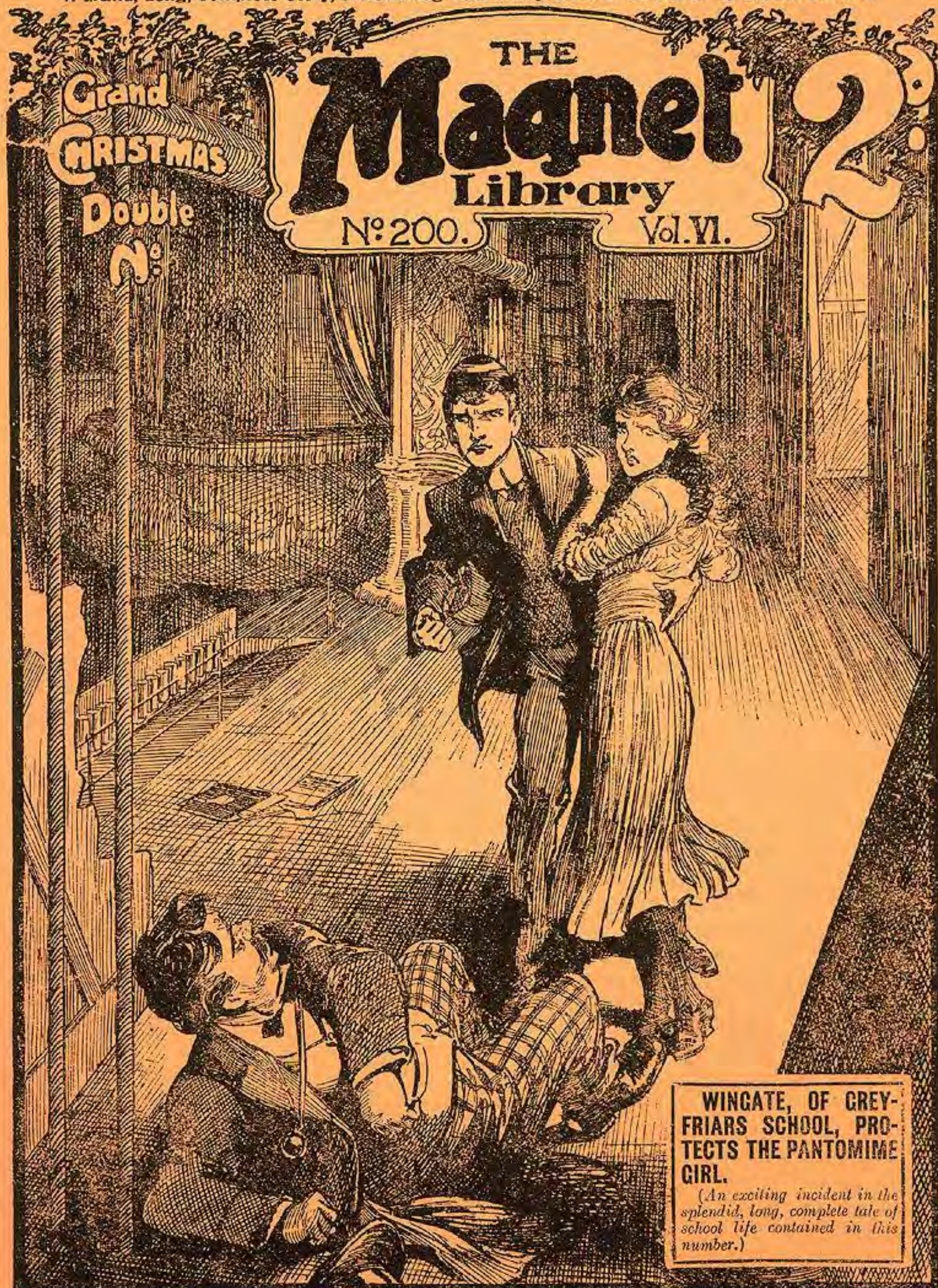


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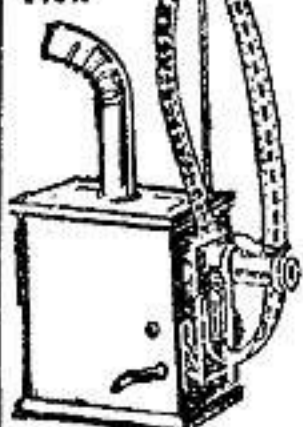


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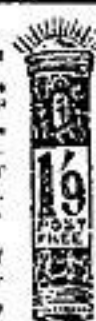
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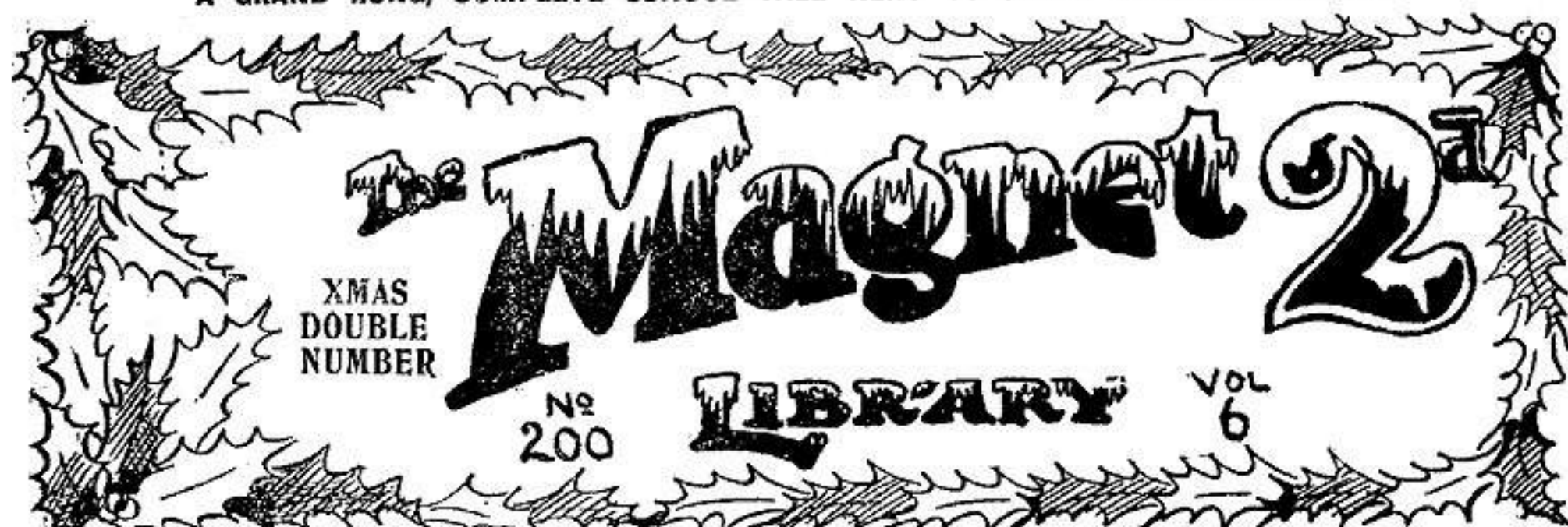


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By
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Harry Wharton & Co. at
Greyfriars.

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THE FIRST CHAPTER. A Very Special Occasion.

WINGATE, of the Sixth, the captain of Greyfriars, came out of his study with his overcoat on and a scarf round his neck. There had been a slight fall of snow, and the powdery flakes glimmered on the old elms in the Close at Greyfriars, and on the window-sills and the old red roofs. Juniors, in the passages, were stamping their feet and blowing on their fingers. It was cold—very cold—the first real breath of Christmas weather in the air.

Most of the faces about Greyfriars, however, were very cheerful. For one thing, the Christmas holidays were near at hand, and the fellows all looked forward to breaking up for Christmas. For another thing, on this special afternoon

there was a half-holiday; and although the ground was not in a condition for footer, the fellows did not mind that very much. For they were not thinking of footer just then. They were thinking of the pantomime in the neighbouring town of Courtfield, and a good half of Greyfriars were intending to visit it that afternoon. That was partly the reason why Wingate was frowning slightly, while all the rest of the fellows looked cheerful.

Wingate, as captain of the school, had many duties to do, and as a rule he did them well and cheerfully. A better football captain, a better captain of the boats, it would have been hard to find. Wingate was popular in his own Form, and the idol of the juniors. A fag who was cuffed by Wingate would brag of it to his fellow fags; and further than that hero-worship could not go.

The Remove Form—the Lower Fourth—had made good their claim to be exempt from fagging; but there was not one of the Removites who would not have fagged for Wingate with pleasure. And so, when they heard the Head's

order that all juniors who went to the pantomime that afternoon were to be under Wingate's charge, they took it patiently. Wingate was frowning a little at the idea of having a couple of score of unruly fags on his hands; but the juniors tolerated the idea with all the cheerfulness they could muster.

It was all rot, of course. Bob Cherry made that statement, and the rest of the Remove cordially agreed with him.

It was utter rot, Frank Nugent said, to suppose that the Remove could not take care of themselves. And Lord Mauleverer, the dandy of the Remove, said that, begad, it was so.

Harry Wharton, very considerably, said that it would be a bother to Wingate, too; and the Removites grinned, and agreed that very likely it would be. But the Head's word was law!

After dinner, the Removites had prepared at once for their excursion. It was a matinee performance they were going to, and it was booked to start at half-past two. All the Removites who could raise the price of admission intended to go, and all who could not, begged or borrowed it.

Lord Mauleverer, who had more money than any other fellow at Greyfriars, found himself the object of the most pressing attentions; and Vernon-Smith, the next richest fellow in the Remove, and one of the most unpopular, found that his unpopularity had taken unto itself wings and flown away for a time. Not that it had any effect on Vernon-Smith, the Bounder of Greyfriars.

Fellows could tell him that it was a fine day, ask him how he liked the frost, dilate on the joys of a pantomime, inquire his opinion on this or that subject with great respect, and so on, without end; and without extracting a single coin from his well-filled pockets.

But Lord Mauleverer was made of different stuff. When he discovered that there were some fellows in the Remove who could not go, for want of ready cash, his lordship announced at once that he would be happy to stand treat to everybody who was out of funds—an announcement which was received as tidings of great joy.

Billy Bunter said that he was going to make the same offer, only that a postal-order he had been expecting had been unexpectedly delayed in the post—a remark to which the Removites responded, with one voice, and with great unanimity:

"Rats!"

Wingate, in coat and scarf, walked down the Sixth Form passage, and came into the Remove quarters at just two o'clock. The Remove passage was crowded with fellows, waiting for the time to start, most of them with scarfs and coats on, and thick boots, and thick gloves. They had a cold walk before them. There was a shout of welcome as Wingate was sighted.

"Here's old Wingate!"

"Hurrah!"

The captain's face thawed a little.

There could be no doubt about the heartiness of the greeting, and Wingate knew that if any other prefect had been appointed to look after the Remove he would have been received with groans, suppressed more or less according to the state of the prefect's temper. The captain of Greyfriars smiled.

"You kids ready?" he asked.

"Yes, rather!"

"Yaas, begad!" said Lord Mauleverer. "I'm quite ready, I think. Anybody see where I laid my hat?"

"You've got it in your hand, you ass!" said Bob Cherry.

"Begad, so I have! Thanks awfully, my dear fellow!"

"I say, you fellows——"

"Shut up, Bunter!"

"Oh, really——"

"Well, come on," said Wingate. "Don't give me a lot of trouble. Don't start snowballing the Courtfield fellows, if you meet them, and don't start ragging one another. Be as quiet and respectable as you can, and don't jaw! Come on!"

"Begad, you know——"

"I say, you fellows, you might lend me a muffler, one of you——"

"Somebody's taken my spats," said Vernon-Smith, looking out of the study. "Has anybody seen my spats?"

There was a general chuckle. Vernon-Smith's spats were adorning the feet of Billy Bunter, but no one felt inclined to enlighten the Bounder. John Bull came running out of his study.

"Who's taken my gloves?"

"Oh, really, Bull——"

"Bunter! You fat bounder! Disgorge them, or——"

"Oh, really——"

"Who's got my boots?" howled Bulstrode, from his study.

"Oh, really——"

"Why, you cheeky young sweep——"

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"I found there was a hole in my boots, Bulstrode. I suppose you don't want me to catch cold, do you, walking in the snow with a hole in my boot?" said Billy Bunter, in an injured tone.

"Why, you——you——"

"Where's my topper?" shouted Frank Nugent, putting a very red and excited face outside No. 1 Study. "I've hunted for it everywhere——"

"Come in a cap!" said Harry Wharton.

"Rats! I'm coming in a topper! I took it out of the box—— Why, Bunter, that isn't your hat! It's too small for your fat head!"

"Oh, really, Nugent——"

"You——you fat bounder——"

"A chap ought to look respectable, going to a matinee," urged Billy Bunter, blinking nervously at Nugent through his big spectacles. "Mine is getting rusty——"

"Well, of all the cheek——"

Tom Brown came out of his study.

"Anybody moved my coat?" he asked. "It's a brown one, with—— Why—— Hallo! Bunter! Where did you get that coat?"

"Oh, really, Brown——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"My only hat!" ejaculated Wharton. "The fat bounder has borrowed things from head to foot!"

"Come, come!" said Wingate. "I'm waiting for you fags!"

"We're coming."

"I'm coming, Wingate," said Bunter. "I can't find a muffler——"

"I guess you've looked in every study but your own," remarked Fisher T. Fish, the American junior.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, really, Fish——"

"You start, you fellows," said John Bull. "I'll catch you up! I'm going to have my gloves off the fat bounder."

"And I'm going to have my boots!" howled Bulstrode.

"And I'm going to have my hat!"

"I'm going to have my coat——"

"I—I say, you fellows——"

"Hand them over, you fat burglar!"

"Oh, really—— Ow!"

Billy Bunter wriggled in the grasp of many hands. Wingate grinned, and started with the juniors who were ready. They left a terrific din behind them in the Remove passage. The Owl of the Remove was struggling in the grasp of the crowd of juniors, but, in spite of his resistance, the borrowed plumes were stripped from him.

Wingate strode across the Close towards the gates with a crowd of Removites, and the laggards came running after them. They left a fat junior sitting on the cold linoleum in the Remove passage, half-dressed, and gasping for breath. It was Billy Bunter!

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Seeing Them Off.

HARRY WHARTON & Co. marched sedately behind Wingate to the school gates. Wingate tramped on with a grim face. He did not like the task of taking a crowd of fags under his wing; but the Head had asked him to do it, and there was an end of it. The Removites were on their best behaviour, out of consideration for Wingate, but there was no telling how long that would last.

Other juniors, hanging about the Close, made remarks to them as they passed, marching in order, looking very like what they look like on those solemn occasions when they had a "walk" with a master. Those walks with a master, the saddest occasions in a schoolboy's life, were not frequent at Greyfriars. Temple, Dabney & Co., of the Upper Fourth, followed the Removites across the Close, talking to them pleasantly. It was impossible for the Remove, under the circumstances, to make a rush at Temple, Dabney & Co., and the Fourth-Formers made their remarks with impunity.

