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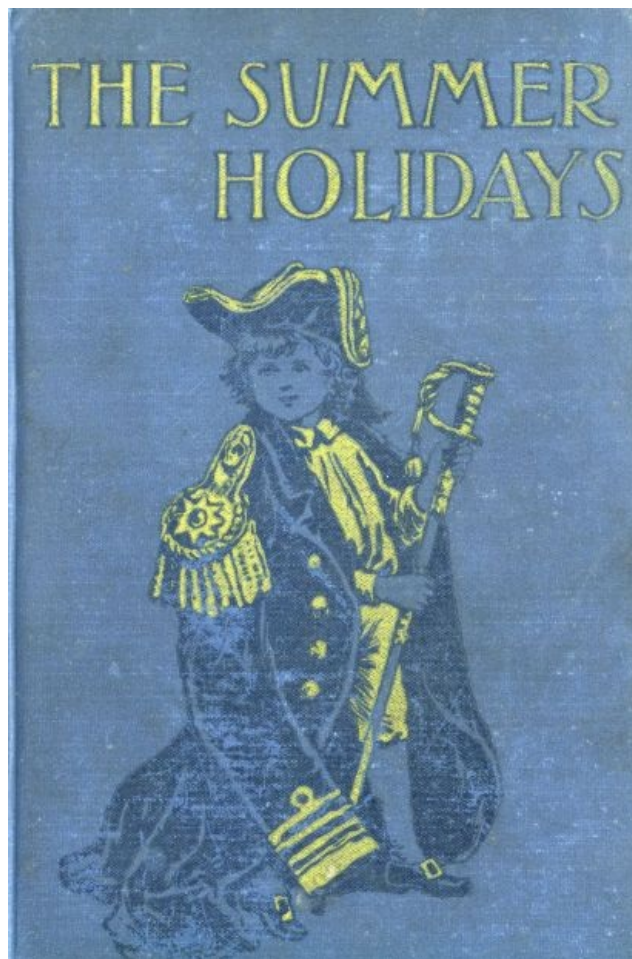
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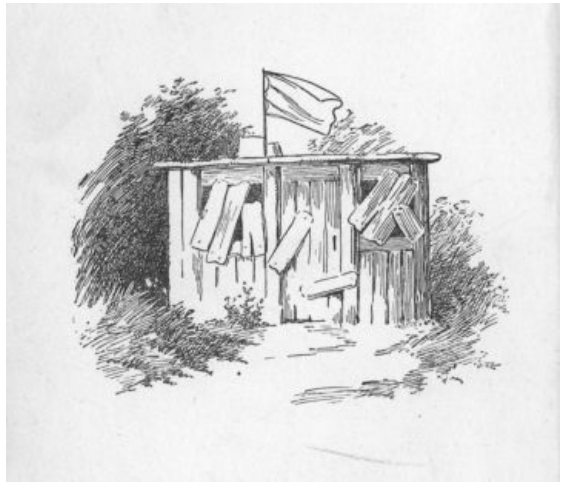
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A Tale
of the
SUMMER
Holidays



A Tale of the Summer Holidays

by

G. Mockler

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ILLUSTRATIONS

"Jim scribbled the word 'yes' on his piece of paper."

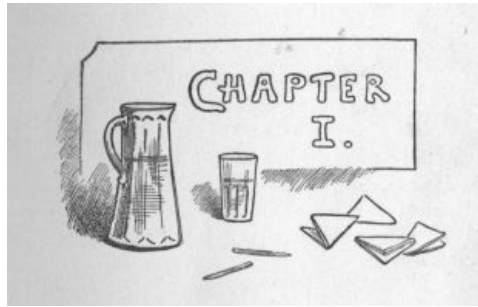
"Jumbo began to wash his face and ears."

"I suppose you will own that you really are out this time?"

"The boy had thrown his lasso with deadly aim."



"Jim scribbled the word 'yes' on his piece of paper."



CHAPTER I.

THE SECRET MEETING.



Two days after the holidays began, the four younger members of the Danvers family received a note summoning them to a secret meeting at half-past seven the next morning in the summer-house. Drusie, who had written and delivered the notes, including one to herself, was the first to reach the appointed place; and when, a few minutes later, the other three arrived, they found her seated at the rustic table with a sheet of paper and a pencil before her, and a glass of water at her elbow.

"Good-morning," she said, rising and shaking hands with them all round. "Helen, will you sit facing me, and Jim and Tommy at either side?"

In a solemn silence they obeyed; and then seating herself again, she took a sip of water. Not that she was thirsty, but she was rather nervous.

It was so long since the last meeting, and hitherto Hal had always been the chairman. She stifled a sigh; it seemed so strange to hold a secret meeting without him.

"Go ahead," said Jim, encouragingly; "or would you like me to be chairman, Drusie?"

"Certainly not," she replied hastily. "I am the eldest here, and of course I must be chairman. And you must be serious, Jim, for we have got a lot to talk about this morning, and it won't do for Hal to come out and find us here."

"He is asleep and snoring," said Helen, in a tone of great contempt. "He has learned a lot of silly things at school, and one of them is never to get up until he is called."

"Order, please," said Drusie, rapping on the table. "You must not begin to discuss the subject until I have announced it." She rose, gulped down a few mouthfuls of water, and said: "Ladies and gentlemen, we are met here this morning to discuss a question of paramount importance." She paused, partly for breath and partly to take note of the effect of her words. She was proud of that beginning, which she had learned from the report of a missionary meeting. She was pleased to observe that Helen and Tommy looked decidedly impressed, but Jim was grinning. Frowning at him, she resumed: "I may say that the matter affects us all very seriously, and it is one that ought to be taken up by the nation at large. But I regret to say that the people of England are only too apt to shirk their very obvious, their very obvious—"

But at that point she stuck hopelessly fast. Though she had carefully avoided glancing at Jim, she had seen his face out of the corner of one eye, and the wide, fixed grin that ornamented it had put her out dreadfully.

"Oh, come," he said, striking in; "aren't you laying it on rather thick? Even though Hal has come back from school with so much side on that he does not know what to do with himself, I don't see that the nation at large is concerned."

"No, of course not," Drusie acknowledged; "but it said that in the paper, you know, and it

seemed a nice beginning."

"Well, suppose we skip that part," said Jim, "and get to the real business, which is of course about Hal."

"Very well," said Drusie, though she rather regretted her long sentences. "I called this meeting to talk about Hal," she said, "and to ask what you all thought about the birthday. You know we have been busy making the ammunition to storm the fort with; but if he doesn't want to defend it, it won't be much good preparing any more cannon balls. Of course, one of us could defend it; but a fight without Hal wouldn't be any fun at all. At least, that is what I think; but what do you say?"

This time Drusie had been heard with as much attention as she could wish for. The matter really was a very serious one. In two days' time it would be the twins'—Hal and Drusie's—birthday; and ever since they had been big enough to throw straight, they had always celebrated this double birthday with a big battle, followed by a feast in the summer-house. Hal had always defended the fort, while Drusie led the attacking party; and this year they had expected to have a really splendid fight, for during the past fortnight they had spent all their spare time in making ammunition, and the supply of cannon balls was larger than ever before.

But if Hal was not going to take part in the fight, all these preparations would be thrown away. It was really very difficult to know what he would or would not do, for he was so altered by his one term at school that he hardly seemed like the same boy. He did not tease or bully them, but he simply took as little notice as possible, and spoke to them in a lofty, superior sort of way, as though he were a very grown-up person and they very little children. Sometimes, however, he quite forgot to be dignified and condescending, and then Drusie hoped he meant to take part in the birthday fight as usual. And the awkward part of it was that Drusie could not ask him his intentions, as it was against their rules to say one word to him about the fight until the very day on which it was to take place.

"I suppose," said Helen, with a scornful little sniff, "he has grown too grand to fight. He would call it baby-play."

"What about the feast?" asked Jim. "Weren't you going to say something about that too, Drusie?"

"Oh yes," she said; and after she had drunk a little more water she rose to her feet again. The chairman was always supposed to finish the glass of water, and that was a part of her duties that Drusie did not much relish when the meeting was held before breakfast. Under pretence of moving it out of her way, Jim drew the tumbler towards him, and when she was not looking he filled it up from a jug which he had hidden under the table the evening before.

"The feast," she said earnestly, "is going to be a specially nice one. I am making all the wine myself, and I taste it ever so many times a day to see if it is still good. I won't tell you everything that is in it; but you can guess how lovely it will be when I say that it was made from apples, and pears, and prune juice, and sugar, and some tea that I saved from breakfast. There are lots of other things in it, too," she said, interrupting herself; "but that is a secret. The best of my wine is that it hasn't cost anything, and so we shall have more money to spend on other things. It is pocket-money day to-day, and it must all go towards the feast. My sixpence and yours, Jim, and Helen's and Tommy's threepences make one and sixpence. That is a lot of money, and I am sure Hal will give us his shilling."

"I don't think he will," said Jim, biting his lips to keep from laughing as he saw Drusie look down with mingled surprise and dismay at her nearly full glass; "he is hard up. He borrowed a penny half-penny from me the other day, and hasn't paid it back yet; and he told me that he had got rather a big bill in the village."

"Well," Drusie continued, after she had bravely gulped down some more water, "it doesn't matter very much if he doesn't give anything. We have plenty. And now we must vote." Tearing the sheet of paper into four pieces, she passed them round the table. "If you want to go on preparing for the fight and the feast, you must each write 'yes;' if you don't want to go on, you must write 'no.'"

Then she sat down, feeling rather proud of the clear way in which she had spoken, and made another attempt to finish her glass of water.

Without the slightest hesitation Jim scribbled the word "yes" on his piece of paper, and when Tommy saw what Jim had written he put "yes," too. Helen took longer to make up her mind. She could not help thinking that if they went on with the preparations for the fight, and Hal refused to have anything to do with it, they would look very silly. For at the bottom of her heart Helen was rather impressed by the airs that Hal gave himself, and would have liked very much to imitate them. But knowing well that the other three would vote for going on with the fight, she, too, wrote "yes," and put her folded slip with the others into the hat which Jim passed round.

The chairman opened them hastily.

"They are all 'yeses,' so we must go on with the preparations just the same," she said, rising

once more to address the meeting; "and if Hal gives us his shilling after breakfast, it will mean that he is going to defend the fort. That is all, I think. I now declare this meeting ended."

"Hear, hear!" said Jim. "But you must finish your water, Drusie. We shan't think anything of you as a chairman if you leave a drop."

"I keep on drinking all the time," said poor Drusie, giving her tumbler, still nearly full, a glance of strong distaste.

"Perhaps you only sip it," said Jim gravely. "Shut your eyes, and take big mouthfuls. You *must* finish it, you know."

The sense of duty was strong in Drusie, and so she shut her eyes and made one more heroic effort. The instant her eyes were closed, Jim filled up her glass as she drank. He had hoped to make her finish the entire jugful, but he shook so with suppressed laughter that instead of pouring it into her glass he poured it on to her nose.

"O Jim!" she said reproachfully, as the truth burst upon her; "how much have I drunk?"

"Four tumblers full," he said triumphantly. "You make a splendid chairman, Drusie."

She couldn't help laughing, too, when she saw the nearly empty jug. She dried her face, scolded Jim, and then forgave him in the same breath, for a sweeter-tempered child than Drusie never lived. After that the meeting broke up, and a few minutes later the bell rang for breakfast.

Hal was already seated at the table when they reached the nursery. He was a nice-looking boy, taller than Drusie by a couple of inches, and well grown for his years, which would be twelve on the following Tuesday.

"Hallo!" he said, as they all trooped in; "what have you been up to? I know," he said, catching sight of the tumbler now really empty at last in Drusie's hand. "A secret meeting. You might have asked me. What was it about?"



Drusie flushed up and looked guilty. She could not tell him that the meeting had been about himself. But just then Helen interposed.

"Why, you wouldn't have cared to come," she said. "You said yesterday that secret meetings were baby things."

