncle. If Tom had had at all a weak nature, he would certainly have been spoiled by the rancher. Nothing was too good for him, in Gabriel Poinsett's opinion, and everybody about the ranch, too, treated him with the greatest respect as the heir of the ranch and the great wealth of the Cattle King.

But Tom Merry was not the kind of fellow to get a swelled head. He was always the same—modest and good-tempered, with the same sunny smile for everyone

Needless to say, the juniors enjoyed the remainder of their stay in the Far West, and felt keen enough regrets when the time came to part.

Mr. Poinsett and Colonel Stalker and Hawk the Blackfoot and Pomp the darkey came with them as far as Santa Fe on the return journey. Pomp was inconsolable at not being able to accompany "Mass' Tom" back to England, but he was promised that he should see Tom Merry again, when the hero of St. Jim's came back to Arizona, and meanwhile he was to stay at the ranch—a more comfortable position than that in which Tom Merry had first found him in Chicago.

At Santa Fe, Gabriel Poinsett parted from his nephew, with a sad face. In those few short weeks he had come to be very fond of Tom, and he felt the parting keenly. The juniors waved their hands to the old man as he stood on the station with the Blackfoot, and watched the departing train, Pongo also barking a farewell.

Colonel Stalker saw the boys as far as the farm in Wyoming where Blake's uncle lived, and where the boys were to spend a few days before returning to New York. Buck Finn was by this time quite one of the party, and when the chums travelled eastward at last, the American boy was looking forward eagerly to seeing the Old Country, and to his new life as a junior at St. Jim's.

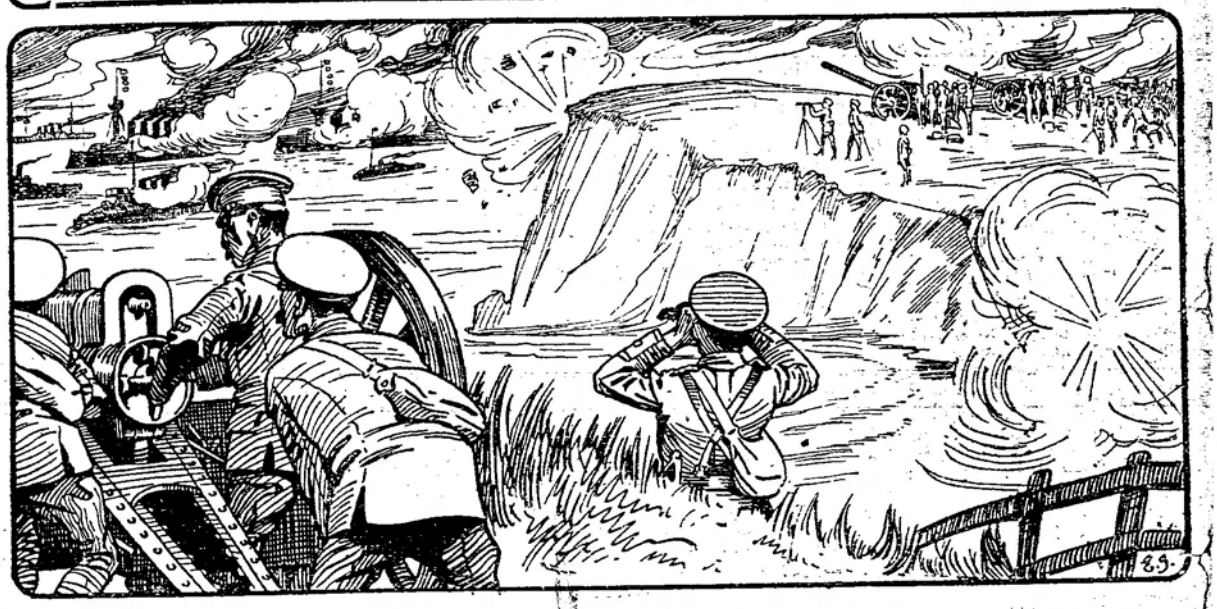
It was not without regret that the juniors bade farewell to the American continent, yet they gladly embarked at New York, and as they steamed past Sandy Hook they were thinking gleefully of the return to St. Jim's. Skimpole's notebooks were full, in fact, crammed, and he was quite ready to settle down in his study at St. Jim's and write his book. Tom Merry & Co. were thinking of the reunion with all their old chums, and gladly enough they greeted the sight of the shores of Old England.

THE END.

(Next Thursday's "GEM" will contain a grand long, complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's, entitled "The Ragging of Buck Finn," by Martin Clifford. 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, and comin' in fast. 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.

General Sir Sholto Nugent 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 makes a glorious victory of it. Bad news, however, comes from the north. There, the British have suffered a terrible defeat. Sam and Steve volunteer to take despatches to the commander of the beaten force from Sir Sholto Nugent. While making their way across the River Blackwater, the two boy scouts are run down by a German torpedo-boat. Sam and Steve float about for a time, and hesitate whether to clamber aboard a yacht which is coming down stream with the tide.

(Now go on with the Story.)

Face to Face with the Kaiser!

"But what's the yacht for?" muttered Stephen.

"Goodness knows! P'r'aps she's bringin' some big officer Johnnie over on the quiet. It looks like it," replied Sam.

"She's goin' dead slow."

"Most likely she don't know the Channel well. You can hear 'em heavin' the lead. The torpedo-boat was piloting her up."

"She'll come mighty close. Will they see us?" whispered Stephen.

"Keep low, an' don't splash."

The boat was so low in the water as to be scarcely visible at all, and the boys' heads only could be seen as they trod water beside her. It seemed likely enough that those on the yacht would fail to notice them.

Slower and slower she went, edging along till she was nearly abreast the brothers, and they saw she was a powerful-looking though not a large yacht, and could probably go very fast if she liked. The only men visible on her were two on the little bridge, doubtless the captain and steersman—and another in the bows, who was heaving the lead, and calling out the depths in low, guttural German. When barely twenty yards from the boys her engines almost ceased, and she remained hove-to, just stemming the tide.

"That's it," whispered Stephen; "she's waitin' for the torpedo-boat to come back an' lead her up. Gosh! If we could only stick her on the mud!"

"No chance of doin' that," murmured Sam. "By gum, though," he whispered, as a thought struck him, "there's something we can do! Anyway, we'll have a try at it."

He reached over with his arm and fished about in the bottom of the swamped boat till he found the rope Stephen had coiled up, and dragged it out.

"What are you goin' to do?" said Stephen

"Wait here, an' don't make a row, whatever you do," rejoined Sam.

And before Stephen could ask any questions his brother had struck off towards the yacht with a slow, silent stroke, taking the rope with him. In a couple of minutes he was back.

"What have you done with the rope?" said Stephen.

"Hitched it round her propeller," chuckled Sam grimly. "The blades were goin' so slowly it was easy enough. It's half wound up by now. She won't get to Maldon to-night!"

"Glory!" muttered Stephen. "I wish the tide'd let us stay an' see the fun! She's startin' again."

