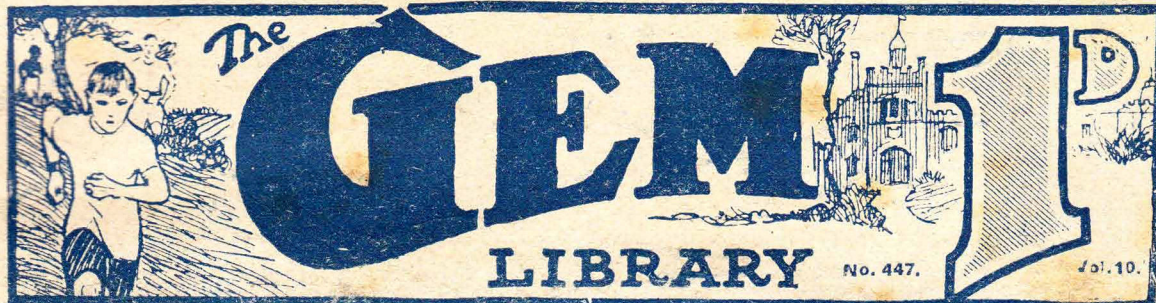


HOLIDAY CAMP!

A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co



IN THE NIGHT AND THE STORM!

(A Dramatic Scene in the Splendid Long, Complete Tale of School Life in this issue.)



THIS WEEK'S CHAT



Whom to Write to — — — — —
EDITOR "THE GEM" LIBRARY.
 THE FLEETWAY HOUSE, FARRINGTON ST. LONDON. E.C.
 OUR · · THREE · · COMPANION · · PAPERS!
 "THE MAGNET" THE "PENNY CHUCKLES."
 — LIBRARY — ; — POPULAR — ; — 1/2° —
 EVERY MONDAY | EVERY FRIDAY | EVERY SATURDAY.

For Next Wednesday :

"HEROES OF THE FOURTH!"

By Martin Clifford.

In the grand, long, complete story which appears next week, three Fourth-Formers play very important parts. These are the great Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and his chums, Digby and Herries. Gussy is invited by his brother, Lord Conway, home on leave from the Front, to bring a junior cricket team down to a country house in pleasant Hampshire for a week of matches. Making up the team presents some difficulty, for Gussy's special chums naturally expect places, and the trouble is that neither Herries nor Digby is quite in the front rank as a cricketer. The stern sense of justice of the noble Gussy hinders him from anything in the least savouring of favouritism. One of the two can go. The question is—which? Several attempts to solve the problem by means of contests between the two only leave it still undecided; but a solution is arrived at eventually, and both go. They distinguish themselves as amateur detectives during the visit, and Gussy distinguishes himself on the field of play, so that altogether great things are done by the trio who may be styled for the moment

"HEROES OF THE FOURTH!"

TO MY CORRESPONDENTS.

Just lately it has been quite impossible to keep absolutely up-to-date with my readers' letters. Every endeavour is made to do this; but it is obvious that there is much work to be done in connection with any paper which must be attended to before correspondence is dealt with. The issue for each week has to be got out, you know, for one thing. I am sorry to disappoint those who write to me by keeping them waiting; but it cannot be helped, especially during the holiday season. I do not mean that I am taking a holiday, or have any expectation of being able to take one this year; but others are getting some part of the time off that they would have in ordinary circumstances—not in any case all of it—and the absence of even one man naturally makes a difference to those left behind. So I would ask readers to be patient—or, as the Irishman said, if they can't be patient, to be as patient as they can—and to be content with brief answers when the answers do come.

AN OBJECTIONABLE PRACTICE.

During the last few weeks I have had several letters of the abusive type sent on to me by their recipients. In every case these have been written to readers who had had notices inserted, saying that they meant to start "Gem" and "Magnet" Leagues. Why the letters were written is a mystery to me. What does it matter to one reader that another should wish to run a league? He is not compelled, or even asked to join. I gather that one at least of the writers has a notion that I encourage these leagues with a view to getting something out of them in some way or another. He is entirely wrong. No charge is made for the notices, and the leagues are run by their members, not by me.

Judging by these precious epistles, one would imagine that the boys who write them consider the readers of the "Gem" and "Magnet" as no better than idiots. That is what they want the fellows they write to to believe, anyway. Yet they themselves read them, or they would know nothing about the notices. I don't mind saying plainly, however, that they are not by any means the kind of readers we want.

NOTICES.

Football.

W. Nixon, 32, Sonning Street, Barnsbury, N., wants to arrange fixtures for the coming season for the club of which he is hon. sec. Age 14-17.

Great Croft St. Rovers F.C. (16-17) wants home and away matches within six-mile radius of Darlaston.—Hon. Sec., William Rose, 14, Pinfold Street, Darlaston, Staffs.

Ferndale F.C. (16) wants good fixtures in the South London district.—Hon. Sec., J. Lee, 42, Chantrey Road, Brixton, S.W.

Rusholme Wesleyan A.F.C. (15½) wants home and away matches in the Manchester district.—Hon. Sec., I. Darnison Street, Rusholme, Manchester.

Wanted, for a junior football club in Belfast, three good players who can take any position.—Apply immediately, personally or by letter, to T. Draffin, 9, Glenvale Street, Belfast.

Park Juniors A.F.C. want matches within a six-mile radius of Cardiff.—Hon. Sec., R. David, 53, Llandaff Road, Canton, Cardiff.

B.U.F.C. (17) want matches within six-mile radius of Marylebone.—Hon. Sec., H. Rich, 15, Melbourn Square, Brixton, S.W.

Back Numbers, &c., Wanted.

By W. Whelan, Rawdon College, near Leeds—"Figgins' Fig-Pudding."

By F. C. Watling, 55, Rhodes Street, Gibbet Lane, Halifax—"Figgins' Folly," "Figgins' Fig-Pudding," and Nos. 1-20 of the "Gem."

By J. Cooper, 61, King Edward Road, Middleton—"Through Thick and Thin," "The Boy Without a Name," and Nos. 1-400 of both "Gem" and "Magnet."

By C. Hentsch, 97, Palatine Road, Stoke Newington, N.E.—Back Nos. of the "Gem."

By M. McMahon, Grace Street, Kilrush, Co. Clare—"Figgins' Folly," "The School Without Masters," and the "Magnet" stories, "Bunter the Boxer" and "Fought For and Won."

By Private W. Burns, 18515, 1st West Yorkshire Regt., D1 Ward, St. Luke's War Hospital, Bradford—Back Nos. of the "Gem" and "Penny Popular," if any reader will spare them.

By Leslie Burroughs, 29, Gas Street, West Hartlepool—"Figgins' Fig-Pudding," "Figgins' Folly," and "Bob Cherry's Barring-Out."

An Extraordinary Pennyworth.

No reader of the "Gem" should fail to order his copy of next Monday's "Boys' Friend." This great issue of our companion paper is quite the best that has ever been published.

A really magnificent photogravure plate is given free with next Monday's "Boys' Friend," and it is entitled "The Bulldog Breed!" The drawing of the plate has been executed in excellent style by a well-known artist, and it shows John Travers Cornwell, the boy hero of the Navy, at his last post of duty. If only out of respect to this gallant son of Britain, every reader of the "Gem" should procure one of these magnificent presentation-plates, and after having it framed, he should hang it up on the walls of his house.

This special issue of the "Boys' Friend" also contains the first grand, long, opening instalment of a thrilling, new adventure story, entitled "The Red Raiders," by Duncan Storm, and the first of a splendid new series of stories introducing Derrick Brent, the schoolmaster detective.

Also in this issue is the first of a splendid new series of articles entitled "Boys and the Air Service." Altogether this issue is one that you should not miss, and to avoid being disappointed you should order your copy of next Monday's "Boys' Friend" in advance. The price of this great issue is the usual one—One Penny.

Your Editor

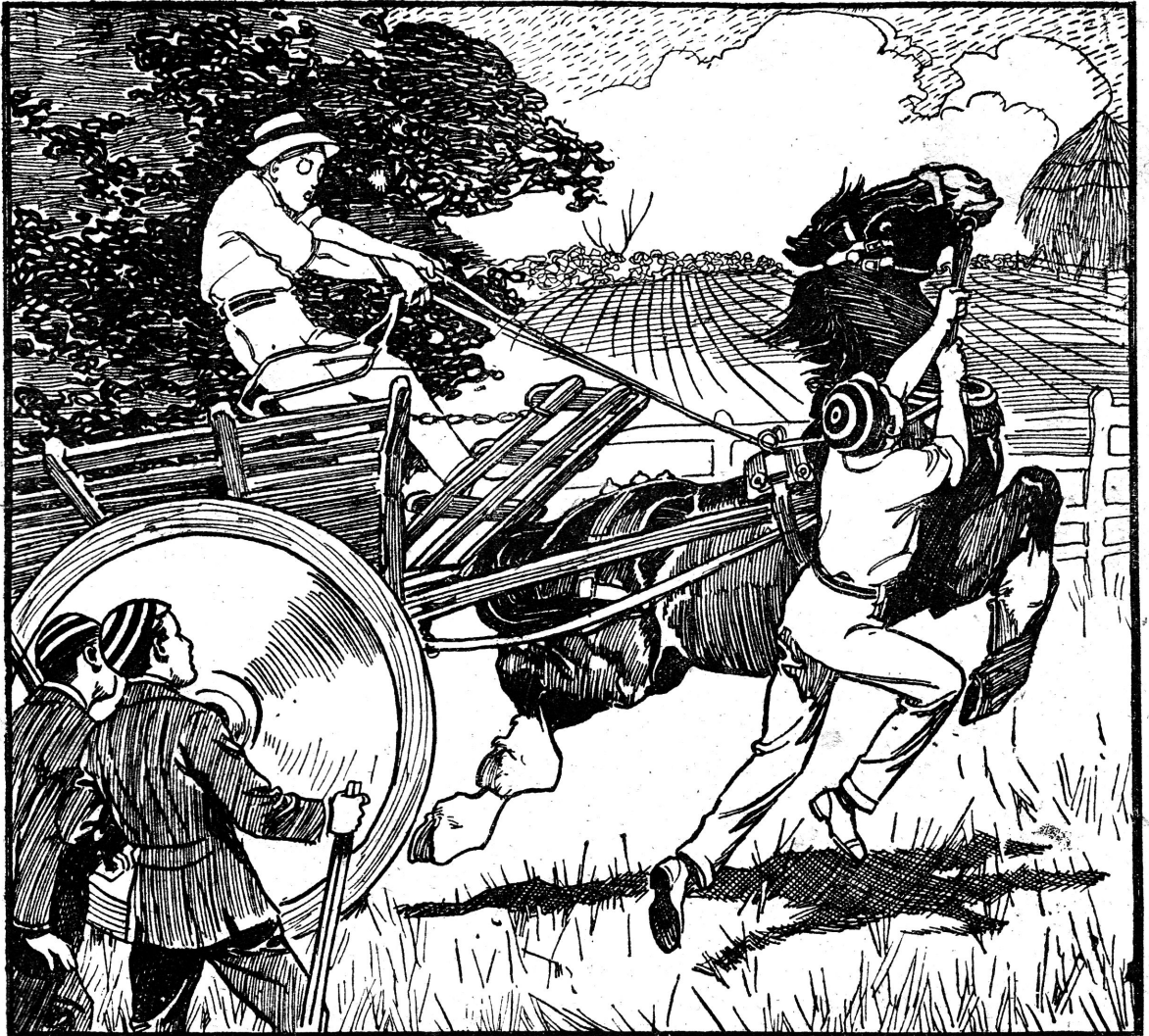
PUBLISHED IN TOWN
AND COUNTRY EVERY
WEDNESDAY MORNING



COMPLETE STORIES
FOR ALL, AND EVERY
STORY A GEM!

HOLIDAY CAMP!

A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Story of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's.
By **MARTIN CLIFFORD.**



The horse started off at a gallop, making straight towards the fallen Crooke. Kerr rushed for the horse's head, caught his rein, hung on, but could not stop him. (See Chapter 6.)

CHAPTER 1. The Peaceful Village.

OH, hurry up, you fellows! Get a move on you, do!" It was Kangaroo, of the Shell Form at St. Jim's, who called out these words to his comrades at Holiday Camp.

Four white tents stood on a slight ridge, at the foot of which there ran a clear, sparkling brook. Less than a quarter of a mile away this brook ran into a wide river. To

westward, beyond the river, far-away hills showed blue in the evening light.

Up from the river, hurrying as they heard Noble's yell, came the four chums of Study No. 6, Jack Blake, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, Herries, and Digby, of the Fourth Form, with Dick Redfern, Kerr, and Fatty Wynn, of the New House, Clifton Dane, the Canadian junior, and Bernard Glyn, the schoolboy inventor.

Tom Merry and Talbot came out of one tent, side by side.

Next Wednesday,

"HEROES OF THE FOURTH!" AND "CORNSTALK BOB!"

Out of another proceeded the brainy Skimpole, beaming through his spectacles at his schoolfellows.

"My hat! We're jolly well going to be late at the station!" said the Australian junior.

Tom Merry glanced at his watch.

"So we shall, Kangy, if we don't look sharp!" he said.

Arthur Augustus and Digby, with towels draped gracefully round their necks, were in the lead of the bathing party. They and the rest all looked very fit and cheery indeed.

"Was the water wet, Gussy?" said Tom Merry, grinning.

"Don't be widic, deah boy! Watah is always wet, in my experience. But it's simplay lovely this evening, like new milk. Why was it you fellahs didn't come along?"

"We've had one bathe to-day, and there were lots of things to do here. We're thinking of going down by moonlight."

"Oh, bai Jove! What a wippin' ideah! I'll come, deah boy!"

"You've bathed twice to-day already, old ass!"

"Yaas; but that's no odds, deah boy," said Gussy, letting the injurious epithet pass for once.

"What time's the train that Manners and Lowther and Figgy are coming by?" asked Jack Blake, deftly flinging his towel round the noble neck of Arthur Augustus, and dragging him backwards.

"Yawooogh! Gwooooh! Dwpot it, Blake! Dwpot it, I say, or I shall be reluctantly compelled—"

"Seven o'clock, and it's jolly near eight miles to the station," said Noble impatiently. "If we're going to meet them—"

"Wats! Of course we shall meet them," D'Arcy said, dragging himself free and glaring at Blake through his monocle. "I vote we all go. Feah my part, I shall be delighted to see all three of the deah boys again."

"So shall I," said Tom Merry. "I've missed Monty and old Manners no end, though we've only been here about twenty-four hours. And Fatty's like a lost sheep without Figgy."

"I want to see old Figgy again, but I can't quite see myself fagging sixteen miles on a bike just to meet him about half an hour sooner," said the Falstaff of the New House. "So I don't mind staying here and looking after the camp while the rest of you go."

"Jolly likely—I don't think!" said Jack Blake sarcastically. "Why, you'd be snoring before we were out of sight, and anybody might come along and collar the whole bag of tricks while you snoozed on!"

"I also would prefer to remain behind with Wynn," said Skimpole, in his precise way. "The front tyre of my bicycle has sustained a serious casualty in the nature of a puncture, and, moreover, I really do not feel quite equal to a prolonged ride after the exhausting activities of the day."

"Great Scott! Skimmy's exhausting activities!" scoffed Digby. "Tell us what you've jolly well done all day, old ass!"

"Nothing at all—and a little bit off that," put in Herries. "But I can tell you what the old idiot wants to do, Dig. He wants to stay here and mug up Professor Balmycrumpet on the whichness of the what, or something of that fooling sort."

Skimpole breathed a deep sigh.

"At the request of Tom Merry, Herries," he said mildly, "I left the most interesting works of the learned Professor—"

"That's no odds," said Blake. "You'd rather have the dullest of the whole giddy lot than none at all. Though I'm blessed if I reckon there's a pin to choose among 'em."

"You misapprehend me, Blake. I left them all behind, and I do not mind confessing that—"

"Oh, hang it! If you're going to let old Skimmy give us all the jolly chin-music he wants to, we sha'n't get to the blessed station before midnight!"

"All right, Reddy! Let's make a start at once," said Talbot, smiling.

"I'll stay and look after these two chumps," volunteered Kerr. "You can tell old Figgy why I didn't come along."

So the rest grabbed their bicycles, and were off. They bumped a bit over the rough turf at first, but the studious Skimpole remained as a camp guard—which really meant that on Kerr depended the safety of the camp, should it be threatened, though that hardly appeared likely.

The juniors had still scarcely got over their surprise that Skimmy should have consented to come with them on this holiday outing. The thing really did not seem at all in Skimmy's line.

Talbot had suggested his inclusion after Reilly, who had arranged to be of the party, had dropped out. Talbot, who shared a study with Skimpole and Gore, had learned that the studious junior's plans for the holiday had been upset, and that he might have to stay at the school. When the rest knew of this, they agreed readily that Skimmy should be

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asked, though no one except Talbot believed that he would accept the invitation. They fancied it would just suit old Skimmy to moon around at St. Jim's and mug up Balmycrumpet, as Lowther said.

But Skimpole accepted, and even consented to leave the professor's works behind. Tom Merry, Jack Blake, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy rode side by side in the rear of the other cyclists.

The common was left for a road running alongside the railway line. A rumbling noise came to the ears of the juniors as a train plunged into a distant tunnel.

"Oh, hurwy up, you fellahs!" shouted Gussy. "Theah's the giddy twain, an' we're miles an' miles fwom Towthorpe yet!"

"Rats, Gustavus! That's not the train our fellows are coming by!"

"Pway, how do you know that, Tom Mewwy!"

"Only because it's coming the wrong way, that's all! If Figgy and the other two were your sort of asses, they might be in it. For there's no telling where in the wide, wide world they'd have got to on their way here. But you can trust them not to go getting into the wrong trains at junctions and travelling half-way across this blessed little island before they find it out."

"Oh, wing off, Tom Mewwy, do! I admit I made a slight ewwow, but it was a thing anybody might have done in the circus, don'tcherknow."

"What, getting to Northampton instead of Worcester, because you hadn't the know-how to find the right train at Birmingham?" snorted Blake. "Your uncle would take jolly good care it didn't happen to him!"

"And turning up in the small hours by the mail train, and trying to kid us that it was all right—ho!" grinned Tom Merry. "It might happen to me, but not until I'd gone potty!"

"Oh, weally, I wish you'd dwpot it, Tom Mewwy! I've heard enough about it already!"

"Puzzle to me is that he ever found the camp. Looks almost as if the poor old ass had a tiny little bit of sense left after all."

"If you do not wing off, Blake, I shall be under the painful necessity of alightin' fwom my bike and administahin' to you—"

"Just as you like, Gustavus! But I sha'n't get off mine for a little thing like that."

Now the road took a bend, and left the side of the line. Through an avenue of limes they pedalled into the sleepy street of a small village.

"What a twily lovely little place!" remarked Gussy, beaming around him through his monocle. "Look at the old ivy-grown church an' the pictuwesque cottages with their gardens an' the wegulah old-fashioned countwy inn! I nevah in my life saw a moah peaceful villa— Oh, yawooch! Ow—yow! Hang it! Confound you, you lout!"

Gussy went sprawling from his machine. A yckel of seventeen or so, who sat with others on a grassy bank by the roadside, had thrust out a hooked stick, and hooked the spokes of his back wheel.

