



## I.

IT was nearly—but not quite—a hundred years ago; just within this present century, in fact. Be pleased to picture a very old-fashioned village—old-fashioned even at that remote period. Sharlford was its name, and it lay completely out of the world and some three miles inland from the coast—the south coast of England; the latitude and longitude of it to be had on personal application to the existing churchwardens, but not otherwise.

On a particular summer evening a goodly young man rode slowly down the village street, and everyone, as a matter of course, came out to have a look at him and his brown cob. He was dressed pretty smartly, and his horse's skin was so well groomed that it shone like satin, and altogether he was an agreeable object of contemplation.

"Young master Fielding goin' a-courtin' again," said the villagers with sly wags of the head; "goin' a-courtin' up to rectory."

But that was all nonsense. What he came to the rectory so often for was to learn all about bees and bee-keeping from old Mr. Burlingham, the rector, and—yes—from that charming Miss Lucy, his daughter, who knew

quite as much as her father. And young Mr. Fielding was a very slow pupil indeed, and had to come over very, very often. Why, he had been there only the day before yesterday!

He rode leisurely up to the rectory garden gate, and almost before he could get off Tommy, his cob, out came Miss Lucy, a lovely golden-haired vision, flying down the path and looking more charming than ever, but evidently in a great state of mind about something.

"Oh, Mr. Fielding," she cried, "I am so glad you've come! Something has happened, and I'm in such a state of distress about it!"

It was so great a pleasure to the young man to be welcomed like that, and to have both hands held out to him (as Miss Lucy had actually done in her excitement) that it was as much as he could do to control his voice and ask what the matter was.

"Oh, Mr. Fielding, I hardly know how to tell you—and father knows nothing about it; and you know he's so deaf, he would never understand. It was this afternoon, and I had gone down into the village with some gravy soup for old Sally, who lives opposite the green, you know, and just as I had left Sally's and was coming back by Dimble's, the baker's, I saw a man—a poor man looking like a tramp—after a glance round to see that no one was spying (and he never could have noticed me at all), dash into the shop and come out again with a loaf, which he tried to hide under his coat. He set off running up the street, and I, before I knew what I was doing, cried out, 'Stop thief!' as loud as I could. They must have heard me at the forge, for Bull, the constable, was there, and he ran out with Higgs, the blacksmith, and—oh! Mr. Fielding!—they knocked the poor man down, and when I got up to them, there he lay on the road all in the dust, and his head was bleeding and the loaf was rolled away in the gutter.



"And when I wanted them to let the man go, seeing what a poor half-starved wretch he was, Bull said he couldn't do it, and that it was a hanging matter; and then Dimble came up after his loaf, and he said it was a hanging matter too. And the poor man begged ever so hard, and said he was nearly dead with hunger, but Bull wouldn't listen to him; he dragged him up and said he must come along to the lock-up until the morning, when he would be taken off to Dullington to be charged before a justice. And the worst of it is, I am the witness—the chief one, I mean—and if the poor man is hanged, it will be all through me! Think how dreadful! I bound up the poor fellow's head with my handkerchief, and they took him off to the lock-up, and—oh! dear, dear!" cried Miss Lucy, now fairly breaking down and sobbing, "whatever am I to do? My dear Mr. Fielding, do help me!"

The young man comforted her, and said he would do what he could; but all the time he was at his wits' end to think what he *could* do, for he knew enough of the law (as in force in those glorious old times, for the return of which we all sigh and groan continually) to be fully aware that the thief was as good as hanged already unless he could be got clean out of the clutches of Bull the constable. However, he promised vaguely, and Miss Lucy was sure he could do anything he chose, and she should be *so* grateful to him; she could never show her gratitude enough. But Mr. Fielding thought that last might be possible. At which speech Miss Lucy blushed, and the young man departed feeling that he must do or die, and, forgetting all about the bees, strange to say, only wondered whether that charming young lady would listen to him, if he could do her the service she asked. He set his wits to work upon it as he rode off down the rectory lane.

