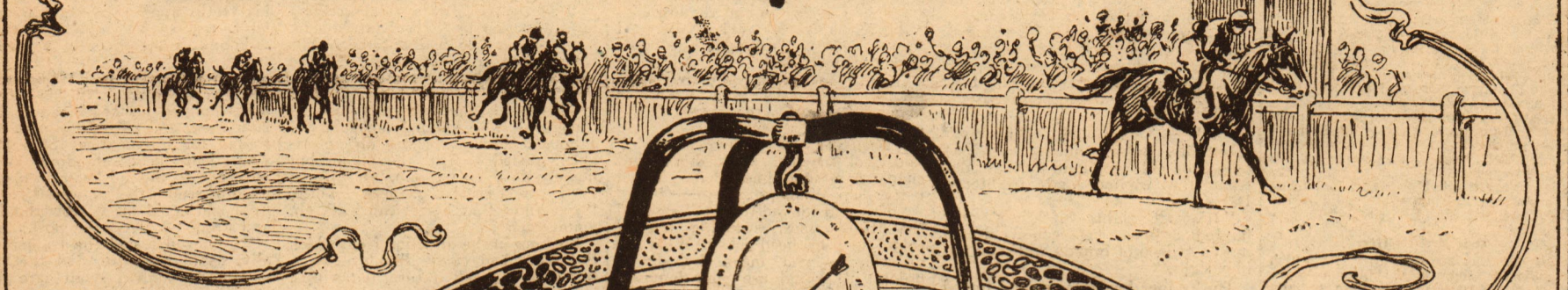
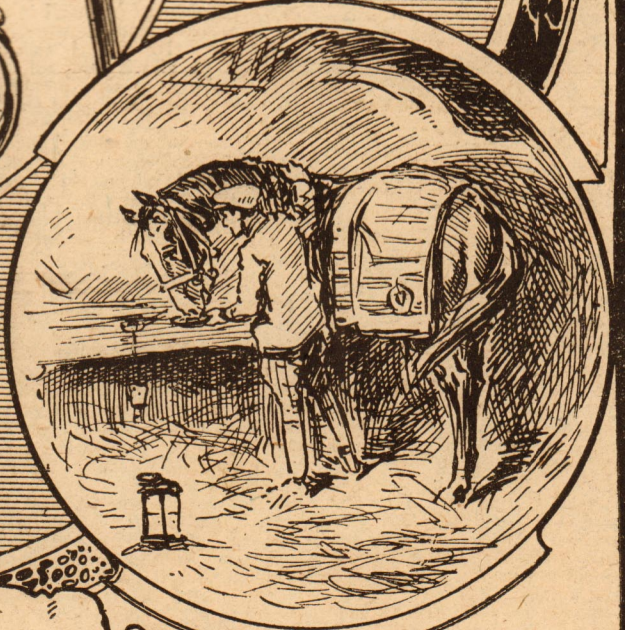
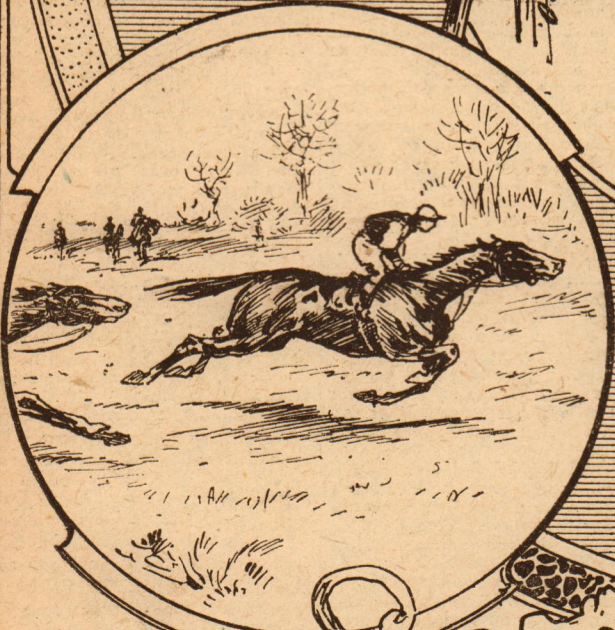


SPECIAL HOLIDAY NUMBER.

