

STALKY & CO.

BY RUDYARD KIPLING.*

Illustrated by L. RAVEN HILL.

NO. I.—“STALKY.”

How they have taken Kinnmont Willie
Against the peace of the border tide,
And they've forgot that the bauld Buccleuch
Was keeper here on the Scottish side.

—*Kinnmont Willie.*

“AND then De Vitré said we were beastly funks not to help, and I said there were too many chaps in it to suit us. Besides, there's bound to be a mess somewhere or other with old De Vitré in charge. Wasn't I right?”

“Quite. And, anyhow, it's a silly biznai, bung through. What'll they do with the beastly cows when they've got 'em? You can milk a cow—if she'll stand still. That's all right, but——”

“You're a pig, Beetle.”

“No, I ain't. What's the sense of drivin' a lot of cows up from the Burrows to—to—where is it?”

“They're tryin' to drive 'em to Toowey's farmyard at the top of the hill—the empty one, where we smoked last Tuesday. It's a revenge. Vidley chivied De Vitré twice last week for ridin' his ponies on the Burrows; and De Vitré's goin' to lift as many of old Vidley's cattle as he can and plant 'em up the hill. He'll muck it, though—with Parsons, Orrin and Howlett helpin'. They'll only yell, an' shout, an' bunk if they see Vidley.”

“We might have managed it,” said McTurk slowly, turning up his coat-collar against the rain that swept over the Burrows. His hair was of the dark mahogany red that goes with a certain temperament.

“We should,” Corkran replied with equal confidence. “But they've gone into it as if it was a sort of spidger-hunt. I've never done any cattle liftin', but it seems to me-e-e that one might just as well be stalky about a thing as not.”

The smoking vapours of the Atlantic drove low in pearly grey wreaths above the boys' heads. Out of the mist to windward, beyond the grey loom of the Pebble Ridge, came the unceasing roar of the sea rising and falling in mile-long rollers. To leeward a few stray ponies and cattle, the property of

the Northam potwallopers, and the playthings of the boys in their leisure hours, showed through the haze. Beyond—blotted out—lay Appledore and the flats of her Pool, where the Taw and the Torridge join. They halted by the Cattle-gate which marks the limit of cultivation, where the fields come down to the Burrows from Northam Hill. Beetle, shock-headed and spectacled, drew his nose pensively to and fro along the wet top-bar; McTurk shifted from one foot to the other, watching the water drain into either print; while Corkran whistled through his teeth as he leaned against the sod-bank, peering into the mist.

A grown or sane person might have called the weather vile; but the boys of the College had not yet learned the national interest in climate. It was a little damp, to be sure; but it was always damp in the Easter term, and—this was an article of faith—sea-wet could not give one a cold under any circumstances. Macintoshes were excellent things to go to church in, but crippling if one had to run at short notice across heavy country. So they waited serenely in the downpour, clad as their mothers would not have cared to see.

“I say, Corky,” said Beetle, wiping his spectacles for the twentieth time, “if we aren't going to help De Vitré, what are we here for?”

“We're goin' to watch, of course. Keep your eye on your Uncle and he'll pull you through.”

“It's an awful biznai, driving cattle—in open country,” said McTurk, who, as the son of an Irish baronet, knew something of these operations. “They'll have to run half over the Burrows after 'em. S'pose they're ridin' Vidley's ponies?”

“De Vitré's sure to be. He's a dab on a horse. Listen! What a filthy row they're making. They'll be heard for miles.”

The thick air filled with whoops and shouts, cries, words of command, the rattle of broken golf-clubs, and a clatter of hoofs. Three cows with their calves came up to the Cattle-gate at an indignant milch-canter, followed by four wild-eyed bullocks and two rough-coated ponies. A fat and freckled

* Copyright, 1898, by Rudyard Kipling, in the United States of America.

youth of fifteen trotted behind them, riding bare-backed and brandishing a hedge-stake. De Vitré up to a certain point was an

galloped, had once called him a thief, and the insult rankled. Hence the raid.

"Come on," he cried over his shoulder.