"Nice little boys going to a nice little pantomime!" Temple remarked.

"Oh, rather!" said Dabney.

"With a nice little prefect to look after them, to see that they don't eat oranges in the gallery, and smoke farthing cigarettes!" said Fry.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Removites turned crimson.

"You——you bounders!" muttered Bob Cherry. "If it wasn't for Wingate——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Be good!"

"And mind you keep your nice little collars clean!"



The fat man halted at last, panting, puffing, unable to take another step in pursuit of the juniors; and then they gathered round him in a ring, and fairly rained snowballs upon him. "Help!" shrieked Mr. Vernon-Tracy. "Police!" (See Chapter 10.)

"Oh, rather!"

Wingate turned round sharply. He was looking very pink himself. He made an angry gesture to the Fourth-Formers.

"Be off!" he said sharply.

"Oh, certainly!" said Temple, of the Fourth. "But look after the Remove, won't you, Wingate? Their mothers don't know they're out, you know."

"Oh, rather!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And the Fourth-Formers retreated, still laughing. The Remove marched on angrily. They would almost have given up the pantomime, just then, for the pleasure of rushing the Upper Fourth, and hammering them.

"Lot of rot, marching out with a blessed prefect, because we're going to a rotten panto!" growled Vernon-Smith.

"Begad, you know—"

"Here come the fags!" groaned Bulstrode.

A crowd of fags had gathered near the gates. Nugent recognised his younger brother, Dicky Nugent, of the Second, among them, and the grin on Dicky Nugent's face showed that he meant mischief. Gatty and Myers, of the Second, were with him, and Tubbs, of the Third, and a score

of others. The fags had their hands behind them, and the Remove knew what that meant. They had been scraping up snow for snowballs, in anticipation of the appearance of the Remove in their best clothes.

Wingate walked on unheeding. The hardest fag at Greyfriars would scarcely have dared to snowball the head of the Sixth and captain of the school. But the Remove were fair game, especially as they had their hands tied, as it were, by the circumstance that they were dressed in their best, and were under the charge of a prefect, and bound to keep order.

The Remove worked up heavy frowns as they drew nearer to the group of fags. Dicky Nugent & Co. smiled sweetly.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" Bob Cherry exclaimed. "If you snowball us, you young rascals—"

"Who's going to snowball you?" asked Nugent minor.

"Well, don't, then!"

"We haven't!" said Sammy Bunter—Bunter minor, of the Second. "But if you put the idea into our heads—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We—we'll squash you, if you do!" growled Bulstrode.

Dicky Nugent chuckled.

"You can't! You're going to good-little-Georgie act now,

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and you can't!" he said. "Now, then, give 'em a volley! Leave my major's topper to me!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Dick, you young scoundrel— Ow!"

"Yah!"

"Groo!"

"Yaroop!"

The fags' hands came suddenly from behind them as the column of Removites came abreast, and the snowballs, ready rolled and hard and round, came whizzing in a shower upon the heroes of the Remove.

The fire was at close range and point-blank, and it was deadly. The Remove were raked fore and aft, as they say in the nautical novels. Nugent minor sent his major's topper flying with a well-aimed shot, and almost every topper in the Remove fell at the discharge. And snowballs broke and squashed in faces and necks.

There was a yell of glee from the fags.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Go for 'em!" roared Bob Cherry.

And the Removites broke order at once, crimson with rage. But the fags of the Third and Second were already in full flight. Wingate turned round and shouted to his excited charges.

"Come back, you young sweeps!"

"Look here, Wingate—"

"Line up, I tell you!"

The Removites, excited and angry, obeyed. They tramped on after the captain of Greyfriars, rubbing snow off their faces and squeezing it out of their necks, and wiping their hats with their handkerchiefs. In the distance the fags yelled and grinned and made expressive signs by means of placing thumbs to noses and extending fingers.

The Removites affected not to notice. They reached the gates of Greyfriars, and marched out into the road. Coker, of the Fifth, with Potter and Blundell and Bland and Greene, of the same Form, were going out, and the Fifth-Formers paused to grin at the Remove.

There had lately been trouble between the Fifth and the Remove, and the Remove had scored, and Coker & Co. had not forgotten it yet.

"Hallo!" said Coker. "What have you got in your eye, Wharton?"

"What's the matter with your nose, Nugent?" asked Potter.

"When did you put on a clean collar last, Bulstrode?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Been snowballed?" asked Blundell sympathetically.

"Too bad!" He stooped to the drift of snow at the side of the road. "Ahem, I think— Ow!"

Bob Cherry had stepped suddenly from the ranks of the Remove, and with a quick shove of his foot he biffed Blundell over, and the Fifth-Former plunged headlong into the snowdrift. It was the Remove's turn to laugh, and they did.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Groo—ou—ugh!" gasped Blundell, dragging his head out of the snow. "Groo! Ugh! Yow! Yah! Hug-g-g!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Even Wingate grinned.

The Remove marched on down the road, leaving Blundell shaking and rubbing the snow off and saying emphatic things to Coker & Co., who were laughing. Their laughter seemed to displease Blundell, and his voice rose higher and higher, and the Removites heard it for quite a long distance down the road.

When they looked back, at the corner, Blundell had one arm round Coker's neck, and was hitting him with his right, and Coker was punching at Blundell with both fists; which afforded considerable satisfaction to the Remove, and they walked on their way to Courtfield in higher spirits.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Remove at the Theatre.

COURTFIELD town was glimmering white under a thin, feathery mantle of snow. Harry Wharton & Co. looked round them uneasily as they entered the High Street of the old town. In Courtfield town was Courtfield County Council School, and the youths who attended that scholastic establishment were generally on terms of warfare with the Greyfriars fellows.

Not that there was any real enmity between them, but it was said from of old that boys will be boys. The fellows of the two schools—the juniors, at least—seldom met with badinage or a row. And if the Courtfield fellows found them marching into the High Street in order in this way, there was little doubt that they would get a severe snow-balling. But there was no danger, as it happened.

"The Courtfield fellows don't have a half-holiday to-day," Frank Nugent remarked.

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"Jolly good thing for us," said Bob Cherry. "I forgot that."

"Oh, those County Council School bounders are shut up in their blessed red-brick school all right!" said Snoop.

Wharton gave him a look of contempt.

"You wouldn't call them Council School Bounders if they could hear you, Snoopey," he said. "You'd better shut up!"

"I shall call them what I like!"

"No, you won't!" said Harry. "I'll rub your nose in the snow if you say what you said again!"

And Snoop did not say it again. He knew that Harry Wharton was a fellow of his word.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" exclaimed Bob Cherry. "Here we are!"

"Here's the theatre!"

"Good!"

And the juniors halted outside the Theatre Royal. Theatre Royal as it was, it was not an imposing building, and on usual occasions it had a "twice-nightly" bill; for the twice-nightly craze had extended even to the quiet little town of Courtfield.

The Little Red Riding Hood Pantomime Company were running a twice-nightly show, and on matinee days there was an afternoon performance as well, which made three for the day; and by the time the third one was over it was no wonder that many of the artistes refreshed themselves with strong spirits, with their bodies and nerves worn out by heavy work.

But the boys, and, indeed, most of the audience, knew nothing of that, and thought only of the stage as it was seen from the auditorium—bright and gay and dazzling enough to youthful eyes, but full of grim and grey realities to those whose feet trod the boards.

There was already a goodly crowd outside the theatre waiting for the doors to open. The wind was blowing keenly along the street, and light, feathery flakes of snow were still falling; but, with the peculiar gift of patience which characterises the British public, a long queue had formed up to wait sedately for the pit doors to open.

That the doors might as well have been opened earlier, and that they might just as well have waited for the performance inside the theatre, was a thought that never occurred to them, or, indeed, to any pit crowd, or theatre managers would be compelled soon enough to make some more reasonable arrangement for their customers.

The Greyfriars fellows, however, were not going into the pit. Stalls had been booked for the whole crowd—stalls at Courtfield Theatre Royal not being by any means expensive.

Vernon-Smith, with his usual desire to "swank," had booked a box for himself and one or two friends; but that could be done without drawing very deeply on his resources, for the boxes were seven-and-six and half-a-guinea.

Wingate marshalled his numerous family into the theatre, and the Greyfriars fellows pretty nearly filled up the stalls. Behind them the pit was still empty, and the balcony above was only dotted with early comers, and the gallery—the abode of the "gods"—was dark and deserted. Only a slight fragrance of oranges lingered there, reminiscent of the previous night.

The curtain was down, and the words in big letters, "Safety Curtain," showed that it was the fireproof screen. There was a further legend to the effect that it had to be lowered once during every performance, by order; and the Greyfriars juniors had ample time to memorise that fact, for they had nothing but the safety curtain to stare at for the next ten minutes or so.

When the Greyfriars juniors had nothing to do they generally got into mischief. Stealthy glances were cast at Wingate, who was keeping an eye on his charges. But a little later Courtney, of the Sixth, strolled in with Valence, and they joined Wingate and began chatting with him, and

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then the captain of Greyfriars kept a less keen eye on the Remove.

Hazeldene produced a catapult, and, taking the fireproof curtain as a target, entered into bets to dot each of the letters in turn.

Murmurs of encouragement from the Remove urged him to proceed. Hazeldene was a good shot with the catapult, and he dotted one letter after another till he came to the last. Just then a stage hand came from the wings and crossed before the curtain. It was certainly unfortunate that he should have chosen that moment to appear.

Ping!

"Yaroo!" yelled the unfortunate man, as the pellet from the catapult caught him on the ear. "Yowp!"

His startled yell rang through the half-empty theatre. Every eye was turned upon him, and the Remove could not help laughing. The man stood apparently in bewilderment, rubbing his ear, and a voice behind the stage-curtain growled out something, to which the "hand" responded that he believed it was a "wops"; and the growling voice rejoined that if Smithson fancied there were wasps in the theatre so shortly before Christmas, he must be either drunk or mad, and in either case he had better shut his head, all of which was heard by the delighted Remove.

The man retired from sight, still rubbing his ear, and Wingate looked round suspiciously. Hazeldene's catapult disappeared into his pocket, and he studied the inscriptions on the safety curtain with great zeal.

The safety curtain was raised at last, and light gleamed through the flimsier one behind it from the stage. The Remove made a movement; they were getting to business at last.

The theatre was filling.

Doors had been opened, and the patient public, after waiting an unnecessary hour or two in the cold, were filing into the theatre, coughing and sneezing.

The members of the orchestra were coming in through the entrance to the peculiar little den where they sit with their instruments, and there was a sound of tuning up. The band was not a powerful one. The few instruments were helped out by a piano, the player of which was also conductor of the orchestra. The grunting and wailing of the instruments as they were tuned mingled with the coughing and grunting of the audience, and formed that delightful prelude which precedes theatrical performances, especially in England. The gallery was quite full now, and already a smell of oranges proceeded from that direction.

And now the cinematograph got to work. On the curtain before the stage a succession of advertisement pictures appeared, and the audience learned that Spifkins's potted beef was undoubtedly the best, that Beesles's pickles were the finest, and that they would have to search for a very long time before they discovered the equal of Poyson's malted liquor.

Middle-aged young ladies came round with programmes, which were declined with thanks by most of the audience, their price being quite out of proportion to their value. About every third fellow in the Remove bought one, and they shared them round.

"Little Red Riding Hood!" said Bob Cherry, reading from the programme. "Well, that is a ripping pantomime, you know. Only I hope there'll be some pantomime, and not all song and dance."

"Yes, rather!" said Wharton.

"Who's taking Little Red Riding Hood?" asked Leigh, with the air of an old playgoer.

"The wolf tries to take her," said Bob Cherry innocently, "but I think a prince or somebody clips in—"

"Ass! I mean, who takes her part?"

"The prince does; he takes her part against the wolf."

"Fathead! I mean, who gets the role?"

"She doesn't roll; she trips."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, give me the programme, fathead!" said Leigh; and he read out: "Little Red Riding Hood. Miss Paula Bell."

"That's a pretty name!" said Bob Cherry.

Leigh sniffed.

"Oh, I don't suppose it's her real name. All these stage people have new names on the stage. I dare say her name is Jane Jones."

"And Jones is a jolly good name, look you," said Jones minor, with a rather warlike look at Leigh; "and your name is Hopkins when you're at home."

Leigh turned red, and there was a chuckle along the row of Removes. Bob Cherry took the programme back, and read out the characters.

"The wolf—Mr. Edmund de Vere."

"By Jove!"

"Begad!" said Lord Mauleverer. "I know a chap named De Vere. He's an awful ass, you know. His uncle's a duke, you know, and he tells a fellow—awful snob! I wonder if this is a relation!"

"Ha, ha, ha! I don't suppose this special De Vere has any ducal relations!" roared Bob Cherry.

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NEXT
TUESDAY.

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ONE
PENNY.

"Red Riding Hood's grandmother, Madame Flippi," said Wharton, reading it out.

"Who's the prince?" asked Nugent.

"Miss Mirabel Tudor."

"Oh, good!"

"Any Plantagenets or Guelfs?" asked Hazeldene.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Miss Mirabel Tudor," said Bob Cherry; "that's a girl's name."

"Well, ass, the prince is a girl."

"Oh, I see," said Bob.

"She's principal boy, you see," explained Harry Wharton.

"Managers always have a girl to take the leading boy's part, for some mysterious reason. It's a custom in the profession, and they would laugh if anybody suggested to them to have a little more sense. Hallo, there goes the curtain!"

And the curtain went up upon the first act of "Little Red Riding Hood," and the muttering of voices died away.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Pantomime!

THE Removes of Greyfriars looked on at the first scene with breathless interest. A few among them, like Vernon-Smith, affected a more or less bored air; but the majority were thoroughly enjoying the visit to the theatre, and were too sensible to pretend anything else. The pantomime, no doubt, left a great deal to be desired, as a work of art, but there was plenty of fun in it, and plenty of rough-and-tumble farce, and that was quite enough to amuse boys—and men, too, if they would only admit it. The old gentleman who takes "the youngsters" to see the pantomime is frequently discovered laughing and applauding with more whole-hearted vigour than the "youngsters" for whose sake he is supposed to make the expedition. True, the pantomime bore about as much resemblance to the history of Little Red Riding Hood as to the history of Sindbad the Sailor, or the Man in the Moon. But what did that matter, if the dances were graceful, and the songs comic, and the wheezes of the funny man laughable? And they were—at all events, to inexperienced youths, who had not heard the same wheezes cracked countless times before. And even about the oldest pantomime wheeze there is something pleasant.

The comic "merchant" in this particular company was Red Riding Hood's wicked uncle, and the wolf also afforded considerable comic relief to contrast with the savage side of his character. When he was not tracking little Red Riding Hood through the wood, with intent to devour her bodily, he was willing to give a song and a dance—peculiar proceedings, certainly, on the part of a wolf, but very much appreciated by the audience. But Little Red Riding Hood attracted most of the attention of the juniors. She was a girl of about nineteen, with a very charming face, whose soft and tender outlines were not hidden by the stage make-up, and very charming she looked in her red hood. Miss Paula Bell had a charming voice, too, and she could sing in tune—rather a rare gift in a pantomime company of the grade of the one acting at Courtfield Theatre Royal. When she sang "Here I gather wild flowers," the juniors applauded to the echo, and joined in the roar of the gallery for "Core—core!"