## II.

At this time the great Napoleon (this is the instructive portion of the narrative for the benefit of youth)—the great Napoleon, I say, had got the best part of Europe firmly under the heel of his jack-boot, and scarce a creature dared to say his soul was his own except he was a Frenchman; and even then he had (per conscription) to go out and be shot at, as well as try to shoot others, for the Emperor's delectation. All this without a murmur and when called upon. But what chiefly concerned English folk was that Boney was not yet master of *them*, though that he meant to make a try for it sooner or later everyone knew; and none could be certain but that some fine morning the jack-boots and the cocked hat and all the rest of

it would appear with a French army outside the very house-door, and slay every mother's son that could be found.

It is all very fine to laugh at these fears now, but Waterloo was not fought as yet, nor had the Emperor received his quietus, although old Nelson was crashing round-shot through as many French men-of-war as he came across, and Wellington was keeping the Marshals lively. Still no one knew but what an invasion of England might take place at any time, and folk slept badly in their bed o' nights, especially if they lived on the South Coast, where the enemy, if ever they did come, would be pretty sure to land.

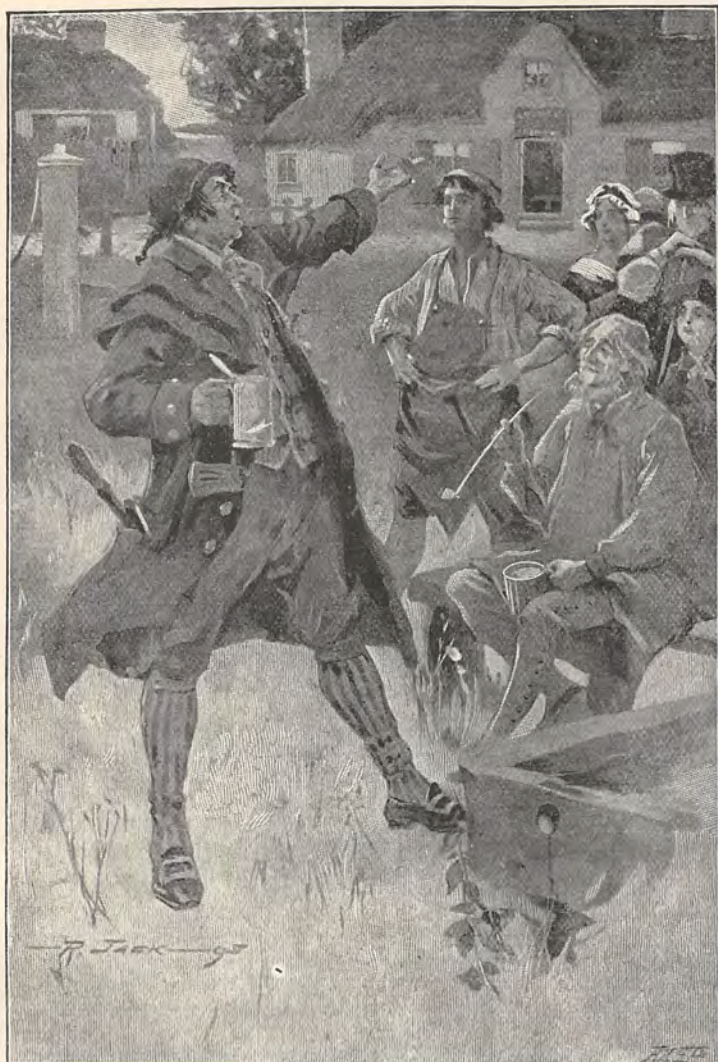
Now when all kinds of rumours were flying about—some even going so far as to state that Boney had already made a start of it—the village of Sharlford was in a dreadful state of mind. They were clean out of the world, and their news was generally a good week old, but when they did get it, they discussed it pretty fully.