"The thick air filled with whoops and shouts . . . and a clatter of hoofs."

inventive youth, with a passion for horse-exercise that the Northam commoners did not encourage. Vidley, who could not understand that a grazing pony likes being

"Open the gate, Corkran, or they'll all cut back again. We've had no end of bother to get 'em. Oh, won't old Vidley be wild!"

Three boys on foot ran up, "shooing" the

cattle in excited amateur fashion, till they headed into the narrow, high-banked Devonshire lane that ran uphill.

"Come on, Corkran. It's no end of a lark," pleaded De Vitre; but Corkran shook his head. The raid had been presented to him after dinner that day as a completed scheme, in which he might, by favour, play a minor part; and Arthur Lane Corkran, No. 104, did not care for lieutenantancies.

"You'll be collared," he cried, as he shut the gate. "Parsons and Orrin are no good in a row. You'll be collared sure as a gun, De Vitre."

"Oh, you're a beastly funk!" The speaker was already hidden by the mist.

"Hang it all," said McTurk. "It's about the first time we've ever had a cattle-lift at the Coll. Let's—"

"Not much," said Corkran firmly; "keep your eye on your Uncle." His word was law in matters like these. Experience had taught them that if they manœuvred without Corkran they fell into trouble.

"You're wrathful because you didn't think of it first," said Beetle; and Corkran kicked him thrice slowly, neither he nor Beetle changing a muscle the while.

"No, I ain't; but it isn't stalker enough for me."

"Stalker," in the school vocabulary, meant clever, well-considered, and wily, as applied to a plan of action; and stalkiness was the one virtue Corkran toiled after.

"Same thing," said McTurk. "You think you're the only stalker chap in the Coll."

Corkran kicked him as he had kicked Beetle; and, even as Beetle, McTurk took not the faintest notice. By the etiquette of their three-year-old friendship, this was no more than formal notice of dissent from a proposition.

"They haven't thrown out any pickets" (that school prepared boys for the Army). "They ought to do that—even for apples. Toowey's farmyard may be full of people."

"'Twasn't last week," said Beetle, "when we smoked in that cartshed place. It's a mile from any house."

Up went one of Corkran's light eyebrows. "Oh, Beetle, I *am* so tired o' kickin' you! Does that mean it's empty now? They ought to have sent one fellow ahead to look. They're simply bound to be collared. An' where'll they bunk to if they have to run for it? Parsons has only been here two terms. *He* don't know the lie of the country. Orrin's a fat ass, an' Howlett bunks

from a guv'nor" (vernacular for a native of Devon engaged in agricultural pursuits) "as far as he can see one. De Vitre's the only decent chap in the lot, an'—an' I put him up to tryin' Toowey's farmyard."

"Well, keep your hair on," said Beetle. "What are we going to do? It's hefty damp here."

"Let's think a bit." Corkran whistled between his teeth and presently broke into a swift, short double-shuffle. "We'll go straight up an' see what happens to 'em. Cut across the fields; an' we'll lie up in the hedge where the lane comes in by the barn—where we found the dead hedgehog last term. Come on!"

He scrambled over the earth bank and dropped with a flop on the rain-soaked plough. It was a deep slope to the brow of the hill where Toowey's out-barns stood. The boys took no account of stiles or footpaths, crossing field after field diagonally, and where they found a hedge, bursting through it like beagles. The lane lay on their right flank, and they heard much lowing and shouting from that direction.

"Well, if he isn't collared," said McTurk, kicking off a few pounds of loam against a gate-post, "he jolly well ought to be."

"We'll be collared, too, if you go with your nose up like that. Duck, you ass, and come along under the hedge. We can get quite close up to the barn," said Corkran. "There's no sense in not doin' a thing stalkily while you're about it."

They wriggled into the top of an old hollow double hedge less than thirty yards from the big black timbered barn with its square of out-buildings. Their ten minutes' climb had lifted them a couple of hundred feet above the Burrows. As the mists parted here and there, they could see the great triangle of sodden green, tipped with yellow sand-dunes and fringed with three miles of white foam, laid out like a blurred map below. The steady thunder of the surge along the Pebble Ridge made a background to the wild noises in the lane.