So he had, but it nevertheless was a pity that Helen reminded him of it just then. He had come down to breakfast that morning inclined to drop back into his old place among them, and his tone and manner were friendly and pleasant. But Helen's speech rubbed him up the wrong way at once, and in an instant he became the lofty and contemptuous school-boy brother again.

"And so they are baby things, Miss Helen," he said; "but it is rather amusing, you know, to watch babies at play. That is why I should have liked to be told of this important secret meeting in time."

That that was not the reason Drusie knew as well as he did. And he felt rather ashamed when he saw the hurt expression that came to her face. But Helen really must be taught that there was a great difference between a little girl of eight who had never been away from home in her life and a boy of twelve who had been to school. But it was not always easy to snub Helen.

"You are silly, Hal," she said. "Just because you have been to school for one term, you fancy that you are too big to play with us. Such nonsense."

Well, of course, that led to a sharp answer from Hal. Helen replied again, and a hot wrangle went on across the breakfast table.

"Come, come, Master Hal," said nurse at last—for though Helen had certainly begun this quarrel, it was generally Hal who had done so since he came home—"what would your father and mother say if they were at home and heard you? They would not think that you had been very kind to your brothers and sisters since you came back."

"I wish they were at home," said Hal, suddenly flaming out, "and then I should have my meals with them, instead of being shut up with all of you. I hate having my meals in the nursery. I am not a little boy any longer, and I don't see why I should."

There was a moment's dead silence after this outburst, and all the others gazed wonderingly at Hal. They were astonished that he should have dared to speak in that rebellious tone to nurse. She, however, looked neither surprised nor angry.

"Very well, Master Hal," she said; "if that is all your grievance, it is easily put to rights. You shall have your meals in the schoolroom, if you like. I can't let you have them in the dining-room, because it would make extra work, and the parlour-maid is away. But Ann can easily carry in what I send you from here."



That was not at all what Hal wanted. He was too proud, however, and also far too sulky, to say any more on the subject. He was glad when nurse rose and said grace, and he was at liberty to leave the nursery.

"One minute, Master Hal," she said, as he was hurrying to the door; "have you forgotten that this is Saturday and pocket-money day? Wait while I get out my purse and pay you all."

Drusie watched him anxiously. Would he remember the birthday feast, and hand her the shilling, or would he keep it himself? Alas! Jim had been right, and she wrong. He received the shilling with a muttered word of thanks, and slipping it into his pocket left the room.

"I wonder," said Tommy, in an awestruck, thoughtful voice, "what Hal will do with a *whole* shilling? Will he spend it all at once, do you think?"





CHAPTER II.

A FRIEND IN NEED.



hough Hal's crossness at breakfast had made Drusie feel rather sad, it was impossible for her to be unhappy for long on such a beautiful morning; and when Helen suggested that they should take a few of the rabbits with them to the clover field she cheerfully agreed.

"Punch and Judy and Toby went with us last time," she said, "and they didn't behave very well, so we won't take them with us to-day. Let's take Jumbo."

Jumbo was the oldest of all the rabbits, and he belonged to Hal, which was perhaps the reason that Drusie wished to take him. She thought it would please Hal.

Partly because Jumbo was so old, and partly because he was also very bad tempered, he lived by himself in a comfortable, roomy hutch, with a soft bed of hay at one end and a great wide space at the other, in which he took his meals and looked out of the door at the other rabbits. Helen, who did not care very much for Jumbo, declared that he did that on purpose to aggravate them, for they all finished their food long before he was half-way through his, and then they had nothing else to do but to sit and watch him. And that made them feel hungry again. He was sitting before his door now munching bran and oats, and at the mention of his name he pricked up his long ears and sleepily blinked his eyes. "H'm," said Helen, looking at him rather distrustfully; "Jumbo too can be dreadfully naughty when he likes, and he rather looks as if he meant it to-day."

But that, Drusie said laughing, was all nonsense, for no rabbit could have looked meeker or better-behaved than Jumbo that morning. So it was decided that he should accompany them; and as Punch and Judy and Toby scratched at their doors when they saw him on the ground, Jim said it would be unkind not to take them as well. And Drusie declined to leave Salt and Pepper behind, for they were always good. Thus, when the four children started for the clover field, it was a very big party of rabbits that went with them. But as Jumbo followed a great deal better than many dogs do, and as all the other rabbits followed Jumbo, the children had no trouble at all with them.

The way to the clover field lay through their own garden, and then across a big, sunny meadow. By the time they reached the meadow it was growing very hot, and the children sauntered along under the shade of a high hedge, and talked about the fight to be held on the following Tuesday.

Drusie felt more hopeful than she had done before breakfast, and she was perfectly sure that Hal would defend the fort. She was full of plans for making the fight a better and more exciting one than any they had yet had, and she was suggesting a scheme by which Tommy could act both as scout and advanced outpost, when a strong, delicious scent from the clover field was wafted towards them on the soft summer breeze.

Jumbo smelt it, and lifting up his black nose gave one or two sniffs, and then darting past them at a rate surprising in a rabbit of his age made straight for the gap in the hedge; and, of course, after that there was no more time for conversation, for where Jumbo went the other rabbits followed. It was quite as much as the children could do to keep them in sight, and when they scrambled through the gap five of the six rabbits were sitting in a row contentedly munching away at the juicy stalks and cool green leaves of the clover. But Jumbo would not condescend to eat anything but pink, honey-filled flowers, and going from plant to plant he sat up on his hind legs and bit off the stalk just below the head.

"Jumbo is a clever rabbit," said Helen admiringly; "the others don't know the difference between the flowers and the leaves."

Then suddenly they all burst out laughing. For Jumbo, getting tired perhaps of sitting up so much on his hind legs, tried to support himself against a stalk while he nibbled at the flowers. But the stalk gave way, and Jumbo fell heavily across Pepper's neck, who, indignant at such a liberty, gave a squeak and darted away. Jumbo, trying hard to look as though he had tumbled down on purpose, began to wash his face and ears in a very diligent manner.



"Jumbo began to wash his face and ears." Page 30.

"Jumbo began to wash his face and ears"

It was some time before the children thought of returning; but presently Jim, who never cared to sit still for very long, said that they might as well be going, and added that as the rabbits had been so good they would give them an extra ramble, and take them home by the lane that ran along the top of the hill.

But that, as Helen remarked, was saying one word for the rabbits and two for himself; for the lane bordered the land belonging to an old gentleman, named Grey, who had lately come to live there, and from a gate at the top of the hill a glimpse could be caught of the river, where, too, a lovely pair of swans might be seen. Jim took a great interest in these swans, and longed to get down to the water so as to be close to them. But the gamekeeper was a surly fellow, and if he saw the children lingering near he would tell them that his master "couldn't abear boys nor girls either," and always was most severe if any people were caught trespassing on his land. Thus Jim had never dared to climb the gate. But Jumbo this morning was to give him an excuse for so doing. When they reached it, the children paused to gaze down at the river, which there broadened out into a sort of lake, with a grassy islet in the centre. The six rabbits paused also.

The clover they had eaten had made them feel rather sleepy, but now they were beginning to recover from the effects of it, and now they suddenly became quite frisky. Punch leaped over Judy's back, and then chased her into the middle of the road and back again. Even old Jumbo caught the infection, and though he very seldom condescended to take any notice of the other rabbits, now he gave Toby a playful poke with his nose, following it up by a bite on his ear that was not quite so playful. Toby gave a loud squeak of pain, and Jumbo, afraid perhaps that he might receive a bite in return, jumped through the bars and scampered down the field. He was half-way to the river before the children recovered from their surprise, and shouted to him to come back. But the more they shouted the faster he ran. And that was not the worst either, for the other rabbits were after him in a twinkling. But quick as they were Jim was quicker. He had no intention of allowing such an excellent opportunity of exploring the forbidden ground to slip, and crying that it was of no use to call to Jumbo he scrambled over the gate and rushed helter-skelter down the field, taking great care, however, not to get in front of Jumbo, but running behind him shouting and waving his hands.



To the interested onlookers at the gate, whom an uneasy fear of the gamekeeper kept from entering the field, it really seemed much more as though Jim were chasing Jumbo down the field than trying to capture him.

But, perhaps, even if Jim had wished to catch Jumbo he could not have done so, for the old rabbit was thoroughly enjoying his scamper, and with his little, short tail cocked up and his long ears streaming behind him he raced along like the wind.

And then a dreadful thing happened. Some twenty feet from the river the ground sloped very steeply, and such was the rate at which Jumbo was going that, when he reached this part, he could not stop himself, but tumbled head over heels, and rolling down the bank disappeared with a big, loud splash into the water.

Jim uttered a shout of dismay, which was echoed by all the others, who, hastily climbing over the gate, came rushing pell-mell down the field.

"Oh, where is he? Oh, is poor darling Jumbo drowned?" Drusie gasped.

But he was not drowned. Even as Drusie spoke his soft, black nose came to the surface, and kicking vigorously he struck out for the opposite bank.

"Why, he can swim!" Drusie cried joyfully. "But don't go that way, Jumbo; come here. Jumbo! Jumbo!"

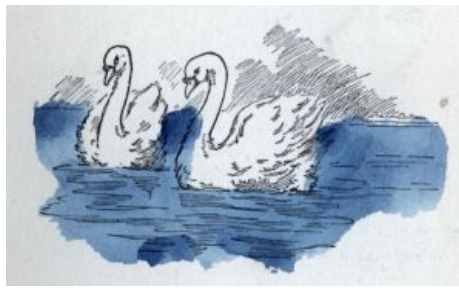


Kneeling down on the bank she called to him; but Jumbo had quite lost his presence of mind, and, far too bewildered and alarmed to heed the children's cries, he paddled away from them as fast as ever he could.

"Oh, what shall we do?" Drusie cried in great distress. "His long fur will soon get so heavy that he will not be able to keep himself up. O Jumbo darling, come here!"

Jim was quite as frightened as she was. If only he had known how to swim, he would have plunged in to the rescue at once.

Then, as if matters were not already bad enough, they suddenly became worse. The swans, which Jim had been so anxious to see, suddenly sailed majestically round the bend of the small island, and came towards the children, expecting crumbs.



But none of the children, not even Jim, had any attention to spare for them, beautiful though they were. Their eyes were fixed on Jumbo, whose breath was coming in quick, short pants, and whose poor, short, little legs were growing more and more tired.

Disappointed at not getting the crumbs, the swans slowly turned round and were sailing away again when they caught sight of Jumbo, and with angry hisses and long necks outstretched they bore down upon him as he swam about half-way between the island and the bank.

"Oh, go to the island; it is nearer!" Drusie shrieked; "and O Jumbo, make haste!"

It almost seemed as if Jumbo understood what she said. At any rate he began to swim towards the island as fast as ever he could. But weighted with his long fur, and unaccustomed to swimming—for he had never in his life before been in the water, and how he had learned to swim always remained a mystery to the children—he yet struck out valiantly. He knew that he was swimming for his very life, and he never ceased paddling for one moment.

The children watched the race in a state of frantic excitement, while Jim ran up and down the bank looking in vain for something to throw at the swans and drive them away. And now came a moment during which the children literally held their breath. Jumbo was within two or three yards of the island when the foremost of the two swans stooped its long neck and made a savage grab at his hind legs. It seemed impossible that the cruel beak could miss him, yet it did; for poor Jumbo was by that time so exhausted that he suddenly sank and disappeared. The angry, surprised swan dived his head down in search of him; but the current, which swept round here with some force, carried Jumbo away, and finally flung him, a bedraggled and most unhappy-looking rabbit, on to a corner of the island. Drusie always declared afterwards that Jumbo had dived and swum under water; but whether that was true or not, saved he certainly was. Luckily for him the swans did not follow him, but contented themselves with sailing majestically up and down between the island and the bank, ready, if he showed the least sign of taking to the water again, to pursue him. But Jumbo had had enough of swimming to last him all his life, and preferred to stay where he was rather than venture again into the river.

