



The Rival Escort

Another of
CHARLES HAMILTON'S
Grand Complete Cliveden
School Stories.

The 1st Chapter. One for the Combine.

"MY only hat!" Pankhurst and Price, the auburn-haired chums of the Fourth Form at Cliveden, were coming out of the school-house, when the former suddenly stopped, with that ejaculation of surprise. "My only pyjama-hat!" repeated Pankhurst. "Look at them, Pricey!"

And Price looked. Three juniors were wheeling their machines from the direction of the bicycle-shed. It was Wednesday—a half-holiday at Cliveden—and a sunny June afternoon. The three youths—Poindexter, Neville, and Flynn, otherwise known as the Cliveden Combine—were evidently going out for a cycle-run. But it was not that which caused Pankhurst's ejaculation. There was nothing out of the ordinary in the Combine going for a cycle-run on a fine afternoon. It was the "get-up" of the Combine that made Pankhurst stare.

And truly, the get-up of the three cyclists was striking. "My only hat!" Pankhurst murmured again. "Gorgeous, aren't they?"

And Price murmured: "Quite so!"

The Combine were clad in Norfolk jackets and knickers. Jackets and knickers had been carefully brushed, and not a speck of dust was to be seen upon them. That alone was rather a striking circumstance in the Fourth Form at Cliveden. But that was not all. Each of the three had his best tan boots on, and the tan boots, too, were spotless. Each had a beautifully white collar, and a tie tied exactly in the middle. Each had his cap set straight on his head.

Dick Neville had been seen with his cap straight before, and so had Poindexter once or twice. But never Micky Flynn. But now each of the three had his cap as straight as if it had been glued upon his head. Even that was not all. Each of the three had a flower in his coat, and it was this last circumstance that made Pankhurst and Price stare more than anything else.

"My hat!" said Pankhurst, for the fourth time. "What, in the name of wonder, is the matter with them? They can't be going to a wedding—"

"Or a funeral?" suggested Price vaguely.

"Chaps don't go to weddings or funerals on bikes," said Pankhurst with a shake of the head. "But there's something unusual on. Did you ever see Micky Flynn with his cap straight before?"

"Never, that I remember."

"He must have put that on in front of a looking-glass," said Pankhurst. "Look at their gloves, too. Going cycling in light kid gloves."

"My word!"

"And roses in their coats! What does it mean?"

"Mad, perhaps."

"Well, that's possible. We'll ask them." And Pankhurst and Price walked towards the three chums of the Fourth.

The Combine stopped and waited for them to come up.

Poindexter, Neville, and Flynn were looking very pleased with themselves, and they greeted the Old Firm with superior smiles. It was evident that they considered that they were scoring in some way.

"I say," began Pankhurst. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing, I guess," drawled Poindexter.

"Price thinks that you are mad. Are you mad?"

"I guess not."

"Sure, and your complaint's not infectious," said Micky Flynn; "we haven't caught it, Panky."

"Then what's up?" demanded Pankhurst rather excitedly. "What do you mean by dressing yourselves up like tailor's dummies?"

"Oh, cheese it!" said Dick Neville, turning rather red. "You two chaps never get yourselves up decently; but that's no reason why we shouldn't."

Especially when we're going to take a lady out for a bicycle run," said Poindexter loftily. Pankhurst started.

"You're going to—what?"

"Oh, didn't you know?" said Poindexter

carelessly. "Miss Clara is going for a cycle run, and we are going to escort her."

"Rats!"

Poindexter shrugged his shoulders.

"I guess you'll see soon, my son."

"It's all gas!" exclaimed Pankhurst excitedly. "Miss Clara isn't going out with you. I'll believe it when I see it."

"You'll see it in a quarter of an hour," said Dick Neville, with a grin.

"Faith, and that's thrue for ye!"

"Rats!"

Pankhurst said "rats!" But Pankhurst was uneasy. He began to feel that the Combine were not rotting, and that Poindexter was speaking the truth. And that was gall and wormwood to the Old Firm.

Miss Clara was the Head's little daughter. Miss Clara was fourteen years old—a pretty, sweet-tempered, if rather wilful, little girl, and every fellow in the Fourth Form at Cliveden was her slave. She did not see much of the juniors, however, the Head's house being somewhat secluded from the school grounds; but every now and then they met, and there was not a fellow in any Form at Cliveden who would not have let Clara Rayne wipe her little boots on him if she had wished to do so.

For Miss Clara to allow a junior to be her escort on a cycle-run was an honour and a glory, and it was no wonder that the Combine felt pleased with themselves, if it was true! And Pankhurst felt that it was true. The rivalry between the Combine and the Old Firm was keen. They had had their ups and their downs, and honours were easy. But Pankhurst felt that if the Combine succeeded in a thing like this, the Old Firm might as well hide its diminished head, and go out of business altogether. It would be a triumph which the three juniors would never allow their rivals to forget.

Poindexter, Neville, and Flynn grinned at one another with conscious triumph. They had scored one over the Old Firm this time, and they knew it. Pankhurst and Price knew it, too. "I'll believe it when I see it," said Pankhurst, at last.