And Miss Paula flushed with pleasure, and gave the encore, and was cheered and clapped to the echo.

Wingate of the Sixth left off chatting in low tones with Courtney and Valence, and fixed his eyes upon the girl on the stage. Red Riding Hood seemed to have made a great impression upon the captain of Greyfriars. She bore a distant resemblance to Miss Rosie, the Head's daughter at Greyfriars, who was a great chum of Wingate's, and perhaps that was the reason. Miss Rosie was not at Greyfriars now, having gone abroad some time ago for her health, and Wingate was supposed to miss her very much. Not that the captain of Greyfriars said anything on the subject, or appeared to be any less cheerful than usual; nor, indeed, was he supposed to be the kind of fellow to bother his head with such idle thoughts as falling in love at his early age. But certainly Miss Paula Bell seemed to have struck him very much, and he never took his eyes off her.

There was another member of the audience, too, who seemed decidedly interested in Miss Paula—though his interest was not so respectful as Wingate's. He was a fat man, in a frock coat, who had come into Vernon-Smith's box. He had jammed an eyeglass into his eye when the girl came on the stage, and he never allowed his eye to wander from her. Miss Paula did not once glance towards the box; but it seemed that she was aware of the fat man's scrutiny, for once or twice she faltered a little when his applause was most obtrusive. The juniors noticed the man, and wondered who he was. The fact that he had come into the Bounder's box seemed to imply that he was a relation, or, at least, an acquaintance, of Vernon-Smith's.

"I wonder who that old bounder is," said Bob Cherry.

"THE DUFFER'S RETURN!" By FRANK RICHARDS.

glancing up at the box rather wrathfully. "He's watching Red Riding Hood like a cat."

"I know him," said Bolsover; "at least, I've seen him before."

"Who is he, then?"

"A cousin of Vernon-Smith's. I remember seeing Smithy meet him in Friardale once," said Bolsover. "He's a giddy dog!"

Bob Cherry sniffed.

"The Vernon-Smith's are a nice family altogether—I don't think!" he remarked. "What does the fellow mean by watching Red Riding Hood like that! He's put her out in her song once."

"Oh, the panto girls like that," said Snoop, with an air of worldly wisdom. "They play with one eye on the manager, and the other on toffs in the audience."

"Some of them, perhaps!" said Nugent.

"Oh, they're all the same."

"Oh, shut up, Snoop!" said Harry Wharton.

"You'd better!" said Bob Cherry. "You don't want me to wipe my boots on you, do you, Snoopey? And I shall, if you talk like a cad next to me."

And Snoop bit his lip, and shut up.

The scene ended, and Red Riding Hood retired from the stage, and the audience clapped, and Wingate of the Sixth sighed. Courtney glanced at him curiously.

"Hallo! What's the matter with you, Wingate?" he asked.

Wingate coloured.

"Nothing!" he said, rather abruptly.

Courtney laughed.

"I've seen that girl before," Wingate explained, after a pause.

"Another theatre, do you mean?"

"Oh, no!"

"I didn't know you had stage-door acquaintances, Wingate," said Valence, with a grin.

"I haven't!" said Wingate curtly.

The band struck up again, and the curtain went up on a forest scene. A wicked baron was disclosed, plotting with the wolf to devour Little Red Riding Hood. The wicked baron, according to the programme, was Mr. Cecil de Courcy, and he was also manager of the company. The plot between the wicked baron and the wolf was interrupted by the appearance of the prince, who chased them both round the stage, and then, with the charming irresponsibility of a pantomime, the three sang a trio together, amid laughter. The wolf, otherwise Mr. Edmund de Vere—alias Mr. Jack Brown, if the truth had been known—had a good baritone voice, though it was injured by incessant use, and by the necessity he was under of growling continually, and he had one opportunity in the piece of delivering a good song. When he sang his solo, it was almost painfully evident that he put all he knew into it, and that he regarded that as his real work, and not the fooling he was compelled to do as the wolf. The audience received the solo politely, but they were evidently impatient for the rough-and-tumble to begin again, which was really hard upon the poor wolf.

"Where have you seen Miss Paula Bell before, Wingate?" asked Valence, in a pause between the acts.

"When I was home."

"Not with your people?" exclaimed Valence, in surprise.

"No."

"Playing near your place?"

"Yes."

"And you met her outside the theatre?"

"Yes."

"You giddy boulder!" said Valence, with a whistle.

Wingate turned upon him with flushed cheeks and gleaming eyes.

"What do you mean, Valence?" he exclaimed angrily.

"Can't a fellow speak to a girl, then, without any of your rotten insinuations?"

Valence started and coloured. Valence was one of those fellows in the Greyfriars Sixth who prided themselves on being what they called "doggish," and, as a matter of fact, he had intended to be pleasant. But his pleasantry was not appreciated by the captain of Greyfriars.

"All serene; don't cut up rusty," he said, in surprise. "It was only a joke."

"Well, I don't like rotten jokes," said Wingate. "If you want to make jokes, there's no need to make them about a girl, I suppose."

"Look here, Wingate!"

"Oh, dry up!"

Valence shrugged his shoulders, and Courtney looked surprised. It was not like George Wingate to cut up rusty like this. But Wingate had a frown on his brow now, and was plainly not to be argued with. He was glancing, occasionally, at the fat gentleman in Vernon-Smith's box, and perhaps the sight of that individual's rude stare at Little

Red Riding Hood was disturbing his equanimity. The fat gentleman was evidently one of the numerous class of persons who imagine that a girl cannot go on the stage without becoming fair game for impertinent stares.

The show was over all too soon for the juniors. They would have liked the pantomime to last all through the afternoon and evening. When the curtain was rung down at last for the final time, the theatre rang with applause. The fat gentleman with the eyeglass immediately left Vernon-Smith's box. The audience rose to go out, and Wingate, with a troubled frown upon his brow, marched his numerous charges out of the theatre.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Something Like a Snow Fight.

DUSK was falling in the streets of Courtfield as the matinee crowd came pouring out of the theatre. The Greyfriars juniors, full of pent-up energy after the enforced orderliness of the theatre, were ready to parade the streets of Courtfield, and snowball one another, or the veriest strangers, or to look out for a chance of a row with the Courtfield School fellows. But they were under Wingate's charge, and that outlet for their superabundant energy was cut off. Not that Wingate appeared to be taking much care of them just now. When the crowd had poured out of the theatre, Wingate drew Courtney aside.

"Courtney, old man," he said, in a whisper.

"Hallo?" said Courtney.

"Dr. Locke put these young beggars under my charge," said Wingate, with a frown. "Of course, I couldn't refuse. But—look here, old man, you're a prefect, and quite as well able to look after them as I am. Will you see them home to Greyfriars?"

"Aren't you coming, then?"

"I don't want to come just yet."

"Business in Courtfield?"

"Well, yes."

Courtney looked at him keenly. He was Wingate's best chum at Greyfriars, and he understood the captain of the school better than any other fellow did, and took more interest in him. There was a very grave expression upon Courtney's face.

"I don't want to meddle in your business, George, old man," he said slowly, "but—"

"But what?" asked Wingate, with unusual irritation, as his chum paused.

"Would you mind telling me what you're staying in Courtfield for?"

"What does it matter?"

"Are you going to see somebody?"

"Yes."

"Is it Miss Bell?"

Wingate was silent.

"Have I guessed right, Wingate, old man?"

"Suppose you have?" said Wingate abruptly.

Courtney's face grew more serious in expression.

"I think you'd better come back, Wingate."

"Rubbish!"

"Of course, if you take only a friendly interest in the pantomime girl—"

Wingate breathed hard.

"Why should you suppose anything else?" he demanded.

"Well, the way you were looking at her, for one thing," said Courtney, beginning to get a little nettled himself. "If I didn't know you so well, George, I should think that you'd been duffer enough to get smitten with an attack of love."

Wingate turned crimson.

"Don't be an ass!" he said.

"Then it isn't the case?"

"Don't talk rot!"

"That isn't an answer, old man. I don't think you'd be such a fathead. And besides, there's Miss Rosie—"

"Miss Rosie?"

"Yes," said Courtney. "I understood—"

Wingate interrupted him angrily.

"I don't see that you needed to understand anything," he exclaimed. "Miss Rosie and I have been jolly good chums, till she went away, and shall be so again, I suppose, when she comes back to Greyfriars."

"No need to get excited about it," said Courtney quietly. "It looks to me, George Wingate, as if you're going to make a fool of yourself, and the best thing you can do is to come back to Greyfriars."

"I'm not coming."

"You will have your own way, of course," said Courtney, rather tartly.

"Will you look after these confounded juniors, back to Greyfriars?" asked the captain. "That's all I want to ask you."

"If I say no——"
Wingate set his lips.
"If you say no, I shall leave them to go back by themselves," he replied.
"That might mean trouble with the Head."
"I don't care. I'm my own master."
"You're not your own master, when you've taken up the position of head prefect and captain of the school," said Courtney quietly. "You have your duties to do."
"I don't see why you should refuse me a little favour, Courtney."
"I wouldn't, unless it would make you go back to Greyfriars with us now."
"It won't make me do that."
"Then I'll certainly look after the juniors for you."
"Thanks!"
And with that one word, ungraciously spoken, Wingate of the Sixth turned away, and disappeared in the gloom that was now gathering thickly over the street.
Courtney bit his lip.

He came over to the juniors, who were waiting for Wingate. They had been watching the whispered talk in surprise.

"Get off to Greyfriars!" he said.

"Where's Wingate?"

"He's not coming just yet."

"But——"

"I'm looking after you, so none of your tricks," said Courtney sharply. "Start!"

And the juniors started.

But Courtney, popular fellow as he was, had not the control of the juniors that Wingate had. And it was getting dark now, and snowing again. The juniors put up their coat collars as they tramped away. There was a shout as they passed the schoolground of Courtfield County Council School.

"Greyfriars bounders!"

"Give 'em socks!"

"Yes, give 'em thocks, dear boys!"

Trumper & Co., of the County Council School, came rushing up, snowballs in hand. Trumper and Grahame and Solly Lazarus were there, with a score of others. The Courtfield fellows had been snowballing one another, but they were only too glad of the opportunity of snowballing Greyfriars instead.

"Line up!" roared Harry Wharton.

"Go for 'em, Greyfriars!"

Whiz, whiz, whiz!

Snowballs broke and burst all over the Removites of Greyfriars. The juniors scattered, and stooped to gather snow at once.

"Get on!" shouted Courtney.

But no one listened to the prefect.

Even Wingate would have had difficulty in keeping the juniors together under the circumstances, and Courtney had not the slightest chance of doing it. He shouted in vain.

In a few seconds Removites and Courtfielders were mixed, shouting, cheering, pommelling, and snowballing in furious style.

"Hurrah!"

"Go for 'em, Greyfriars!"

"Buck up, Courtfield!"

Smash, smash! Whiz! Biff, biff!

It was a regular battle.

Courtney rushed among the combatants to stop them, but he received showers of snowballs himself. Valence coolly walked on towards Greyfriars. He considered that it was no business of his. More and more of the Courtfield fellows came up to back up Trumper & Co., and the odds were very much against Greyfriars.

"Keep together!" shouted Harry Wharton. "Get out in the lane!"

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Little Red Riding Hood, our Pretty Heroine.

NEXT
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ONE
PENNY.

"Hurrah!"

The juniors retreated in the direction of Greyfriars. They were outnumbered two to one by this time, for they were in the heart of the enemy's country, and the village lads were joining forces with Trumper & Co. on all sides. They had to get out, or to be overwhelmed and fairly rolled in the snow; and Wharton guided the retreat. Disputing every foot of the way, the Greyfriars Removites retreated into the lane.

But there was little respite for them there. The Courtfielders pressed their advantage, and snowballs rained on the Greyfriars fellows in thick showers.

"Chase them back to Greyfriars!" roared Trumper.

And the County School crowd cheered.

"Hurrah!"

"Down with the collegers!"

"Give 'em socks!"

"Buck up, Greyfriars!" rang the cry.

Courtney had given up the attempt to stop the row now. Even if the Greyfriars juniors had been willing, the Courtfielders were not, and the Removite had to defend themselves. The prefect placed himself at the head of his party, and joined in the combat, instead of making further useless efforts to get the juniors away. The fight waxed fast and furious. The enemy evidently meant to drive the Removite home, and as the balance of force was irresistibly on their side, there was nothing to prevent them from doing it. All the way down the long lane to Greyfriars, Trumper & Co. pressed the Removite hard, and the retreating juniors kept up a running fight.

Right up to the gates of Greyfriars they surged at last, and there the Removite made a desperate stand. They would not be driven in at their own gates. And now one or two had dashed in, and spread the news, and other Greyfriars fellows came out to help. Temple, Dabney & Co., of the Upper Fourth, and Hobson, of the Shell, and Coker, of the Fifth, and a crowd more, came to the rescue, and matters were a little more equal.

Outside the gates of Greyfriars in the shadowy lane, dimly lighted by the lamp over the gateway, a terrific combat raged. The snow banked up in a drift beside the lane afforded ample ammunition for both parties. The air was thick with flying snowballs, and resounded with the shouts of the opposing parties.

"Go it, Courtfield!"

"Buck up, Greyfriars!"

"Hurrah!"

"Boys!"

It was a sudden, deep voice. And the hands of the Greyfriars fellows that held snowballs dropped to their sides, as a general exclamation went up:

"The Head!"

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

Wingate is Inquire For.

DR. LOCKE, the Head of Greyfriars, stepped from the gateway into the dim light of the lamp overhead. The terrific tumult had drawn the Head of Greyfriars to the spot. The battle ceased at once. A few snowballs still flew, but as soon as they saw the doctor the enemy stopped. Trumper & Co. were only out for fun, and they did not want to show disrespect to the headmaster of the

old school. Trumper & Co. melted away in the dusk, and the Greyfriars fellows were left to face their headmaster.

Dr. Locke looked at the crowd of breathless, ruddy-faced fellows sternly.

"Wingate!" he said sharply.

There was no reply.

"Wingate!"

"Wingate isn't here, sir," said Harry Wharton, at last.

"Indeed! He left Greyfriars in charge of you."

"H'm! Yes, sir."

"I—I undertook to bring the Remove back, sir," said Courtney. "As a prefect—"

The Head turned upon him.

"The boys were in Wingate's charge!" he exclaimed.

"Why did not Wingate come back with them, Courtney?"

"He stayed in Courtfield, sir."

"Indeed!"

"I—I think he had—had something to attend to there, or—or something," stammered Courtney.

"Oh!" said the Head drily. "I shall speak to Wingate about it when he returns. You boys can go in at once. I feared that there would be some scene of this sort, and that is why I placed you in Wingate's charge. Go in!"

And the Greyfriars fellows streamed in at the gates. There was a grim frown upon Dr. Locke's face as he strode back to his house. It was easy to see that Wingate was "booked" for a lecture when he did return.

