

STALKY & CO.

By Rudyard Kipling

“Let us now praise famous men”—
Men of little showing—
For their work continueth,
And their work continueth,
Greater than their knowing.

Western wind and open surge
Tore us from our mothers;
Flung us on a naked shore
(Twelve bleak houses by the shore!
Seven summers by the shore!)
‘Mid two hundred brothers.

There we met with famous men
Set in office o’er us.
And they beat on us with rods—
Faithfully with many rods—
Daily beat us on with rods—
For the love they bore us!

Out of Egypt unto Troy—
Over Himalaya—
Far and sure our bands have gone—
Hy-Brasil or Babylon,
Islands of the Southern Run,
And cities of Cathaia!

And we all praise famous men—
Ancients of the College;
For they taught us common sense—
Tried to teach us common sense—
Truth and God’s Own Common Sense
Which is more than knowledge!

Each degree of Latitude
Strung about Creation
Seeth one (or more) of us,
(Of one muster all of us—
Of one master all of us—)
Keen in his vocation.

This we learned from famous men
Knowing not its uses
When they showed in daily work
Man must finish off his work—
Right or wrong, his daily work—
And without excuses.

Servants of the staff and chain,
Mine and fuse and grapnel—
Some before the face of Kings,
Stand before the face of Kings;

Bearing gifts to divers Kings—
Gifts of Case and Shrapnel.

This we learned from famous men
Teaching in our borders.
Who declare'd it was best,
Safest, easiest and best—
Expeditious, wise and best—
To obey your orders.

Some beneath the further stars
Bear the greater burden.
Set to serve the lands they rule,
(Save he serve no man may rule)
Serve and love the lands they rule;
Seeking praise nor guerdon.

This we learned from famous men
Knowing not we learned it.
Only, as the years went by—
Lonely, as the years went by—
Far from help as years went by
Plainer we discerned it.

Wherefore praise we famous men
From whose bays we borrow—
They that put aside Today—
All the joys of their Today—
And with toil of their Today
Bought for us Tomorrow!

Bless and praise we famous men
Men of little showing!
For their work continueth
And their work continueth
Broad and deep continueth
Great beyond their knowing!

Copyright, 1899. by Rudyard Kipling

Contents

"IN AMBUSH."

SLAVES OF THE LAMP

AN UNSAVORY INTERLUDE.

THE IMPRESSIONISTS.

THE MORAL REFORMERS.

A LITTLE PREP.

THE FLAG OF THEIR COUNTRY.

THE LAST TERM.

SLAVES OF THE LAMP.

“IN AMBUSH.”

In summer all right-minded boys built huts in the furze-hill behind the College—little lairs whittled out of the heart of the prickly bushes, full of stumps, odd root-ends, and spikes, but, since they were strictly forbidden, palaces of delight. And for the fifth summer in succession, Stalky, McTurk, and Beetle (this was before they reached the dignity of a study) had built like beavers a place of retreat and meditation, where they smoked.

Now, there was nothing in their characters as known to Mr. Prout, their house-master, at all commanding respect; nor did Foxy, the subtle red-haired school Sergeant, trust them. His business was to wear tennis-shoes, carry binoculars, and swoop hawklike upon evil boys. Had he taken the field alone, that hut would have been raided, for Foxy knew the manners of his quarry; but Providence moved Mr. Prout, whose school-name, derived from the size of his feet, was Hoofer, to investigate on his own account; and it was the cautious Stalky who found the track of his pugs on the very floor of their lair one peaceful afternoon when Stalky would fain have forgotten Prout and his works in a volume of Surtees and a new briar-wood pipe. Crusoe, at sight of the footprint, did not act more swiftly than Stalky. He removed the pipes, swept up all loose match-ends, and departed to warn Beetle and McTurk.

But it was characteristic of the boy that he did not approach his allies till he had met and conferred with little Hartopp, President of the Natural History Society, an institution which Stalky held in contempt, Hartopp was more than surprised when the boy meekly, as he knew how, begged to propose himself, Beetle, and McTurk as candidates; confessed to a long-smothered interest in first-flowerings, early butterflies, and new arrivals, and volunteered, if Mr. Hartopp saw fit, to enter on the new life at once. Being a master, Hartopp was suspicious; but he was also an enthusiast, and his gentle little soul had been galled by chance-heard remarks from the three, and specially Beetle. So he was gracious to that repentant sinner, and entered the three names in his book.

Then, and not till then, did Stalky seek Beetle and McTurk in their house form-room. They were stowing away books for a quiet afternoon in the furze, which they called the “wuzzy.”

“All up,” said Stalky, serenely. “I spotted Heffy’s fairy feet round our hut after dinner. ‘Blessing they’re so big.”

“Con-found! Did you hide our pipes?” said Beetle.