Off jumped Tom Merry and Blake.

"Ow! Lemme alone!" howled the lout as they seized him by the arms.

The rest were a little distance ahead, and they went on quite in the dark as to what had happened.

"What did you do that for?" said Tom Merry angrily.

"Ax me another!" replied the lout, grinning. "Lawks, he did come down proper, didn't he?"

Gussy picked himself up. His hands were badly cut, and his forehead had also suffered by making acquaintance with the hard road.

"Let me get at the bwute, Tom Mewwy!" he cried.

"No, old man; he's a bit above your weight! Now, then, you hulking rotter, are you going to answer me?"

"No, I ain't; unless you calls this 'ere a answer!"

With a movement quicker than could have been expected of him, the fellow snatched his right arm from Blake's grasp, and planked a hard fist in Tom Merry's face.

"Oh, that's your game, is it? Take that, then—just to be going on with!"

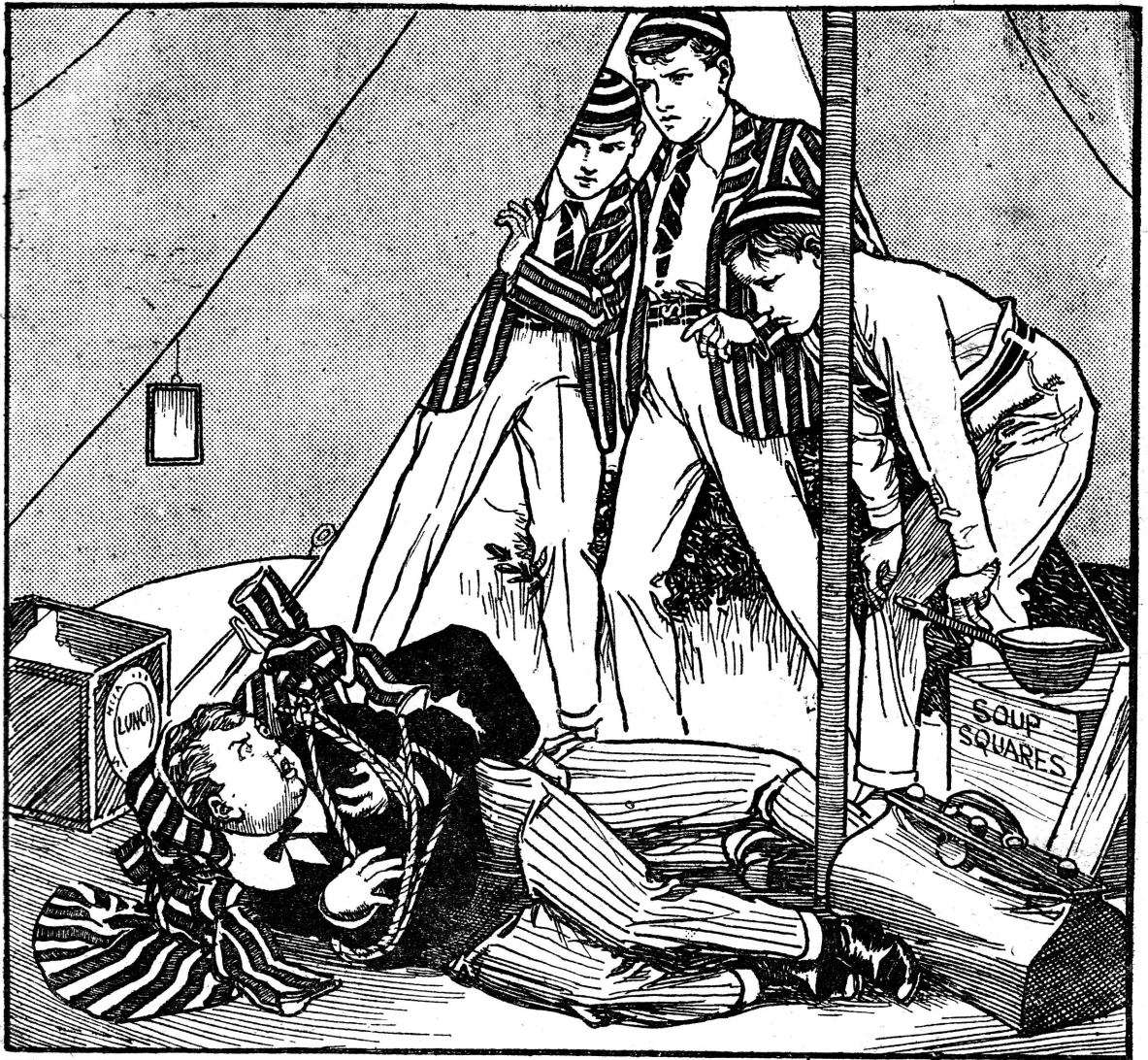
The captain of the Shell at St. Jim's hit out hard, and smote the lout upon the nose.

"Yarooogh! Resky! Resky! Bill! Tom! Jim! Jacob! Here be these furriners all a-settin' on to me!" yelled the lout.

"You lying sweep!" cried Tom Merry. "Put your fists up, and fight like a man!"

But that was not the simple countryman's game. Bill and Tom and Jim and Jacob came hurrying up, and behind them followed Jack and Dick and Harry and Bob and Nehemiah.

There were ten or a dozen, at least, and some of them had



Fatty Wynn and Skimpole lay on the ground, lashed together, back to back! Skimmy's head was enveloped in a blazer, tied around his neck by the arms. Fatty had been treated in the same way, but had managed somehow to get the thing partly off. (See Chapter 2.)

sticks, and meant to use them. They were all older and bigger than the St. Jim's juniors, too.

"We're in for it, Tom," said Jack Blake.

"Hold together!" answered Tom Merry. "The other chaps will come back directly they find we're not with them. We've just got to keep up our end till then!"

Gussy said nothing, but his fists were clenched, and the light of battle shone in his eyes.

"Charge 'em, all of you!" roared the lout.

"Right you be, Josh!" yelled the biggest of the newcomers.

"Don't let them get at the bikes!" said Tom Merry.

He and Blake had put their bicycles against the bank. Arthur Augustus had just time to pick up his and place it with them before the charge came.

The village louts piled in irregularly, waving their sticks, shouting, and evidently expecting to strike fear into the three schoolboys.

Tom Merry darted forward a yard or two. He planked his fist hard against the jaw of Bill, the biggest fellow. He snatched a stick from another, and was back by the side of his chums in about five seconds.

Blake punched at Josh, and sent him tumbling backwards. He caught another fellow by the leg, and they sprawled over together. A thick stick was descending upon Gussy's head, but Tom Merry guarded the blow with the one he had seized, and dealt the striker so hard a rap on the knuckles that he howled with rage and pain.

Gussy was not idle. He hit out right and left.

"Yow!" howled Nehemiah, as his claret was tapped.

And Dick staggered with one on the jaw.

The horde drew back.

This was not going to be the easy victory they had bargained for.

But Josh had risen to his feet, and he led them on again to the attack.

"Come on!" he yelled. "There ain't but three of 'em! We can lick them easy!"

They came on.

Now, the three were in a tight place.

They fought valiantly, but they were handicapped by the necessity of protecting their bikes.

Tom Merry had dropped the stick. He could not bring himself to use it as these fellows did theirs. He preferred fists.

He used them with good effect. And Blake and D'Arcy used theirs, too, scarcely attempting to guard, only hitting out quickly and forcibly.

Then D'Arcy reeled back on top of the bicycles, and Blake and Tom Merry were pressed so hard that in another moment they must have been forced on top of him.

"Rescue! St. Jim's to the rescue!"

Riding as if for their lives, now that they saw what was happening, came Talbot and Redfern and Noble, Dane and Glyn and Heggies and Digby.

Talbot was first on the scene. He hung his bicycle down

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NEXT
WEDNESDAY:

"HEROES OF THE FOURTH!"

recklessly, and rushed into the fray. The rest followed him. They piled in like heroes. They drove the louts before them, pummelled them, and scattered them, and would have pursued them, but that Tom Merry called them back.

"There's a bobby coming!" he said. "See! I'm going to report this to him. I don't mind an ordinary free-fight; but this started by one of those rotters tumbling Gussy off his bike. Might have killed him, you know! And they didn't play the game, either!"

The policeman halted, and looked at them questioningly. He was quite an elderly man, with grey whiskers and a red, good-humoured face.

"Seems like to me you've bin in the wars a bit, young gents," he said.

"We have," answered Tom Merry. "And I've something to report to you. Three of us were riding behind the rest when a lout pushed a stick in among the spokes of one bike, and tumbled my friend, here, off!"

"Ah!" said the red-faced constable, looking at D'Arcy's cut and scratched hands. "Go on, sir!"

"We jumped off, and seized him. He hit me, and I hit him back. Then he yelled for help, and half a score of others came up."

"Him what tumbled the young gent over—what did the others call him?" inquired red face.

"Josh, I think."

"Ah, that'd be Josh Barnicoat! He's the worst of the lot of 'em, an' they're a pesky bad lot! Well, all you've got to do, young gents, is to go before the nearest magistrate, and take out a summons agin 'em for assault. Then they'll ha' to come afore the Bench at Towthorpe next Monday, an' I count they'll get dropped on to pretty smart!"

"Where does the nearest magistrate live?" asked Talbot.

"Not above four miles or so away. I'll come along with you, if you like."

"We can hardly do that, can we, old fellow?" Tom Merry said to Talbot. "It means missing those chaps at the station, and wasting best part of a day attending the Bench."

"If you think you'd rather let it drop, Tom—"

"I do. After all, you fellows came up in time, and we gave that crowd pretty nearly as good as we got, I reckon. No, constable; we won't do that."

"You'll let it kind of slide, sir?"

"Yes. Thank you, all the same!"

"That's all right, sir. I won't say as you're wrong, nor yet 'otherwise. Are you the gents as have put up a camp on Three Mile Common?"

"We are."

"Well, you're a bit nearer this 'ere village than mebbe is very good for your 'ealths; but you seemed handylike with your fists, and it ain't certain as that lot will want to meddle with you no more. I'd promise to keep my eye on 'em, only I don't fancy promisin' more nor what I can perform, and I've a longish beat to get over. This is the worstest place in it—a 'ole, this is!"

"Why, it looks such a vevy peaceful, pictuwesque spot!" said Arthur Augustus.

"It do, sir. But it ain't!"

"We shall have to be getting on," said Tom Merry. "I say, constable, here's something to get a drink with, and if you're our way we shall be pleased to see you! There's always something to eat going, and I dare say you can drink ginger-pop at a pinch?"

"I can, sir. My face may say 'beer,' but if it do it's a liar!"

"No," answered Talbot; "it isn't that. It doesn't say 'beer,' only sun and wind and plenty of outdoors."

"Thank you, sir! Thank you, gents, all!"

He saluted as they mounted and rode on.

CHAPTER 2. Pillage!

"THERE they are! Hurrah!" yelled Manners, leaning so far out of the carriage window that he nearly fell out.

"St. Jim's for ever!" shouted Lowther. Figgins said nothing, but his beaming face and twinkling eyes showed that he was every bit as pleased as his two comrades.

By hard riding the ten from the camp had just managed to reach Towthorpe Station before the train rolled in.

"Hallo, Gussy! Been playing with a wild-cat?" asked Lowther, noticing the scratched face and hands of the Swell of the Fourth.

"Cheer-ho, Figgy! Why didn't you come along yesterday, you bouncer?" cried Blake.

"Couldn't. Where are Kerr and Fatty?"

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"Lazy beggars wouldn't ride over. So we left them in charge of the camp, with Skimpole."

"Any luggage you've got that can't be carried on the bikes must be left till to-morrow," announced Tom Merry.

"I'm going to get this on my bike somehow," Manners said.

"It's a bit of a whacker to carry, old Scout."

"Never mind. I'm going to take it. I won't leave it to the tender mercies of porters and carriers, you bet!"

"What's in it?"

"Never mind that, either, Tom. You'll know in due course."

"How far is it?" asked Lowther.

"About eight miles. We'll be there in a little over half an hour," answered Talbot.

"If we don't meet with any hostile forces at that peaceful little village Gussy loves so much on the way," said Blake, with a grin.

"You're talking Greek to us, you know," said Manners.

"Oh, it's nothing much! We had a scrap with some village louts about a couple of miles from camp. Gussy began it."

"Just like him!" put in Manners.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy! And if you mean, Mannahs, that I am a quawwesome chap, all I have to say is that if you will take youah coat off I will pwoceed—"

"Ha, ha, ha! Jolly good way of proving you're not quarrelsome, Gustavus!"

"Wing off, Blake! Tom Mewwy, I weally cannot stand being miswepwented in this mannah!"

"You mean to this Mannahs, don't you, Gussy?"

"Oh, you howwible ass! You are positively worse than Lowthah! It weally was not my fault at all, Mannahs. Tom Mewwy and Blake and I were widin' behind the west, when a lout shoved a stick into my back wheel and brought me ovah. That's how I got these swatches and bruises. Then a whole crowd of them attacked us, and Tom Mewwy and Blake fought like hewoes."

"That's enough, Gussy! This isn't a special war edition. Come along, Manners! All the rest have gone, and we'd better all keep pretty close together, I reckon. Haven't you got that rotten parcel tied on yet?"

"Just fixed it. Not so rotten either. You'll sing a different tune when— But never mind that now. It isn't going to be dull in camp, from what you say."

"Dull? My hat, no! The river's gorgeous, ever so much bigger than the old Ryll. Bathing no end good. We've hired boats for the rest of the time, too."

The five—Tom Merry, Arthur Augustus, Digby, Manners, and Blake—mounted now, and pedalled hard to catch up the rest, who were taking things easily till they were joined by their comrades.

The sun was sinking in a blaze of glory, and the country looked at its best.

Few people were about—indeed, there were few people in all this countryside.

So they rode at a good, spanking pace along the switchback road, and reached the village while the sunset still glowed in the western sky beyond the blue hills.

"Yah!" sounded a defiant shout, and they saw a little band of their enemies gathered on the green in front of the chief inn of the place.

"They're the beauties, I suppose?" said Manners.

"Guess again, and you'll guess wrong, old man."

"Well, I bag the bandy-legged one with the red hair for mine when the next scrap happens!"

"Rats! We don't want to have any more to do with the rotters!"

"That's all very well, Tom, but I'll bet we shall. They don't look very peaceable and friendly, do they? Oh, the sweeps!"

Stones were flying through the air. One big one hit Tom Merry between the shoulder-blades, another went within an inch of D'Arcy's face, and a third whacked against the big parcel on the carrier of Manner's machine.

"Let's go back and slog them!" urged Blake.

"No!" answered Tom Merry sharply. "There's no damage done, and it really isn't worth while. This may be the last we shall see of them. They'd be at work in the daytime, I guess, and only at liberty to behave like Germans in the evening."

"There's the camp!" said Talbot, a few minutes later, pointing across the common to the four white tents.

"Looks ripping!" returned Lowther. "And, my hat, I'm peckish! Aren't you, Figgy?"

"I am. Were the camp guardians left to cook, Merry?"

"No. We've plenty of cold stuff. No cooking to-night."

Kangaroo sent a long-drawn "Coo-ee-ee-ee!" shrilling across the common.

But no answer came.

"That's queer," he said. "If old Kerr heard that he'd make us hear, I'm jolly sure."

They drew nearer. Still the camp showed no sign of life. No one stirred in the neighbourhood of the tents.

"All gone to sleep, I guess," said Glyn.

"Not likely! Fatty might, and there's no answering for Skimmy, but Kerr's wide awake enough," answered Clifton Dane.

Noble coo-ee'd again.

No reply.

Now they had left the path and had to dismount, finding the next hundred yards or so altogether too rough and broken for riding over.

"Kerr! Fatty! Skimmy!" yelled Digby.

"Are you all asleep, you bounders?" shouted Blake.

Something like an answer came then. It was not in words. It was more like a groan—"like a cow with the toothache," Lowther said.

"That was old Fatty!" said Figgins.

"Kerr!" yelled Kangaroo again.

But now they were so near the camp that the fellows there must have heard. If they did not answer it was because they could not, for some reason or other.

The thirten covered the last hundred yards at the double. A rush was made for tents No. 3 and 4, in one or the other of which the guardians of the camp might be expected to be found, since they were not visible outside.

From No. 3 came a hollow groan. They swarmed into it.

Fatty Wynn and Skimpole lay on the ground, lashed together, back to back. Skimmy's head was enveloped in a blazer, tied around his neck by the arms. Fatty had been treated in the same way, but had managed somehow to get the thing partly off.

Tom Merry had his knife out, and was slashing away at the ropes on the instant. The two victims rolled apart. Talbot tore the blazer from Skimmy's head.

"Great Scott, this is too thick for anything!" shouted Figgins. "Who did it, Fatty? Speak, you old ass! Skimmy, are you dumb?"

"Ow-yow! Grooo-oooh! We don't know who did it," mumbled Fatty Wynn.

"You don't mean to say that neither of you woke up until it was all over?" asked Lowther.

"We weren't asleep."

"Then you must have seen—"

"I say, you fellows, the rotters have wrecked the whole show!" roared Herries. "They've piled up all the grub behind No. 4, and mixed it with mud and gorse-branches!"

"They've smashed up the crockery!" howled Noble.

"The waterproof sheets are all cut!" shouted Blake.

"They've slit holes in the tents!" yelled Digby.

"Who were they? I say, you fellows, you must know! It's quite impossible that—"

"But we don't know, Merry—really, we don't—do we, Skimmy? They had black masks on, and they didn't speak a word. They just came in, and before we could move they'd slung Skimmy down on top of me, and then they tied us together like this, and after that, I suppose, they smashed things up. We couldn't hear very much, and we couldn't stir hand or foot to stop them. It isn't our fault, is it, Skimmy?"

"No, Wynn. I do not see how we can be blamed for it. The utmost vigilance—"

"No use you two idiots talking about vigilance!" snapped Figgins. "You don't know what the giddy word means! Where's Kerr?"

"Where is Kerr, Skimmy? He was with us—"

"Of course he was, Wynn! No, not when those ruffianly creatures came. He had gone before that. Let me see—let me consider—where did he go?"

"Oh, I know now! Across to the farm over there for milk. But it's a rummy thing he shouldn't be back yet."

"How long was it between his going and the attack?" asked Talbot.

Neither Wynn nor Skimpole seemed to have any real idea.

"I guess he'll turn up all right," said Talbot. "Kerr can take care of himself as well as the next man. But I don't fancy he's been all this time fetching milk."

"Let's see what damage has been done," suggested Tom Merry. The damage done was pretty extensive.

The raiders had slashed holes in the canvas of all four tents. They had also slit the waterproof sheets, and the blankets likewise. They had smashed plates and dishes. Luckily, most of the crockery—as Lowther said—was tinware.

They had gathered together all the provisions they could find, and had mixed them into a heap, with the agreeable addition of mud, prickly gorse-stems, and other foreign matter. There, in an awful confused pile, were ham and cold beef, bread and cake, butter and jam, tea and coffee, potatoes and onions, with bicycle, lubricating, and lamp oil poured over them!

CHAPTER 3.

Good Scouting.

WHERE could Kerr be?

