

TOWNSHEND RICHARD
BAXTER, WHISHAW FREDERICK,
AVERY HAROLD

**GUNPOWDER
TREASON AND PLOT,
AND OTHER STORIES
FOR BOYS**

Frederick Wishaw

**Gunpowder Treason and Plot,
and Other Stories for Boys**

«Public Domain»

Whishaw F.

Gunpowder Treason and Plot, and Other Stories for Boys /
F. Whishaw — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

WHEN FRIENDS FALL OUT	5
TWO HEROES	13
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	17

Harold Avery, Fred Whishaw, R. B. Townshend Gunpowder Treason and Plot, and Other Stories for Boys

WHEN FRIENDS FALL OUT

Old Dan Mudge, fisherman, of Brixham, Devon, saw a curious sight one afternoon as he walked along the shore between his own village and another of the name of Churston, in order to see whether the gale of the preceding night had disturbed his lobster-pots, laid in a symmetrical line just clear of the rocks that lie to the north of Broad Sands, one of the many lovely coves in Tor Bay.

A curiously-shaped object floated and bobbed in the still lively sea, fifty yards from shore, and from the midst of the object there seemed to rise – yes, he was sure of it – a child's cry.

"I must wade in and see to that matter," thought old Dan. "It isn't deep where she's floating now."

"She" consisted, as he plainly saw when he had approached a little nearer, of a most elaborately-made floating nest. Two lifebuoys, held apart by thick wire zigzags, floated one above the other; and slung upon the uppermost, hanging between it and the other, was a basket, lined within and without with thickest oilskin. In the basket, lying securely fastened among cushions and blankets, were two splendid little boys, one of whom slept soundly; the other yelled loudly. From their likeness to each other, it was plain that they were brothers.

Old Dan Mudge was astonished beyond words – so astonished that he omitted to save the lifebuoys with their ingenious appendage, but simply took the two children out and carried them ashore, leaving their peculiar raft to itself and to the mercy of the waves.

"Good Lord, deliver us all!" he exclaimed. "What a splendid pair of babies! And what in the name of good gracious am I going to do with them?"

As a preliminary to finding an answer to this question, Dan took the children to Brixham, and showed them to his wife and to a select company of neighbours, who had come in to hear the news, having seen Dan walk through the streets with two babies on his two arms.

"You'll have to advertise 'em," suggested some one. But Dan demurred.

"Can't afford that kind of thing," he said.

"Oh, but we must! Hat round for subscriptions," exclaimed some one, "to find the owner of these babes!"

The hat went round, and sufficient was soon collected to pay for several insertions of an advertisement in a London paper of the day; but nothing was ever heard of any claimant to the privilege of proprietorship of the two little waifs, and it was concluded that they were sole survivors of a fine passenger sailing-ship bound for Plymouth, which was known to have gone down, with all hands, during a gale in the Channel, about the time of their discovery.

Meanwhile old Dan Mudge was at his wits' end to know what to do with the bairns. His wife was too old and sickly to care to have the charge of small children, though she adored the pair of babes as much as any of the good folk who came to weep over and kiss and admire them during their stay of a few days under her roof.

The children were of gentle birth, too; that was evident from the quality of their clothes, which were of the finest and best, and carefully marked, those of one child bearing the name "Noel," and the other "Granby." It would not be right, the good old couple thought, even though they were able to do so, to bring up these little ones in the station occupied by themselves, as poor Brixham trawling folk, they being, as any one might plainly see, of gentle birth.

"Why shouldn't you see the captain and his wife, up to Weston by Totnes?" suggested some one; and Dan thought this a good idea.

Captain Brocklehurst and his wife were childless, and supposed to be well off. They had lost two children as infants; and now, though still comparatively young, lived their lives without the constant consolation which the presence of children affords in a household.

When old Dan walked across to Weston and interviewed the captain, Brocklehurst summoned his wife to the conference, and though she said but little more than that it would be impossible to say one thing or the other without first seeing the children, it was plain, from her flushed face and agitated manner after Dan had departed, that the idea of adopting these little ones was more than interesting to her. Her husband had been more inclined to reject the old trawler's proposal with a laugh and a jest, but his wife's more serious attitude sobered him, and he quickly agreed that the children might at least be brought for inspection.

But when Dan brought them, the little things laughed deliciously up in Mrs. Brocklehurst's face, and played with her gold chain when she bent to kiss them. Her husband saw that there were tears of joy in his wife's eyes, and that the matter of their adoption was as good as settled already.

Not that he ever regretted afterwards that this had come about. On the contrary, the boys grew up fine little fellows, likely to do their adopted parents credit in the world. And many a time, when Mrs. Brocklehurst reminded him that God had been very good to them in this matter, he cordially and sincerely agreed.