THE BOYS' FRIEND 1^D



The Odds Against Him



Our Grand New Racing Serial

in the green garment, with a white heart painted upon the breast.

"This is no time, youngster, for fool's play!" said one of them, in an angry tone that brought an answering flush to Lionel's cheek.

"If thou hast a better plan than mine, put it in action, my friend," said Lionel. "In this guise can I ride among the enemy, and, perchance, set them upon a false scent, or, may be, warn Goodman Robin."

"He says well!" cried Dick Quintain. "Lend me thy horse, Jack, and I will go with him."

"That will I and welcome," said Jack Patch, who was wondrous sore. And quickly donning another surcoat, and picking out a helmet from the score that littered the saddle of the black horse as the others trailed off into the trees.

It was very still in the forest, and a heavy dew lay over everything.

"'Tis nigh upon a league," said Dick, "and yonder lies the path."

He pointed to an opening in the bushes, where the ground had been recently trodden by the passage of many horses, and, keeping their eyes and ears wide open, the pair got the tired animals to a trot, bending low now and again to escape the overhanging branches.

"Listen for the blackbird's whistle," said Dick Quintain. "He is a true friend to the forester."

It was weird and spectral as they passed down the long aisles of the woodland through which the path wound, now plunging into some gloomy bottom where a stream brawled, again traversing a wide savanna, where the trees seemed to have fallen back to form a natural amphitheatre.

No mottled deer trooped across the glades, for the recent march of the men-at-arms had scared all living things, and hushed the waking birds to silence.

Overhead, through the marvellous lacework of bough and twig, the sky was flushing rosy as the sun rose, and several times they reined in and listened for the sound of conflict.

"'Tis strange," said Dick Quintain, as they rode abreast up a steep hillside, "we are scarce two bowshots from the camp now."

As they gained the top, and met the cool, sweet air that brought with it a thousand woodland scents and a fragrant freshness unknown to your town-dweller, a low murmur reached them, and the two lads looked at each other.

It was the hum of many voices, mellowed by the width of the valley over which they gazed.

"What shall we see, I wonder?" muttered Dick Quintain. "'Twere best to turn aside here, for by skirting the hawthorn shade we shall come in sight of the camp in a few moments."

Lionel loosened the heavy sword which he had taken from the dead man's shoulders, and followed his companion along the southern ridge of the valley, but they had scarce ridden fifty paces when a voice cried: "Hold! Another step forward and you die!"

Lionel bore on his reins, and the sword was half out of its sheath when a low laugh from Dick Quintain reassured him.

"Nay, now, good dame," he said. "I should know the music of thy speech anywhere." And he took off the helmet he was wearing.

"Saint Hubert be praised!" cried the voice again, only this time there was a glad ring in it. "Where is my Robin, Dick?" And Maid Marian, long bow in hand, ran from behind a spreading beech-tree.

Her hair was all dishevelled and her kirtle of Lincoln green torn by thorns.

"Robin is safe!" said the two lads in chorus. "But what of the camp?" Maid Marian stepped back a pace, and pointed to an opening in the hawthorn-trees.

"The King is there, and the sheriff with him," she said, "which no doubt you know already; but they have found nothing save our huts and the ashes of the fire, for yesterday we spied an evil visage peering into the dell. Of men we had but three, and two of those lame, so I did e'en stalk our visitor myself; yet he eluded me and made off to southward."

"And thou, Marian?" said Dick Quintain.

"Pardie, that was enough for Robin's spouse!" said the fearless young woman with a flash of her magnificent eyes. "I marked where the varlet had lain half the day long, and knew that boded no good to us and my man away, so straightway we did get the boat, placed the sick and the little ones within it, and they be

snug hid on the island in the middle of the marsh."

"Bravo! Bravo!" cried Dick and Lionel. "Thou art a true outlaw's wife!"