But what was to happen next? They could not go home and leave Jumbo on the island, and yet there seemed no way in which they could get at him. And at any moment the cross gamekeeper might appear, and at this thought Drusie glanced round uneasily.

As she did so she gave a little jump, for running quickly towards them was somebody who, she was afraid at first, might be the gamekeeper himself. But a second glance showed her that the new-comer was only a boy, and a very nice-looking boy too, with merry, dark-blue eyes and a friendly manner.

"Hallo!" he said, rather breathlessly. "Is anything the matter? I heard a lot of shouting, and I came to see if anybody had tumbled into the river. But you are all quite dry."

"Yes, we are all right," Drusie explained hurriedly. "But one of our rabbits—Jumbo—has tumbled in, and the swans have chased him on to the island, and we don't know how to get him back again."

She pointed as she spoke to the island, and the boy, following the direction of her glance, burst out laughing.

"Is that a rabbit?" he said. "Why, it looks more like a drowned rat than anything else."

"Jumbo is very handsome when he is dry," Drusie said, inclined at first to be a little offended. But his laughter was infectious, and Jumbo did after all look so very much like a drowned rat that she could not help laughing too.

"I say, what a jolly lot of rabbits you have got!" the boy said, looking down at the other five, who were busy nibbling away at the grass, without seeming to care in the least what happened to Jumbo; "but aren't you afraid of their running away?"

"They generally behave beautifully," Drusie said, who, because the other three were rather shy, was obliged to do all the talking herself; "but something must have startled Jumbo when we were at the top of the hill, for he set off at a tremendous scamper, and tumbled in headforemost before we knew what was happening to him."

"Poor old Jumbo!" said the boy, as he looked across at the shivering, melancholy rabbit. "We

must rescue him though, and that is easily done."

As he spoke he led the way along the bank to a spot where a thick clump of willows grew; and moored to one of these trees was a small, light canoe.

"I'll paddle across in less than no time," he said, "and if the swans do not interfere, I'll soon bring him safely back to you."

The swans did not interfere, however, and Jumbo a minute or two later was clasped in Drusie's arms. She almost cried over him in her joy at his safety.

Sitting down on the bank she began to dry him with her handkerchief; but it was soaked through at once, and the boy suggested that they should rub him with their hands. So Drusie placed him tenderly on the grass, and they rubbed him until their arms ached; and no doubt Jumbo ached too, for they all rubbed with a will.

"But at any rate," Drusie said in a tone of satisfaction, "he won't catch cold now, and he is so old that he might have had a dreadful attack of rheumatism."

Long before Jumbo was dry they had all become very friendly with their new acquaintance. Jim and Helen and Tommy forgot to be shy, and they all chatted away together as if they had known each other for quite a long time. It was not until half an hour later, as, with Jumbo lying comfortably in Drusie's arms, for she said he was too weak to walk, they were all hurrying home, that they remembered they did not even know what their new friend's name was, or where he lived.

"Perhaps," said Helen, "he lives at the Grange, and Captain Grey is his father."

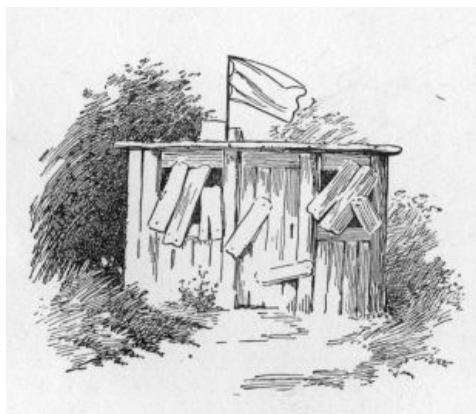


"Captain Grey hasn't any children," Drusie said. "I heard nurse say so."

"Then perhaps he is staying there on a visit," Jim said.

But Drusie did not think that that was likely either, for had not the gamekeeper said that his master "could not abear boys"? And if that was the case, he certainly would not have one staying in the house.

But whoever he was, they all four agreed that he was an exceedingly nice boy, and they hoped that they might meet him again.





CHAPTER III.

HAL FINDS A FRIEND.



n their way through the garden they met Hal. Directly they saw him his brothers and sisters rushed up and told him all about Jumbo's adventures, and about the boy who had been so kind to them. Hal was not greatly interested. He was looking pale and listless, and there were heavy, dark lines about his eyes. When they asked him eagerly if he knew who the boy could be, he shook his head and yawned, and said that he was sure he did not know.

"Come and have a game of cricket," he said, rousing himself a little. "I have got my bat here, and the ball is somewhere about. Just have a look for it, Tommy. We won't bother about stumps. This tree will do quite well for the wicket."

"All right," Drusie said, delighted to find that Hal was willing to be friends again. "I should love a game; but we must put Jumbo and the other rabbits away first.—Come along, Jim and Helen."

She and Jim ran off at once, but Helen followed more slowly. She had a shrewd suspicion that Hal merely wanted them to bowl and field for him, and that he did not intend to allow them to bat. And she did not see the fun of running about in the hot sun after his balls, if she was not going to have any of the batting.

But Drusie and Jim were too excited at the prospect of a game to listen to her words of warning, and as soon as the rabbits had been hastily bundled into their hutches they raced back to the tree where Hal was waiting for them.

"You shall bowl first, Jim," he said.—"Drusie, you can stand behind the tree and be wicket-keeper, for, unless Jim has improved wonderfully since I went away, most of his balls will be fearful wides.—Helen, you go over there, and mind to throw the balls up sharp."

"Then you are going in first," said Helen, "and we are not going to toss?"

But Hal was busy measuring out the distance at which Jim was to stand, and did not hear her question. Or if he did, he evidently did not consider it worthy of an answer.

"Now then," Hal said, coming back; "I am ready. I am not going to make any runs, you know, as it is too hot; but you others must send the ball up promptly, or else it makes it slow work for me."

Jim's bowling was not very difficult to deal with, and Hal knocked the balls about pretty much as he pleased, and gave the fielders, and especially Helen, plenty of running about.

"Well, at this rate," Drusie said merrily, as she cleverly stopped a ball that was a very bad "wide" indeed, "we shall never get you out."

"No, I don't suppose you will," said Hal; and then he added ungratefully, "That is the worst of playing with a set of girls; one never gets any practice."

Whether Jim was annoyed at being classed as a girl, and was therefore put on his mettle, cannot be said for certain, but at any rate his very next ball hit the tree fair and square, and with so much violence that a piece of the rough elm bark was knocked off.

"Hurrah!" shouted Drusie, clapping her hands; "bowled at last. Who goes in next?"

"Don't be in such a mighty hurry," said Hal, who was looking distinctly angry. "I am not out—not a bit of it. Why, that ball was not anything like in the middle of the tree. Who ever heard of a wicket a yard and a quarter wide? You'll have to bowl better than that, Jim, to get me out."

"All right," Jim said, recovering himself. He had looked rather blank for a moment when Hal declared so emphatically that he was not out. "I suppose that ball was rather to one side of the tree. I will have another try."

But Helen was not so easily satisfied.

"You said, Hal, that the tree was to be the wicket; you never said anything about only counting the middle of the tree."

"Did I say so?" he replied. "Well, I made a mistake. Of course, it would be rather absurd to count the whole tree. I tell you what I will do. I will hang my cap on this little twig here, and if the ball hits that I am out. Now, are you satisfied?"

They all, with the exception of Helen, hastened to say that they were, and the game went on. A few minutes later he sent an easy catch, and darting forward Helen caught the ball.

"How about playing with girls now, Master Hal?" she cried. "I suppose you will own that you are fairly out this time?"

But he did nothing of the sort.

"Pooh!" he said contemptuously; "that was a pure fluke. Any one could have caught that; and so it does not count either. I am not going out."

"Oh, I say," Jim said in a remonstrating tone, "is that the way you play at your school?"

"Of course, it is not," said Hal. "Don't be a donkey, Jim. How often am I to tell you that this is not a regular game, but just a sort of knock up, you know?"

"In which you get all the knocking up," Helen said indignantly.

Hal laughed.

"Now, don't get into a temper, Helen. I don't see what girls want to play cricket for. It is not a girls' game. All they are good for is just to field, and that sort of thing."

At that Helen fairly choked with anger, Drusie opened her eyes very wide, and Jim lay down on the grass and laughed quietly to himself. Considering that both his sisters had been toiling on his behalf for the last half-hour, it certainly was very cool of Hal to make such a speech.



"I knew how it would be," Helen exclaimed passionately, as soon as she could find her voice; "and I warned you two others, only you would not listen. I knew perfectly well that Hal was not going to let us go in, and I call it downright unfair, and I for one am not going to field for him any more.—And you say," she added, turning indignantly to Hal, "that girls can't play cricket. Well, they can. Father says himself that Drusie plays awfully well for a girl, and I suppose he ought to know."

"For a girl," Hal said slightly; "yes, that is just it."

"Please don't quarrel," Drusie said quickly. "You may stay in if you like, Hal, and I will bowl for you.—Jump up, Jim, and go and be wicket-keeper."

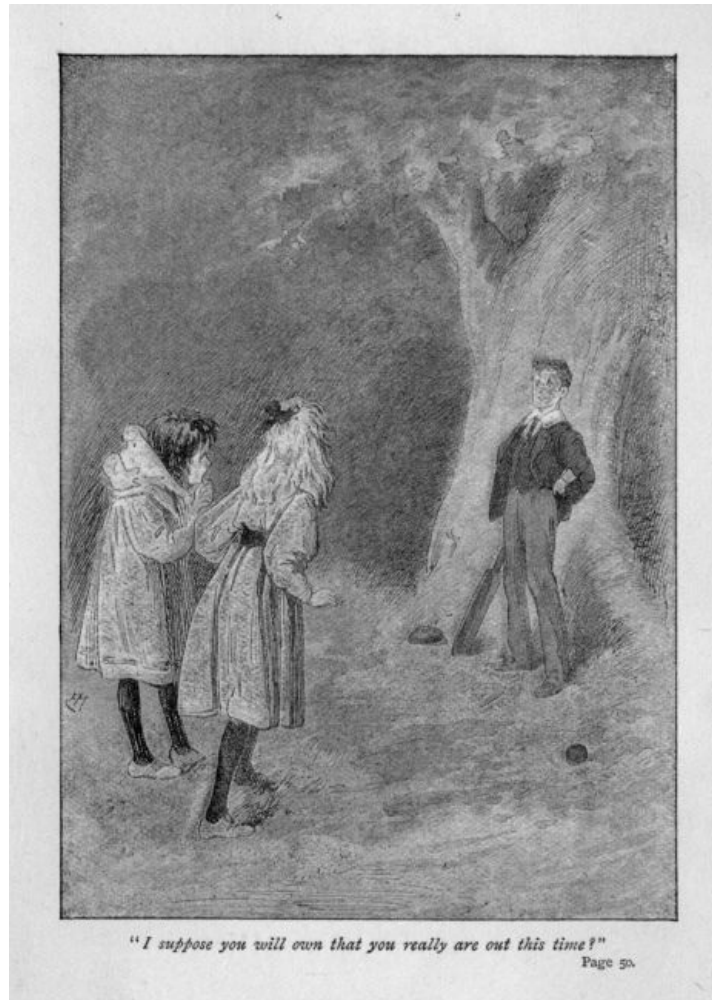
With a scornful sniff for what she considered to be great weakness on Drusie's part, Helen

returned to her place, where, in spite of her declaration that she did not intend to play any more, she continued to field.

For a girl Drusie did bowl remarkably well, and Hal would have been the first to own it, had he not perceived a sort of triumphant "told you so" expression on Helen's face, which annoyed him greatly, and made him withhold the praise which Drusie would have been so pleased to hear.

She exerted herself to do her very best, and before many minutes had passed she clean bowled him. There could be no doubt about it this time, for the twig on which the cap had been hung was broken by the force of the ball, and the cap fell to the ground.