Courtney looked very uneasy. He had done his best to fill Wingate's place, but his best had not been very good. Wingate certainly had not wished his staying in Courtfield to be brought to the special notice of the Head. But it could not be helped now.

Harry Wharton & Co. tramped in, and dusted the snow from their faces and hair, and took off their coats and their wet boots.

"It's rather rotten for Wingate," said Bob Cherry, as he kicked off his boots, and put on a pair of very large slippers.

"What on earth did he want to stay behind for?"

"I guess I could tell you," said Fisher T. Fish.

"Yes, you can tell everybody everything, I suppose," said Bob, with a sniff. "What is it you think, then?"

"He went round to the stage door of the theatre."

"Rats!"

"I guess I saw him!"

All attention was turned upon the American junior at once. Fisher T. Fish was one of those keen youths who can do very little, but who observe everything. When Fisher T. Fish talked football, or cricket, or sprinting, or rowing, the fellows laughed; but they were willing to admit that few things escaped the eagle eye of the American.

"You saw him?" repeated Harry Wharton.

"Yep."

"At the stage door of the theatre?"

"Surely."

"What the dickens would Wingate be doing at the stage door of the theatre?" said Lord Mauleverer, in wonder.

"You must have been mistaken, my dear fellow."

"Nope."

"Well, it's Wingate's bizney," said Wharton, after a pause. "No need for us to worry our heads about it."

"It's jolly curious, though," said Ogilvy.

"Better not let Wingate hear you talking over his business," said Mark Linley. "He would cut up rough if he knew that it was jawed about in the Remove."

And several juniors nodded assent to the Lancashire lad's remark. Wingate was the last senior at Greyfriars to allow his private affairs to be discussed in the junior dormitories and studies, if he could stop it.

"I say, you fellows—"

"Oh, shut up, Bunter!"

"Oh, really—"

"Who was that chap in the box with you, Smithy?" asked Frank Nugent, to change the topic.

"My cousin," said the Bounder.

"What's his name?"

"Arthur Vernon-Tracy," said the Bounder. "He's a relation on the mother's side—my mother's people were Vernons. He's awfully rich!"

"Well, I don't congratulate you on your cousin!" said Bulstrode drily. "He may be awfully rich, but the way he stared at that girl on the stage was caddish!"

Vernon-Smith laughed.

"He is mashed on her," he explained. "He was telling me about it."

"Nice talk for a man to jaw to a schoolboy!" exclaimed Bob Cherry, in disgust.

The Bounder shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, I'm not a soft baby!" he replied. "I could tell you fellows some things—"

"You needn't trouble!" said Harry Wharton curtly.

"Look here, Wharton—"

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"Oh, shut up!"

"I say, you fellows—" Billy Bunter had come into the dormitory, and he was looking pink and indignant. "I say—"

"Get out, Bunter!"

"I didn't go to the pantomime," said Bunter, in an aggrieved tone, "owing to Bulstrode's beastly selfishness in taking the boots, and Brown's refusing to lend me a coat—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'm going to-night, though," said Bunter. "But I say, you fellows, I suppose you feel pretty hungry after a walk in the snow—"

"Yes, rather!"

"What-ho!" said Bob Cherry, in tones of deep feeling.

"Then I'll stand you a little feed, with pleasure!" said Bunter, blinking at the chums of the Remove. "Oh, I say, I wish you wouldn't walk away while I'm talking!" The fat junior rolled out of the dormitory after the Famous Four—Wharton, Nugent, Cherry, and Johnny Bull. "Look here, a titled friend of mine has sent me an extra big postal-order for a Christmas present, and I'm going to stand a feed!"

"Oh, good!" said Bob Cherry.

"I want all you fellows to come—"

"Oh, we'll come!"

"There's just one slight hitch," said Bunter, talking as he followed the chums of the Remove down the stairs. "Owing to a delay in the post, the postal-order hasn't arrived yet—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, really, you fellows, it's not a laughing matter! It leaves me short of money, you see. But it will be all right when it comes. What I was going to propose is, that you fellows lend me ten bob, and take the postal-order when it comes—"

"Rats!"

"Well, look here, lend me five bob, and have the whole of the postal-order," said Billy Bunter generously. "You make a profit of five bob that way—you get five bob for nothing!"

"You mean, you get five bob for nothing!" grinned John Bull.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, really, you know—"

"Buzz off, Bunter!"

"But I say, you fellows— Ow!"

Bob Cherry gave the Owl of the Remove a gentle push on the chest, and he sat down on the stairs. The Famous Four walked on, laughing.

"Beasts!" gasped Bunter. "Ow! Beasts!"

The juniors went into No. 1 Study. Frank Nugent soon had the fire going, and the fragrant smell of frying bacon and eggs filled the study, and to that was added the fragrance of tea. With a bright fire burning, and the cloth laid, and the gaslight glimmering on the crockery, Harry Wharton's study looked very cheerful. Mark Linley and Tom Brown came in to tea, and a very merry party gathered round the little table. The tea had just commenced when the door was pushed open, and a fat face, adorned with a pair of large spectacles, peered cautiously round it.

"I say, you fellows—"

"Get out, you fat toad!" shouted Frank Nugent.

"Oh, really—"

Nugent picked up a loaf. Billy Bunter jerked his head back, and the loaf crashed on the door, and rolled over on the carpet. Bunter's head was cautiously projected into the study again.

"I say, you fellows—"

"My hat! He's still there!" ejaculated Bob Cherry.

"Hand me the poker!"

"Oh, really, Cherry! I say, it's Christmas-time, you know, and I'm willing to let bygones be bygones!" said Bunter.

"Don't be beasts, you know, at Christmas-time!"

Harry Wharton laughed.

"But it isn't Christmas-time yet!" he exclaimed.

"Well, it's jolly near it, anyway; and—and I'm jolly hungry!" said Bunter.

"Oh, come in," said Harry—"come in and have tea, you fat waster; only don't talk!"

And Bunter came in. He did not talk, either—his jaws being kept too busily engaged for idle exercise of that sort.

ANSWERS

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER. Behind the Scenes.

GEORGE WINGATE knocked quietly on the stage door, and the rough, unshaven man who opened it looked at him curiously. Wingate was well dressed, and looked quite good enough for a substantial tip, and the race of doorkeepers subsist largely upon tips. The man touched his cap very civilly to Wingate, and made room for him to enter the narrow, ill-lighted passage inside the stage door. It occurred to Wingate, as he entered, what a strange contrast the mean, sordid surroundings afforded to the tinsel glitter and brilliance of the stage.

"What might you want, sir?" asked the doorkeeper. The thought came into Wingate's mind that the man had been expecting someone else at the stage door. The thought of the fat man with the eyeglass, in Vernon-Smith's box, came into the captain's mind at once, and he frowned. Was that the kind of man whom a girl like Paula was forced to meet?

"Can I see Miss Bell?" Wingate asked quietly. The man grinned. "The lady's in 'er dressing-room now, sir," he said. "Will you take in my name?"

"I dessay I could, sir, perhaps!" Wingate understood. He slipped a half-crown into the doorkeeper's rough palm. The man had expected no more than a shilling, and his manner became almost oppressively respectful.

"Will you ask Miss Bell if she can see George Wingate for a few minutes?"

"Very well, sir." The doorkeeper went away, and Wingate was left standing there. He waited patiently. It was some minutes before the man returned. Wingate gave him an eager look. "Yes, sir; Miss Bell will see you. Will you foller me, sir?"

"Thank you!" Wingate followed the man. He wondered where he was to be led. He knew little about the interior arrangements of theatres, but he could guess that the dressing-room accommodation at a theatre of the size of the Royal in Courtfield would be very limited. Miss Bell, in all probability, shared a small dressing-room with two or three other women in the company; and, in any case, it would not have been possible for Wingate to see her there. It was upon the stage that the doorkeeper led him.

Only a quarter of an hour before Wingate had seen the stage lighted up in the last scene of "Little Red Riding Hood," with the brilliance of the limelight and the flutter of gay dresses. Now it was dark and deserted. Scenes stood about, placed anywhere, and the only light came from a single burner.

The theatre was empty and weirdly silent, save for the dull sounds made by two or three attendants who were sweeping to make the place ready for the evening's audience. A packing-case had been dumped down on the stage, and a stage-hand was tacking canvas upon a screen, the thuds of his hammer sounding strangely hollow.

"Miss Bell will come here, sir," said the doorkeeper. He lingered for a moment, as if on the chance of another gratuity, and then went back to his own place. Wingate waited.

He did not have to wait long. There was a light step in the wings, and the girl who had played the part of Little Red Riding Hood in the pantomime came on.

She was clad now in a quiet dress, and wore a shawl over her shoulders, for it was very cold. Her hair was twisted in a single plait bunched on her head. She showed signs on her face of the make-up, yet she looked very sweet and very simple and very charming. She was small beside the sturdy captain of Greyfriars, though, at least, two years older than he. The big, broad-shouldered Sixth-Former of Greyfriars seemed to tower over her.

Her face broke into a welcoming smile as she came on. "So it is truly you!" she exclaimed. She held out her hand frankly, and Wingate took it in his own big one, and held it there, till the girl, with a slight blush, withdrew it.

"Did you see me in the stalls?" asked Wingate. "I thought I saw you, but was not sure."

"I knew you at once; but, of course, I knew I should see you here, when I saw that the company was coming to Courtfield, and saw your name on the bills," said Wingate.

"Then you had not forgotten me?"

"Forgotten you!" echoed Wingate. "Did you think that was likely, Miss Paula?"

The girl smiled a little sadly. "Why not?" she said. "We met quite by chance, and parted, expecting never to meet again. I knew you for three days, that was all—and we met unexpectedly."

"Unless it was Fate," said Wingate. Paula laughed.

"It was not Fate," she said. "If it was Fate, it was in

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the form of the wind that blew my parasol away, and made you find it in the thicket, and bring it to me."

"It was jolly good luck, anyway." "I don't know. Perhaps I should not have let you talk to me, then—or see me again; but—but—" The girl sighed.

"But what?" said Wingate softly. "But it was so nice to talk to you," said Miss Paula frankly. "You do not understand—you cannot, without more experience—but you are so different from the kind of man that a pantomime girl generally meets. It was so pleasant and nice to talk to you—as if you had been a younger brother."

Wingate winced. "I'm not so jolly much younger than you are, you know," he said warmly.

She smiled. "I am nineteen," she said. "Well, that's nothing—a mere kid!" said Wingate. "I feel older than that, especially since I met you, Miss Paula. Are you glad to see me again?"

"Of course I am! And you?" "I shouldn't be here now if I weren't," said Wingate. "Oh, Miss Paula, you don't know how happy it has made me to see you! What have you been doing all the time since I saw you last? You weren't in this company then?"

She shook her head. "No; I was in the 'Midnight Attack' Company," she said with a slight smile. "I was the heroine, and narrowly escaped murder every night. That company finished its run, and was broken up. I was lucky to get an engagement in Mr. de Courcy's company for the run of 'Little Red Riding Hood.' It is a good shop."

"Shop?" said Wingate, puzzled. Paula laughed. "I mean place—position! We call it a shop. We are doing good business, and the bookings extend to three months after Christmas, so I am not likely to have to rest for a long time to come."

"Isn't the work hard?" "Yes; especially in places where we give two shows a night," said Paula. "But that is nothing—I can work!"

"And you like your work?" The girl smiled. "I do not dislike it. Of course, I dream of becoming a famous actress some day—we all do, and one in a hundred finds her dream come true! Perhaps mine will; I hope so! But the people are very kind, though rough and ready, and I am very lucky to get a shop for such a long run."

"You stay in Courtfield—"

"A fortnight, at least." Wingate's face brightened wonderfully. Wingate, of Greyfriars, had never been called a handsome fellow, though his rugged face was so kind and frank and honest that everybody found it very agreeable to look upon. But at that moment Wingate looked very handsome.

"Then I shall see you sometimes, Miss Paula?"

"You want to see me?" the girl asked slowly. "Can you ask?"

Paula hesitated. "After all, what will be the use?" she said in a low voice. "You are very kind; but—but—it would be more sensible not."

"But I want to—and if you want to—"

"Ah! I have found you, little bird."

It was a strident voice. The girl turned sharply, the colour ebbing in her cheeks; and Wingate's brows contracted in an ugly frown. The fat gentleman of the box had just come on the deserted stage, and his eyeglass was jammed in his eye, and fixed upon Paula. Of Wingate's presence he did not take the slightest notice.

"I am fortunate to have found you," went on Mr. Vernon-Tracy. "It is a real pleasure. I sent in my card ten minutes ago; but you could not see me—"

"I should not see you willingly now, Mr. Vernon-Tracy," said Miss Paula coldly.

The man smiled—a smile that looked very disagreeable upon his thick lips.

"The little bird is cruel," he said. "Dare I hope that she will come to supper this evening after the second house?"

"Certainly not!"

"Then to-morrow evening—"

"No evening—not at all, sir!"

Mr. Vernon-Tracy shrugged his shoulders. "Ah! Perhaps my little bird has found a new friend," he remarked with a sneer. "The little suppers after the performance are no longer agreeable."

Wingate gave a start as if he had been struck.

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Was it possible?

He had known that Paula was persecuted by the attentions of this man—he had seen him before. But he had never dreamed for a moment that it was possible that she encouraged the pursuit of Mr. Vernon-Tracy. The girl's face flushed crimson, and she turned a beseeching look upon Wingate.

"You do not believe him?" she exclaimed.

"Miss Paula—"

"He is trying to deceive you, to trouble me!" the girl exclaimed. "I have never been to supper with him, and he knows that!"

Mr. Vernon-Tracy laughed.

Wingate made a step towards him. The fat gentleman looked at him, adjusting the eyeglass with much nicety in his eye, as if the Greyfriars captain were some peculiar animal he was interested in studying. But the overpowering manner of the Piccadilly Johnny did not affect Wingate. He clenched his hands hard.

"You are annoying this young lady," said the captain of Greyfriars; "you can see that she does not wish to speak to you. You had better go!"

"You young cub!"

Wingate's hands clenched harder. He found it difficult to keep them off this man. But Paula's presence restrained him.

"Please go, Mr. Vernon-Tracy!" said Paula in a low voice.

"As I have my friend the manager's permission to come here, I think I shall please myself about that," said Mr. Vernon-Tracy airily. "As for you, you young cub, you had better get off the scene if you do not want your ears boxed. And the young lady, as you are pleased to term this pantomime girl—"

"You cad!" shouted Wingate. "Hold your tongue!"

The girl came quickly towards Wingate. She was pale and trembling. She evidently feared what might happen if George Wingate's temper got the better of him. Mr. Vernon-Tracy was a man of forty, but he was no match for the champion athlete of Greyfriars School.

"George! Do not—"

"George, eh?" sneered Mr. Vernon-Tracy. "How good! So this young cub has made some progress in your affections, my little one, while I—oh! Ah!"