"What did I tell you?" said Corkran, peering through the dripping stems of quickset which commanded a view of the farmyard. "Three farm-chaps—getting out dung—with pitchforks. It's too late to head off De Vitre. We'd be collared if we showed up. Besides, they've heard 'em. They couldn't help hearing. What asses!"

The natives, brandishing their weapons, talked together, using many times the word "Colleger." As the tumult swelled, they



"They wriggled into the top of an old hollow double hedge."

disappeared into various pens and byres. The first of the cattle trotted up to the yard-gate, and De Vitré felicitated his band.

"That's all right," he shouted. "Oh, won't old Vidley be wild! Open the gate, Orrin, an' whack 'em through. They're pretty warm."

"So'll you be in a minute," muttered McTurk. The raiders hurried into the yard behind the cattle. They heard a shout of triumph, shrill yells of despair; saw one

"Found 'em! They bullocks drove like that—all heavin' an' penkin' an' hotted. Oh, 'tes shaamful. Yeou've nigh to killed the cows—lat alone stealin' 'em. They sends pore boys to jail for half o' this."

"That's a lie," said Beetle to McTurk, turning on the wet grass.

"I know; but they always say it. 'Member when they collared us at the Monkey Farm that Sunday, with the apples in your topper?"

"My Aunt! They're goin' to lock 'em up



"They wriggled into the hay and crawled to the edge of the loft."

Devonian guarding the gate with a pitchfork, while the others, alas! captured all four boys.

"Of all the infernal, idiotic, lower-second asses!" said Corkran. "They haven't even taken off their house caps."

"Aie! Yeou young rascals. We've got 'e! Whutt be doin' to Muster Vidley's bullocks?"

"Oh, we found 'em," said De Vitré, who bore himself well in defeat. "Would you like 'em?"

an' send for Vidley," Corkran whispered, as one of the captors hurried downhill in the direction of Appledore, and the prisoners were led into the barn.

"But they haven't taken their names and numbers, anyhow," said Corkran, who had fallen into the hands of the enemy more than once.

"But they're bottled! Rather sickly for De Vitré," said Beetle. "It's one lickin' anyhow, even if Vidley don't hammer him,

The Head's pretty wild about gate-liftin', an' poachin', an' all that sort of thing. He won't care for cattle-liftin' much."

"It's awfully bad for cows, too, to run 'em about in milk," said McTurk, lifting one knee from a sodden primrose-tuft. "What's the next move, Corky?"

"We'll get into the old cartshed where we smoked. It's next to the barn. We can cut across while they're inside and get in through the window."

"S'pose we're collared?" said Beetle, cramming his red and black house-cap into his pocket. One does not attack under house-colours.

"That's just it. They'd never dream of any more chaps walkin' bung into the trap. Besides, we can get out through the roof if they spot us. Keep your eye on your Uncle. Come on."

A swift dash carried them to a huge clump of nettles, beneath the unglazed back window of the cartshed. Its open front, of course, gave on to the barnyard.

They scrambled through, dropped among the carts, and climbed up into the rudely-boarded upper floor that they had discovered a week ago when in search of retirement. It covered a half of the building and ended in darkness at the barn wall. The roof-tiles were broken and displaced. Through the chinks they commanded a clear view of the yard, half filled with disconsolate cattle, steaming sadly in the rain.

"You see," said Corkran, always careful to secure an open line of retreat, "if they bottle us up here, we'll squeeze out between these rafters, slide down the roof, an' bunk. They couldn't even get out through the window. They'd have to run right round the barn. Now are you satisfied, you burbler?"

"Huh! You only said that to make quite sure yourself," Beetle retorted.

"If the boards weren't all loose, I'd kick you," growled Corkran. "What's the sense of gettin' into a place if you can't get out of it? Shut up and listen."

A confused murmur of voices reached them from the end of the attic. McTurk tip-toed thither with caution.

"Hi! It leads through. At least you can get through. Come along!" He fingered the boarded wall.

