



The Further Adventures of Romney Pringle

THE KIMBERLEY FUGITIVE.

BY CLIFFORD ASHDOWN.



WESTERLY and south-westerly breezes, close, thunder locally."

Twenty times that day had Mr. Pringle consulted the forecast, and then had tapped the barometer without inducing the pointer to travel beyond "change." Indeed, as evening drew near with no sign of the promised storm, the prospect was quite sufficient to abate the philosophic calm which was his usual mask to the outer world. A morning drizzle had been so greedily licked by the scorching pavement, or lost in the sand and grit that, inches deep, covered the roadway, that the plane trees on the Embankment, with a mottling where the rain had splashed their dusty leaves, were the sole evidence of a shower too fleeting to be remembered. The drought was of many weeks' standing. The country lay roasting beneath a brazen sky, great fissures starred the earth, while a mat of peculiarly penetrating dust impartially floured the roads and hedges. London, with all its drawbacks, was more tolerable; at the least there was some shade to be found there, and Pringle had not yet been tempted from his chambers in Furnival's Inn.

When sunset came, and the daily traffic slackened, Pringle shouldered his cycle and carried it down the stone stairs from the second floor. His profession of the phantom literary agency, so gravely announced upon his door, allowed him to dress with a disregard of convention, and it was in a bluish

flannel suit and straw hat that he pedalled along Holborn in the comparative coolness. By the bumpy slope of St. Andrew's Hill and the equally rough pavement of New Bridge Street, he reached Blackfriars, and turned to the right along the Embankment; it ran in his mind to go as far West as possible, inhaling whatever ozone the breeze might carry, returning later with the wind behind him.

The seats, crowded with limp humanity, the silent children too tired even to play, the general listlessness and absence of stir, all witnessed to the consuming heat. The roadway was almost deserted, but just by the Temple Pringle was conscious of the disagreeable sensation, so full of meaning to a cyclist, of something striking his back wheel. From behind there came an exclamation, an oath from between close-ground teeth, and as he sprinted on and dismounted these were punctuated by a loud crash. Pringle knew the meaning of it all without turning. The shock had been too gentle and withal noiseless to be caused by anything but another cycle, ridden most likely by some ground-gazing scorcher, and knowing that with even the best of riders a collision with another machine in front means disaster, he was quite prepared for what he saw. A few yards back a dilapidated-looking cyclist was examining his mount. His dark hair and moustache had acquired the same grey tint as his clothing, so generously had he been coated with dust in what must have been a long ride; but the machine appeared to have suffered more from the

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fall than its rider, who dolefully handled a pedal which declined to revolve.

"Can I be of any help?" inquired Pringle with his usual suavity. "I hope there's nothing serious the matter."

"Pedal pin's bent, and I've hurt my ankle," returned the cyclist. He spoke shortly, as if inclined to blame Pringle for the accident due to his own folly.

"Is it a sprain?" asked Pringle sympathetically. "Do you think you can ride with it?"

"Nothing much, I think." He walked round the machine with a slight limp, and added surlily, "But I can't ride a thing like that." He indicated the pedal with a pettish finger as he raised the machine from the ground.

"Oh, I think a few minutes' work will put that right," observed Pringle encouragingly.

"No! Really?" He brightened visibly, as if Pringle had rid him of a certain incubus.

"I don't think we shall find a repairer open now—besides, I don't know of one just about here. If you will allow me, I'll see what I can do to put it right. As you say, you can't ride it like that."

The stranger was obviously not a practical cyclist, and Pringle, leaning his own machine against the kerb, had produced a spanner and was on his hands and knees beside the damaged cycle before the other had well got his pouch unstrapped. Pringle had put down his concern for the machine to the natural affection of an owner, but, with some of the dust and mud brushed off, it stood revealed as a hired crock, with cheap Belgian fittings. The dull enamel, the roughly machined lugs, the general lack of finish, showed the second-rate machine; and it was no drop-forging which yielded to the persuasion of a very moderately powerful wrench, the soft steel straightening under the leverage almost as readily as it had bent. Meanwhile, the owner vented an unamiable mood in dispersing the inevitable boys crowding like vultures round the fallen cycle; and when Pringle, his labour ended, struck his shoulder beneath the handle-bar and was peppered with a shower of dust and pellets from the mud-guards, he had lost some of his former incivility, and, producing a handkerchief, insisted on dusting his benefactor with quite a gracious air.

"I see you've ridden far," remarked Pringle as he finished.

"Yes; from—er—er—Colchester," was the hesitating reply.