"Hurrah!" Helen shrieked, dancing about and clapping her hands. "How about girls not being able to bowl now, Master Hal? I suppose you will own that you really are out this time?"



"I suppose you will own that you really are out this time?"

Hal looked not only mortified but exceedingly angry into the bargain.

"You are a precious set, I must say," he said, looking contemptuously at the excited capers which Helen was cutting. "One would think that you had done something awfully wonderful by the way in which you are going on. That is just like a girl. Let her do something which she thinks rather clever, and there is no end to her airs."

This was really rather severe on Drusie, who had neither said nor done anything to justify Hal's scornful remarks. But he was too annoyed to be fair, and as a punishment for what he chose to call Drusie's bragging, he tucked his bat under his arm, and told them that he was not going to play with them any more.

"You can brag by yourselves," he said, "of your wonderful cricket. I am not going to put up with you any longer. I am sick of you all. I must say it is awfully hard on a fellow to come home and find that not one of his brothers or sisters is worth playing with. A more conceited, disagreeable lot I never met with."

A dismayed silence followed this abrupt departure. It was broken by a short, quick sigh from Drusie.

"Oh dear, oh dear!" she said, looking after Hal as he marched off with as much dignity as he could. "I do wish that I had not bowled him. If I had guessed that it would make him so cross, I would have sent him easy, baby-balls."

"And got told for your pains that you could not bowl," Helen said with much scorn. "I do wonder how you can be so silly, Drusie. I think it serves Hal quite right. But I told you how it would be. I knew we should not get our innings. You can't say that I did not warn you."

"No, we certainly can't," Jim said with a chuckle. "You have had a sort of 'I told you so' expression on your face ever since we began to play. And you know, Helen, if you ask me, I think it is all your fault that Hal went off in such a huff. He simply couldn't stand your being so awfully delighted when Drusie bowled him."

If Hal's sudden display of temper had struck dismay into the hearts of his brothers and sisters, it had not left him particularly happy either. Though he would not own it, even to himself, he had an uncomfortable feeling that it was he who was conceited and disagreeable. He was, however, full of excuses for himself, and when his conscience pricked him he answered impatiently that nobody could be expected to put up with the fearful airs that they had all been giving themselves.

Then, looking round to see that he was not being followed, he made his way to a hiding-place he had discovered behind the summer-house, and proceeded to employ himself there after a fashion of which nurse would most strongly have disapproved. He remained until the dinner-bell rang, when he crept out with a pale face and with every bit of his appetite gone.

He dined alone in the schoolroom, and nurse shook her head as his plates were carried back to the nursery, for he had scarcely touched anything that she had sent in to him.

"I hope, Master Hal, you are not going to be ill," she said, as soon as dinner was over. "What has come to you? You have not eaten anything."

"I am not hungry," Hal muttered, flushing under her scrutinizing gaze. "I have got rather a headache—that's all."

"Well, don't run about much in the sun," nurse said, only half satisfied. "You are looking very pale. Put on your straw hat too; that little cap is of no use at all. And don't go eating any green apples or gooseberries. I expect you have been in the kitchen-garden this morning, and that is what is the matter with you."

But it was neither green apples nor gooseberries which had given Hal the very uncomfortable sensations from which he was suffering. That, however, he did not explain to nurse; and feeling very wretched and unhappy he wandered out into the garden, and flung himself under a big, shady elm-tree. The others were nowhere in sight, and he felt injured that they should, even after his conduct of the morning, have left him to himself.

"A nice, sociable set they are," he said moodily. "Oh dear, how I do wish that I had somebody sensible to play with!"

But though he chose to grumble, he knew perfectly well that he was not just then in the humour to appreciate any society, however sensible, and pillowing his head upon his arm he dropped off to sleep.



Meanwhile, Drusie had planned a busy afternoon for herself and the others, for they intended to go to the fort and make ammunition for Tuesday.

Few children had nicer grounds to play in than the Danvers children. The garden was very large, and besides the lawn and the winding walks among the shrubberies, which afforded such capital hiding-places when they played hide-and-seek, there was the large kitchen-garden as well. Beyond the kitchen-garden lay pleasant, sunny fields, at the foot of which flowed a small stream that farther down joined the river in which Jumbo had been so nearly drowned. On the other side of the stream lay a long slip of land which Mr. Danvers always spoke of as a waste piece of ground, and over which he sometimes threatened to send the plough. But partly because the ground was really too poor to be of much good, and partly because the children begged him to leave it alone, it had never yet been disturbed, and the Wilderness, as they had named it, remained theirs to all intents and purposes.

That the Wilderness was a brambly place could not be denied. It had originally been a grove of nut trees, and though some of these still flourished and bore nuts that had not their equal for size and flavour in all the country-side, they had for the most part been strangled by blackberry

bushes and briars, and smothered by masses of wild clematis.

The fort stood in a corner of the Wilderness. Within a few yards of it on one side was the stream; on the other and at the back it was surrounded by densely-growing hawthorn bushes. But the front was open and exposed to attack, for a cleared space in which only a few scattered nut trees grew lay before it.

This fort had once been a summer-house, but it had long since been disused, and would, no doubt, have fallen into decay, had not the children hit upon the idea of making it the scene of their pitched battles, and had so propped it up and strengthened it that it was impossible to take except by surprise.

The door had been nailed up and so had the window, and entrance could only be effected by scrambling up on the flat roof, and dropping through a hole which had been made there for that purpose. Even that hole could be closed by a hatch in time of need, and the besieged could lie snugly inside and listen to the heavy firing without, secure in the knowledge that as long as he chose to remain there none of the besiegers could touch him. But then his flag would be in danger; and by their rules of warfare, if the flag were captured or shot down, the fort was held to have capitulated.

For more than a week before Hal's return from school the others had been busy getting the ammunition ready; they had dug up a quantity of sand from the bed of the stream, which, when mixed with a little clay and moistened with water, represented cannon-balls. As, however, they had no cannon, these balls had to be thrown by hand; and as they scattered when they struck, they appeared more formidable than they really were. But still one had been known to bring down the flag, and so win the day for the besiegers.

The fort was mainly defended with a catapult loaded with mud pellets, shot being strictly forbidden as too dangerous. To protect them the besiegers wore a kind of helmet, which, though it gave them a somewhat ludicrous appearance, saved them from many a nasty blow. These helmets were neither more nor less than fine wire-gauze dish-covers, which they tied across their faces and fastened at the back of their heads. But the holder of the fort had to rely chiefly upon capture to win a victory, and when his enemies approached too closely, a bold rush often resulted in one of them being made prisoner. But, of course, even a brief absence from the fort left the flag undefended, and there was always a chance that, while one of the attackers was being pursued, some of the others might steal up and succeed in going off with the flag.

So it will be easily understood that courage and skill, combined with a spirit that was bold and yet not too rash, were required to hold the fort. And as none of them possessed these qualities to the same extent as Hal, it followed that none of them held the fort as well as he did, or made such a good fight of it.

Superintended by Drusie, they all worked very busily at the ammunition, and as they kneaded cannon-balls and pellets they laid out a plan of attack for the following Tuesday. Jim was of the opinion that they never took enough advantage of the shelter afforded by the thick and almost impenetrable bushes that grew on one side of the fort, and he proposed that while two of them made an attack in the open air, he or Drusie should lie concealed, and if Hal could be drawn out in pursuit they might get a chance of slipping in during his absence.

"He may have brought back some new dodges," said Drusie hopefully. "I wonder if he has ever played a game of this sort at school? Do you think he has, Jim?"

Jim thought it was doubtful.

"I believe they always play cricket in the summer term," he said. "But this will be a splendid change for him."

"I hope it will," said Drusie, with a sigh. "But I am simply not going to think what we shall do if, after all our trouble, Hal turns up his nose at a fight on Tuesday."



At tea-time Hal did not put in an appearance at all.

"He ought to be hungry," nurse said, "for he did not eat much dinner. I wonder where he can be?"

Tea was over, and they had all gone out into the garden again for a last stroll before bed-time, when they saw him come running across the field, which was separated from the lawn by a sunk fence. Leaping this, he rushed towards them, looking brighter and happier than he had done since his return.

"I say," he called out; "whom do you think I have met this afternoon? I have had such a splendid time; just guess."

They shook their heads; they could form no guess at all.

"Well, you will hardly believe it, but Dodds is down here. Dodds Major," he added, seeing that somehow his news did not produce as much effect as he had anticipated.

"Who is Dodds Major?" Drusie asked.

"Oh, how stupid you are!" Hal cried; "Why, I have told you about him in my letters lots of times. He is out and away the nicest fellow in our school. A big fellow, too, thirteen and a half, and simply splendid at cricket. He is leaving at Christmas, and going to the college."

"Does he live down here?" said Drusie.

"No; he is staying at the Grange with his uncle, Captain Grey. He is going to be here the whole holidays. Isn't it splendid for me?"

"Why," said Drusie, with a sudden sinking of her heart, "will you be much with him?"

"Rather," said Hal; "as much as ever he will have me. Of course," he added, with an important air, "he is jolly glad, too, to find another fellow down here. We are going fishing to-morrow in Captain Grey's trout stream. Dodds says that it is simply packed with fish. Won't that be jolly? I was playing cricket with him all this afternoon. He is going to play in a match that some friends of his uncle's are getting up next week, and he says that perhaps he can get me into it too. Won't that be jolly?"

In short, Hal was brimming over with good spirits. When, soon afterwards, nurse called Helen and Tommy to come to bed, Hal invited Drusie and Jim to come and sit with him while he had his tea, in order that he might chatter to them of his doings that afternoon, and about what he intended to do in future. And, of course, Dodds's name figured largely in his conversation, and neither Drusie nor Jim could help feeling rather glum as they heard how completely they were to be left out in the cold.

"It was a lucky chance meeting him," Hal rattled on. "After dinner I had a nap, and then I went for a stroll. I crossed over the river and went up the field that lies next to the Wilderness, and there, sitting on a gate, I saw Dodds. I can tell you I was surprised, and so was he. We talked for a bit, and then he asked me to come and play cricket. We had an awfully jolly afternoon, I can tell you," Hal added for the fiftieth time, at least. "I am jolly glad that he is here."

"Will you ask him to come over here and play?" said Drusie. "It would be rather nice to have some cricket with him—wouldn't it, Jim?"

Hal looked as though his ears had been deceiving him.

"What?" he said. "Ask Dodds over here to play with all of you? Why, you must be out of your senses, Drusie. The idea of Dodds playing with a girl! I say, how he would laugh!—We might have you, though, sometimes, Jim; you would be useful for fielding. I will ask him to-morrow if he would mind."

Jim, far from being overwhelmed at the possible honour in store for him, privately made up his mind to decline it with thanks when the time came.

While Hal had been speaking, a sudden idea had occurred to Drusie, and her face lit up with eagerness and excitement.

"O Hal," she exclaimed, "I believe that Dodds Major is our boy—the nice boy who rescued Jumbo, and who talked to us for such a long time."

Hal laughed scornfully.

"You don't know Dodds Major," he said. "He is not a bit like that. Why, I tell you that he hates girls, and wouldn't take any notice at all of any of you. Why, he is older even than I am."

"So was this boy," said Drusie. "But, of course, if you say that Dodds Major is not nice, they cannot be the same."

"I never said Dodds was not nice," Hal said impatiently. "I only said that he was not the sort of boy to play with girls. I expect that fellow you met this morning was an awful muff."



CHAPTER IV.

DISAPPOINTED HOPES.



or the next two or three days his family saw little of Hal. Morning, afternoon, and evening he was over at the Greys'. His meals he took in the schoolroom, and though nurse would have allowed him to come back to the nursery, if he had cared to do so, he very much preferred to have them in solitary state. He seemed to see nothing ridiculous in sitting there by himself; indeed, as he confided to Drusie, he thought it perfectly absurd that a boy of his age should ever have been expected to take them in the nursery.