And then they told her, while they watched the glitter of armour round about Long Harry's Oak, how Robin himself, with five-and-twenty stout men of the band, had made for the camp a good hour ago, and how thirty more were even then within hail somewhere in the woods behind them.

"'Tis pity," said Dick Quintain, chewing his underlip, "to let yonder dogs go free."

"Gramercy!" cried Lionel. "But the King and the sheriff have nigh upon five hundred armed and mounted knaves with them. What can less than a hundred do against such an array?"

Maid Marian and Dick exchanged a meaning glance, and both laughed.

"Robin Hood's ward has much to learn," said Maid Marian, "and 'twill irk me sore if there be not dead men in the forest ere it is high noon."

While she was speaking a wood-pigeon's note floated through the trees, and Dick swung round on his heel, for he had dismounted.

"If ever I heard Alan-a-Dale, I hear him now," he said, and he imitated the call of the wood bird.

They had not long to wait, for Alan-a-Dale came stealing quickly through the bushes, making straight

plan? Let you and I ride to the King with news that the French Prince has landed to join the barons. I warrant me he will not linger for all the outlaws in the world when he hears that!"

Maid Marian clapped her hands.

"Boy, boy!" she cried. "'Tis a thought worthy of an older head than thine! Give me but time to warn Robin yonder, and then dig in the spurs." And without waiting for Dick Quintain to speak, she plunged through the hawthorns and made her way down the valley side.

"By my halidom, thou art a bold rogue!" laughed Dick, as her green kirtle disappeared amongst the trees; "but we will risk it. Marian can thread the forest with the best of us, and she and Alan will reach Robin together."

And so they waited in the shadow of the hawthorns, listening to the murmur of the distant voices and the shrill neighing of the horses until Dick Quintain should judge that sufficient time had elapsed for Robin to get the news.

The False Messengers.

"WELL, FitzAlwyn," said King John, "so it seems we have come upon a fool's errand once more." And he threw a side glance at the sheriff that boded him no good.

FitzAlwyn intercepted the glance

"By my halidom!" cried John, who saw it at the same moment. "Where the cub is, the she-wolf is not far off. The outlaws are yonder. Look, man, what make you of that?"

FitzAlwyn bit his lip the harder as a woman ran out into the sedgy grass, and snatching up the child, darted back with it into the trees.

Perhaps he was thinking how once on a time Robin Hood had saved his own child from destruction, for FitzAlwyn had a heart beneath his chain-mail, and he knew that John had neither heart nor pity for any living thing that crossed his path.

"Ho, there—to horse!" cried the King. "And ride some of you round the edge of the water! We have them in a trap. Is there no way by which we can cross to the island, FitzAlwyn? Is the ground hard enough to bear the weight of a horse and its rider?"

"There is one spot," replied the sheriff gloomily—"a gravel ridge, along which a man may wade with the water to his middle. But those yonder be but women and children, for have we not seen the men ourselves in the forest?"

John gave a bitter, scornful laugh as his Italian mercenaries swung themselves into their saddles and trotted away round the ragged edge of the marshy lake.

"Thou art over-soft for thy post, FitzAlwyn!" he hissed. "Thou

hoofs and the sound of approaching voices coming from the southward made everyone turn his head in that direction, and they saw two mounted figures spurring their horses into the dell.

"Ill news—ill news for the King's ear!" cried the new-comers, who were none other than Lionel and Dick Quintain. And as John checked his charger, the messengers flung themselves from their panting steeds and ran to his stirrup.

"My liege," cried Lionel, "we bring thee woeful tidings indeed! Prince Louis of France hath landed on the coast of Norfolk with a great army, and is to march on London as soon as his men be all gotten from the ships. He who brought this evil word lies dead beside his horse in the forest yonder, and with his last breath bade us seek you out with all speed."

John's face flushed crimson, and then grew pale as carven ivory.

"By my father's bones," he muttered, "hath it come to this?"