"What's the other side?" said Corkran the cautious.

"Hay, you idiot." They heard his boot-heels grating on wood, and he had gone.

At some time or other sheep must have been folded in the cartshed, and an in-

ventive farm hand, sooner than take the hay round, had displaced a board in the barn side to thrust fodder through. It was in no sense a lawful path, but twelve inches in the square is all that any boy needs.

"Look here!" said Beetle, as they waited McTurk's return. "The cattle are comin' in out of the wet."

A brown, hairy back showed some three feet below the half-floor, as one by one the cattle shouldered in for shelter among the carts, filling the shed with their sweet breath.

"That blocks our way out, unless we get out by the roof, an' that's rather too much of a drop, unless we have to," said Corkran. "They're all bung in front of the window, too. What a day we're havin'!"

"Corkran! Beetle!" McTurk's whisper shook with delight. "You can see 'em; I've seen 'em. They're in a blue funk in the barn, an' the two clods are makin' fun of 'em—horrid. Orrin's tryin' to bribe 'em, an' Parsons is nearly blubbin'. Come an' look! I'm in the hayloft. Get through the hole. Don't make a noise, Beetle."

Lithely they wriggled between the displaced boards into the hay and crawled to the edge of the loft. Three years' skirmishing against a hard and unsympathetic peasantry had taught them the elements of strategy. For tactics they looked to Corkran; but even Beetle, notoriously absent-minded, held a lock of hay before his head. There was no haste, no betraying giggle, no squeak of excitement. They had learned, by stripes, the unwisdom of these things. But the conference by a root-cutter on the barn floor was deep in its own affairs; De Vitre's party promising, entreating, and cajoling, while the natives laughed.

"Wait till Muster Vidley an' Muster Toowey—yis, an' the policemen come," was the only answer. "'Tis about time to go to milkin'. What 'ull us do?"

"Yeou go milk, Tom, an' I'll stay long o' the young gentlemen," said the bigger of the two, who answered to the name of Abraham. "Muster Toowey, he'm laike to charge yeou for usin' his yard so free. Iss fai! Yeou'll be wopped proper. 'Rackon yeou'll be askin' for junkets to set in this week o' Sundays to come. But Muster Vidley, he'll give 'ee the best leatherin' of all. He'm passionful, I tal 'ee."

Tom stumped out to milk. The barn doors closed behind him, and in the fading light a great gloom fell on all but Abraham, who discoursed eloquently on Mr. Vidley, his temper and attributes.

Corkran turned in the hay and retreated to the attic, followed by his army.

"No good," was his verdict. "I'm afraid it's all up with 'em. We'd better get out."

"Yes, but look at these beastly cows," said McTurk, spitting on to a heifer's back. "It'll take us a week to shove 'em away from

He drew forth a long, lean, well-worn, home-made catapult—the "tweaker" of those days—slipped a buckshot into the supple chamois leather pouch, and pulled to the full stretch of the elastic. The others followed his example. They only wished to get the cattle out of their way, but seeing the backs so

near, they deemed it their duty each to choose his bird and to let fly with all their strength.

They were not in the least prepared for what followed. Three bullocks, smitten as they believed by Io's gad-fly, trying to wheel amid six close-pressed companions, not to mention three calves, several carts, and all the lumber of a general-utility shed, do not turn end for end without confusion. It was lucky for the boys that they stood a little back on the floor, because one horned head, tossed in pain, flung up a loose board at the edge, and it came down lance-wise on an amazed back. Another victim floundered bodily across the shafts of a decrepit gig, smashing these and oversetting the wheels. That was more than enough for the nerves of the assembly. With wild bellowings and a good deal of left-and-right butting they dashed into



"Corkran, through the roof, scientifically 'tweaked' a frisky heifer on the nose."

the window; and that brute Tom'll hear us. He's just across the yard, milkin'."