She and the rest had plenty of time to make all their preparations for the double birthday to be celebrated on Tuesday, for Hal left them completely to themselves; and when he did see them, he was so full of all that he and Dodds Major did together that he had no time to show any interest in them.

"I should very much like to ask him whether he intends to take part in the fight to-morrow, or whether he means to spend the day as usual with his friend," said Helen.

It was late on Monday evening, and they had brought all their preparations to a satisfactory conclusion. The flag—a bright, new Union Jack—had been fastened to a long, slender pole, and was quite ready to be hoisted. The ammunition was arranged in a neat, high pile, and the armour lay ready to hand.

And in the garden summer-house, where, a few days back, the secret meeting had been held, the materials for a most sumptuous feast were in readiness to refresh the weary warriors when the day's work was done.

On previous birthdays they had always been satisfied with lemonade as a drink, but Drusie, feeling that this was a special occasion, had considered that lemonade was, perhaps, hardly a suitable form of refreshment; and so, from a recipe which she was proud to think was entirely out of her own head, she had concocted a bottle of red wine.

"And I think," she said, as she carefully hid it under the seat—"I think that when you taste it you will say that you never in all your lives before drank anything like it."

Tartlets and buns and a few other delicacies were to be ordered from the pastry-cook's on the eventful day itself.

So, everything being ready, and it wanting still an hour or more till their bedtime, they were rather at a loss to know what to do with themselves; and then it was that Helen expressed a desire to know what part Hal intended to take in the morrow's proceedings.

"No part at all, if you ask me," she added. "I say, Drusie, don't you think we might go up to the Greys' gate, and see if we can get a look at Hal and his precious friend Dodds?"

"Hal would be awfully angry if he saw us," said Drusie. "I don't think we should go."

But the hesitating tone in which she spoke showed that she was open to persuasion; and when Jim added his word to Helen's, and said that he thought there would be no harm in just going up and having a look over, she gave way. They soon reached the five-barred gate on which Hal had found Dodds sitting.

Neither of them was there, now, however; and so Helen proposed that they should climb over, and go down the grassy glade, which would bring them on to a small knoll, from whence they could command a view of the house and the wide lawn that lay in front of it.

The temptation to see Hal and his friend together was too strong for them to remember that they would be trespassing, and, scrambling over the gate, they made their way cautiously through the wood.

It was as well that they went cautiously, for the two boys were much closer to them than they had expected. To the left of the wood was a big level field, and it was here, and not on the lawn, that they were playing. The sound of a voice calling impatiently to Hal to hurry up with that ball, and not to be all night about it, was what first drew their attention to his whereabouts; and feeling rather astonished that any one should venture to address him in that imperious way, they crept up to the edge of the wood, and became silent spectators of what was going on.

The wicket was pitched in the middle of the field. Dodds was batting, but as his back was toward them, the children could not see his face. But they could hear his voice, and a very imperious, commanding voice it was. Hal was bowling and fielding as well, and as Dodds sent his balls flying to all parts of the field, Hal had plenty of work to do. And while he raced about in all directions Dodds lay luxuriously on the grass and shouted to him to hurry up. Presently Hal bowled a ball that very nearly knocked the middle stump flat on its back, and Drusie softly clapped her hands, and said "Bravo" under her breath.



"That was a very good ball indeed," they heard Dodds say approvingly. "Send a few more like that."

Hal flushed with pride and pleasure at this praise, but the others thought that he looked a shade disappointed as his friend placed himself again in front of the wicket.

But he continued to bowl for other ten minutes; then Dodds remarked that the light was getting bad, and that they might as well stop.

"I would bowl a bit for you," he said. "It is too dark to see the ball properly; I hope you don't mind. I really did mean to let you have some batting to-day."

"Oh, it does not matter," Hal said hurriedly. "Any time will do. I don't mind a bit."

"Still, I don't like to be selfish," said Dodds, whose conscience appeared to be pricking him. The unseen listeners among the bushes thought it might have pricked him a little earlier in the day, for they soon learned that neither on this occasion nor on any other had Hal been permitted to bat. He had merely bowled and fielded for Dodds. When they recovered from their astonishment at this, they could hardly help laughing. It was really rather funny, after all Hal's bragging, to find that he was only made use of in the way that he made use of them.

And the curious part of it was that Hal raised no objection, although it was easy to see that he was feeling a little disappointed this evening. On the other hand, he was so flattered at being allowed to associate, even on these unequal terms, with a boy so much older than himself, that he took care to smother his discontent.

"What about to-morrow?" said Dodds carelessly. "Can you be here pretty early?"

Hal hesitated for a minute before replying. In spite of Helen's assertions to the contrary, he had not forgotten that to-morrow was the day of the storming of the fort.

Several times, as he had hastened to and from the Greys', he had heard them at work there, and had known perfectly well what they were doing. He had even overheard a conversation, in which they discussed the likelihood of his taking part in the fight.

And at the time Hal, touched to see how much they wanted him, had resolved that he would spend the whole of his birthday with them.

"Yes," Dodds went on; "come as soon after breakfast as you can—it is cooler then—and we will have a regular good go in. I want to make a big score at that match next week. You are coming over to see it, aren't you?"

"Y-yes," Hal stammered. Though Dodds had not mentioned that cricket match during the last few days, Hal had not forgotten his promise to get him included in it if possible. Consequently, Dodds's careless inquiry as to whether he intended to come over as a mere spectator disconcerted him very much. However, he swallowed his disappointment, and said that he had thought of going.

"But about to-morrow," he added. "I don't think I can come—"

"Oh, but you must," Dodds cried out, interrupting him. "I simply can't do without you. Look here; if it is the batting that you are feeling sore about, you shall go in first. There! I have promised you that."

Hal's face brightened. He *did* wish to show Dodds that his batting was very much better than his bowling. And perhaps Dodds would be so struck with the brilliancy of his performance that he might after all manage to secure him a place in the match. It would be a real pity, he reflected, to neglect such a chance. After all, the others could very well do without him to-morrow.

"Well," said Dodds impatiently, "what do you say? Will you come? Or are you going somewhere with your brothers and sisters? You have got some, haven't you?"

"Yes," said Hal; "but I never play with them—not since I have been at school, at least. You see they are all much younger than I am."

"Oh, a set of kids," said Dodds indifferently. "What a nuisance they must be!"

But this Hal did have the grace to contradict.

"Oh no, they are not," he said; "but they have kept on liking things that I don't care about, and they get huffy when I don't play with them. Of course," he added with an aggrieved air, "it is hardly likely that I should care to mix myself up very much with them now."

"I see," said Dodds; and though they could not see his face, Drusie and Jim were sure there must have been a twinkle of merriment in his eyes. "You have grown out of all their games, you mean, and are too old to play with them any more."

"Yes," said Hal eagerly; "that's just it. Now, you understand that all right at once, but I cannot get them to see it."

"It is wonderful how silly kids can be," said Dodds gravely. "But, look here; are you coming or are you not? For, if you are not, I shall ask one of the Harveys to spend the day with me."

That was enough for Hal. Throwing his scruples and his half-formed resolution to spend his birthday at home to the winds, he said at once that he would come.

"That's right," said Dodds in the half-patronizing tone he had used all along. "Be here directly after breakfast then, and you shall have first innings; that's a bargain."

"I won't forget," said Hal in a delighted tone. "I expect I shall be up here about nine o'clock."

It was a very melancholy little quartette that presently emerged from the bushes, and took its way home through the woods and the fields.

"I never should have believed it of Hal—never!" said Helen, quite forgetting that she had always warned the others of what they might expect. "To desert us on his birthday, and for a boy that does not care a bit about him, except to make use of him!"

"It is funny," said Jim thoughtfully. "I never should have thought that Hal would have allowed another boy to order him about as Dodds does. Why, he fags for Dodds just as Hal would like us to fag for him; only we won't. And he did not seem to mind a bit."

But Drusie never spoke one single word the whole way home. To think that Hal—her own twin—from whom, until a short three months ago, she had been almost inseparable, should arrange to spend the whole of his birthday away from home caused her bitter grief. It was not even that he had forgotten the fact of their birthdays. She knew quite well he remembered, from

the momentary hesitation he had shown. No; he had deliberately chosen to desert her, and Drusie felt as if she should never get over it.



CHAPTER V.

THE FORT IN THE WILDERNESS.



ll, the Danvers, except, perhaps, Tommy, who was too young to take things very much to heart, awoke the next morning with a weight on their minds, and not, as Helen said afterwards, "with a bit of birthday feeling about them."

Hal was ashamed of himself. Though he was unaware, of course, that they had overheard his conversation with Dodds, he guessed from their downcast faces that they knew that he intended to desert them on his and Drusie's birthday, and was not going near the fort.

He was more ashamed than ever when, lying beside his plate at breakfast, he found one of the handsomest pocket-knives he had ever seen. It had no less than four blades, besides so many other weapons that, as the man who sold it remarked to Drusie and Jim, "it was a carpenter's tool-chest in miniature."

And a dreadful feeling of remorse came over Hal when he remembered that he had neglected to get something for Drusie. It was not that he had forgotten her birthday either—seeing that it was on the same day as his own, he could not very well do that; and when he had gone to school he had quite made up his mind to put aside at least half of his pocket-money every week, and

save it for her.

"It does not matter in the least," Drusie said eagerly, when Hal began to stammer out his shamefaced apologies. "I don't want a present from you one bit. I know quite well that boys must have a great deal to do with their money at school."

At that Hal got rather red. He remembered the regular weekly visits to the "tuck-shop;" and he knew that if he had only denied himself a little, Drusie might have had her birthday present.

"I did ask nurse to advance me some money when I came home," he said in self-defence, "but she would not."

Drusie assured him again that she had not expected a present, and begged him not to say anything more about it. And so nothing more was said; and although Helen was burning to ask him what he had done with his shilling, she remembered her promise to Drusie, and did not make any unpleasant inquiries.

Half an hour later Drusie and Jim, having fed all the animals, were loitering on the sunny terrace together when Hal, looking very spick and span in a clean suit of flannels, came out with his bat under his arm.

"I suppose you are going to play cricket," said Drusie in a tone from which she tried to keep the wistfulness she felt.

"Well, yes; I am," said Hal, carefully avoiding the reproachful gaze of Jim's brown eyes. "Dodds wanted me particularly, or else, you know, Drusie, I should have stayed with you, and done what we always do on our birthdays."

This explanation was meant as a sort of apology, and Drusie never could bear any one, especially Hal, to apologize to her.

"It doesn't matter, Hal," she said generously, winking away a troublesome tear that would tremble on her eyelashes. "You have a right to enjoy yourself in your holidays, and, of course, you are bigger than all of us now."

"Do you mind very much about my going, Drusie?" Hal said suddenly; "for, if you do, I will throw Dodds over, and come and defend the fort."

A flash of joy passed over Drusie's face, but the next moment it died out, and she shook her head. She knew her brother better than he knew himself, and she was sure that, if he gave up his own wishes for theirs, he would regret it long before the morning was over.

"No, Hal," she said. "If you promised Dodds, you ought to go."

"Well, don't say that *I* did not offer," said Hal, very much relieved that the offer had not been accepted.

"No, I won't; and it was very good of you," said Drusie warmly; and Hal, feeling that he had behaved very generously, went on his way whistling a cheerful tune.

"It is a good thing that Helen was not here," said Jim, "or Master Hal would not have got off so easily. I know she is burning to give him a piece of her mind."

"Oh, I hope she won't," said Drusie, in real distress; "and he has been so nice about it. You heard him offering to stay, Jim?"

"Yes," said Jim, "I heard him, and I thought you were very wise not to accept. He would have been sorry long before the fight was over."

Meanwhile Hal, feeling very well pleased with himself, hurried on, and reached the cricket field just as a distant church clock was striking nine.