The question was asked by all with varying degrees of anxiety, and, for a short time, seemed even more important than that of supper.

But only for a short time.

It was not at all likely that anything dreadful had happened to Kerr, whereas it did appear very likely indeed that something very dreadful was going to happen to the camp generally.

The camp seemed in danger of having to go without supper altogether.

Fatty Wynn contemplated ruefully in the waning light that awful heap of good food spoiled.

"My hat, what brutes!" he said. "I could forgive them all the rest, but to look at this makes me feel horribly revengeful! That was a lovely ham, nice, yellow fat, not just plain boiled bacon, like so much stuff they call ham is, but real, properly-cured ham, with a flavour to it, and—"

"You may have it all now, Fatty," said Clifton Dane generously.

Fatty looked at him in silent reproach.

"One thing, the drink's all right," remarked Kangaroo.

"They didn't tumble to the cool place I'd made for it by digging a hole under our tent."

"I don't know whether it's kept much cooler, but it's kept, anyway, and that's something," answered Herries.

"We can't fill ourselves up with ginger-beer!" growled Digby.

"And I don't care about ginger-beer at all for supper," added Dane. "Tea or coffee's best then."

"When you've all done grousing, I'll tell you something," said Manners.

No one had noticed that Manners had been far more cheerful than the rest through these trying minutes, but such was the case.

"If it's anything to eat—"

"It is, Fatty! And it's just your sort. Come this way, you fellows!"

He led them into tent No. 1.

"My hat!"

"I say, Manners, you're a brick!"

"It's gorgeous!"

"Great Scott, and we were grizzling about—"

"Crumbs, what a pie!"

"Manners—I mean, manna in the wilderness!"

Manners had unpacked that precious parcel of his.

No longer did Tom Merry feel inclined to gibe at it, for that parcel had held the largest and finest pie they had ever seen. There was enough for them all, and for sixteen such appetites the pie needed to be of goodly size.

"They made it at our show on purpose for me to bring," said, Manners, surveying it proudly. "And I thought we'd better eat it while it was fresh."

"Makes my mouth water to look at it," confessed Fatty Wynn. "Your people, Manners, are real benefactors to the human race."

"Do you reckon you're the human race, Fatty?" asked Jack Blake.

"No, Blake. But I always feel like a very important part of it when I get really hungry."

"That," remarked Skimpole, "is a gross delusion, Wynn. It shows an unphilosophical mind. We are all but infinitesimal atoms in a vast universe—"

"You may be, Skimmy; we're not," broke in Figgins. "Infinitesimal atoms can't have much use for pie; and, as you own up to being one, 'nuff said. Now, the question is, what can we rake up by way of a second course?"

There was an unopened tin of biscuits which the raiders had missed. They had also failed to find all the jam, and a couple of large pots of raspberry would go well with the biscuits, all agreed.

As the pie had a good, thick crust, bread could be dispensed with for once.

"Shall we start without Kerr?" asked Tom Merry.

"Oh, I think we might as well. He won't mind," said Talbot.

"And, anyway, if we have to go out and look for him, we can't go on empty stomachs," Fatty remarked. "I feel quite faint."

"I should go on my feet," said Herries.

"Yes, they're plenty big enough, aren't they?" returned Fatty simply.

The pie was soon cleared up. Biscuits and jam followed, a share of these also being kept back for Kerr.

Supper was over, and everybody felt better. But still Kerr did not come.

Some of them wanted to go out and search. But Tom

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Merry and Talbot thought it better to wait a little while longer before doing that.

"Whatever Kerr's dropped into, he'll come out right end up," said Talbot.

"Better turn in," Tom Merry advised. "We'll wake you, if it's necessary."

But they would not all turn in. Tom Merry, Figgins, Blake, and Noble had been elected tent captains, and the first three, with Talbot, chose to sit up and keep watch for their missing member.

They made up the fire again. For half an hour or so they talked, but then silence fell upon them, and for fully ten minutes no one spoke. Then Blake stirred, and murmured:

"Has he come back yet?"

Tom Merry got up.

"My hat, I don't fancy this a bit!" he said. "Kerr may be lying somewhere with a broken leg, or a broken neck, for that matter. I think we shall have to turn out and hunt for him, Talbot."

"Cooee-ee-ee-ee!"

The long-drawn cry came through the night air across the common.

Kangaroo couldn't have been asleep, for on the instant the "cooee" came back in answer from close at hand.

The four around the fire got up, and stared out into the night in the direction whence the sound had seemed to come.

They could see nothing. But Tom Merry called:

"Is that you, Kerr, old chap?"

"Yes, it's me!" came the answer.

Everyone was turning out now. Kerr was the centre of a crowd directly he reached the camp.

He had his bicycle, and hanging to the lamp-bracket was a big can of milk. He had not forgotten that.

"It's all right, you fellows!" he said. "I've tracked the beggars down, and I know who they are!"

"Good egg!" cried Tom Merry.

"Hurrah for old Kerr!" yelled Blake.

"I should think you must be horribly hungry," said Fatty Wynn.

"I am! And thirsty, and tired. But I suppose there isn't much in the way of grub left?"

"Nothing much," answered Manners. "Only this, and these."

He produced the liberal helping of pie and the biscuits and jam, which had been saved for Kerr.

"Crumbs! That's a meal good enough for the Prince of Wales," said Kerr.

Tom Merry opened a bottle of ginger-beer, and handed a brimming glass to the returned hero.

"We won't ask you any questions till you've had something," he said.

"All serene! I sha'n't be long, you bet!"

He did not keep them waiting long. His supper was very quickly dealt with, and then he turned with a grin to the throng of curious faces.

"I don't know whether you'll think I'm a funk," he began.

"Not likely!" came a chorus of voices.

"If we do, it will be the first time, old scout!" said Tom Merry.

"Skimpy and old Fatty might think so," Kerr said. "For I came up before those rotters had finished, and I never even attempted a rescue!"

"Wouldn't have been a scrap of good if you had," said Fatty Wynn. "They took us unawares, and they'd have been four to one, for we couldn't have helped. You wouldn't have had a dog's chance."

"That's what I thought," said Kerr. "I'd been over there for the milk, and I stayed a bit to have a look round at the animals; the farmer's no end of a decent sort. I was coming back, riding carefully so as not to spill the milk, and when I got to the sharp rise a hundred yards or so away, I thought I'd better get off and walk up it. I couldn't see the camp till I got to the top, and directly I did see it and what was going on there, I popped down behind a gorse-clump."

"What was going on?" asked Blake.

"They'd got these two poor old bounders tied up, and they were making hay of the grub! I shouldn't have been in time to save anything, even if I could have hit upon a plan for scaring them off, and to show myself seemed pretty useless."

"They'd only have tied you up with the rest," said Manners.

Kerr nodded.

"So, like Brer Rabbit, I lay low an' said nuffin. From the first I'd made up my mind to find out who the rotters were. They all wore black masks, and they'd got mackintoshes on, so that you could hardly tell one from another, except by their height. And there wasn't very much difference there, though one fellow was shorter than the other three.

"You didn't guess who they were?"

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"My aunt, no! It puzzled me completely. They couldn't be strangers, I felt sure, because what would any strangers want doing such a rotten thing as that? But I couldn't begin to think of anyone likely, and practically everybody about here must be strangers to us."

"It wasn't the village crowd, that's certain," said Blake, as if rather disappointed.

"No; I'd thought of that. But they wouldn't have had time to get here and back between our going and coming," answered Tom Merry.

"You're talking riddles to me," said Kerr. "But, never mind, you can explain later. The four rotters moved away at last, and I saw that if I lay low they wouldn't be likely to spot me. So I lay low till they were a goodish distance away, but took care to keep my eyes on them. Then I stowed the milk-can away in the gorse-bush, and followed."

"Riding?" asked Kangaroo.

"Only when I got into a dip where they couldn't see me. Other times I had to go along with my head low, and keeping to cover as much as I could. But they never got much farther than the two hundred yards or so I'd let them get at the start, and I never lost sight of them."

"I suppose you hadn't twigged who they were yet?"

"Great Scott, no! I'd no chance. They struck the road that goes to Norton Wildmarsh, and I guessed they might be making for Norton station—it's the next on the down line to Towthorpe. But it seems they had bikes hidden away in a barn close to the common. They fetched them out, and got on. I followed, of course; I'd made up my mind that if they went fifty blessed miles I'd track them down, unless they beat me by taking to train or motor-car!"

"Good man, Kerr! And they didn't?"

"Yes, they did, Merry—to the train. They were really making for Norton Station, after all, it turned out."

"Then you lost them? No, you couldn't have done, though, for you say you know who they are!"

"I didn't let them get away like that, you bet! I heard the train coming in, and booted for the platform. I hadn't time to get a ticket, but I tipped the guard to shove my bike aboard, and scrambled in with him just as the train was moving off."

"Had they seen you?" asked Digby.

"I don't think so. No, I'm pretty sure they hadn't. Their bikes were in the van, so I didn't have to bother about looking out for them at the next station."

"Weren't the bikes labelled?" asked Kerr.

"Not with names; only to Freelingworth—next station but one after Norton. They didn't come for them there; they sent a couple of porters. And I had to wait until their machines were got out before I could stir. Then there was a bit of a fuss because I hadn't a ticket, and I was on pins and needles because I was afraid they might get clear away before it was all settled up. But the guard spoke up to the station-master for me, and I collared my bike and rushed off like mad."

"It must have been getting near dark by that time," said Glyn.

"No; only twilight. If I'd been half a minute later I should have lost them. But I was just in time to see them turn a bend in the road, and I pedalled hard after them. In about three minutes I had practically caught them up, and I rode within twenty yards or so of them for a mile or two. It was getting darker every minute, of course. I hadn't a lamp, but I risked that. Then they turned into the yard of a house standing all by itself, and one of them looked round at me as I passed. I don't think he spotted me—pretty sure he didn't; but I knew him."

"Who was it, old chap?" demanded Manners eagerly.

"Just you wait! Then I heard one of them speak to another by name, and I knew his voice. And that told me who one of the other two was, of course. The fourth I'm not sure of, but you fellows will probably be able to guess."

"Who was the first?" asked Digby.

"Crooke!"

"My hat! The rotter! We'll put him through it for this!" cried Tom Merry.

"And the chap who spoke?" inquired Blake.

"Cutts!"

"And the fellow he spoke to?" Noble asked.

"Gilmore!"

"Then the fourth would be St. Leger!" said Figgins. "It's a queer thing those three knocking around with Crooke, though!" went on Figgins.

For Cutts, Gilmore, and St. Leger were all of the Fifth. They considered themselves "sportsmen," and tried to live up to the part by betting, playing billiards, smoking, and drinking.

Crooke was a junior. He was the cad of the Shell, the Form to which Tom Merry, Manners, Lowther, Talbot, and one or two others of the camping party belonged.



"Bit more, Fatty? May as well clear it up," said Kerr, with a wink at Talbot. I don't mind if the constable's on." Fatty replied good-temperedly. (See Chapter 7.)

In an ordinary way the "sportsmen" of the Fifth would not have palled up with Crooke. But if they happened to find themselves thrown into his company during holidays, that would be rather a different matter.

Cutts and Crooke were both enemies of Tom Merry & Co. St. Leger and Gilmore were wasters, with no notion of fair play, and they generally followed the lead of Cutts.

"Good scouting, old fellow!" said Tom Merry warmly. "I doubt whether there's another chap among us who would have carried the thing through half as well!"

"Bai Jove, Tom Mewwy, I agwee with you! Kerr is weally a most extwaoydinawy fellah!"

"You'll make me blush, Gussy," said Kerr. "There was nothing in it, Tom. It just happened to fall to my share, that's all!"

"You haven't told us how you got back, Kerr," said Figgins. "These chaps seem to think what you did no end wonderful! But it's the sort of thing I should expect from a New House fellow! Nothing much in it, looked at that way!"

"Hear, hear, Figgy!" chimed in Dick Redfern.

"Oh, that was easy enough! I rode hard back to Free-lingworth, and found that I was in time for a train. I was able to get a ticket, too, and had a few words with the booking-clerk. Those rotters had got up against him in some way, and he told me a thing or two about them!"

"It's lucky you picked up the milk on your way back,

because it's all we shall have for breakfast," said Tom Merry drily.

"Rats! We'll manage something better than that! But I must turn in now; I can hardly keep my eyes open!"

Everybody turned in, and within ten minutes the whole camp was asleep.

CHAPTER 4. A Rural Strike.

TOM MERRY awoke early next morning. But somebody was awake before him. The rising sun, shining through the slits in the tent, was suddenly obscured by a passing figure. Tom hurried out in his pyjamas, and saw Kerr, dressed lightly in flannels and blazer, but ready to go anywhere or do anything, evidently.

"Hallo, old chap! Where are you off to at this time in the night?"

"Don't wake the rest, Tom! I'm going across to the farm. Put on your things and come with me!"

"Right-ho! We'll have a bathe when we get back!"

In less than three minutes the two were trotting over the dew-spangled turf side by side.

"What's the move?" asked Tom Merry.

"Bacon and bread. We're bound to have some breakfast, I guess!"

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"We haven't got a frying-pan," said Tom Merry,

"But we can borrow one, can't we?"

"Let's hope so. I could do with a rasher or six of bacon for breakfast. We ought to be able to get some eggs, too!"

Inside half an hour they were back, heavily loaded with something like half a side of bacon, some four dozen eggs, several loaves, and a huge frying-pan, all from the farm.

"Don't wake them! Let's cut down and bathe, and then get to work," said Kerr.

They ran down to the river, undressed quickly, swam across and back again, towelled briskly, put on their clothes, and hurried back.

Still everyone slept. Fatty Wynn's nasal trumpet could be heard at work.

"Will you slice the bacon while I break the eggs, Tom?" asked Kerr, producing two packages hitherto unseen by his comrade.

"Just as you like, old scout. What have you got there?"

"Coffee and sugar. I got them while you were talking to Mr. Wannop."

"My hat! You deserve cherishing, if ever anyone did! Let's get a fire going first!"

By-and-by there came from Tent No. 3 the sleepy voice of Fatty Wynn.

"It's a beautiful dream," murmured Fatty. "Please don't wake me, you fellows, for I can smell bacon frying, and I can't bear to wake up and find that we haven't anything for breakfast—and we haven't!"

The voice ceased, and in a couple of minutes or so the snoring began again.

"My aunt! Oh, I say, you fellows, this is noble of you!"

Lowther had popped out of Tent No. 1 in his pyjamas.

"I could hug you for it!" he said. "Here have I been dreaming 'no breakfast,' and trying to swizzle myself that such a whack of pie as I had would make me able to play camel till something turned up, and now the very smell of the frying is like unto a poem!"

"Wake the others up, and get your bathe over, or the stuff will be cold," Tom Merry told him.

Lowther popped back, dipped a sponge into a pail of water, and proceeded to wake up Manners and Talbot.

In a few minutes there was a rush for the river. A hurried plunge followed. Then came a rush back.

And breakfast was ready. Rashers of bacon cooked to a turn, eggs ditto, ditto, fried bread made nicely golden, coffee that tasted like nectar!

"Gentlemen all," said Arthur Augustus, getting on his legs when he had finished, "this is the vewy wippingest bwekkah I evah stwuck! And I pwopose a vote of thanks to Kerr and Tom Mewwy—"

"Say to Kerr, old ass! I should have been snoozing like the rest of you if it hadn't been for him. So if you'll say a vote of thanks to Kerr, and leave me out, I beg to second the proposition!"

"Hear, hear!" chorussed the rest.

"It's nothing," Kerr said. "We were simply bound to have some breakfast, and I happened to wake up. Got that map handy, Merry? We'll have a look at that while some of these fellows clear away and wash up. I think we deserve a spell off!"

"Here we are," went on Kerr, sticking a finger on Three Mile Common. "Here's Norton Wildmarsh, a bit to north-west; Towthorpe's eastwards, and here's Freelington—nearer to us than I reckoned, but on the other side of the river, and no bridge handy. I don't see how I could have got back by a quicker way than I did last night, but I can see how we can get at those rotters without going so far round. Let see, here's the road I took from the station! Why, the house they're staying at must be within a stone's-throw of the river, and only about three miles up!"

"What do you think we can do to get even with them?"

"Don't know yet, Merry; but we've jolly well got to do something, haven't we? When do you expect the boats?"

"Any time now. They were to come early to-day, the chap wrote."

"Ahoy, there!"

The shout came from the river.

They rushed down pell-mell.

The boats were there—three of them, each for four oars; or, rather, four of them, for they had been brought down by two men in another boat, who had them in tow.

"Think they'll do, gen'l'men?" asked the man in charge.

"Rather!" was the unanimous verdict.

"Can you drink ginger-beer?" asked Tom Merry.

"We could drink a'most anything," answered one burly fellow.

That did not sound as though ginger-beer would have been their choice. But they seemed to appreciate it when it was

brought, and sculled away merrily after it, each with a florin tip in his pocket.

"Now trot back to the washing-up, you kids, and Kerr and Talbot and Figgy and Blake and I will fix up the crews for the boats," said Tom Merry.

"Go and eat coke, Merry!" cried Herries. "We're all going to have a say in that."

"Right-ho! It's five to each boat, and one over. Who's the one over? Somebody who can't either steer or row?"

"Skimmy, can you row, or steer?" asked Digby.

"I do not know, Digby. I never tried."

"Then you can't! Skimmy's odd man. He's got to be stowed away in one corner of the biggest boat. That's the biggest—the Invincible, they call it."

"We'll have that, and take Skimmy along," said Tom Merry.

The other crews were soon fixed up, and in the highest of spirits they went back to the camp, finished the work of clearing up, and stowed everything away in shipshape fashion. Just as they had finished, a grocer's cart arrived from Towthorpe with a case of tinned stuff.

"Why didn't you come yesterday?" asked Tom Merry of the boy in charge.

"I did, but I couldn't find your camp."

"What are you snivelling about?" demanded Blake.

"You'd snivel, as you call it, if you'd been treated like I have!" retorted the grocer's boy, with a flash of spirit.

"Dunno," answered Blake. "Tain't much in my line."

"What's been done to you?" asked Manners.

"Them Pullingbury brutes set on to me. They're like a blessed lot of 'uns, they are, ready to interfere with anybody! They kicked me, an' clouted me, an' flung stones at me as I drove away!"

"You'll be all right going back, I suppose?" said Kerr.

"They'll be at work now."

"No, they won't, then! They're all on strike!"

"On strike? I say, what for?" said Redfern.

"For five bob above men's wages, that's all. An' five bob above 'arvest pay, too—an' 'arvest pay's pretty good pay, I can tell you."

"But nobody's going to let them have that, surely?" asked Dane.

"I dunno. You see, nearly all the men's away—gone to the war, an' not back yet. An' these chaps 'ave mostly been gettin' men's wages. Then we ain't got no Irishers over this year, like we 'ave most. They reckon they've only got to sit tight till the crops begin to spoil, an' the farmers will 'ave to give 'em what they want."

"Who do they work for mostly?" asked Tom Merry.

"A goodish batch of 'em for Mr. Wannop, 'ere. He ain't got hardly a man left, 'cept two or three old 'uns. His own sons, they've gone to the war, an' all the young men went alonger them."

Some of the juniors looked at one another.

In their minds there was the same thought. The path of duty lay straight before them.