Brocklehurst had retired from the Royal Navy as commander, receiving a step in rank upon his retirement, and he was never in two minds as to the profession that the boys should enter when they were old enough to do so.

"They shall serve the Queen, as I did," he would say, "and one day there shall be two ships in the navy list commanded each by a Brocklehurst."

"Good lads," he would say when pleased with them for any reason; "you shall die admirals, both of you."

Though the boys were alike in many ways, they were dissimilar in this, that Granby early betrayed an obstinacy of disposition which was most marked, and which punishment only seemed to intensify. Noel did not share this peculiarity. Both were kindly and affectionate, and accustomed to stand by one another through thick and thin.

At the age of thirteen, just before their admission to the *Britannia*, the twins had a misunderstanding. It was as foolish and ridiculous a matter as could well be imagined to found a standing quarrel upon; yet a breach was made, and Granby's constitutional obstinacy stood in the way of its healing.

It happened at school – a naval preparatory school of long standing at Cubberly-on-Sea, to which the captain sent his boys because he had been there himself, and would have considered no naval education complete unless founded and continued at this establishment.

Granby was an excellent sprinter, and had been considered at school a "certain card" for the hundred yards race, as well as for the hurdle race and the long jump. Now, the winning of these three events would make Granby "champion" for the year, a position greatly desired by these athletes of thirteen and fourteen years; and when Granby sallied forth on the afternoon of the great day, equipped in his racing garments, he carried an ambitious and an intensely-agitated heart within his buttoned-up greatcoat, being resolved to win that championship or perish in the attempt.

Noel was not great at athletic sports, though an excellent cricketer, and more than pretty good at football. He therefore officiated as referee or judge on this occasion, not having entered for the races. Noel was quite as anxious as Granby that his brother should win the championship medal; and when Granby easily won the long jump, and just contrived to shake off his most dangerous rival, Evans, in the hurdle race, Noel felt certain, with the rest of the school, that the medal was as good as in Granby's pocket.

"He's all right, even if he halves the hundred yards with Bradbury," whispered an excited partisan in Noel's ear. "If Bradbury runs him a dead heat, his half marks for the hundred will still clear him. Bradbury is next up, though. The mile and second in the quarter only leave him twenty-five marks behind Granby, so it's an important race for both. Granby's 375 up to now – 200 for the hurdles and 175 for the long jump; and Bradbury's 350 – 200 for the mile and 100 for second in the quarter. It's a near thing, isn't it?"

"Run and ask Mr. Headon to be judge for this race, will you?" said Noel. "I hardly like officiating when it means so much for my brother."

The boy ran off to request the master named to undertake the duty which Noel, under the circumstances, dreaded; but he was too late. Mr. Headon was at the starting-place, and the race was begun before the messenger reached him.

It was a magnificent race.

Granby got off badly, his foot slipping at the mark and losing him nearly two yards.

Bradbury, seeing that he had an advantage at the start, made stupendous efforts to retain the lead, and did well for the first half of the race. But inch by inch Granby crept up behind him, and when but ten yards were left to run there was scarcely half a yard between them.

Bradbury made his effort, and for an instant it seemed as though those last eighteen inches would not be recovered by his opponent; but Granby made his own effort, and a frantic one, in the last three strides, ending with a leap forward which appeared to a few to land him in front of Bradbury. To the majority they seemed to breast the tape at the same instant; to a second minority it appeared that Bradbury had just won.

Beyond the tape Granby had shot well ahead. Had the race been five yards farther he would certainly have won it. As it was, all eyes were turned upon Noel, in whose hands the decision lay. Partisan shouts arose and rent the air. Some shouted "Brocklehurst!" – a majority, perhaps; others shrieked "Bradbury!"

Noel's face was very pale, but he had a set, determined look about the mouth. He was going to decide as he believed to be right and just – that was clear.

The head-master bustled up, panting, having "scorched" up from the starting-mark.

"Well, Brocklehurst?" he said; "well?"

"Bradbury, sir, by two inches," said poor Noel; and, having dashed the cup of happiness from Granby's and his own lips, he turned and marched away to his study and shut himself up, quite tragically miserable. Perhaps he even shed a tear of mortification. He was only thirteen, be it remembered, and the decision against his brother had been a very hard and somewhat heroic thing.

Granby arrived presently, and entered the study, taking no notice of Noel. He was evidently very angry, for he banged the books about, and scattered a packet of chocolate – Noel's – all over the floor.

Noel was nervous as to how Granby would take his decision. Perhaps he would not understand how *more* than ordinarily important it had been that he should be absolutely impartial, or even inclined, if anything, to favour the opponent.

"Granby, I'm awfully sorry, old man," he began, "that you didn't win. I'd give a good deal – "

"You're a liar! I *did* win! Everybody says so but you," said Granby, interrupting him furiously.