A bell clanged once in the engine-room, and the screw began to beat a little more quickly. After about a dozen beats, however, it seemed to slacken. There were words from the yacht's bridge—hot, fretful words—the engine-room bell clanged twice in two sharp notes; the engines redoubled their speed; the screw threw up foam, and then stopped dead. Grinding, bumping noises were heard in the engine-room, and angry voices on deck, and then steam was quickly rung off.

The screw had completely wound up the rope Sam had hitched to it, and, as screws always do in such a case, had jammed itself tight. The yacht was drifting down the tide as helplessly as a log, and the boys laughed silently and with huge glee as they heard the oaths on deck, and saw a boat being hastily lowered from the davits.

"They're goin' aft to see what's wrong," grinned Sam.

"Think she's run over some fishin'-nats, I reckon!" chuckled Stephen. "How cross the high-born suckling in the cabin will be, whoever he is! If we've missed our fight he's missed his, an' that's some consolation. I say, we've drifted rather closer. Hadn't we better swim off an' try to get back to the south shore?"

Sam, after a quick glance up and down, decided they would have to, though it was a long swim in their clothes. They were driving in too close to the yacht and the boat which had put off from her.

"Come on!" he whispered, striking out silently from the swamped craft.

A guttural cry reached him from the yacht's boat the same moment, however, she turned and came dashing towards the boys, the oars making the water fly

"They've seen us!" said Sam. "We can't escape 'em! Get rid of those despatches—quick!"

Stephen tore open the breast of his light Service jacket and hastily crumpled up the papers, which Sam had already done, letting them go under water, and hoping the tide would carry them swiftly away. The boat was already almost upon the boys, and, with four men in it, it was plain resistance was useless, for the brothers had not a weapon between them.

"Get hold of that one there!" said a harsh voice in German, as the boat came up with Sam. "What are they?"

"Britishers!" said a big seaman, with an oath, grabbing Sam by the collar.

The cadet knew well enough that to escape the boat's crew was utterly impossible, but he made it as difficult as he could to haul him aboard, and as soon as he was there he grabbed his assailant and threw him, hoping the delay might give Stephen time to get away.

"Curse the cub, he's showing fight!" exclaimed the boatswain, seizing a stretcher and making a cut at Sam's head as he rolled over with his captor. "That shows they're up to some mischief. They aren't here by accident. Donnerwetter, Hans, can't you master the brat?"

A couple of them pinned Sam down, and the first man sat on him heavily, while the others bent to their oars again.

"After the other one—sharp!" ordered the boatswain. "Where is he? Pull, you lazy dogs, or I'll move some of you!"

"Away to the left there somewhere, sir," said the bow oar. "No: that's a sunken boat."

"Round with her! Strike in towards the shore!" cried the boatswain. "Blitzen! It's like having a lot of old fraus in the boat!"

Sam's hopes rose high for a few moments, for it was plain they had lost sight of Stephen altogether. But a moment later there was another shout.

"I see him! Pull away!"

"What do you want?" Sam heard his brother say, in pure German. "Can't a man swim the river without you lubbers running over him?"

"Blitzen! It's one of our fellows!" exclaimed the bow oar.

"No, it isn't, you thickhead! It's another British brat! Can't you see his uniform?" snarled the boatswain.

There was a sudden scuffle, and the boat heeled violently. Amid great splashing and kicking, Stephen was hauled aboard, and the first thing he saw was his brother in the bottom of the boat, with the German seaman sitting on him.

"What! Have they got you, Sam?" said Stephen gloomily, as he was dragged across the thwarts. "I hoped you'd dodged 'em. I wouldn't have tried to get away if I'd known."

"You silly young ass, that's just what I wanted you to do!" gasped Sam. "Have you got rid of that paper?" he added, quickly and anxiously.

"Yes."

"Thank Heaven for that!"

"They're soldiers of some sort, by their clothes," said Stephen's captor, looking at him.

"Never mind what they are; throw them down and get back to the yacht," raged the boatswain. "Don't you hear the skipper shouting like a foghorn? Get a move on you! Do you forget who we've got on board? He'll soon remind you, you swabs!"

As the boat went flying back to the larger vessel the boatswain glanced at the two prisoners.

"I'd bet a chew they'd something to do with our propeller fouling," he growled. "If so, a bullet apiece will soon pay them for it!"

"Hi, you!" cried the captain fiercely from the yacht's bridge. "What in blazes do you mean by going off like that? I'll break you for it, you dogs!"

"Beg pardon, Herr Captain. We found two English soldiers in the water, and believe it was they who fouled our screw, so we made them prisoners."

"Devil take the prisoners! Get aft and see to the propeller!" roared the captain.

And the boatswain hastily obeyed.

"What is this delay, and why is the yacht going astern?" said a deep, commanding German voice from the deck.

What the captain's reply was the boys could not hear as the boat went to the yacht's stern. An engineer in the stern-sheets made a rapid examination, reaching down to the screw with a boathook.

"She's picked up a rope and jammed. There'll be no starting her engines till she's docked," he said.

"I'll bet a hogshead of beer these cubs had a hand in it!" growled the boatswain fiercely. "Get back under the davits—quick!"

A couple of minutes later the boys were on the yacht's deck, confronted by a grim-looking, black-bearded German skipper, who glared at them savagely as he heard the engineer's report.

"Here comes the torpedo-boat back. We shall have to tow," said the skipper, with a curse. "To think such a thing should happen to-night, of all nights! Get a hawser out, there, and quick about it!"

"Has he gone below, sir?" said the boatswain, under his breath.

"Yes," said the captain grimly. "We shall hear about this later. You say you found these two in the water—they fouled us with that rope?"

"That's what I believe, Herr Captain."

"He must be told at once. Though hang me if I like the job of telling him!" muttered the skipper, striding off nervously to the cabin.

The two boys were kept fast prisoners, held by a couple of the seamen. They saw the torpedo-boat looming up through the darkness as she approached the yacht. The skipper returned.

"Hans, take the prisoners to the cabin," he said to the boatswain. "I have to be on deck to see us made fast."

The big seaman seemed strangely nervous as he marched the boys forward, a large Service revolver in one hand. He watched closely to see they made no attempt to escape, though it was not the boys he seemed afraid of, but of his mission.

Sam and Stephen, knowing that any such attempt was quite useless, and would only end in their being shot in the back, marched in front of their janitor, wondering who the dreaded general was that they were to be brought before, and why he came over at dead of night in a yacht, instead of with his troops.

The boatswain knocked at the cabin door, and the same deep, authoritative voice answered. He opened the door, and the brothers were ushered into a well-lit saloon.

At a desk at the farther end a man was sitting, writing rapidly, while a tall, heavily-built man, in undress military uniform, with his back turned to the boys, was bending over the writer and dictating to him.

"Yes, what is it?" said the tall man, without moving his head.

"The—the prisoners, please, your Majesty," replied the botaswain nervously.

The tall man turned sharply, and not since the great invasion first opened had Sam and Stephen felt the thrill that that moment brought them.

They were face to face with Kaiser Wilhelm, Emperor of Germany!

Prisoners of the Emperor.

For a moment the two cadets could hardly realise it. But one glance was enough. The tall, square frame, grim face, steely eyes, and upward twisting moustache, like the horns of a bull, were beyond mistake. They stood before the great War Lord of Europe—the most ambitious monarch since Napoleon's time, general of four million trained soldiers.

