

## Just William and the Band of Brown

The Outlaws had never really discussed the exact purpose of their organisation, but this was probably just as well, as trying to pin down its exact functions might have led to worrying lack of conclusions. The membership - William, Douglas, Ginger and Henry – were, however, unquestioningly loyal to its unspoken ideals, whatever they were. The Outlaws had certainly never found any shortage of important things to do during their time together, but the previous day's school had turned out to be a real inspiration to further their daring exploits. Their teacher, Miss Jones, had been dreading the thought of another hot Friday afternoon spent trying to enlighten her class on the finer points of English grammar. Inspiration had struck that morning when she had come across the suspiciously gaudy-looking book which her gentleman friend had left behind at her lodgings the previous Sunday when he had run to catch the last bus. After taking the register, she announced to the class that this week there would be a history lesson instead grammar and, reaching into her bag, produced "Travels in the Kalahari" by Sir Giles Dunwoody and Lord Elwin of Troon.

The volume turned out to be a surprise success with her charges despite, as Miss Jones soon realised, it's rather cavalier attitude to the probable truth and its suspiciously colourful interpretation of the facts. Nevertheless, the class had sat open-mouthed and eerily quiet as she read from it. Treacherous natives with spears and poisoned arrows, valiant English gentlemen with superior, loyal values, and a great deal of peril and gruesome killings had held them enraptured. It was, Miss Jones thought, an altogether easier way to spend a Friday afternoon than grappling yet again with the double negative rule and the difference between and adjective and an adverb. What grabbed The Outlaws interest most had been the author's detailed description - near admiration in fact - of the way savage tribesmen could track their unsuspecting enemies for hours before silently creeping up on them and slitting their throats from ear to ear in a mere second. Although Miss Jones found it necessary to edit Sir Giles and Lord Elwin's prose from time to time, wondering as she did so if this was seemly literature for any suitor of hers to be reading, the Outlaws sat listening in total awe.

When the foursome met on Saturday morning, no discussion was needed about how to spend the day as, after carefully discussing the gorier details of the previous day's story in William's garden shed, it was clear to them all that they needed to hone their tracking skills. Luckily, after a few minutes waiting quietly in a bush just behind the gate into the lane, two suitable candidates for tracking came into view in the form of William's older brother Robert and his friend Edgar, emerging from the Brown family's front door dressed in cricket whites ready for the game against the Old Hamptonians that afternoon. After leaving what seemed a suitable gap, the Outlaws crept silently through the gate and tailed the two young men down the lane and towards the railway station.

Deep in conversation, the cricketers didn't notice the gaggle of Outlaws in pursuit. The four trackers stopped just short of the village station and took stock of the situation as they watched their prey sit down on the bench on the up platform. After a brief discussion, Ginger and Douglas were given the job of continuing surveillance whilst William and Henry were dispatched to the station refreshment rooms to assess the options regarding the rather fly-blown sticky buns under the glass domes on the

counter and working out the most efficient way to spend the fourpence ha'penny they had managed to assemble between them.

After a frustrating wait in the buffet whilst the vicar's wife had a long discussion with the girl behind the counter, William and Henry emerged with the morning's refreshments in a brown paper bag. As they crept stealthily to re-join the others, they saw that the bench that had held the Outlaws' prey was now empty and a train was leaving the platform under a veil of steam and soot with Robert and Edgar onboard, mercifully oblivious of their recent surveillance. Reunited with the stalkers and mouths full of buns, William and Henry listened as Ginger began a full debriefing.

"They was talking," he started, rather obviously, but with gravitas. "And I'm sure it was very important stuff what they was talking 'bout. Quietly - like they didn't want anyone to hear. But we crept right up behind them - just like they do in the Kalahari. We could have slit their throats easy, but we only had a penknife."

"What was they saying?" said William, interest peaked. "'sno good just saying it was important like that."

"Well," said Douglas, not wanting to be left out. "It was strange. It must have been some sort of secret code - it was something about getting a 'bear helmet'. They said Tarquin de Veere-Carter just got one, and he reckons having a bear helmet is really good, and that everyone who is anybody has one these days 'cos everyone knows you're better off wiv a bear helmet."