"Well, I watched both posts, and I did my best to give a fair decision," said Noel, shocked at his brother's violence.

"You have swindled me in Bradbury's favour," Granby began.

Noel laughed. He was growing angry also.

"What rot you talk!" he said; "as if I wouldn't rather you had won!"

"Then why not tell the truth and say I did, like a man?" cried angry, disappointed Granby.

Noel saw that argument was useless, and left the study; but afterwards, later in the evening, he returned to the charge.

"Come, Granby; we'd better shake hands and make it up," he began, but Granby interrupted him.

"Will you admit you cheated me?" he said.

"Certainly not!" said Noel. "I tell you I –"

"Very well; you have ruined my happiness. I was set upon getting that medal, and you have lost it to me by your unfairness. I shall never shake hands with you again so long as I possess a right hand, and it's no use your speaking to me in future, for I shan't answer!"

"Oh, very well," said Noel, hurt and offended, leaving the room; "I daresay you'll be less idiotic about all this when you've slept over it."

Noel certainly never supposed that Granby's wrath would last, or that he would carry out his avowed intention of "remaining enemies," and of silence. Had he known what he was to learn with deep regret during the next few years of their lives – namely, that Granby would remain obstinately determined to ignore his brother when in his presence – he would somehow have contrived to soften the bitterness of his offence on that first night, or have made almost any sacrifice in order to appease the floodtide of fury and mortification which his unfortunate decision – a wrong one, as many assured him – had called forth. But from this time forward not a word would Granby vouchsafe his brother, even though affectionately addressed or treated with marked kindness. During their sojourn on board the *Britannia*, officers, instructors, and cadets were alike amused first, and afterwards incensed, by the obstinate refusals of Granby to speak to his brother. The older men, officers and instructors, devised many ways of bringing them together, for both were noteworthy among the cadets of their year, whether at work or play; but no ingenuity of theirs was successful in compelling Granby to address even an accidental word to his brother, for his own cleverness was at least equal to theirs, and he invariably contrived to escape the necessity of direct communication with Noel by employing a third party to convey the required message or whatever he might have been asked to do or say.

As for the cadets, Granby soon showed these interfering persons that two things in connection with his quarrel with Noel must be laid to heart by them. The first was, that the said quarrel was no affair of theirs, and that interference or attempted peace-making, by trickery or otherwise, was *dangerous*. Granby was a doughty person among the cadets of his term, or any term, and not one to be lightly provoked.

The other truth they were obliged to learn was this, that though Granby might not wish, for private reasons, to maintain friendly intercourse with his brother, no one else in this world was at liberty to offend or injure Noel in his presence, whether Noel himself were by or not. Once or twice some misguided cadet attempted to curry favour with Granby by abusing Noel, imagining that he would thereby placate the brother who, to all appearances, was upon the worst possible terms with his twin. Such cadets learned very quickly that their last state was worse than the first.

As for Noel, the state of affairs with Granby gave him much sorrow as well as shame. He was as fond of his brother as ever, in spite of his foolish, long-continued obstinacy, and this although he was at times very angry with him, and ashamed of the foolishness which Granby was apparently not himself ashamed to display before others. Was Granby waiting for an apology for the old offence at Cubberly? Well, Noel was not without a spice of stubborn will, though his obstinacy was not to be compared with that of his brother, and he for his part was firmly determined that he would never offer any kind of apology for his decision on that historical occasion, unless Granby should first own up to his great foolishness, and ask for pardon.

Nevertheless, though Granby never replied, and though Noel knew that he would never reply, Noel invariably spoke to his brother just as though he might be expected to carry on the conversation; or, if others were present, he would refer to Granby by name just as frequently, during the course of conversation, as to any other person. And on such occasions Granby would reply as though one of the others had spoken, and not Noel.

It was a queer state of things, and sometimes ludicrously exasperating, as, for instance, one day when, during a cricket match on the beautiful Dartmouth Hill, the brothers being at the wickets together, Granby ran Noel out simply because he would not so much as cry "No!" when Noel called a run and started from his wicket. Granby had been somewhat ashamed of this, and had said in Noel's presence afterwards that he was "beastly sorry he had run some fellow out" – he forgot who it was – but "he ought to have seen there was no run."

Things had not improved a couple of years later, when the twins, both serving now as midshipmen in H.M.S. *Argus*, landed upon the west coast of Africa as members of a small party sent to chastise some umbrellaed potentate of the Gold Coast, who, unwilling to be chastised without a struggle, had the effrontery to oppose a thousand or two of his black legions against the *Argus* contingent, in the hope of preventing the representatives of Her Majesty from reaching the native village, lying in the pestiferous forests which abound in those parts, which formed his metropolis.