Mr. Vernon-Tracy got no further. Wingate's fist lashed out, and the fat man rolled over on the stage, knocked clean off his feet by the angry captain's blow. Paula gave a cry, and seemed to totter. In a moment Wingate caught her. The fat man was scrambling up, muttering curses between his teeth. Wingate threw his left arm about the half-fainting girl, and clenched his right hand.

"You had better—" he began.

But the man was rushing at him savagely. Wingate said no more. His fist came out, straight from the shoulder, and his hard knuckles crashed upon the face of his insulter. The fat man fell heavily upon the boarding of the stage, and this time he did not rise.

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.

The Shadow of Trouble.

"PAULA! I'm sorry, but—"

Miss Paula drew herself quickly from Wingate's arm. She tried to recover her composure; but her breath came in quick gasps, and the colour wavered in her face. The poor girl had more cause for alarm than Wingate understood. For the fat "bounder" was a friend of the manager's, and the shadow of the "sack" hung over Little Red Riding Hood, and even in travelling pantomime companies "shops" are not easy to get.

Several stage hands had looked on at the discomfiture of Mr. Vernon-Tracy, and they were grinning. Mr. Vernon-Tracy, in spite of his liberal tips to the needy members of the pantomime company, was not popular with them. They all knew him for a bad man, and, although their own way of life might not bear too close an inspection, they were disgusted at the sight of sheer evil in a man of better class, who should have known better. The doorkeeper, whose palm had been "oiled" on many an occasion by Mr. Vernon-Tracy, came and gave the fat man a helping hand to rise.

Wingate clenched his hands hard. But the "bounder" was not thinking of renewing the conflict. He had had enough of the captain of Greyfriars and his hard hitting.

"I shall remember this!" he muttered.

Wingate laughed scornfully.

"I hope you will remember it, and not give me any reason for repeating it, you cur!" he replied.

Vernon-Tracy gave him a savage look, and swung away, muttering. His nose was red and swollen, and he dabbed it

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savagely with his handkerchief, and his handkerchief came away red.

Wingate turned to Paula.

"I'm sorry, Miss Paula," he said in a low voice—"more sorry than I can say! But—but I couldn't let him speak insultingly to you, could I?"

"It was kind and brave of you," said Paula, in a low voice, "but—but—never mind! You had better go now. That man is a friend of the manager's, and there will be trouble if you stay."

Wingate frowned.

"He is allowed to come here as he likes?"

"Yes."

"And speak to you if he pleases?"

The girl smiled slightly.

"That cannot be helped. So long as he does nothing worse than that I am well content. But—but I must say good-bye now."

"I shall see you again, Paula?"

She hesitated.

"I must!" exclaimed Wingate eagerly. "Paula! I must see you again, especially as—as there may be trouble for you over this."

"Very well; if you wish it."

"Where, then?" asked Wingate. "Not here, I suppose?"

Paula shook her head.

"No; it would not do, the manager would object. Mr. Vernon-Tracy's friendship means a great deal to him. The man has great influence in theatrical circles in London, and the manager is only too glad to have him following our show about like this, whatever may be his reason for doing so. I will see you again, out of doors somewhere. Say that we have a little walk? I like to take a walk when I have an opportunity, and the country about here is very beautiful. But—but it must not be for long. And besides, what would they say at your school? You are still at school?"

"Yes."

"Then the masters—"

Wingate smiled.

"I am head of the Sixth, and captain of the school," he said. "I can do pretty much as I like. Will you see me to-morrow? Our school work finishes at half-past four."

"Very good. There is no matinee to-morrow," said the girl.

"I will come to Courtfield, then, and meet you. I will wait for you under the trees near the old church. You know the place?"

"Yes—yes."

"Good-bye, Paula!"

A stout man, with a grim frown on his brow, came from the deserted wings. He came directly up to Wingate as he shook hands with Miss Paula. Wingate recognized him as the man who had played the wicked Baron in the pantomime, although he had changed into ordinary clothes. He had a fat unlighted cigar in his mouth.

"I'm afraid I must ask your friend to leave the theatre, Miss Bell," he said, "and not to come back to it, either. He seems to have quarrelled with a friend of mine here."

"I am sorry—" began Wingate.

"Yes, yes; but that doesn't alter facts. I cannot have my friends thrown about the stage," said the manager, though, as a matter of fact, there was a peculiar glimmer in his eyes which hinted that he was not really sorry that the swanking Mr. Vernon-Tracy had been thrown about the stage. Mr. Vernon-Tracy had influence which could make him very useful to the panto. manager; but he was not a man whom anybody could really like or esteem. "No need for talk about it—just run off and say no more, there's a good lad."

"Very well, sir."

And Wingate shook hands with Paula, and left. The manager of the Little Red Riding Hood Company looked after him curiously.

"Friend of yours, Miss Bell?" he asked.

Paula nodded.

"A nice lad," said Mr. Cecil de Courcy, to give him the grandiloquent name by which he was known in the noble profession to which he belonged. "I like his looks. Only don't let him punch Tracy any more, Miss Bell; I can't afford it."

Paula could not help smiling.

"Mr. Vernon-Tracy was insulting," she said.

"Yes. So are all the bounders of his sort," said the manager, lowering his voice a little, in case the esteemed friend he was alluding to should hear him. "But things like that have to be put up with, you know. Girls can't be kept in cotton-wool in a panto show. But"—he lowered his voice still more, almost to a whisper—"but that's a fine lad, and I'm glad he thumped the Johnny, and I wish he'd meet him out of doors somewhere and give him another. Mum!"

And the manager, having delivered himself of the expression of those friendly feelings—very similar to those with which Mr. Vernon-Tracy inspired most of his acquaintances—chuckled, and left Miss Bell to herself.

Miss Bell returned to her dressing-room in a very thoughtful frame of mind. She was wondering what was to come of her friendship with George Wingate of Greyfriars, and what Mr. Vernon-Tracy would do? That the mean, spiteful man would seek revenge in some way she felt certain. But, after all, he could not hurt Wingate. And for the shadow of trouble upon her own life, strangely enough, she did not care so much.

THE NINTH CHAPTER. A Surprising Meeting.

HARRY WHARTON looked out into the Close as the Remove came out of their Form-room on the following afternoon. There had been a fresh fall of snow during the day, and it was piled high and white in the old Close and among the trunks of the trees, and clung thickly to the leafless branches. The dusk was descending on the old school, and trees and walls and ledges gleamed white through the gathering gloom.

"Plenty of snow!" said Wharton.

"Yes, rather!" Bob Cherry remarked. "I can see what you're thinking of, Harry!"

Harry Wharton laughed.

"Well, the Courtfield fellows drove us home yesterday," he said. "I should like to carry the war into the enemy's country, you know. Suppose we went down to Courtfield and looked for the bounders?"

"Good egg!"

"Better get a pass from Wingate," said Frank Nugent.

Wharton shook his head.

"No fear! He'd guess—and so would Courtney! I'll ask Walker. Walker's a rotter; but I'll take him some things in for his tea, and he'll give me a pass for six or seven."

"Good wheeze!"

"Besides, Wingate's gone out," said John Bull. "I saw him putting his coat on, the minute the Sixth were out of the class-room."

"Gone out!" repeated Wharton reflectively.

"Yes. He's been looking a bit rotten to-day," Nugent remarked. "He had to go and see the Head in his study when he came in last evening, and I fancy he got a ragging for letting us come in without him. It was a bit queer of Wingate—he generally sticks to his work; and he really ought to have come back with us last evening."

"Cherchez la femme!" grinned Vernon-Smith.

"Oh, shut up, Smithy!"

Harry Wharton succeeded in obtaining the passes from Walker, the prefect. Walker was not a pleasant fellow by any means; he was given to consorting with Loder and Carne, to bullying the fags, and making them find materials for his little feeds without providing them with the necessary cash. But it was always possible to placate Walker by taking him a little present, and a bundle of groceries or a bag of eggs or a cake generally sufficed to bribe and corrupt the prefect, as Nugent expressed it.

Wharton came back successfully with the passes, and half a dozen of the heroes of the Remove quitted the school for a walk through the snow to Courtfield.

The wind from the sea was howling through the trees of the Black Pike, and it swept keenly up the road, laden with snowflakes. The juniors turned up their coat-collars and tramped on cheerfully, with the wind beating on their backs. Courtfield, white with snow, loomed up before them in the gloom of the winter evening. It was not yet half-past five, but the sun was quite gone.

Wharton and Nugent and Bob Cherry and John Bull and Mark Linley and Bulstrode were on the warpath. They wanted to avenge their defeat of the previous evening, not with any malicious intentions, but merely to set matters level again. It was more than likely that they would fail in with some members of Trumper & Co. in the vicinity of the County Council School, where some of the Courtfield fellows attended evening classes after the work of the day. But, as it happened, the juniors were not destined to meet Trumper & Co. that evening.

As they came round the old church of Courtfield, to make for the school, Harry Wharton uttered a sudden exclamation and halted.

"My hat!"

Bob Cherry stooped instantly for a handful of snow.

"Where are they?" he gasped.

"Hold on——"

Bob grabbed up the snow, and rose in warlike attitude. But it was not the enemy.

Wharton caught his arm. With the other hand he pointed to two figures under the trees near the church engaged in deep conversation.

Bob Cherry uttered an ejaculation.

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NEXT
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ONE
PENNY.

"Wingate!"

"And Little Red Riding-Hood!" said Nugent, with a low whistle.

"My only Aunt Selina!" murmured John Bull.

The juniors stared at the scene. There was no doubt about it. Wingate and the girl who had played Red Riding-Hood in the pantomime were talking under the trees, so deeply engrossed in what they were talking about that they did not notice the juniors, although the latter had come up into plain view.

"Well, this takes the cake!" muttered Bulstrode. "Then that is what Wingate was staying behind for last evening!"

"Let's get away," said Mark Linley, in a low voice. "It would be rotten if Wingate thought that we were watching him——"

But it was too late!

Wingate's eye had fallen upon the juniors, and a dark cloud came over his face. He spoke in a low tone quickly to the girl, and then strode towards the Removes.

"What are you doing here?" he exclaimed angrily.

"Nothing," said Harry Wharton.

"What did you come here for?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, we were going to look for the Courtfield chaps."

The captain of Greyfriars frowned darkly.

"Looking for more trouble, I suppose!" he said roughly.

"How dare you come out after school without a pass?"

"But we have a pass—from Walker."

"Oh!"

Wingate seemed at a loss for a moment. He was very angry that the juniors had seen him with Miss Paula, but he realised that they were not to blame, and that anger was futile in any case.

"You had better get back to Greyfriars," he said.

"There's been quite trouble enough between you and the Courtfield fellows, and we don't want any more of it."

"Very well, Wingate."

"Go at once, then."

Wingate turned away, and rejoined the girl under the trees. There was a flush in Miss Paula's cheeks.

The juniors turned away from the scene, wondering.

"I suppose we shall have to go," Bulstrode said doubtfully.

Harry Wharton nodded.

"Yes, yes, of course!" said Nugent.

"We've got a prefect's pass, you know."

"We can't refuse Wingate, though."

"I say, it's pretty thick of him, meeting the pantomime girl like this," said Bulstrode, as the juniors moved away through the trees. "What would the Head say if he knew?"

"He won't know!" said Harry Wharton. "I must say I think Wingate is an ass; but there's no need for us to tell tales. Not a word—even in the Form!"

"Right-ho, of course!"

"Hold on!" muttered Nugent. "Look there!"

The juniors stopped.

In the dusk, under the trees, a form had passed them—that of a man in a fur-collared overcoat, which made his fat person look fatter than ever. The gleam of an eyeglass in the dusk caught their eyes. They knew the man at once. It was Vernon-Tracy, the cousin of the Bounder of Greyfriars!

"The fat rotter!" Bob Cherry muttered.

"Give him a snowball!" whispered John Bull.

"Hold on!"

The fat man evidently did not see the juniors. He was stealing through the trees, his footsteps soundless on the soft carpet of snow. It was evident that he was watching somebody; and it was equally clear that that somebody was Wingate of the Sixth.

The juniors exchanged glances.

"That chap's got something up against old Wingate!" Frank Nugent said, in an undertone. "I fancy they've had a row already. You can see that he's had a punch on the nose from somebody."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And the rotter's spying on Wingate!" said Harry Wharton, in disgust.

"Looks like it!"

"Not much doubt on the subject. Look there!"

The fat man had halted where two or three trees screened him from Wingate and Paula. But he was close to them, and was evidently listening—or striving to listen—to what they said.

The juniors looked at him with gleaming eyes. The expression on the man's fat, coarse face showed the hatred he felt for the captain of Greyfriars, and there was savage malice in his narrow, piggy eyes.

Wharton grasped a handful of snow.

"All together!" he muttered. "We'll soon put a stop to his spying!"

The juniors chuckled softly, and kneaded snowballs. Wharton gave the signal, and they crept through the trees towards the spy. Within easy range, the snowballs flew in a volley.

Whiz! Whiz! Whiz!

THE TENTH CHAPTER.

Ragging a Rascal.

MR. VERNON-TRACY uttered a sharp yell. Two or three of the missiles had missed him, but one had caught him on the ear, another under the chin, and a third on the side of his somewhat prominent nose.

The juniors darted back into the cover of the trees. They were not afraid of the fat man, but they did not want Wingate to see them again.

The loud yell of the johnny made both Wingate and the girl turn their heads. They saw Mr. Vernon-Tracy, with his eyeglass dangling from its cord, and his hat on one side, savagely gouging snow out of his eyes and mouth and nose.

Wingate burst into a laugh, and Paula joined him—she could not help it.

Mr. Vernon-Tracy blinked through powdery snow, and scowled at them.

"Hang you! Hang you!" he yelled. "I—I—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Wingate and Paula walked quickly away. Wingate did not desire another scene with Mr. Vernon-Tracy, for Paula's sake. For his own sake, he would have been glad of a chance of hammering the johnny till he howled for mercy. Paula understood his feelings, and she drew him away, with her hand on his arm. The captain of Greyfriars and Miss Paula disappeared in the dusk, by the wall of the old church, while Mr. Vernon-Tracy was squeezing snow out of his collar and gouging it from his eyes.

While he was so occupied Mr. Vernon-Tracy was saying things. Some of his lurid utterances came to the ears of the chuckling juniors under the trees.

"The rotten blackguard!" said Bob Cherry, in disgust. "Fancy a man of his age swearing away like that! Let's give him some more!"

"What-ho!"

"We'll give him a thorough doing!" said Harry Wharton, between his teeth. "He's an enemy of Wingate's, for one thing, and he's a dirty spy, and he's a blackguard! Three jolly good reasons for snowballing the cad!"

"Yes, rather!"

Mr. Vernon-Tracy had set his hat straight by this time and jammed his monocle into his eye and had followed in the direction taken by Wingate. The juniors grasped up handfuls of snow and kneaded snowballs and followed on the track of Mr. Vernon-Tracy. The fat man stepped out into the village street, where it was lighter, and looked up and down, evidently looking for the captain of Greyfriars.

Whiz! Whiz! Whiz!

"Yaroooooh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

One snowball sent the hat flying, and another caught the johnny on the side of the head, bursting there, and he staggered.

