

ALARUMS AND EXCURSIONS

"Let's pretend," suggested Harold, "that we're Cavaliers and Roundheads; and YOU be a Roundhead!"

"O bother," I replied drowsily, "we pretended that yesterday; and it's not my turn to be a Roundhead, anyhow." The fact is, I was lazy, and the call to arms fell on indifferent ears. We three younger ones were stretched at length in the orchard. The sun was hot, the season merry June, and never (I thought) had there been such wealth and riot of buttercups throughout the lush grass. Green-and-gold was the dominant key that day. Instead of active "pretence" with its shouts and perspiration, how much better--I held--to lie at ease and pretend to one's self, in green and golden fancies, slipping the husk and passing, a careless loungeur, through a sleepy imaginary world all gold and green! But the persistent Harold was not to be fobbed of.

"Well, then," he began afresh, "let's pretend we're Knights of the Round Table; and (with a rush) I'll be Lancelot!"

"I won't play unless I'm Lancelot," I said. I didn't mean it really, but the game of Knights always began with this particular contest.

"O PLEASE," implored Harold. "You know when Edward's here I never get a chance of being Lancelot. I haven't been Lancelot for weeks!"

Then I yielded gracefully. "All right," I said. "I'll be Tristram."

"O, but you can't," cried Harold again.

"Charlotte has always been Tristram. She won't play unless she's allowed to be Tristram! Be somebody else this time."

Charlotte said nothing, but breathed hard, looking straight before her. The peerless hunter and harper was her special hero of romance, and rather than see the part in less appreciative hands, she would even have returned sadly to the stuffy schoolroom.

"I don't care," I said: "I'll be anything. I'll be Sir Kay. Come on!"

Then once more in this country's story the mail-clad knights paced through the greenwood shaw, questing adventure, redressing wrong; and bandits, five to one, broke and fled discomfited to their caves. Once again were damsels rescued, dragons disembowelled, and giants, in every corner of the orchard, deprived of their already superfluous number of heads; while Palamides the Saracen waited for us by the well, and Sir Breuse Saunce Pite vanished in craven flight before the skilled spear that was his terror and his bane. Once more the lists were dight in Camelot, and all was gay with shimmer of silk and gold; the earth shook with thunder of horses, ash-staves flew in splinters; and the firmament rang to the clash of sword on helm. The varying fortune of the day swung doubtful--now on this side, now on that; till at last Lancelot, grim

and great, thrusting through the press, unhorsed Sir Tristram (an easy task), and bestrode her, threatening doom; while the Cornish knight, forgetting hard-won fame of old, cried piteously, "You're hurting me, I tell you! and you're tearing my frock!" Then it happened that Sir Kay, hurtling to the rescue, stopped short in his stride, catching sight suddenly, through apple-boughs, of a gleam of scarlet afar off; while the confused tramp of many horses, mingled with talk and laughter, was borne to our ears.

"What is it?" inquired Tristram, sitting up and shaking out her curls; while Lancelot forsook the clanging lists and trotted nimbly to the hedge.

I stood spell-bound for a moment longer, and then, with a cry of "Soldiers!" I was off to the hedge, Charlotte picking herself up and scurrying after.

Down the road they came, two and two, at an easy walk; scarlet flamed in the eye, bits jingled and saddles squeaked delightfully; while the men, in a halo of dust, smoked their short clays like the heroes they were. In a swirl of intoxicating glory the troop clinked and clattered by, while we shouted and waved, jumping up and down, and the big jolly horsemen acknowledged the salute with easy condescension. The moment they were past we were through the hedge and after them. Soldiers were not the common stuff of everyday life. There had been nothing like this since the winter before last, when on a certain afternoon--bare of

leaf and monochrome in its hue of sodden fallow and frost-nipt
copse--suddenly the hounds had burst through the fence with their mellow
cry, and all the paddock was for the minute reverberant of thudding hoof
and dotted with glancing red. But this was better, since it could only
mean that blows and bloodshed were in the air.

"Is there going to be a battle?" panted Harold, hardly able to keep up
for excitement.

"Of course there is," I replied. "We're just in time. Come on!"

Perhaps I ought to have known better; and yet---- The pigs and poultry,
with whom we chiefly consorted, could instruct us little concerning
the peace that in these latter days lapped this sea-girt realm. In the
schoolroom we were just now dallying with the Wars of the Roses; and
did not legends of the country-side inform us how Cavaliers had once
galloped up and down these very lanes from their quarters in the
village? Here, now, were soldiers unmistakable; and if their business
was not fighting, what was it? Sniffing the joy of battle, we followed
hard on their tracks.

"Won't Edward be sorry," puffed Harold, "that he's begun that beastly
Latin?"