Sharlford considered itself hardly treated. There they were, not three miles from the coast where was as good a landing place as the Frenchmen could wish, and not a vestige of defence was there for the unhappy village—nothing to hinder old Boney from marching his men straight down upon them and (as Bull the constable expressed it) making cold meat of all the inhabitants. Other places had their defences. Southampton, Portsmouth, Plymouth, had nothing much to fear; but Sharlford was perfectly clear that the enemy would never attack one of those big places. They would just slip in quietly at Sandy Bay and swoop down like a wolf on the fold.

And yet nobody took one-pennyworth of notice of Sharlford. A petition signed by the rector, two churchwardens, and three other men who could write, despatched to the Government, setting forth the unprotected state of the village and requesting a body of troops for defence, was simply ignored by my lords and gentlemen, and Sharlford folk finally had to face the bitter truth that, if anything was to be done for their safety, they must do it themselves.

After immense discussion upon the village green, it was decided (the schoolmaster, John Grundy, quoting the precedent of the Spanish Armada) to erect a bonfire on the hill above Sandy Bay, kept in readiness to be lighted, and to station a watchman there at the public expense, on the look-out all night over the sea; who, if he saw the least sign of an approaching French fleet, was to set the bonfire ablaze, and thus warn the village of impending danger. As for the daytime, nobody was afraid of that; all were firmly





"THIS WAS HIS FIRST PRISONER FOR SOME TIME."

convinced that the Frenchmen, if they did come at all, would come in the night.

Two watchmen were hired (at sixpence each per week and find themselves) to stop awake all night, one at the bonfire and one at the village; and the inhabitants of Sharlford each evening saw that everything was ready for flight if ever the beacon fire shone down on them. Their programme contained no single item of resistance. All they wanted was to have time to get away across the River Mullet and break the bridge down after them. Farm wagons were kept in readiness to carry the children and the old people; folk saw that the flint and steel were where they could lay hands on them, and that their boots were

ready, and then went to bed to sleep as well as they could.

This sort of thing went on for a month or more, and as each morning rose without ever a sign of a Frenchman or of the bonfire being lighted, the villagers began slowly to lull themselves into the comfortable belief that Boney was too well occupied elsewhere to bother about such a small place; that he might not come after all; and that there had altogether been too much of a panic. Still they kept on the watchmen and paid them their sixpences with great magnanimity, although it was considered that they had done nothing for their money so far; but the mass of the folk slept sounder and were less particular about the boots and the flint and steel.

They were just in this stage, and with their minds fairly easy, at the time when this little story opens—with which, by your leave, we will now proceed

### III.

I AM afraid, now I come to think of it, that young Fielding was not too scrupulous a gentleman, and had but a small regard for law and order. All he

wanted was to please Miss Lucy and extricate her from her unpleasant position as witness in a criminal case. As to the poor prisoner being hanged for stealing a loaf—why there was nothing out of the common about that; people were used to it in the good old times.

Fielding rode down to the village green, and there he found the usual company assembled, discussing affairs of state, and Bull, the constable, swollen to twice his natural size with the importance of his capture, swaggering up and down and taking all due credit for his great achievement. This was his first prisoner for some time, so no wonder he bragged about it. In his character as hero he had also been treated to a good gallon and



a half of beer by his friends, which inflamed his courage mightily.

"Secured him myself," he was announcing (for about the fifteenth time) and waving his truncheon in a valiant manner, "secured him myself, I did, an' fastened him in lock-up."

"First 'angin' matter you've 'ad," quoth one, Jonas Black, butcher and grazier, with a cheerful relish.

"You'll get promoted, eh, Thomas Bull?" said Dimple, the baker, a stout flabby man, who had, since the theft, made money out of showing the particular loaf as a curiosity.

Bull shook his head in a knowing manner, and no one had a doubt of it.

Mattock, the sexton, here chimed in with his thin squeaky voice—"If ye *hev* done a great thing, there's no need to flourish that there staff of yourn, Thomas Bull; I don't want my brains beat out wi' it. Put it up, Thomas, or else go an' fight French wi' it."

"Frenchman!" cried Bull angrily, and scenting sarcasm in the little sexton, "who's afeared of a Frenchman?"