"Suppose we move on a bit from this crowd?" Pringle suggested. "I think we are both going westwards."

"I was on the look out for a quiet hotel somewhere near here," said the cyclist as they rode side by side.

"I think the 'Embankment' in Arundel Street would suit you; it's moderate and quiet—round here to the right. By the bye, it's some time since I was on the Colchester Road, but I remember what an awful hill there is at Hatfield Peverel. I don't know which is the worst—to come up or go down."

"Hatfield—Hatfield Peverel?" repeated the other musingly.

"Just this side of Witham, you know. Why, surely you must have noticed that hill!"

"Oh, yes. Witham—yes, a very nasty hill!"

"No, not Witham. You come to the hill at Hatfield Peverel."

"Yes, yes—I know." And then, as if anxious to change the subject, "Are we anywhere near the hotel?"

"Just the other side of that red-brick building. I see you've managed to pick up a little real estate on your way." The stranger started and glanced suspiciously at Pringle, who explained, "The mud, I mean."

"Oh! the mud. Ha! ha! ha!" There was more of hysteria than hilarity in the laugh, and the man suddenly grew voluble. "Yes, I came through a lot of mud. Fact is, I was caught in the thunderstorm."

"Indeed! That's good news. Whereabouts was it?"

"Near Tonbridge."

"Tonbridge?"

"Tut! What am I talking about? I mean Colchester. But this is the place, isn't it? Good-night—good-night!" He dragged the machine into the hotel, leaving Pringle to silently debate whether his boorishness was due to his confusion, or his confusion to his boorishness.

With his foot on the step, Pringle was just remounting when a muffled rumble sounded overhead. The stars were hidden by a huge inksplash, and a pallid, ghostly light flickered in the south; then, with measured pat, huge blobs of rain began to fall, while a blast, as from all the furnaces across the stream, blew up from the Embankment. It was the long-deferred storm, and Pringle told himself his ride must be abandoned; he had wasted too much time over this

ingrate. Resigned to another night of stuffy insomnia, he turned and pedalled up towards the Strand. Beside him ran a newsboy, shouting his alliterative bill: "Storm in the south! Rain in rivers." Cramming a pink sheet into his pocket Pringle hurried on, and reached Furnival's Inn as a blinding glare lit up the gateway, and the clouds exploded with a crackling volley.

Fagged and dusty, his head throbbing to the reverberation of the thunder, Pringle collapsed on his sofa and languidly unfolded the paper; but at the first glance he sat up again with a start, for in the place of honour beneath the alliterative headlines he read:—

The Central News reports that a violent thunder-storm, which did some damage to the hop-fields, burst over the Tonbridge district early this afternoon. For a time many of the roads were impassable, the drains and ditches being choked by the sudden rush of storm-water. So far as is known no loss of life occurred. Further storms may be expected in the home counties and will be anxiously awaited by agriculturists.

"Tonbridge!" thought Pringle. "Was there no storm in Essex?" He scanned the rest of the paper with an eagerness which dismissed his fatigue. The cyclist had positively named Colchester as the scene of the storm. Strange that the paper said nothing about it—and there was ample time for the news to have reached London, too. He flicked a crumb of dry mud out of his turned-up trousers, and recalled what an avalanche had poured from the stranger's machine. That was no passing shower it had sped through. Stay—why, of course! The man actually did say Tonbridge, and then made haste to correct himself. And how clumsily he made his escape afterwards! Supposing he had travelled up through Tonbridge he would probably cross Blackfriars Bridge, and thus his presence on the Embankment would be explained. But why had he told a lie about it? What could he possibly have to conceal? Pringle absently turned the rest of the mud out of his trousers and threw up the window. With wide-spread fingers he cast the handful abroad, when a sudden inspiration bid him pause, and tightly clasp the remnants of dust, he took a sheet of paper and carefully scraped his palm over it. The "Britannica" stood ever ready to his hand, and taking a volume from its shelf he studied it intently for a while, murmuring, as he replaced it, "Essex, Thanet sands and London clay."

Across the room stood his oak bureau—

the bureau which indifferently supplied an actor's make-up or a chemist's laboratory, and opening it, he drew out a test-tube and a bottle of hydrochloric acid. Shaking the dust into the tube he poured the acid in, and watched the turbid solution as it slowly clarified after a brisk effervescence; then with steady hand he added a few drops of sulphuric acid, and his impassive features relaxed in a grim smile as the resulting opalescence deepened to opacity, and this in turn condensed into a woolly cloud. The delicate test established the presence of chalk and the entire absence of clay. Thus, for all his clumsy lying, science, which cannot be deceived, declared that the cyclist had ridden into London over chalky roads—that is to say, not from Essex, but from the south.