William was really interested now - this had to be important. Tarquin was the son of Mr and Mrs de Veere-Carter, new arrivals in the area but already a real force to be reckoned with as the lady of the house had been one of THE Randells of Hertfordshire before she married and moved to the big estate on the edge of the village. Anything the de Veere-Carters said or did commanded local attention and instant aspiration, but Tarquin, however, was just about as different a species of boy from as the Outlaws as it was possible to be. Closer to Robert's age and distant and aloof when it came to any contact with the village youth, he was a weekly boarder at Harrow and spent his weekends in the village doing "nice" things. He had even been seen, to the Outlaws total derision, in a dinner jacket at the Vicar's Saturday evening poetry readings in the Village Hall. Many of the village parents, quick to hold Tarquin up as a model how a young man should behave, might, however, have been rather surprised had they heard Ethel, William's older sister, on that particular subject. The young gentleman in question, she had said to her friend Margaret, was "a real dreamboat and obviously very well catered for in the trouser department if you like that sort of thing, but you wouldn't be safe with him in a taxi as he his hands are all over the place." Margaret had replied that she had heard that too, and that she wouldn't be at all surprised if he was the reason why their parlour maid Elsie had had to leave the village to go and stay with her "sick" aunt in Bournemouth for six months, if you took her meaning.

"Go on," said William, "they must have said more than that."

“Well”, said Ginger, “it was hard to hear ‘cos we didn’t dare get too close, and then express from London came through as they was talking, but they said somefing about getting a ‘Sir size’. That’s what Tarquin got during the holiday, apparently. He said everyone at Harrow has a Sir size nowadays, ‘cos Sir size is so much better. Then Robert said that he’d heard it was “harder to meet the bishop if you got a bare helmet, but all the girls love it when you got one Sir sized and, once they see it, they can’t wait to get it inside.”

William was puzzled. His older brother had never previously shown much interest in meeting any clergyman, let alone a bishop. Wanting to get any closer to a bear than at a zoo seemed equally out of character. It was true that girls, thinking of his sister Ethel and Violet Elizabeth - his next-door neighbour and nemesis - always seemed interested in sappy stuff like trying on hats, but a bear helmets certainly didn’t sound like their style. Perhaps, in that case, it made sense that they’d want to have bear helmets on inside so that no one saw them wearing something as un-ladylike outdoors.

Ginger went on, saying that Robert had then said that “if girls couldn’t wait to get a bear helmet inside, then he certainly wanted to have one too.” Although Ginger said he couldn’t really hear because the station master was shouting about the approaching train, the last thing they’d heard was Robert saying something about ‘ending up with a brown band if you got a bear helmet, but it was a price worth paying if it meant he’d be fighting them off.’

“But I dunno what that’s all about”, said Douglas – “getting a bear helmet in a Sir size and a brown band fighting them off.”

“S’obvious,” said William instinctively, before realising that he didn’t actually have a clue. Being leader of the Outlaws sometimes meant that you had to be decisive, taking the lead for the others. Well practised in the art, however, he was thinking quickly, knowing that if he sounded convinced then the others were very unlikely to doubt his verdict.”

“Well,” he continued, “s’obvious that bears is jolly dangerous animals. At the zoo they’re always in cages with signs saying don’t go close. So you’d bloomin’ well need a bear helmet if you was going to go fighting ‘em off, otherwise -” He made a lurid gesture with a well-matched sound as he sliced the edge of his palm across his throat. The unlikely idea of Robert planning a close encounter with a bear puzzled him again, but perhaps bear helmets were just something newly fashionable, like spats. “And I expect that Sir size means it’s a good sized one, like ...err.” His confident flow faltered slightly, but he was soon back on track as the authors of the previous day’s story came to mind. “Yes, Mister sized is or’dnary size, Sir sized is a good sized one, and Lord sized is best of all – it’s a new way of explaining how big they are. Ev’ryone knows that. I’m surprised that Tarquin only got a Sir size; you’d expect they’d have got him a Lord sized one knowing how la-di-dah the de Veere-Carters are.”

William chose not to ponder aloud on the significance of the Brown Band. He really wasn’t sure what this meant, but he didn’t like the sound of it much. Only the previous week, the Outlaws had had the dubious pleasure of being carolled into Mrs

de Veere-Carter's "Band of Hope" meeting in the village hall, and one Band like that in the village was one too many in his opinion. Could Robert really be thinking of starting a Band too? A Band of Brown – his family's name? Robert wasn't thinking of having something a bit like the Outlaws for his own horrible chums, was he? And fighting who off? The Outlaws perhaps? That sounded like trouble - a threat to William's superior position as someone to be reckoned with when it came to running exclusive clubs. If Robert was starting his Band of Brown - a club like the Outlaws but with members that bit older and dangerous – that could be a big cloud on the horizon.

Nobody, thought William, could possibly object to him doing his prep. He chose, though, not to consider what they might say about him choosing to do his homework sitting on the floor in the hall with his ear inches from the keyhole of the parlour door. After supper, he had happened to over-hear Robert ask their father if they might have a word "man to man." This was such an unusual turn of events that the situation most certainly required careful monitoring. William had quickly grabbed his school books, bundled his dog Jumble into the kitchen and shut the door, and then taken his position outside the parlour, not noticing that his Mathematics text book was upside down on his lap. Frustratingly, Robert kept walking up and down inside the room as he spoke so his voice came and went. What with that and the noise Jumble was making scratching on the kitchen door, only the odd word of the conversation made it through the keyhole of the parlour door.