“Oh, no. Left ‘em in the middle of the hut, of course. What a blind ass you are, Beetle! D’you think nobody thinks but yourself? Well, we can’t use the hut any more. Hoofer will be watchin’ it.”

“‘Bother! Likewise blow!’” said McTurk thoughtfully, unpacking the volumes with which his chest was cased. The boys carried their libraries between their belt and their collar. “Nice job! This means we’re under suspicion for the rest of the term.”

"Why? All that Heffy has found is a hut. He and Foxy will watch it. It's nothing to do with us; only we mustn't be seen that way for a bit."

"Yes, and where else are we to go?" said Beetle. "You chose that place, too—an'an' I wanted to read this afternoon."

Stalky sat on a desk drumming his heels on the form.

"You're a despondin' brute, Beetle. Sometimes I think I shall have to drop you altogether. Did you ever know your Uncle Stalky forget you yet? *His rebus infectis*—after I'd seen Heffy's man-tracks marchin' round our hut, I found little Hartopp—*destricto ense*—wavin' a butterfly-net. I conciliated Hartopp. 'Told him that you'd read papers to the Bug-hunters if he'd let you join, Beetle. 'Told him you liked butterflies, Turkey. Anyhow, I soothed the Hartoffles, and we're Bug-hunters now."

"What's the good of that?" said Beetle.

"Oh, Turkey, kick him!"

In the interests of science bounds were largely relaxed for the members of the Natural History Society. They could wander, if they kept clear of all houses, practically where they chose; Mr. Hartopp holding himself responsible for their good conduct.

Beetle began to see this as McTurk began the kicking.

"I'm an ass, Stalky!" he said, guarding the afflicted part. "*Pax*, Turkey. I'm an ass."

"Don't stop, Turkey. Isn't your Uncle Stalky a great man?"

"Great man," said Beetle.

"All the same bug-huntin's a filthy business," said McTurk. "How the deuce does one begin?"

"This way," said Stalky, turning to some fags' lockers behind him. "Fags are dabs at Natural History. Here's young Braybrooke's botany-case." He flung out a tangle of decayed roots and adjusted the slide. "'Gives one no end of a professional air, I think. Here's Clay Minor's geological hammer. Beetle can carry that. Turkey, you'd better covet a butterfly-net from somewhere."

"I'm blowed if I do," said McTurk, simply, with immense feeling. "Beetle, give me the hammer."

"All right. I'm not proud. Chuck us down that net on top of the lockers, Stalky."

"That's all right. It's a collapsible jamboree, too. Beastly luxurious dogs these fags are. Built like a fishin'-rod. 'Pon my sainted Sam, but we look the complete Bug-hunters! Now, listen to your Uncle Stalky! We're goin' along the cliffs after butterflies. Very few chaps come there. We're goin' to leg it, too. You'd better leave your book behind."

"Not much!" said Beetle, firmly. "I'm not goin' to be done out of my fun for a lot of filthy butterflies."

"Then you'll sweat horrid. You'd better carry my Jorrocks. 'Twon't make you any hotter."

They all sweated; for Stalky led them at a smart trot west away along the cliffs under the furze-hills, crossing combe after gorzy combe. They took no heed to flying rabbits or fluttering fritillaries, and all that Turkey said of geology was utterly unquotable.

"Are we going to Clovelly?" he puffed at last, and they flung themselves down on the short, springy turf between the drone of the sea below and the light summer wind among the inland trees. They were looking into a combe half full of old, high furze in gay bloom that ran up to a fringe of brambles and a dense wood of mixed timber and hollies. It was as though one-half the combe were filled with golden fire to the cliff's edge. The side nearest to them was open grass, and fairly bristled with notice-boards.

"Fee-rocious old cove, this," said Stalky, reading the nearest. "'Prosecuted with the utmost rigour of the law. G. M. Dabney, Col., J.P.,' an' all the rest of it. 'Don't seem to me that any chap in his senses would trespass here, does it?'"

"You've got to prove damage 'fore you can prosecute for anything! 'Can't prosecute for trespass," said McTurk, whose father held many acres in Ireland. "That's all rot!"

"Glad of that, 'cause this looks like what we wanted. Not straight across, Beetle, you blind lunatic! Anyone could spot us half a mile off. This way; and furl up your beastly butterfly-net."

Beetle disconnected the ring, thrust the net into a pocket, shut up the handle to a two-foot stave, and slid the cane-ring round his waist. Stalky led inland to the wood, which was, perhaps, a quarter of a mile from the sea, and reached the fringe of the brambles.

"Now we can get straight down through the furze, and never show up at all," said the tactician. "Beetle, go ahead and explore. Snf! Snf! Beastly stink of fox somewhere!"