"Tweak 'em, then," said Corkran. "Hang it, I'm sorry to have to go, though. If we could get that other beast out of the barn for a minute we might make a rescue. Well, it's no good."

the barnyard, tails on end, and began a very fine free fight on the midden. The last cow out hooked down an old set of harness, which flapped over one eye and trailed behind her. When a companion trod on it, which happened every few seconds, she naturally fell on her knees; and, being

a Burrows cow, with the interests of her calf at heart, attacked the first passer-by. Half awed, but wholly delighted, the boys watched the outburst. It was in full flower before they even dreamed of a second shot. Tom came out from a byre with a pitchfork, to be chased in again by the harnessed cow. A bullock floundered on the muck-heap, fell, rose and bedded himself to the belly, helpless, astare, and bellowing. The others took great interest in him.

Corkran, through the roof, scientifically "tweaked" a frisky heifer on the nose, and it is no exaggeration to say that she danced on her hind legs for half a minute.

"Abram! Oh, Abram! They'm bewitched. They'm ragin'. 'T'es the milk fever. They've been drove mad. Oh, Abram! They'll horn the bullock! They'll horn *me!* Abram!"

"Bide till I lock the door," quoth Abraham, faithful to his trust. They heard him padlock the barn-door; saw him come out with yet another pitchfork. A bullock lowered his head, Abraham ran to the nearest pig-pen, where unearthly squeakings told that he had disturbed the peace of a large family.

"Beetle," snapped Corkran. "Go in an' get 'em out. Quick! We'll keep the cows happy."

A people sitting in darkness and the shadow of a monumental licking, too depressed to be angry with De Vitre, heard a voice from on high saying, "Come up here! Come on! Come up! There's a way out."

They shinned up the loft-stanchions without a word; found a boot-heel which they were bidden to take for guide, and squeezed desperately through a hole in darkness, to be hauled out by Corkran.

"Have you got your caps? Did you give 'em your names and numbers?"

"Yes. No."

"That's all right. Drop down here. Don't stop to jaw. Over the cart—through that window, and bunk! Get out!"

De Vitre needed no second word. They heard him squeak as he dropped among the nettles, and through the roof-chinks they watched four slight figures disappear into the rain. Tom and Abraham, from byre and pig-pen, exhorted the cattle to keep quiet.

"By gum!" said Beetle; "that *was* stalky. How did you think of it?"

"It was the only thing to do. Anybody could have seen that."

"Hadn't we better bunk, too, now?" said McTurk uneasily.

"Why? We're all right. *We* haven't done anything. I want to hear what old Vidley will say. Stop tweakin', Turkey. Let 'em cool off. Golly! how that heifer



"The last cow out hooked down an old set of harness, which flapped over one eye and trailed behind her."

danced! I swear I didn't know cows could be so lively. We're only just in time."

"My Hat! Here's Vidley—and Toowey," said Beetle, as two farmers, both with sticks, strode into the yard.

"Gloats! oh, gloats! Fids! oh, fids! Hefty fids and gloats to us!" said Corkran.

These words, in their vocabulary, expressed the supreme of delight. "Gloats" implies more or less of personal triumph, "fids" is felicity in the abstract, and the boys were tasting both that day. Last joy of all, they had the pleasure of Mr. Vidley's acquaintance, albeit he did not love them. Toowey was more of a stranger, his orchards lying overnear the public road.

Tom and Abraham together told a tale of stolen cattle maddened by overdriving, of cows sure to die in calving, and of milk that would never return, that made Mr. Vidley swear for three consecutive minutes in the soft speech of North Devon.

"Tes tu bad. Tes tu bad," said Toowey, consolingly; "let 'ope they 'aven't took no great' arm. They be wonderful wild, though."

"Tes all well for yeou, Toowey, that sells them dom Collegers seventy quart a week."

"Eighty," Toowey replied, with the meek triumph of one who has underbidden his neighbour on tender; "but that's no odds to me. Yeou'm free to leather 'em saame as if they was yeour own sons. On my barn-floor shall 'ee leather 'em."

"Generous old pig!" said Beetle; "De Vitre ought to have stayed for this."

"They'm all safe an' to rights," said the officious Abraham, producing the key. "Rackon us'll come in an' hold 'em for yeou. Hey! the cows are fair ragin' still. Us'll have to run for it."