Here, glaring defiantly round the circle, he stuck his chest out still further; and young Fielding (who had stood by, his horse's bridle over his arm, during the foregoing conversation) left the valorous Bull descanting on the summary manner in which he would deal with all "forringers" who came within a reasonable radius of his truncheon.

Now Fielding had intended, as the shortest way out of the difficulty, to have got that truculent constable quietly on one side and offered him so much in good English money to allow his prisoner to quietly escape—by accident. But finding that this plan was now out of the question by reason of Bull's having taken the whole village into his confidence (as well as being some three-parts drunk already), he abandoned that scheme, and cast about in his mind for some other plan of delivering the wretched criminal.

As he rode off again the shades of night were beginning to fall, and old Mattock, the sexton, was ambling peacefully up to the church to ring the curfew.

#### IV.

UP on the hill above Sandy Bay sat old Anthony Trip, watchman, beside a great stack of wood and other combustibles which had been dragged up there and set ready to blaze when wanted. Anthony was growing used to his professional duties, and less and less fearful of ever being called upon to do anything but watch, though he considered that a penny a night, with one thrown in in every seven, was little enough for his services.

He had now slept comfortably for several nights, and found it such a success that he blamed himself severely for not trying it before. As rather a cool wind blew in from the sea, he sat himself down under the lee of the stack, and faced comfortably inland with a small fire to warm the soles of his feet by, and to get a light for the big bonfire whenever that should be necessary; though how he was to see the Frenchmen coming while looking quite in the wrong direction did not occur to him, or, if it did occur to him, did not trouble him.

He had been doing a job at thatching that day, and repose was particularly grateful; the spot was peculiarly lonely, there was nothing to disturb him; the fire to the soles of the feet was very grateful. Loud snores soon shook the stack of wood, and proclaimed to three dismal shorn sheep, the only auditors, that Mr. Anthony Trip was asleep again for the sixth time that week.

He dreamed, did Anthony—actually dreamed that the French were come; and he knew it, but could neither move hand nor foot to give the alarm. Now, to his horror, one of them—none other, he thought, than Boney himself—came creeping quietly up the hill, while he (Anthony) would have given a week's pay to cry out and run away. But no; he seemed to be chained to the spot, and in another moment up came Boney behind him, and clapped a sack over his head, and—

Gracious powers! He was awake, and the dream was true! There *was* a sack over his head, and he was being tied hand and foot—nay, was already bound and could not move. He gave a stifled cry under the sacking, and thought his last moment had come; and his conscience had time to tell him that this was a very proper reward for his unfaithful service as watchman. He began to beg hard for his life, and even went so far as to say that he thought the French a very fine and noble race, and Bonaparte even a better man than a Briton.

All this was while he was being rolled downhill by unseen hands, and without a word spoken on the other side. Finally he rested, to his great satisfaction, in what in his blindfold state he judged (and quite rightly) to be a ditch-bottom, still alive and able to breathe through the sacking with fair ease.

While lying there and wondering what to make of it, he heard to his wonderment the crackling of wood, and scented the reek of smoke; and, in spite of his desperate situation, old Anthony could not repress a chuckle to think that these very Frenchmen



in their folly were giving warning of their own approach. That they had lighted the fire from his own small embers was clear. The crackling was like guns going off; soon he could even feel the heat of the flames blown down to him where he lay among the dock-leaves, and decided that if ever that dreadful night should be got through with safety, and he ever saw his village again, he would take credit for having lighted the beacon himself and ask for an increase of wages—if the churchwardens were not both of them slain—on the strength of it.