The storm had passed. Clear moonlight succeeded the lambent spasms of the lightning, and a cool breeze sang past the upper windows of the Inn. Physical weariness would not be denied, and with the novel prospect of an unbroken night's rest before him, Pringle abandoned any present attempt to learn the motive of the stranger's deception.

The sun was shining brightly between the green blind-slats when he awoke. Tired out, he had slept long past his usual hour. Lighting the spirit-lamp to prepare his simple breakfast he glanced over the paper he found beneath his outer door. As he was accustomed to explain, he read the *Chronicle* not from any sympathy with its opinions, but as being the most really informing journal published in London. The water boiled and boiled in the little kettle, the flame sputtered and died as the spirit burnt out; but Pringle, intent on the newspaper, took no heed of his meal. There was barely a third of a column; but as he read and re-read the paragraphs the personality of the cyclist was ever before him, and remembering the chemical analysis, his suspicions all crowded back again—suspicions which he had laid aside with the headache of last night.

A TALE OF THE DIAMOND FIELDS.

About a month ago, according to the South African papers just to hand, some sensation was caused in Kimberley by the disappearance of an outside broker named Thomas, who for some time past had been under the surveillance of the Diamond Fields police for suspected infractions of the Illicit Diamond Buying Act, colloquially known as I. D. B. Under this local Act arrest is lawful on much slighter evidence than would justify such a course elsewhere, but the police had little to work upon until some purloined stones

were actually traced to Thomas just after he disappeared; the ordinary law was thereupon invoked by the police, and a warrant was granted for his apprehension. The fugitive had a good start, and although traced to Cape Town, he never lost the advantage he had gained, but managed to escape on the out-going liner *Grantully Castle*, and the police feeling certain of his arrest at Southampton telegraphed full particulars to England. Thomas would appear to be well served by confederates for, when the *Grantully Castle* arrived at Madeira, a telegram awaited him and he suddenly left the ship, alleging urgent business at Funchal, and stating his intention of coming on by next boat. When the next liner duly arrived at Southampton it brought an inspector of the Diamond Fields Police armed with the warrant for Thomas's arrest, but no one on whom to execute it. As usual, Thomas was a day ahead of his pursuers, and for a time no trace of him could be found. At length, through the Castle agent at Funchal, it was discovered that Thomas had remained but a day or two there, having taken passage for London in the *Bittern*, a cargo steamer trading to the Gold Coast. The scene now changes to the Downs, where the inspector, in company with a London detective, awaited the *Bittern*. A slow sailer, she was believed to have encountered bad weather in the Bay of Biscay, and it was not until yesterday morning that she made her number off Deal, and was promptly boarded by the police in a pilot boat; but once again they were just too late. Off the South Foreland a "hoveller" had tried to sell the *Bittern* some vegetables, but instead secured a passenger in the person of Thomas, who struck a bargain with him, and was rowed ashore near Kingsdown. From there he appears to have walked to Walmer, taking the train to Dover, where for the present he has been lost. Thomas is stated to be a native of Colchester, for many years in Africa, and is described as a strongly-built man of about forty, wearing a dark beard and moustache, and with a scar over the right brow caused by a dynamite explosion which blinded the eye.

Here was matter for reflection with a vengeance. As Pringle refilled his lamp and kindled the charred wick, his one thought was the possible identity of the cyclist with the man Thomas. The description given in the *Chronicle* was inconclusive,

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but the cyclist had a very effective mask of dust and mud. True, he was beardless, but would not a shave be the first act of Thomas on arriving at Dover? To Pringle it seemed such an obvious precaution that he dismissed the fact as irrelevant. The time, too, was sufficient for even an inexperienced rider to have cycled the distance. It was certainly a clever idea, and very characteristic of the man, to come by road rather than by the train with its scheduled times and its frequent stoppages, to say nothing of the telegraph wires running alongside. As Pringle had almost conclusively proved, he had travelled up from the south by way of Tonbridge, yet he had shown an extreme desire to conceal the fact. Then, again, he talked of coming by the Colchester road, and Thomas was said to be a native of Colchester. It was a small matter, no doubt; but the fugitive, anxious to hide his tracks, would be sure to speak of a neighbourhood he knew—or, rather, which he thought he knew, for it was clear



"CAN I BE OF ANY HELP?" INQUIRED PRINGLE.
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that Thomas, if it were he, had forgotten the main features of the route. But supposing Thomas to have been the cyclist, where were the diamonds? Surely, thought Pringle, he must have some with him. And at the thought of the treasure to which he had been so near his pulse quickened. Could Thomas have concealed it about his person? Hardly, in view of his possible capture. But what of the cycle? He had shown considerable solicitude for the machine—in fact, he had scarcely loosened his hold on it. And had not he, Romney Pringle, tested the possibilities of a cycle for concealing jewellery? Smiling at the recollection he sat down to his breakfast.