The barn being next to the shed, the boys could not see that stately entry. But they heard.

"Gone an' hided in the hay. Aie! They'm proper afraid."

"Rout un out! Rout un out!" roared Vidley, rattling a stick impatiently on the root-cutter.

"Oh, my Aunt!" said Corkran, standing on one foot.

"Shut the door. Shut the door, I tal 'ee. Rackon us can find un in the dark. Us don't want un boltin' like rabbitses under our elbows." The big barn-door closed with a clang.

"My Gum!" said Corkran, which was always his oath in time of action. He dropped down and was gone for perhaps ten seconds.

"And that's all right," he said, returning at a gentle pace.

"Hwhatt?" McTurk almost shrieked, for Corkran, in the shed below, waved a large key.

"Stalks! Frabjous stalks! Bottled 'em! all four!" was the reply, and Beetle fell on his bosom. "Yiss. They'm so's to say, like, locked up. If you're goin' to laugh, Beetle, I shall have to kick you."

"But I must!" Beetle was purple with suppressed mirth.

"You won't do it here, then!" He thrust the already limp Beetle through the

cart-shed window. It sobered him, for one cannot laugh on a bed of nettles. Then Corkran stepped on his prostrate carcass, and McTurk followed, just as Beetle would have risen; so he was upset, and the nettles painted on his cheek with a likeness of hideous eruptions.

"Thought that 'ud cure you," said Corkran, with a sniff.

Beetle rubbed his face desperately with dock-leaves, and said nothing. All desire to laugh had gone from him. They entered the lane.

Then a clamour broke out from the barn—a compound noise of horse-like kicks, shaking of door-panels, and fivefold yells.

"They've found it out," said Corkran. "How strange!" He sniffed again.

"Let 'em," said Beetle. "No' one can hear 'em. Come on up to Coll."

"What a brute you are, Beetle! You only think of your beastly self. Those cows want milkin'. Poor dears! Hear 'em low," said McTurk.

"Go back and milk 'em yourself, then." Beetle danced with pain. "We shall miss call-over, hanging' about like this; an' I've two black marks this week already."

"Then you'll have fatigue-drill on Monday, sure pop," said Corkran. "Come to think of it, I've got two black marks *aussi*. Hm! This is serious. This is hefty serious."

"I told you," said Beetle, with vindictive triumph. "An' we want to go out after that hawk's nest on Monday. We shall be swottin' dumb-bells, though. *All* your fault. If we'd bunked with De Vitre at first—"

Corkran paused between the hedgerows. "Hold on a shake an' don't burble. Keep your eye on your Uncle. Do you know, I believe someone's shut up in that barn. I think we ought to go and see."

"Don't be a giddy idiot. Come on up to Coll." But Corkran took no notice of Beetle.

He retraced his steps to the head of the lane, and, lifting up his voice, cried as in bewilderment, "Hullo? Who's there? What's that row about? Who are you?"

"Oh, Peter!" said Beetle, skipping, and forgetting his anguish in this new and jestful development.

"Hoi! Hoi! 'Ere! Let us out!" The answers came muffled and hollow from the black bulk of the barn, with renewed thunders on the door.

"Now play up," said Corkran. "Turkey, you keep the cows merry. Member that

we've just discovered 'em. We don't know anything. Be polite."

They picked their way over the muck and held speech through the crack by the hinge. Three more genuinely surprised boys the North Devon rain never fell upon. And

blewed against us an' jammed herself." That was Abraham.

"Yes, we can see that. It's quite jammed this side," said Corkran. "How careless you chaps are!"

"Oppen un. Oppen un. Bash her oppen



"Abraham ran to the nearest pig-pen."

they were so polite—so polite and so difficult to enlighten. They had to be told again and again.

"We've been 'ere for hours an' hours." That was Toowey. "An' the cows to milk, an' all." That was Vidley. "The door she

with a rock, young gen'elmen! The cows are milk-heated an' raagin'. Haven't yeou boys no sense?"

