The Red Patrol.

The Story of a Border Raid.

By F. St. MARS.

We are the little folk—we!
Too little to love or to hate.
Leave us alone and you'll see
How we can drag down the Great!
("A Piet Song."—Rudyard Kipling.)

CURVES unbroken by even a tree, league-long ridge upflung against the faultless blue of a vast sky like the heave of a scornful shoulder, hollows firm and purely perfect as the bend of a woman's arm, and over all nothing, no sound in that wondrous void of refined distance, but "the little voice of the sea by the cliffs," and the trickling carol of innumerable larks, all blended together in one vast canopy of song—these things be, peering keenly out from the old flint barn, beheld and heard. They gave him no comfort. The spirit of the place; the calm sense of ample rest and assured peace suggested by this aspect as of "the solemn slope of mighty limbs asleep," had no power to enter into his fierce, intolerant soul; he who had been born in war, and would die in strife, knowing no peace between, whose very heritage, in fact, was war; he, nature's executioner, appointed and anointed as such: what had he to do with the spirit of our immemorial Downs?

Long, low, sturdy-limbed, liveried in red mahogany of the wood above, and yellow of sulphur beneath, with a head smooth, wedge-shaped, and cruel, from whose pointed muzzle flashed fangs whiter and sharper than the very Downland flints around him, with eyes of an amazing brightness, and in his gait a strange, rippling, almost snake-like motion that you shall not see in any other beast except the weasel—such was he, the old dog-stoat, the leader of the Red Patrol.

Presently his little head, peering out of the hole in the niche of the old flint barn, was joined by another. That was his mate's, a trifle smaller; about twelve inches from black-cold nose to black tail-tuft, as against his fifteen inches; a little neater in appearance, perhaps, if that were possible, but built on precisely similar lines. Anon a third head popped out beside them, to which added itself a fourth, and these again were joined by a fifth, who brought with him a sixth, thus completing the Red Patrol. The old dog-stoat, his mate, and four near full-grown young, all looking as if they had been cast in identical, but different-sized moulds, all of them the same fierce, implacable, intolerant, "close-packed gnome engines of energy," fearing neither man, nor beast, nor devil.

Now that dog-stoat, as the leader of his family, was in a mighty bad predicament. In the course of their sojourn in that place he and his had slain almost every living thing in the old flint barn and the yard and roofed sheds, all in flint, without, and what they had not killed they had driven away. Famine, therefore, breathed on their shoulders.

They must depart to a new hunting-ground. Yes, but your stoat is a lover of cover, not of the open. Does he but cross a gateway he must do so by the drain-pipe underneath. He keeps to the hedgerow. You never find him cutting off a corner of a field in the open; he goes round. But here were no hedgerows, and the open chalk drained itself. There were not even flint walls, nor any manner of cover on the velvet-matted, sheep-cropped Downland turf. If they moved a hundred yards beyond the clear-cut shadow of the barn by day, hawks and dogs awaited them, whilst by night the owl, and the fox, and the badger were always about. Fear they had never heard of, but courage alone cannot vanquish beasts six times one's strength. True, the barn was full of corn, full from clean floor to vast flying roof, full with the whole of the fortune of the young gentleman farmer renting that land. What odds? It might have been full of bare flints for all the use it was to them. No; they must go. They were there assembled at that moment for that purpose, peering out into the cold, lean grey of dawn.

Suddenly the stoat sat up on his haunches, incidentally making a very pretty, neat little picture. It was a habit common to him—he, who had such a long body and such short legs—like a dachshund's they were. It helped him to see further than most people would expect. This, however, was no ordinary sitting at gaze. He was tense as a waiting snake. His short, harsh coat bristled and crisped straight out all over him. His family, too, had sprung to attention, catching, it seemed, the excitement through his body.

Beneath his view the close, flint-starred, virgin turf of the Downs, striped horizontally with white sheep tracks, as the rump of a zebra is striped, fell away in faultless, rounded curves to the great, wind-whipped, shiny chocolate undulations of the plough, which again, still falling, vanished in the dead-dumb mist yet covering the Weald like a sea. A long, brownish, curving thing was wriggling off the plough—with which it harmonised well enough to be invisible at that distance—on the turf, where it showed fairly plainly, and working its way upwards slowly, sinuously, rather horribly. It looked like some giant serpent. It was not pleasant to behold, in some way. There was something sinister about it. One felt, somehow, that the thing was too late, and ought to have retired to its lair, or hole, or wherever it lived, with the retiring night; for it was alive, that thing—no one could doubt that. No wonder the stoat bristled. Even the Flint Workers of very, very long ago, whose burrows yet showed on the slope above like an old and long-healed scar, had known no serpent on the Downs after this fashion, and the later Romans had never peered down from the ramp of the fort that still girdled the crest to behold such a monster crawling up out of the dark and shrouded mystery of the Weald forests.