Then—whiz! Whiz! Whiz!

Another and another snowball crashed and smashed on his face and neck and chest, and the fat man reeled, and sat down in the snow in the village street.

There was a yell of laughter.

Village urchins gathered round, laughing, and the loafers in the doorway of the Red Cow public-house set up a cackle.

The fat man sat dazedly in the snow.

As he sat there, snowballs rained upon him from the yelling juniors. They laughed and pelted, and pelted and laughed, till they were breathless.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Whiz—whiz—whiz!

"Go it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Mr. Vernon-Tracy staggered to his feet. His hat was in the snow, and his eyeglass trailed over his shoulder. His face was scarlet with rage. He grasped his umbrella, and rushed furiously at the juniors.

If he had reached them, they would certainly have been hurt, for the umbrella-handle was a hard and heavy one, and Mr. Vernon-Tracy was too savagely reckless to care what damage he did at that moment. But he was not likely to reach the elusive juniors. They were far too quick for him. He rushed furiously at one after another, and while he was chasing one, the others yelled and pelted him, and each of

the juniors, like the lively insect in the old story, was never there when he was almost caught. Mr. Vernon-Tracy rushed to and fro until he was out of breath and gasping wildly. He halted at last, panting, puffing, unable to take another step in pursuit of the juniors; and then they gathered round him in a ring and fairly rained snowballs upon him.

"Help!" shrieked Mr. Vernon-Tracy. "Police!"

But there were no police forthcoming; and as for help, all the spectators of the scene were laughing, and not in the least inclined to help Mr. Vernon-Tracy. The fat man fairly ran at last, pelting up the street, with the snowballs pelting after him. He disappeared amid a regular shower of them.

The juniors gasped with laughter.

"Oh, my hat!" yelled Bob Cherry. "Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Still breathless with merriment, Harry Wharton & Co. took the road home to Greyfriars.

They had missed the intended encounter with Trumper & Co., of Courtfield, but they had had much more fun than they could possibly have extracted from an encounter with the Courtfield fellows. The remembrance of the fat man pelting up the street to escape from the whizzing snowballs made them yell with laughter, at intervals, all the way home to Greyfriars.

THE ELEVENTH CHAPTER.

Trouble!

WINGATE gave Harry Wharton a very peculiar look when he saw him again in the passages at Greyfriars; but he did not speak to him. The captain of Greyfriars did not allude once to the encounter near the old church of Courtfield. What the juniors thought about it he did not know, and apparently he did not care. Perhaps he felt that he could trust them to hold their tongues about his affairs, and it would make matters no better to ask them to do so. But what he thought—if he thought anything at all about it—Harry Wharton & Co. had no means of knowing. He did not mention the matter to them.

But Harry Wharton and his chums could not help thinking about it. Wingate filled a very big place in the life at Greyfriars. He was captain of the school, and head of the sports. He was the best footballer the old college had ever turned out, and the School eleven was nothing without him to lead it. He was a popular fellow in every way, and the idol of the Lower School. Fags would punch one another's heads to win the honour of laying Wingate's tea-table and boiling his eggs, whereas wild horses would not drag them to other studies in the Sixth Form passage, if they could help it.

Wingate had always been kind to Harry Wharton, especially when he first came to Greyfriars—a time when Harry very much needed kindness. Wharton had as much regard for him as anybody at Greyfriars, and he was anxious about him.

There was no doubt that Wingate was getting into a very bad way.

Harry Wharton knew the reason.

It was Miss Paula.

Not that Miss Paula was not a good and a nice girl, whose friendship could have any but a good influence upon a fellow. Wharton judged girls with the insight of a boy, which is, as a matter of fact, generally much keener and truer than that of a man. To Wharton, as to most lads who have been brought up among decent people, all girls were good. Some were better than others, but all were good. The cynical worldly-wisdom of a fellow like Vernon-Smith, the Bouncer of Greyfriars, only brought a smile of contempt to Wharton's lips. It was said of old that the eye sees everywhere what the eye brings the means of seeing; and how should a base nature escape seeing baseness in others? One glance at Miss Paula's face had told Wharton of a nature of frankness and sincerity, and he never had a doubt on the subject—and he was right.

But all the same, it was not a good thing for Wingate.

For the captain of Greyfriars was evidently giving his whole thoughts to his friend in the Theatre Royal at Courtfield, and he was in consequence neglecting his work and his duties.

He slacked down in every way.

Not that he intended to do so. His intentions were as good as ever: but, somehow or other, they were never carried out. Between his eyes and his exercises would come a sweet, kind face, and two kind, dark eyes. The Head, who generally took the Sixth in classics, was amazed to hear Wingate construe like a particularly stupid fag in the Third Form Loder, Carne & Co., who were usually extremely nervous of a visit from Wingate when they smoked or played



Mr. De Courcy, the manager, stamped and raved at the unfortunate wolf. "If you're going to sing like that to-night," he raved, "I don't know what's going to happen to the show. For goodness' sake, buck up!" (See chap. 19.)

cards in their studies, found that Wingate seemed to have forgotten their existence and their habits at the same time. Loder gave quite a crowded card-party in his study one evening, and Wingate never even knew, or if he knew, he did not take the trouble to interfere.

Wingate generally saw the Remove to bed, and one evening he put the lights out in the Remove dormitory without even noticing that one bed was empty, with a bolster arranged in the place of a sleeper, to conceal the fact that the Bounder was absent. Vernon-Smith had gone down to Courtfield for a "night out" with his estimable cousin, and the fact did not come to Wingate's knowledge.

The Greyfriars captain had dropped out of the football practice, too. It was in vain that Courtney and North reminded him that an important match was due on Saturday. Wingate knew it as well as they did, but he seemed to have lost all interest in the matter. Wingate, who was generally so keen upon the school's success in sports, did not seem to care whether Greyfriars beat Westmoor Seniors, or were beaten by them.

As a matter of fact, the Red Riding Hood Company were giving a matinee performance at the Theatre Royal in Courtfield on Saturday, and Wingate knew it. And that fact outbalanced hosts of football matches. Courtney suspected it, and he chafed inwardly, wondering what had come over his old chum.

THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 200.

Next Tuesday's number of The "MAGNET" will be the usual price, 1D. and will contain a splendid, long complete story entitled: "THE DUFFER'S RETURN!" By FRANK RICHARDS.

Wingate wondered himself, sometimes. But he seemed to make hardly an effort to resist. He found himself hoping that the weather would make the Westmoor match impossible.

But that hope proved to be unfounded. There was no fall of snow after Thursday, and on Friday the weather was hard and fine, and Saturday was a clear, cold day, splendid for football. The Sixth looked forward eagerly to the afternoon's match, and many of the players in the first eleven talked eagerly to Wingate about it as the Form came out after morning lessons.

Wingate was very silent.

There was a troubled frown upon his brow. He did not speak on the subject until after dinner, and then he drew Arthur Courtney aside as they left the dining-room.

"I want you to captain the team this afternoon, Courtney," he said abruptly.

Courtney compressed his lips.

"Why?"

"I can't play."

"Why can't you play?"

Wingate made an irritable gesture.

"I can't! I don't want to, if you'd rather I put it like that. You can captain the team as well as I can. You've done it before."

"Only when you were crooked, Wingate."

"Yes. You can do it again."

"I can't do it again, Wingate, and won't!" said Courtney bluntly.

Wingate flushed crimson.

"Look here, Courtney—"

"I mean it," said Courtney, setting his lips. "We've got a hard match this afternoon, and you've got to captain the team! Do you want Westmoor to lick us?"

Wingate's brows contracted.

"You know I don't, Courtney!"

"Then captain the eleven."

"I can't!"

"Well, I won't!" said Courtney angrily. "You can explain to the fellows that you're going to let one of the best matches of the season go to pot, to hang round the Theatre Royal after a pantomime-girl!"

Wingate clenched his hands.

"Don't say anything against her, Courtney!" he muttered.

"I'm not saying anything against her. The girl's good enough, I believe; but she's making you make a fool of yourself!"

"Courtney!"

"You're going to the theatre this afternoon. Can you deny that?"

"I'm not going to answer questions."

"No; you can't answer them! You know that you're going to the theatre, and that you'll try to see the pantomime-girl afterwards! Is that what you call playing the game?"

"Look here—"

"Well, if you are going to desert us, you can explain to the fellows yourself, and tell them to find a new skipper," said Courtney angrily.

And he swung away before Wingate could reply.

Wingate cast an angry look after him, and went into his study and closed the door with a slam.

THE TWELFTH CHAPTER.

Wingate's Resolve.

BOB CHERRY brought the news to the Remove. He had heard it from Coker, of the Fifth, who had heard it from Walker, of the Sixth. Wingate was not playing the game that afternoon! He was missed out of the list for the Westmoor match!

He had left himself out, of course. He could not be left out unless he chose. The juniors could hardly believe their ears. Wingate sometimes stayed out of a match to give somebody else a chance, but only in an easy match that the Friars were certain to pull off in any case. In a match like that with Westmoor, where the chances of victory were about evenly balanced, Wingate was wanted, if he was ever wanted at all. It seemed incredible that he would not play, for it was known that he was not crooked. He was fit enough, and yet he was not going to play for Greyfriars!

The juniors could not believe it at first. The seniors were in the same frame of mind.

Frank Nugent proposed going to Wingate's study and asking him if it were true. John Bull asked him if he had ever thought of putting his head into a lion's den, and what would happen if he did? And Nugent, after thinking it out, decided to let Wingate's study alone.

The captain of Greyfriars had caused a furore in the school by his decision not to play in the afternoon's match, and he was undoubtedly not in a mood to be questioned by juniors.

What did Wingate mean by it?

That was the question that all the Greyfriars fellows were asking themselves. What on earth did he mean?

The few who knew of the acquaintance with Miss Paula Bell, of the Red Riding Hood Pantomime Company, thought that they could understand. But they kept the secret. Courtney, angry as he was, did not want his chum's strange infatuation to become the talk of the school; and Harry Wharton & Co. knew how to hold their tongues.

Wingate was alone in his study, and fellows who passed the door could hear him tramping to and fro, evidently in a restless and dissatisfied mood.

Wingate was trying to think it out.

What was he going to Courtfield for? To see the pantomime! That was nothing—only that Miss Paula was on the stage. To see whether that blackguard, Vernon-Tracy, was troubling her! To meet her afterwards and have a pleasant little talk! Wingate's motives were mixed; but what stood out clear from all the rest was that he was going to the Theatre Royal, and that nothing would stop him.

There was a knock at his door at last, and Arthur Courtney came in. There was a grim expression upon Courtney's face, but he was trying to keep his temper. Wingate stopped his restless pacing, and swung round to face Courtney, with lowering brows.

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"The list isn't posted up yet for the footer eleven, Wingate," Courtney said abruptly.

"Oh, I forgot it!"

Courtney set his lips.

"Well, it ought to be posted up, I suppose?" he said.

"Yes," said Wingate wearily. "I suppose so."

He drew pen and paper towards him. Courtney watched him as he wrote down the names in a list in his clear, steady handwriting. His own name—George Wingate—did not appear among them. Courtney's name was put down as skipper.

Courtney's eyes gleamed as he read over the list. Wingate laid down the pen, and threw himself back in his chair.

"You can put the list up on the board," he said.

"Without your name in it?"

"Yes."

"Wingate, you've thought this over. I suppose you know what you're doing?" said Courtney.

Wingate nodded.

"Yes."

"You are deserting the team, leaving us a fight against odds without your assistance; and Greyfriars will be licked."

"I don't see why. You're a good skipper, and the team's very fit."

"We want you to captain us."

Wingate shook his head.

"I can't."

Courtney took two or three turns up and down the study. He was trying to keep back the bitter words that leaped to his lips.

He paused at last before Wingate, who was sitting with his hands thrust deep into his pockets, and his chin down, his face gloomy and depressed.

"Wingate, you must play this afternoon!"

Wingate shook his head.

"You can't desert us like this! You can't!"

Wingate made a weary gesture.

"Oh, let the subject alone, Courtney! I can't play, I tell you. I don't feel up to it, for one thing. I'm worried."

"What about?"

Wingate was silent.

"You must play, Wingate! Look here, if you must get to Courtfield, you can go after the match."

Wingate shook his head again.

"Very well," said Courtney, "if the match is going to pot, I shall resign from the team. Westmoor can have a walk-over."

"Look here, Courtney—"

"You'd better sneak out of the back door, too, when you go," said Courtney bitterly. "The fellows are all waiting for you to come out to talk to you."

Wingate rose to his feet restlessly.

"Look here, Courtney, I don't want to play."

"It's not a question of that—it's your duty to the team!" said Courtney hotly.

"That's all very well—"

"You are disgraced if you don't play. It will come out, sooner or later, why you cut the match. Miss Bell's name will become the joke of the school!"

Wingate turned crimson.

"Courtney, if you've said—"

"I've said nothing. But other fellows will see—and guess things—and talk. You can see for yourself how it will be."

Wingate groaned.

"I shouldn't wonder."

"Then do the sensible thing—play in the match, and afterwards you can do as you like," urged Courtney.

Wingate set his teeth.

"Very well, I'll play."

Courtney's face cleared at once.

"Good. Shove your name down, and I'll put the list up in the hall."

Wingate did so, and Courtney hurried out of the study with the paper in his hand. He was fearful lest Wingate should change his mind. As he went down the passage he heard an irresolute voice calling his name, but he affected not to hear. He hurried on to the noticeboard in the hall, round which a great crowd had collected in anticipation of seeing the match list.

"Got the list?" exclaimed North.

"Yes; here it is."

"Who's skipper?"

"Wingate!"

"What! He said—"

"Oh, he's come round all right!" said Courtney serenely.

"Here it is, in his own list! That's all right—eh?"

He pinned the footer list on the board. It was read aloud by an eager chorus of voices.

"Yes, that's all right, by Jove!"

"Wingate's playing, after all!" exclaimed Bob Cherry.

"Greyfriars will win! Hurray!"

"Hurrah!" shouted all the fellows in the crowd, seniors and juniors together.

The cheer reached the ears of George Wingate in his study, and perhaps it brought some consolation to him, for the heavy cloud lifted for a moment from his face.

THE THIRTEENTH CHAPTER.

Wingate's Failure.

"WE'RE all right now!"

Another round of cheering coming from the crowd as Wingate came on to the field with North and Courtney seemed to corroborate Courtney's opinion.

"Good old Wingate!" shouted the crowd. "Rub it in to 'em!"

Wingate acknowledged the salute with a little nod. It was clear that he was far from being his usual self. He walked about the field as if the proceedings were not real. When he won the toss, he smiled as if it might have been some sort of joke. But he was not so far gone as not to choose "with the wind" and the sun behind him.

The whistle went, and with an additional cheer from the junior portion of the crowd, the game started. From the first it was seen that the first team were carrying a passenger, and the passenger was Wingate himself.

"Now, Wingate," shouted the crowd, "buck up!"