Sam and Stephen, after the first surprise, looked him in the face, and waited with beating hearts for him to speak. The same thought occurred to both—they wished they were armed, and the Kaiser, too. Before them was the man who, without warning, and like a thief in the night, had thrown his legions across the water to strike home at the sleeping British Lion. Behind those sharp eyes was the brain that had turned Essex into a shambles, and brought fire and sword through the land.

"Well," said the deep voice sharply, "who are these?"

"The British prisoners we have just taken out of the water, your Majesty," replied the boatman, saluting.

The Kaiser looked keenly at the boys, and his glance seemed to take in not only their faces, but every stitch of their clothing from top to toe, as they stood there, dripping and dishevelled.

"They are mere children," said the Kaiser. "Why are they brought before me?"

"Your Majesty asked to see them," stammered the boatswain. "It is thought they had some hand in the stopping of the yacht."

"Impossible!" said the Kaiser, looking at the boys again. "You are in uniform!" he said abruptly to Sam. "What is your regiment, if any?"

"The Greyfriars Cadet Corps," replied Sam quietly.

"Schoolboy volunteers—near Frinton," said the Emperor to himself. "Resistance was shown to Von Adler, who destroyed the place. Humph!"

"You have had no part in the fighting, of course?" he said sharply, aloud.

Sam made no reply, but he thought a great deal as he kept his lips closed, and so did Stephen. If the Kaiser chose to think they had done no fighting, all the better.

"How came you in the water?" added the Emperor, who spoke to the boys in English.

"We were crossing the river in a boat, and were cut down by your torpedo-boat in the dark," said Sam.

"Show more respect in your address!" said the secretary, who had drawn near the boys.

Sam took no notice. Kaiser Wilhelm was no sovereign of his, and "your Majesty" would not come from his lips. Nor did the Kaiser pay any attention to the secretary's whispered speech.

A thought seemed to strike Wilhelm.

"Your names?" he said abruptly.

"Aubrey and Stephen Villiers," replied Sam.

The Kaiser raised his eyebrows.

"Ja wohl!" he murmured in his own tongue. "Can these, then, be the young scouts who, it is reported, have given Von Adler so much trouble?"

He turned sternly to them.

"Had you any hand in the fouling of my propeller," he asked quickly, "as my boatman reports?"

"Yes," said Sam simply.

The Kaiser's eyes grew hard and cold as stone.

"Ah!" he said. "You know, I suppose, the penalty for hindering my troops or ships in the German county of Essex?"

"We are regular members of the fighting forces of Britain," replied Stephen. "We aren't civilians."

The Kaiser smiled grimly.

"The Greyfriars' Cadet Corps was never properly enrolled," he replied. "Though you may not know it. You are not of the regular forces. Have you any reason to give why you should not be summarily executed, as set forth by the proclamations of General von Adler, Commandant of German Essex?"

"One good reason," said Sam. "And that is that it's German Essex no longer. The two army corps that held it are defeated, General von Adler a prisoner, and the Union Jack flies again at Southminster."

The Kaiser's eyes flashed with wrath, and his face showed rank unbelief. He drew himself up, and was about to speak, when a boat grated alongside from the torpedo-boat, whose screw could be heard beating without, and a moment later there was a knock at the cabin door, and a young torpedo-lieutenant appeared hurriedly.

"I have important news, sir. Have I your leave to come in?" he said.

"At once!" said the Kaiser. "What is the news?"

"The Third and Fourth Army Corps are almost annihilated, sir, and Nugent has captured General von Adler and his staff——"

A swift change came over the Kaiser's face, and his jaw set like iron.

"Yes—go on!" he said.

"The rout in Essex is complete, sir. But in the north, General von Krantz has defeated Gethin and Ripley, who have fallen back to the south of Ipswich, and are not far away. Nugent's movements are uncertain."

The Emperor's face cleared a little, and he looked before him without speaking for a few moments.

"We have them now!" he said under his breath. "London will fall within the week!" He raised his voice again. "You are sure of this news?"

"I had it from General Blitz's despatch-boat, sir, at Northey Island. The passage is clear to Maldon."

"Are my arrangements all in order?" asked the Kaiser rapidly. The boys seemed to be forgotten, as well they might be.

"Yes, sir. Strood House is prepared for you, and under guard. The wires are laid, and the Marconi installation fixed."

"Then proceed to Maldon with all possible speed! You will take the yacht in tow, and put on full power. Herr Heintz, your writing-desk! Take down this despatch at once!"

"What shall be done with the prisoners, your Majesty?" said the boatswain, saluting.

"Lock them in the fore-cabin, and see that they are imprisoned there securely!" said the Kaiser impatiently. "I may need them when we arrive!"

Sam and Stephen were hustled out of the cabin, and met on deck by two of the crew. Under the bo'sun's directions they were hurried forward, tightly gripped by their gaolers, and thrust down the companion into the fore-cabin. The stout hatch was locked and bolted above them, and, in less than a minute, they felt the yacht moving rapidly ahead, as the torpedo-boat took her in tow.

A Bid for Freedom.

"By Great James!" said Stephen, as soon as he could find his tongue. "Are we dreaming?"

"Dreaming! It's the Kaiser right enough!" said Sam excitedly. "But I'll agree it's the biggest thing we've run against yet. I could hardly believe my eyes!"

"He's come over secretly, then?"

"Yes; to direct the war in his own person. The world knows what Wilhelm is—he trusts nobody but himself in a big affair. He's goin' to take charge of operations!"

"My word!" muttered Stephen. "What do you think'll be the result?"

"Whatever can be done, he'll do. It's a black look-out. You heard him say London would fall?"

"Inside a week!" said Stephen.

"It hasn't fallen yet," returned his brother grimly. "A few other things may happen before that. But the danger's great, there's no denying it, with Gethin driven back, and Von Krantz so near. If they're not checked now——"

"Thank goodness we sunk those despatches!" exclaimed Stephen. "Fancy, if they'd fallen into the Kaiser's hands! An' his men don't know what Nugent's doin'. Wilhelm's goin' to Maldon, then? Strood House, they said. Where's that?"

"A big house on high ground just outside the town. If they've got the wireless telegraph there, an' field wires as well, he couldn't have a better place for gettin' all news an' givin' orders."

"She's hustling to get there," replied Stephen, as the water was heard bubbling past the yacht. "Isn't it queer he didn't board the torpedo-boat, an' leave the yacht behind?"

"He's got a good reason for it, you can bet. She'll save her tide up easily, as it is. Well, we've happened on something that'd surprise all Britain, an' Europe, too, if they knew it. The Kaiser at Maldon! It would be kept dark all the time, too—he wouldn't show up, of course!"

"An' we can't show him up," said Stephen. "It'll never be known. I suppose we're done for, anyhow. We ain't much importance now," he added bitterly, "as we failed at our job. He'll have us shot at Maldon, won't he?"

"I reckon not," said Sam. "After all, I suppose he's a king, an' not a butcher. Better be in his hands than some of his beastly colonels."