Then there shot up out of the wreathing, silent mist, a single kestrel, which hung poised, as if on invisible wire, swinging slowly in a circle. Anon it moved on, beat, it may be, a hundred yards up the hill, and repeated the swinging process, for this is the only way the little falcon knows how to hunt, whether the quarry sought be grasshoppers, or—yes, sometimes young stoats. The leader of the Red Patrol had watched the performance twice before, but that which followed was new to him.

Suddenly the falcon seemed to catch sight of the serpent thing, now well on its way up the northern ramp of the Down, marking a course straight towards the barn. The sight attracted him. He hurried to it, flapping, not very gracefully for a falcon, and curving about it, hung there (again) circling slowly round and round. Next instant he fell—bang on to the thing.

The stoat saw him fall, and saw him rise almost instantly, bearing something in his talons; saw, too, the brown column "splay" out and break in half, saw it change from a column to a patch—nay, two patches—and beheld it gradually join together again, and stretch out into a column as before, and, seeing, he blinked his eyes, not wholly because the rising sun had suddenly flashed in his face, as well he might. This was no ordinary sight which he beheld, and one not seen every day on the Downs, or anywhere else, for the matter of that.

The sun crept upwards, washing all things in gold resplendent, and turning the "living garment" of the tiny, flower-starred, short Downland turf into a carpet of sparkling wonder, each tiny dew-drop a jewel, perfect, in a setting past compare. So did the brown column creep up. While the larks sang, and the first sheep-bells began to "tonka-tonk" down under the foot of the hill, and the gulls commenced to stream inland, a wondrous white, airy army, on their daily excursion to the plough, it crawled and squirmed upwards; a thing without beauty, an unspeakable blot on the perfection of the Downland dawn.

Then the column thing was hidden by the flint wall that formed a litter-covered yard out from the flint barn on one side, and the old dog-stoat came down on to his four feet again, and waited on his low, sturdy legs, with his low, sturdy family for the thing to re-appear, which, if it kept its course, it would do quite close by the yard gate.

The shadow of a gull—inky in that wonderful clear light—shot across the yard and up the barn wall; a little wheatear prim in his white and brown jacket with black facings, flitted up on to the wall, and made noises like tapping-stones, and a small jet-black fly, with a perfectly crimson traverse band, dashed up to the stoat, poised, and dashed off again at a tangent, leaving behind a metallic "ping-g-g" on the stillness of the morning.

Then, scarcely audible at first, there grew into the hushed and waiting calm—hushed save for the continuous voices of the larks, which seemed rather an integral part of the scene than any silence-breaking sound—a low and ghostly whisper. It was, oddly enough, in its earlier stages, rather like the whisper of cards, which you hear when people are playing in a quiet room. It was not nice in any way. Especially was it not nice as it grew, and added unto itself an uncanny, shuffling pattering, as if an army, an army of very small people—gnomes— was approaching secretly.

The effect of the sound—which was almost a feeling of repellent fear as well as sound—upon the stoats was strange. Their ears went flat, their thin upper-lips were lifted, showing the small, sharp canines glistening in the sun, and their harsh, short fur stood out on end all over them, every hair separate and stiff, hiding the lean ribs along the empty sides, and shamming fatness in the thin bodies; but their eyes—their eyes had taken on a red tinge when the sun caught them, blood-colour behind the black, and blind folk will tell you that red in the eye means anger, intense and wicked.

At last something showed through the rails of the yard gate, paused for a moment, and then hopped through into the yard, where it stood still, or rather crouched still, blinking and peering about in the stark glare. It was a huge buck-rat, a great scarred and seamed, gaunt-limbed, yellow-toothed boar brown rat, and a giant of his tribe if ever there was one. For a few moments he stood there, his beady, light eyes flitting with amazing speed from water-trough to wall, to wheatear, to barn, and round again, taking in everything. Then he turned and made some kind of sound in his throat.

The wheatear fled screaming.

Instantly, as water pours through the crevices of a partly-opened sluice, there poured through between the gate-rails into the empty yard a solid, unbroken stream of rats; plump rats, slender rats, young rats, powerful fathers of families, rotund mothers, swaggering young bucks, old and scarred villains, hopped they in, until in five minutes the place was crawling with them, them and their giant leader, or king, or whatever he styled himself.

It is fairly safe to presume that they had eaten up all the supplies in some other barn not greatly distant, and had been forced to organise a general "flitting" to fresh fields and pastures new, or perhaps it was lack of water that drove them. Anyway, it matters little what brought them. What does matter is that they were there, and in being there caused the Red Patrol to remain.