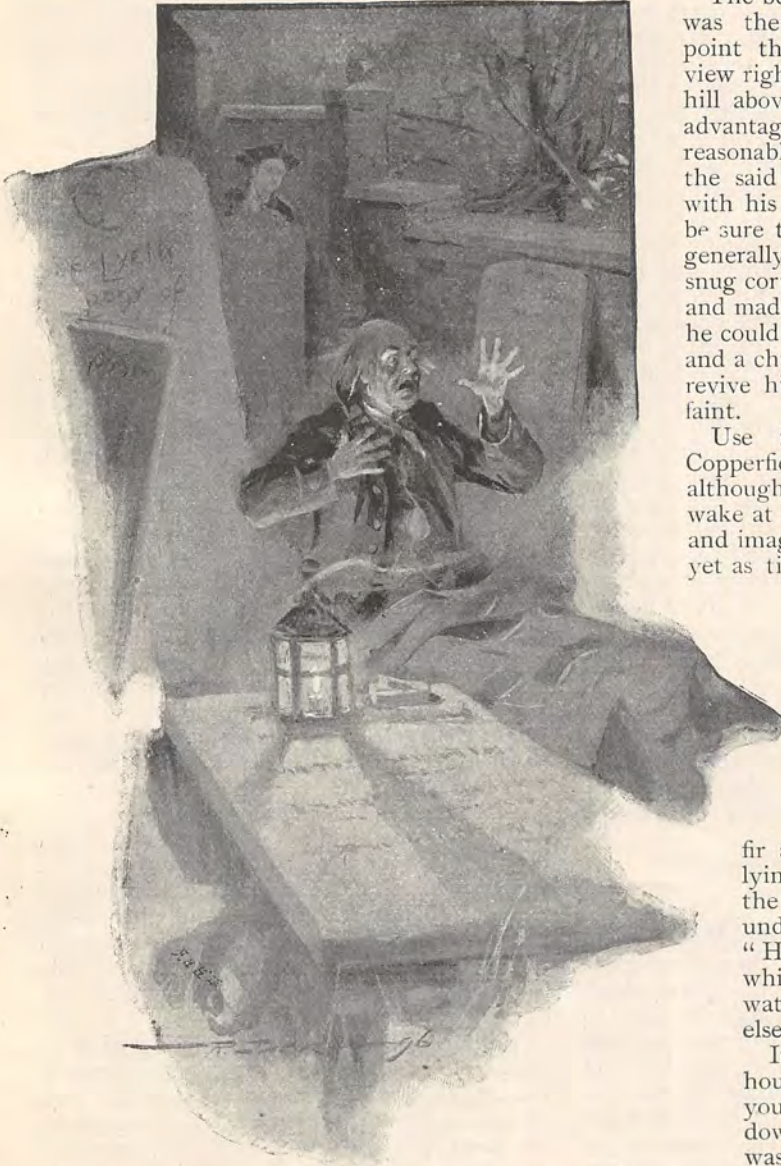
V.

Now the watchman who stopped down at Sharlford to keep one eye—or two, if he chose—on the spot where the beacon might blaze, was old Anthony's own brother. Jeremiah Trip was his name, and he was a more conscientious man than his relative, for he had concluded within himself that to sleep when he ought to be watching was a most dastardly thing, and not to be thought of for a moment. But as he felt that some repose was necessary, he decided to wake once every three hours, cast an eye up to the beacon, and go to sleep again.

The best place for his observatory was the churchyard, from which point there was an uninterrupted view right on to Sandy Bay and the hill above it. It also possessed the advantage that no man could there reasonably expect to sleep more than the said three hours at a stretch, with his mind dwelling, as it would be sure to do, on ghosts and bogies generally. Jerry had sought out a snug corner among the gravestones, and made himself as comfortable as he could with an old piece of carpet, and a chunk of bread and cheese to revive him if he woke up and felt faint.

Use is everything, as David Copperfield's waiter remarked; and although at first old Jerry used to wake at short intervals with a start, and imagine the place full of ghosts, yet as time went on he was as easy in his mind among the gravestones as you or I are (let us hope) in our beds. Ease of mind conduces to slumber, and on that very night when the bonfire was blazing away like "old boots"—and, in fact, very much better, being mainly of fir and pine wood—Jerry was lying asleep at full length, with the carpet round him, and just under a big headstone, with "Here lyeth ye body of—" which happened to do for the watchman as well as anybody else.