On all fours, save when he clung to his spectacles, Beetle wormed into the gorse, and presently announced between grunts of pain that he had found a very fair fox-track. This was well for Beetle, since Stalky pinched him *a tergo*. Down that tunnel they crawled. It was evidently a highway for the inhabitants of the combe; and, to their inexpressible joy, ended, at the very edge of the cliff, in a few square feet of dry turf walled and roofed with impenetrable gorse.

"By gum! There isn't a single thing to do except lie down," said Stalky, returning a knife to his pocket. "Look here!"

He parted the tough stems before him, and it was as a window opened on a far view of Lundy, and the deep sea sluggishly nosing the pebbles a couple of hundred feet below. They could hear young jackdaws squawking on the ledges, the hiss and jabber of a nest of hawks somewhere out of sight; and, with great deliberation, Stalky spat on to the back of a young rabbit sunning himself far down where only a cliff-rabbit could have found foot-hold. Great gray and black gulls screamed against the jackdaws; the heavy-scented acres of bloom round them were alive with low-nesting birds, singing or silent as the shadow of the wheeling hawks passed and returned; and on the naked turf across the combe rabbits thumped and frolicked.

"Whew! What a place! Talk of natural history; this is it," said Stalky, filling himself a pipe. "Isn't it scrumptious? Good old sea!" He spat again approvingly, and was silent.

McTurk and Beetle had taken out their books and were lying on their stomachs, chin in hand. The sea snored and gurgled; the birds, scattered for the moment by these new animals, returned to their businesses, and the boys read on in the rich, warm, sleepy silence.

“Hullo, here’s a keeper,” said Stalky, shutting “Handley Cross” cautiously, and peering through the jungle. A man with a gun appeared on the sky-line to the east. “Confound him, he’s going to sit down.”

“He’d swear we were poachin’, too,” said Beetle. “What’s the good of pheasants’ eggs? They’re always addled, too.”

“Might as well get up to the wood, I think,” said Stalky. “We don’t want G. M. Dabney, Col., J.P., to be bothered about us so soon. Up the wuzzy and keep quiet! He may have followed us, you know.”

Beetle was already far up the tunnel. They heard him gasp indescribably: there was the crash of a heavy body leaping through the furze.

“Aie! yeou little red rascal. I see yeou!” The keeper threw the gun to his shoulder, and fired both barrels in their direction. The pellets dusted the dry stems round them as a big fox plunged between Stalky’s legs, and ran over the cliff-edge.

They said nothing till they reached the wood, torn, disheveled, hot, but unseen.

“Narrow squeak,” said Stalky. “I’ll swear some of the pellets went through my hair.”

“Did you see him?” said Beetle. “I almost put my hand on him. Wasn’t he a wopper! Didn’t he stink! Hullo, Turkey, what’s the matter? Are you hit?”

McTurk’s lean face had turned pearly white; his mouth, generally half open, was tight shut, and his eyes blazed. They had never seen him like this save once in a sad time of civil war.

“Do you know that that was just as bad as murder?” he said, in a grating voice, as he brushed prickles from his head.

“Well, he didn’t hit us,” said Stalky. “I think it was rather a lark. Here, where are you going?”

“I’m going up to the house, if there is one,” said McTurk, pushing through the hollies. “I am going to tell this Colonel Dabney.”

“Are you crazy? He’ll swear it served us jolly well right. He’ll report us. It’ll be a public lickin’. Oh, Turkey, don’t be an ass! Think of us!”

“You fool!” said McTurk, turning savagely. “D’you suppose I’m thinkin’ of *us*? It’s the keeper.”

“He’s cracked,” said Beetle, miserably, as they followed. Indeed, this was a new Turkey—a haughty, angular, nose-lifted Turkey—whom they accompanied through a shrubbery on to a lawn, where a white-whiskered old gentleman with a cleek was alternately putting and blaspheming vigorously.

"Are you Colonel Dabney?" McTurk began in this new creaking voice of his.

"I—I am, and—" his eyes traveled up and down the boy—"who—what the devil d'you want? Ye've been disturbing my pheasants. Don't attempt to deny it. Ye needn't laugh at it." (McTurk's not too lovely features had twisted themselves into a horrible sneer at the word pheasant.) "You've been birds'-nesting. You needn't hide your hat. I can see that you belong to the College. Don't attempt to deny it. Ye do! Your name and number at once, sir. Ye want to speak to me—Eh? You saw my notice-boards? Must have. Don't attempt to deny it. Ye did! Damnable, oh damnable!"

He choked with emotion. McTurk's heel tapped the lawn and he stuttered a little—two sure signs that he was losing his temper. But why should he, the offender, be angry?

"Lo-look here, sir. Do—do you shoot foxes? Because, if you don't, your keeper does. We've seen him! I do-don't care what you call us—but it's an awful thing. It's the ruin of good feelin' among neighbors. A ma-man ought to say once and for all how he stands about preservin'. It's worse than murder, because there's no legal remedy." McTurk was quoting confusedly from his father, while the old gentleman made noises in his throat.