Months before harvest there had been talk of what might happen if this August found the country short of men.

"There would probably be plenty of volunteers to help get in the corn," folks had said.

And some of them had meant that they would help willingly, but most that other people—they didn't mind who the other people were—would volunteer.

The St. Jim's juniors had never thought very seriously about it till now.

But now—some of them saw already, and all would soon see.

"Mr. Wannop didn't say a word about this when we were over there this morning, Tom," remarked Kerr.

"He never grumbles about nothink," said the grocer's boy. "He was over to Towthorpe to market when word came as 'is eldest son was killed at that there Wipers. He just put a 'and before 'is eyes for a minnit, and then he went on with 'is business. My guv'nor, he says: 'I'm very sorry, Wannop! An' Mr. Wannop, he just says: 'Never mind, 'Artley. The lad died a man's death, an' it ain't for me to grumble. There's five of 'em left! But there ain't no more, 'cos 'e's lost two more.'"

Some of the juniors felt lumps in their throats.

"My dad, 'e's gone, too," the grocer's boy said. "We dunno whether 'e's dead, or a pris'nor in that 'orrid Germany. Mr. 'Artley's sons have went, 'an most of the young men from the shop—all as could pass the doctor."

"Look here!" said Talbot. "It's pretty hard times for you at home, I suppose, with your father away, isn't it?"

"Oh, mother gets the 'lowance, an' there's my wages. But dad earned two pounds a week, an' of course it don't come near that."

Hands went into pockets, and the grocer's boy drove off with a sovereign to take to his mother.

"No river for us to-day!" said Tom Merry.

Digby's face fell—and not Digby's alone.

"I was afraid you'd say that," confessed Manners. "It's a bit rough, but—"

"It may not be for very long," said Talbot. "When the Pullingbury Petes hear that we're on the job, I guess they'll cave in. But as far as I'm concerned, I don't care if it lasts all the holidays. I'm game!"

"Of course you are! So are we all!" cried Digby. "Poor old Gustavus, though! Fancy him working!"

"Weally, Dig! I assuah you that I am quite as capable of honest work as you, or the next man!"

"Let's go over to the farm at once," said Tom Merry.

CHAPTER 5.

Hard Work

MRS. WANNOP stared in amazement when the whole sixteen trooped up to the door of the farm.

She recognised Tom Merry and Kerr at once, and smiled in a puzzled sort of way. Now that they knew the story of those six gallant yeoman sons—three of them dead on the field of honour—they could see the marks of tragedy in her face, and they wondered that she should be able to smile.

Tom did not wait for her to speak.

"We've just heard about the strike, ma'am," he said. "So we've come along to volunteer for work in the fields."

"Deary me! Well, I never. Wannop won't say no, I'll be bound; but—"

"And we think, Mrs. Wannop, that you ought to have told us about it this morning when we were here, because you might have been sure we should be ready to help!" said Kerr boldly.

His bluntness pleased the farmer's wife.

"Well, I don't mind ownin' as I did mention it to my husband," she said. "But he seemed to think it was askin' too much. Said as one could only be young once, and it seemed a rare pity to spoil your holiday."

"But it won't do that," answered Talbot. "We should feel like selfish rotters if we didn't offer, and that would spoil everything for us."

She looked at them all for a moment, and her face worked. Then she put her apron over her head, and burst out crying.

Mr. Wannop came in just then.

"There, mother, there!" he said, patting her shoulder.

The apron was lowered, and she spoke quite calmly and collectedly.

"These young gentlemen have come along to offer themselves for work," she said. "And—and I thought of our boys out there, Bob, that's all!"

Now the farmer looked at them hard. He seemed to be sizing them up. "Wondering if it would last," Lowther said afterwards.

"Thank you, gentlemen!" he said. "I accept gladly! There's me, two elderly men, and two old-age pensioners, as can do a bit yet, and I've full sixty acres of corn to carry and stack. The strike's none of my fault. I've always paid my men good wages, but I won't be driven by them young louts from Pullingbury!"

"You're quite right, Mr. Wannop!" said Talbot quietly.

"I ain't sure. It's worried me above a bit. The corn may be sore needed, and if I let it spoil, that'll lay on my conscience heavy. But I've tried hard to see the right way, and a man can but do his best accordin' to his own lights—nobody else can't judge for him."

"Let's get a start at it at once!" cried Kangaroo.

"Come along, then! You'll see about plenty of lemonade, an' a hot dinner, mother?"

"That I surely will, Bob!"

"I say, you know, weally, we mustn't be a howwid nuisance to Mrs. Wannop!" protested Arthur Augustus.

"While you're workin' for me you mustn't be too proud to eat my victuals, sir!" replied the sturdy farmer. "My wife won't think it a trouble. I'll not insult you by offering you pay, but my guests you must be!"

There could be no arguing against that, so all agreed.

"Now, as to the work," the farmer said. "There's some hefty-looking customers among you, and I'm goin' to give them men's jobs. Did you ever pitch, sir?"

This was to Talbot.

"No. But I know what you mean—lifting the sheaves up to the man in the cart."

"That's your job. You, too, sir."

This was to Tom Merry.

"The loading's a job that takes some brains and skill. Will it suit you, sir?"

Figgins signified that it would suit him admirably.

Arthur Augustus tried not to fidget. But he did hope that all the tasks requiring brains and skill would not be given out before his turn came.

Redfern was chosen to pitch, and so was Blake. One on each side of a cart was required. Herries got the other loading job.

Digby, Noble, Dane, and Manners were sent to help at the stack.

"You mustn't mind if I put you six to boy's work," the farmer said to those left. "Somebody's got to drive the cart, and I daresay some of your friends will be willing to change jobs before the day's over."

"Anything you wish us to do we will do with pleasuah, sir," replied Arthur Augustus, manfully choking down his disappointment at being selected for a mere boy's task.

"Do we sit while we drive?" asked Fatty Wynn.

"You do, sir!"

"Then I sha'n't change with anybody! I don't mind saying straight out that driving's the job that will suit me best!"

They were eager to start, and trooped off gladly with Mr. Wannop.

The first thing to do was to harness more horses, for the lack of labour had kept several in the stables.

"So—and so—and so," said the farmer, quickly harnessing a black mare he spoke to as Smiler. "Now, sir, if you'll just climb up and catch hold of the reins—"

Skimmy was the chosen driver.

"Through the gate and across the two paddocks—the gates are all open. Two pitchers and a loader along with him!"

Smiler had already started, much to Skimpole's relief, for there was nothing he could remember in Professor Balmycrumptet's works which would have helped him had the mare been indisposed to budge.

He tried a timid "click," and thought himself getting on very well indeed. Tom Merry, Talbot, and Figgins ran after the cart, and clambered into it as it moved.

Some of the others had got to work harnessing. Arthur Augustus distinguished himself by the persistence with which he tried to buckle straps in wrong places, but Redfern and Digby and Noble all worked like old hands.

Dobbin was despatched, with Fatty Wynn driving.

"He's rare and quiet," said the farmer.

"Then he'll suit Wynn," answered Kerr.

"I'll take this one," said Arthur Augustus. "What's his name, Mistah Wannop?"

"That's Prince—he's a young horse, and a bit mettlesome. Gets fractious, too, when he's tired of working."

"Yáas, I'll take him, then! I know something about horses."

Kerr drove off next with a big chestnut between the shafts, and Redfern, Blake, and Herries in the cart.

"You won't be able to keep the same hosses, though," said the farmer. "I'd forgot that. It'll be a case of bringin' along the empty cart, and takin' away the full one. We haven't hands to spare for leadin' in the field. Except for Prince—you'll have to stick to him, sir, for he needs someone at his reins."

Prince went off next, with a rattle and a rush, and two of the four chosen for stack-work went with D'Arcy.

Then Lowther drove off with his horse, and Digby and Dane went with him. Glyn was the last to leave.

When he got to the field, he found some of his chums pitching sheaves like veterans at the job, and Figgins and Herries making the best attempt they could at the loading work, which is by no means as easy as it looks.

"Don't make 'er too top-eavy," he heard an old fellow with a face like a nutmeg-grater tell Herries.

The men were all very decent, and willing to help these novices. They had no sympathy with the Pullingbury strikers.

"I don't count as you young swells would last out a week of this," said a burly giant on the stack to Digby and Dane. "But there won't be no need. You be strike-breakers, that's what you be! That there Pullingbury gang will cave in when they hear of what's doin'."

The sun climbed high in the heavens, and his rays were like unto the scorching heat of a furnace. Never in their lives before had most of the St. Jim's juniors perspired as they did that day!

"I call this a dead easy job," remarked Fatty Wynn, taking charge of a cart which Figgins had just loaded.

"You, porpoise? You ain't working at all! Just ambling up and down behind a horse. Don't call that work, do you, Daniel Lambert? You ought to come and change places with me. That would take some of the lard off you, I'll bet!"

"Ah, but I couldn't do it like you do, Figgy!" was Wynn's diplomatic reply.

Figgins surveyed the loaded cart, and then looked hard at Fatty.

The load did not look too well-balanced. But Fatty looked quite innocent.

"Hurry up, Figgy!" cried Tom Merry.

He and Talbot were still working with all their early zeal, and did not seem to be at all tired. The rest were piling in for all they were worth; but most of them were beginning to think that there were more hours in a day than they had ever realised before, and that this day had more than its share.

Figgins scrambled into the empty cart. Glancing round, he saw someone in trouble.

"There's that ass Skimmy run one of the wheels of his cart against the gatepost!" he cried.

"Hubbed the gatepost is, I understand, the correct technical expression," answered Tom Merry, with a grin. "What could you expect of Skimmy? Dig's gone to his rescue, I see."

"My hat! What will Wannop think of us if we get making such blessed silly mistakes?" returned Figgins. "Oh, I say—that ass Fatty—it must be his fault!"

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

For the dismay written upon Figgy's face was really too comical for anything.

What he had dreaded had happened. The top-heavy load had scattered itself!

Mr. Wannop came up just then. They saw him take a fork and quickly put the trouble right, with the help of Digby and Fatty, who pitched the sheaves up to him. And Fatty worked quite as hard as the more active Dig.

Then the farmer came along.

"I say, sir, I'm awfully sorry!" said Figgins, with real contrition. "I loaded that cart, you know!"

"That's all right, my lad. We don't expect anybody to learn everything all at once. Will you pitch a bit while I load? I think I can keep pace with the three of you."

Tom Merry winked at Talbot and at Figgins. The wink meant: "Let's show him!"

They tumbled. Sheaves came up so fast that the farmer, expert though he was, had to cry a halt.

"I can't do it!" he owned. "But you won't be able to keep that pace up all day, so don't you try. I reckon you're ready for a drink and a mouthful of food now—eh?"

Skimpole had just driven up. He had the collision with the gatepost upon his conscience, but forgot his disgrace when he heard that.

"Is it dinner-time, Mr. Wannop?" he asked eagerly.

The farmer laughed.

"Dinner-time? Not likely, lad! This is what we call our eleven o'clock. We reckon to knock off a few minutes and take something then. Didn't think it was one, did you?"

It had seemed a very long time to Skimmy, who knew so little of horses that he could not take things easy for a moment.

Two little girls had pushed through the field a perambulator containing a great jar of home-made lemonade and a supply of bread, cheese, and cake. Everyone left off work, and never had food and drink tasted better.

"How's the work go, Reddy?" asked Tom Merry.

"Oh, not so bad! I ache a bit in places, and I find I haven't as much muscle as I thought I had, but I can stick it out. Old Blake's piling-in like one o'clock, and Herries is a bang-up chap at the loading."

Work began again. Lowther and Kerr took a turn on the stack, and Digby and Dane drove the cart for a time.

"Gussy's prancing like a peacock," remarked Digby to Herries, as he delivered an empty cart and took charge of a loaded one. "Of course, he's got the awkwardest horse of the lot—that Prince really is a bit troublesome. But he makes out he knows all about horses, so he needn't be so blessed conceited because he can manage the beggar."

"Something will happen to Gussy before long, old man," replied Herries. "Simply bound to. He will wear that rotten monocle! Who ever heard of such a thing in a harvest-field!"

But the time between eleven o'clock and dinner passed, and still Arthur Augustus went on his way without mishap.

Hot as it was, they were more than ready for their dinner, and did not grumble because that was hot, too.

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"Rabbit-pies!" said Fatty Wynn. "My word, this is scrumptious!"

"Do you like rabbit-pies, my lad?" asked the farmer.

"Don't I just!" answered Fatty, ogling one of them.

"Well, then, take that one, and get outside it!"

"But, I say, there isn't one each! I can't—"

"That's enough, I reckon! Pitch in!"

Fatty sat down, with the pie-dish between his knees, and started.

Never had he tasted a better pie. So good was it that he forgot everything else, took no share in the little talk that went on, but devoted himself entirely to that pie.

It did make rather a whack for one fellow. But Fatty had naturally something more than a one-fellow appetite. He cleaned it up to the last morsel.

Then he looked up.

Every eye was upon him!

If his face could have gone redder, he would have flushed. But it couldn't.

A great peal of laughter rolled.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the farmer.

"He do cap all I ever see! He, he, he!" chuckled the old man with the face like a nutmeg-grater.

"Ho, ho, ho! I reckoned I'd got a fair twist, but he's ahead o' me!" shouted the burly giant from the stack.

"Best pie I ever tasted!" Fatty said solemnly. "I could eat another in three hours or so!"

"Good thing you haven't got to work on it, Fatty!" said Tom Merry, clapping him on the back.

"Work! Why, I reckon I have been working!" answered Fatty, with wide-open eyes.

"Call that work? Why, you fat old duffer, you've been asleep half the time!" cried Figgins.

"Right-ho, Figgy! If I can't load better than you, I'll never eat another rabbit-pie—there! I'll show you!"

And he did show them. Figgins went to the stack, and Manners took a turn at driving.

"That's a picture!" said Fatty, contemplating the first load he had worked at.

"Yes; a bit out of drawing!" answered Talbot, with a laugh.

But it went safely to the stack under the careful guidance of Glyn.

CHAPTER 6. A Runaway.

"IT doesn't get any cooler," remarked Tom Merry, wiping his perspiring brow.

An hour or more had passed since dinner, and some of the fellows who had been elated at getting men's jobs had willingly exchanged for a time with their chums who had been given boys' work.

But all stuck to their guns. However tired they might feel, they realised that it was up to them to hold out.

Arthur Augustus had had an hour or so on the stack. But a heated argument with Kangaroo, following upon a jab with

the fork, which went wrong and lamed the Australian junior for a time, had made him rather fed-up with that, and he resented the laughter of the men.

Glyn admitted that he found Prince troublesome, and Arthur Augustus went back to the driving gladly.

"Horses are weally my line, don'tcherknow, Glyn," he remarked.

"You're welcome to that brute," answered the young inventor. "I don't mind any of the rest; but he's the blessed limit! His mouth seems made of cast-iron, and his brains got left out altogether!"

"Hand him ovah to me, deah boy! I can dwive him!"

"Cooler? It's the hottest day I ever knew!" answered Talbot to Tom Merry. "How do you feel, Fatty?"

"I don't expect to live out the day!" Fatty replied. "At any rate, not most of me! There may be a little skin and bone left when it's over, of course!"

"My hat, you've got a long way

**TUCK HAMPERS
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BOYS' FRIEND
OUT TO-DAY!
ONE PENNY.**



Gussy went sprawling from his machine. A yokel of seventeen or so, who sat with others on a grassy bank by the roadside, had thrust out a hooked stick, and hooked the spokes of his back wheel. (See Chapter 1.)

to go, old man! I say, you fellows, look there! Of all the rotten cheek!"

"Well, I'm hanged!" said Talbot.

"It is a bit thick!" remarked Fatty.

For there, walking along the hedge two by two, came Cutts, St. Leger, Gilmore, and Crooke.

Each carried a gun, and all were dressed in knickers and Norfolk jackets. By contrast with the perspiring and dirt-stained juniors, they looked very spick and span.

"Pass the word that nobody's to let on that we know they made hay of the camp," said Tom Merry to Digby, who had just brought up an empty cart, and was about to return with a full one.

"I guess they'll tumble to that all serene," Dig answered. "I say, Merry, those rotters never even took any notice of me when I passed them!"

"You don't want their blessed condescension, do you?"

"No. But it's frightful swank to behave like that."

The four had come over to ask if they might do some rabbit-shooting on the farm, it appeared.

"Not to-day, I'm afraid," said Mr. Wannop. "That's best done when we're cutting. Of course, we're glad of an extra gun or two when we get to work with the reaping-machine, and the rabbits begin to bolt—that is, if the guns are in hands that know how to use them!"

He looked hard at Crooke, whose manner of carrying his gun seemed to suggest that carrying it at all was a bit of a novelty to him.

"Ah! And when shall you be cutting?" asked Cutts, in his most superior tone.

Cutts felt an immeasurable distance above the mere

farmer. But Robert Wannop did not feel an immeasurable distance below him!

"That I can't say for certain," he answered. "But I tell you what—if you like to stay and give me a hand, you'll be on the spot ready for it!"

"What do you say, St. Leger?" asked Cutts sneeringly.

"Oh, hang it, we can't be expected to do day-labourers' work!" replied St. Leger haughtily.

"Hear, hear!" said Gilmore; and Crooke grinned, and did weird things with his gun in an effort to shoulder it properly.

"Just as you like," answered Mr. Wannop coolly. "I hardly thought you would. Happen hard work and you are no friends! I've a whole crowd of schoolboys here helping me—my hands have mostly struck—all from St. James' School down Sussex way. St. Jim's they call it. An' they're workin' away like men, too!"

"The bigger asses they!" said Gilmore. "We're from the same school, as it happens—three of us staying at the Manor over at Freelington. Mr. Martindale's, you know!"

"From the same school, are you?" the farmer replied. "Now that's interestin'—an' queer, too, some ways. Seems to me the younger lads at that school might be able to teach their elders something!"

"I suppose they're earning a little pocket-money?" sneered Crooke.

"No. As it happens, they won't hear of being paid."

"Then it licks me what they're doing it for!" Crooke growled.

"Ah!" said the farmer. "I dare say it would."

"Well, you might drop us a line or wire when you're cutting," Cutts said graciously.

"I'll consider it," answered Mr. Wannop, in his driest tones.

Then his eyes fell upon Crooke. "For any sake, boy," he said sharply, "don't fool round with that gun in that fashion! Did you never handle a gun before? I hope the thing ain't loaded?"

"I dare say I know as much about guns as you do—" "About Greek! Mr. Wannop don't reckon to go in for that sort of thing, Crooke, I guess!" struck in Herries, coming up behind them on the forepart of a cart.

"Oh, you shut up, you cad!" snarled Crooke. "You fellows don't seem to see how frightfully you're letting St. Jim's down!"

"They haven't decent feeling enough for that!" said Cutts.

"Jolly well ought to get the sack for lowering the school!" remarked Gilmore.

"Oh, leave them alone! They can't help their horrid low tastes!" St. Leger said.

All that Herries said was: "Rats to you!"

But Mr. Wannop said more. His face was very grave, but he did not let the anger he felt show.

"This is no ordinary time, gentlemen," he said slowly, weightily. "It isn't only for the sake of my own pocket—"

"Oh, of course not!" sneered Cutts.