It did, indeed, seem hard. Edward, the most martial spirit of us all,
was drearily conjugating AMO (of all verbs) between four walls; while

Selina, who ever thrilled ecstatic to a red coat, was struggling with the uncouth German tongue. "Age," I reflected, "carries its penalties."

It was a grievous disappointment to us that the troop passed through the village unmolested. Every cottage, I pointed out to my companions, ought to have been loopholed, and strongly held. But no opposition was offered to the soldiers, who, indeed, conducted themselves with a recklessness and a want of precaution that seemed simply criminal.

At the last cottage a transitory gleam of common sense flickered across me, and, turning on Charlotte, I sternly ordered her back.

The small maiden, docile but exceedingly dolorous, dragged reluctant feet homewards, heavy at heart that she was to behold no stout fellows slain that day; but Harold and I held steadily on, expecting every instant to see the environing hedges crackle and spit forth the leaden death.

"Will they be Indians?" inquired my brother (meaning the enemy); "or Roundheads, or what?"

I reflected. Harold always required direct, straightforward answers--not faltering suppositions.

"They won't be Indians," I replied at last; "nor yet Roundheads. There haven't been any Roundheads seen about here for a long time. They'll be

Frenchmen."

Harold's face fell. "All right," he said; "Frenchmen'll do; but I did hope they'd be Indians."

"If they were going to be Indians," I explained, "I--I don't think I'd go on. Because when Indians take you prisoner they scalp you first, and then burn you at a stake. But Frenchmen don't do that sort of thing."

"Are you quite sure?" asked Harold doubtfully.

"Quite," I replied. "Frenchmen only shut you up in a thing called the Bastille; and then you get a file sent in to you in a loaf of bread, and saw the bars through, and slide down a rope, and they all fire at you--but they don't hit you--and you run down to the seashore as hard as you can, and swim off to a British frigate, and there you are!"

Harold brightened up again. The programme was rather attractive.

"If they try to take us prisoner," he said, "we--we won't run, will we?"

Meanwhile, the craven foe was a long time showing himself; and we were reaching strange outland country, uncivilised, wherein lions might be expected to prowl at nightfall. I had a stitch in my side, and both Harold's stockings had come down. Just as I was beginning to have gloomy doubts of the proverbial courage of Frenchmen, the officer called

out something, the men closed up, and, breaking into a trot, the troops--already far ahead--vanished out of our sight. With a sinking at the heart, I began to suspect we had been fooled.

"Are they charging?" cried Harold, weary, but rallying gamely.

"I think not," I replied doubtfully. "When there's going to be a charge, the officer always makes a speech, and then they draw their swords and the trumpets blow, and--but let's try a short cut. We may catch them up yet."

So we struck across the fields and into another road, and pounded down that, and then over more fields, panting, down-hearted, yet hoping for the best. The sun went in, and a thin drizzle began to fall; we were muddy, breathless, almost dead beat; but we blundered on, till at last we struck a road more brutally, more callously unfamiliar than any road I ever looked upon. Not a hint nor a sign of friendly direction or assistance on the dogged white face of it. There was no longer any disguising it--we were hopelessly lost. The small rain continued steadily, the evening began to come on. Really there are moments when a fellow is justified in crying; and I would have cried too, if Harold had not been there. That right-minded child regarded an elder brother as a veritable god; and I could see that he felt himself as secure as if a whole Brigade of Guards hedged him round with protecting bayonets. But I dreaded sore lest he should begin again with his questions.

As I gazed in dumb appeal on the face of unresponsive nature, the sound of nearing wheels sent a pulse of hope through my being; increasing to rapture as I recognised in the approaching vehicle the familiar carriage of the old doctor. If ever a god emerged from a machine, it was when this heaven-sent friend, recognising us, stopped and jumped out with a cheery hail. Harold rushed up to him at once. "Have you been there?" he cried. "Was it a jolly fight? who beat? were there many people killed?"

The doctor appeared puzzled. I briefly explained the situation.

"I see," said the doctor, looking grave and twisting his face this way and that. "Well, the fact is, there isn't going to be any battle to-day. It's been put off, on account of the change in the weather. You will have due notice of the renewal of hostilities. And now you'd better jump in and I'll drive you home. You've been running a fine rig! Why, you might have both been taken and shot as spies!"

This special danger had never even occurred to us. The thrill of it accentuated the cosy homelike feeling of the cushions we nestled into as we rolled homewards. The doctor beguiled the journey with blood-curdling narratives of personal adventure in the tented field, he having followed the profession of arms (so it seemed) in every quarter of the globe. Time, the destroyer of all things beautiful, subsequently revealed the baselessness of these legends; but what of that? There are higher things than truth; and we were almost reconciled, by the time we were dropped at our gate, to the fact that the battle had been

postponed.