Dodds had not yet arrived, and Hal thought with pleasure of the promise Dodds had given him that he should go in first. And he meant to stay in too; Dodds should not get him out so easily as he imagined. He only hoped that Dodds would not get tired of bowling to him, and turn him out willy nilly.

That was the worst, he reflected, of playing with a boy so much older than himself. At school Dodds was an immensely popular fellow, and a new and comparatively small boy, as Hal was, would have been very much snubbed if he had ventured to say a word against him. But here Hal could not help seeing that Dodds was rather inclined to be selfish. And Hal was quick not only to see but to resent selfishness in other people.

He had plenty of time to think over the faults in the character of his friend, for half-past nine and then ten struck, and still he had not put in an appearance. Hal began to get impatient, for the sun was gradually getting hotter, and soon it would be too warm to play with any comfort. It really was too bad of Dodds to treat him so.

He wondered what the others were doing, and whether they had begun their fight. If it had not been for Dodds, he might have been with them now, instead of dawdling away the whole of the morning doing nothing.

For another half-hour Hal waited, and at the end of that time he came to the conclusion that Dodds did not intend to turn up at all.

"He *is* selfish," he thought indignantly. "Here have I spoiled the whole of my birthday morning waiting for him. I might have been defending the fort all this time and enjoying myself."

Here his conscience whispered that he might also have been helping his twin sister to enjoy her birthday; and when he remembered how bravely she had concealed her own disappointment, and how unselfishly she had told him to go and spend his birthday in the manner that pleased him best, he began to see how very selfishly he had behaved.

"I will go to them now," he thought, starting up; "there are heaps of time to have a rattling good fight before dinner."

And so there would have been, but—alas! for his good resolutions—as he jumped to his feet something fell out of his pocket. It was the little packet which he had bought last Saturday.

For a moment he hesitated; then down he sat, and picked up the packet.

"I will have just one," he said, "and then go and play with them."

"One" proved to be a cigarette, for cigarettes were what the little packet contained.

Ever since he came home, he had been trying to master the art of smoking, and had not yet succeeded. Each cigarette made him feel worse than before. But with a perseverance worthy of a better cause he would puff steadily on, and try hard to believe that he was enjoying himself.

One or two of the elder boys at his school—Dodds was not among the number—had boasted that they often smoked in the holidays, and Hal had been fired with the idea that it would be a fine thing to be able to say when he went back that he knew how to smoke too.

And this was the secret of much of his altered behaviour, of his mysterious absences, and more than all of his frequent pale looks and irritable moods. The discomfort he felt when the cigarette was actually between his lips was nothing compared to the very disagreeable sensations that always followed. He would feel sick and dizzy, and suffer from a headache for hours afterwards; but as soon as he recovered he would return to the charge and refuse to acknowledge himself beaten.

This morning he met with no better success. He began to feel ill long before he had half finished his first cigarette, and by the time he was half-way through the second the most painful qualms seized him, and forgetting the fort and the fight and everything else in his extreme misery he rolled over on the grass, and spent a most unhappy morning. At dinner-time he crept into the nursery looking so pale and wretched that nurse was really alarmed.



"I can't think what has come to you, Master Hal," she said. "You never used to suffer from these dreadful sick headaches. You had better go straight and lie down, and I will have some soup sent up to you."

Hal was thankful to accept her advice. The sight of the roast mutton, and the currant tart with Devonshire cream, which formed the nursery dinner that day, made him shudder; and going to his own room, he flung himself on the bed, and after having taken some of the soup which was brought to him, he fell asleep.

"Which," said Helen, as she and the rest peeped at him through a chink in the doorway, "is *one* way of spending a birthday."



"This birthday has been a failure altogether," said Jim. "I thought the morning was never coming to an end, and what we are to do this afternoon I am sure I don't know."

"You won't take my advice and let us have a fight by ourselves," said Helen. "It might not be much fun, but, anyway, it would be much better than dawdling away the whole day."

But the others did not agree with her. They felt that without Hal the whole thing would be lacking in spirit.

"I had meant to order a wagonette and take you all for a nice drive," said nurse, who was sorry for their disappointment. "But now that Master Hal looks so queer, I don't like to leave him."

"Hal has spoiled our whole day," said Helen in a grumbling tone, as they all sauntered somewhat aimlessly across the garden.

"Poor Hal!" said Drusie softly; "if it comes to that, he is not having a very nice day himself, Helen."

"And he has not spoiled our feast, Helen," put in Tommy. "We are going to have that all the same—aren't we, Drusie?"

"Oh yes," she said cheerfully; though, to tell the truth, the feast had lost all charms for her. She was not even looking forward to seeing them drink her wonderful wine.

Though they had not intended when they started to go near the fort, almost without their knowing it their steps led them in the direction of the Wilderness, and scrambling over the gap in the hedge, they pushed their way towards the camp. This was a small clearing in the surrounding thicket, which was always used by the attacking party as a meeting-ground and a store-house for ammunition. There it lay ready for use—piles and piles of sandy balls, of all shapes and sizes.

They really could not bear to look at them, and turning away they went in single file down to the fort. The flag that had floated so defiantly from its summit all day might as well be hauled down, for if it rained in the night it would be spoiled.

A narrow path led from the camp; and when Drusie, who was leading the way, came within sight of the fort she paused and gave vent to a mournful sigh. The flag, waving gently in the soft summer breeze, looked so beautiful, and it did seem such a pity that it was to be taken down in so ignominious a manner.

She advanced into the open, thinking, as she did so, how, if there had been any one to defend the fort, they would have been obliged to skulk from bush to bush, taking advantage of every scrap of cover.

She looked round and smiled to see that, from the mere force of habit, the others were darting cautiously from bush to bush, exposing themselves as little as possible to the imaginary fire from the fort.

It would have been well for her had she taken the same precaution, for the next moment a shriek, that was half of pain and half of delight, broke from her.

She had received a stinging blow—one that was evidently aimed from a catapult—on her hand.

"Jim," she cried, "Hal *is* in the fort. Hurrah, hurrah! We are going to have a fight after all!"

Here another bullet, not so well aimed as the last, whizzed past her, and drove her to seek shelter in the nearest bush.

"Are you better, Hal?" she called. "And do you really want to fight?"

There was no answer to the first question, but a shot that struck her just above the ankle was a sufficient reply to her second; and, quite regardless of the pain, she gave another loud whoop of joy, in which the other three joined.

"We must get back to the camp," Jim cried, "and arm ourselves. This is altogether too one-sided an affair."

Bitterly now did they regret the rashness which had led them to approach in such a confident, careless manner. Yet, at the same time, they could not help admiring the wiliness which the enemy had shown in thus reserving his fire.

His aim was deadly; but, with a generosity that was truly noble, he did not take advantage of the fact that they were without their armour, and refrained from hitting their faces.

Almost every shot found its mark on them, and at last, despairing of being able to wriggle away in good order, they rose to their feet and made a dash into the thicket.

Rushing pell-mell to the camp, they tied their dish-covers over their faces, and, arming themselves with as much ammunition as they could carry, returned to the clearing.

But now they were more prudent. Silently they stole through the Wilderness, advancing with such caution that hardly the creaking of a twig betrayed their advance; and, keeping themselves carefully concealed, they suddenly hurled the big balls at the fort, throwing them high, so that they should drop through the top. A great noise of spluttering, followed by a fit of mingled coughing and choking, told them that their fire had taken ample effect, and had even partially disabled the enemy.

"Let's rush the fort," cried Jim; and breaking into the open, he headed a wild dash.

Their united attack had quite silenced the fort, and they anticipated an easy victory. Springing on to a projecting ledge just outside one of the loopholes, Jim's head was already above the level of the summit, and his outstretched arm was within a foot of the flagstaff, when something hurtled through the air, and, to Jim's intense astonishment, a coil of rope fell heavily over his shoulders, and slipped to his waist.

"A lasso, a lasso!" Drusie shrieked. "Look out; it is tightening."

The warning came just in the nick of time. Taken utterly by surprise, Jim yet did not lose his presence of mind.

Grasping the rope with both hands, he kept the knot from growing tighter; then sliding through the noose with the slipperiness of an eel, he dropped to the ground. But unluckily he caught his foot in the noose, and although he immediately twisted it free, he fell sprawling to the ground. In that position he afforded a splendid mark to the enemy, who got two good shots at him before he could move.

The others had wisely retreated to the thicket; and there Jim, limping somewhat from his fall, joined them.

"That lasso is a splendid idea," said Drusie enthusiastically. "I wonder how Hal ever came to think of it. I don't believe he has been ill at all, but only just pretending, on purpose to give us this lovely surprise."

"It was a lovely surprise," said Jim, laughing. "I thought I was done for that time. I say, Drusie, we shall have to be awfully careful, or we shall be taken prisoners before we know where we are."

"The only way is to keep at a safe distance and throw high," said Drusie; "for the balls break as they fall, and if they drop on to his head they fill his eyes and his mouth so full of sand that he is obliged to take off his helmet and clear it all out."

"Well, we can't do better than follow the same plan again," said Helen. "Only, don't you remember what we did last year? Some of us threw high, while some of us aimed at the loophole and blocked it up."

"I've got a much better idea than that," said Drusie. "I vote that we scatter, and creep as near to the fort as ever we can, and then when I give a low "coo-ee" we will all fire, and make a dash for the fort. And if we do that altogether, Hal won't know which to aim at, and so one of us ought to get the flag.—What do you say, Jim?"

"I approve," he said; "only look out for that lasso trick."

Then they separated, Jim and Tommy working their way up the stream, while Drusie wriggled through the thick undergrowth, with a view to approaching the fort at the back. To Helen was given the easier task of skirting round the clearing, keeping well under cover of the bushes, and holding herself in readiness to dash into the open and fire when the signal was given.

It seemed to her a task that was almost too easy, and, as she crouched under a bramble bush,

it occurred to her that if she advanced gradually nearer to the fort she would be of much more use to her party than if she merely followed her instructions and remained where she was. Accordingly, dropping on her hands and knees, she left the safe shelter of the denser part of the Wilderness, and crawled out to a bush.



Encouraged by the dead silence that reigned within the fort, she flattered herself that her stealthy approach was unperceived by the enemy, and so, after pausing for a moment, she advanced still farther and gained another bush.

Crouching there, she cautiously raised her head a few inches and looked round. Five or six yards farther on there was a thick clump of young willows: if she could reach that in safety, it would be a capital place in which to halt until Drusie gave her signal.

But, unfortunately, between it and where she now lurked grew a thick bed of nettles, which made it impossible to creep thither on her hands and knees. Once more she glanced at the fort Hal seemed to have gone to sleep, and emboldened by that thought she rose to her feet for a swift, silent rush to the willows.

She was half-way across, and was feeling very well pleased, when something hurtled through the air with a loud, swishing sound, and the next moment she was jerked violently to the ground, while an exceedingly uncomfortable sensation round her waist told her that she had been caught by the lasso.

Hardly had she realized it when the strain on the rope tightened, and she was dragged through the bed of nettles.

"Help, help!" she shouted; "I am lassoed. Drusie!—Jim!"

Instantly the silent Wilderness became alive with shouts and cries.

"Don't let the rope tighten," Jim called, bursting through the bushes to her rescue. "Slip out of it, Helen."

That was easier said than done, for her struggles had already drawn the noose so tight that, although she resisted to the utmost of her power, she was being hauled rapidly towards the fort.

Her captor showed no mercy; he did not even allow her to get to her feet; and though she clutched vainly at brambles and branches, and even at the stalks of the nettles, he was too strong for her.

She was within a few yards of the fort when Jim reached her side, and grasping the rope with both hands, he was in the act of widening the noose when he was struck heavily across the shoulders by a second lasso, and before he could even throw up his arms they were bound tightly to his side.

Then he was even in a worse plight than Helen, for she, at least, had the use of her hands; and, though he flung himself backwards, and twisted and contorted his body in every conceivable way, he could not release himself. Neither could he prevent himself from being drawn helplessly towards the fort; and it occurred to him that Hal must have grown wonderfully strong lately, for he seemed to have no difficulty at all in dragging both his captives in together.