"—that I'm rare glad to have these fine lads turning in to do their bit. There's more than that to it. We're a nation at war, and we may want every bushel of corn as can be gathered in. There's them that's doing their work over there"—he pointed eastwards—"bless them all! Some as would have been workin' here to-day are among them. I count that them as are too old or too young to be in the trenches are doin' the right thing when they try to help otherwise. They're workin' for our country, and that's all one with fightin' for it. So I think. You don't. We won't argue. Good-day to you, gentlemen!"

He turned, and strode towards the fast-rising stack. "Low boulder!" said Cutts.

"Knows which side his bread's buttered, though!" St. Leger remarked.

"Wheat at war prices!" sneered Gilmore.

Crooke said nothing. He was struggling with that gun again. He didn't seem able to get it in a position that was safe and satisfactory. He wished he had not been persuaded to bring the thing. It was not his, but belonged to the eldest son of the house at which he was staying, half a mile or so from Freelington Manor. The gun's owner was in Flanders, and his people would not have minded if Crooke had been there, too!

The four turned to go away, none of them looking very pleasant.

Arthur Augustus was just driving Prince through the gate. He saw the four, and put up his monocle.

Crooke caught his clumsy feet in some thick stubble, and sprawled.

Bang! The gun had gone off!

Its effect upon Prince was electrical. Perhaps some of the

shot had peppered him. Certainly it had come in his direction.

Anyway, he started off at a gallop, and nothing D'Arcy could do availed either to stop him or to direct his course.

And that course led straight towards the fallen Crooke!

"Whoa! Stop, you wascal! Oh, get out of the way, Cwooke!"

"Get up, Crooke, you idiot, or D'Arcy will drive right over you!" yelled Cutts.

"That's a thumpah! I can't hold him!" protested Arthur Augustus, bumped roughly up and down in his seat.

"Yar-oogh! I've bitten my tongue!"

"Stop it, D'Arcy! I—I—" Cwooke struggled up, but got that troublesome gun between his legs, and sprawled again.

Kerr rushed for the horse's head, caught his rein, hung on, but could not stop him.

"Yaroooh! I—I'm goin'!" yelled Arthur Augustus. And he went.

Not of his own free will. He had been hurled headlong from his place.

He landed right on top of Cwooke, and the barrel of the gun came very near to ending his career once for all.

But it missed his chin by the fraction of an inch, and merely made a long cut along his cheek.

"You—you utter idiot!" yelled Cwooke. "You—you—" "Look out for yourself!" shouted Kerr, tugging hard at the reins.

He could not stop Prince, but he managed to swerve him aside—only just in time!

The horse rushed on, swinging Kerr right off his feet. The tail of the cart, passing within an inch of Gussy's head, smote Cwooke, who had risen again, in the back, and sent him floundering right into a shock of wheat.

"Ow—yow! I'm killed!" howled Cwooke.

Then Talbot and Tom Merry came to Kerr's aid, and among them the three managed to stop Prince's mad career.

"Hurt, old fellow?" asked Talbot, picking Arthur Augustus up. "I say, you've got a nasty cut there!"

"Oh, that's only a scwath, deah boy!" answered Gussy, putting up his handkerchief, and looking with surprise at its soaked condition when he removed it. "Is Cwooke hurt, that's the question?"

"As he isn't killed, I jolly well hope he is!" Talbot returned hotly. "Such an idiot with a gun I never saw in my life! He isn't fit to be trusted with a peashooter!"

Cwooke emerged, scowling, from among the wheat, his face scratched by the straw.

"I believe my back's broken!" he groaned.

"No such luck!" replied Tom Merry, with complete absence of sympathy.

"Come along, Cwooke, if you mean to come!" sang out Cutts.

The three Fifth-Formers had stopped to watch the runaway, but had not made the slightest attempt to stay its course.

Now they were walking quickly away.

Cwooke limped after them.

"Better go and enlist, all of you, in the German Army!" yelled the burly giant on the stack. "That's the place for croes like you!"

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CHAPTER 7. A Friendly Action.

THE long day was over. The sun had set redly in a cloudless sky, promising another fine day for the morrow. Not until the last flush had faded and twilight was gathering, did the harvest work stop.

"Lucky for you young gents as there's no moon to-night," remarked the big man, who seemed to be something of a humourist.

"Why?" asked D'Arcy innocently.

With a bloodstained handkerchief tied around his face, his monocle still in his eye, and the grime of a hard day's work upon him, the swell of the Fourth could hardly have recognised himself had he looked in a mirror.

"'Cause it would be up to us all to keep on half the night if there was a moon, an' I'm reckonin' you'd find it a trifle long-some," replied the genial giant.

With all their very real desire to help Mr. Wannop, they thought it just as well. All of them had had enough.

They would not go to the farm for supper. They thought it best to get to camp at once.

"If we once sit down," said Lowther, with a stifled groan, "there'll be no moving on for most of us."

So they dragged themselves the short distance over the common to the camp.

"Never had any notion before how beastly rough this ground is," remarked Herries, stumbling. "Hold up, Gustavus!"

But, for all their fatigue, they felt happy. Even Gussy, whose face was very painful, felt happy. Even Skimpole felt happy, though he was still worrying about the problem of replacing horses in the harvest-field.

They knew they had been doing their duty for their country and for a good fellow who had made sacrifices for it.

It was quite dusk—nearly dark, indeed—when they reached the camp.

A bulky form loomed up from among the tents.

"Ah, you've come along, then, gentlemen!" said a voice that some of them recognised as belonging to the red-faced constable. "I'm glad of that, for I couldn't have waited much longer."

"My hat! Do you want any of us?" inquired Tom Merry. The policeman laughed—a great, hearty rumble of a laugh.

"No, sir; not in that sense. But I 'ad to stay 'ereabouts because I reckoned there was trouble a-nigh, an' I wanted to pecture your interests, as you may say."

"How was that?" asked Blake.

"You young gents 'ave got enemies. There's the Pulling-bury gang, what talk about 'avin' of your blood, an' there's some more, what don't say so much, but may be all the more dangerous for that."

"Tell us all about it, constable," said Talbot, "and have some supper with us."

"Well, I dunno as I 'ad ought to wait for that. But I'm rare an' empty, too. D'ye know anything of four chaps—gents they'd call themselves, but I can't agree with 'em there—in Norfolk jackets an' fancy knickerbockers, all a-carryin' of guns?"

"What about them?" asked Herries.

"They ain't friends of yours, by no chance?"

"It would be a queer chance that would make them so," said Tom Merry quietly. "But we know them, if that's your meaning."

"I was along this way in the afternoon, and see your camp deserted like. Then I spotted them comin' towards it, an' I set down behind that there clump of gorse. So up they comes. And thinks I, 'Wonder whether you young swells has all took out your gun licences, now?'"

"My hat! I never thought of that!" grinned Figgins. "Ten to one they hadn't!"

"We'll come to that presently. Well, they comes up—one of 'em limpin' a bit—the smallest, that was—an' all seemin' a trifle out in their tempers. An' just as I was goin' to pop up an' ask about them licences, one of 'em said, 'We didn't half finish the job the other night! Let's tear the blessed tents

down, an' chuck 'em in the river!' It was the shortest one, I reckon, what said that."

"Ah, it sounds like Crooke," remarked Redfern.

"So I lay low, thinkin' as I was well on the track of summat," went on the constable. "An' there was a bit more talk, an' all of 'em seemed to 'ave their knives into you young gents—some more, some less—but the wicouset of 'em all was the one as you say was Crooke, an' I'm blowed if the name don't fit 'im like a glove!"

"They didn't do anything, though, after all," said Kangaroo.

"They was just a-goin' to start in, when I popped up sudden like. I didn't let on as I'd heard anything what they'd been sayin'; but they must have smelt a rat, for they turned several kinds o' colours, an' looked at one another very uneasy like. Then I says, quite polite, 'Would you oblige me with a voo of your gun-licences, gents?'"

"And they produced them at once, of course?" said Tom Merry, winking at Talbot.

"Not much, they did not! The tallest one, 'e says, 'We've left 'em at 'ome, my good man.'"

"That was Cutts."

"Ah! 'E looked as if that might be 'is name," answered the constable vaguely. "Well, that don't go, you know, so I says, 'Then will you be good enough to give me your names an' addresses?'"

"Which, of course, they did at once?" put in Jack Blake.

"Not to say at once. They did a bit of whisperin' together first, an' I 'eard the one as you say is Crooke, whisper something about any name an' address bein' good enough for that old bluebottle—which was me, young gents!"

"Shows their innate depravity," remarked Lowther solemnly.

"It do that, an' plenty of it! But Mr. Cutts, he says something about somebody givin' the show away—as it might be you gentlemen. An' then another one, he says, 'We're stayin' with Mr. Martindale, at Freelington, constable. 'He's a magistratè, you know. Surely that's good enough?'"

"And you were satisfied, of course?" said Tom Merry.

"Ho, yes! I says, 'That's good enough for Mr. Martindale, so long as 'e takes out 'is licence, which 'e always do, but it don't cover every Tom, Dick, an' Arry as likes to use 'is name.' Then Cutts, 'e says, 'You're impudent, my man!' An' I says, 'You're another, an' your name an' address, if you please!'"

"What were the names they gave you?" asked Figgins.

"Cutts, Crooke, something with a Saint in it, though I don't think he looked like it, an' Mentmore—no, Gilmore."

Tom Merry nodded. The raiders had feared to give wrong names.

"Then they moved off towards the river," went on the constable, "and I followed of 'em. An' Mr. Cutts, 'e turns round an' says, 'aughty like, 'We don't desire your company, policeman!' I didn't answer 'im, an' I didn't turn back neither, for I'd seen that you gents 'ad got boats down there, an' I guessed as they would be up to some mischief to 'em if they were left to theirselves."

"I say, though, that was awfully decent of you!" cried Tom Merry. "There'd have been no end of trouble if they'd damaged the boats. And we might not have been able to prove anything against them."

"So I thought, sir, an' I watched 'em get into their own boat, an' row up the river. That's the nighest way to Freelington Manor. Then I came back 'ere, an' who should I see but Josh Barnicoat, from Pullingbury! 'E looked as inmerent as ever 'e know 'ow, an' I pretended as I didn't twig 'e'd got some of 'is pals a-lyin' in 'idin' 'ard by."

"We seem to be between the devil and the deep sea," remarked Talbot.

"Jest my thought, sir! I 'ad a talk with Josh. 'Im an' 'is lot are very sore about you blackleggin', as they call it. 'E didn't threaten, 'cause 'e daren't do it to me, but I'm thinkin' you'll 'ave trouble with them. In the end, I do believe, though, as you may break the strike."

"We'll chance the trouble, if it's at all likely we can do that," said Talbot.

"My hat, yes! Let 'em all come!"

"Feel like fighting to-night, Tom?" asked Manners. "I don't."

"We've got to, if it comes to the pinch."

They had not missed Kerr, but he appeared now with a big plateful of slices of tongue, the top of a crusty loaf, and a foaming glass of ginger-beer.

"Here you are, constable!" he said. "Start on yours, and we'll join you in half a tick. I've opened four tins of tongue, you chaps, and we may as well have our supper."

Everybody was quite ready for it, and they piled in with good will, though some of them were so sleepy that they nodded over their plates in the light of the camp-fire.

"Who's game to keep watch?" asked Tom Merry.

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NEXT
WEDNESDAY:

"HEROES OF THE FOURTH!"

There was a moment's hesitation, and then Talbot and Kerr said together:

"I am!"

Manners groaned.

"I'm willing," he said, "but I jolly well know I can't keep awake, so that it isn't a bit of use promising."

"Is all the tongue wolfed up, Kerr?" asked Fatty Wynn plaintively. "I'm not half-full yet!"

"I can open another tin," said Kerr, who seemed to have stepped into the position of head of the commissariat department.

"I wish you would, old chap! You can do with a bit more, can't you, constable—I don't know your name?"

"Wilkins is my name, sir, an', to tell the truth, I could eat another small plateful."

Kerr opened another tin.

"Needn't trouble about cutting it so thin, old chap," Fatty said.

So Kerr cut it thick, though he knew as well as anybody else that wasn't the right way to cut tongue.

"That's the style—eh, Wilkins?" said Fatty, squaring himself for work.

"It's the way I like it, sir," answered the constable.

Two or three of the fellows stole off to their tents, unable to resist longer the lure of sleep.

But the rest stayed. The duel between Fatty Wynn and Constable Wilkins had become interesting.

Fatty finished his helping two mouthfuls ahead of the burly policeman.

"Just a little more, Fatty?" asked Kerr.

"Yes, please! A trifle, you know."

"Little more, constable?"

"Since the young gent is willin' to keep me in countenance, like, I don't mind if I do, sir."

Kerr cut it thick again.

"This isn't half bad tongue," said Fatty meditatively.

"Wery good tongue, indeed!" answered the policeman.

No one else said anything. No other tongue but that from the tin seemed going. Jack Blake was asleep, with his head on Lowther's lap, and Lowther had dozed off, with his head on Tom Merry's shoulder. Figgins, Glyn, Skimpole, and Arthur Augustus had retired. Digby Manners, Redfern, and Kangaroo were nodding.

"Bit more, Fatty? May as well clear it up," said Kerr, with a wink at Talbot.

"I don't mind if the constable's on," Fatty replied good-temperedly.

"I think I could eat another mouthful or two," said Constable Wilkins.

The remainder of the tin gave each a good plateful. They set to work with apparently unabated zest. In a few minutes both plates were empty.

"I'm not going to open another tin," Kerr said; "but if anybody can eat bread and cheese—"

"A morsel of cheese is a good thing for the digestion, they say, Wilkins," observed Fatty.

"I'm with you, sir!" said the constable.

He was not only with Fatty, but in the long run he beat him! For the Welsh junior declined a second helping of bread and cheese, while the policeman accepted it—and did not toy with it, either!

"I could eat a bit more if I wasn't so frightfully sleepy," observed Fatty Wynn, in a tone of disappointment.

Nobody answered. Nobody said anything more till Constable Wilkins, having solemnly disposed of two bottles of ginger-beer, rose to take his leave.

Fatty was nodding then. Only Tom Merry, Kerr, and Talbot were still awake.

"Well, good-night, gentlemen, an' thank you kindly!" said Constable Wilkins, patting his tunic about two-thirds of the way down.

"Good-night, constable, and our thanks to you!" answered Tom Merry, and the others chorussed: "Good-night!"

The constable disappeared into the half-darkness of the summer night.

"Fatty, old porpoise, you're beaten!" said Tom Merry.

"Eh? Beaten! Not likely! I say, Kerr, open another tin of tongue, will you, and I'll show—"

His voice trailed off, and he was asleep again.

CHAPTER 8.

An Offensive Alliance.

RING-A-TING! Ring-a-Ting! Ring-a-Ting! Early in the morning, while the dew yet sparkled on the grass, and the sun was low in the eastern sky, a bell rang in the holiday camp.

Sleepers awoke, grumbled, and stirred.

But not all awoke. Fatty Wynn still snored on placidly.

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Skimpole and D'Arcy and Digby were too sound asleep to be easily aroused.

Ring-a-ting! Ring-a-ting! Ring-a-ting!

Arthur Augustus murmured something, and sat up.

Digby growled: "Rising-bell!" He, too, sat up.

Fatty and Skimpole still slumbered on.

Redfern popped his head out of No. 2 tent.

"My hat, I guessed it was you, Kerr! Where did you get the bell?"

"Borrowed it from the farm yesterday, and brought it along without saying anything. Everybody's awake in our tent?"

"All but Fatty, and Figgins is just—"

"Yarough! Ow—yow! Don't Figgys!" sounded Fatty's voice.

He had just been given the sponge treatment, warranted to cure oversleeping—for the time being, anyway.

Kangaroo looked out of No. 4 tent.

"Poor old Skimmy was so dead-beat I don't like to wake him!" he said.

"Excuse me, Noble, but I am already awake," spoke the voice of the philosopher. "I arise refreshed, and after breakfast shall feel quite fit to renew my arduous exertions of yesterday."

"Sitting in front of a cart, and letting the horse go anywhere it jolly well likes!" remarked Clifton Dane. "Giddy arduous, Skimmy! I wonder you didn't break down altogether!"

"Do I smell bacon?" asked Tom Merry.

"Dunno," answered Kerr, "but it's cooking. I've had my bathe. Cut along, you fellows! I'll be ready for you by the time you're back!"

"Kerr, you're a blessed treasure! We shall all subscribe to present you with a—a—"

"Gold dinner service, jewelled with pearls, Tommy," struck in Lowther. "Or, if it don't quite run to that, a bar of chocolate!"

"That would be more useful just now," answered Kerr.

"I get too hungry to worry about what I'm eating my grub off. Do cut along, you fellows!"

Skimmy volunteered to stay and help get breakfast; but Kerr would not hear of it, and the inventive genius, who had rather a preference for bathing in a smaller company, had to go with the rest.

There was not the usual amount of splashing and larking that morning, however. The plunge into the river did them all good, but they were in a hurry to get back to breakfast.

The last of the fried bread was being lifted out of the pan when they reached the camp. The bacon was all ready, ingeniously kept hot by a device of Kerr's own, in which a big basin turned upside down in the sun played a part.

Everyone set to with appetite. There were no eggs this morning, but no one grumbled at that.

The meal over, they left Glyn, Digby, and Skimpole to wash up, and follow as soon as they had finished, while the rest made their way at once to the farm.

"The enemy didn't turn up," remarked Talbot.

"No. Why should they bother to get up in the night, and have to fight for it, while they can come along any time in the day and do what they like without anyone to stop them?" returned Tom Merry.

"We must trust to old Wilkins," said Redfern.

"But he can't be there all the time," answered Kerr.

"He won't be far off, I guess," Lowther said. "It would grieve the old chap no end to think of good grub being spoiled. Fatty, old man, your shield is tarnished!"

"Right-ho, Lowther! Let it be! But wait till old Wilkins waltzes along again, and then see if I don't make him lose some of the county constabulary's buttons before he can say he's licked me!"

At the farm they were greeted heartily.

"Never expected to see you turn up so early as this, lads," said Mr. Wannop. "Bit short in your number, though, I reckon—eh? Some of 'em too knocked up after yesterday?"

"No, it's not that. They only stayed behind to wash up. They'll be along presently," answered Tom Merry.

The trio left behind made all speed, though Skimpole seemed likely at one time to delay them by the explanation of a remarkable invention for the quick washing-up of greasy plates. The idea had just occurred to him, he said, and though it was in the rough as yet—

"Tell you what, Skimmy," said Glyn. "I do a bit of inventing myself, and I haven't the beginnings of a conscience. If you tell me about your invention, I'm dead certain to bag it. So don't say afterwards I didn't warn you!"

"Rats to all piffing inventions!" growled Digby.

Between Digby's coldness and Glyn's over-warmness, as he held it, Skimmy was choked off.

"I do hope the horses will be more tractable to-day!" he said, with a sigh, as they started.

"Better invent a horse that will steer to port when you put the rudder for starboard, Skimmy!" answered Glyn.

The camp was left to itself. All the provisions had been hidden, but it was not practicable to hide everything, of course.