In this attempt he succeeded so well that, long before the British marines and blue-jackets had advanced half-way to his village, they found themselves attacked by so strong a force of natives that the only course open to them was to retire at once towards the sea, in the hope of regaining their boats before King Kom-Kom's hosts should have cut them all to pieces.

That retreat through the jungle was a nightmare experience for all, and when at length the British troops reached their boats and opened fire upon their pursuers with a small piece of ordnance which they had brought with them but could not land (this was long before these days of quick-firing guns and Maxims and such military luxuries of our day), they chased away the niggers, indeed, but became aware, having at length time and leisure to count their losses, that about half the party had fallen, and among those missing were both the Brocklehursts, the only two officers lost, barring the first lieutenant, who had dropped at the first attack, when the party of unsuspecting British had walked straight into the ambush prepared for them.

Several had seen Noel Brocklehurst fall. He had been pierced by a spear in the neck, and had dropped dead apparently, for there were those present who would have risked much to bring him along. No one had actually seen Granby fall, but a sailor declared he had seen him tearing through the jungle, apparently in a fury of passion, after a "nigger – probably the Johnny as killed his brother, sir," said the sailor; "and he looked that angry I wouldn't have given a tuppenny Bath bun for the nigger's life."

"Well, but in that case we can't possibly return to the ship," said the officer left in command. "He may turn up; and if not, I think I shall have to ask for volunteers to form a search party."

Instantly every man present volunteered.

"Thanks, lads," said the officer; "I knew you would; but we'll give him ten minutes."

Before that period had elapsed, Granby suddenly appeared out of the cover, bleeding profusely from a slight wound in the leg and another cut in the face, and carrying his brother Noel, who might be dead, by the look of him, though Granby said, as he put him down, —

"He isn't dead, doctor. Have a look at him, quick, please!"

The doctor did not waste many seconds in acting as desired. He knelt down by Noel's body and carefully inspected his wound. The spear had passed almost through his neck, and Noel had lost much blood, which accounted for his unconscious condition.

"He may pull through," said the doctor presently, "but he's middling bad, Brocklehurst, and it'll take some nursing."

All through the days of suspense and peril Granby watched by his brother's bedside. Noel lay and groaned – alive, indeed, but little more. He knew no one, and did not speak, though he was semiconscious. But presently his youth and his splendid constitution began to assert themselves, and Noel grew better.

Then, finding that his brother was apparently out of danger, and would begin to recognize faces, and to speak and be spoken to, Granby ceased to haunt Noel's bedside.

When the latter was well enough to speak, the first question he asked was whether Granby had survived the attack on the day of the ambush.

"Why, certainly," said the doctor. "He was slightly wounded, but nothing to matter. He has been nursing you till yesterday, and nursing you very well too!"

Noel shut his eyes and was silent. When he reopened them two hours later, "Did you say Granby nursed me?" he asked, and the doctor replied that he had said so.

"Dear old chap!" murmured Noel.

While his brother slept, Granby came in to see how he progressed, and sat and watched the sick man. Once Noel opened his eyes and caught him in the act of departing.

"Granby!" said Noel in his weak voice; but Granby either did not or pretended that he did not hear.

After this he came no more to look after Noel.

But when Noel was able to come into the gunroom, a few days later, he said to Granby in the presence of all the midshipmen, —

"Granby, old man, I want to tell you before every one present how grateful I am for all you did for me when the niggers knocked me over that day. I — "

"You were saying we were likely to renew the attack in a few days, weren't you, Chambers?" said Granby. "It's about time we did something to take down that Kom-Kom fellow's impertinence, besides peppering them from the ship. I don't know why we've waited so long."

It was no use, and Noel, weak still from his illness, and more easily upset than of old, went back to his cabin and shut himself in and — yes, cried — shed tears of disappointment and bitterness; for he thought that if Granby would not "make it up" now, he never would.

So matters went on for another year or two, or it may have been half a dozen. The brothers served for a while apart from one another, in different ships. Both were lieutenants now, Noel having been appointed to the *Thunderer*, Granby to the *Mars*. But now they were together once again, a circumstance which had caused both brothers much secret delight, though the feud still continued — the foolish, lamentable, incomprehensible breach that dated from the race day at Cubberly-on-Sea, now nearly ten years ago.

As a matter of fact, Granby, hearing that Noel had been appointed to the *Irreconcilable*, applied himself for the same ship, using all the influence he could command in order to get the desired appointment. Old Captain Brocklehurst assisted the application by seconding it with a personal request at the Admiralty, where he possessed many old friends; and his endeavours to have the brothers once more serving in the same ship met with success.

Granby had always taken care to apply for leave whenever he knew that Noel had either had his own or would not yet be taking it, for he was unwilling that his parents should become aware of their quarrel. As a matter of fact, so fond did the old captain know the boys to be of each other that he would never have believed it if assured of the existence of such a quarrel. Each brother invariably spoke of his twin most kindly and affectionately while in the presence of the old folks. In Granby this was a sign of grace, the saving clause in his foolish and obstinate perversity.