"Do you know who I am?" he gurgled at last; Stalky and Beetle quaking.

"No, sorr, nor do I care if ye belonged to the Castle itself. Answer me now, as one gentleman to another. Do ye shoot foxes or do ye not?"

And four years before Stalky and Beetle had carefully kicked McTurk out of his Irish dialect! Assuredly he had gone mad or taken a sunstroke, and as assuredly he would be slain—once by the old gentleman and once by the Head. A public licking for the three was the least they could expect. Yet—if their eyes and ears were to be trusted—the old gentleman had collapsed. It might be a lull before the storm, but—

"I do not." He was still gurgling.

"Then you must sack your keeper. He's not fit to live in the same county with a God-fearin' fox. An' a vixen, too—at this time o' year!"

"Did ye come up on purpose to tell me this?"

"Of course I did, ye silly man," with a stamp of the foot. "Would you not have done as much for me if you'd seen that thing happen on my land, now?"

Forgotten—forgotten was the College and the decency due to elders! McTurk was treading again the barren purple mountains of the rainy West coast, where in his holidays he was viceroy of four thousand naked acres, only son of a three-hundred-year-old house, lord of a crazy fishing-boat, and the idol of his father's shiftless tenantry. It was the landed man speaking to his equal—deep calling to deep—and the old gentleman acknowledged the cry.

"I apologize," said he. "I apologize unreservedly—to you, and to the Old Country. Now, will you be good enough to tell me your story?"

"We were in your combe," McTurk began, and he told his tale alternately as a schoolboy and, when the iniquity of the thing overcame him, as an indignant squire; concluding:

“So you see he must be in the habit of it. I—we—one never wants to accuse a neighbor’s man; but I took the liberty in this case—”

“I see. Quite so. For a reason ye had. Infamous—oh, infamous!”

The two had fallen into step beside each other on the lawn, and Colonel Dabney was talking as one man to another. “This comes of promoting a fisherman—a fisherman—from his lobster-pots. It’s enough to ruin the reputation of an archangel. Don’t attempt to deny it. It is! Your father has brought you up well. He has. I’d much like the pleasure of his acquaintance. Very much, indeed. And these young gentlemen? English they are. Don’t attempt to deny it. They came up with you, too? Extraordinary! Extraordinary, now! In the present state of education I shouldn’t have thought any three boys would be well enough grounded. But out of the mouths of—No—no! Not that by any odds. Don’t attempt to deny it. Ye’re not! Sherry always catches me under the liver, but—beer, now? Eh? What d’you say to beer, and something to eat? It’s long since I was a boy—abominable nuisances; but exceptions prove the rule. And a vixen, too!” They were fed on the terrace by a gray-haired housekeeper. Stalky and Beetle merely ate, but McTurk with bright eyes continued a free and lofty discourse; and ever the old gentleman treated him as a brother.

“My dear man, of course ye can come again. Did I not say exceptions prove the rule? The lower combe? Man, dear, anywhere ye please, so long as you do not disturb my pheasants. The two are not incompatible. Don’t attempt to deny it. They’re not! I’ll never allow another gun, though. Come and go as ye please. I’ll not see you, and ye needn’t see me. Ye’ve been well brought up. Another glass of beer, now? I tell you a fisherman he was and a fisherman he shall be to-night again. He shall! Wish I could drown him. I’ll convoy you to the Lodge. My people are not precisely—ah—broke to boy, but they’ll know you again.”

He dismissed them with many compliments by the high Lodge-gate in the split-oak park palings and they stood still; even Stalky, who had played second, not to say a dumb, fiddle, regarding McTurk as one from another world. The two glasses of strong home-brewed had brought a melancholy upon the boy, for, slowly strolling with his hands in his pockets, he crooned:—“Oh, Paddy dear, and did ye hear the news that’s goin’ round?”

Under other circumstances Stalky and Beetle would have fallen upon him, for that song was barred utterly—anathema—the sin of witchcraft. But seeing what he had wrought, they danced round him in silence, waiting till it pleased him to touch earth.

The tea-bell rang when they were still half a mile from College. McTurk shivered and came out of dreams. The glory of his holiday estate had left him. He was a Colleger of the College, speaking English once more.

“Turkey, it was immense!” said Stalky, generously. “I didn’t know you had it in you. You’ve got us a hut for the rest of the term, where we simply *can’t* be collared. Fids! Fids! Oh, Fids! I gloat! Hear me gloat!”

They spun wildly on their heels, jodeling after the accepted manner of a “gloat,” which is not unremotely allied to the primitive man’s song of triumph, and dropped down the hill

by the path from the gasometer just in time to meet their house-master, who had spent the afternoon watching their abandoned hut in the “wuzzy.”