"Sure, and ye'll see it at three o'clock precisely, darling," said Micky Flynn.

"I guess so!"

"We'd take you chaps along," said Dick Neville condescendingly, "only, you see, we can't have a beastly crowd; and then, you're not dressed very neatly. Your collar is rather soiled, Panky, and Price has laced up his boots crookedly—"

"And then there's ye're faces. If ye were to frighten the horses on the road, it might be dangerous for Miss Clara—"

"Well, their heads would serve as danger-signals, I guess," said Poindexter thoughtfully.

"Ha, ha! Faith, and it's right ye are, Pundtoddler."

"You rotters!" grunted Pankhurst. "You've stolen a march on us."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If we'd had the faintest idea that Miss Clara was thinking of going out for a cycle run, and would let a fellow come along to look after her, we'd have been on the scene like a shot."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you rotters—"

"I guess you're usually a little late," said Poindexter. "You haven't any initiative, you know. That's why we always score."

"You always score!" roared Pankhurst.

"Well, I like that—"

"Well, if you like it, what are you yelling about?"

"The cheek! You always score! Haven't we always knocked you into a cocked hat?"

"Not that I remember, I guess," said Poindexter, with irritating coolness.

"Ain't we the heads of the Form—"

"I guess not."

"Oh, come away," said Neville. "We can't waste time quarrelling, now. You two chaps can run away and play. Come on, kids!"

The Combine wheeled their machines on.

Pankhurst and Price stood looking at one another in inexpressible dismay and wrath.

The 2nd Chapter.

Pankhurst Has a Plan.

"THEY'VE done us this journey!"

growled Pankhurst, at last.

"Quite so!"

"I never had the faintest idea that Miss Clara—"

"Well, the fact is, Panky, you ought to have thought of it," said Price, in an argumentative way. "You're chief of this firm—"

"Look here—"

"As leader, you ought to have thought of it. You oughtn't to let the Combine score over us like that," said Price, with a shake of the head.

"I can't think of everything, can I?"

growled Pankhurst wrathfully.

"No, I suppose not; but you ought to have thought of that, you know."

"If I had anybody but a confounded idiot to back me up, I might have—"

"It's no good calling me names—"

"Then don't you start ragging me because they—"

"I wasn't ragging you—"

"Yes, you were—"

"I say—"

"Oh, cheese it!" said Pankhurst. "It's no good our rowing. That won't make matters any better, that I can see."

"Quite so."

"We're not going to take this lying down! We're going to upset the game of those rotters somehow!" said Pankhurst excitedly.

Price looked extremely dubious.

"How can we manage that, Panky?"

"I don't know! We shall have to think of something. You've got a brain, haven't you? Start it working, then, for a change."

"I'm blessed if I—"

"The rotters!" said Pankhurst, gazing after the Combine. "That's why they're got up in such gorgeous style, because they're going to take Miss Clara out. And how dark they've kept it up till now. They're waiting at the gate; she's going to join them there. I suppose—"

"Quite so."

Pankhurst wrinkled his brows in thought. The Combine were standing near the gateway, leaning on their machines and chatting cheerfully. They were in high feather. Pankhurst, buried in deep thought, stood with corrugated brows and set lips. Price watched him in silence. It was very seldom that Pankhurst found himself at a loss for a plan when one was required. But Price could not think of anything that could be done now. They could not "go for" the Combine, as there was a lady in the case. And Price's idea of reprisals was

limited to the simple and drastic method of "going" for the enemy.

Pankhurst gave a sudden jump, as a stream of cold water was projected against his trousers. He yelped, and swung round sharply. The stream of water came from the nose of a hose in the hands of Stump, the young known indifferently at Cliveden as Stumpy, Stumpy, and Rags. The Old Firm were standing upon a grass plot, and Stump had taken upon himself to water that particular plot at that particular moment. Stump was not on the best of terms with the Old Firm or the Combine, either. The stream was against Pankhurst's legs was probably not an accident.

"What are you up to, you clumsy villain?" howled Pankhurst.

Stump looked at him.

"Begging your pardon," he said. "I didn't see you in the shade of the elm—"

"What do you mean, young gentlemen?"

"You might have said that before you drenched my trousers, ass!"

"Haccidents will 'appen—"

Pankhurst growled and walked off the grass followed by Price. The Combine, at the gate, had seen the mishap, and they were grinning. A glimmer came into Pankhurst's eyes, and he grasped Price's arm, so suddenly and so hard that Price uttered an exclamation.

"What the dickens—"

"Quiet! I've got an idea!"

Price stared at him.

"What do you mean, Panky?"

"I've got an idea how to do those rotters!" hissed Pankhurst. "Stumpy has just put into my head!"

"Has he? What the—"

"They are going out with Miss Clara three," said Pankhurst. "That's a good five minutes yet, and she's bound to be a bit late."

"What about it?"

"Why, there's time for us to change in our cycling things, and get up decently and be ready by three o'clock—"

Price stared hard at his chum. It seemed to him for a moment that Pankhurst was wading in his mind.

"But we can't go," he said. "They would take us!"

"Ass!"

"Then what—"

"Suppose they can't go?"

"Eh?"