Wingate seemed to wake up with a start to the facts. Courtney and North were looking at him. They could not make him out. It was so unlike the manly skipper of Greyfriars to play in this fashion. He was missing passes. Missing the initiative when glorious opportunities presented themselves.

If it had been any other fellow, it is to be feared that Courtney and North would have "mentioned" the matter in language which would have gained in force what it might have lacked in grace. But Wingate! The idea was fearful!

Westmoor were grinning. Wingate was the funniest thing in captains they had seen for some time. His lackadaisical style made them smile. A skipper who was missing six out of every ten passes sent to him was a novelty. The result was salutary. Westmoor playing on the foemen's weakest spot, naturally had very little difficulty in breaking through.

Courtney and North, by supreme efforts, managed to keep them at bay twice, but the third time they came with too much rush for anything. A shout next moment announced that they had found the net, and registered first blood for Westmoor.

"That's nice!" growled North.

Courtney shrugged his shoulders. Wingate was apparently in a dream. He did not seem to hear the Westmoor cheering.

"I suppose we must put up with it," said Courtney, with a glance at his skipper.

"It's simply rot!" snapped North. "Their play isn't phenomenal. If he'd buck up, we'd make rings round them yet!"

Wingate turned as he appeared to catch some of North's words. Before he could say anything the whistle went, and the game was in full cry again. But Wingate had gathered enough of his friends' conversation to know that he was looking rather foolish. He made an effort to shake off his present mood. For some time his play became "the thing" that was expected of him.

Westmoor were not grinning now. The difference that a captain in form and out of form made was apparent at once. Their "brilliant" rushes were smashed up with the precision of clockwork. Wingate seemed now as good as three men, and his stirring work on the wing made sad havoc of all Westmoor's "pretty" play.

"Ripping!" said North. "Go it, Wingate!"

The captain of Greyfriars smiled.

"I think we shall win all right, North," he said quietly.

And it seemed likely shortly afterwards.

The Greyfriars fellows had got the measure of their opponents to an inch. They knew what liberties might be taken and what avoided with the Westmoor men. But hope told a flattering tale with regard to their captain. Playing like a Trojan, all at once he seemed to relapse into his former dreamy methods. His feet dangled about the ball instead of playing it. He beat his man well enough on most occasions, but of dash he seemed utterly devoid.

Round after round of clever footwork—the goal apparently at his mercy; then he would lose the leather to the merest baby opposition. North was in a towering rage. But he kept it under as best he could. Courtney's heart sank. Wingate was terrible. It was like playing footer with a fellow who had only just learned the rudiments of the game.

But the Greyfriars men were determined to make a show for themselves, nevertheless.

North and Courtney, cleverly robbing one of the Westmoor men, came for goal in splendid fashion. Wingate was in his position. But that is about all that could be said of him.

The rest of the Greyfriars line did their work well, and with the full-backs beaten "to the wide," as the expression is, a score seemed certain. Greyfriars' three best men, Win-

NEXT
TUESDAY.

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ONE
PENNY.

gate, North, and Courtney, were up in goal. The leather curved in beautifully from the right wing.

The Westmoor goalie's face was anxious-looking, as well it might be.

"Now, Wingate!" yelled the crowd.

"Leave it to me!" shouted North.

The crowd, thinking how Wingate had "done" that sort of shot hundreds of times, took it for granted, and caps were in the air as the ball sailed in.

"Oh!"

Wingate had missed the easiest of shots. He bungled it horribly. The ball rebounding from the post, North tried to make it good, but Westmoor were all up, and in a trice the sphere was flying up field, their men roaring with laughter. Wingate stared in at the goal mouth.

The crowd were almost on the point of hooting. The Westmoor goalie was prancing about his goal as if he had just witnessed the treat of a lifetime. He made no secret of his amusement.

"Fancy missing a shot like that," said Harry Wharton.

"Simply rocky, Wingate!" said Bob Cherry. "Greyfriars are down if he doesn't alter soon!"

The game went on. But the Greyfriars were playing very badly now. The failure of their skipper was telling upon them. Westmoor seemed to be having it all their own way. Down the field they swept like conquering heroes. They made no secret of the fact that they considered Greyfriars an easy thing. And it seemed to be proving so, for before the whistle went for half-time they had enlarged their score to 3—none.

"I say, Wingate, what's up?" said Courtney, in the interval.

Wingate shook his head.

"I'm dead off colour to-day, Courtney," he said. "I felt that you would do better without me, really."

"Oh, rats!"

"I mean it, North," said Wingate. "I simply can't play to-day."

"You were all right for a time," persisted North.

"Yes, do put some stuff into your work, old man," said Courtney. "I'm sorry for you—"

Courtney broke off as Wingate coloured. The captain of Greyfriars was wondering if Courtney knew the real cause of his bad play. Some sense of his failure seemed to sting him.

"Well, I'll have a real go for it this half, anyway, you chaps," he said.

And when the game re-started, it seemed that Greyfriars would retrieve the position yet.

The first twenty minutes was real football, especially the Greyfriars' display. Wingate really bucked up, and Courtney and North, taking a bigger heart in things, made a really splendid gap in the visitor's defence, which ended in a brilliant shot by North.

"Bravo, North!" yelled the delighted crowd, as the goalie stretched his length on the goal-line to try and save.

"Goal!"

"We're beginning to score, anyway," said Bob Cherry, as the side took up their position for the re-start. "Three—one sounds better than 3—none, anyway."

The chums nodded. But Bob Cherry's words soon proved to be cold comfort. The Westmoor men, having made all they could of the first half, were not going to give anything away. They tried hard to do it, and at last they managed it. They put Greyfriars entirely on the defensive. Seeing that Wingate had after all only made a partial recovery, they adopted rushing tactics. It was not football, but it was the game to win. The Westmoor skipper was making signals to his men repeatedly. The pace was very hot, and at last they got their reward.

"Goal!" yelled their supporters.

There was no doubt about it. The Greyfriars' defence were beaten hollow, and North and Courtney saw with regret that Wingate had been first to make a mistake when the attack started. Westmoor, flushed with victory, went ding-dong to prove that nothing succeeds like success. The Greyfriars men made valiant efforts to stop them. Wingate was shouted at, encouraged, and laughed at by the crowd. But it did not seem to affect him. He went through his work like a fellow still in a dream.

"Oh, chuck it, Wingate!" bawled a fellow in the crowd.

Courtney and North turned their faces away from the crowd. Westmoor laughed, and well they might, for they were bound for goal again in no uncertain fashion. Counter-cheers came for North and Courtney as they swept across the field to try and save the rout. They held it up, but in an unlucky moment Wingate received a pass. He let it slip through his legs, and the yell of disappointment that went up from Greyfriars was such as he had never heard before. The Greyfriars side were completely nonplussed. A few

rolleys back and forward with the ball, and another mighty shout. Westmoor had added another goal to their total.

"Five—one!" said Harry Wharton. "By Jove, this is rotten!"

"Now, Wingate! What's the matter with you! Time yet. Buck up!"

But reverses of five—one are very seldom rubbed off in the last ten minutes. North and Courtney had plainly given up hope. The encouragement of the crowd was gall now. They knew that they were being pitied. Neither of them said a word now to Wingate.

"Let's save it from getting any higher, anyway, Courtney!" growled North, as they got off again. "I shall never forget this, I can tell you!"

Westmoor came for the Greyfriars' goal again, confident of it being only a "matter of minutes" to add "number six." But, strange to say, the thorn in their side that turned up at this eleventh hour was Wingate. All at once he seemed to tower head and shoulders above everyone in his play. Westmoor fellows were charged aside like skittles. So confident had they been that another score was imminent that their backs were playing at being forwards. Then the bitterest moment arrived for Greyfriars. Going forward in that manner which is sometimes styled "trampling" on the opposition, the whole home line crossed the half way with a clear field before them, only to hear the whistle go.

Pheep!

The game was over!

With grim, gloomy faces, Greyfriars tramped off the field, amid the moody silence of the crowd. Westmoor were jubilant; but for Greyfriars it was the blackest day in their football annals that any of the seniors could remember. Wingate had played, and his play had been a rank, utter, ghastly failure: and Greyfriars counted the Westmoor match as the blackest defeat of the season.

THE FOURTEENTH CHAPTER.

The Breaking of a Friendship!

WESTMOOR were gone!

The match was over, and Greyfriars had been beaten.

The bitter disappointment of the Greyfriars fellows could not be expressed in words.

It was not only that they had been beaten. They had been beaten hollow, beaten to the wide, beaten without a chance.

Wingate had failed utterly. The captain of Greyfriars had never made so poor a show. There were players who could have been picked out of the Fifth or the Shell, even out of the Fourth, who would have done better for the school than the head of the Sixth had done. It was useless to talk about it. It had happened, and the Greyfriars fellows had to stand it. But there were grim and angry and disappointed looks; and Wingate's popularity seemed to drop from him like a cloak.

What was the matter with him?

That was the question that the Greyfriars fellows, seniors and juniors, were asking one another. Why had he made such an utterly "rotten" show. He was not crooked in any way. He seemed fit enough. It was as if his thoughts had been elsewhere, as if he was thinking about something else all the time, and could not put his thoughts in the game.

That, as Courtney knew, was exactly what was the matter.

Wingate had been unable to fix his attention on the game, just as he seemed unable to fix it upon his work in the classroom, or his duties as a prefect. Wingate was not himself.

Courtney had gone into the house with Wingate after the match. Courtney did not utter a word of reproach. That was useless.

"You might as well have let me go!" Wingate said bitterly. "I haven't done much good to the side, after all."

"I don't want to talk about it," said Courtney shortly.

And Wingate seemed to gulp something down, and he went into his study.

He remained there for some time. When he came out, he had his coat and cap on, and he left the school without saying a word to anybody. Courtney saw him go, from his study window, and he smiled bitterly. He knew very well where the captain of Greyfriars had gone, and he knew that Wingate was not likely to return before locking up, if indeed by then. North, of the Sixth, came into Courtney's study with Valence and Walker. They were all looking very curious.

"What's the matter with Wingate?" Valence asked.

Courtney frowned. He had dreaded questions on the subject, and he did not mean to betray his chum, much as he blamed him.

"How should I know?" he said evasively.

"Well, you're his best chum," said Walker. "I should think you'd know, if anybody did. I'm blessed if I ever saw such an utterly rotten game of footer!"

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"Never!" said Valence.

"Has Wingate got something on his mind?" North asked.

"Better ask him."

"Well, he doesn't seem to be in a talkative mood just now," said North, with a slight laugh. "He seems to be spending most of his spare time lately in going out on lonely walks all by himself. He's getting morbid, I think."

Courtney was silent.

"There's the match on Wednesday. What about that?" North went on. "It's the return match with Eversley, and they beat us on their ground. If Wingate plays on Wednesday, as he played to-day, I fancy we may as well give up the game."

"My opinion exactly," said Valence.

"If he isn't in better form than he was this afternoon, I expect he won't play," said Courtney.

North whistled.

"That won't be much better for us, Courtney. We can't beat Eversley without Wingate in the team."

Courtney made a restless movement.

"Well, it can't be helped," he said. "It's no good talking about it. I feel as rotten as anybody does about the matter. But it's no good talking, especially to Wingate."

The subject was evidently so distasteful to Courtney that the seniors soon left the study, and left him to himself. Courtney remained alone, thinking it over. He was George Wingate's best chum, as Walker had said, and surely it was his duty to make some effort to save the Greyfriars captain from the road he was following. But what could he do? Words on the subject seemed to be useless, and only likely to lead to bitter feeling.

But Courtney felt that he could not allow the matter to rest where it was. However Wingate might take his remonstrances, he felt that it was his duty to make at least one effort to save his chum. Courtney felt that he could settle down to nothing; he waited for Wingate to come in, to speak to him, for the last time, if it was useless.

But he had a long time to wait. Wingate did not come in to tea, and he did not come in afterwards. At half-past nine, the bedtime of the juniors, Wingate had not returned. In the junior common-room, many eyes turned to the clock, but the Remove and the Upper Fourth were not inclined to go to bed unless they had to.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" Bob Cherry exclaimed suddenly. "It's a quarter to ten."

"So it is," said John Bull, who was playing chess with little Wun Lung, the Chinese junior. "Your move, Wun Lung."

"Time to go to bed," said Mark Linley.

"Oh, I dare say the clock's wrong," said Frank Nugent, with a yawn. "Anyway, where's Wingate?"

"I believe he's out," said Wharton.

"Good for him!"

"He's neglecting us a lot lately," grinned Bolsover. "I'm jolly well not going to bed, anyway. It's a prefect's duty to see lights out."

"Yes, rather."

"Faith, and ye're right," exclaimed Micky Desmond. "But sure Wingate seems to be gettin' mighty careless in his old age."

"Blessed if I can make him out," said Ogilvy. "It's very different from what he used to be. Hallo, Courtney!"

Courtney, the prefect, looked into the room. There was a frown upon Arthur Courtney's handsome face.

"Not gone to bed yet," he exclaimed.

"I guess Wingate hasn't looked us up," said Fisher T. Fish.

"You jolly well know it's bedtime, though," exclaimed Courtney angrily. "Be off to bed with you at once!"

"I guess—"

"No jaw. Go to bed."

Courtney was a prefect, and had to be obeyed; and he was angry, which seldom happened. The juniors streamed off to bed without protest. Courtney, with a grim face, saw lights out, and then went down to his study. It was close upon ten o'clock, and George Wingate had not returned to Greyfriars. Courtney thought that he could guess the reason. He was staying in Courtfield for the evening performance of "Little Red Riding Hood."

The frown deepened on Courtney's face as the evening wore on, and Wingate did not appear. At half-past ten, as a rule, the seniors went to bed, and they were seldom up after eleven. But at eleven o'clock there was no Wingate.

Loder, of the Sixth, looked into Courtney's study, where the prefect was trying to read. There was a peculiar expression upon Loder's face. The cad of the Sixth evidently imagined that he was on the track of something.

"Wingate in yet?" he asked.

"Not that I know of!" growled Courtney.

"Know where he's gone?"

"Better ask him!"

"My hat!" said Loder.

There was a great deal of expression in that ejaculation of Loder's, and there was a curious grin on his face as he went out of Courtney's study. It was quite clear to Courtney what Loder was thinking. Loder was one of the black sheep of the Sixth Form at Greyfriars, and he was not unaccustomed to breaking bounds at night, to pay visits to the Cross Keys in Friardale, where he played cards and smoked with a gang of betting rascals. Loder evidently imagined that Wingate had taken to the same ways; indeed, Loder had never fully believed that Wingate was any better than himself. And the supposed discovery gave the cad of the Sixth a great deal of food for thought.

Courtney waited.

One by one the lights went out in the windows of Greyfriars. Wingate was not likely to be missed or inquired after. All the prefects at Greyfriars had keys to the side gate, and came and went as they chose. They were trusted by the Head. If Wingate stayed out till midnight it was not likely to be noticed by anyone but Courtney. As a matter of fact, it was half-past eleven, and every light but Courtney's was out, when the prefect heard a step in the passage.

He threw his door wide open, and looked out.

It was Wingate!