One day, while cruising in the southern seas, some of the younger officers were amusing themselves, first by feeding a number of sharks which they had attracted to the ship's side by throwing offal and other refuse into the sea, and afterwards by fishing for the brutes, of which there were a dozen or more swimming around and about the vessel, showing, from time to time, their great dorsal fins and their tails, as they rose close to the surface in order to see what was to be had in the way of delicacies of a floating description.

Noel was officer of the watch, while Granby happened to be among the youngsters, enjoying the fun of watching and angling for the great brutes beneath just as much as the younger officers. Noel, walking up and down the deck, being on duty, took but little notice of the group of laughing and chattering youngsters. He strolled up the deck and down again, now taking a look at the sharks

for a moment, now pausing to issue some order to one or other of the crew lazily busy over the varied duties that fall to Jack at sea in order to keep him employed and the ship clean and smart.

Suddenly a terrible thing happened.

A youngster, nominally busy upon a yardarm, but actually too interested in watching what went on below in the matter of the shark-feeding, suddenly lost his hold, in the excitement of gazing down, and fell from his perch.

It so happened that Granby was at that moment leaning dangerously over the side of the ship endeavouring to entice a certain shark to take the bait he dangled in front of it, and the youngster, in falling, struck Granby so violently upon the neck that he too lost his hold and fell with the lad into the sea.

A loud, inarticulate cry arose from all who saw the occurrence.

"Man overboard!" shrieked some, and "A boat!" cried others. "Cutter's crew – quick, for Heaven's sake!"

Noel heard and ran to the side of the ship just in time to see Granby and the lad fall together, with a great splash, in front of the huge shark which Granby had angled for but a moment before.

Noel instantly seized the great knife which had been used by the anglers for cutting their bait.

"Out of the way there!" he shouted, elbowing aside the horrified crowd that looked down, shouting, each one, in more or less articulate horror – "out of the way! Heave a rope out, some of you, and shy things into the water to make a splash."

The concluding words of the sentence were spoken as Noel shot, head downwards, through the air. He cleft the water in a beautiful header, rising just in time to see Granby lift the lad towards the rope which willing hands above quickly dangled ready for him.

The bellowing youth laid hold of the rope, and swarmed up with amazing quickness. He was safe.

Granby was about to follow his example, when he suddenly caught sight of Noel. Up to this moment he had not known that his brother had plunged to his assistance.

Noel had dived very carefully. He had seen the huge shark disappear, probably startled, as the two human bodies fell with a great splash before its very nose; then he saw it slowly gliding forward once more, and had dived so as to emerge, if possible, at its shoulder, in order to plunge his knife into the brute's eye and blind him.

The shark had set its heart upon Granby, it appeared, for it turned slightly towards him, with the result that Noel rose to the surface, brushing against its very side, at which he viciously jabbed his knife, under water, without much effect, excepting to attract the brute towards himself. Then, getting his head out of the water, Noel placed his left arm over the shark's head, and made several stabs at the brute's eye with his right, which held the knife. But the position was awkward, and his blows missed their mark, though they seemed to rouse the fighting instincts of the huge fish, which lashed the water with its tail, and snapped viciously at its adversary, though clumsily, for it was in a bad position for taking its prey.

Meanwhile – for all this occupied but an instant of time – Granby had slipped back into the water, and swam behind his brother.

"Dive, Noel! Dive and rip up the beast from underneath!" he cried. These were the first words he had addressed to his brother for ten years.

"Keep out of his way then," said Noel, and dived.

But the shark would not be denied, for even as Noel dived and ripped a long slit that let the savage life out of it, the great brute made a last snap in Granby's direction, and with a cry Granby grew suddenly pale, and sank.

But help was at hand now. The cutter's crew had floated their boat with marvellous quickness, and were even now approaching, splashing with their oars in order to frighten away other sharks, of which there were many around.

Noel rose to the surface, having laid hold of Granby as he came; and as the dead shark sank, the two plucky officers were assisted into the boat. Granby was unconscious; and it was seen, to the horror of all present, that his right hand had been bitten clean off at the wrist.

For some days the ship's doctor almost despaired of saving the gallant fellow's life. The whole crew hung with dread and excitement upon his hourly report. Noel was frantic with anxiety. But the wounded man, like Noel, had been blessed with a good constitution; and, thanks to the doctor's skill and attention, to Noel's devotion, and to his own splendid strength, Granby gradually beat back oncoming death, and took a new lease of life, maimed, indeed, for life, but healed and recovered.

He was very weak and quite unable to speak for many days and even weeks; but when at last he was able and allowed to attempt it, he asked to see Noel.