"I say, suppose they can't go?" said Pankhurst impatiently. "When Miss Clara comes down to the gate with her machine, she will like to be disappointed of her ride. Suppose they can't go—and we're standing there with our machines? We'd beg to be allowed the honour, and, of course, she'd come with us."

"Yes, I dare say that's quite right, Panky, but they can go, can't they? What's to prevent them from going?"

"A chap about my size!" grinned Pankhurst. "Haven't I told you I'd got an idea? Get into the house and change as quickly as you can, and get my things out ready for me while I speak to Stumpy."

"But—"

"No time for talk. I'll explain afterwards. Right you are!"

Price knew he could trust his leader. He hadn't the faintest idea of the plan that was working in Pankhurst's active brain, but he was content to follow his chum's lead. He went into the house to carry out Pankhurst's instructions, and the chief of the Old Firm walked across the grass towards Stumpy.

"Get huff the grass!" called out Stump.

"You'll get wetted again, Master Pankhurst. Get huff the grass!"

"I want to speak to you, Rags—"

"Get huff the grass!"

"Is a two-shilling piece any good to you?" asked Pankhurst, showing a glimmer of a grin between his finger and thumb.

Stump's manner changed at once. A two-shilling piece was a great deal of use to him. It meant a pleasant evening—pleasant to his point of view—in the Green Man in the bank village.

"Wot can I do for you, Master Pankhurst?" he asked, quite civilly.

"It's ten to three now," said Pankhurst in a low voice; "at a few minutes to the hour, I want you to go away and leave the hose lying here, so that anybody who came along could pick it up and use it."

The porter stared.

"What for, Master Pankhurst?"

Pankhurst gave a slight jerk of the head towards the gate. Stump glanced in that direction, and saw the Combine standing there—and understood. He grinned. He was the worst of terms with the Combine, but he was not like Pankhurst much better, as a matter of fact, but that was no reason why he should accept the two-shilling piece and allow the Combine to receive a drenching.

"It'll have to be kept dark, sir," he murmured.

"Of course," said Pankhurst readily. "I'll just walk away for a few minutes and let the hose lying here. It's not your fault if somebody picks it up and plays with it on your back's turned."

"That's so, Master Pankhurst!"

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"I'll drop this two-shilling piece into the grass, and you can pick it up," went on Pankhurst. "Is it a go?"

"Yes, sir!"

Pankhurst let the coin fall and walked away into the School House. Stump stooped to move the boscage and picked up the florin. He was grinning expansively. He had never earned two shillings before in so easy a way.

The 3rd Chapter.

A Change of Escort.

INCOLN G. POINDEXTER looked at his watch.

"Two minutes to three," he remarked.

Micky Flynn and Dick Neville glanced towards the spreading elm-trees that hid the Principal's house from sight. Two minutes more, and they would be carrying off the Head's daughter before the envious eyes of all the Fourth Form, and of the Fifth, too.

"Bound to be a little late, I guess," murmured Poindexter.

"Faith, and ye're right!"

"Oh, I don't know!" said Neville. "Miss Clara isn't the kind of girl to be late. I expect we shall see her as the clock strikes."

Micky Flynn hastily gave his necktie a jerk, to make sure that it was quite straight. Neville jerked a little more white cuff into sight. Poindexter flicked a speck of dust from his knickers.

"One minute more—ow-wow—what the deuce—"

"Oh!"

"Arrah!"

A sudden jet of water played right over the Combine. They whirled round in rage and amazement, and yelled out simultaneously.

"Pankhurst! You villain!"

Pankhurst and Price were there. They were clad in their best, and they had wheeled down their bicycles and stood them against a tree near the gate. Then Pankhurst had taken up the hose left on the grass by the bribed and corrupted Stump.

Taking care not to get any water over himself or his comrade, Pankhurst was playing the hose upon the astounded Combine. The fellows in the Close looked on, at first in utter amazement, and then with yells of laughter.

The Combine yelled, but not with laughter. They were far from laughing at that moment.

For the first wish of the water drenched them from head to foot, and almost swept them off their feet. It was a powerful stream, with heaps of force behind it, and Pankhurst let them have it at full strength.

Alas! for the elegant attire of the three cyclists. In a few seconds, before they fairly knew what was happening, their clothes hung around their limbs in drenched folds, the flowers were swept away from their buttonholes, their caps were off their heads, their hair was streaming with water, their shirts and cuffs were limp rags.

"Arrah—tare an' 'ounds—"

"The deuce—"

"You villains—"

Pankhurst and Price chuckled. Pankhurst played the hose right merrily. The Combine reeled from the torrent. Then, frantic with rage, they made a desperate rush at the Old Firm.

If they had reached them, the Old Firm would have fared badly—quite as badly as the unhappy Combine had fared. But they did not reach them; they could not. Pankhurst kept the torrent at full force, first upon one of them and then upon another, and they were fairly knocked flying by the rush of the water.

Neville went over, and Flynn fell across him. Poindexter rushed on desperately, but the torrent caught him fairly beneath the chin and bowled him over.

There was a shout from Gatty, of the Fourth:

"Look out, you drowned rats! Miss Clara's coming!"

The Combine staggered to their feet.