"Prep use," Robert was saying. Well, William's opinion concerning prep was that doing it was no use at all. Time in any Band could be much better spent than on doing homework. Then "clean", "modern", "hygienic." All William could think of was that it sounded like the time Mrs de Verre-Carter had dropped by and regaled Mrs Brown at length on the many merits of her new electric refrigerator. Was Robert really trying to get their father to buy one of those? If he was, then William wasn't at all sure how "just more manly" fitted in. The snatch he heard about helping to prevent "elf abuse" seemed a very peculiar diversion into fairy stories. Mr Brown, annoyingly, had taken up residence for the conversation in the large armchair with its back to the door so his side of the chat was even harder to hear. Suddenly, though, he bellowed out "two guineas!" so loudly that William jumped and nearly fell through the door. At that point, with Jumble's protestations now probably doing serious damage to the kitchen paintwork too, he thought it best to beat a retreat, with the little he had heard meaning that the mystery of the conversation had only deepened.

Robert was surprised that getting his father's permission for his proposal had been much easier than he had feared. The financial aspect of it had been the thing on to which Mr Brown had latched, that being something that was within his area of expertise whereas the merits or otherwise of having your foreskin removed was way beyond him. Once they had come to an agreement about Robert paying back half the cost of his circumcision from his wages, Mr Brown had just muttered something

about “glad to hear of a young man wanting to keep himself clean in mind and -err - body” and found that he couldn’t think of anything else that he cared to discuss with his eldest son on that particular topic. The next day, Robert again found that getting agreement was easier than he had expected when he went to see the doctor and quickly found that he had no convincing to do - quite the opposite, in fact.

Dr Micklethwaite was a very modern man. He lived in the newest house in the village, a gleaming white edifice that, viewed from the far side of the green, looked like the bridge of a liner. He drove a brand-new motor car too, and generally had little time for the more old-fashioned niceties of village life. Finding his progressive views unpopular in his native Yorkshire, he had headed south in an attempt to be somewhere where his patients might be more receptive to his up-to-date innovations. The talk he gave at the Village Hall on “The Marvels of Contemporary Medicine (with a full five syllables on the penultimate word yet only two on the last) had left most of the audience rather bemused and glad that at least the tea and sandwiches laid on by the committee meant that the evening hadn’t been completely wasted. They had been pleased to hear that he considered that there would soon be “a pill for every ill”, but many had been rather wary of his recommendations of “early surgical intervention” as it had become common knowledge in the village that going to him with something like a bit of a limp could lead to a recommendation that replacing the limb in question with “an efficient modern prosthesis” was the obvious solution.

The Doctor had been very struck recently by a series of most interesting articles in the Lancet on the many benefits of circumcision, saying that the procedure had been adopted as routine at some of the most forward-thinking maternity hospitals in the country. This seemed to him to be a most progressive and beneficial innovation that he should be promoting in his own practice too. The thought of instigating it had returned to him many times and, in fact, the thought about what it would be like to actually perform circumcisions on some of the better-looking younger men in the village was beginning to more than interest him. After a further article had extolled the virtues of a new American invention which, it said, made the procedure “quick, painless and foolproof whilst guaranteeing excellent results” it was only a few weeks later that an eagerly awaited parcel had arrived for the Doctor, fulfilling the order he had placed with the Comgo Corporation Inc, California.

Whenever he had a moment between patients, Dr Micklethwaite enjoyed toying with the shining, modern components that the parcel had contained. In his mind’s eye, every young man that came into his surgery was imagined fitted into it and he was very taken with the idea of a special part of them under his control, clamped firmly between shining, stainless steel plates. Though he relished the thought of putting it to use and however admirably modern the invention was, it was a rather complicated device. In the interests of mastering its intricacies, the Doctor had tried fitting the Comgo on himself many times. It was a fiddly contraption and not as simple to use as perhaps the publicity had suggested, and he had dropped the metal domes repeatedly, followed by the frustration of trying to find to where they had rolled across the smooth linoleum on his consulting room floor. The previous week he had thought the biggest dome, the one that covered his own helmet best, was lost for good only to find it that evening during his supper as his housekeeper, who had found it under the filing cabinet whilst cleaning, had used it to prop up the centre of pastry topping on top of that day’s steak and kidney pie.