"All right," said the doctor; "you're right to thank him, my boy, for, by all that's heroic, he did a fine thing in saving you. But don't excite yourself; that's all I ask."

When Noel entered, Granby beckoned him nearer.

"I'm going to speak at last," he said, smiling. "It's time I did, isn't it? But I'm afraid I can't shake hands, dear old man. I vowed I wouldn't, so long as I had a right hand. Well, now I haven't one. I suppose it's my punishment, and I'm sure I deserve it. Will you forgive me, Noel?"

"I've nothing to forgive," said Noel with a sob. "And as for that race –"

"Yes – I *did* win that race, you know, Noel. Nearly every one thought so."

"I really and honestly believe you did, dear old Granby," said Noel, sobbing quite freely; "and I believe I was utterly wrong. But I was so fond of you, old chap, that I was afraid of cheating the other fellow."

"Thanks! thanks!" said Granby. "Oh, I am so happy – and so sleepy!"

Then the doctor came and turned Noel out; but Noel was happier that night than he had been for ten long years.

TWO HEROES

The two young counts, Peter and Paul Selsky, were as sturdy a pair of boys as you'd find in all Russia, and as fond of outdoor life and outdoor sports as though they were very Britons. For this circumstance they were largely indebted to their tutor, a young graduate of Oxford, Frank Thirlstone, who had lived with them since the death of their father, three years ago, and had taught them, besides the English language and a smattering of classical lore, something more than the elements of cricket and of golf and other games dear to the heart of every British youth. Peter and Paul were now respectively seventeen and sixteen years old, and the period of their tutelage by Thirlstone was drawing to a close; for both must shortly enter the Lyceum at St. Petersburg, in preparation for the usual career of young aristocrats in their country, and Thirlstone would return to England.

It was winter, and most aristocratic land-owners had long since left their country seats for their warmer mansions in town; but it was not the custom of the Selskys to leave their beloved outdoor avocations for the cooped-up amusements of the metropolis for any long period at a time, and they would spend their Christmastide and the New Year at the manor house as usual.

They were the more inclined to do so because their nearest neighbours, old General Ootin and his daughter Vera, intended to do the same. Since the death of his wife, the general had never cared to live in St. Petersburg, preferring to pass his time in the seclusion of country life with his adored and certainly most charming daughter. Old Ootin was a fine sportsman, devoted to every form of hunting and shooting, and nothing pleased the old man so much as to wander, gun in hand, among his ancestral pine trees, accompanied by pretty Vera. He was an adept in all matters of tracking, and had taught young Peter and Paul and their English tutor many a "wrinkle" in the art of bear-hunting, wolf-ringing, and even of calling the lynx and other animals from an ambush – one of the most difficult and exciting of all forms of sport.

Scarcely a week passed even in winter time without some sporting enterprise planned and undertaken by the four men (to dignify Paul and Peter by that title, scarcely yet due them by the operation of time); and when there was a battue or ambush-shooting, Vera nearly always formed one of the party as a spectator. When the sport included long runs upon the snowshoes in pursuit of lynx or elk, the girl, though no mean performer on snowshoes, preferred to leave the hunt to the sterner sex.

One evening the young counts, with Frank Thirlstone, drove over to the general's to dinner, as they frequently did, in order to plan a campaign for the following day. To their astonishment the old servant in the hall informed them that "his excellence" was in bed ill, but that his young mistress was up and ready to receive them.

Hurrying upstairs to learn what ailed their old friend, the three young men found Vera greatly excited, and anxious to tell them the whole story, which was sufficiently exciting, and may be told in her own words.

"Father and I were wandering in the woods," she began. "He carried a gun with small shot, for I had asked him to shoot a brace of tree partridges or so for the house. We heard one whistle in the distance – you know how sharp father's ears are for that kind of sound – and stood to listen. We stood in the midst of a tangle of fallen pinetrees – what the peasants call a *lom*. Suddenly, within five yards of us, there was a startling upheaval of snow and pine twigs, and with a deafening roar a big she-bear rushed straight out at us. We had been standing unconsciously within a few paces of her winter lair, where father says she probably has a family of cubs, or she would have been asleep.

"Father cried out to me to run for my life, which I did, skating away on my snowshoes at my very best speed. I heard my father fire a shot, but did not turn round for fear of running into a tree stump and tripping up.

"Then my father shouted again, and to my horror I found that the bear was in full pursuit of me, apparently none the worse for the charge of small shot.