A charming girl, with brown hair and blue eyes, was wheeling a bicycle through the elm-trees that surrounded the Head's house.

The chums looked at her—and at themselves. Their condition was deplorable. They looked, as Gatty put it, like drowned rats. They could not face the girl in that state.

Well they knew how the bright blue eyes would glimmer with fun. As for going out for the promised ride, it was impossible.

They were in no state for that. As the slim form of Clara Rayne appeared through the elms, three juniors broke into a desperate sprint for cover. Three drenched bicycles lay on the ground in a puddle of water. Three flying figures disappeared into the house, Poindexter only stopping a moment to shake his hat at Pankhurst.

Pankhurst, choking with laughter, shut off the water and threw down the hose. The Old Firm took their bicycles from the tree where they were leaning, and wheeled them forward to meet Miss Clara near the gate.

The girl glanced at them, and then at the drenched machines on the ground. The laughing faces of all the fellows near seemed to puzzle her. She looked at Pankhurst and Price inquiringly as they raised their caps.

"Will you excuse Poindexter, Neville, and Flynn?" said Pankhurst smoothly. "They were waiting here when something went wrong with the garden-hose—"

"Quite so."

"They have somehow got drenched; you see the state their machines are in."

"Dear me!" murmured Miss Clara. "I am so sorry!"

"Yes, it is a shame," said Pankhurst hypocritically. "They looked such drowned rats that they couldn't face you, and they've left me to make their excuses."

"Quite so."

"If you would allow us to ride with you, Miss Clara, we are quite ready," went on Pankhurst eagerly. "They would feel it very much if you were disappointed about the ride, and as we are ever so much better riders than they are—"

The girl laughed—a pleasant, rippling little laugh.

"How did the accident happen?"

"It was quite sudden," said Pankhurst. "The hose was turned in their direction, and they were in the way of the water; that's how it came about."

"Was Stump using the hose?"

"No, he had carelessly left it on the grass, and a couple of juniors started playing with it," said Pankhurst innocently.

Miss Clara smiled.

"If you would let us come with you—"

"Well, I must have my ride," said Miss Clara, "and if my companions are not here, I must be quite free to accept your kind offer. It is very kind and obliging of you, Pankhurst."

"Not at all," said Pankhurst blissfully. "It's a great honour, and we are awfully grateful. We'll take the best care of you, Miss Clara."

"I can take care of myself," Miss Clara remarked.

"Yes, of course," agreed Pankhurst. "We're not the kind of fellows who think that a girl always needs taking care of, just because she is a girl."

Pankhurst would have said anything at that moment. And Price would have backed him up. Miss Clara, still smiling, mounted her machine, refusing assistance, and the Old Firm rolled out of the gates of Cliveden one on either side of the fair cyclist. Three drenched figures stood at a study window shaking fists after them.

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manner before. And the thought that while they were cleaning themselves down, the Old Firm were skimming along the leafy lanes with Miss Clara, was utterly exasperating.

They left the house, meeting with grins and chuckles from every fellow they passed.

Trevelyan, the captain of Cliveden, stared at them as they came into the close.

"Hallo! Weren't you going out with Miss Clara?" he asked.

The chums turned red.

"I guess so," said Poindexter awkwardly. "But there was an—an accident, and Pankhurst and Price have gone instead."

The big Sixth-Former laughed.

He guessed well enough that the "accident" had been some device of the Old Firm, for the rivalry of the two parties in the Fourth was a standing joke among the seniors at Cliveden, and furnished them with much food for merriment.

The Combine passed on, looking very uncomfortable. Monsieur Friquet, the French master, was seated under one of the elm-trees, reading. He glanced up at the Combine.

"Ah! Was it not zat you ride viz ze charming Mees Clara zis afternoon?" he asked. "I zink zat I hear so."

"Panky and Price have gone instead, sir," said Poindexter, wondering whether all Cliveden, from the Head to the boot-boy, knew that that ride had been arranged for that afternoon.

The French master smiled. He had evidently heard of the incident of the garden-hose.

"Bettair luck ze next time," he remarked.

The Combine walked on.

"Hallo, you merchants!" exclaimed Gatty, meeting the Combine, with Greene and Philpot and Simpson and some other of the



ROUGH ON THE COMBINE!

"Look out, you drowned rats! Miss Clara's coming." The Combine staggered to their feet. A charming girl with brown hair and blue eyes was wheeling a bicycle through the elm trees that surrounded the Head's house.

Fourth Form, in a laughing crowd. "Hallo! I hear you've been taking shower-baths instead of taking Miss Clara out for a ride—"

"Oh, shut up!"

"It was nice of Panky and Price to come to the front as they did, and take your place, wasn't it?" Greene remarked. "I only wish I had been on the spot with my camera. I'd have liked a snapshot—"

"If you fellows aren't looking for trouble, I guess you'd better levant," said Poindexter darkly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, stop your cackling!" said Neville testily.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Combine strode away and passed the gates. They had had enough chipping to last them for the afternoon. Poindexter threw himself down upon a grassy bank.

"Things are getting into a nice state," he grunted. "We shall be chipped to death over this, to say nothing of the crowing we shall have to put up with from Panky and Price."

