

A GROUP OF SCHOOL-BOYS.

CHAPTER IV.

"BEG pardon, young gents," said the landlord, who overheard the remark, "but them cliffs ain't safe, and you'd best go back by the road. A lad nearly lost his life there only two days ago."

"Which makes it all the safer for us now," said Robin, whose philosophy of life was amazingly optimistic. "One accident a week's as much as even a newspaper reporter could expect."

"I don't know nothing about newspaper reporters, young sir, but I do know as them cliffs ain't safe, especially after rain, and you'd best mind my words, and go home the other way, like good lads."

"Thanks," said Fergus, "we will." But he reckoned without his host; for, as soon as they were out of the man's hearing, Robin broke out in open mutiny against this decision.

"It's all rubbish!" he said. "You don't really believe such old wives' tales, do you, Ferg? I vote we go home by the cliffs as we planned."

"Hear, hear!" cried Jimmy Short, a boy after Robin's own heart where danger was concerned.

"The man knew what he was talking about," said Wilson. "I agree with you, Hume."

"Let's put it to the vote," cried Robin, and Fergus agreed.

"Hands up for the cliffs!" he said. Robin, Jimmy, young Dobbie, Percy Young, and Spider held up their hands.

"The contrary thereto," and only Wilson responded.

"Well, you've got your own way, and I hope we'll none of us repent it," he said; "but upon my word I think we're pretty considerable idiots."

"You needn't come if you don't want to," said Percy Young. "If you and Wilson really think it's dangerous, you'd better go home by the road."

"No, we'll all stick together," replied Hume. "There'll be more of us to carry back the pieces," and they set out on their dangerous enterprise.

The charm of the cliffs to these adventurous spirits lay in the fact that here and there great slices of them had fallen away in previous landslips, and while the regular path made a considerable *détour* inland, rough steps had been cut along the face of the chalk, which made it possible for a good climber to scramble down and up again at the risk of his neck.

The first of these dangerous places was successfully passed over; but at the brink of the second the boys paused with one consent.

Deep, ominous fissures streaked the face of the chalk, and in one place the surface earth had crumbled away, leaving a very insecure foothold.

"I say, it's won't do," said Fergus Hume. "We shall have to go round."

"Rubbish!" cried Robin. "A child could scramble down there!"

"Possibly; but he wouldn't get up again. Look here; if you're tired of your life, I'm not, and I don't see the fun of risking it for nothing. Do you, Wilson?"

"Well, I rather agree with Robin that it's possible," said Wilson. "Look here, I'm just going down a little way to see."

He climbed down the first step as he spoke, and cautiously made his way along the shelving face of the rock. The others watched his progress breathlessly.

"It seems all right," he shouted, and even as he spoke he put his foot on a loose stone, slipped, and disappeared from sight.

"Great Scott—old Wilson's done for!" cried Fergus.

"He may not have fallen all the way. Let's shout!" said Robin. "Wilson! Harry!"

To the intense relief of the watchers above, a feeble voice replied.

"Where are you, old fellow?" called Hume.

"On a jutting bit of rock that broke my fall. Make haste and bring help. I've hurt my arm, and I've only just got room to stand."

"There's a farm we passed on our way," said Fergus. "Here, Percy and Dobbie, you're both good runners, go as fast as you can and bring men and ropes."

The two lads went off like arrows from the string, and there followed a weary time of waiting to those left.

Presently Wilson called again. "I say, how much longer will they be? I'm getting dizzy."

"Shut your eyes and hold on tight," replied Fergus. "Hallo, Robin, what are you after? We don't want two fellows to come to grief."

"I'm just going down a little way to see if I can see where old Wilson is," and Robin scrambled cautiously down, until he had almost disappeared from sight.

"I can see him now," he called; "and, what's more, I believe I can get down to him."

"Don't be so unwise, Robin," cried Fergus, almost angrily. "Whatever is the good of risking your life like that?"

"Wilson's dizzy, and I can hold his hand," was the answer. "Hold on, Harry, I'm coming!"

But alas! even as he spoke the words, he slipped, and shot past Wilson into the gulf below.

There was an awful silence. "Robin! Robin!" cried little White, in an agony of fear; but this time there was no reply.