Unluckily, all Mr. Prout’s imagination leaned to the darker side of life, and he looked on those young-eyed cherubims most sourly. Boys that he understood attended house-matches and could be accounted for at any moment. But he had heard McTurk openly deride cricket—even house-matches; Beetle’s views on the honor of the house he knew were incendiary; and he could never tell when the soft and smiling Stalky was laughing at him. Consequently—since human nature is what it is—those boys had been doing wrong somewhere. He hoped it was nothing very serious, but...

“*Ti-ra-ra-la-i-tu!* I gloat! Hear me!” Stalky, still on his heels, whirled like a dancing dervish to the dining-hall.

“*Ti-ra-la-la-i-tu!* I gloat! Hear me!” Beetle spun behind him with outstretched arms.

“*Ti-ra-la-la-i-tu!* I gloat! Hear me!” McTurk’s voice cracked.

Now was there or was there not a distinct flavor of beer as they shot past Mr. Prout?

He was unlucky in that his conscience as a house-master impelled him to consult his associates. Had he taken his pipe and his troubles to little Hartopp’s rooms he would, perhaps, have been saved confusion, for Hartopp believed in boys, and knew something about them. His fate led him to King, a fellow house-master, no friend of his, but a zealous hater of Stalky & Co.

“Ah-haa!” said King, rubbing his hands when the tale was told. “Curious! Now *my* house never dream of doing these things.”

“But you see I’ve no proof, exactly.”

“Proof? With the egregious Beetle! As if one wanted it! I suppose it is not impossible for the Sergeant to supply it? Foxy is considered at least a match for any evasive boy in my house. Of course they were smoking and drinking somewhere. That type of boy always does. They think it manly.”

“But they’ve no following in the school, and they are distinctly—er brutal to their juniors,” said Prout, who had from a distance seen Beetle return, with interest, his butterfly-net to a tearful fag.

“Ah! They consider themselves superior to ordinary delights. Self-sufficient little animals! There’s something in McTurk’s Hibernian sneer that would make me a little annoyed. And they are so careful to avoid all overt acts, too. It’s sheer calculated insolence. I am strongly opposed, as you know, to interfering with another man’s house; but they need a lesson, Prout. They need a sharp lesson, if only to bring down their over-weening self-conceit. Were I you, I should devote myself for a week to their little performances. Boys of that order—and I may flatter myself, but I think I know boys—don’t join the Bug-hunters for love. Tell the Sergeant to keep his eye open; and, of course, in my peregrinations I may casually keep mine open, too.”

“*Ti-ra-la-la-i-tu!* I gloat! Hear me!” far down the corridor.

“Disgusting!” said King. “Where do they pick up these obscene noises? One sharp lesson is what they want.”

The boys did not concern themselves with lessons for the next few days. They had all Colonel Dabney’s estate to play with, and they explored it with the stealth of Red Indians and the accuracy of burglars. They could enter either by the Lodge-gates on the upper road—they were careful to ingratiate themselves with the Lodge-keeper and his wife—drop down into the combe, and return along the cliffs; or they could begin at the combe and climb up into the road.

They were careful not to cross the Colonel’s path—he had served his turn, and they would not out-wear their welcome—nor did they show up on the sky-line when they could move in cover. The shelter of the gorze by the cliff-edge was their chosen retreat. Beetle christened it the Pleasant Isle of Aves, for the peace and the shelter of it; and here, the pipes and tobacco once cache’d in a convenient ledge an arm’s length down the cliff, their position was legally unassailable.

For, observe, Colonel Dabney had not invited them to enter his house. Therefore, they did not need to ask specific leave to go visiting; and school rules were strict on that point. He had merely thrown open his grounds to them; and, since they were lawful Bug-hunters, their extended bounds ran up to his notice-boards in the combe and his Lodge-gates on the hill.

They were amazed at their own virtue.

“And even if it wasn’t,” said Stalky, flat on his back, staring into the blue. “Even suppose we were miles out of bounds, no one could get at us through this wuzzy, unless he knew the tunnel. Isn’t this better than lyin’ up just behind the Coll.—in a blue funk every time we had a smoke? Isn’t your Uncle Stalky—?”

“No,” said Beetle—he was stretched at the edge of the cliff spitting thoughtfully. “We’ve got to thank Turkey for this. Turkey is the Great Man. Turkey, dear, you’re distressing Heffles.”

“Gloomy old ass!” said McTurk, deep in a book.

“They’ve got us under suspicion,” said Stalky. “Hoophats *is* so suspicious somehow; and Foxy always makes every stalk he does a sort of—sort of—”

“Scalp,” said Beetle. “Foxy’s a giddy Chingangook.”