About nine o'clock Pringle started in search of his new acquaintance, but at the hotel he was met by a fresh difficulty—he knew no name by which to describe the stranger, and could only ask for “a gentleman with a bicycle.”

“You may well say the gentleman with the bicycle,” exclaimed the waiter, as he took Pringle's judicious tip. “That's what we all call him. Why, he wouldn't let us put it in the yard last night, but he stuck to it like cobbler's wax, and stood it in the passage, where he could see it all the time he was eating. An' would you believe it, sir?”—sinking his voice to a confidential whisper—“he actually took the machine up to his bedroom with him at night!”

Pringle having expressed his horror at this violation of decency, the waiter continued—

“Ah! and when the guv'nor heard of it and went up to speak to him about it, he'd locked the door and pretended not to hear. He said it was a valuable machine; but I've got a brother in the trade and I know something about machines myself, and I don't see it's anything out of the way.”

“What name did he give?”

“Think it was Snaky, or something foreign like that.” The waiter consulted a slate. “Ah! here it is, sir—Snaburgh, No. 24; call 7.30.”

“Has he gone, then?” inquired Pringle anxiously.

“Took his machine out with him soon after eight. The guv'nor objected to his going out before he'd paid his bill, seeing as he'd got no luggage, so he paid up, and then took a look at the time-table, and asked when lunch was on.”

“What time-table was it?”

“‘A B C’ I saw him with.”

“Do you expect him back?”

“Can't say for— Why, dash my wig, here he is, cycle an' all!”

The cyclist, holding a small black bag and wheeling the machine, wormed his way into the lobby resolutely declining the waiter's assistance. On seeing Pringle he started, then paused, and half turned back, but encumbered as he was his movements were necessarily slow, and Pringle, ignoring the action, advanced with his most engaging smile.

“I'm so pleased to find you're none the worse for your accident. Allow me!” He steadied the machine against the wall. “Have you been for a morning ride?”

“Only to do some shopping,” was the ungracious reply.

Mr. Snaburgh, as he called himself, looked all the better for his morning toilet, and Pringle watched him closely in the endeavour to compare him with the rather vague newspaper description. He was certainly thick-set, and might have been any age from thirty to five-and-forty. His moustache was coal-black and drooped in cavalry fashion over his mouth; the chin had already grown a short stubble, and two fresh cuts upon his chops were eloquent of the hasty removal of a recent beard. There was a constant nervous twitching about the eyelids, but although shaded by the peak of the cap, a dirty-coloured corrugation over the right brow was quite apparent. Pringle took special note of the right pupil. As Snaburgh stood he was in a full light, but yet it was unduly dilated, *thus showing its insensibility to the light and the blindness of the eye.*

“I must apologise for intruding on you so early in the day,” said Pringle, with all his wonted suaveness; “but a sprain is often at its worst a few hours after the accident.”

“It's all right, thanks,” gruffly.

“If I can be of any service to you while you're in town—”

“I'm not going to stay in town! Er—good-morning!” And he resumed his elephantine struggle through the hall.

In face of this snub Pringle could do nothing, and fearful of rousing suspicions which might scare the fugitive into another sudden disappearance, he accepted the dismissal. As he passed out he overheard, “Shall I take the machine, sir?” and the reply, “No, I want a private sitting-room where I can take it.”