"It's no good," called Wilson mournfully; he's gone right down, and must have been killed. I'm afraid old Robin's done for this time."

At that moment Young and Dobbie, accompanied by two labourers, came in sight.

"What's up? Where's Robin?" inquired the two boys, as they approached.

"He went down to try and help Wilson, and he's fallen over," replied Fergus, in awestruck tones, while little White lay face downwards on the grass, sobbing out: "Oh, Robin! Robin! you can't be dead!"

"If he's fallen over there, there's not much hope for him," remarked one of the men, beginning to let down the end of a long coil of rope over the cliff's edge. Wilson caught it, and was soon hauled up into safety.

Then the younger of the two men fastened the rope round his waist, and was let down the side of the rock. It seemed a long time before his shout of "He's here!" told them he had reached the bottom.

"Pull up!" he called, after about a minute, and those at the top hauled by main force, till he reached the summit with Robin in his arms.

The boy was unconscious; at first sight they thought him dead. But his heart was still beating faintly, and a sad little procession carried him back to his mother, knowing that if he died it would almost break her heart.

The doctor was summoned, and after he had examined him, he shook his head sadly.

"His back's broken," he said; "he can't possibly recover."

"Will it be long?" asked the poor mother. "It's only a question of hours. He'll probably die before night. There's nothing to be done, poor little chap."

The doctor went on his way leaving the poor mother alone with her boy; her whole soul centred round one passionate longing, that he should speak to her before he died. And her prayer was granted. Robin opened

his eyes, and fixed them wonderingly on his mother's face.

"Where am I? What has happened?" he asked.

"My darling, you have had an accident; you fell down the cliff."

"Oh, I remember. Was Wilson saved?"

"Yes; he helped to bring you home."

"That's all right. I say, mother, I feel rather bad. Shall I have to lie in bed long?"

There was no reply. His mother's heart failed her. How could she tell him the truth? But her face conveyed more than she knew.

"What's the matter?" he said. "Why do you look like that? Am I really ill?"

"Very ill, my darling."

"Is my back hurt? Shan't I be able to walk again?" asked Robin, his eyes wide with terror.

"Oh, my darling, my darling, you can't get better," she sobbed.

But still he did not understand.

"Don't cry, mother!" he said gruffly. "It will be awful to be a cripple; but I'll try and be brave for your sake."

"My Robin, you will not be a cripple."

"Do you mean I'm going to die?" he asked, a light breaking in on him.

She nodded, unable to speak.

But to her surprise his face lighted up. "Oh, I am glad," he said; "it would have been too dreadful to be a cripple."

He lay silent for a few moments; then he said—

"Mother, I've been an awful trouble to you. Will you forgive me for all the naughty things I've done?"

"My Robin, my darling, there is nothing to forgive."

He smiled up in her face, then: "Mother," he said, "do you think God will be hard on a fellow? If I could have my time over again, I'd try to be very different; but do you think God will forgive me as easily as you have done?"

"My darling, God will be infinitely more tender and loving than I am. I know He will forgive you."

"Yes, I think He will," said Robin, and he closed his eyes and lay silent for a few minutes.

When he next spoke it was of earthly matters. "I'd like my friends to have something to remind them of me," he said. "There are my rabbits: Wilson would like them, and I should like old Fergus to have my knife that Uncle Jack sent me last birthday: it's a beauty, and he's always envied it; and you might give Percy Young and little Dobbie and Jimmy Short a book each, and any other fellow you think would like one; and I should like Arthur White to have the rest. And mother, dear, I want you to be kind to poor little Spider for my sake. He's such a little chap, and some of the fellows bully him, and if you'd ask him in to tea sometimes, and take notice of him, it would cheer him up. I'm afraid there'll be no one to look after him when I'm gone."

He lay silent after that, and presently lapsed into unconsciousness; and at eventide, as the doctor had prophesied, the spirit of Robin King passed into the presence of his Maker.

A wasted life! I think I hear someone say. Perhaps so, and yet I do not think it was quite wasted. True, his death was quixotic and unnecessary; but surely the memory of that brave, cheery life was of service to the boys who loved him and stood weeping round his grave. For surely no true life—whether it be that of an aged saint or of a little school-boy—is ever wasted, and this, at least, I know, that it was many years before Robin King was forgotten.