For fully three hours it remained deserted, except for a rabbit or two that scuttled in and out among the tents, and half a dozen rooks, who strutted about in their peculiar, side-long way, and picked up crumbs from the breakfast.

Then the rooks flew up, and sailed away, cawing, and the rabbits cocked their scuts, and made for shelter among the gorse-clumps.

Four fellows were coming up from the river. They did not carry guns to-day.

"Told you so!" said Croke. "They don't call this early on a farm, though it isn't much past nine yet. I said they'd all be gone!"

"Leaving the field clear for us," answered Cutts.

"If you ask me, old man, we'd better go a bit slow," St. Leger said. "That fat bobby may be hiding somewhere handy. And, anyway, it's risky to do anything now that they know we're about!"

"Hang the fat bluebottle!" snapped Cutts.

"Oh, hang him, if you like! But I reckon we've enough trouble on hand with that gun licence business. Martindale's very strict about that sort of thing; and I gather that we haven't exactly made ourselves popular at the Manor by borrowing the guns!"

"Confound it all, what do they expect a fellow to do?" growled Cutts. "We can't play billiards all day and every day, especially as our blessed host bars betting on the game! It isn't safe to go near a pub. There aren't any races to go to. There's not anything, so far as I can see!"

"Oh, yes, there is!" said Gilmore.

"What is it, then?"

"A strike in the neighbourhood."

"Pooh! There's no fun in that!"

"I don't know, Cutts. We might make something out of it!"

"How? I'm not going to hire myself out for rotten farm work! And I'm certainly not mug enough to go and do it free gratis, like those kids!"

"My dear chap, I wouldn't suggest anything so low! Not for a minute, Cutts, would I connect the notion of work with you, or with myself, or St. Leger!"

"What are you driving at, then?"

"I propose that we go and sympathise with the strikers!"

"Rot! Beastly bounders want keeping in their places! What are they for but to work?" returned Cutts.

"I'm not arguing on that point. Don't you tumble, St. Leger?"

"I think I do, old man."

"So do I!" growled Croke.

Gilmore patted him on the head.

"Under our influence, Cutts, the youthful Croke begins to show signs of intelligence! Explain, Croke, if you are really on to my meaning!"

"Get the village rotters to mob the other rotters!" Croke snarled.

"Ah, that's an idea!" said Cutts.

Over the breakfast-table at Freelington Manor that morning the story of the strike at Mr. Wannop's farm had been told, and Mr. Martindale had expressed approval of the patriotic conduct of the campers in volunteering for harvest work.

He did not know that they were St. Jim's boys, and Cutts & Co. did not enlighten him on the subject.

Nor did Cutts & Co. rise to the delicate hints he threw out that they might like to go and volunteer also. It would have taken something much stronger than delicate hints to bring Cutts & Co. in such dangerous nearness to work!

"Shall we go along to the village?" asked St. Leger. "Pullingbury Something-or-other, Martindale called it!"

"How far is it?" returned Cutts.

"Two miles, or thereabouts, I fancy."

"Beastly fag on a hot day like this! Let's think it over. Got any of the cigarettes you boned, Croke? No chance of filling our cases at the Manor. Martindale's a non-smoker; don't like it!"

"I have to be middling careful," Croke answered, offering his case. "I never take more than two or three at a time, and don't go to them again until Richardson has had one or two himself; but I've raked together a decent stock."

None of these young rascals seemed to have any notion that the sort of thing they discussed was mean and low. It was not like work!

They lay down within a few yards of the camp, and smoked.

"Hallo!" said St. Leger, throwing away a cigarette-end "There's a native!"

The native was Josh Barnicoat, the leader of the Pullingbury louts. He had crept up close to them unobserved, but, perceiving that the smokers were not members of the camping-party, had shown himself.

"Hi, you chap, come here!" yelled Cutts.

Barnicoat came nearer, his stick ready in case of attack.

"What are you after?" Cutts asked.

"Avin' a look round, that's all."

"Are you one of the strikers?"

"I are."

"Oh! Got your noses nicely put out of joint now, haven't you?" said St. Leger. "Let's have another cig, Croke. Our rustic friend here will also take one."

"Who's a rustic?" demanded Barnicoat, while Croke complied with rather an ill grace.

Croke did not quite see why the cigarettes he had obtained with so much trouble should be offered to outsiders by other fellows.

"Not you, my friend! Oh, no! Well, what about the strike? Sit down and let's hear."

"If you're friends of them—"

"We are not," said Gilmore quickly. "Dismiss the thought! We don't like them a little bit."

"You're wearin' of the same colours on your 'ats."

"That proves nothing! See here, would you like to get even with them?"

"We means to," answered Barnicoat, clenching his hands and drawing a deep breath.

The result of the deep breath was to send smoke the wrong way, and cause him to cough and splutter. But that only made him feel more ferocious.

"Well, I think I can help you—or show you how to help yourselves."

"Ooh, I dunno about that! Old Wilkins, he'd be down on us pretty quick if we 'elped ourselves. An' we don't want no tents nor no rugs nor such, an' there don't seem much else lyin' around."

"That wasn't exactly what we meant," St. Leger said. "I take it that old Wilkins is the fat bluebottle?"

"That's 'im. He's wunnerful down on us Pullingbury chaps—says we're a lot of good-for-nothen' louts."

"A man of no judgment!" said Gilmore.

"Decidedly not. A very wrong-headed creature indeed!" returned St. Leger.

"Don't waste time talking about the bobby," growled Cutts. "Tell him what they've got to do."

"Hear, hear!" said Croke.

"Not so much of the what we got to do!" retorted Barnicoat. "I ain't takin' orders from none of you!"

"You're too bold a hero to take orders from anybody," answered St. Leger soothingly. "We don't ask you to. All we want is to make a suggestion."

"Well, I'll listen to that," announced the Pullingbury leader affably. "Might as well 'ave another fag, I reckon."

Croke gave him a basilisk glance, but he tendered his case.

"What we mean is something in the way of an offensive alliance with you fellows," said St. Leger.

"Oh, ah! Like Garmany an' Australia—no, t'other one—an' Turkey—eh?"

"That's it. Why don't you come in force and raid these blacklegs?"

"There's old Wilkins. He's on the watch. An' we don't want to get quodded."

"Surely there's some way of getting round that?"

Barnicoat shook his head slowly.

"You can't bribe him. He ain't that sort. An' he's a deal smarter nor he looks."

"Couldn't he be got out of the way by a false message or something?" asked Cutts.

"Dunno. We couldn't work that now. If you can—"

For a mere rustic, Josh Barnicoat was not so utterly dense. He evidently had an idea that all the advantages of an alliance should not be on one side.

"We could, I think, Cutts?" said St. Leger questioningly.

"Easily!" answered Cutts. "You just leave it to us, my man. Tell us when you mean to make your raid, and we'll fix up Wilkins. Where does he live?"

"Pullingbury St. Mary's, about two miles away from us."

"I'll make a note of it," St. Leger said. "Now about the raid? How many can you muster?"

"Enough to give them young 'ounds a good doin'!" answered Barnicoat spitefully.

"That's all right. When will you do it?"

"Say ter-morrer night."

"Why not to-night?"

But for some reason or other that proposition did not suit Mr. Barnicoat.

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"No. Ter-morrer night," he answered firmly. "But I shall want to see you fust, an' arrange about the money for it!"

"The—the what?"

"Bit deaf, ain't you? The money, I said!"

"But, my good fellow——"

"You don't suppose, do you, as we're a-goin' to do your dirty work for nothen'? That ain't our line."

Cutts and Crooke looked sulky. Gilmore rubbed his chin meditatively, and St. Leger grinned.

"We thought that, having a grudge against this gang, you would be only too glad to wipe the floor with them," said Gilmore.

"So we be. Ain't you the same way of thinkin'? You can lend us a 'and if you like, an' then we sha'n't ask you for no more than to stand us a few gallons arterwards."

But that proposal did not suit any of the four. It was altogether too risky.

"See here," said Cutts, "how much do you want?"

"Well, I s'pose a couple of bob each for twenty on us wouldn't quite break you."

"You shall have it!" Cutts replied.

"Better 'ave it now, 'adn't I?"

"Not jolly well likely! After the job's done."

"That means as you don't trust me, an' I ain't a-trustin' nobody what don't do that."

A deadlock seemed to have arisen.

Cutts did not mean to pay—only to promise payment. And Barnicoat was shrewd enough to suspect that.

"It won't do, you know, my friend," said St. Leger, shaking his head. "Pay when the job's done—that's business."

"But trust ain't no ways good business," answered Barnicoat. "See 'ere, I suppose you'd like to see 'em set on, too?"

You come along 'ere, an' we'll meet you. Then 'and over, an' we'll give 'em socks!"

"How will that answer, Cutts?"

"Let's see, to-morrow's Thursday. We were supposed to be leaving on Friday. Can't we go to-morrow instead, get beds somewhere handy, and go home on Friday just the same? Martindale won't mind."

As a matter of fact, Mr. Martindale would be very glad indeed to see the backs of his guests. They were not likely to get another invitation to Freelington Manor.

"How's that suit your book, Crooke?" asked Gilmore.

"All serene. I'm due to go to-morrow anyway, but I had meant to forget all about it, unless they gave me the straight tip."

"That's settled, then. I suppose we can hire a trap of some sort at Pullingbury to take us over to Towthorpe?" said Cutts to Barnicoat.

"Yes, as long as it ain't too late at night."

"Better fix your raid for ten o'clock, then. We'll meet you on the road over there, and pay you before you start."

"That'll do us," answered Barnicoat. "I'll be goin' I reckon. Shouldn't wonder if old Wilkins was to 'appen along pretty soon."

The four plotters thought they might as well go, too. They had no wish to meet Constable Wilkins.

"What about the cash, Cutts?" said St. Leger, as they went back to their boat. "It's a heap to pay those rotten bumpkins."

"Oh, I've thought about that. I don't mean to pay them. They'll think they've got the cash, but I've a couple of those Bank of Elegance note things. Snip 'em down a bit, and they'll feel like pound-notes in the dark! That chap won't smell a rat till it's too late."

CHAPTER 9. A Bold Move.

THE second day's work on the farm was a somewhat shorter one than the first. Operations had been thrown out of gear by the strike, and when the corn cut had been carried the weather had begun to look so doubtful that Mr. Wannop thought it wiser to postpone further cutting until he saw what the morrow would bring forth. Cut corn is easily damaged by heavy rain.

So by seven o'clock the juniors were all back at Holiday Camp, and with no cooking or preparations for a meal to do either. They had a rare spread at the farm before they returned.

"What do you think of the notion of going over to Pullingbury, and talking to the Petes, Talbot?" asked Tom Merry.

"I'll tell you when I know what you want to talk to them for, old man. I don't yearn for conversation with them myself."

"My hat, no! I don't mean in that way. It's like this—we're all willing to go on working for Wannop as long as he

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needs us. We don't any of us funk the fag of it, I'm sure. But it's a rotten bizney that these fellows should be loafing about doing nothing."

"H'm!" said Kerr thoughtfully. "There's a good deal in that—if you can only get 'em to see it."

"Isn't it worth while to try? They may think it over a bit when they know that we're doing the work for nothing, because that will show them Wannop isn't likely to cave in."

"Yes, of course. He's making a profit on it," remarked Manners.

"My only Aunt Sempronia! I don't believe he thinks of that at all!"

"Didn't mean that he did, Tom. You needn't catch a fellow up so quickly! But it strengthens his hand no end."

"Well, who's game to go?"

Talbot, Kerr, Manners, Lowther, Redfern, Figgins, Blake, and D'Arcy all volunteered at once. The rest were willing, but not precisely keen on it. They were all tired out, and Tom Merry said nine was quite enough to make the enterprise safe.

"I will do the talking part, Tom Mewwy," said Arthur Augustus. "I flattah myself——"

"You do, Gussy! You're always doing it. But if you go with us I'll see that you jolly well don't do the talking! This isn't an acrobatic show."

"Whoevah suggested that it was a acwobatic show? Don't be widic, Tom Mewwy!"

"What I mean is that we're not going to have you opening your mouth and putting your foot in it—see?"

"Wats to you, Tom Mewwy! I have a gweat mind——"

"Carefully concealed up to the present," put in Lowther.

"A vewy gweat mind not to go at all!"

"Right-ho! Stay here, old chump!"

But that did not suit the views of Arthur Augustus. Though he was so tired that he could scarcely climb into his saddle, he went along.

They rode quickly over to Pullingbury St. Peter's, put up their machines at the general shop—the only place besides the public-house that seemed possible—and then, keeping together, looked round for the strikers.

At first none of these were visible. But after a while the sounds of skittle-playing were heard from the region of the Pullingbury Arms, and a small boy was commandeered to take a message to the players.

They came trooping out.

The nine had gathered on the green in front of the inn. The inn signpost stood upon a raised mound, and to this they now ascended.

The village louts stared and muttered.

"Be you come over lookin' for trouble?" asked Nehemiah.

"Not at all," answered Tom Merry politely. "We ask for a truce. We only want to talk to you."

There was evidently a good deal of suspicion among the small crowd that had gathered.

"Blacklegs!" growled one fellow.

"Sock 'em!" yelled another.

"What be they a-doin' this way at all, the blessed fur-riners?" inquired a third.

"We'd better settle who's to do the speechifying," said Figgins.

"Why, I'd reckoned Talbot would—or Kerr, perhaps," answered Tom Merry.

"No, Tom. You'll do it better than I can," said Talbot.

"Or me. I'm no orator," said Kerr.

"I have already said that I am willing to address——"

"Oh, ring off, Gussy! I suppose I shall have to do it. The only difficulty is to make a start. I know pretty well what I want to say."

"Well, then, just pile in, old man!" said Blake encouragingly.

"Will you fellows give me a hearing?" asked Tom Merry loudly.

"We'll give you a thick ear if yer like," replied one of the louts, and laughter followed this very small witticism.

"Thanks; but that will keep! There isn't any reason why we should quarrel with you, really. Are you ready to hear me?"

"May as well," said a voice from the crowd.

"It'll be a bit of a lark," said another. "My eye, ain't the young swell with the winder-pane got a face on him? Must 'ave been bit by Prince, I reckon!"

Again the crowd roared.

"Well, if you're willing to hear me, I'll go on," said Tom Merry.

"You're a-sneakin' of our pay!" shouted Josh Barnicoat, who had only just arrived on the scene.

"That's just what we're not doing. It's only fair to ourselves to say that we're working for Mr. Wannop free. He was quite willing to pay us, but we wouldn't take it."

"What are you a-doing it for, then?" demanded Nehemiah.

"I should like to explain, if you'll let me. I suppose you fellows know that England's got a big war on her hands?"

"I suppose we oughter. Plenty of men gone from 'ere."

"And what are the fellows left behind doing?" asked Tom Merry. "It isn't a fair thing to Mr. Wannop. He's a good master, I'm sure. Isn't that right?"

"There ain't nothen' much agin Wannop," admitted a member of the crowd.

"I'd sooner work for he nor for anybody else hereabouts," said another.

"We're getting on! Now, is it fair to Mr. Wannop that his crops should be ruined for want of labour? I don't see how you can say it is. But there's more behind that. Is it fair to England?"

Tom Merry's voice rang out bravely. He felt sure of himself now. He had been a little nervous at first, but that had passed.

"Is it fair to England?" he repeated, after a pause to let his words sink in. "We're all Englishmen, aren't we? I'm not going to say a lot about loving our country. One takes all that for granted. This war hasn't ended so soon as some thought it would. Neither you nor I can say but it may last a long time yet. We may be in need of corn. Every bushel lost helps to put up the price. Why, you fellows are fighting against your own interests! Wait till the winter comes, and bread's gone up again, and you'll see that! But don't think only about yourselves. Think of the women and the children—not only here, but in the great cities. You wouldn't like to feel that you'd helped to make things harder for them, would you?"

"Dunno as we care nothen' about them!" growled Josh Barnicoat. "Sides, long as you young swells do our work, where's all that come in? Tell you what—strike a bargain! We'll take the pay, an' let you go on a-doin' of the work! That oughter suit everybody."

There was tumultuous applause at this. Tom Merry waited till it had died away. His young face was stern and set, and looked older than his years.

"That's neither manly nor fair," he said quietly when the hubbub had subsided.

"Hear, hear, young gent!" spoke up the publican, who had joined the throng, and two or three grey-haired men who had come up nodded assent.

"We're willing to go on. We won't leave Mr. Wannop in the lurch. We don't mind the hard work. But the whole thing's wrong! Show yourselves decent Englishmen, do!"

"Go an' work so's you can go an' play, you mean, don't you?" demanded Barnicoat.

"No. Come and work with us. I dare say there's room for all. We're ready to go on."

"Then Wannop can very well afford to be lettin' us 'ave the five bob a week as we struck for," said Nehemiah, grinning like one struck with a bright idea.

"No, he won't! You're not worth it! You were only getting men's pay because better men than you'll ever be had gone over there! Over there, where they're dying by thousands—dying for you, and me, and the rest of us! Think of them—the good fellows who've gone—the lads in khaki! They're facing death every day! And you, you're striking for money you've no right to, and helping the enemy by your strike!"

A hush fell upon the crowd. To some at least those words had gone home.

Tom Merry saw that. He made up his mind to stop. "Think it over!" he rapped out, and stepped down from the mound.

His chums followed, some of them slapping him on the back.

There was no hostile demonstration. It appeared that the rustics were thinking it over, though what the result might be even they themselves could scarcely have told yet.

"Tom, old chap, you spoke well!" said Talbot quietly. "Wathah! I could not have done it bettah myself!" added Arthur Augustus.

"I shall never be an orator," Tom Merry answered. "But it's easy enough to talk when you can feel sure what you say is right. I don't know that anything will come of it, but I'm glad we came over here."

"It was a bold move," remarked Kerr; "but I think it will pay."

At least, there was no trouble, only a little boozing. They got out their machines and rode back to camp, a light supper, and well-earned rest.

CHAPTER 10.

A Plot That Went Wrong.

MORNING broke fair again, though with signs that the fine weather might not last out the day, and Holiday Camp was astir betimes.

Digby had made up his mind overnight to steal a march on Kerr. He was up first, stole into the tent, bagged the bell, and set it ringing lustily.

"Done you in the eye this time, old man!" he said, as Kerr looked out.

"Right-ho! Let's cut down and get our bathe. Hallo, there's Noble! Come along, Kangaroo, old chap!"

The three hurried down to the river, and had had their bathe, and got half-way back before the rest came along.

"Tom," said Kerr, drawing the captain of the Shell aside for a moment, "a boat put in here yesterday. You'll see the marks on the bank if you look. And I twigged several cigarette-ends near the camp last night."

"My hat, that looks like Cutts & Co.!" answered Tom Merry. "But it's a queer thing that they went away without doing any damage!"

He ran on to catch up the rest, and the three early risers trotted along to get breakfast ready for them. And they were ready for it when they came along.

"But it's all w'ong!" said Arthur Augustus. "Theah were thirteen of us bathing togethah, and I'm suah something will happen!"

"Rats!" replied Blake. "Anyway, Skimmy didn't properly bathe. He only wetted his tootsies."

"Seeing that you yourself took me by the scruff of the neck, and held me under water, Blake, I regard that as an unjust aspersion," answered Skimpole, with more heat than he usually showed. Skimmy was bucking up. Never in all his life before had he been so brown of face, or, in spite of his fatigue, so fit.