"They say he's a merciless sort, though," replied Stephen. "An' there's Colonel Blitz at Maldon, who was achin' to get hold of us after we sunk his transport a fortnight ago. We shall get turned over to him, I bet!"

Sam suddenly roused himself, and began to look round the cabin. It was small, and oblong in shape, with no out-

let but the hatchway down which they had come. A single lamp swung from the ceiling beam, and there was a sleeping-berth on each side, with no beds made up. A couple of varnish-tins and a marlinspike were on the floor, showing the cabin was untenanted, and had been used as a workshop.

"It's no good sniffing round," said Stephen despondently. "That hatch is two-inch teak, bolted an' locked!"

"What's beyond the fore-bulkhead, I wonder?" said Sam.

"The sailors' fo'c's'le. There's no door through into it. I say, what d'you think our chances are, really, at Maldon?"

Sam did not reply. He was examining every inch of the cabin and all the lockers in his usual energetic way. They yielded him no sort of profit, but he continued. Then he had a good look at the portholes—one over each berth.

"These haven't been put in long," he said. "What big ones they are for a yacht! Nearly as large as a liner's!"

"What's the good of that? They aren't big enough to get out by. I could only get my head an' one shoulder through. It's a pity we ain't smaller," grunted Stephen, "or the holes bigger. But they wouldn't be mugs enough to put us in here if they were."

"By gum, though, they might be made bigger!" said Sam, lowering his voice, and speaking with a trace of excitement, as he examined and felt the port all round.

"How? Cut away the metal with a steam-saw?" said Stephen sarcastically.

"No; by unscrewing 'em, an' taking the whole thing out. There's a foot of flat copper frame all round the glass. They're those Hamburg ports, with patent flanges to keep the frames watertight, an' all the screws are on the inside."

Stephen was beside him in a moment.

"Gosh! If the frame an' all were taken out, I believe we could get through!" he exclaimed. "But how's it to be done without a screwdriver?"

"Search for one! A bit of flat metal, or a scraper!" said Sam, rummaging with feverish haste among the drawers and lockers. "There are other tools here. Anything's better than not tryin'!"

Other tools there were, sure enough, but no screwdriver.

"Here's a small chisel," said Stephen. "It might turn the screws."

"Give it here!" said Sam; and snatching it, he applied it to the port.

The smaller, round-headed screws turned well enough, but when he tackled the big ones, the thin blade broke, in spite of all his care. That was a blessing in disguise, however, for the thicker part of the chisel's edge took the groove better, and the steel being of excellent temper, and the handle long, it was but a minute before the first of the large, deep screws came away.

"Good!" said Stephen excitedly, fired by new hope. "Keep it up! We must be above Osea already!"

"Why the dickens didn't we look round at once, instead of talkin'?" said Sam, working away. "But one doesn't meet an Emperor every day!"

He bent all his energies on his task and progressed rapidly, but he could not use great haste, for all depended on the improvised screwdriver holding out against the strain. At length he had the last of the screws out, and inserted the chisel under the flange.

It was lucky for him that he had to deal with one of the Hamburg self-fitting ports, with no screws outside, and he blessed the builder who had attached them to the yacht. Once he had it loose, to unscrew the nuts between the flanges was easy work, and at last the boys were able, with great care, to avoid making any noise, to collapse the hinges and lift the whole port in towards them.

A thrill of joy went through them both as they laid the heavy affair in the berth. There remained in the side a fine wide circular opening, with a narrow copper rim, and through it they could see the stars and the distant mud-flats that lined the river's channel.

"Look sharp!" said Sam. "There's no time to lose! We're abreast Northey Island. You must get through feet first and drop into the water as quietly as you can. Remember all that hangs on it, and the news that we've got to take at any cost. The first to go will be the most likely to get clear, as the noise may be heard by the crew before the next can drop. Off with you!"

"If that's so you must go first," said Stephen quickly; "since so much depends on it, for you're the strongest swimmer, an' know the place best. They won't shoot me if I don't get a chance to go."

Sam paused only a single second. It went against his grain most bitterly, but he saw Stephen was right. It was no time to think of themselves or of each other; to take the best chance of getting clear with the news was their first duty.

"Follow as close on me as you can, then, unless they spot me," he whispered, and gently edged his legs through the open space. It was a tight fit for his broad shoulders, but he managed it, and, letting himself down till he hung outside with only his hands in the opening, he dropped.

Stephen scarcely heard the slight splash his brother made as he took the water; it was drowned in the bubbling of the yacht's wash. The boy paused for an instant to listen for any alarm on deck, but none was given, and he rapidly hoisted his legs through the opening.

Though smaller than his brother, and able to get through more easily, Stephen made the mistake of hoisting himself out too hurriedly, and before his head was clear of the opening he heard a harsh, guttural cry of warning, and the running of booted feet along the deck above.

With an effort Stephen forced himself through, and as his head came out and he swung clear he looked up for the fraction of a second before dropping.

In that one glance he saw the big boatswain, with a furious face, standing at the rail above, and swinging an oar above his head for a deadly blow at the escaping cadet. Near him, wrapped in a military great-coat, and starting forward angrily as he saw the boy, was the Kaiser himself.

But one glimpse did Stephen take as he let go, and the oar came down with terrific force. He felt the wind of it in his hair as it smote with a clang against the yacht's iron side and splintered to pieces. The sound hardly reached him before the water was roaring in his ears, and down he went into the depths.

Sam Makes a Bold Offer.

Stephen turned as the bubbling tide closed over him, and struck out with all his might, downward and ahead, every stroke driving him as far as possible. Not till his lungs were cracking for want of air did he come to the surface, and the first sounds he heard were the shouts and outcries aboard the yacht, now thirty yards distant and still speeding up river.

A revolver spat viciously—once, twice, thrice—the bullets plugging into the water within a few feet of the swimming cadet. He dived again at once, and when he came up he was out of any reasonable revolver range under cover of the darkness. He heard the agonised yells of the German captain calling on the torpedo-boat to stop.

Stephen swam along downwards with the tide as fast as he could use his hands and legs, wondering if he could really be about to escape his mighty gaoler, when a soft whistle like a curlew's, reached him across the water ahead. He whistled in return, striking out towards the spot whence the sound came, and after a few strokes caught sight of Sam, swimming gently in the shallow water near the edge of the mud.

"Up the creek, here—quick!" was all Sam said, forging ahead again with a powerful breast-stroke.

Although at that time of tide the channel was narrow, they were still a good distance from land, for the water had run off the soft flats that stretched between them and the shore itself.

Stephen could see no creek, but his brother turned sharply round a spit of ooze, turned yet again, and the brothers were in a deep rill running right down from the land to the main channel through the great flats of ooze. Once in this, with the muddy walls of the creek to screen them, they could hardly be seen from the deep fairway up which the yacht had passed.

"Are we goin' to slip through the Kaiser's fingers?" gasped Stephen, as he fought his way against the current, which was against them on their way up the creek.

"With luck we'll do it. But don't make a row, for if they find we've gone in here it's all up," said Sam. "They'll move heaven an' earth to get hold of us, alive or dead, for they know we're away with the secret of the Kaiser's coming."