Despite his strong conviction that giving every man a thorough circumcision was to confer a blessing which prevented the problems that nature's very un-scientific design of the human body caused, the Doctor had somehow not yet managed to confer that special blessing on himself. On two occasions, he had finally managed to get the thing assembled and had a scalpel to hand, but he had somehow not been able to bring himself to tighten the screw and complete the process. So, with the brown box from America meaningfully on the desk between them, Mickelthwaite was delighted to have a fine looking fresh-faced young man sitting opposite him who was modern and enlightened enough to actually be asking for circumcision. The doctor, in fact, was alarmed to find that the young man's request was causing him to share in his keenness in a rather unprofessional way and was glad that the desk between them was preventing that particular display of enthusiasm being seen through his tweeds.

Dr Mickelthwaite found the Comgo even trickier to fit onto Robert than he had onto himself. It only took a couple of tries to find the right sized dome to fit over his glans, but the rather copious foreskin had singularly failed to co-operate when it came to fitting the rest of the device around it. Dr Mickelthwaite was already feeling hot and tired when he was finally ready to start turning the screw but luckily Robert had not noticed the Doctor's struggle and had been encouraged by his assured talk about what a wise and very up-to-date choice he had made and of the benefits it would confer. Mickelthwaite had had to be rather careful to choose his words when it became clear that Robert clearly assumed that he was a circumcised man himself, making a mental note that, should he ever find himself next to Robert in the new public conveniences on the village green, then perhaps a little more decorum than he usually showed when standing next to good-looking young men might be in order.

It really surprised the doctor, having read in the Lancet how the Comgo was quick and painless, quite how loudly Robert howled when he started tightening the screw. In the time took to his rather lopsidedly clamped foreskin to die, Robert had so used so much colourful language that the Doctor was very glad that it was only old Mrs Scaggs in the waiting room and that she was deaf enough not to hear his yells. After what seemed an interminable time to Robert, Mickelthwaite finally reached for his scalpel and, hands shaking, ran it round the edge of the bell.

Thinking about it later, Dr Mickelthwaite realised that he just needed more experience with the Comgo in order to master it fully. It had, he reasoned, just been rather unfortunate that his first patient had been one with quite so much foreskin as well as being one who was quite so vocal in the face of, as the brochure that came with the Comgo had described it, "momentary discomfort". The Doctor admitted to himself that perhaps he hadn't wielded the clamp in the most efficient way and thought that a somewhat younger patient would be rather more compliant and easier to work on. Perhaps – although for reasons of stopping them squirming around quite so inconsiderately whilst being clamped up rather than anything to do with saving them pain – it would be best to use it next on an etherised patient. His chance to test this theory came the next day when Mrs Cummins, the village grocers' wife, came in with her son Harold and his sore throat. It was, the doctor explained, most likely to be tonsillitis which, in the old days, would have been left to get better by itself but the much more advanced, modern way was to nip it in the bud by means of the wonders

of modern surgery. Mrs Cummins was duly instructed to go home and thoroughly scrub the kitchen table ready for his visit the next morning when he would perform a tonsillectomy and, for good measure, remove Harold's adenoids too.

When the doctor arrived at the Cummins, a bemused looking Harold was soon on the kitchen table. Mickelthwaite rolled up his sleeves ready for action and, although what there was of his bedside manner had been pushed to the limits by Harold's insistence that his teddy would have to be etherised before he was, the boy was soon out cold. With Harold's possibly offending organs soon removed, the doctor seized his chance. He explained that he still had some ether left – which was hardly surprising as he'd brought much more with him than he knew he would need - and asked Mrs Cummins if, as she had paid for it anyway, she would like him to “use it up” and perform a circumcision on her son for an extra 5 shillings. It was, he explained in a way that somehow made her feel guilty for not having had it done already, considered the best modern practice to perform the procedure on all boys. Mrs Cummins wasn't entirely sure what a circumcision was, but if the doctor said it was good and she'd paid for the ether anyway, then finding an extra 5 shillings out of the housekeeping seemed to be money well spent. She was taken aback when the doctor commenced by pulling down Harold's shorts and drawers. She was going to change her mind until the doctor said that the shiny thing that he got from his leather bag was the most modern and efficient of devices and that he had had it sent from Los Angeles where it was already in widespread use. Mrs Cummins lived for her thrice-weekly visits to the pictures in town and the thought of something that, however remotely, connected her family to the stars in Hollywood thrilled her – if circumcision was good enough for the sons of the glamorous actors and actresses that she read about so avidly in “Silver Screen Weekly,” then it was certainly good enough for her Harold too and 5 shillings seemed a small price to pay for it.