"Sure, and it's rotten, Puntddodger darling!"

"Can't something be done?" said Dick Neville desperately. "Can't you think of something, you Chicago bouncer? Where's that keen brain you're always talking about? If you've got a brain at all, think of some way of getting level with those rotters."

Poindexter looked very thoughtful.

"I'm trying to," he said. "If we could muck up the ride somehow, without letting Miss Clara see anything like a row, that would be something."

"They've been gone half an hour," growled Dick Neville. "We sha'n't see them again till they come in at tea-time!"

"Faith, and that's thrue! What are ye thinkin' of, Puntbuster?"

"We know the way they are going, I guess. Miss Clara particularly wanted to ride round Cliveden Hill at the foot, and come home by the road through the chestnut woods. It's a two hours' run, or about. We could waylay them at any point on the homeward route, if we liked."

Neville and Flynn looked a little more attentive. This had not occurred to them before, and at a chance of getting even with their rivals they were on the alert at once.

"But what can we do?" said Neville. "We should be three to two, and we could yank them off their jiggers and roll them in the ditch, if they were alone. But we can't have any horseplay with a girl about."

"Faith, and ye're right!"

"I wasn't thinking of that," said Poindexter. "We could wipe up the ground easily enough with Panky and Price, but Miss Clara being present bars all that. If we could think of some way of bringing them down off their perch without a row—"

"But we can't!"

"I don't know. Let's think it out."

Poindexter lay back in the grass and put his hands behind his head. He was thinking it out. Dick Neville stared gloomily away towards the glimmering river. Micky Flynn extracted a packet of toffee from his pocket and began to eat it. The situation was a difficult and anxious one; but that was no reason why he shouldn't eat toffee, as far as Micky could see.

"Faith!" said Micky. "If the spalpeens would only get a few punctures, the ride would be mucked up, and—"

Poindexter started up.

"Punctures!" he yelled.

Micky gazed at him in astonishment.

"Somethin' in the grass bitten you, Punt-shifter?"

"No, ass! Punctures!"

"What do ye mean by punctures?"

"Punctures! Ha, ha, ha!"

Dick and Micky exchanged glances of alarm. Poindexter was laughing as if over the best joke of the season, and the tears were running down his cheeks.

"Take it calmly, old lad!" said Neville. "No need to go right off your giddy rocker, you know!"

"Faith, it's the tinned beef that's got into his head intirely—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you've thought of a wheeze, Puntddodger, tell us what it is!" exclaimed Neville. "If you haven't, just stop going off like a cheap German alarm clock!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You fathead—"

"You silly gosssoon!"

"I've got it!"

"Got what?"

"The wheeze!"

"Expound, then, and stop cackling!"

"Ha, ha! I guess we shall be able to get our own back, after all. It was Flynn saying something about punctures that made me think of it!"

"Faith, and I'd loike to know what you chaps would do without me to think of things for ye!"

"Oh, cheese it, Micky, and let's hear Puntddodger's idea!"

"Sure, and what I say is—"

"Shut up! Go on, Poindexter!"

"Suppose the cyclists were to get a large, full-grown, first-rate crop of punctures!" said Poindexter, grinning. "What do you think of that?"

"It would muck up the ride, and no mistake—but it can't be worked."

"It can be worked, I guess."

"Faith, but that would spoil Miss Clara's ride, as well as the copper-topped spalpeens," said Micky Flynn, with an Irishman's thoughtfulness for the fair sex. "We can't have anythin' of that sort, Puntbuster!"

"Ass! Do you think I'm the kind of chap to give a girl any trouble, or spoil her outing?" said the American chum indignantly.

"Faith, then, what—"

"Miss Clara's tyres will be punctured along with Panky and Price's, but suppose three fellows about our size happen to drive by in a neat little trap—"

"My hat!"

"Just in time to come to the rescue. We give Miss Clara a lift, of course—and she has a pleasant drive under the chestnut-trees, instead of a ride. She would like it just as much—in fact, after riding so far, she'd like a drive for a change."

"Very likely, but—"

"Panky and Price can wheel their bikes home, and Miss Clara's, too. There won't be room for them or the machines in the trap."

"Yes, but—"

"We'll carry off Miss Clara under their eyes, just as they've done us. But the chap laughs best who laughs last, and we shall laugh last. And those rotters will stop chipping us when they see us drive into Cliveden Close with Miss Clara in the trap, and when Panky and Price come crawling in an hour or two later wheeling their machines."

"Yes, but how—"

"Don't you think it's a ripping wheeze?" demanded Poindexter.

"Absolutely ripping, if it can be worked! But how in the name of all that's impossible are you going to give them a lot of punctures they can't mend?"

Poindexter chuckled.

"That's where the beauty of the idea comes in!"

"Blessed if I can see it!"

"I guess we can work it easily enough, all

the same. There are lots of things you don't see, my son, till I point them out to you."

"Oh, get on with the jaw, and don't cackle!" "Very well. You know they are riding back through the chestnut wood, and you know the track through the wood is so narrow that three riders would have to ride very close, if one didn't have to drop behind."

"What about that?" "Tin-tacks are cheap."