"Nay, more, my liege," said Dick Quintain, who made a very presentable man-at-arms in steel cap and surcoat. "We understood the messenger to say that twenty of the barons rode forth from London two days since to meet the French prince, led by the Lord FitzWalter."

At the mention of his bitter foe John's anger flamed, and he swore an impious oath.

"Hearest thou this, FitzAlwyn?" he shouted. "These rebel dogs have drawn their swords with a vengeance, but do I vow that I will lay England waste and the grass shall no more grow where my horse hath set his hoofs. To me, De Bottefort, and you, Messire Pisa! To me, Simon of Wark and Claude of Avranches! Ho, sound the trumpets there!"

While the tyrant was yet speaking, those who were on foot ran to their horses, and at the first blare of the trumpets Messire Pisa's mounted crossbowmen came galloping back with a mighty splashing, as, clapping his spurs to his horse's side with a force that made the poor brute leap forward, King John sped up the dell into the narrow track.

Jostling each other in their eagerness to be first, bowmen and spear-men and burly men-at-arms dashed across the brook, and followed in single file, for the path there was narrow and bordered on either side by great bushes of prickly holly.

But ere little more than half the cavalcade had left Long Harry's Oak, a suspicion of treachery flashed through FitzAlwyn's brain, and he turned to question the messengers who had brought these strange tidings.

Their horses were there, but Lionel and Dick had vanished.

The two rascals had stolen into the sandy cave under the oak-tree, where they lay watching the successful outcome of Lionel's plan through a crevice among the roots.

"FitzAlwyn suspects something," whispered Lionel. "If they seek us here we are lost."

"Not so," replied Dick, scarce able to restrain his laughter. "The oak above us is hollow as an empty nut."

They heard FitzAlwyn bid his men beat the bushes without avail, and as a distant note from a bugle-horn came faintly to their ears, they saw by the start he made that he had heard it, too, and guessed its import.

"Beshrew me!" cried the Sheriff of Nottingham. "I was right! 'Twas an outlaw ruse, and the King is like to remember this day ere he and his following draw out of the forest!"

But though he gave the word to march, a curious smile played about his handsome face, and the watchers knew that the sheriff's heart was not in the King's cause, despite the office that he held.

"For all his threats, yonder brave gentleman is more our friend than our enemy," said Dick Quintain. "Mark you how slow he rides, and the backward glance he throws at the island. He cares not if he comes up with the King—not he; and, for my part, I hope he does not."

They saw the last of FitzAlwyn's men ride out of the dell, and then Dick Quintain, thrusting his arm into the sandy bank, drew out a couple of longbows and a quiver full of arrows.

"Come, friend Lionel, we may be yet in time!" he cried, tearing off the surcoat and tossing the steel cap on to the ground. "Do thou as I do, and I will take thee by a short cut to the spot where I divine Robin will be in ambush."

(Another thrilling instalment on Tuesday next.)



Friar Tuck's staff shore clean through wood and all; and, with a blow that drove the steel cap home about his ears, laid Bardolf motionless upon the turf.

for the spot where they stood, overjoyed to see the trio, but most of all Maid Marian, for, as he told them, Robin was in despair to find the camp at Long Harry's Oak already in the hands of the enemy.

"We skirted the edge of the woods to northward lest we should bring the soldiers to the spot," Alan explained. But the mystery was solved when they told him of Peter of Lincoln and the toad-man, and how FitzAlwyn and the King, when once they had learned the whereabouts of the camp, and had hanged the informant for his pains, had made straight for the spot.

He had seen nothing of Ulf, whose stratagem of the bush-fire had saved them; but while they were yet holding earnest counsel, Ulf appeared, with a pale face, for he feared that Robin and the rest had been taken.

"Go you, Ulf," said Alan-a-Dale, "and intercept those of our men whom friend Lionel summoned from Trent side, and join us at the Thickets, for I will hie me to Robin with the news. I would that by some device we could draw these wolves away from the camp, for once among these straggling paths they will make good targets for our longbows."