Seeing that McTurk from time to time tweaked the wretched cattle into renewed bellowings and caperings, it was quite pos-

sible that the boys had some knowledge of a sort. But Mr. Vidley was rude. They told him so through the door, professing only now to recognise his voice.

"Humour un if 'e can. I paid seven-an'-six for the dom padlock," said Toowey. "Niver mind *him*. 'T'es only old Vidley."

"Be yeou gwaine to stay a prisoneer an' captive for the sake of a lock, Toowey? I'm 'shaamed of 'ee. Rowt un oppen, young gen'elmen! 'T'was a God's own mercy yeou heard us. Toowey, yeou'm a borned miser."

"It'll be a long job," said Corkran. "Look here. It's near our call-over. If we stay to help you we'll miss it. We've come miles out of our way already—after you."

"Tell yeour master, then, what keeped 'ee—an arrand o' mercy, laike. I'll tal un tu when I bring the milk to-morrow," said Toowey.

"That's no good," said Corkran; "we may be caned twice over by then. You'll have to give us a letter." McTurk, backed against the barn-wall, was firing steadily and accurately into the brown of the herd.

"Yiss, yiss; come down to my house. My missus shall write 'ee a beauty, young gen'elmen. She makes out the bills. I'll give 'ee just such a letter o' racommendation as I'd give to my own son, if on'y yeou can humour the dom lock!"

"Niver mind the lock," Vidley wailed. "Let me get to my pore dommed cows, 'fore they'm dead."

They went to work with ostentatious rattlings and wrenchings, and a good deal of the by-play that Corkran always loved. At last—the noise of unlocking was covered by some fancy hammering with a young boulder—the door swung open and the captives marched out.

"Hurry up, Mister Toowey," said Corkran; "we ought to be getting back. Will you give us that note, please?"

"Some of yeou young gentlemen was drivin' my cattle off the Burrowses," said Vidley. "I give 'ee fair warnin', I'll tell yeour masters. I know *yeou*!" He glared at Corkran with malignant recognition.

McTurk looked him over from head to heel. "Oh, it's only old Vidley. Drunk again, I suppose. Well, we can't help that. Come on, *Mister Toowey*. We'll go to your house."

"Drunk, am I? I'll drink 'ee! How do I know yeou bain't same lot? Abram, did 'ee take their names an' numbers?"

"What *is* he ravin' about?" said Beetle. "My good fool, can't you see that if we'd

taken your beastly cattle we shouldn't be hanging round your beastly barns. 'Pon my Sam, you guv'nors haven't any sense——"

"Let alone gratitude," said Corkran. "I suppose he *was* drunk, Mister Toowey; an' you locked him in the barn to get sober. Shockin'! Oh, shockin'!"

Vidley denied the charge in language that the boys' mothers would have wept to hear.

"Well, go and look after your cows, then," said McTurk. "Don't stand here cursin' us because we've been kind enough to help you out of a scrape. Why on earth weren't your cows milked before? *You're* no farmer. It's long past milkin'. No wonder they're half crazy. Disreputable old bog-trotter, you are. Brush your hair, sir. . . . I beg your pardon, Mister Toowey. Hope we're not keeping you."

They left Vidley dancing on the muck-heap, amid the cows, and devoted themselves to propitiating Mr. Toowey on their way to his house. Exercise had made them hungry; hunger is the mother of good manners; and they won golden opinions from Mrs. Toowey.

* * * * *

"Three-quarters of an hour late for call-over, and fifteen minutes late for lock-up," said Foxy, the school sergeant, crisply. He was waiting for them at the head of the corridor. "Report to your housemaster, please—an' a nice mess you're in, young gentlemen."

"Quite right, Foxibus. Strict attention to dooty does it," said Corkran. "Now where, if we asked you, would you say that his honour Mister Prout might at this moment of time be found prouting—eh?"

"In 'is study—as usual, Mister Cockran. He took call-over."

"Hurrah! Luck's with us all the way. Don't blub, Foxy. I'm afraid you don't catch us this time."