He refused to act as dish-washer that morning. It was somebody else's turn, he said. Herries and Kangaroo stayed.

The rest went off to the farm. They were not so tired this morning as they had been the day before.

Now they had new work to do. While the reaping-machine went round and round, lowering the tall corn, they bound it into sheaves, and built the sheaves into shocks.

As the sun rose, higher clouds drove up, hiding it from view. But the clouds did not bring coolness. The heat was far more oppressive than it had been before. A thunderstorm hung about somewhere in the neighbourhood.

"We may not get it here at all, though," said Mr. Wannop. "There's no telling but what it will pass over. Anyway, we mustn't stop work for fear of it. Time enough to stop when it comes."

The day wore on, and still the close heat prevailed; but the expected storm did not come yet.

They worked on till the light began to fail, and then the farmer insisted on their coming in for supper.

While they sat at table, there came a sudden pelting of rain against the windows.

"There's the storm," said the farmer. "They've got the thunder and lightning elsewhere, I guess, an' we're only gettin' the edge of it. Ah, I heard a rumble then, but it was some way off. An' there's a flash!"

He was right as to their being on the edge of the storm. As a matter of fact, not a drop of rain was falling at Pullingbury, St. Peter's, or on Three Mile Common.

But it came down hard at the farm, and no one there guessed the true state of affairs at Holiday Camp.

They remembered those slits in the tents. There had been no time to mend them; and no one bothered about them.

But now the slits meant that the tents would give little or no protection, and even their waterproof sheets had been cut—not that the sheets would have kept them dry with a deluge coming in from above, anyway.

"You young gentlemen can't possibly go down to your tents to-night," said Mrs. Wannop. "We'll put you up here."

"But you can't do that!" answered Tom Merry. "Sixteen of us! This is a good-sized house, but—"

"Tell you what," broke in Kerr, "there's a big, empty barn—I've looked inside it. If we could have some straw that would make a dormitory for us all, and no trouble for Mrs. Wannop."

"We'll agree to stay if we can have the barn," said Talbot.

"So you shall, then, and plenty of blankets—eh, mother?" returned the farmer.

That settled, they no longer troubled about the rain. Mr. Wannop lighted his pipe, and they sat round and talked nineteen to the dozen.

"My hat, it's past ten o'clock!" cried Tom Merry. "We ought to turn in, you chaps!"

Yes, it was past ten o'clock, and the raid had been set for

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ANSWERS

NEXT
WEDNESDAY!

"HEROES OF THE FOURTH!"

A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Tale of
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ten that night, and as yet there had been no rain to damp the ardour of the raiders.

Cutts & Co. had taken train to Norton Wildmarsh, and thence walked to Three Mile Common. The bicycles they had ridden on their first visit there were borrowed ones, and were not available that night.

They did not care for the walk at all.

"We ought to have gone on to Towthorpe, hired a trap there, driven over, and let the trap wait till the job was put through," said St. Leger. "Padding the hoof in this muggy weather isn't my style."

"Why didn't you think of that before?" growled Cutts.

"I don't believe those louts will turn up at all," Crooke said.

"It's a fool's game altogether," remarked Gilmore.

"You had as much as anyone to do with planning it!" Cutts snarled.

"All serene! Keep your silly wool on!"

"Got the notes ready, Cutts?" Crooke asked, a few minutes later.

"What do you think?"

"I'm a bit doubtful about that note dodge," said St. Leger.

"Why? What's it matter about swizzling cads like that?"

"My hat, I don't mind swizzling them, Cutts! I should say it was a great notion, if only we'd an aeroplane handy to take us away when the things had been passed over! But if they smell a rat—"

"They won't smell a rat! Feel these things. Could you tell the difference between them and pound-notes?"

St. Leger admitted he couldn't. Gilmore agreed. So did Crooke.

"All the same," said Crooke, "I hope they won't be fly enough to take a squint at them. They'd jolly well slay us!"

"Oh, we'll clear before they get a chance!" answered Cutts.

The clouds lowered heavier above them, and their hearts did not grow lighter as they approached the trysting-place.

As they came up, they saw that their allies were in full force. There seemed quite a little army of them.

Josh Barnicoat had overcome the scruples of such of his followers as felt any.

Most of them had no notion of doing anything very dreadful. A little rough-and-tumble fighting—a small amount of pillage, perhaps—such was their programme.

"Here are the gents as promised me the cash," said Barnicoat, peering at them through the gloom.

"And here's the cash," spoke Cutts. "Two one-pound notes. Shove 'em in your pocket, and get on with your job! Have you ordered a trap for us at Pullingbury?"

"No. 'Tain't no use me orderin' of it. You'll 'ave to do that for yourselves."

Barnicoat was fingering the notes as he spoke. They felt all right, and he thrust them into his pocket.

"We'd better go on at once, or it will be too late," said St. Leger, and the rustic leader detected a note of nervousness in his voice.

"Ain't you goin' to stay an' see us put them through it?" he asked, and fingered the notes again.

"No, I think not. We'd better get on," Cutts answered, and in his voice, too, there was something which made Barnicoat suspicious.

"Which is the way?" asked Gilmore.

"Straight afore your noses," answered a voice from the crowd.

Barnicoat was not the only one there who had cunning enough. The way to Pullingbury was not straight before the noses of the plotters. If they went straight ahead they would reach the camp.

"What did you tell 'em that for, 'Miah?" asked someone when they were out of earshot.

"I dunno. Yes, I do, though! I don't like them chaps. They want us to do all the work an' take all the risk. Let's 'ave a look at them notes, Josh! It's a lick to me why they couldn't 'ave 'anded over the real chink!"

He struck a match, holding it in the hollow of his hands. Josh pulled out the notes. They had only got the merest glimpse of them when the match blew out.

But that glimpse had made them pretty certain that all was not right, for they had seen the trimmed edges.

Nehemiah struck another match, while Josh swore and spat viciously.

"They're wrong 'uns!" he howled, as the momentary illumination showed him the worthless scraps of paper.

At that moment the rain began to pour down.

Cutts & Co., not more than a hundred yards away, felt its lash, and in the same instant saw before them the tents looming up.

"Oh, hang it all, those rotters have sent us wrong!" roared Cutts.

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"Here's shelter from the rain, anyway," answered St. Leger impatiently. "We'll be wet through in less than a minute. Let's get inside!"

They rushed for the nearest tent, and burst in.

A surprise awaited them.

It was empty!

Gilmore pulled out a pocket-lighter.

"Why—what—where— I say, this is a rummy go!" said Cutts.

"The rain's coming through! Oh, hang it, we're very little better off here than we were outside!" said Gilmore.

"It's going to keep some of it off, anyway," answered St. Leger. "There's a bike-lamp. Light that, old man. And these waterproof things over our shoulders will help to keep us dry."

"Let's see whether there's any grub about," said Crooke, who was a born bandit. "I say, though, it's queer those chaps all being away! Where can they be?"

"Up at the farm, I suppose," answered Cutts. "What's the odds? We're under some sort of shelter, and—I say, though, suppose those village cads attack while we're here?"

The possibility was not a pleasant one, by any means. Crooke got up, and prepared to go. But the rain was coming down in torrents. It had missed Three Mile Common a while ago, but seemed to be making up for it now.

St. Leger and Gilmore looked at one another. Gilmore giggled nervously, and St. Leger bit his under-lip and scowled.

"They won't do that," said Gilmore. "The rain will send them pelting for home, I'll bet! And, even if they do, we've only got to tell them—"

"What about those notes?" burred Crooke. "Suppose they've found out? I say, Cutts, you've gone and let us in for a jolly nice thing!"

"They won't! Oh, shut up, you idiot! I tell you they won't—"

Cutts stopped short.

Through the rain there had come to his ears something that sounded like the war-whoop of a tribe of Red Indians rushing on the foe.

The Pullingbury Petes were attacking!

Constable Wilkins heard that war-whoop as he tramped along through the rain, and left the road at once to make for the camp. He was already so wet that a little more, or a great deal more, rain could hardly matter to him, and he had no notion of leaving his St. Jim's friends in the lurch.

But just at that moment a man called out to him.

"Who're you?" demanded the constable sharply.

"Thompson, horsekeeper at Mr. Wannop's!" was the prompt answer.

"Then I call upon you to help me, Thompson, for if I ain't greatly mistook those young scoundrels of strikers be attackin' of the camp over there!"

"I'm willin' enough to help, Mr. Wilkins. Them campers are rare good lads," Thompson answered. He was the burly giant who worked on the stack. "But the lads themselves won't come to no 'arm."

"How's that?"

"They're all up to the farm, sleepin' in the big barn. The rain come on heavy there a couple of hours ago."

"Then there ain't nobody to stop that pesky lot, an' no bounds to the mischief they'll do! Thompson, you hurry off back an' fetch them lads out, an' I'll go across to the camp d'rectly this minute!"

"You hadn't ought to go alone, Mr. Wilkins."

"They won't dare do nothin' to me. But I dunno as I can stop 'em single-handed, once they've made a start, and know they're in for trouble, anyways. Just you do as I say, Thompson!"

"Right you are, constable! An' I'll come back alonger the lads."

So, just as the campers were settling down for the night in the barn the big man appeared with his news, and in a moment they were scrambling to put on again such clothes as they had taken off.

And in but a minute or two they were making at a run for their camp; and heavy-footed Thompson, fifty, if a day, and never built for pace, could not begin to keep up with them.

CHAPTER 11.

In the River.

THE Pullingbury Petes saw that they would get wet through even if they started at once. So they thought they might as well rush the camp.

Shouting at the top of their voices to lend each other courage, they charged.

Tent No. 4 came first in their way. They slashed at the ropes, and it fell.

But from beneath it came no sound!

The raiders could not understand it at all.

Cutts & Co. were in No. 1, undecided whether to bolt or to stay. But for the rain they would have bolted at once.

"Where are they? Let us lay 'ands on the blaggards what palmed false notes on to us, an' we'll show 'em!" yelled Barnicoat.

Cutts & Co. made up their minds to go.

But they had left it till too late.

Even as they bolted they were discovered.

In the confusion of the blinding rain they headed straight for the river, not knowing in the least where they were going.

The Pullingbury forces followed, in full cry, like hounds after a fox.

Splash!

St. Leger had sprawled into the river.

"Help! I'm drowning!" he yelled. Then next moment he called: "It's all right! I've got hold of a boat. Tumble in, you fellows!"

A lightning-flash showed the three on the bank their comrades clambering into one of the boats the campers had hired.

They heard behind them the shouts of their pursuers, and they saw in the boat the only way of escape.

So they also tumbled in, narrowly escaping capsizement.

"Get to the steering-lines, Gil!" ordered Cutts. "Where are the sculls? Oh, look out, idiot, you gave me a wipe of the head with that thing!"

"Well, you know where it is now, anyway!" growled Crooke.

Cutts seized two sculls, St. Leger and Crooke took one each, and Gilmore held the lines.

"Shove off, Crooke!" yelled Cutts.

Crooke shoved off, and only just escaped plunging in.

"After 'em!" yelled Barnicoat. "There's another boat—ah, two more! Into 'em, you chaps!"

Most of the Pullingbury brigade crowded into the two remaining boats. Very few of them knew anything about rowing, and fewer still could swim. But they were bent on vengeance, and were not minded to let the enemy escape thus easily.

Half a dozen or more stayed behind. They were those who had not been keen at the outset, and did not at all care now for the risk of navigation in such a storm.

For the storm had worked round again, and now the lightning flashed and the thunder rolled at frequent intervals.

Wet to the skin, breathless, but full of pluck and determination, Tom Merry, Figgins, and Talbot reached the camp together. They found it deserted, but they heard the hubbub, and saw by a flash in the sky the little crowd left on the river-bank.

They made for the spot at once, shouting to their comrades behind to steer for the river and leave the camp.

Redfern, Blake, Kerr, Kangaroo, Herries, Digby, and Lowther heard, and passed on the word to D'Arcy, Dane, Glyn, and Manners behind them. Skimpole and Fatty Wynn were toiling far in the rear.

"What on earth are they after?" panted Tom Merry.

"On water, aren't they?" returned Talbot.

"The idiots! The giddy goats! There'll be somebody drowned!"

An appalling shriek rent the air.

The two pursuing boats had collided, and one of them had been overturned. Half a dozen or more of the Pullingbury fellows were struggling in the water.

"Help!"

"Oh, 'elp! I'm a-drownin'!"

Cutts & Co. heard, and saw one another's faces by a lightning flash livid with fear. They had not expected this.

It was not their fault, of course! They were prepared to swear blind to that.

But it would be an awful thing if any of those louts were drowned! And it would be worse still if they themselves had to appear at the inquest and tell the whole story!

"Back water!" ordered Cutts. "Pull her round! We must help if we can!"

"There's somebody plunging in!" cried St. Leger.

Figgins had put on a desperate spurt, outpaced his chums by a yard or two, and taken the water with a clean dive. It was he whom St. Leger had seen.

Tom Merry and Talbot plunged in the darkness. There came another flash, and Redfern and Kerr and Jack Blake saw, and they also dived in.

Kangaroo and Digby would have followed, but Lowther kept his head, and held them back.

"That's enough!" he gasped. "You'll only muddle them up! We can help better here!"

He threw himself flat on the low bank, and the rest did likewise. Then up came the third contingent.

A flash showed Digby struggling to keep Arthur Augustus

from plunging in. It showed one fellow—a Pete—swimming for the bank. Lowther jumped up, and dived in. He had seen what no one else had—Tom Merry being dragged under by the frantic grasp of Barnicoat!

And Monty Lowther, for all his warning to the others, went to the rescue on the instant.

"Catch hold!" cried Talbot, and hands were stretched out to drag Nehemiah from the water.

"Here's another!" shouted Figgins, and one more Pullingbury Pete was lifted into safety.

Another flash showed those on the bank Figgins with a yokel grasped by the hair, Kerr and Blake farther out, but no sign of Tom Merry, Lowther, or Barnicoat!

"I must go, Dig! I can't have Tom Mewwy drowned!"

"Right-ho! I'll go, too, old man!"

Digby and Arthur Augustus plunged in together. Kangaroo followed them. Fatty and Skimpole came pounding up and threw themselves down on the bank.

Ten of the St. Jim's juniors were now in the river—no, eleven! Herries could not bear to stay behind. And in another moment the number was twelve, for Manners had dived, too!

"We've got one!" yelled Cutts.

Another flash showed Tom Merry and Lowther nearer the bank, and each with a rescued lout.

Fatty hauled someone up. He could not see who it was.

Talbot and Figgins scrambled out, and helped to get the others ashore. Then Figgins dived in again. In the blue lightning-flare he had seen a face twenty yards out.

The thunder rumbled, the lightning zigzagged across the sky. One by one and two by two those who had tumbled or plunged in were helped out. Cutts & Co. pulled in to the bank. Those of the Pullingbury brigade who had not embarked lent what help they could.

"Hurrah! Here's old Figgy, and he's got him!" yelled Digby.

They dragged Figgins and an insensible yokel out of the water. Figgins collapsed. Some of the others set to work to practise life-saving methods on the Pullinbury fellow.

"Are we all here?" asked Tom Merry. "Talbot, Redfern, Manners, Lowther, Figgins, Kerr, Wynn, Blake, D'Arcy, Digby, Herries, Dane, Glyn, Noble, Skimpole?"

Each in turn answered to his name, except that Kerr spoke up for Figgins, who was past speaking for himself.

"Are all the other lot safe?" inquired Tom Merry anxiously.

Barnicoat could not answer. He was busy in getting rid of a gallon or two of water he had swallowed. It was some minutes before it became possible to make certain that none of the Pullingbury fellows had gone under. If any had, there was small hope for him now, as all knew. But the lightning showed no face in the water.

Constable Wilkins and Thompson came up together. The policeman had tripped and fallen in his haste to get to the camp, and had struck his head against something hard. Thompson had stumbled over him, and found him senseless. But he had come too in a few minutes.

"I thowt the lightnin' must 'ave struck me," he said.

"Lads, I'd never 'ave forgive myself if any of you 'ad been drowned—I never would!"

Nobody was drowned, however. Barnicoat said now that there had been eighteen in his little army, and all were there.

Tom Merry walked up to Cutts & Co.

"I don't see the bottom of this bizney yet," he said. "But it looks to me as if you fellows had had more to do with it than you'll care about answering for. But we'll leave that alone for to-night. What do you meant to do? Going back to Freelington, I suppose?"

"What's that to you?" snapped Cutts.

"Oh, drop it!" cried St. Leger, ashamed for once in his life, if he never had been before. "No, we can't go back to our quarters, Merry. We left there this evening, and they suppose we've gone home. We were going to hire a trap at Pullingbury and drive to Towthorpe."

The one Pullingbury fellow who had been dragged out unconscious was now on his feet, and so was Figgy. The storm still raged, and every now and then a vivid flash of lightning lit up the crowd on the river bank.

"You're wet through, and you'll be half dead before you get to Towthorpe—if you ever get there," said Tom. "Better come along with us!"

"Where to?" asked Gilmore.

"To the farm. We're putting up in a barn there, and there's heaps of room for four more. I say, you Pullingbury lot, you'd best clear off home!"

Barnicoat came shambling up.

"We—we're sorry—honest, we are!" he blurted out. "You've saved the lives of some on us! 'Tain't no good talkin', but we're real sorry!"

"Right-ho!" answered Tom Merry. "We've no grudge

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NEXT
WEDNESDAY:

"HEROES OF THE FOURTH!"

against you. Clear off, and come along to work to-morrow—that's all we ask for!"

"Three cheers for the young gents!" sang out Nehemiah. His companions shouted lustily, till the thunder drowned their voices.

Then they moved off. "Now, Cutts!" said Tom Merry. "Have you made up your mind for a truce for to-night, and are you coming along?"

"Oh, go to blazes!" roared Cutts. "I don't want any of your rotten forgiving, or truces, or any such blarney! And as for going and sleeping in a barn, I'm hanged if I will! It may be good enough for rotters like you, but it isn't for me! Come along, you fellows!"

"I'll come, anyway," growled Crooke.

St. Leger and Gilmore hesitated.

"Are you coming or not?" Cutts snapped.

Then they made up their minds to go. After all, they were wet through, and could get no wetter. And they dreaded the morning—the explanations with the aggrieved juniors, the blame the farmer would be sure to give them, the possible appearance of their late host, Mr. Martindale, if the story got to his ears.

"I am," answered St. Leger.

"So am I," said Gilmore. "Much obliged, you fellows, but I think we'd better stick together!"

"Let them go!" said Talbot bitterly. "If this were known at St. Jim's I reckon they'd be hoofed out! But they know very well we can't let on, and they think they can crawl out of it."

"Let's go back," Tom Merry said. "Figgy, old man, you've had the worst doing of the lot of us! Can you walk?"

"Oh, I guess so!" Figgins answered.

But he found that he could not, after all, and Thompson carried him up to the farm on his back.

They met Mr. Wannop on the way. He would have been along earlier, but had been hindered by the breaking loose of a young bull, terrified by the storm.

"I'd have let him run where he would if I'd had any notion of what was happenin', though," he said. "Don't know that I'd have been much use—I ain't a swimmer. But, lads—lads, I don't know how to tell you what I think of your pluck! You ought to be at the Front, every one of you!"