With a wave of the hand the two young foresters vanished, and while Dick and Maid Marian talked together, Lionel sat in his saddle, wrapped in thought, pondering deeply over Alan-a-Dale's last words.

"Dick," he cried suddenly, "I have it! What think you of this

without seeming to see it, and bit his lip.

"You saw the outlaws for yourself, my liege," he said; "'twas scarce our fault that they escaped us by a clever ruse, and that this has been their camp 'tis right easy to see. Here is their burrow in the sand-bank; there is the fire still smouldering."

"Pish!" interrupted the King. "Of what use is the nest when the birds have flown? You are warden of this forest, and yet these scurvy loons defy thee and make a laughing-stock of us all."

They had walked side by side past Long Harry's Oak to the spot where the little stream found entrance to the broad marsh, and the reedy shore still bore the print of the fugitives' feet where they had pushed out the rude boat that had carried them to their hiding-place.

"Come, man," snarled the King. "I will ride in pursuit till doomsday, but it is for thee to say which way the dogs have gone!"

The sheriff's eye swept the dense forest in vain, but as it travelled over the marsh, it suddenly became riveted, and FitzAlwyn made an involuntary start.

A long, low island, on which some willows and stunted alders grew, stood rather more than a bowshot off, and out of the bushes ran a little child, clapping its hands at the great red sun that had now risen above the forest top.

shalt change thy sheriff's mantle for a monk's hood!"

"My sword is at your service," said FitzAlwyn, laying his hand upon it; "but not for the slaughter of babes and innocents!" But John only laughed the louder.

He would have liked to have cut FitzAlwyn down, save for the fact that the sheriff was a taller and stronger man than himself, and had, moreover, half a score of his own fellows behind him.

One of these, who had overheard his master speak of the gravel-ridge that led to the island, pointed to a silver birch stem a yard or two away, and said:

"There is the ford, my lord, and one has but to keep rather to the right than to the left to come yonder."

"So be it," said the King. "Then lead on, fellow, and three-score knaves shall follow thee."

John sprang into his saddle, and though FitzAlwyn folded his arms and stood haughtily aloof, his men obeyed the King's orders with alacrity, and as crossbows and spear-men rode along the spongy margin to intercept any fugitives, a party of dismounted ruffians waded out in the wake of their guide.

The air resounded with loud shouts and triumphant laughter. 'Twas rare sport this hounding down of the defenceless, but scarce had the leading man gone twenty yards out from the shore than the thud of

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A GRAND TALE OF FRANK NORMAN & CO.

THE 1st CHAPTER.

Mr. Thorpe and the Tortoise.

HAROLD GUARD took one sip of the thin, burnt, washy coffee his fag had just brought him...

tions to the very letter, "Guard wants to see you at once." "What for?" "He's given me a holiday. I'm not very well, you know," answered Sidford.

"What has gone wrong with you lately, Sidford?" asked the captain. "I can't drink this horrible mash."

"Out with your tongue," said the captain, with a professional air. "Myes; not as pink as it might be. I'll give you a pass, and you can run off and see Dr. Hallick after breakfast."

How? What are you talking about? The captain of the Junior Fourth explained the brilliant manner in which he had managed to elude bondage himself and enslave the enemy in his place, and Tony roared.

The first bell for class sounded. They discovered Fred Goss informing Wilson and the Honourable Billy White of what had happened. "Cheero, Goss! I—oh, Mary, of course!" said Tony Wise.

had handed in an unfinished exercise. If Mr. Thorpe did not reach it before the breakfast bell rang, Frank intended to come back and complete it.

"The basket was certainly moving. It was sliding slowly across the floor. Frank, Hatfield, and Tony Wise saw it too with no little astonishment. Mr. Thorpe leaned over his desk.

cold-blooded animal. I am not, nor are you. If you are—all the better for you, for I shall not hurt you much.

THE 2nd CHAPTER. Missing Money.

"WHAT a studious chap you are, Guard!" cried Dr. Hallick breezily. "I knocked twice. Hallo! Is this the Bank of England? What fabulous wealth!"

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