* * * * *

"We went up to change, sir, before comin' to you. That made us a little late, sir. We weren't really very late. We were detained—by a——"

"An errand of mercy," said Beetle, and they laid Mrs. Toowey's laboriously written note before him. "We thought you'd prefer a letter, sir. He got himself locked into a barn, and we heard him shouting—Toowey who brings the Coll. milk—and we went to let him out."

"There were ever so many cows waiting

to be milked," said McTurk; "and, of course, he couldn't get at them, sir. They said the door had jammed. There's the note, sir."

Mr. Prout read it over thrice. It was perfectly unimpeachable; but it said nothing of a large tea supplied by Mrs. Toowey.

"Well, I don't like your getting mixed up with farmers and potwallopers. Of course you will not have any more to do with the Tooways."

"Of course not, sir. It was really on account of the cows, sir," said McTurk, glowing with philanthropy.

"And you came straight back?"

"We ran nearly all the way from the Cattle-gate," said Corkran, carefully developing the unessential. "That's a mile, sir. Of course, we had to get the note from Toowey first."

"But it was because we went to change—we were rather wet, sir—that we were really late. After we'd reported ourselves to the sergeant, sir, and he knew we were in Coll., we didn't like to come to your study all dirty." Sweeter than honey in the comb was the voice of Beetle.

"Very good. Don't let it happen again." Their housemaster learned to know them better in later years.

They entered—not to say swaggered—into Number Nine form-room, where De Vitre, Orrin, Parsons, and Howlett, before the fire, were still telling their adventures to admiring associates. They rose as one boy.

"What happened to you? We just saved call-over. Did you stay on? Tell us! Tell us!"

The three smiled pensively. They were not distinguished for telling more than was necessary.

"Oh, we stayed on a bit and then we came away," said McTurk. "That's all."

"You scab! You might tell a chap, anyhow."

"Think so? Well, that's awfully good of

you, De Vitre. 'Pon my sainted Sam, that's awfully good of you," said Corkran, shouldering into the centre of the warmth and toasting one slippered foot before the blaze. "So you really think we might tell you?"

They stared at the coals and shook with deep, delicious chuckles.

"My Hat! We *were* stalky," said McTurk.



"Tom and Abraham together told a tale."

"I swear we were about as stalky as they make 'em. Weren't we?"

"It was a frabjous stalk," said Beetle. "Much too good to tell you brutes, though."

The form wriggled under the insult, but made no motion to avenge it. After all, on De Vitre's own showing, the three had saved the raiders from at least a public licking.

"It wasn't half bad," said Corkran. "Stalky is the word."

"You were the really stalky one," said McTurk, one contemptuous shoulder turned to a listening world. "By Gum! you *were* stalky."

Corkran accepted the compliment and the name together. "Yes," said he; "keep your eye on your Uncle Stalky an' he'll pull you through."

"Well, you needn't gloat so," said De Vitré, viciously; "you look like a stuffed cat."

Corkran, henceforth known as Stalky, took not the faintest notice, but smiled dreamily.

"My Hat! Yes. Of course," he murmured. "Your Uncle Stalky—a doocid good name. Your Uncle Stalky is no end of a stalker. He's a great man. I swear he is. De Vitré, you're an ass—a putrid ass."

De Vitré would have denied this but for assenting murmurs from Parsons and Orrin.

"You needn't rub it in, then."

"But I do. I does. You are such a

woppin' ass. D'you know it? Think over it a bit at prep. Think it up in bed. Just oblige me by thinkin' of it every half hour till further notice. Gummy! *What* an ass you are! But your Uncle Stalky"—he picked up the form-room poker and drove it thoughtfully against the mantelpiece—"is a great man!"

"Hear, hear," said Beetle and McTurk, who had fought under that general.

"Isn't your Uncle Stalky a great man, De Vitré? Speak the truth, you fat-headed old impostor."

"Yes," said De Vitré, deserted by his band. "I—I suppose he is."

"Mustn't suppose."

"Well, he is."

"A great man?"

"A great man. *Now* won't you tell us?" said De Vitré pleadingly.

"Not by a heap," said Stalky Corkran.

Therefore the tale has stayed untold till to-day.