Pringle meditated upon two facts as he turned homeward. He had ascertained

beyond any reasonable doubt that the cyclist was Thomas, and that the machine was as much as ever the object of his idolatry. The extraordinary pains to keep it in sight, his refusal to part with it even in his bedroom, the saddling himself with it when, as he said, he only went shopping, all pointed to the fact that a machine intrinsically worth some three or four pounds had a very special value in his eyes. One thing was a little puzzling to Pringle: the man had no luggage—not even a cycle-valise—the night before, yet at an early hour, almost before the shops were open, in fact, he had gone out and purchased a bag. Did he suspect how much comment his care of the cycle was arousing? Was he about to transfer its freight to the bag? He must be meditating a further move, too, else why consult the time-table? Here again he displayed his usual shrewdness, for the “A B C” gave no hint as to the line he favoured. Pringle wondered how much longer Thomas would remain at the hotel. He had certainly made inquiries about lunch, and the unloading of the cycle would take a little time. But then there was that story in the *Chronicle* to be reckoned with. Were Thomas to see that he would be sure to connect it with Pringle’s visit, and would promptly vanish. But was it in any other paper? Pringle made a large investment in the journalism of the morning and, mounting an omnibus, industriously skimmed the whole. The *Chronicle* alone printed it, and he decided to take the risk of Thomas reading it there.

Hard by Furnival’s Inn is an emporium where the appliances of every known sport (and even of a few unknown ones) are obtainable. Pringle was no stranger to the establishment, and making his way to the athletic department, purchased a cheap cycling suit and sweater, with a cap which he ornamented with an aggressive badge. Downstairs among the cycling accessories he bought a “ram’s-horn” handle-bar, and hurried back laden to his chambers. His first step was to remove the characteristic port-wine mark on his right cheek with spirit, and then having blackened his fair hair and brows, he created the incipience of a moustache with the shreds from a camel-hair brush. Although it would have been difficult for Pringle to look other than a gentleman, with his slim athletic figure clothed in the sweater, the cycling suit, and the cap and badge (especially the badge), he presented a fair likeness of the average Sunday scorcher. The manners of the tribe he fortunately saw no necessity to

assume. To perfect the resemblance, the scorcher being comparable to a man who shall select a racehorse for a day’s ride over country roads, it was necessary to “strip” his machine, so, removing the mud-guards and brake, and robbing the chain of its decent gear-case, he substituted the “ram’s-horn” for his handle-bar.

Towards noon Pringle rode down Arundel Street, and alighting at a tavern commanding a view of the Embankment Hotel, sat down to wait in the company of a beer-tankard; but as he slowly sipped the beer, his vigil unrewarded and the barman beginning to stare inquisitively, the thought arose again and again that Thomas had given him the slip. He almost decided on the desperate step of visiting the hotel and once more pumping the friendly waiter, when, shortly after one, he caught a momentary glimpse of a familiar face as its owner examined the street over the coffee-room blinds. Pringle drew a long breath. He was on the right scent, after all; and ordering a cut from the joint he made a hearty lunch, preserving an unabated watch upon the hotel door. This was a somewhat irritating task. It was the autumn season, and with a full complement of country and American cousins in the house, there was a constant movement to and fro. Nevertheless, his persistence was rewarded after an hour by a slight but portentous occurrence: a waiter emerged with a cycle, which he propped against the kerb. It was the hired crock. By this time Pringle could have identified it among some thousands at a cycle show. But the owner? Where was he? What, Pringle asked himself, could have soured his affection for the machine? What else but the removal of the treasure? Pringle was saved further speculation by the appearance of Thomas himself. He was carrying the hand-bag, and entered on an earnest conversation with the waiter, the subject of discussion appearing to be the cycle itself. Presently the waiter opened the tool-bag, and taking a wrench from it, commenced to adjust the handle-bar, which Pringle for the first time noticed was all askew. This took some little time, and when the man finished he pointed to the saddle, as if that too required attention, an office which he straightway performed. And all the while Thomas, with the bag fast held, contented himself with supervising the task. The sight was an instructive one for Pringle. The disarrangement of the cycle was an assurance that the contents had been transferred, and Thomas clearly regarded



"PRINGLE DISAPPEARED TOWARDS COLCHESTER IN A WHIRLWIND OF DUST."

the machine but as a means of locomotion.

Resisting the waiter's attempt to hold the bag while he mounted, Thomas scrambled to the saddle and steered a serpentine course up the slope, the bag bouncing and trembling in his grasp. Even had he been capable of the feat of turning round, he would have felt no apprehension of the youth who followed at a pace regulated by his own.

In the case of every pastime some special Providence would seem to direct the novice: either he has an impregnable run of luck, or he performs feats which he can never after attain. So it was with Thomas. An indifferent rider, he boldly plunged into the torrent which roared along Fleet Street; unscathed he shot the rapids of Ludgate Circus, and kept a straight and fearless course onwards up the hill. But in Queen Victoria Street the steering became too com-

plicated and, forced to dismount, he pushed the cycle for the remainder of the way. Pringle had followed in some alarm that they might be hopelessly separated in the traffic, and more than once had even entertained ideas of seizing the bag in the midst of a purposed collision and trusting to luck to dodge into safety between the omnibuses. But he dismissed them all as crude and dangerous; besides, his artistic ideals revolted at the clumsiness of leaving any details to mere luck.

