

"By Jove!" exclaimed Sir George, "what murderous little beasts we were!"

Somehow the thought, new to both men, tinged the memory of their boyish happiness with a sombre hue. Perhaps, after all, the inactive serenity possible to old age was better than the fierce uncaring activity of youth. Certainly, the sky never was bluer, the sunshine more cheering, the music of running water sweeter than now. Sir George glanced at Joey. He was sitting stolidly on the log, gazing at the pistol in his hand. Poor old Joey! Just as common a bit of clay as ever, but just as faithful and willing to efface himself. Also, no doubt, just as ready to steal up behind a flabby frog and deal it an unnecessary annihilating blow. Sir George closed his eyes in momentary disgust. He could positively see that sturdy little figure—worse, he could hear a boisterous soggy whack.

"Come Joey," he said briskly, in sudden remorse, "we'll cross the bridge and walk about a little."

He took the pistol, and Joey followed with the hamper. Over the stream lay a strip of woods where birds and squirrels abounded, but Sir George only looked at them with a benignant protecting air as they hurried out of his way. Not even the sight of a piratical crow that cawed as if in derision tempted him to use the weapon. And yet, he began to feel the charm of its touch. The smooth wooden stock fitted into the palm of his hand so familiarly; the smell of oil on the rough lock was like a perfume, recalling the delightful odor of burnt powder and scorched wadding that was associated with it. The barrel was cold now, but well he remembered how it warmed up with the first discharge. A sudden idea struck him; he consulted Joey. Yes, Joey thought it a capital plan, and knew the very spot. A bare pine stump out in the open with high ground behind it that would make an ideal target. They hurried away from the belt of woods, seized with sudden animation. Half way over the field Sir George caught Joey by the arm and pointed out a brown furry animal that was moving slowly in the distance. A woodchuck, declared Joey, breathlessly, and the entrance to its hole was where the sand was heaped up beside the rail fence. There was a brief consultation, then Sir George dropped to the ground, while Joey was dispatched by a circuitous route to outflank the animal by getting between it and the hole.

Sir George, in his prime, had hunted with fervor, but never since his boyhood had he stalked game with half the enthusiasm that inspired his efforts to creep within range of the woodchuck. He dropped his cane at the start; later, he shed his immaculate spring overcoat; next, his monocle, fastened by a delicate gold chain, was torn from him by a projecting root, but still he crept along, unheeding. Joey, too, like an old pointer returning to the hunt, trembled with eagerness as he lay panting on the ground after his hurried detour. The unsuspecting animal basked in the sunlight up to the moment that Sir George stood up with the levelled pistol, then darted away as he fired. There was an ineffective shout from Joey, and the woodchuck had vanished into the ground.

"Gad!" exclaimed Sir George, in disgust, "I've missed."

Joey declared he hadn't, but that the shot wasn't heavy enough to kill; he had seen fur fly. Sir George smiled ruefully, for it was an old habit of Joey's to see either fur or feathers fly. They discussed the affair excitedly. If Sir George had got closer—if the shot had only been heavier—if Joey had been armed with a club—if the

woodchuck had stayed still a moment longer. They talked on in the old way, and then sat down to eat the bread and cheese and drink the ale. Sir George ate ravenously; he had not tasted anything so good for years, and he arose elated. As for Joey, he was perfectly happy; so happy, indeed, that the certainty that a grain of shot was imbedded in one leg, from which he could feel the blood slowly trickling, affected his spirits no more than a mosquito bite. He would cheerfully have absorbed all the shot intended for the woodchuck rather than let Sir George know that his aim had been so wild.

When the sun dropped down and a long shadow spread over the valley, they walked slowly back to the stream. The sparkle had gone from the water, and in the gathering gloom the sound was chill and forbidding. Joey's movements were slow and dragging as he took an empty bottle out of the hamper and chose a rocky ledge to set it on. Sir George looked on gloomily, almost inclined to rebel against this last ceremony. Joey was so slow; he could not see clearly without his eyeglass; the darkness was coming; he felt a presentiment that he could not hit the mark, and it would be such bad luck to miss. But Joey was insistent. He stood behind Sir George with the second bottle in his hand, urging him to fire. At last Sir George did so, although he couldn't see the target. There was a crash of broken glass. Sir George smiled with relief; he never knew that the sound came from Joey's bottle that went hurtling overhead at the moment he fired. Joey, the deceiver, rushed forward with loud acclaim; then he ran back and loaded the pistol hurriedly for the last shot. He was trembling, and Sir George urged him to hurry, with a shade of irritation. Joey squatted down, drew a long breath, and fired. The report died away in utter silence, and Sir George uttered an exclamation of impatience. "Come, Joey," he said, "we must get out of this."

Over the bridge, up the side of the ravine they stumbled, every step bringing them nearer to the prosaic realities of life. Sir George felt as if he were awakening from a dream, and that things were taking on their true proportions. He turned, as they emerged into the light of the straggling city street, with a hard un-mirthful laugh. Joey stood still, silent and submissive. Something was coming, he knew not what, but he felt that the past had receded farther away than before. Sir George looked down at his own muddy boots, soiled clothes and blackened hands. "Joey, he said, "I am not even presentable enough to send for my carriage. There's a cab station four blocks west. I'll wait here while you leave a message that Sir George Dale wishes a cab. Come back with it and I'll have you driven home too."

"Sir—Jarge—Dale," repeated Joey slowly.

A few minutes later the cab drew up beside Sir George. He stepped in. It was empty. He leaned back with a little sigh of relief. "A most incomprehensible experience," he muttered.

On his way home Joey loitered on the middle of a long iron bridge. He rested his arms on the railing and leaned forward, the dreary sense of utter loneliness intensified by the sound of the jostling throng of passers-by. In the little hamper that he held suspended over the water lay the pistol, the powder flask and shot bag. Suddenly his grasp relaxed; he heard a soft splash from far below. He choked, then his sturdy little figure straightened bravely, and he walked on. "Sir—Jarge—" said Joey, under his breath.