"Drusie, Drusie!" he shouted despairingly, as he was flung to the ground, and, fighting every inch of the way, was dragged and bumped nearer and nearer to the fort.

With a sound of breaking branches and rending of clothes, Drusie was hastening to the rescue. She had not been able to come sooner, because she had penetrated so far into the dense thicket that she could not readily extricate herself. However, by leaving scraps of her clothing on every sharp thorn, and getting her hands and legs terribly scratched, she forced her way out at last; and keeping a wary outlook on the fort, she tried to unloose the knots that bound Jim.

"Once let me get my arms free," he said, "and I shall be all right."

It was clear that the fort had exhausted its stock of lassos, for no third coil of rope came flying out. Instead, however, the enemy kept up a brisk rain of bullets, which harassed Drusie

very much, and prevented her from releasing either Helen or Jim.

Every now and again the wily enemy would stop firing, and give a tug to the two ropes which bound his unfortunate captives, and they would be jerked a foot or two nearer the fort.

Drusie was in despair; unless more help could be brought upon the scene, her two best men would be taken prisoners.

"I am coming," shouted an eager voice at that moment; and Tommy, dripping wet from head to foot, came running up, armed with as many big balls as he could carry. Right up to the very walls of the fort he went, and threw his balls into it in quick succession.

There was a muffled shout of indignation, which suddenly died away into a smothered choking sound, while, at the same time, the strain on the ropes relaxed. Jim and Helen did not lose a second in taking advantage of this, and, slipping back the running knots, they freed themselves.

"Let's capture the ropes," cried Drusie, flinging herself upon them. But at this point the enemy, who had been choked and blinded for the moment, evidently recovered himself, for with the rapidity of lightning the two lassos were drawn back again.



"Get back," shouted Jim, and, seizing Helen by the hand, he retreated with all possible speed. And it was well they did so, for hardly had the lassos been drawn in than they were flung out again with so strong and well-directed an aim that, had Jim not set them the example of flying, one or more of them would have been made prisoners again.

They did not pause to take breath until they were within the shelter of the Wilderness, where they threw themselves, hot and exhausted, on the ground.

"This was a failure," said Drusie, and she looked severely at Helen, "and it was all your fault. You did not obey orders. If it had not been for Tommy, the day would have been lost. You ought to be court-martialled, Helen, and I daresay you will be later on when the fort is taken."

"I am very sorry," said Helen in a shamefaced manner, "but I thought it would be such a splendid thing if I could get right up to the fort before the attack began."

"You should not think, then," said Drusie. "You should only do what you are told.—And, by the way, Tommy, what happened to you?"

"I fell into the stream," he said ruefully. "Helen's shrieks startled me so much that I lost my balance just as I was crossing it."

"It was the narrowest escape we have all had yet," said Jim. "I vote that we try the same plan again, and whatever you do, Helen, don't go and spoil it again by thinking to do something clever."

Before Helen could retort, Tommy jumped up with a shout of defiance, and snatching up two balls that lay ready to his hand, discharged them right into the centre of a bush a few yards off.

"What on earth are you about?" exclaimed an indignant voice; and Hal, his face covered with sand and mud, sprang out of the bushes and made for his younger brother.

But Jim flung himself between them, and, aided by Drusie, they brought Hal, kicking and struggling, to the ground, and sat upon him.

"The fort is ours," cried Drusie joyfully. "Run, Helen, and get the flag before Hal can release himself."

Helen dashed off to do as she was told, but as she was flying across the clearing she was suddenly brought up by a perfect hailstorm of bullets, which played round her in all directions, and caused her to fly back to the camp with the astounding information that it was not Hal who had been defending the fort, but somebody else.

"If you had not behaved like a set of duffers who had all lost their heads, I could have told you that myself," said Hal crushingly. "But instead of letting me explain, you all flung yourselves upon me as if I were your greatest enemy."

"Well, of course, we thought that you were," said Drusie. "We thought that you had sallied out from the fort to take us all prisoners. But if it is not you who have been in the fort all this time, who is it?"

But that was just what none knew; and Hal was as much in the dark as the rest. He had awaked a quarter of an hour ago, feeling all right again. "And so, I thought," he added, "that I had been rather a pig about this birthday, and that, if you would have me, I'd come out and defend the fort."

"Have you?" cried Drusie joyfully. "Of course, we will—won't we, Jim?"

"Rather," Jim said; and that word of assent was heartily echoed by both Helen and Tommy. "But I say, Drusie, if it is not Hal in the fort, who on earth can it be?"

"I know," Drusie said, after a moment of puzzled silence; "it must be our friend—Jumbo's boy."

When Hal heard of the lassos he cried out that it was no less a person than Dodds.

"I know it is he," he cried excitedly, "for he is awfully keen about lassos. He has been reading about the cowboys in Texas, and the other day he was practising on the lawn."

"Whoever it is," Drusie said, "he defends the fort awfully well. I don't believe we shall ever capture it."

"Oh yes, we shall," said Jim, "now that Hal has come to help us."

"Just fancy Dodds playing with you kids all the afternoon," Hal said in a tone of surprise. "I wonder what ever made him do it."

Fired with the idea of showing Dodds that the attacking party had received a valuable reinforcement, Hal threw himself with ardour into the fight, and—Drusie having resigned her post as captain in his favour—led sally after sally against the fort. But the aim of the lassos was so deadly, and the hailstorm of bullets so incessant, that time after time they were obliged to retire.

Once Drusie, who had wriggled herself through the thick hawthorns at the back of the fort, was within an ace of taking the flag; but, just as she had climbed up on the roof, the defender, whose face was completely hidden by his helmet, made a grab at her, and she was obliged to fly for her life.

"We must alter our tactics," Hal said, as, hot and exhausted from the prolonged struggle, he withdrew his little army into the recesses of the Wilderness. "We are not a bit nearer taking the fort than when we started."

"Not so near," said Helen; "for our ammunition is giving out. We have only about twenty or thirty balls left. This is quite the hardest fight that we have ever had."

"We must get the fort," Hal said, setting his teeth. "We are four to one, and it will be a great disgrace to us if we don't."

"But that one is such a one," Drusie said.

"I told you Dodds was a splendid fellow, didn't I?" said Hal eagerly. "But, all the same, I wish he was not quite as splendid now. But listen; I have got a glorious plan in my head, if we can only carry it out."

But at that moment he was interrupted by a loud, piercing scream, which was followed by another and another; and, glancing hastily round, Hal saw that Tommy was missing from the council.

"He was with us only a minute ago," Drusie exclaimed.

Springing to their feet, they all rushed out, and there they saw Tommy, bound and helpless, being hauled rapidly up to the very walls of the fort.

He had brought his sad fate upon himself. As he was following the others into camp, he had seen the enemy spring out of the fort and run into the bushes, and, quick as thought, Tommy had darted off to capture the flag during his absence. Had he only reported what he had seen to his

commander, a proper attack might have been hastily organized and the fort captured; but Tommy was in such a hurry, and so anxious to gain all the glory for himself, that he slipped off without saying a word to the others. And when it was too late he found that the desertion of the fort was only a cleverly-planned trick on the part of its defender, who had crashed noisily into the bushes, in the hope of deceiving the attacking party into the belief that the fort was empty. As soon as he saw that Tommy was going to fall into the trap, he slipped quietly back, and, lassoing Tommy just outside, dragged him a prisoner into the fort.



"Serves him right," said Jim. "He had no business to act on his own account like that."

But it was all very well to say "serves him right." Perhaps Tommy had met with no better fate than he deserved, but he, nevertheless, brought about a very serious check to his party; for, while one of their number was in the hands of the enemy, no attempt to take the flag could be made. The prisoner must first be rescued. Sometimes he was ransomed with ammunition. But their store was too low for them to be able to do that now. They could better afford to spare Tommy than cannon-balls.

Meanwhile, complete silence reigned in the fort. The Union Jack waved triumphantly from the flagstaff, and the captive Tommy had disappeared from view.

"Got you rather neatly, I think," his enemy had said, as he pulled him in. Even in that moment of bitter humiliation Tommy gave a start of surprise as he recognized his captor. Drusie was right, for the defender of the fort was indeed Jumbo's boy.

"Oh," Tommy gasped out, as, breathless from the struggle he had just gone through, he stared at his captor, "it is you, is it? Hal said he was sure it was Dodds, but I am jolly glad that you are not Dodds. He is conceited. I should not have liked to have been taken prisoner by him."

"Oh, you wouldn't, wouldn't you?" said the boy with a twinkle in his eyes. "But who told you that I—that Dodds, I mean—was conceited? Young Danvers, I suppose?"

"No; Hal didn't. He likes Dodds. But we others don't think very much of him."

The boy laughed.

"Dodds is a great friend of mine," he said. "I shall tell him what you have said. But never mind that now. Tell me what I am to do. Can you be exchanged or ransomed, or are you allowed to escape if you can?"

"I don't think they will ransom me," Tommy said reflectively. But he was far too wary to tell the enemy why. "And I mayn't try to escape until one of them has touched me; and till I am rescued the fort can't be taken."

"That's good news," said the boy. "I shan't let you be taken in a hurry. How will they try to rescue you?"

Tommy shook his head. He knew better than to allow himself to be drawn into giving any information, and the boy laughed at his caution, and climbing on to one of the two empty orange boxes, which were the only seats that the fort contained, he kept a good lookout.

Tommy climbed on to the other, and standing on tiptoe was just able to peer over the edge of the fort.

The open space that surrounded it was deserted, and although Tommy searched the bushes with anxious eyes he could not see any signs of his fellow-besiegers. He knew that Hal must be exceedingly angry with him, and that if the attack on the fort could have been carried on while he was a prisoner, he would have been left there as a punishment.

But, as it was, he comforted himself with the thought that, for the sake of capturing the flag, they would rescue him as soon as ever they could.

Presently his sharp eyes caught sight of Drusie creeping from bush to bush. He was afraid that the boy had seen her too, for, stepping down, he picked up a lasso and coiled it in readiness.

"Hi, you," he said, imperiously addressing his prisoner. "You must get down and sit on the floor."

"Not unless you can make me," retorted Tommy; "and if you are holding me down, you won't be able to fight."

There was so much truth in that that the boy went back to his box again, and Tommy was permitted to remain upon his.

And now the situation grew exciting, for the rescuing party advanced in full force and without any real attempt at concealment. Tommy wondered what was their plan of attack.

The boy was puzzled too, and as they approached he glanced sharply from one to the other. Drusie darted from bush to bush, a cannon-ball in either hand. Hal, with nothing in his left hand, but with his right concealed in his pocket, followed her, and Helen and Jim skirmished about in a somewhat aimless fashion on their own account.

But all the time they drew steadily nearer to the fort, and Tommy watched their movements with the keenest interest, ready to scramble out directly he was rescued.

When they were within ten or fifteen yards, Hal and Drusie paused, and the latter, with all the strength of which she was capable, hurled her cannon-balls in quick succession into the fort.

The first was beautifully aimed. It broke on the boy's head, and for a moment choked and blinded him. The second struck Tommy on the head, and caused him to tumble down from his box and lie for a moment sprawling on the floor.

When he got to his feet again and climbed on to his perch, he saw, to his dismay, that things were apparently going very badly for them. The boy, disabled only for a moment by Drusie's ball, had thrown his lasso with his usual sure and deadly aim, and Hal was struggling in its noose.



"The boy had thrown his lasso with deadly aim."

Drusie and Helen were circling round him, and though their shrill war-whoops echoed through the Wilderness, they were making no effort to help Hal to escape. And as for Jim, he had totally disappeared.

Tommy, however, knew enough of war to be aware that there was some reason for Jim's sudden disappearance; and he presently detected a slight movement among the hawthorn bushes at the back of the fort, and guessed at once that, under cover of the noise that Drusie and Helen were making, Jim was creeping up with the intention of rescuing him. And Hal had probably allowed himself to be taken prisoner on purpose to distract attention from this manoeuvre.