The pursuit led on through the City till presently Pringle found himself descending the approach to the Great Eastern terminus. Inside all was bustle and confusion, and they had to elbow an arduous track through the crowd. Seeing wisdom in a less intimate attendance, Pringle withdrew to the shelter of a flight of steps, and while Thomas perspired he rested. But he never relaxed his

watch, and the moment the other emerged from the booking-office and panted towards the labelling rack, Pringle followed on. As Thomas moved off with his machine Pringle palmed a shilling on the porter with the demand, "Same, please," and a few seconds later drew aside to read the label pasted on his spokes. It was *Witham*. Handing the cycle to a porter he rushed to the booking-office and then on to the platform as the crock, in the indifferent absence of Thomas, was trundled into the van with customary official brutality; his own followed with a shade more consideration, and under the pretence of adjusting it he presently got into the van, and as he passed Thomas's machine buried a knife-blade in each of its tyres. He had just time to take his seat before the whistle sounded, and the train glided out of the station.

Witham was a good forty minutes off, and at every halt Pringle's shoulders blocked the carriage window. He feared lest Thomas should repeat his favourite strategy of alighting before his destination. But so long as they were in motion Pringle whiled the time by imagining fresh reasons for this mysterious journey. He was staring at the map of the Great Eastern system which appositely hung in the compartment, when his eye fell on a miniature steamboat voyaging a mathematically straight line drawn across from Harwich to the Hook of Holland. The figure suggested a new idea. Supposing the present trip had been arranged with an accomplice—could it in brief be a clever scheme to dispose of the diamonds in the best market? What more likely to disarm suspicion than for Thomas to cycle from Witham to Harwich?

"Witham!"

Pringle, with every sense alert, looked out. No one alighting? Yes, here he was. The guard had already evicted the two cycles when Thomas, with the precious valise, hurried down the platform and seized his own. The supreme moment had arrived. Pringle waited until the other had disappeared, and stepped on to the platform as the train began to move. There was no need for him to hurry; the damage he had inflicted on the crock would ensure its leisurely running. And true enough, when he reached the station door Thomas had got but a little way along the road in a bumpy fashion, which even to his inexperience might have told the rapid deflation of the tyres. His progress was further complicated by the presence of the bag, which he had

no means of fastening to the cycle; and, slowly as Pringle followed, the distance between them rapidly shortened, until when Thomas turned into the main road he was nearly up to him. Pringle halted a few seconds to allow a diplomatic gap to intervene, and then followed round the corner as Thomas shaped a painful course along the Colchester road. On and on, growing ever slower, the way led between high edges, until with a pair of absolutely flat tyres there dawned upon Thomas's intelligence a suspicion that all was not well with the machine and, dismounting, he leant it against the hedge.

"Can I lend you a repair? You seem badly punctured," piped Pringle in a high falsetto. He had shot by, and now, wheeling round, passed a little to the rear and propped his machine against a gate.

"I thought that was it. I haven't got a repair," was the least bearish reply that Pringle had yet heard from Thomas.

"You must get both tyres off—like this!" Pringle inverted the crock, and with the dexterity of long practice, ran his fingers round the rims and unnecessarily dragged out both the inner tubes for their entire length. "Catch hold for a second, will you, while I look for a patch."

Thomas innocently laid the bag at his feet and steadied the machine, when a violent thrust sent him diving headlong through the frame. With a spasm of his powerful back muscles he saved a sprawl into the hedge, and was on his feet in another second. Pringle, the bag in hand, was already a dozen yards away. He had noted a fault in the hedge, and for this he made with all imaginable speed. The road sank just here, but scrambling cat-like up the bank, with a rending and tearing of his clothes, his bleeding hands forced a passage through the gap. Once clear of it he doubled back inside the hedge; beyond the gate there stood his cycle, and even as he neared it there was a scream of curses as the thorns waylaid Thomas in the gap. In a bound Pringle was over the gate. The bag was hooked fast upon a staple; desperately he tugged, but the iron held until at a more violent wrench the leather ripped open. He seized the canvas packet within; it crisped in his fingers. Behind there was a furious panting; he could almost feel the hot breaths, but as Thomas clutched the empty bag and collapsed across the gate, Pringle disappeared towards Colchester in a whirlwind of dust.