"Tin-tacks!"

"Yes, tin-tacks! What's the matter with buying a dozen packets or so of tin-tacks in Clivebank, and distributing them in the road there for a distance of about fifty yards, to make quite sure? The rotters ride over them, and they gather up about a hundred punctures in a couple of seconds—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"They'll get their tyres so jammed full of tacks, that there won't be any question of mending the punctures. You can't mend fifty punctures by the roadside, and keep a lady waiting for you all the time—especially when there's three nice young fellows ready to take her home in a trap."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Neville.

"Faith, and it's a janius ye are!" yelled Micky Flynn, and he fairly threw his arms round Poindexter's neck, and hugged him.

"Ger-r-r-r-groo, you're ch-ch-choking me!" gasped Poindexter.

"It's a janius ye—"

"Groo! Leggo!" Poindexter hurled off the enthusiastic Micky, and staggered to his feet. "Come on, and let's go down to the village. We've got to buy the tacks, and hire the trap. Lucky I'm a good driver! Let's get a move on."

And the Combine, chuckling over the prospect, hurried towards the village. A quarter of an hour later, Poindexter was driving a handsome little trap up the road through the chestnut-woods, and Micky and Dick sat in it with their pockets full of tin-tacks.

The 5th Chapter. Disaster.

TWO more absolutely joyous and beaming faces than those of Pankhurst and Price could not have been found, that sunny June afternoon, throughout the length and breadth of Merry England.

They had beaten the Combine hollow. They had carried off the prize. They were enjoying a pleasant ride with a charming girl. Earth had nothing more to offer!

Satisfaction bubbled over in the faces and the talk of the auburn-haired chums. Miss Clara was in a merry mood, too. She half-suspected that the Combine had been put out of the ride by some trick of the Old Firm, and though she was sorry for their defeat, she could enter into the fun of the thing. The ride was a great success, and at the old inn at the foot of Cliveden Hill, the three cyclists enjoyed a light refreshment of cakes and pure milk with great gusto. And then the ride lay under the shadowy branches of the great chestnut-trees, a run of four miles under almost continuous shade back to Cliveden Lane.

"I say, this is ripping!" Pankhurst remarked for about the twentieth time, as they entered upon the narrow lane, under the thick shade of the chestnuts—a welcome relief after the hot June sun on the open roads.

"Quite so," Price said, with a sigh of satisfaction.

"It is charming," said Miss Clara, with a bright smile. "I don't think I have ever enjoyed a ride so much!"

"Haven't you really?" said Pankhurst, beaming.

"No, really!"

"And the best part lies before us, too," said Price. "It's jolly under these shady trees, and you never meet any traffic on this road, either."

Three abreast, riding somewhat close, for the lane was narrow, and the sides of it were rough and rugged, the cyclists spun on under the overhanging chestnuts. Overhead the branches met and formed a green canopy, through which the sun's rays filtered in subdued shafts of gold. It was the pleasantest ride within a hundred miles of Cliveden, and a favourite of Miss Clara's.

"Ripping!" said Pankhurst once more.

Price was looking worried.

"I—I say, I believe I've got a puncture!" he murmured.

Pankhurst glanced at him. Pankhurst looked annoyed. It was really very exasperating of Price to get a puncture just then.

"Don't you think of waiting for me," said Price hastily. "I'll examine the tyre, and you keep on. I'll overtake you before you get to Cliveden."

"Oh, no!" said Miss Clara immediately.

"We shall wait for you!"

"I'd rather—"

"Dear me, I think I have a puncture, too!" said Miss Clara, as she stopped her machine and lightly dismounted. "My front tyre is getting flat."

"Oh, I'll jolly soon mend that for you!" said Pankhurst, not wholly displeased at the chance of showing his skill in the repairing line.

"Gracious!" exclaimed Miss Clara, in astonishment. "My back tyre is going down, too! What can be the matter with it?"

"I've got a puncture in each tyre, too," said Price, looking blue. "Both the beastly tyres have gone as flat as pancakes."

"That's curious," said Pankhurst. "I never came across such a crop of punctures so suddenly before!"

"Nor I," said Miss Clara. "But look at your own machine! Dear me, your tyres are both flat!"

Pankhurst stared at his machine in amazement.

Miss Clara was quite right. His tyres were going down, and were almost flat. Both tyres on all three machines were flattened out. And the punctures must have been pretty serious ones for the tyres to go down so suddenly.

"My only hat!" said Pankhurst.

Miss Clara was looking puzzled.

"This is very strange!" she remarked. "I have never heard of such a thing before—never!"

"Quite so," said Price.

"I—I can't understand it!" muttered Pankhurst. "I—I'm afraid the ride's rather spoiled, Miss Clara. Can you see what's wrong with your tyres, Pricey?"

"Yes!" yelled Price, who was bending down by his machine. "My hat, they're stuffed full of tacks!"

"What?"

"Tacks!"