This time, with the boy deep asleep and uncomplaining on the kitchen table and with a much more manageable amount of foreskin to contend with, Mickelthwaite had only had to retrieve the bell from under the Welsh dresser twice before he was ready to turn the screw. At the moment that the doctor picked up the scalpel and, with a confidence he shouldn't really have felt, prepared to run it round Harold, Mr Cummins turned the sign on the grocers' door to “closed” and shut it behind him as he set off across the green to head home for lunch. Just as the doctor was saying to Mrs Cummins that, thanks to the marvellous new device, it had all been done so quickly that there was actually more ether left still, the garden gate opened and Mr Cummins walked up the path as if on cue. As her husband entered the kitchen, Mrs Cummins pounced and took his brown warehouse coat from him.

“Look lively James - go on out back and have a wash, “she said. “The Doctors going to circumcise you while the lamb chops finish browning.”

After what seemed an incredibly long month of “abstinence” as advised by the Doctor, the magical day that Robert had so long anticipated finally arrived. It fell rather handily on a Saturday so, after just a half day at the office, he had had time to shave again carefully and put on his best jacket and the new tie he had been saving for

a special occasion before setting out with his mind full of the wonderful things to come and the girls he would have to be prepared to “fight off.” He was pleased when the first one he came across was his sister’s friend Margery sitting sketching in the churchyard. Strangely, she didn’t seem a bit impressed when he told her that he now had a bare helmet. Rather than agreeing to his suggestion that she might like to go into the hayfield with him to enjoy it, Robert was amazed when she told him that he was a “dirty beast and should be ashamed of himself.” Surprised but undaunted, he walked on down to river and ran into his old class-mate Phyliss whom he’d taken out dancing a few times and who had “shown promise” when he’d walked her home afterwards. He was, however, taken aback she’d slapped his face and ran off when he told her of his new acquisition. It was all a bit perplexing really. Clearly the village girls must be so very far behind the times that perhaps they just didn’t realise what a great thing he now had to offer them.

Things didn’t go much better when, not quite in desperation, Robert went to the Kings Head. Most of the young men in the village knew that Rose the barmaid could always be relied on to be a “good sport” when it came to a bit of slap and tickle, and Robert had only just started on his lemonade when she “coo-ee’d” to him from behind the half open cellar door with an inviting wink. After sitting on a keg of stout for a few minutes of the usual sort of fun and games, Robert was in no doubt that things would progress to what Edgar called “volume three” as soon as he told Rose his exciting news. She didn’t seem perhaps as impressed as Robert had hoped, but her “give us a look then” did at least hold some promise of at least a move towards “volume two.” Rose’s face showed nothing of the raptures he expected to be provoked when he freed his penis from his herringbone tweeds and presented it proudly to her. Rather than an instruction to get it inside her with no further delay, her “very nice I’m sure” was as good as it got before she smoothed her hair and said there would be customers waiting and she’d better get back behind the bar.

Frustration only increased later that night when Robert was back in his bedroom, having found no girls to fight off. Realising that he now very urgently needed to “meet the bishop,” he took out his penis. He looked again at the brown band that now ran round it rather haphazardly and at 45 degrees across the shaft and wondered again what the scientific thinking was behind putting it at that angle rather than going straight across. He was sure that there was the best of reasons for it, even though it did look a little strange. It was also rather odd, he thought, that science decreed that it was best to make the skin a lot tighter on one side than the other. After several minutes with his new, modernised member in his hand, Robert thought he must somehow be missing a trick regarding how to coax from it the superior pleasures it must surely now offer. Somehow, there just didn’t seem to be the means left with which to do the necessary as nothing now moved in the very satisfying way it once had. Still frustrated, he retreated to bed with his library book and only cheered up a little when it dawned on him that it must surely be the case that the village girls just weren’t sophisticated enough to know what was good for them. Edgar and Tarquin must, he realised, have meant that it was the girls in town, with their better understanding of how wonderful it all was, that the bare-helmeted young men were all having to fight off. Resolving to make sure that he ran into some nice, modern girls at the pictures in town the following day it was, he concluded, not going to be a problem that the bishop would have to remain un-beaten in future as he just wouldn’t need to anymore.



Sadly, and despite many valiant attempts, none of Robert's trips to the pictures over the next few weeks got him any further than "volume one." Things became even more dispiriting on the day of the cricket club's charabang outing. It was then that he found out then that his friends Edgar and Charles were "more than going steady" with Jane and Cecily. Both girls, he gathered, had been persuaded to go to "volume three" – something that they had never been known to do before, despite many efforts at persuasion by the many young men who considered the two girls to be by far the "hottest tickets" in the village. Although it seemed to be rather unfair that they had "come across" to Edgar and Charles rather than him, Robert comforted himself with the thought that the girls' sudden willingness to co-operate after holding out so long could only be explained by Edgar and Charles also having had the sense to have been circumcised too. It was with a deep feeling of despair when, several crates of light ale having been consumed on the charabang on the way home, the driver pulled over onto the side of the road to let his passengers take some much-needed relief in the hedgerow. Unable to stop himself from taking the opportunity of a sideways look to check out his theory, Robert saw that both Edgar and Charles remained most decidedly "un-modernised." Charles, in fact, was clearly still extremely "old-fashioned" to the extent of a good inch of extra skin hanging off the end of his member. Robert wasn't quite sure how to interpret the nudge that Edgar gave Charles when he saw them glance at him in return, nor the expression on their faces. It was surely, he managed to convince himself, just jealousy.