“Poor Foxy,” said Stalky. “He’s goin’ to catch us one of these days. ‘Said to me in the Gym last night, ‘I’ve got my eye on you, Mister Corkran. I’m only warning you for your good.’ Then I said: ‘Well, you jolly well take it off again, or you’ll get into trouble. I’m only warnin’ you for your good.’ Foxy was wrath.”

“Yes, but it’s only fair sport for Foxy,” said Beetle. “It’s Hefflelinga that has the evil mind. ‘Shouldn’t wonder if he thought we got tight.’”

“I never got squiffy but once—that was in the holidays,” said Stalky, reflectively; “an’ it made me horrid sick. ‘Pon my sacred Sam, though, it’s enough to drive a man to drink, havin’ an animal like Hoof for house-master.”

"If we attended the matches an' yelled, 'Well hit, sir,' an' stood on one leg an' grinned every time Heffy said, 'So ho, my sons. Is it thus?' an' said, 'Yes, sir,' an' 'No, sir,' an' 'O, sir,' an' 'Please, sir,' like a lot o' filthy fa-ags, Heffy 'ud think no end of us," said McTurk with a sneer.

"Too late to begin that."

"It's all right. The Hefflelinga means well. *But* he is an ass. *And* we show him that we think he's an ass. An' so Heffy don't love us. 'Told me last night after prayers that he was *in loco parentis*," Beetle grunted.

"The deuce he did!" cried Stalky. "That means he's maturin' something unusual dam' mean. Last time he told me that he gave me three hundred lines for dancin' the cachuca in Number Ten dormitory. *Loco parentis*, by gum! But what's the odds as long as you're 'appy? *We're* all right."

They were, and their very rightness puzzled Prout, King, and the Sergeant. Boys with bad consciences show it. They slink out past the Fives Court in haste, and smile nervously when questioned. They return, disordered, in bare time to save a call-over. They nod and wink and giggle one to the other, scattering at the approach of a master. But Stalky and his allies had long out-lived these manifestations of youth. They strolled forth unconcernedly, and returned in excellent shape after a light refreshment of strawberries and cream at the Lodge.

The Lodge-keeper had been promoted to keeper, *vice* the murderous fisherman, and his wife made much of the boys. The man, too, gave them a squirrel, which they presented to the Natural History Society; thereby checkmating little Hartopp, who wished to know what they were doing for Science. Foxy faithfully worked some deep Devon lanes behind a lonely cross-roads inn; and it was curious that Prout and King, members of Common-room seldom friendly, walked together in the same direction—that is to say, northeast.

Now, the Pleasant Isle of Aves lay due southwest. "They're deep—day-vilish deep," said Stalky. "Why are they drawin' those covers?"

"Me," said Beetle sweetly. "I asked Foxy if he had ever tasted the beer there. That was enough for Foxy, and it cheered him up a little. He and Heffy were sniffin' round our old hut so long I thought they'd like a change."

"Well, it can't last forever," said Stalky. "Heffy's bankin' up like a thunder-cloud, an' King goes rubbin' his beastly hands, an' grinnin' like a hyena. It's shockin' demoralizin' for King. He'll burst some day."

That day came a little sooner than they expected—came when the Sergeant, whose duty it was to collect defaulters, did not attend an afternoon call-over.

"Tired of pubs, eh? He's gone up to the top of the bill with his binoculars to spot us," said Stalky. "Wonder he didn't think of that before. Did you see old Heffy cock his eye at us when we answered our names? Heffy's in it, too. *Ti-ra-la-la-i-tu!* I gloat! Hear me! Come on!"

"Aves?" said Beetle.

"Of course, but I'm not smokin' *aujourd'hui*. *Parceque je* jolly well *pense* that we'll be *suivi*. We'll go along the cliffs, slow, an' give Foxy lots of time to parallel us up above."

They strolled towards the swimming-baths, and presently overtook King. "Oh, don't let *me* interrupt you," he said. "Engaged in scientific pursuits, of course? I trust you will enjoy yourselves, my young friends."

"You see!" said Stalky, when they were out of earshot. "He *can't* keep a secret. He's followin' to cut off our line of retreat. He'll wait at the baths till Heffy comes along. They've tried every blessed place except along the cliffs, and now they think they've bottled us. No need to hurry."

They walked leisurely over the combes till they reached the line of notice-boards.

"Listen a shake. Foxy's up wind comin' down hill like beans. When you hear him move in the bushes, go straight across to Aves. They want to catch us *flagrante delicto*."

They dived into the gorse at right angles to the tunnel, openly crossing the grass, and lay still in Aves.

"What did I tell you?" Stalky carefully put away the pipes and tobacco. The Sergeant, out of breath, was leaning against the fence, raking the furze with his binoculars, but he might as well have tried to see through a sand-bag. Anon, Prout and King appeared behind him. They conferred.