They could see the dark hulls of the yacht and her escort in the channel across the intervening flats, and the cries of the searchers still reached them. The yacht had run some distance up before she was able to stop, having no engines working to stop her way with, so she and the torpedo-boat had to slide along till their way stopped, while everybody swore at once, forgetting all Royal etiquette.

The moment the yacht slowed enough her boat was launched, and the torpedo craft sent off three of her crew in a dinghy. Away went both boats down the river as fast as they could be rowed, a German with a rifle in the bow of each.

"They'll have orders not to return till we're shot or captured," said Sam, as he caught sight of them over the mud.

"Then they'll be out all the giddy night! Sam, I can't swim any farther against this current. I'm done. The water's getting shallow, too."

"Wait till they pass the creek, if they do, an' we'll wade up," said his brother.

It was a moment of intense anxiety for both as the

yacht's boat, a hundred yards below, came abreast the mouth of the creek. Would they see it and turn up it? If so, they must overtake the boys in a minute or less.

But the searchers were paying all their attention to the open water. They knew nothing of the creek's existence, and did not even see it. Sam drew a great breath of relief as they passed its mouth. He waited till they were well below it, and then, touching Stephen, raised himself and began to wade upwards in the shoal water by the creek's edge.

"Keep as low as you can," whispered Sam, "an' don't splash. Sound carries over the water."

Nearly bent double, they made their way laboriously along the muddy slope, the banks on each side hiding them. Very soon the water became a mere trickle, and the bed of the creek was nearly bare.

It had a fairly firm paving of shells and rubble, easier to walk over than the soft ooze of the flats; but it was perilous for the boys, as they came more and more in view from the channel the higher they went. However, they plodded along steadily, and trusted to luck and the darkness, hurrying the more as they saw it would not last much longer. The eastern sky was already beginning to lighten, and the stars grew pale over Mersea Island.

Ahead of them loomed the low embankment and the saltings of Decoy Point, and when at last they reached firm land they threw themselves down among the coarse herbage to get their breath back. At last they were out of reach of the search-party, whose voices they could still faintly hear.

"Slipped through the clutches of a king!" panted Stephen. "Wilhelm isn't the only bristle on the brush."

"No worse to get away from than his own Uhlans," murmured Sam.

"I expect that boatswain'll get his giddy head chopped off!" grinned Stephen. "Serve him right! If the interferin' ass had left us alone there'd have been no trouble!"

"We must push on," said Sam, rising. "Have you got your wind back? That news must be in camp without delay, an' the dawn's breakin'."

The chill grey light of early morning was growing over the land as they hurried away from the estuary. One glance back showed them the two vessels, now nearly a mile away, forging ahead on their way up to Maldon, while the boats were still left below to continue the search.

"There goes the yacht!" muttered Sam. "I wish we'd a six-inch gun here. What a lot of trouble an' lives it would save to drop one shell into her amidships!"

They wasted no time in vain fancies, however, but kept a sharp look-out for German scouts as they went, for they were too near Maldon to be safe from meeting them; yet the place was not guarded and patrolled in the way it had been when they first came down, before General Nugent drove the two Army Corps across to the south side of the Blackwater.

No signs of the enemy were seen, however, and the boys, very foot-weary and anxious to save time, were thinking longingly of the horses they had abandoned on the other side of the river, when suddenly they came upon a large shire horse with a rope halter, grazing in a little paddock near a lonely-looking farmhouse.

"Let's borrow that," said Stephen. "It's only a carthorse, but it'll take us along faster, an' I'm dead-beat."

No sooner said than done. They had no difficulty in catching the great hairy-heeled steed, who stood in mild surprise as they got on his back, Sam in front, handling the halter. No saddle was available, but they did not miss it, and a thump with a hedge-stake sent the carthorse cantering clumsily out through the gate. They urged him along the road at a good pace, and the irrepressible Stephen began to jest as usual on the situation.

"Gethin'll think we're the scouts of a bran'-new War Office corps," he said—"the Royal Carthorse Guards! I say—— Hallo!"

They suddenly came round a bend of the highway, and, too late to pull up, found themselves within thirty yards of a group of German sappers, who were busily doing something to the roadway, but what it was there was no time to see. The Germans, as startled as the boys, dropped their spades and pickaxes with a shout, and jumped for their carbines.

To wheel and turn back was useless. Sam gave a wild yell, and dealt the horse such a whack along the quarters that it broke into a heavy gallop. Another cut made it dash forward at an amazing speed considering its weight, and before there was time to think it was among the sappers.

The great carthorse charged right through them like a fire-engine going at full speed, knocking four or five head over heels and dashing straight on, while the boys gripped with their knees and hung on for their lives. Over went the sappers like ninepins, and hardly was the horse a dozen yards clear of them when there was a sharp, shattering explosion behind that made him fairly bolt, while oaths and yells went up in the rear.

"Some ass has dropped a cake of guncotton!" cried Stephen. "Hang on with teeth and toe-nails!" he added, as three or four carbine bullets came singing past them. "Turn him through the gate, Sam, and round the wood there, or they'll pot us!"

"How the dickens is a chap to do artillery drivin' with a bit of rope?" grunted Sam, bending low as the bullets buzzed past him. But he pressed the halter against the neck of his mount, and swung with all his might. The great plough-horse, used to rough driving, turned obediently and thundered through the gate, giving a loud snort as a bullet scored along his shoulder.

They still heard the raucous cries of the Engineers, and stray slips of lead sang overhead, but the carbines had lost their chance, and a dozen strides took horse and riders across the grass and round the corner of a small wood that screened them from the road. A light gate was in front of them, and Sam had no choice but to ride at it. Instead of rising, the great horse crashed right through it as if it had been paper, and away they went for the next road across the fields, the shouts of the Germans now out of hearing behind them.

"Glory! That was a close call!" said Stephen. "That cake of guncotton blew about six of them to rags!"

"Teach 'em to be more careful with explosives next time," said Sam, loosening the halter. "It spoilt the shootin' of the ones that were left, anyhow. We're well clear of that lot."

"What were they up to?"

"Looked as if they were mining the road. I don't know what for. None of our chaps are likely to come this way. We'll have to report it when we get in."

"It'll be no end of a report we shall make," said Stephen, licking his lips. "Old Flying Fox took us out of it nobly, didn't he? See the way he went through that gate? Like Multum in Parvo, in the Soapy Sponge book."

"Buck up, Dobbin!" said Sam to the horse. "You ain't much to look at, but handsome is as handsome does, an' I doubt if my black charger would have done as well. Hope we sha'n't meet any more Prussians," he added, "for it's broad daylight, an' we sha'n't get a bit of luck like that twice."

"What's that place ahead?" said Stephen.

"Tiptree—where the jam comes from. Afraid the Germans'll have messed up the jam crop this year!" grinned Sam.

"They'll get all the jam they want before they get back," opined Stephen, "an' plenty of pepper with it. But we're two miles off that village yet."

"Layer Marney's farther to the right. I forgot this was the district you didn't know," said Sam. "Hallo, they're at it behind us!"