"I could scarcely think for horror. I was some thirty yards ahead; but, since the snow was fairly hard, I knew the beast would soon catch me, and if she did I had nothing but a small Circassian dagger with a silver handle – the one that Mr. Thirlstone gave me," Vera added with a glance at the Oxonian and a slight blush, "on my birthday. Then I thought I would try to reach a patch of soft snow which I remembered to have passed over a few minutes before, and in that direction I now turned my shoes. I could hear poor father shouting frantically after me, but it was impossible to distinguish what he said. I know now that he wished me to lead the bear round in a curve, so that he might shoot her. But I succeeded in reaching the soft snow, and there my pursuer floundered, while I sped quickly on and gained some yards upon her. This also enabled my father to come up closer to the bear, and as he was now nearer to her than I was, and all the noise came from him, she turned round and charged back at father.

"Father fired when she was close, but his charge flew like a bullet, and he missed her. Apparently, however, the shot passed near enough to the brute to frighten her into discretion; for, having knocked poor father backwards, and run right over him, she took no further notice of him, and retired to her *berloga* [lair]. Father was much shaken, but not seriously hurt; he will be quite well after a day or two of resting in bed."

When Paul had an opportunity of speaking privately to Vera, he was very eloquent in his expressions of gratitude for her deliverance from danger. "Ah-rr!" he ended, "the brute; she shall die to-morrow, Vera, I swear it, for frightening you."

"Still more for hurting poor father, I hope," she laughed; "but be careful, Paul, for she is savage."

"I am sorry that the general was hurt," said Paul, "but she shall die for the other fault."

Presently Peter took Vera aside, and said almost the same words.

"If that brute had hurt a hair of your head, Vera," he said, "I should have spent the rest of my life exterminating bears; as it is, this one shall die to-morrow for frightening you."

"It is very kind of you, dear Peter, to be my champion; but, please, be careful, for this is a very savage bear, and I would not have you hurt."

"Bah!" said Peter; "I am not afraid of a bear."

Vera was an extremely pretty girl, and as she sat at the head of her father's dinner table dispensing hospitality to her three guests, each one of the young men evidently recognized this fact, for many admiring glances were bestowed upon her. Both Paul and Peter afterwards made private inquiries as to the exact locality of the day's adventure, neither, however, mentioning his intention to his brother. Presently, while Vera sat at the piano and sang for their delight, Thirlstone standing by, she asked the Englishman with a laugh whether he did not intend, like the boys, to avenge her upon the bear. Thirlstone laughed also. He would leave the matter in the hands of her champions, he said; they were quite safe with the beast, and would certainly resent any interference. Thirlstone seemed very fond of music, and remained at the piano with Vera for a long while.

When Peter went upon his snowshoes early next morning to the place where, as described by Vera, the bear had unexpectedly made its appearance, he was surprised, and somewhat disgusted, to find his brother Paul already on the spot.

"I didn't know you were coming, Paul," he said. "I understood from Vera that I was to have the privilege of punishing the brute that offended her."

"I thought the same thing for myself," said Paul. "I suppose she concluded we meant to come together. It doesn't much matter, though, so long as the bear is chastised for her sin."

"If it is all the same to you, brother, I think I should like to be the one to kill it," said Peter. "I am the elder, you see, and – and, well, I've an idea she would like me to do it."

"Why?" asked Paul in genuine surprise.

"I'll tell you one day," said Peter; "but perhaps we'd better kill the bear first. If you don't mind, I'll be first spear."

Good-natured Paul agreed, though sadly against his will, for he too was very anxious to serve Vera.

The brothers had come forth armed with bear spears only – that is, each carried a knife in his belt, but no firearms. They would have thought it but a shabby enterprise to carry rifles. Bear-shooting from the *berloga* was too easy to be sportsmanlike.

But a fall of snow during the night had obliterated all the tracks of the preceding day, and though they knew that they must certainly be within a hundred yards, more or less, of the exact spot from out of which the creature had charged only yesterday, they could not be sure which of many clumps of fallen pine trees and forest *débris* was the one referred to by Vera in her description of the occurrence.

"One of us had better run home and fetch Milka," said Peter. He expected that Paul would immediately volunteer to fetch Milka, and he was not disappointed.

"If you are to have first spear," said Paul, "then I'd better go for the dog, as the bear may come out while I'm away."

So away ran young Paul, skating beautifully upon his long snowshoes, anxious to reach home, fetch the dog, and bring him back before his brother should find the bear and finish operations without him.

Milka was a wonderful little dog, half terrier, half nondescript, whose nose and instinct for localizing a sleeping bear were most surprising, a talent as useful to her masters as remarkable in itself.

When Paul had disappeared, Peter, not with any mean desire to steal a march upon his brother, but simply because he was tired of doing nothing, strode hither and thither upon his snowshoes examining the likely places, half hoping the bear would come rushing out upon him, yet half sorry for Paul if it should. As for any feeling of fear or even nervousness about having to withstand all by himself the rush of a furious bear, the mother of a family, and therefore very dangerous, such an idea never for an instant occurred to him.