A dog barked somewhere in the morning near at hand, a sheep-bell broke into a rhythmic tonk-tonk-tonka-tonk; a shepherd appeared on the skyline, silhouetted for a moment, like a man carved in coal, and started to ascend, his flock following. They were coming to the dew-pond near by, to drink.

Came then, instantly, a short, sharp squeak from the giant leader of the rats, a whirl of long tails, a swift, scurrying patter, and—silence. The yard was empty, bare in the glare of the sun, possessed by no living thing except a red-handed black fly or two, at all. It was like the sinking of water into parched land, or the vanishment of cockroaches on the sudden appearance of a light in a dark room. Also it was very wonderful. Into every hole and gap and crack the rats had poured themselves, and gone out. But they were there—the Red Patrol knew that—there to stay.

Then, one after the other, in single file, leaping their peculiar sideling leaps, the stoats made for the only spot at which the rats had shied, a great heap of flints and chalk boulders piled in one corner of the yard. This was their stronghold—the rats could smell that easily, for, I give you my word, particularly when there is trouble toward, the stoat, he does not smell well at all. What would you? Has he not the polecat for first cousin, and the skunk for a not very distant relation?

That night, after the bats had danced their gnome-dance, and the owls had gone their first twilight round, but before the foxes came out, that is to say, 'twixt dusk and eight o'clock, the Red Patrol sallied forth. It was a pretty sight in the moonlight to see that fearless, ruddy family—father leading—breaking in rippling line across the bare yard.

They did not talk. One does not talk much, as a rule, in the midst of a hostile army. They were out strictly on business, grim business, work such as their implacable little hearts loved, and incidentally they were out to fill their too-long empty little stomachs also.

They gained the hole in the barn, from which they had watched the advent of the rats, with care, and with redoubled caution crept through—each fierce little flat head peering over each black-tufted little tail—till they got inside. Then they stopped.

They beheld a great black void in front, dim and suggestive, with deeper blackness where the serried, ranked rows of corn-sacks were piled from end to end of the great floor. The air was heavy with the clean smell of corn, and warm, but there was no silence in the place. Last night the barn had been still as death save for the ghostly flutter of the bats and the whisper of little draughts. To-night the place was alive. Everywhere, over the great, swept floor, and above in the granary, were furtive, quick patterings, surreptitious shufflings, and eyes, green eyes, cruel eyes in pairs, that gleamed, and appeared, and vanished again. That was the rats at their play. From the dense shadow by the piled corn-sacks came a steady, low, grinding sound, and that was rats, too—at their work.

Presently, after the stoats had been standing watching for a little time, three blurred blots, darker than the surrounding darkness, appeared all at once, glowing, as it were, towards them. The old stoat waited till he could see the shining eyes—like little lamps they were—turned full upon him, then he backed away down the hole. Three rats were making for that hole. One presumes they were off to the dew-pond to drink. They never got there. Somewhere down beneath the floor of the barn, all among the dust and the rubble, and in darkness that could be felt, the Red Patrol dealt with them. There was no cry, no squeal, nothing to reach up to the army above and give them warning. Simply, the three walked into that hole, and were swallowed up—utterly. Those stoats were very, very hungry indeed.

An hour later a powerful old ruffian of a buck-rat, a father of families exploring on his own account for mouse families to murder, heard a sudden, half-stifled squeal down an isolated black-looking hole in a far corner. The squeal choked on itself almost as soon as uttered, but it jerked the scarred old villain upon his haunches, crouched in the true rat's fighting pose, quick as thought.

He knew that cry, had heard it before; had, if appearance and the traditions of his male ancestors count for anything, caused it more than once—the death scream of a young rat.

Now there is one good trait which the rat and the pig and the baboon share in common. They may be cruel as frost, treacherous as thin ice, murderer, child-slayer, or cannibal, but they will rally to the call of a comrade in distress, and even, in some cases, risk their wicked life in his cause. This may explain why that thin, high squeal, so suddenly silenced down there in the blackness, should cause that vile old ruffian to rally swiftly two more such as himself, and plunge headlong into the mouth of that very black hole.

The hole led down under the floor of the barn, sometimes opening out into rubble-strewn spaces, where newts and toads, spiders, beetles, and all manner of unclean things had their retreat, and sometimes narrowing to a twisty, turny tunnel, and it pleased fate that just where one of the latter gave on to the former he should almost charge into the corpse of him who had cried aloud. He stopped dead and stared, the eyes of his friends showing gleaming over his shoulder. He was aware of eyes, red eyes, floating above the corpse, and of a horrible smell in the air. Then a voice