A month or so later, Robert had - just - worked out how to beat the bishop, but there was really only half the pleasure for twice the effort in it that there had been before. The idea of fighting girls off that had once seemed so alluring now seemed ludicrous, let alone that any of them would be desperate to have his modernised member inside them. In his darker moments he regretted his big mistake but publicly he had, of course, done nothing but extol the wonders of becoming bare-headed to all his friends. Without actually lying, he also got rather good at implying that his much-improved member had been inside almost all the girls in the village. It was, he had implied, because they all thought it so essential to have only bare-helmeted suitors that none of the other village youths were getting a look in. In reality, it troubled him that none of the other boys in the village seemed to have taken up the new, modern option either, and he was feeling very much the odd one out. Although he could still sometimes convince himself that the full benefits were yet to come when he finally came across some more enlightened young women, it was starting to feel unfair that he was the only one who had been the victim of something that had turned out to be a pig in a poke.

The psychiatrist who had recently set up shop in town after finishing his studies with Dr Jung in Vienna and to whom Dr Mickelthwaite was regularly sending patients for cures for the most unlikely of ailments, might well have said that Robert was using William and his compatriots as scape-goats onto whom his frustration over his recent disappointments could be transferred. Robert, though, just thought they were annoying, silly little boys who needed teaching a lesson. Although only two weeks into his summer school holiday, William had already engaged in countless tiresome incidents, culminating in one where he had managed to somehow wreck

many of the parts of Robert's brand new bicycle which he had "borrowed" for the cart the Outlaws had made which had subsequently done severe damage to the new greenhouse when it had veered out of control. It was after that incident when inspiration struck Robert. After tea, he suggested a walk with his father and told him how concerned he was about his younger brother and feared that things would only get worse as he got older. He had, he explained, an idea of how a step might be taken to help William and that, perhaps, there was a way that his father could do everyone in the village a favour by arranging it for the rest of the Outlaws too. Mr Brown was of course keen to hear of anything that might give him some peace and quiet, let alone reduce his considerable monthly bill from the village glazier. Such fraternal concern from Robert was unusual but, perhaps, thought Mr Brown, it was another sign of the new maturity that had led to his oldest son's un-expected request for circumcision.

Telling his father how pleased he had been by the results of his recent procedure and what a total blessing it was, Robert said that his one regret was that he hadn't received it earlier when he was at William's "impressionable" age. It would, he said, have helped him face up to the seriousness of life as a young man and enabled him concentrate on the higher things in life "without distraction, if you take my meaning." Mr Brown, rather uncertain what that meaning was but not liking to ask, became rather more interested when Robert said that, as mature young man, he had coped well with the month it took to heal after the procedure, but that with younger boys like William and his friends, the inevitable need to take things calmly in order to avoid discomfort would give them pause for thought and make them inclined to realise the pleasure to be had from pursuits like, perhaps, reading, water colours or jigsaw puzzles rather than running riot. Mr Brown, desperate for some relief from the constant complaints from neighbours about the havoc William had wrought, saw a straw to be clutched in what Robert had said. To do the village the most good and regain a little of his lost standing in local society, there seemed some sense in Robert's suggestion that his father might talk to the Outlaws' parents so that not only could the all the boys get the benefit of a circumcision but that, as a bonus, the whole village might get some peace and quiet over the summer whilst they all got over it.

The next evening, Mr Brown left the office just too late to catch the 5:40. He was only a few stations down the line on the 6:10 before starting to regret the second cup of tea that he'd had in the station buffet whilst waiting for it. By the time he alighted at the village station, his need for relief was severe. As he was finally attaining it in the Gents lavatory on the down platform, Mr Brown noticed that he wasn't alone at the stalls. The other two men in there were standing next to each other at the far end of the long row of ceramics, the others remaining un-occupied. Mr Brown didn't think much about it – perhaps a sudden rush of customers from the London train had arrived and departed quickly leaving just two with very full bladders who just happened to be standing side by side. With his own bladder now empty enough to be able to think about things other than his need for relief, Mr Brown realised that one of the other men, who did indeed now seem to be taking a very long time indeed, was Dr Mickelthwaite. With Robert's suggestion fresh in his mind, Mr Brown realised that he may as well strike while the iron was hot. When Mr Brown greeted the Doctor cheerily, the young man standing next to him suddenly seemed in a great hurry to button up his flies and be on his way.