"Aha! Foxy don't like the notice-boards, and he don't like the prickles either. Now we'll cut up the tunnel and go to the Lodge. Hullo! They've sent Foxy into cover."

The Sergeant was waist-deep in crackling, swaying furze, his ears filled with the noise of his own progress. The boys reached the shelter of the wood and looked down through a belt of hollies.

"Hellish noise!" said Stalky, critically. "'Don't think Colonel Dabney will like it. I move we go into the Lodge and get something to eat. We might as well see the fun out."

Suddenly the keeper passed them at a trot. "Who'm they to combe-bottom for Lard's sake? Master'll be crazy," he said.

"Poachers simly," Stalky replied in the broad Devon that was the boy's *langue de guerre*.

"I'll poach 'em to raights!" He dropped into the funnel-like combe, which presently began to fill with noises, notably King's voice crying: "Go on, Sergeant! Leave him alone, you, sir. He is executing my orders."

"Who'm yeou to give arders here, gingy whiskers? Yeou come up to the master. Come out o' that wuzzy! [This is to the Sergeant.] Yiss, I reckon us knows the boys yeou'm after. They've tu long ears an' vuzzy bellies, an' you nippies they in yeour pockets when they'm dead. Come on up to master! He'll boy yeou all you're a mind to. Yeou other folk bide your side fence."

"Explain to the proprietor. You can explain, Sergeant," shouted King. Evidently the Sergeant had surrendered to the major force.

Beetle lay at full length on the turf behind the Lodge, literally biting the earth in spasms of joy. Stalky kicked him upright. There was nothing of levity about Stalky or McTurk save a stray muscle twitching on the cheek.

They tapped at the Lodge door, where they were always welcome. "Come yeou right in an' set down, my little dearrs," said the woman. "They'll niver touch my man. He'll poach 'em to rights. Iss fai! Fresh berries an' cream. Us Dartymoor folk niver forgit their friends. But them Bidevor poachers, they've no hem to their garments. Sugar? My man he've digged a badger for yeou, my dearrs. 'Tis in the linhay in a box."

"Us'll take un with us when we're finished here. I reckon yeou'm busy. We'll bide here an'—'tis washin' day with yeou, simly," said Stalky. "We'm no company to make all vitty for. Never yeou mind us. Yiss. There's plenty cream."

The woman withdrew, wiping her pink hands on her apron, and left them in the parlor. There was a scuffle of feet on the gravel outside the heavily-leaded diamond panes, and then the voice of Colonel Dabney, something clearer than a bugle.

"Ye can read? You've eyes in your head? Don't attempt to deny it. Ye have!"

Beetle snatched a crochet-work antimacassar from the shiny horsehair sofa, stuffed it into his mouth, and rolled out of sight.

"You saw my notice-boards. Your duty? Curse your impudence, sir. Your duty was to keep off my grounds. Talk of duty to *me*! Why—why—why, ye misbegotten poacher, ye'll be teaching me my A B C next! Roarin' like a bull in the bushes down there! Boys? Boys? Boys? Keep your boys at home, then! I'm not responsible for your boys! But I don't believe it—I don't believe a word of it. Ye've a furtive look in your eye—a furtive, sneakin', poachin' look in your eye, that 'ud ruin the reputation of an archangel! Don't attempt to deny it! Ye have! A sergeant? More shame to you, then, an' the worst bargain Her Majesty ever made! A sergeant, to run about the country poachin'—on your pension! Damnable! Oh, damnable! But I'll be considerate. I'll be merciful. By gad, I'll be the very essence o' humanity! Did ye, or did ye not, see my notice-boards? Don't attempt to deny it! Ye did. Silence, Sergeant!"

Twenty-one years in the army had left their mark on Foxy. He obeyed.

"Now. March!" The high Lodge gate shut with a clang. "My duty! A sergeant to tell me my duty!" puffed Colonel Dabney. "Good Lard! more sergeants!"

"It's King! It's King!" gulped Stalky, his head on the horsehair pillow. McTurk was eating the rag-carpet before the speckless hearth, and the sofa heaved to the emotions of Beetle. Through the thick glass the figures without showed blue, distorted, and menacing.

"I—I protest against this outrage." King had evidently been running up hill. "The man was entirely within his duty. Let—let me give you my card."

"He's in flannels!" Stalky buried his head again.

“Unfortunately—most unfortunately—I have not one with me, but my name is King, sir, a house-master of the College, and you will find me prepared—fully prepared—to answer for this man’s action. We’ve seen three—”

“Did ye see my notice-boards?”

“I admit we did; but under the circumstances—”

“I stand *in loco parentis*.” Prout’s deep voice was added to the discussion. They could hear him pant.

“F’what?” Colonel Dabney was growing more and more Irish.

“I’m responsible for the boys under my charge.”