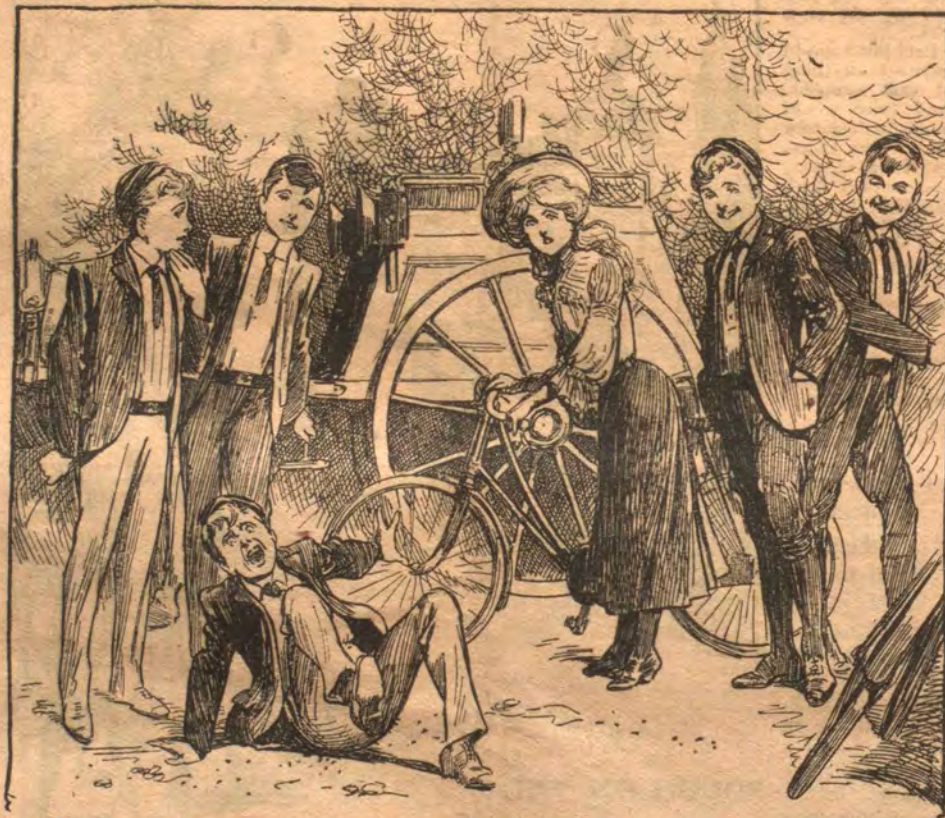
"Tacks?"

"Yes, tin-tacks!"

Pankhurst, in utter amazement, bent over his tyres, and looked at them closely. There was no doubt about Price's statement. It was not an accidental thorn or piece of glass that had done the mischief. The tyres had been punctured by tacks, and there were a dozen of them still sticking in the rubber.

"Tacks!" murmured Price dazedly. "Look, they're scattered all over the road! There's as much tacks as dust!"

Pankhurst glanced round him. He had not noticed it at first, but it was the case. Tacks were scattered everywhere in the dust of the road. Tacks were sticking all over the tyres on all three bicycles.



Dick Neville pushed against Micky so suddenly that he lost his balance and sat down in the midst of the tacks, and jumped up again like a jack-in-a-box, with a terrific yell. "I hope you are not hurt, Flynn?" said Miss Clara.

No wonder the tyres had suddenly gone flat. As for repairing, that was out of the question. Pankhurst and Price were too careful ever to travel without their repair outfits, but they could not have mended all those punctures in a whole afternoon. They were looking utterly dismayed and nonplussed.

"It's—it's rotten!" said Pankhurst. "Somebody has done this for a joke, I suppose. I wish I had the joker here, by Jove! I'd joke him!"

"We shall have to walk the machines to Cliveden," said Price. "You needn't bother with yours, Miss Clara; I'll wheel it. And I can manage yours, too, Panky. You can walk on with Miss Clara, and I'll follow with the machines."

"Not at all!" said Miss Clara.

"It's—it's a beastly long walk for you, and uphill half the way," said Pankhurst. "I—I wish we could get a vehicle of some sort. But there's nothing near here."

"I can walk it," said Miss Clara bravely, though, to tell the truth, the prospect was not attractive.

"Hallo, I can hear something on the road!" exclaimed Pankhurst eagerly. "It may be something that will give us a lift to the village."

The sound of a horse and wheels could be heard round the corner in a narrow lane that branched off a score of yards away. The juniors and their fair companion looked eagerly towards the turning. A market-cart going to Clivebank would have been a godsend then. But it was not a market-cart that came into view. It was a neat little trap with a boy driving, and two other boys sitting in it. And a gasp broke from Pankhurst and Price simultaneously.

"The Combine!"

The 6th Chapter.

The Capture.

POINDEXTER stopped the trap, threw down the reins, and jumped into the road. He raised his cap to Miss Clara, and Neville and Flynn were only a moment behind him.

"Fancy meeting you!" exclaimed Poindexter. "Nothing wrong, I hope?"

Miss Clara gave him a curious look.

"Yes," she said; "the tyres are punctured."

"Too bad! Nothing serious—eh, Panky?"

"Yes," grunted Pankhurst. "About a dozen punctures in each tyre, on each jigger."

Poindexter whistled.

"I guess that's bad."