He turned and looked back in the direction of Maldon. From the heights where they were, the fine old town on its hill at the head of the Blackwater was in plain view, and a couple of puffs of smoke, like little dabs of white wool in the sky, floated above it. Then the growl of heavy guns drifted across to where the boys were.

"What can they be firin' at? Nobody seems to have opened at them," said Stephen.

"Can't make it out, unless Nugent's army corps is passing within range of 'em. Yes, that'll be about the size of it. An' he hasn't time to stop an' engage 'em—he's got to hurry an' join Gethin."

"I'll bet it's the Kaiser's notion—tackling him like that!" said Stephen suddenly.

"Not a doubt of it. Things'll buck up now, you'll see. Sit tight; we've got to shove Persimmon along faster."

There was no great speed to be got out of the big carthorse, however. He kept steadily plugging along at a jogging trot, and did not seem to turn a hair, or to notice the double load on his back. Sam was becoming anxious as to whether Lord Gethin's force had departed since the dawn, when Stephen uttered a warning exclamation.

"Look out! On your right! Swing round an' bolt for it!"

Sam turned the horse as quickly as he could at the sight of some mounted men not far away to the eastward, when suddenly he gave a joyful cry, and wheeled towards them.

"They're our men! Mounted infantry!" he exclaimed, urging the horse along. "Hi, there, Ikonas! Where's Gethin's bivouac?"

The patrol of five khaki-clad men pulled up in astonishment at the sight of the lads. Sam repeated his question eagerly.

"At Witham," replied the sergeant. "Who the blazes are you? Here, hold up! What's the news?"

"You'll know it before long! Thanks for the range," said Sam, wheeling hurriedly again, and galloping away to

the north-west, leaving the astonished Ikonas—they have been known by that name since the Boer War—staring after them. "By glory, Steve, that's a bit of luck for us! We'll be there a lot sooner than at Layer Marney."

"Nice dance we'd have been led if we hadn't met 'em. They don't look used to the Carthorse Guards—we seemed to surprise 'em. Shove that crock along, Sam. It's time we kennelled somewhere."

The news had reached them just in time, and it did not take long to ride down along the side of Braxted Park, when Witham came into view, and a great body of horse, foot, and guns were visible just to the north of it, on both sides of the railway.

Twenty minutes later, after encountering two cavalry patrols, the boys were challenged by a surprised sentry at the outer pickets, and when they had satisfied the guard, they were allowed to pass on through the battalions of halted troops, who were at their rations, and a grim, war-worn, ready-looking lot they were.

Sam and Stephen paid no attention to the surprise and chaff their appearance caused. The headquarters-tent was the goal they aimed at, and the great carthorse lumbered up to it, bearing the tired, mud-caked, dishevelled cadets on his back. They slid to the ground even before the horse was pulled up, and the first person Sam saw walking up to the tent was Lieutenant Carey, who had been entrusted with the despatches by General Nugent.

"Hallo, Carey, you've beaten us, then," said Sam; "but we've got something besides despatches." He called to the sentry. "Is Lord Gethin there? Urgent news!"

A tall, stout officer, with a red and grim-looking face, came to the tent's opening at that moment. It was Lord Gethin himself, and he heard Sam's call.

"Eh!" he said, staring at the boys and the carthorse. "Who the dooce are these scarecrows?"

"Lieutenant and Sergeant Villiers, sir, Greyfriars Cadet Corps," replied Sam, saluting. "We were entrusted by General Nugent with despatches for you, sir," he added, colouring, "but——"

"Entrusted confounded infants-in-arms with despatches! Bosh, sir!" said Lord Gethin angrily. "Are you out of your senses? Go away, and take that dashed carthorse out of the lines!"

"He did, sir, but we haven't got them," said Sam, turning redder still, while Lord Gethin's face became purple.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Lieutenant Carey, stepping forward and saluting "I can answer for these young gentlemen. They were given duplicate despatches at the same time as myself, to take by a very difficult route. And I am only surprised, sir," he added, "by what I know of them, that they did not beat me."

"We fell into the enemy's hands, sir, and had to destroy the despatches," said Sam, "and I am very sorry for—for failing," he added, with a gulp. "We escaped afterwards, sir, and we've some very urgent news."

Lord Gethin seemed unable to believe his ears.

"Come inside," he said abruptly. And they entered the tent, where an officer the boys knew by sight—Major-General Fernes—and a staff officer were writing. "Now, I can give you but one minute. Tell me briefly what has occurred."

"We cleared the German lines, sir, and started to cross the Blackwater in a skiff. She was cut down by a torpedo-boat, which was piloting a yacht up the estuary. The yacht hove-to, and we were able to jam her propeller with a rope, but her crew captured us. They didn't get the despatches sir, as we got rid of them in time. We were taken aboard the yacht."

The officers in the tent, their eyes fixed on Sam's face, listened, and said no word.

"They took us before their chief, sir, who was Kaiser Wilhelm, Emperor of Germany," said Sam, in a lower voice, "and he is now at Maldon."

Lord Gethin sat back in his camp-chair and looked at Sam in utter amazement. The other officers did the same. Then a quick glance was exchanged among the three, and Lord Gethin stepped to the tent entrance.

"Sentry, twelve paces to the front! See that no one approaches the tent," he said, and then turned to Sam.

"Are you sure of this, Lieutenant Villiers?" he said quietly. "Have you not made some mistake?"

"I am absolutely sure, sir, and so is my brother," returned Sam.

"Yes, sir," said Stephen, saluting. "It was the Kaiser, and no one else. I'll bet my—I mean I'm quite certain of it, sir."

Lord Gethin began to question Sam rapidly and briefly. In a very short time he had out of him the whole story of the capture, and everything that had been said on the yacht.

"Gentlemen," said Lord Gethin, in a low voice to his staff-officers, "there is no doubt about this. Lieutenant Villiers is right. The Kaiser is here to direct his own campaign. Not a word of this must be known for the present. Take care no rumour of it leaks out."

"Of course, sir!" replied the others.

Lord Gethin looked very grave.

"A consultation must be held at once," he said. "I am bound before all things to check Von Krantz, but this garrison of the enemy at Maldon, with the Kaiser directing the campaign, cannot be left on our flank without something being done to hold it back."

"And we are still short of men, sir," said General Fernes.

"We shall need every man who can march to stop Von Krantz's advance on London. That we must not fail in. But this coming of the Kaiser doubles our difficulties."

Lord Gethin raised his eyes, and looked at the boys, whom he had forgotten for the moment.

"You may go for the present," he said. "You have done splendidly, my lads, and your report is of the greatest service. I may send for you later."

Sam saluted, and hesitated a moment as he turned to go. Lord Gethin saw it

"Have you anything more to add?" he asked.

Sam took his courage in both hands.

"I don't like to make a suggestion to you, sir," he said, "but there's something——"

"Speak on, but be very brief," was the reply.

"The Kaiser is at Strood House, sir. He will be able to direct operations from there—unless he is captured. I think it might be done by anybody who doesn't mind the risk."

Lord Gethin started up, a sudden frown on his face, and blank amazement fell on everybody but Sam.

"Capture the Kaiser! In the midst of his armed force, and retreat open to him by the sea! Are you mad, boy?"