“Ye are, are ye? Then all I can say is that ye set them a very bad example—a dam’ bad example, if I may say so. I do not own your boys. I’ve not seen your boys, an’ I tell you that if there was a boy grinnin’ in every bush on the place, *still* ye’ve no shadow of a right here, comin’ up from the combe that way, an’ frightenin’ everything in it. Don’t attempt to deny it. Ye did. Ye should have come to the Lodge an’ seen me like Christians, instead of chasin’ your dam’ boys through the length and breadth of my covers. *In loco parentis* ye are? Well, I’ve not forgotten my Latin either, an’ I’ll say to you: ‘*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes*.’ If the masters trespass, how can we blame the boys?”

“But if I could speak to you privately,” said Prout.

“I’ll have nothing private with you! Ye can be as private as ye please on the other side o’ that gate an’—I wish ye a very good afternoon.”

A second time the gate clanged. They waited till Colonel Dabney had returned to the house, and fell into one another’s arms, crowing for breath.

“Oh, my Soul! Oh, my King! Oh, my Heffy! Oh, my Foxy! Zeal, all zeal, Mr. Simple.” Stalky wiped his eyes. “Oh! Oh I Oh!—‘I *did* boil the exciseman!’ We must get out of this or we’ll be late for tea.”

“Ge—Ge—get the badger and make little Hartopp happy. Ma—ma—make ‘em all happy,” sobbed McTurk, groping for the door and kicking the prostrate Beetle before him.

They found the beast in an evil-smelling box, left two half-crowns for payment, and staggered home. Only the badger grunted most marvelous like Colonel Dabney, and they dropped him twice or thrice with shrieks of helpless laughter. They were but imperfectly recovered when Foxy met them by the Fives Court with word that they were to go up to their dormitory and wait till sent for.

“Well, take this box to Mr. Hartopp’s rooms, then. We’ve done something for the Natural History Society, at any rate,” said Beetle.

“Fraid that won’t save you, young gen’elmen,” Foxy answered, in an awful voice. He was sorely ruffled in his mind.

"All sereno, Foxibus." Stalky had reached the extreme stage of hiccups. "We—we'll never desert you, Foxy. Hounds choppin' foxes in cover is more a proof of vice, ain't it?... No, you're right. I'm—I'm not quite well."

"They've gone a bit too far this time," Foxy thought to himself. "Very far gone, *I'd* say, excep' there was no smell of liquor. An' yet it isn't like 'em—somehow. King and Prout they 'ad their dressin'-down same as me. That's one comfort."

"Now, we must pull up," said Stalky, rising from the bed on which he had thrown himself. "We're injured innocence—as usual. We don't know what we've been sent up here for, do we?"

"No explanation. Deprived of tea. Public disgrace before the house," said McTurk, whose eyes were running over. "It's dam' serious."

"Well, hold on, till King loses his temper," said Beetle. "He's a libelous old rip, an' he'll be in a ravin' paddy-wack. Prout's too beastly cautious. Keep your eye on King, and, if he gives us a chance, appeal to the Head. That always makes 'em sick."

They were summoned to their house-master's study, King and Foxy supporting Prout, and Foxy had three canes under his arm. King leered triumphantly, for there were tears, undried tears of mirth, on the boys' cheeks. Then the examination began.

Yes, they had walked along the cliffs. Yes, they had entered Colonel Dabney's grounds. Yes, they had seen the notice-boards (at this point Beetle sputtered hysterically). For what purpose had they entered Colonel Dabney's grounds? "Well, sir, there was a badger."

Here King, who loathed the Natural History Society because he did not like Hartopp, could no longer be restrained. He begged them not to add mendacity to open insolence. But the badger was in Mr. Hartopp's rooms, sir. The Sergeant had kindly taken it up for them. That disposed of the badger, and the temporary check brought King's temper to boiling-point. They could hear his foot on the floor while Prout prepared his lumbering inquiries. They had settled into their stride now. Their eyes ceased to sparkle; their faces were blank; their hands hung beside them without a twitch. They were learning, at the expense of a fellow-countryman, the lesson of their race, which is to put away all emotion and entrap the alien at the proper time.

So far good. King was importing himself more freely into the trial, being vengeful where Prout was grieved. They knew the penalties of trespassing? With a fine show of irresolution, Stalky admitted that he had gathered some information vaguely bearing on this head, but he thought—The sentence was dragged out to the uttermost: Stalky did not wish to play his trump with such an opponent. Mr. King desired no buts, nor was he interested in Stalky's evasions. They, on the other hand, might be interested in his poor views. Boys who crept—who sneaked—who lurked—out of bounds, even the generous bounds of the Natural History Society, which they had falsely joined as a cloak for their misdeeds—their vices—their villainies—their immoralities—

"He'll break cover in a minute," said Stalky to himself. "Then we'll run into him before he gets away."

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