It must have been half an hour after midnight when a young horseman came cantering down into Sharlford, and there was a curious odour of smoke and burnt wood about him



"HIS EYE CAUGHT THE DISTANT GLARE ON THE HILL."



which his brown cob could not make out at all. He appeared to be a good deal surprised and even disgusted to find the happy village so perfectly sound asleep and wrapped in darkness.

"Much good their watchmen are!" he muttered. He tied up his horse to a tree on the green and went stumbling into the churchyard, over the stones in the darkness. Here he flung a handful of light gravel at "Here lyeth ye body of—," and concealing himself behind a buttress watched the result.

Nor was he disappointed, for up got Jerry thinking it was rats, and deciding in his mind that he would have Dimble's old Tom with him another night. However, he kicked against the stone to frighten them away, and then his eye caught the distant glare on the hill, and he woke up with a vengeance.

Without a moment's hesitation he plunged down the path, dashed open the creaking gate, and out into the village street, bellowing like a madman—

"French! French! Look at bonfire! Look at bonfire!"

## VI.

AT ten of the clock on a sunny morning, the rectory garden, looking its best, was the scene of a little conversation. Miss Lucy was listening with evident gratification to the recital of certain interesting particulars by young Fielding, who, with his horse's bridle over his arm, as usual, was holding forth with manifest enjoyment.

He had stopped for a minute to take breath, but Miss Lucy was impatient.

"Pray go on," she cried, "what happened next?"

"Well," said the young man, "when the alarm was given you should have seen what a stampede there was! Upon my word I felt it was a shame, but I didn't see how else to manage it. The first man to flee out of the village was—just as I had expected—the courageous Bull himself, and when everyone else, as well as they could in the darkness, saw the very fattest and bravest of them running away, they felt that Sharlford was no place for them to stop in. All I wanted was to get the constable off in a hurry, and other folk too busy and scared to mind what I was doing.

"Directly Bull had cleared out of his cottage—you know he lives there alone—I nipped across, had the keys of the lock-up down from the nail—"

"You don't mean to say that Bull had left them?" cried Miss Lucy.

"Left them? I should think he had! Why he had forgotten even his truncheon in

his flight. Well, I say, I got the keys and in another minute I had the poor prisoner out of his den. He was terribly frightened at first, and thought I was come to carry him off to immediate execution; but I reassured him and gave him the food you had tied up ready, and—and a little money to help him on, and I told him to strike away west as sharp as he could, and he would be safe enough."

"And will he?" queried Miss Burlingham anxiously.

"Certainly he will. For no one knew anything of him except the villagers here, and who's to stop him? So you may make your mind easy, Miss Lucy. As for the rest of it, I had a regular business, I can tell you, when I had given my man his start, to persuade the folks that there were no French visible as yet; and as for Bull, he had outrun everyone else, and was too far away, fortunately, to be brought back at all. But he came in this morning, looking scared, and we have all had the laugh of him, for no one will confess to being frightened now, or even on the point of running away. The best of it all was when Bull took down his keys and went to the lock-up. I had fastened the door again so that he thought it was all right, but when he opened the door and found the bird flown, you should have seen his face! He is in a terrible state of mind now lest he should be reported to the justices for neglect of duty, and has been begging everyone to keep quiet about it.

"Dimble and Higgs and some others have been up as a deputation to the bonfire (which is all burnt out now, by the bye), and they found poor old Anthony" (Mr. Fielding's expression very innocent here) "actually tied up in a ditch, and able to tell them nothing. Anyhow, there was no sign of a Frenchman; so they all came down, vowing vengeance on the rascal who had lit the beacon; but—I don't think they'll find him."

"Nor do I," said Miss Lucy with a smile. "And you don't think anyone's any the worse, do you?"

"Not a bit of it! Everyone's greatly the better—except—except me," rather dolefully.

"Oh!—and why—except you?" said the girl, but she turned her head aside and spoke as though she knew the answer.

"Lucy!" cried Mr. Fielding.

She looked up, and the eyes of the two young people met.

The next thing—well, the goodly youth had to drop the cob's bridle, because—really he required the use of both arms, and—

Oh, come! The instructive historical part is all over; there's really nothing more to say.

ANDREW HOME.