"Faith, and it will take ye a long time intirely to mend them, Panky darling," remarked Micky Flynn, with an expansive grin.

"We can't mend them."

"Can't mend punctures!" ejaculated Dick Neville. "Really, Panky, old man, you ought to learn to mend punctures with anybody. But it's impossible to mend this lot in less than about a day's hard work."

"Too bad!" said Poindexter again. "How fortunate we came along! We were so sorry to miss you, Miss Clara. Of course, Pankhurst explained?"

The girl smiled.

"Yes. There was an accident with a hose-pipe, I think."

"That is it. A couple of silly young monkeys, who ought to have known better, got playing with the garden-hose, and we were drenched."

Pankhurst and Price exchanged wrathful glances. It was impossible to pick a row with the Combine before Miss Clara, but they had never felt so strongly inclined to do so. It was

"I hope you are not hurt, Flynn."

"N-n-n-o!" mumbled Micky, "I—I'm not hurt."

And he strolled round the other side of the halted trap to pull the tacks out of his trousers, Poindexter turned to Miss Clara with his sweetest smile.

"It's too bad that your bike should be punctured in this way, Miss Clara," he said. "It is very fortunate," Miss Clara remarked—

"that is, of course, if you have room for us in the trap."

"We have room for you, Miss Clara," said Poindexter hastily. "You see, the trap is only a small one, and there's room for exactly four, if they're not too big. We couldn't possibly cram six into it, and besides, it would be cruelty to the horse. And then there are the bicycles. They couldn't be left here."

"Certainly not," said Dick Neville.

The girl nodded. What Poindexter stated was exactly correct. Four young persons would fill the trap comfortably. Poindexter had taken extremely good care to select a vehicle that would not hold more than four.

"Panky and Price will have to walk home," said Poindexter, with much commiseration. "Panky won't mind wheeling your bike along with his own, Miss Clara."

"Of course, I shall wheel it," said Pankhurst, keeping up appearances admirably.

"I'm—I'm glad you came by in time to save Miss Clara from that fearfully long walk, Poindexter."

"Quite so," said Price, gritting his teeth. Miss Clara hesitated.

"You must go in the trap, Miss Clara," said Pankhurst. "I'm only too glad it's come by in time to give you a lift. I'll take care of your machine. If you start now, you'll be in time for tea."

"I suppose I had better," said the girl. "Oh, certainly! There's nothing else to be done."

"Quite so."

"Then I will go. Thank you so much for a very pleasant ride," said Miss Clara, with a sweet smile that made the Old Firm feel much more contented. "I have enjoyed it very much indeed. And it is so kind of you to take care of my machine."

And Miss Clara let Pankhurst assist her into the trap, though Poindexter stood ready. Poindexter gathered up the reins, and Dick and Micky climbed in. They looked very cosy and comfortable in the trap, and they waved their hands to the Old Firm as Poindexter set the horse in motion.

Pankhurst and Price stood holding the disabled bicycles, looking after the trap. It disappeared down the shady lane, and then the Old Firm looked at one another. Pankhurst forced a grin.

"Done at the finish," he said. "Never mind, it has been great fun, and they've only got their own back, after all."

"Quite so," said Price.

And the Old Firm started on the long walk to Cliveden, wheeling the machines.

The 7th Chapter.

"HALLO!"

"Look there!"

"Poindexter!"

"And Miss Clara!"

In the cool of the afternoon the trap drove in at the gates of Cliveden School. The junior cricketers were coming off the ground, and a crowd witnessed the arrival of the trap. They had seen Miss Clara go out with the Old Firm, and they saw her come home with the Combine. Exactly what had happened they did not know, but it was clear to all the Fourth Form at Cliveden that the Combine had triumphed in the end.

Poindexter drove the trap up to the Principal's House with a flourish. Dick Neville jumped down and assisted Miss Clara to alight. Micky Flynn rang the bell.

"Thank you so much," said Miss Clara, with a sweet smile for all three of the juniors.

"I have enjoyed that drive immensely," said Poindexter, beaming.

"So glad you came! I hope you will let us drive you out another afternoon, Miss Clara, when you have time."

"Oh, yes, do!" said Dick Neville.

"Sure, and it's more than delighted I'll be!" exclaimed Micky Flynn.

Miss Clara smiled again.

"You are very kind," she said; "I shall be very pleased, I am sure."

And the girl tripped into the house. The juniors stood cap in hand until the door had closed behind her.

"I guess we've scored this time!" said Poindexter, as they turned away.

"Faith, and it's right ye are, Puntpusher."

"Oh, rather!" said Dick Neville. "Ha, ha! I wonder when those chaps will come crawling in?"

The Combine had taken the trap back to the village, and returned to Cliveden, before the Old Firm arrived. Tired and dusty, Pankhurst and Price wheeled the machines in at the gates of Cliveden. They found the whole Fourth Form in possession of the story, and they were exposed to an unmerciful storm of chipping until they escaped to their study and locked themselves in. When they had had tea and a little rest, they went to look for the Combine. And the next morning five members of the Fourth Form at Cliveden received imposition for appearing in class with prominent signs of combat upon their features.

THE END

("The St. Anselm's Boy Scouts" next week.)