"Strood House is just outside the town, sir," replied Sam; "it will be strongly guarded, of course. But I know all the approaches to it, and there is a way by which I think the guard might be rushed, and the Kaiser secured and held to hostage, especially if an attack were being delivered at another part of the town. I take it that if you could hold the Kaiser a prisoner, the difficulties would be over, sir?"

The commander and his officers looked at each other quickly.

"If you could let me have a dozen picked men, sir," said Sam, "I will do my best to bring it off. I know a way by which I can get them through to Strood House."

The staff-officer stepped quickly across to Lord Gethin.

"Let him try it, sir," he said, in a low voice. "He has the luck of the devil, and the pluck of ten, as half the Army knows. Give him the men, and let him match himself against German William."

Lord Gethin paused as the eager words of the staff-officer reached him, and the boys were on tenterhooks.

"I must know more before I decide," said the famous commander, and he turned to Sam. "Tell me, as briefly as you can, how you propose to carry out this daring scheme."

"I would get my men past the German pickets, sir, by taking them right through the little wood near Brook Farm. That will be the hardest part of the business, but with the right men it can be done."

"Yes; go on."

"There is a long, dark cart-way between high hedges, sir, leading up to Strood House, besides the proper road. I could take my men up the ditches on either side of it. There is not likely to be a big guard at Strood House, for the Kaiser will not want to advertise himself. They will rely on the pickets and patrols much farther out. Once through, we should try to rush the guard quietly, and be into the house before any serious alarm is raised. It all depends on quickness."

"Egad!" muttered Lord Gethin. "What a scheme! The boy has nerve, anyhow, and he knows the place like a book. And when you're at the house, what then?" he added aloud. "Even if you get the better of the Kaiser, do you think you can smuggle him away in your vest-pocket?"

"No, sir," said Sam; "but if an attack could be delivered on the other side of the town, to keep the garrison and pickets busy, he could be rushed through. With a couple of fast horses ready in waiting on this side of the pickets, we could get to them and rush him into camp while the row was in full progress. He'd get rather roughly handled, I suppose, sir," added Sam swiftly; "but if he leaves his Potsdam palace to go soldiering in Essex, he must expect that."

Lord Gethin's lips curled in a grim smile.

"We need not consider that," he said. "He hardly counted on this sort of thing, I should think. But even if this wild scheme succeeded, there would be the risk of his resisting and being shot or cut down by your men. That would never do—it would give the affair too ugly a look. Too much like m——"

"Of course not, sir. You want him taken alive, at any cost, naturally," said Sam.

"Want him. Why, good heavens, boy, you talk as if you had him in your cartridge-pouch!" said Lord Gethin explosively. "How will you prevent him from warning his forces at Maldon, close beside him, and bringing them up instantly to close round you? He will certainly have got a field-telephone connecting with his commandant there."

"Naturally he has, sir. My brother Stephen will stalk the house as soon as we are through the pickets, and cut the wire. It is sure to be a ground wire, and will be easy to find, for we know which side it must be on."

"By Jove! To think this youngster's been wasted in a cadet-corps!" muttered General Fernes, pulling his moustache.

Lord Gethin's eye brightened as he heard Sam's last words. Before he could reply the jingle of spurs was heard outside, and the sentry presented arms. A short, keen-eyed, fierce-looking old soldier entered with a sharp stride. It was Lord Ripley, the head of the whole British Army.

The others saluted at once, and Gethin, making way for his superior and colleague, turned to the boys.

"It is a scheme in a hundred, and, strange as it sounds, we shall consider it!" he said. "A consultation will be held at once. Leave us now, my lads, and you will have our decision later."

The boys saluted and left, as Gethin turned to explain to the surprised Lord Ripley. As soon as they got outside, they found a great stir in the bivouac—General Nugent's force had arrived, and joined those under Ripley and Gethin. A minute later they caught sight of Sir Sholto himself, striding towards the headquarters-tent to join in the council.

"Here, left turn!" said Sam quickly, vanishing as quickly as he could. "Let's keep out of his way. I don't know how I'm going to tell him we lost his despatches!"

"But we couldn't help it, an' we've struck a much better game!" exclaimed Sam. "Why, the news we brought is worth fifty despatches. An' your plan for gettin' hold of Strood House, why——"

"He don't know anything about that. Let's get some grub an' rest—I'm famishing!"

They joined the lines of a rifle regiment that was finishing its rations, and were made hugely welcome, for there was scarcely a corps now that had not heard of the two cadets. Hot coffee and bully beef were served out to them, and they attacked it ravenously.

And, completely fagged out, the two cadets rolled under a commissariat-waggon of the rifle battalion, and fell sound asleep. Neither bugles, troops, nor anything else during the waking hours roused them for a moment. Even when the waggon was hitched up and rolled away from over them, they did not stir. When at last they opened their eyes, the dusk was fast falling, and the evening dew was on the grass.

"Great Scott! We've slept the day through!" exclaimed Sam, jumping up.

"An' wanted it, too," said Stephen. "I could eat a horse, an' when that's done I'm fit for anything. See a horse anywhere? Roast or boiled for choice, but even raw——"

"There are the Fusiliers yonder, unless I'm jolly well mistaken," said Sam. "An' they're starting grub. I can smell the mess-kids. Look, there's Devine with 'em! What luck!" he added, hurrying forward.

"Hallo, luff—hallo, sergeant!" said the young adjutant, waving a knife as the boys came up. "Trust you to be on hand at feedin'-time. So Carey beat you, did he? I heard you got through all right. Yes, we moved over here in a hurry."

"What's happened all day?" asked Stephen.

"Nothing. Both sides marking time for the next big scrap. Von Krantz can't push ahead just now, an' every minute he holds back is worth heaps to us. Our regiments have been movin' out to the westward all day, an' the three chiefs have been holdin' no end of a council on an' off all day, as the scouts bring the news in."

"About us?" chuckled Stephen, eating against time.

"About your grandmother!" retorted Sam, who was doing the same. "D'yer suppose they've nothing to bother about but us, you ass? Why, our little affair, even if they thought about it at all, would be settled in ten minutes."

"Not so little, either," grunted Stephen. "If anything's important it's the K——"

"Shut up!" said Sam warningly.

"Hallo!" remarked Devine, with interest. "What's the little affair—eh? How did you come off at——"

He was interrupted, much to his surprise, by Lord Gethin's aide-de-camp cantering up.

"They want you before the council at once!" he said to the boys. "Hurry up, young 'uns!"

Sam and Stephen hastened to the tent without delay, having just had time to get through their hurried meal. They were sent straight in, and found the four old warriors—Lord Ripley, Sir Shoito, Lord Gethin, and Fernes, ready to receive them. Nugent nodded kindly to the boys.

"Well done, Greyfriars!" he said quietly.

Lord Gethin rose.

"Are you fit for action?" he said briefly to the cadets.

"Fit for anything, sir," said Sam, saluting.

"We have considered your plan. We shall give you the chance to carry it out."

Sam's eyes glistened, and so did his brother's. They had hardly dared hope for this.

"You do not fear to risk your lives in a forty-to-one chance?" said Lord Gethin. "For if you fail, or are captured, I warn you I can give you no help. You will have to bear the penalty, for they will shoot you without trial."