Very gently and gradually, so as not to arouse the suspicions of his captor, Tommy edged his

box to the corner nearest the bushes, so that Jim might give him the touch that would bring freedom with as little danger to himself as possible.

Meanwhile, Hal was making a valiant struggle. As Tommy had already guessed, he had allowed himself to be taken prisoner; but, at the same time, he did not wish to be dragged nearer the fort than he could help. And though, to all appearance, he was a prisoner, he held something in his right hand by means of which he hoped to sever his bonds when he chose. He was very nearly as strong as his enemy, and, as he had managed to keep both his arms free, he hauled back the rope with all his might and main. But, in spite of his efforts, he was gradually losing ground, and, quite forgetting how important it was that the enemy should be kept in ignorance of the stratagem that was being carried out in the rear, he shouted to Jim to make haste.

Luckily, however, Drusie kept her wits about her, and drowned the latter half of his sentence by a terrific yell, in which Helen promptly joined. And under cover of the noise they made Jim tore his way through the thicket, and came right up to the very walls of the fort.

"Rescued!" he shouted, tapping Tommy on the arm, and immediately diving back into the bushes.

"Rescued!" Tommy repeated with a glad yell of triumph; and he was over the wall and after Jim like a flash.

But that his hands were full, the boy would have shaken his fist at his escaping prisoner. As it was, he was obliged to content himself with the thought that his new prisoner was more worth having than his old one.

But even as that thought passed through his mind Hal whipped out a knife, and, opening the biggest blade, began to hack away at the rope.

The rope was thick and the knife was blunt, and though Hal sawed away with desperate haste the strands parted with tantalizing slowness; thus, being less able to offer resistance than before, he was hauled rapidly towards the fort. He was barely five yards away from it when the last strand parted, and, with the noose still round his waist, Hal scrambled to his feet. Ducking to avoid a second lasso, which his disappointed foe hurled after him, he set out at full speed for the camp, and then flung himself exhausted upon the ground.

"That was hottish work," he said, glancing round at his little army to see that none were missing, "and we had some tremendously narrow escapes. But the rescue was carried out splendidly. You all did just what you were told, and no more."

Praise from Hal was rare, and the three recipients of it looked exceedingly gratified. And they felt that they deserved the commendation, for Drusie and Helen were perfectly hoarse with shouting, and Jim's face and hands and clothes were torn and scratched by thorns. And Tommy, to his secret delight, got off with a very slight reprimand, for they were all so proud of the clever way in which they had rescued him that they forgave him for having allowed himself to be taken prisoner.

The news that it was their friend, and not Dodds, who was defending the fort was received with satisfaction by Drusie and Jim, but with incredulity by Hal.

"Why, I know it is Dodds," he said. "Though his face is hidden by his helmet, I recognized the suit of clothes that he had on."

"Then, I tell you what it is," Drusie cried. "Our friend and Dodds are the same."

"Well, we will find out all about that presently," said Hal, who was so eager to take the stubborn fort that he did not care very much who held it. "Carried the fort must be, and within the next half-hour."

"Listen," he said, sitting bolt upright; "I have got a rattling good plan in my head, but," throwing a severe glance in Tommy's direction, "there must be no more disobedience, or the whole thing will be spoiled."

Tommy looked properly abashed, and Hal went on. "I mean to hose Dodds out of the fort."

"Hose him out!" Drusie and Jim echoed in astonishment. "What do you mean, Hal?"

"For goodness' sake, take care," Hal remonstrated. "If you shout like that he'll hear, and the whole thing will be spoiled."

Then Hal proceeded to explain in rapid undertones what he meant.

"I am going to bring up the water-barrel, pump it full from the stream, fit the biggest hose to it, and let fly into the fort."

His four soldiers held their breath for a moment, and gazed at their captain with dumb admiration.

"It's a gorgeous plan," said Helen at last.

"I think it ought to answer," Hal said. "I have been thinking it out for some time. I shall go for it, but I will tell you what you have to do while I am away."

For the next quarter of an hour silence reigned in the camp—a silence so unbroken that the enemy who lay waiting in the fort became more watchful with every passing moment. He distrusted such a complete cessation of hostilities. It could only mean that an attack of unusual fierceness was being planned; and so, that it might not find him unprepared, he cast an eye round the fort to see if he could strengthen it in any way.

But it was already as strong as it could be made; and when he was satisfied on that point, he took stock of his ammunition, and made a fresh noose for the lasso which Hal had cut. Just as he had finished a beautiful slip knot, his ear was caught by a low whistle. Ducking to avoid the shot for which it might be the signal, he listened again. No shot followed; the whistle was twice repeated.

Standing upright again, the boy glanced hastily round. He fancied that the whistle came from the direction of the stream. He was still wondering what it meant, when another whistle, another, and yet another, and all from different directions, echoed round the fort. Each, like the first, was repeated twice, but yet nothing happened.

He strained his eyes this way and that, and then suddenly fitted a couple of bullets into his catapult, and fired into some bushes on the left. A sharp but quickly-suppressed squeal of pain was the result. Again and again he fired, but only to be met by a heroic silence. Either his shots missed or his victim refused to cry out.

Suddenly Hal's voice rang out.

"One!" he shouted.

There was a pause.

"Good," thought the boy. "At three the fun begins. Kind of them to give me warning."

Confident that he would have a few moments' breathing space, his watchful vigilance relaxed. Instead of keeping a sharp lookout, he ran his eye once more over his defences, and was considering whether it would be better to use the shorter or the longer lasso, when Hal's voice made itself heard again.

"Two!" he shouted with the full force of his lungs, and simultaneously a wild war-whoop went up from his army. There was the sound of breaking branches, and from different quarters of the wood four of the besiegers broke into the open and advanced at the double.

This movement was the outcome of a deeply-laid plan of Hal's. He knew that if an advance was made at the word "two" the fort would be taken completely by surprise, and under cover of the attack from the front he was, in the meantime, bringing the heavy gun—the water-barrel—into position at the rear.

His surmise proved correct. The holder of the fort was taken at a disadvantage; he fired wildly in consequence, and had the mortification of perceiving that not one of his shots took effect.

The attacking party, of whom Hal was not one, reserved their fire, and seemed bent upon coming to close quarters. Grimly determined to make it warm for them when they did close with him, the defender sprang on to the roof, and, regardless of the fact that he was exposing himself recklessly, took up his stand by the flagstaff, and, throwing down his catapult, whirled his lasso wildly round his head.

On came the attacking party; he faced them, and with a coolness that did him credit at such a critical moment he picked out the one that he could most easily capture, and was in the act of hurling the lasso, when, up from the very midst of the hawthorn bushes at the back of the fort, Hal's voice was heard again.

"Three!" he shouted: and turning like lightning to meet this fresh foe, who he guessed would prove the most formidable, the boy saw an immense jet of water spurt high into the air. Twenty feet it rose, and then descended full and fair upon his head. A mingled shout of defiance and joy told Hal that his aim had been good, and he continued to ply the hose. At the same moment eight cannon-balls, five at least of which hit him, were thrown at the harassed defender, whose helmet was now full of sand and water.

Choking and gasping and almost unable to see, so great was the force with which the stream was playing upon his face, the boy grasped the flag, determined not to surrender.

But the enemy now surrounded the fort on all sides, and were already scaling the walls. Both Jim and Drusie were anxious to gain the glory of capturing the flag, and a desperate fight raged round the flagstaff. Twice Drusie laid hands upon it, and twice she was driven back.

The hose played upon besieged and besiegers alike, and all the combatants were being drenched to the skin. But the battle continued to rage, and, though he was hampered by his helmet and sorely outnumbered, the valour displayed by the holder of the fort might yet have gained him the day, if Jim, warned by a cry from Hal that the water in the barrel was giving out, had not succeeded in grasping the flagstaff.

"Jump with it, Jim, jump!" Drusie cried, and flung herself between them. But with one hand the boy tossed her aside, while with the other he clutched at the flag.

There was a short tug of war; then a sharp sound of tearing cloth; and while the gallant defender toppled backwards into the stream, carrying the greater part of the flag with him, Jim fell down on the other side, bearing with him the flagstaff and the fluttering remnant of the Union Jack.

Both sides would certainly have claimed the victory, for both held a portion of the flag, had not Drusie, scrambling out of the hawthorn bushes into which she had been tossed, jumped into the middle of the stream, and snatched the part that he still held out of the hand of the prostrate, half-drowned enemy.

Then the fort had no choice but to capitulate, and the day was won by the besiegers.

"You all fought jolly well," said the holder of the fort, calmly sitting upright in the middle of the stream and removing his helmet, thereby disclosing to view the face of the boy who had come to Jumbo's rescue. "It has been warm work from first to last. It is quite jolly to sit here and get cool."

Then Hal, jubilant at the success which had attended his manoeuvre, emerged from the hawthorn bushes in which he had been concealed, and congratulated his late enemy on the splendid stand which the fort had made.

"It ought not to have been taken," Dodds said. "But that hose upset me completely; it came as such a tremendous surprise."

"I say," said Jim, who was standing on the bank panting from his exertions, "are you really Dodds?"

"That's my name," said the boy with a polite flourish of his helmet; "and I hear," glancing round at them all with an amused twinkle in his eyes, "that none of you like me."

"Oh, but we didn't know that you were Dodds," Drusie hastened to explain. "It was Dodds we did not like, not you."

"Well, as I am Dodds, you can't like me if you don't like him," the boy said with a laugh, in which they all were obliged to join, as they realized that they had really been liking Dodds all the time without knowing it.

"Well, as I am cool now," Dodds said, getting up and wading to the bank, "I think I'll go and put on some dry things. And I should think that you had better do the same. And then, isn't there a birthday feast to be eaten? I rather think I heard something about it too. You know, I was fishing here one day, and you were all in the fort talking about the fight, and wondering if Hal meant to hold it, and it struck me that it would be rather a good idea if I held it in his place. And so I just did. And jolly good fun it has been too.—Don't you think so, Hal? or do you still think that playing with kids is slow work?"

At that Hal began to grow red, and Drusie, who knew that he was sorry for that and for many other foolish things that he had said, interposed quickly.

"I think we had better go home and change too," she said; "and then we will all meet in the summer-house for the feast."

"Am I asked too?" said Dodds, who was not shy.

"Of course," they all cried.

"Right you are then," said Dodds, shaking himself and squaring his shoulders for a run. "I'll bring some contributions to the feast. Let's see who'll get changed and be there first. I bet you I will."

But as it happened, his five hosts and hostesses were the first to reach the summer-house; and while they waited for their guest Hal took a small baby guinea-pig from his pocket, and gave it to the astonished, delighted Drusie.

"My birthday present to you, Drusie. I got it down at the village this afternoon. Isn't it a beauty?"

"Oh, it's a darling!" Drusie cried, covering both the guinea-pig and Hal with kisses. "How awfully, awfully good of you, Hal! Is it really my very, very own?"

"Yes, rather," said Hal, looking very gratified at her delight. "I went down into the village this afternoon and got it. I paid for it too," he added proudly. "Nurse advanced me the money."

Then Dodds arrived with a basketful of good things for the feast, and a very merry feast it was. And by the time it was finished Drusie and Jim wondered how they could ever have thought that Dodds was not a nice boy.

Hal was not surprised that they should like Dodds, but he was rather astonished to find how much Dodds got to like them. Hal had thought that Dodds would be far too big and grown up to care about playing with girls; but when he found out that Dodds actually enjoyed playing cricket with them, and thought a great deal of Drusie's bowling and Helen's smart fielding, he began to think that he had made a mistake in supposing that he had grown too old for them. So he ceased to speak to them as if he were years and years older than all of them put together, and remembered that he was Drusie's twin-brother, and that he was very fond of her.

THE END.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A TALE OF THE SUMMER HOLIDAYS ***

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