For half an hour Peter strolled from thicket to thicket without starting the fury of yesterday. He began to grow weary of waiting. Would Paul never return with the dog? Poor old Paul, it was rather hard on him to have claimed the elder brother's privilege; but then Paul didn't know – well, something he (Peter) suspected as to Vera's feelings. For Peter had not claimed the privilege of first spear, he assured himself over and over again, with any mere selfish motive, but because he knew Vera would rather he killed this bear than Paul; and it couldn't really matter to Paul, because —

Peter's reflections had just reached this stage when, with a sudden and most startling rush, and a roar such as is never heard from the mouth of a sleepy and semi-comatose creature just awakened and sallying unwillingly from its winter lair, the big bear set flying the snow and ice which had formed a covering to the hole in which, with her cubs, she lay snugly beneath the upturned root of a pine tree, and made straight for the aggravating person whose presence close to her den had roused her into the state of insensate fury so easily developed by her quick-tempered tribe.

Peter barely had time to kick off his snowshoes and push them out of his way, to plant his heels securely, and present his formidable spear at the proper angle, when the great brute was upon him, or, to be more accurate, upon his spear.

This was a weapon of tough, seasoned, most carefully tested wood, provided with a murderous steel head and point, and a projecting notch two feet from the sharp end, designed to prevent the shaft from passing right through the animal attacked. Down upon the slightly-raised point came the heavy bear, with an impetus which nearly carried Peter over backwards. That is the first crisis of bear-spearing, and a dangerous one it is, for should the hunter fall upon his back, the bear would fall over him, to tear and maul at his discretion, or until his own terrible wound put an end to his power to do mischief.

Peter withstood the shock with difficulty. He had never had to deal with a bear, up to this time, either so large or so savage. The way it now bit and tore at the hickory shaft, which had entered into its flesh to the depth of at least nine inches, was truly terrible by reason of the relentless savagery

displayed in the onslaught. But the shaft was strengthened with iron side-supports, and was, moreover, a magnificent piece of wood, and Peter felt little fear that the wounded beast would rip or break it; she might tear off a few splinters – she was busily doing so already – but the good shaft would stand the strain. As for the power she would presently exert in pushing back at her assailant, that would be a different matter. She was hugely heavy, and Peter greatly feared that he would have trouble.

Only for a few moments she bit and tore at the spear handle; then she suddenly abandoned these tactics, and, looking full at her aggressor, she roared loudly, and began to push forward in order to get at him.

Peter was prepared to exert his strength, and exerted it. For a minute – two minutes – he checked the bear's advance. Then she seemed to gather strength, and, pulling herself together, made a supreme effort. It was as though the heavier forwards in a scrimmage at football forced back the weaker side inch by inch and foot by foot. Peter felt himself giving ground. He, too, made his effort, stemming the advance for five seconds, no more. Then again the bear pushed him steadily back, and Peter now began to realize that unless Paul came quickly to his assistance this bear-hunt might end after a fashion which would be unpleasant for himself as well as for the bear.

He shouted aloud, repeating Paul's name half a dozen times. The bear replied with a couple of loud roars and many quaint moans and complaining noises; but there was no reply from Paul. Peter's strength was failing rapidly, but the bear was still strong. How long could her strength hold out? Back went Peter step by step; he would continue to grip the spear at any rate.

"You're booked anyway, my friend," he panted aloud. "You're punished for frightening Vera; and if you kill me she'll cry till her eyes are red, but no one will cry for you. As for your cubs, Paul will come along and kill every one of them."

Back went Peter, a step or half a step at every word. Suddenly the butt of his spear came full against a pine trunk.

"Thank God!" said Peter; "that will give me breathing time."

Strong as she was, and full of indomitable courage and of fight, the furious bear could not now push her assailant an inch farther. This enraged, maddened her, and with a curious moaning roar she pressed herself forward an inch or two farther upon the shaft. Peter laughed aloud, and mocked her. "I have you now," he said; "push as hard as you please, you can't uproot a pine tree."

She did her best, however, and for several minutes she strove madly to break down Peter's guard, but vainly. Then suddenly he heard the yelping of Milka, and knew that help was at hand.

Peter was terribly tired, and his strength was nearly spent, nevertheless he determined to make one great effort to finish the fight unaided. Pulling himself together, he drew in his breath; then, with a great backwardpush against the tree, he put all his remaining strength into one great rush forward.

For a moment his success was complete and signal. Just as he had given ground but a few moments before, the bear now yielded to his renewed attack. For a second or two she slipped and scrambled backwards, and was within an ace of toppling over, which toppling is the end and object of the bear-spearer, for once down, he has the creature at his mercy; but this bear was a grand specimen of endurance and of splendid savage courage and fortitude. She made yet another effort.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.