Mr Brown could perhaps understand that the Gents wasn't perhaps the place everyone would choose for a conversation, but he was a little surprised at just how awkward and embarrassed Dr Mickelthwaite seemed to be finding it. Undaunted, Mr Brown said that he was glad to run into him as he'd been talking to Robert about his recent "little operation". This seemed to fluster the doctor even more who, apart from the situation that he had been caught in, was convinced that he was also about to be challenged over the less than total success of Robert's circumcision. When the Doctor seemed to be blustering, seemingly unable to make a coherent reply, Mr Brown glanced across at him in curiosity, wondering if perhaps he was feeling unwell. The Doctor seemed to be fumbling a great deal over trying to do up his flies, and Mr Brown realised that the Doctor's drawers seemed somehow to have got tangled in his fly buttons. It struck Mr Brown that the material that protruded from the Doctor's fly opening didn't seem to be the usual plain white cotton. It was, in fact, beige coloured and rather silky looking, with edging that looked suspiciously like lace. The doctor was struggling even more now, almost to the point of panic. In a last-ditch attempt to free things up, regain some dignity and make his escape, he made a sharp tug at the entangled material but, in doing so, he managed to pull his braces free from the buttons that attached them to the waistband of his tweeds. As his trousers descended, the Doctor made a desperate attempt to grab them but it was in vain and, in a second, they were in a heap around his ankles. Before the Doctor could retrieve them, Mr Brown saw not only the doctor's sheer silk stockings and garter belt, but the lacy cami-knickers with the lacy edging that had so clearly become entangled with his fly buttons.

Mr Brown was a little taken aback of course, but considered himself to be a man of the world. He had seen many similarly unlikely things in the trenches and had come to view them all with an attitude of 'live and let live. He thought with a moment's pang of sadness of his old comrade, Private "Dorothy" Robinson – one of the bravest men he'd ever known. Many a lonely tommy had been pleased to find a few minutes comfort with Dorothy behind the dressing station in Ypres. It was widely said that, if the light was fading and a bit of imagination employed, then "she", in light-boned corselette and chenille liberty bodice, was very nearly as good as the real thing. It was a very sad day for the whole battalion when they'd buried Dorothy - full lingerie under his dress uniform, feather boa over his great coat, and his favourite diamante broach pinned carefully in place by the Padre to hold the material closed over the gaping bayonet hole. Suddenly feeling for the Doctors' predicament and wishing him no further embarrassment, Mr Brown buttoned up his flies, said that he'd drop round to his house that evening with a small "business proposition" and left the Doctor to adjust his foundation garments in peace.

Dr Mickelthwaite's housekeeper was worried about him that evening. When she went back to the dining room to clear up after dinner, he had hardly touched his food, even though she had done his favourite boiled suet pudding. The Doctor had been just too agitated to be able to eat. The practice was doing well enough, but finding the blackmail payments to keep Mr Brown quiet was going to make a big dent in his income. He was sure Brown's "business proposition" was going to be sizeable demand as there was not only the lingerie incident but Robert's rather less than ideal circumcision too.

When Mr Brown arrived, the Doctor thought that he actually seemed rather embarrassed about naming his price for silence but realised that an inexperienced blackmailer was no less dangerous than an old hand at the job, perhaps even worse. After a few minutes of rather rambling euphemisms about “coming to an arrangement” and “doing us both some good,” Mickelthwaite was a rather surprised by how reasonable Mr Brown’s demand was when it finally came. It was only when the Doctor had agreed to a very substantial “wholesale discount” for removing four foreskins and four sets of tonsils while he was at it that the penny dropped - he wasn’t actually being blackmailed at all!

With his worry removed, the Doctor started to think a little more clearly. It struck him that perhaps he’d got the wrong end of the stick about the whole situation. Might there perhaps be a different reason for Brown’s visit and his embarrassment? Before they had agreed terms, Brown had suggested that the procedures could perhaps be performed on four Outlaws one after the other at his house. Offering his home for the purpose – thus saving three other kitchen tables being scrubbed and cooked dinners disrupted – would, Mr Brown had thought, save a great deal of trouble to the other families and help get him back into the good books of parents who must have long considered William to be the ring leader who had led their previously angelic sons astray. The Doctor, on the other hand, was beginning to consider a less benign explanation for Brown’s kindly-meant offer. The more he thought about it the more sense it made. Was he perhaps in the presence of something of a kindred spirit in the form of Mr Brown? It was a pleasing possibility and, with his penis beginning to stir inside his tweeds, the Doctor chose his next words carefully.