CHAPTER 12.

Good Work.

"HALLO, there!"

Someone opened the door of the big barn, and the sunlight streamed in.

But no one stirred. All the sixteen slept the sleep of the just.

It was Mr. Wannop who had opened the door.

Behind him, a sheepish troop, crowded the Pullingbury Petes. They had talked it over on the way home the night before, and had decided to go and ask pardon, and get back to work next morning.

"Oh, they've taken no harm!" said the farmer. "You can see that for yourselves; and I'm glad you've got the grace to be anxious about it."

He closed the door again.

"Let them have their sleep out," he said, "if they sleep right round the clock! I sha'n't wake them. They're heroes, every lad of them all—that's my mind! Some of you would have been drowned last night if it hadn't been for them—you, that made yourselves their enemies without a mite of cause! An' never a bitter word did they say about you. They're willing, even now, to work alongside of you; but I don't know—I don't know. You ain't worthy of it, an' that's a fact!"

There was a shuffling of feet among the rustic youths, and faces were red. But no one found the right words to say until Nehemiah nudged Josh Barnicoat, and whispered hoarsely in his ear that it was for him to speak up.

"I ain't sayin' as we are, Muster Wannop," said Barnicoat then. "We're above a bit ashamed of ourselves, that's a fact. Some of 'em come along night afore last, an' told us the rights of it. I didn't pay much heed to 'em then, though one or two of our chaps did; but I see now as I'd ought to 'ave did."

"What d'ye mean about comin' along an' tellin' you the rights of it?" asked the farmer sharply.

Barnicoat explained as well as he could.

"So they went over an' talked to you, did they? Bless their hearts, they're true British stock! So are you chaps, if only you'd give yourselves a fair show, I reckon. See here, I'll give you a chance. The storm has left Twenty Acres dry—a rare, curious, roundabout sort of storm it was as ever I saw—an' there's work to do there. Are you willin' to do it?"

There came a general cry of assent.

"Well, cut off then, and put your shoulders to the wheel!" They were off at once.

Inside the barn slumber still reigned. Seven o'clock came—eight o'clock—yet no one stirred.

It was between eight and nine when Tom Merry opened his eyes, sat up in his blankets, and looked around him.

Opening the door ever so little, he saw how high the sun was, and knew that there must have been a sort of conspiracy to let them have their sleep out.

But meanwhile, he wondered, what about the work?

In haste he aroused his comrades.

Then a run down to the river, and a plunge and a swim.

"Well, well," said Mrs. Wannop, coming out into the yard as they trooped back, "if I shouldn't have thought you'd all had a bit more than enough of that river!"

Overnight they had been warned that they would get into disgrace unless they came in to breakfast at the farm. And now breakfast was ready—steaming hot coffee, bacon and eggs, a ham that made Fatty Wynn's eyes glisten and his mouth water, a mighty pie, crusty home-made bread, marmalade, jam, butter, cream—a royal spread!

"Half-past nine!" cried Tom Merry, looking at his watch. "Oh, hurry up, you fellows! Haven't you nearly done, Fatty?"

"I must have a little bit more ham, Merry," answered the Welsh junior. "It is such good ham."

Then the farmer looked in.

"There's no hurry, lads," he said. "I've got your friends from Pullingbury at work this morning."

"What, Barnicoat and that lot? Oh, good egg!" cried Tom Merry.

"You won't want to work with them though, I guess."

"My hat, we shall, though!" answered Talbot. "Tom told them we would, sir, and we're all agreed. After all, they weren't half as bad as fellows who should have known better."

"Ah, I've heard a bit about them this morning!" said Mr. Wannop. "An' here's Constable Wilkins, the man who told me it."

The stout policeman came in with a beaming face, and a big bump on his head. He had acquired the bump in his fall overnight, but said he "reckoned nought about it."

He told them of how it had fared with Cutts & Co.

They had reached the Pullingbury Arms, to find it shut up and dark. All their knocking had brought no answer. Then, still in pouring rain, they had tried other places; but no one would take them in, until at last the village higgler had offered, at half-a-crown per head, to give them accommodation in his barn.

"He's the dirtiest man in Pullingbury St. Peter's, Danks is," said the constable, "an' 'is barn's as dirty as 'im, if not dirtier! But it was all they could get, an' they took it. They tried to slide off in the mornin' without payin'—I s'pose they thought 'arf-a-crown a bit thick for them quarters—an' then there was a row between them an' the Dankses—that's 'Iggler Danks an' 'is two sons. It came to a fight at the finish, an' I 'ear as your friends, gentlemen—excusin' of the hirony—didn't ezactly get the upper 'and in the scrap. Serve 'em glad! They raided your camp once, as we all know, an' then they made out to pay that Pullingbury gang to raid it for 'em, an' cheated 'em in the payment, as Barnicoat do tell—some fakement with notes as weren't worth nothin'. I got them notes as evidence agin them, but I reckon they won't show their noses in this 'ere neighbourhood agin in no 'urry."

"They're gone, then?" asked Figgins.

"Padded the 'oof to Towthorpe. Nobody wouldn't 'ire 'em a cart."

So Cutts & Co., caught in their own trap, had paid for their treachery! They were not worth troubling any more about, so the juniors held.

It was high time to be getting to work. Down in Twenty Acres they found their late enemies hard at it.

But they stopped when they saw the St. Jim's contingent, and drew up together in a straggling double line.

"Now then, chaps, three cheers for the young gents!" sang out Barnicoat.

And with the lusty cheering all enmity passed. Side by side the St. Jim's juniors and the Pullingbury fellows worked through that day and the next. Side by side they worked till Mr. Wannop's harvest was all in.

Then Tom Merry and his chums made holiday. The boats were brought into use, and they explored the river for full twenty miles up and twenty miles down. They rowed races, and the Invincible (T. Merry, stroke) proved to deserve her name.

And the good time was ten times as good for the real hard work that had preceded it.

THE END.

OUR GREAT NEW AUSTRALIAN SERIAL!

CORNSTALK BOB



The Previous Instalments Told How

Old TOM HILDER, a cattle-farmer of Kattarit, Australia, is faced with ruin for the want of £1,000. He goes to a friend in Sydney, HENRY NORMAN, from whom he obtains the money, but is afterwards robbed, and, in recovering the notes, becomes mixed up, in the eyes of the police, with a gang of scoundrels.

His son BOB receives the money from his father, and takes it to SUMMERS, the bank manager, who is in league with BOARDMAN, a scoundrel who has plotted to ruin old Hilder.

Bob is afterwards arrested and charged with passing false notes at the bank, but is liberated from his prison-cell by CAPTAIN DASHWOOD, a notorious outlaw.

Later, he learns from him that his father was robbed by a man named SUTHERLAND, the leader of another gang of outlaws, and he sets out in pursuit of him. He traces the villain to an hotel, where a fight takes place, Bob having seen his father attacked. The place is burnt down, and Bob narrowly escapes with his life, believing his father to have been burnt to death. He obtains work on an outlying station, and eventually hears that his father is still alive.

One day Bob is left alone in charge of the house by the squatter, who goes away for a holiday. The second night of his occupation, Sutherland breaks in with three of his gang, and is proceeding to remove the silver, when Bob intervenes.

Bob is overpowered, and, by Sutherland's order, taken outside and tied to a tree. The villain threatens to shoot the lad, but Bob defies him.

(Now read on.)

A Furious Chase.

Sutherland scowled. "You're a young fool!" he snapped. "You would be one of the honest sort, I suppose? Not that that pays, as I found out long ago. When I came here I didn't mean to be rough with you. But it seems you know me, and that's a big surprise. I have to look after myself, and if I let you go you'll put the police on me. I don't remember that I ever saw you before. What have I ever done that you should call me a cur and go for me as you did?"

"You tried to kill my father, and I'm not sure that you didn't succeed. You robbed him of all the money he had. You've smashed up our home, and dragged me down to poverty," Bob answered hotly. "And no one but a cur would do that!"

The villain whistled.

"I guess I know who you are now," he said. "You're the son of the old pugrins who came to Sydney a while back. And a dogged old rascal he is. We fooled him easy enough at the start; but he's been on our track ever since, and he's harder to shake off than all the police in New South Wales."

"And you tried to murder him in Mossfred! I saw you!" Bob replied.

Sutherland's face grew dark.

"You know even more than I thought, and I'm taking a big risk by parleying with you," he growled. "Still, you're wrong in one thing. I stop at taking life, though I meant to frighten you; and I wouldn't have attacked your father if he hadn't pressed me hard. You come along quietly with us now, and I won't harm you."

"And where am I to go, and what am I to do?" the lad asked, surprised in his turn.

"You're to join in with us, of course, and take your luck with us. You've got grit, and that's what we want in our game."

"To join in with you!" Bob repeated, contempt in every inflection of his utterance. "What do you take me for?"

"Drop that sneering, anyhow!" Sutherland said, becoming ominously cool. "I don't stand that from any man. You talk like that again, and they will be your last words, even if I swing for it. And don't think I'm doing you a bad turn, for I'm not." He came a step nearer. "Have you thought what this night's work means for you, in any case?" he asked, with a wink of his right eye.

Bob started. He had been too full of fight, too bruised, and, later on, too much taken up with his immediate peril to think of what the future might hold. But now he saw. He would be put down as an accomplice to the crime. Already his reputation was gone. The police were hunting for him; he was believed by everyone to have tried to pass false bank-notes. He had given an assumed name to Mr. Coulter, the squatter, on entering his employment; that would come out on investigation. And this robbery took place at the time he was in charge of the house, and alone.

Sutherland was quick to see the change in the lad's demeanour. He took a more pleasant tone.

"You're knocked out," he remarked. "If you go on your own, you'll be run down for certain, and nothing that you can say will help you. I've never been caught, and I never will be. If you row in with me you'll be safe, and you'll have many a jolly time. I stick to my pals; no one has ever accused me of shirking danger to save them. Your honest days are over, my friend, and you had better make the best of a bad job—if that's the way you look at a fine, free life, with plenty of money for the pluck of grabbing it. You can be of use to me, and, what's more, if you join us I'll see that your father doesn't suffer for the trick we played on him. But there's the other side, and I give you one minute to decide. If you won't join us, then I'll take you, in spite of yourself, and I'll drop you when we've gone ten miles and I and my pals are safe. And the police will have you. And, what's more, I won't spare your father. I'll pay him out!"

Bob's face had flushed. The scoundrel, thinking to wheedle him round, had only insulted him.

"Well, what's your choice?" Sutherland demanded, after a short pause.

"There can be no choice," the lad said coolly. "No choice is possible with a man of your stamp!"

"Oh, that's your kidney, is it?" Sutherland snarled. "Five years in gaol will alter your tune, I guess. You'll be glad enough to crawl to me when you come out a broken man. All right! I've stayed here over long talking to a silly cub. Now I'll cut it short!"

Two of the gang, evidently on his instructions, were approaching from the buggy, and he whistled to them to hurry up. They quickened their steps, and he told them to take the lad from the tree, and carry him to the buggy, making sure that his arms and legs were still bound. This they did, and Bob was dropped on the footboard. All climbed inside, and Sutherland, picking up the reins, drove away.

(Continued on page iv of cover.)

CORNSTALK BOB!

Continued from page iii of cover

The horse was a splendid trotter, and went off at twelve miles an hour. The gang had not left anything to chance; they knew the likelihood of a pursuit. Also, most probably, they had mapped out where they would be safe with the booty, and had calculated how long it would take them to get to the lair.

The buggy, under the heavy weight, swung from side to side, and bounced over the deep cart-tracks on the rough road; but the strong springs held. Bob could not see where they were going; lying on the footboard, with Sutherland's feet pressed against his chest, he suffered great discomfort and even pain. He knew when the buggy ascended a hill and when it shot down a declivity, always travelling at break-neck speed; and he guessed that the villains had a long drive before them, and that they were hastening to get into hiding before daybreak. He listened for any remarks that might pass that would give him a clue to their destination, but they spoke very seldom, and then the clatter drowned their voices.

They had been travelling thus for half an hour, when one of the ruffians shouted in a warning voice. At once Sutherland plied the whip, and the horse broke into a wild gallop. Bob divined that they were being pursued, and a great joy swept over him. He was bound hand and foot, and that would be evidence that he had not been a party to the theft. He wondered how the bushmen living around the station had heard of it so quickly.

And now the villains began to shout to one another, and there was a note of terror in their accents. Sutherland whipped the eager horse savagely, uttering maledictions with every blow, and in his excitement digging his foot into the helpless lad beneath. It was clear to Bob that they were being overtaken. He wondered how long the race would last, if indeed it was not cut short by the buggy overturning. And then, above the din, he heard the thud of horse's hoofs, a strong, vibrant voice, and the sharp bark of a revolver.

Sutherland drove the harder. The horse was galloping up a hill, and as the buggy passed the crest he shot down wildly on the far side. Bulls kept whistling, and Bob began to fear that the police were in pursuit. In that case, whilst, no doubt exonerated from this theft, yet he would be arrested and flung into gaol, a warrant already being out for his arrest. Ay, the villain Sutherland had done him a bad turn sooner than he had expected. But he, too, would be caught. There was, at least, satisfaction in that.

Suddenly the horse swerved, and it seemed as if the buggy must topple over. But somehow the wheels on the left came to the ground again. Bob heard one of the ruffians shouting.

"Catch the reins, Dick!" he yelled. "The boss has been winged, and has dropped them!"

Sutherland began to crumple up. He sank slowly, his knees grinding into Bob's ribs. Nearer and nearer came the thud of horse hoofs. A mocking laugh rang out, and the gang in the buggy yelled in their fury.

Now Bob could hear a horse galloping alongside the buggy.

"Halt, or you are dead men!" a voice rang out.

The horse between the shafts began to go slower. The ruffians had thrown up the sponge.

"Spare us!" they cried.

"Then pull up, and be sharp about it! I've no time to lose!" the rider answered. "Tumble out, the lot of you!"

Captain Dashwood to the Rescue.

The buggy came to a standstill. Snarling, the men stepped out, and Sutherland was dragged to the ground.

"Scot whilst you have the chance!" the stranger said.

"The police are not half a mile behind. Hey! Have I pinked Sutherland? Give him my compliments when he comes round, and thank him for all his work in getting this swag for me! Ha, ha, ha! Won't he be delighted!"

The man stepped into the buggy, and picked up the reins. His foot touched Bob.

"Hallo! Another of them!" he said. "Then you'll have to take your chance with the rest! What! A lad, bound hand and foot, and— Bless my life, if it's not young Hilder! Hey there, Bogong! What do you think of this?"

The man pulled Bob up on to the seat next him. The lad saw a black tracker riding up, his white teeth shining in his dusky face. He looked at the man by his side.

"Captain Dashwood!" he gasped.

"And very much at your service," the highwayman replied, his bronzed, handsome face all alight in a smile. "So we meet again, when I least expected. But we mustn't delay; we can yarn as we get along!"

He laid the whip across the horse's flanks, and the gallant

animal sprang forward. The gang had vanished in the scrub, carrying Sutherland with them. Dashwood looked back for a moment, his shining, dark eyes and hooked nose giving his face, in the half light, the look of an eagle.

"Can we do it, Bogong?" he asked. "They're well mounted, and riding hard!"

"Ay, massa, I can take them off you!" the black tracker replied cheerily. "We ride together to Whitgong Creek, and then you drive into the hollow. I stay on the hill till they see me and follow. You stay in the hollow till they pass. Then you drive to Carambra Gulley, and I meet you in the evening."

"Will your horse hold out?"

"Horse verra good!" Bogong chuckled. "So says Massa Hilder! Yah!"

He shot on ahead, leading Dashwood's horse by the rein. As he flashed by Bob stared, and gave a cry.

"Why, he's on Brave Bess!" he cried.

"And she verra good!" Bogong shouted, looking back. "Better than my geegee! So I swop when I saw her, and I knew you and I meet soon. But no talkee-talkee now!"

He got fifty yards ahead of the buggy, and kept at that distance. The pace was tremendous, but all the same the troopers kept gaining. Dashwood's face was set hard as he plied the whip, whilst Bogong with long strides of the gallant steed kept easily ahead. Bob was too amazed by all that had happened in a couple of minutes to speak, and the highwayman's lips were tightly compressed.

For fifteen minutes they raced along, and then, as they went up a hill, Bogong looked back, waved his hand, and quickened his pace. He shot up the hill madly, and Dashwood, in another half-minute, swung the buggy off the road into a declivity covered with scrub. He drove down into a hollow, and reining up he listened.

A grim smile crept around his lips as he heard a shout.

"They spotted Bogong on the hill, silhouetted against the sky," he said. "Yes, and here they come. Four of them, I reckon, from the thud of hoofs."

Up above on the road the troopers, calling to one another, dashed past, and the outlaw drew a deep breath.

"Sharp work, that!" he remarked. "But a miss is as good as a mile. We'll have to get up on the road at once, and cross to the far side, for they may double back at any moment. When I'm two miles from here, all the police in Australia may hunt for me, and I don't care. But we're not out of danger yet."

He turned the buggy and drove up the hill cautiously. Near the top he waited, and then shot across the road, and into the scrub on the far side. Dodging fallen trees every few yards, he went along by the side of a creek, crossed it presently, and came on to a path. Along this he went at a faster pace, bore away to the left, went in through the wild scrub again, and came to a dense forest, seemingly impenetrable.

But he evidently knew the way. Jumping down, he led the tired horse skilfully between the trees, in and out, up and down, where the buggy was just able to scrape through. On and on he went. For all Bob knew, even with his great knowledge of bush lore, they might have been going round and round in a circle. Never had he entered such a maze. The branches on many trees drooped down to the ground, the heat was stifling, the darkness appalling, the ground covered a foot deep with dead leaves, and the shrieks and chatter of the birds enough to drown all human speech. After an hour Dashwood stepped into a small open circle. The timber and scrub had been newly cleared.

"Bogong worked out this hiding-place; no white man would ever have dared to enter such a terrifying spot, for fear he could never get out again," Dashwood remarked. "Then he made this clearing, as you see. A man might be only a hundred yards from us, and the chances are he would never find us, but die of hunger and thirst instead. There's a hut here, too, that Bogong knocked together, and plenty of grub, for which I'm jolly glad. I'll unyoke the horse and tether him, and then we'll boil the billy. Jump down and give me a hand!"

"I can't," said Bob. "I'm trussed up like a fowl!"

"Great Scott! I forgot that!" Dashwood chuckled. "I'll set you free, and I guess you'll need to stretch your limbs for a bit before you can be of any use."

He undid the cords on Bob's wrists and ankles, and helped him to alight. Stiff and sore, the lad stood unsteadily whilst his blood began to circulate again through his numbed extremities, and Dashwood unyoked the horse. Together they went to the shanty, and the highwayman lit a fire, whilst Bob sank on the grass and stretched his aching limbs. A hot cup of tea presently revived him. But he had no desire for food. Dashwood ate ravenously, and then, lighting his pipe, he looked around.

"A snug place, this!" he remarked. "I guess I'll often find it of use."

Bob shrugged his shoulders. His thoughts were running on serious things. Dashwood observed this, and sat up straight.

(Another grand instalment next week.)