"We don't fear that, sir," said Sam, "or we should not be here. We'll look for no help if we're caught."

"Very good. You may pick your own men from any of the three line regiments bivouacked outside, and start at once. The counter-attack on Maldon will be delivered at ten o'clock, or very soon after. I can spare only two battalions with company guns for that."

"That will give us plenty of time for that," said Sam.

"Then go, my lad, and good luck attend you," said Lord Ripley. "It is a forlorn hope you are setting out upon. And remember this, nothing is to be said about it among the troops, save to your own men. This is no Service mission, but an outside venture, as far as you are concerned. If you've the knowledge and the luck to bring it off, you will have done an enormous service. Try it. Go!"

The brothers threw up their hands to their caps and left the tent, their hearts beating high.

"We owe this to Nugent," said Sam. "He brought 'em round to let us have the men. By gum, there's a night's work before us! There's only one thing you want, Steve. Go an' get it while I pick the men."

Five minutes later, Sam, with the help of the adjutant and a mandate from headquarters was choosing his little force.

"There's only one kind of man I want," he said, "those who belonged to some scouting corps or other in the Boer war. No others need apply. I want men who can move quickly and quietly, an' keep in cover."

Devine, the adjutant, knew every man in his regiment, and, for that matter, the whole of the Fusiliers were itching to volunteer when they heard Sam was to lead a surprise-party. He found nine, however, that answered exactly to his requirements—including a huge Irishman named Kelly

—and he decided to take them instead of the full dozen. In a very short time he had them apart by himself.

"Now, look here," he said cheerfully. "If you come with me you stand a first-class chance of gettin' wiped out, an' if you're caught you'll be stuck against a wall an' shot before you can say knife. If there's a man here who's specially anxious to get back alive, now's his time to fall out an' go back to his regiment."

"We're all with you, sir!" said the men eagerly.

"Without any beating about the bush," said Sam, "I'll tell you right here that the Kaiser is at Strood House, directin' his troops against the little British Army. I'm goin' to take you there by the back way, an' our job is to rush the guard an' bring the Emperor into camp. I'll show you how it's to be done."

A murmur of astonishment broke out amongst the men, and then they gave a cheer, that ended in a wild yell from the Irishman.

"Only mind this," said Sam, "no weapon is to be used against the Kaiser. He is to be taken prisoner. That order comes from headquarters, and any man who disobeys it I will shoot with my own hand. I've picked you because you learned in South Africa to move like mice, an' not like elephants, an' remember that one man who gets seen will most likely cause the death of the lot, and the failure of my plan."

He spoke to them rapidly for five minutes, telling them exactly what he expected of them, and apportioned to each man his duty. They listened attentively, and finally, after a short, low cheer, the little party moved off into the night, the two boys at their head.

The Taking of Strood House.

"Off at last!" murmured Stephen gleefully. "Too much talkee-talkee about these councils an' plans an' things for my taste."

"Well, then, shut your bully-beef trap and let's have no more till the job's done!" said Sam; and he passed the sentries after the usual challenge.

The men had full confidence in Sam within the first half-hour, when they saw how quickly and silently he led them, and how cannily he dodged the patrols. They knew little of the district themselves, and were well content to follow his lead. At last the critical time came; they were nearing the German pickets, which, dotted all round the upland, were guarding the approaches to the distant city.

To "rush" one of them was out of the question, for it would have put the whole German garrison on the alert long before Strood House could be reached. Sam left his men lying in a small fuzzy dingle, and went on to reconnoitre alone. When he came back he led them out in single file, going on almost hands and knees round the corner of the dingle, and down the far side of a hedge till they were within reach of a small spinney. There he bade them look through the hedge.

Against the starlit sky, on a small rise of ground sixty yards away, was a German picket. Barely one field away to the right was another, invisible from that spot. The men nodded, and Sam, going flat on his stomach, wormed his way quietly along the ground towards the wood.

The shelter of the hedge ceased before he reached it, and had he been upright he would have been in full view of the enemy. As it was, they were but a stone's throw from him, but he gained the covert without mishap, and vanished into the darkness of the little wood, through which he crept yard by yard.

The men knew what they had to do. One by one they followed Sam's example, each waiting till the other had gone through; and at last he had them all on the farther side of the spinney, Stephen bringing up the rear. The German outposts were passed.

"The worst of it's over," murmured Stephen.

"Is it?" growled Sam. "That's all you know. Now, then, silence!"

In and out through the dark fields he led the party, none of them, save the two boys, knowing where they were. But Sam's unerring knowledge of the district brought him from point to point without a mistake.

Halting here while a Uhlan patrol rode by, hurrying on then to get into cover before a scout saw them, they dodged discovery half a dozen times before at last the lights of Maldon seemed almost a stone's throw, the Woodham railway crossed, and the long slope, with the dark mass of Strood House on top, loomed before them.

A long, laborious creep brought them near the entrance of a dark, narrow cart-lane, so overhung with trees and bordered by tall hedges that it looked almost like a tunnel.

Here was the most perilous part of the journey. If any hidden sentry gave the alarm, the scheme was at an end. Sam touched his brother on the arm.

"Got your cutters?" he whispered.

"Rather!" breathed Stephen.

"Then strike out to the left, crawl out by the big clump of cedars on the lawn, and cut the wire. It will most likely lead out of the butler's-pantry window, and it's bound to be a ground wire."

"Why? Couldn't they have run it along the telegraph-poles, which go right past the upper windows on the other side?" asked Stephen quickly.

"No; because those don't lead in the right direction. Don't stop to talk, Steve; but go, for it depends on you whether we get out of this alive or not."

"I'll do it," muttered Stephen; "don't fear!"

"If there's a sentry patrollin' round the house, as there's pretty sure to be, lie low till he's round a corner, an' then do the job quickly. If German Billy's up there he mustn't have the chance to call up his other troops. An' when you've done it you must slip away, an' streak back as quickly as you can into Gethin's camp, for if you're found you'll queer our pitch."

"All right!" said Stephen, disappointed at not being able to join in the attack, but seeing that Sam was right. "So long, old boy!"

He vanished away into the darkness like a bat, and Stephen whispered a word to his men. They at once broke up into two parties, and, each taking different sides, reached the deep ditches that bounded the outsides of the hedges which formed the lane. Up these ditches they began to creep quietly and quickly.

To Sam fell the most dangerous share of the advance—which a leader should always take. He very soon left the ditch, and crawled through a gap in the hedge into the dark lane itself, taking with him but one man—the huge Irishman, Kelly.

He had already noticed that Kelly, in spite of his size, was the quickest and quietest mover of any of his party. One thing had to be done without fail—the German sentry in the lane, who was sure to be posted there, must be disposed of.

Moving along close under the hedge itself, in a darkness so thick it could almost be felt, the two progressed for some time without seeing or hearing anybody. The sentry was not at the lower entrance of the lane, that was certain. Sam had an idea he would be half-way up, at the bend, out of sight. And hardly were they round the curve of the lane before they came suddenly upon a tall, dark form, from which shone a dull gleam of metal.

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The EDITOR.

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