“Returning for a moment to your kind offer to for all of the boys’ operations to be done chez Brown, might I be right in thinking that you perhaps have a special interest in one of the procedures? And might you perhaps rather enjoy being present for it? Or even perhaps even like to – err – assist in some way?”

The words “assist” and “special interest” had carried a subtle emphasis. Doctor Mickelthwaite was wondering just how much Mr Brown might be relishing the idea of seeing the Comgo applied to not just one, but four just pre-pubescent schoolboys. He even allowed himself to enjoy the fleeting thought that Outlaws might actually be wearing their school uniforms, caps included, whilst he worked on them with Mr Brown at his side. His flights of fancy were, however, curtailed by the look on Brown’s face when his expression said enough for Mickelthwaite to realise that he would not have the pleasure of sharing the moment with another enthusiastic admirer of school boys and their private parts. To the Doctor’s relief, Mr Brown’s response that “medical matters were best left to medical men” seemed to show he had no idea about what he had been suggesting. Disappointing though it was not to have found someone with whom to share his rather specialised “interest” in young boys, at least it sounded as if he and his Comgo would be left well alone with four young, etherised patients with free-reign for perhaps a moment or two of non-essential “investigation and exploration” – all done strictly in the interests of medical research, of course!

Later that evening, Mr Brown was rather pleased with himself when he put down the telephone after the last of his calls to the parents of the other Outlaws. From the hall, Robert had heard with satisfaction some snippets of his conversations -

“growing boys,” under control,” “concentrate on their school work” “you know what boys are like when it comes to soap and flannel.” Mr Brown was feeling very self-satisfied too that his obviously outstanding negotiating skills had achieved a surprisingly generous discount from the doctor over his fee for freeing four boys from the tonsils and foreskins that were - as the doctor had put it - “redundant and burdensome in this modern world.”

For Robert, listening to the calls through the parlour door, there was good news in over-hearing that there would soon be at least be four other bare helmets in the village other than his and Tarquin’s. He felt comforted to know that if he was to be viewed as a “queer fish down below,” as he had overheard Charles describe him, then at least there would be a few more queer fish in the village pond, even if the others had to be such nasty little boys as his brother and his friends. Perhaps, he thought with a crumb of comfort, having four boys of his brother’s age rendered as bare headed as himself would help to spread the idea that it was “the thing to do” amongst the village youth and he could then at least claim some credit for having led the way. As well as that, and in a way that he couldn’t quite understand, there was also a deep satisfaction in knowing that William too would soon bear the mark of the “band of brown” behind his “bear helmet” too.

Cook, for reasons that were kept rather mysterious, spent the evening fulfilling her orders to thoroughly scrub the kitchen table with carbolic, fill a large pot of water ready to boil on the range and prepare a pilchard salad for the next day’s lunch as she was to take the next morning off and wouldn’t be able to use the kitchen until late the next afternoon. The next day, when she was finally allowed back in to her territory, she was rather puzzled when she went to the pig bin to scrape the pilchard bones off the luncheon plates and saw the rather unusual-looking bits of offal lying on top of yesterday’s potato peelings. At that moment, the Outlaws were, very unusually, alone and unsupervised in the Brown’s parlour. The last time that had happened it had been at the expense of a vase of catkins, the frame that held the photograph of Great Aunt Maud, and the pane of glass in the front of the wireless set. That afternoon, however, the Outlaws were so very obviously not inclined to move quickly - in fact very wary indeed about moving at all - that for once they were allowed in there to sit quietly as the effects of the ether wore off. They enjoyed the virtually unlimited amounts of ice cream that were on offer to help soothe the sore places where their tonsils had previously been, but no such balm was on offer for the other very tender area that was making them move with such unusual caution. To find that they had soreness in such an unexpected area when they emerged from the kitchen had come as rather a surprise to them all, as none of their parents had quite managed to find the words to explain in detail the other procedure that was to be performed on them. Only a hint had been given that the doctor would also be doing “a little tidying up” for them after removing their tonsils and that, to the great delight of all four of them that they would be receiving such an exciting gift, they would be given “bear helmets” too.

“The ice cream is a good treat,” said Ginger”. But it’s not fair that they haven’t given us our bear helmets yet like they said. Be good to go hunting for bears in the woods later once we got ‘em on.”

William wasn't always the most perceptive of youths, and it was only some weeks later when the Outlaws were next in the changing rooms of the Municipal Swimming Baths that the connection between the acquisition of a bear helmet and the requirements for membership of the Band of Brown finally struck him. He opened his mouth to share his insight with the others but, perhaps wisely, decided to close it again.