The captain of Greyfriars paused, and blinked in the sudden light, as the door was thrown open upon the dark passage. He looked tired and troubled, and Courtney's heart smote him. He had been feeling very bitter, but his bitterness vanished now.

"So you've come in, Wingate, old man," he said gently.

Wingate looked at him.

"Have you been staying up for me, Courtney?"

"Yes."

"You needn't have troubled," said the Greyfriars captain curtly.

"I wanted to speak to you."

"Oh, good-night!"

"Will you come into my study for a minute?"

"I'm tired. I'd rather go to bed. Good-night!"

Wingate went into his own room. Courtney, with his lips set very tight, followed him there. His anger was rising again.

Wingate uttered an impatient exclamation as Courtney entered the room. Probably he anticipated what was coming, and his conscience smote him.

"I said I was tired!" he exclaimed sharply. "What have you got to say to me? Won't it keep till the morning?"

"No!"

"Then, for goodness' sake, get it over!" exclaimed Wingate, sitting down upon his bed, and beginning to take his boots off.

Courtney flushed. It required all his friendship towards the captain of Greyfriars to keep his temper with him at that moment.

"It was your business to see the Remove lights out this evening," he said.

Wingate started.

"I forgot that."

"It seems to me that you forgot a good many things," said Courtney. "However, I saw them off to bed."

"Thanks!" said Wingate, ungraciously enough.

"You can't say that you've been playing the game lately, Wingate, considering that you are captain of the school, and that the Head trusts you as head prefect."

"Are you going to begin preaching at me?"

"That isn't preaching; it's a plain statement."

"I don't know that I want to be captain of the school, or prefect either. I've been thinking about resigning," said Wingate abruptly.

Courtney stared at him aghast.

"You can't mean it!" he exclaimed.

"I do!"

"Oh, you're mad!" Courtney exclaimed, unable to control his anger now. "You don't deserve to have a chum sticking to you."

"Then don't do it."

"Do you mean that?"

"Yes, I do; I'm sick of your pestering me. Why can't you let a fellow alone?"

"I can't let him alone when I see him going to the dogs," said Courtney hotly. "And all for the sake of a—"

"Mind what you say!"

"All for the sake of a girl who doesn't care twopence for him, and may be laughing at him all the time!" Courtney exclaimed furiously.

Smack!

The words were hardly out of Courtney's mouth when Wingate struck him, and he reeled away across the study.

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ONE
PENNY.

THE FIFTEENTH CHAPTER.

Birds of a Feather.

COURTNEY staggered back, and fell against the wall. He caught himself there, and stood unsteadily, dazed by the blow. His face was deadly white, save where the red mark showed on his cheek.

"Wingate!"

That was all the prefect could say.

George Wingate stood with his hands clenched, and his chest heaving, and his eyes seemed to blaze. He was not sorry for the blow he had struck.

"That's for speaking so of her," he said; "and if you mention her again—"

Courtney burst into a bitter laugh.

"I shall not mention her again," he said. "I think you will be sorry you struck that blow, Wingate. I've been your chum since we were kids in the Second Form together, and not—" In spite of himself Courtney's voice faltered, and almost broke. "Well, that's all over. You won't be troubled by my friendship any longer."

And Courtney strode from the study. Wingate made a movement as if to detain him, and then his hand dropped to his side again. He watched Courtney with lowering brows, as he passed through the doorway, and then closed the door after him.

Wingate sighed. It was the breaking of an old friendship—and for what? He himself hardly knew for what.

The Greyfriars captain went to bed in a black mood.

Of that scene in the captain's room, no one heard a word. Courtney did not speak of it, and Wingate did not. But all Greyfriars knew on the morrow that Wingate and Courtney were estranged, and that the breach seemed likely to be permanent. They did not speak when they met at breakfast; they did not nod in the passages. Each of them seemed to be unaware of the existence of the other.

The breaking of their friendship was the talk of the school; but hapless inquirers after accurate knowledge on the subject met with rough rebuffs. Coker, of the Fifth, undertook the dangerous task of learning from Wingate how it had happened. Fellows who knew of Coker's intention gathered round eagerly when the Fifth-Former stopped the captain of the school in the Form-room passage after lessons on Monday. They were keen to know; but no one envied Coker his self-imposed task.

"Hallo, Wingate—" began Coker.

"What do you want?"

"Just a word—" said Coker genially.

"Be quick about it, then."

"I hear that you have quarrelled with Courtney—"

Wingate turned his back upon Coker, and walked away.

Coker stared after him.

"I say, Wingate—I was speaking to you—"

He was about to hurry after Wingate, when Potter caught him by the arm.

"Cheese it, you ass!" said Potter. "You'll get a dot on the boko if you talk to Wingate any more now."

"Blessed if I make it out!" said Coker, who was not famous for keen vision. "I don't see why he should cut up rusty. I don't cut up rusty, if I have a row with you, Potty, and a fellow asks me a civil question about it."

Potter grinned.

"I'll ask Courtney," said Coker, after a pause.

"Better let it alone."

"Oh, rats! I want to know," said Coker.

And he cornered Courtney when the latter came out of the Form-room, and proceeded to ask him. The prefect stared at him.

"I hear you're out with Wingate," Coker began. "I suppose—"

"Mind your own business!" said Courtney, very distinctly.

"Eh?"

"Didn't you hear what I said? Mind you're own business!"

"But I say, Courtney—"

"Oh, don't bother!"

And Courtney walked away. Coker scratched his somewhat thick head, and turned very red as the fellows grinned at him.

"Blessed if I make this out!" he said.

"There are lots of things you can't make out," said Frank Nugent. "The best thing you can do, Coker, old man, is to shut up."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And Nugent of the Remove dodged away from Coker's heavy hand. But Coker did not question either Wingate or Courtney any more—and no one else did.

Both the old friends kept their own counsel. But the matter was talked of up and down the school, in every study,

junior and senior. It was in one study only that there was a clear idea of what had happened.

"They've rowed over Wingate's seeing the pantomime girl," said Harry Wharton, in No. 1 Study. "When you come to think of it, that must have been why Wingate let the Westmoor match go to pot."

"I suppose you're right," said John Bull. "Wingate seems to be quite off his rocker lately."

"Fairly off!" said Bob Cherry. "He ought to be stopped."

Harry Wharton laughed rather ruefully.

"It looks to me as if Courtney's tried to stop him—and you see the result," he said. "I believe that's at the bottom of it. I'm jolly sorry to see Wingate and Courtney on bad terms; they were such good chums."

"It may blow over," said Nugent.

"It doesn't look like it."

It certainly did not look like it. On Sunday and Monday the old chums had avoided one another carefully, and on Tuesday they did not speak. It was pretty clear that the breach was in no way to be healed. The matter was very interesting to Loder and Carne and the other black sheep of the Sixth. Loder was firmly convinced by this time that he had found Wingate out, so firmly convinced that he broached the subject to the captain of Greyfriars at last.

"Out to-night?" he asked Wingate, as the Sixth came out of the Form-room.

Wingate started, and stared at him.

"What do you mean, Loder?" he asked.

"What I say," said Loder coolly. "If you're going out to-night, I don't mind coming with you. I don't know where you go, Wingate, but you can't beat the Cross Keys for a jolly time."

"You rotten blackguard!" said Wingate.

Loder backed away a little.

"Oh! So you're still keeping up the humbug?" he asked, with a sneer.

Wingate clenched his hand hard. Loder shrugged his shoulders and walked away, and Wingate frowned darkly and went into his study. It struck him as a blow to know what his actions appeared like in Loder's eyes. The blackguard of the Sixth took it for granted that his absences from Greyfriars were for some disreputable object.

And Wingate had not been able to deny that he was going out that night. He had obtained from Paula permission to see her after the performance; and he had told her that he could easily come. So he could. It was quite true; though he did not care to think what the Head would have said if he had known of it. Romance had come into poor Wingate's life, and it had taken him captive, and all the hard and practical common-sense for which he had been known seemed to have deserted him, now that he needed it the most. Wingate, always open and frank as the daylight, was learning to make concealments. He did not leave Greyfriars openly; other fellows might wait up, as Courtney had done, and with less friendly intentions. Wingate went to his room at the usual time, and locked the door, and when most of the Sixth were in bed he opened his window to drop out into the Close.

It was an easy drop; there was no difficulty about that. But as Wingate looked out of the open window into the Close, he paused. The night was dark, and a cold wind blew across the Close and rustled the leafless branches of the trees. The thought came miserably into Wingate's mind that he was going to do what he had bitterly condemned Loder and Carne and others for doing—breaking bounds at night! True, his object was not like theirs; he was going to do nothing that he need be ashamed of. But he was breaking the rules of the school—those rules which he had been appointed a prefect to enforce. But it was too late to think of that now.

He swung himself from the window and dropped into the Close. There was a footstep close at hand, and Wingate started—a guilty start, with his heart thumping against his ribs. If it was a master!

It was not a master. A sneering voice came to his ears as he swung round, and Loder looked at him with a grim, sneering grin.

"So our immaculate captain is caught at last!" grinned Loder. "Breaking bounds at night! Where is your humbug now?"

Wingate's eyes blazed.

He clenched his hand, and struck at Loder's face. The cad of the Sixth had been watching him—Wingate knew that. His anger boiled up at the thought of being spied upon. His fist crashed upon Loder's mouth, and the senior reeled back and fell to the ground, with a cry of pain.

Wingate strode past him, and disappeared into the gloom of the Close. Loder staggered to his feet, his hand to his mouth—his eyes flaming with rage and spite—but the captain of Greyfriars was gone.

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THE SIXTEENTH CHAPTER.

Something Like a Chance.

"GOAL!"

"Bravo, Wharton!"

The shouts were ringing round the junior football-ground. Morning lessons were over on Wednesday, and in the clear, cold sunshine of the winter day the Removites were at footer practice. Harry Wharton, playing inside-right, had just put the leather in the goal. The Remove were only at practice, but they had two full elevens going, for they were to play the Upper Fourth in the afternoon, and Wharton captained one side, against Bulsirode on the other. Wharton's play was magnificent, especially for a junior, and several seniors had come round the junior ground to look on. Among them were Courtney and North, of the Sixth.

Courtney had been looking glum enough that morning. Wingate had announced that he was not playing in the Eversley match, and after his show against Westmoor the Sixth could not pretend to be sorry that he was staying out. If he played against Eversley as he had played on the last occasion it meant another severe defeat for Greyfriars seniors, and they were better without him. But who was to play inside-right in the place of the skipper? Courtney was inside-left, and he was willing to undertake the captaincy of the team now that he was convinced that Wingate was useless. But where was the other inside winger to come from?

There were plenty of fellows in the Sixth and the Fifth willing and eager to take it on. But Courtney was not satisfied with any of them. The seniors were at this time specially weak in forwards, though they could have produced plenty of backs. As Courtney stood watching the Remove play an idea came into his mind that made his eyes gleam.

"What do you think of Wharton, North?" he asked.

"Ripping, for a junior," said North.

"He plays inside-right now."

"Yes, and a jolly good one."

"What about giving him a trial in the first eleven?"

North whistled.

"A junior in the first eleven?" he ejaculated.

"We want a winger in Wingate's place. I've a jolly good mind to give Wharton a trial," said Courtney: "not for a permanency, of course. I know he's young and light in comparison with the rest of the team. But we've got weight enough in the others, and he's got speed—Look at him, and look at the way he centred just then. And that last goal of his was splendid—the goalie's no fool either, but Wharton beat him easily."

"All very true!" said the other. "But a junior in a Sixth-Form match—my hat!"

"I'm thinking of trying him."

The Removites stopped practice in time for dinner, and walked off the field, Harry Wharton little dreaming of the thoughts that were in the mind of the new skipper of the first eleven.

That Wingate was not playing for the school was known all over Greyfriars now, but hardly anybody regretted it. Until he got into better form it was best for him to keep out of school matches. Many were inclined to blame Courtney for having bothered him into playing against Westmoor, as it had turned out.

Wingate and Courtney did not look at one another at dinner. After dinner, when they came out, Courtney was surrounded by seniors who wanted to know who was going to play inside-right. Courtney shook his head.

"I haven't settled yet," he replied.

"But Eversley get here in half an hour or so," urged Valence.

"I'm thinking it out."

"Ask Wingate."

Courtney's face set. But he felt that it would be better to consult Wingate, although he did not relish the task of speaking to him. He crossed over to the captain of Greyfriars as the latter went to his study.

"Just a word with you, Wingate," he said stiffly.

Wingate stopped.

"I'm thinking out whom to play in your place," said Courtney coldly. "I suppose it's quite settled that you're not playing?"

"Quite."

"I'm thinking of putting a junior in."

Wingate started a little.

"You're captaining the team to-day," he said. "You will do as you like, of course."

"You don't approve?"

"Well, who's the junior?" asked Wingate.

"Wharton of the Remove."

Wingate's face cleared.

"You might do much worse than give him a chance," he

exclaimed. "He is fast and steady, anyway, and the Eversley team are not a heavy lot. Try him, by all means."

"Good!"

Courtney turned away abruptly. Wingate went into his study and closed the door. He came out ten minutes later with his coat on, and walked towards the door on the Close.

"Not staying in to see the match, Wingate?" asked Walker.

"No."

"You don't seem to care much about senior footer lately," Carne remarked.

Wingate flushed.

"Well, I've got other things to think of," he said.

And he went out. Loder, who was standing by, shrugged his shoulders with a sneer, and exchanged glances with Carne. The two cads of the Sixth had quite made up their minds what were the "other things" that Wingate had to think of, but the rest of the Form were very much puzzled.

When Arthur Courtney posted up the football list in the hall there was an eager crowd to see it. Fifteen or sixteen fellows had a lingering hope of seeing their names there. When the name of "H. Wharton" was read out there was a general exclamation of angry amazement.

"Wharton!"

"Harry Wharton!"

"A junior! A Remove kid!"

"It's a rotten joke!"

And a dozen fellows rushed away to find Courtney to expostulate. They found Courtney, and they expostulated, but it was to no purpose. Courtney was firm. And the notice on the board, which had caused such chagrin to aspirants of the Fifth and Sixth, caused emotions of quite a different sort in the Remove. It was Nugent minor, of the Second Form, who saw it first, and he dashed away to Study No. 1, where Harry Wharton and Frank Nugent were changing for the Fourth Form match. He burst into the study in wild excitement.

"You fellows—"

"Hallo!" growled Frank Nugent. "Don't rush into a room like that, you young walrus! What's the matter with you?"

"News!" shouted Nugent minor. "Wharton—"

"Eh?"

"Wharton's to play this afternoon!"

"Of course he is!"

"I mean in the first!"

"What?"

"His name's down in the list for the first eleven, against Eversley!" gasped Dicky Nugent breathlessly.

Frank Nugent took his minor by the collar and shook him. Dicky Nugent gasped and roared.

"Leggo!" he shouted. "Wharrer you up to? Leggo!"

"You young ass! That's for your rotten jokes—"

"It's not a j-j-joke!" stuttered Nugent minor.

"Leggo! I tell you Wharton's name's up, in Courtney's handwriting—honour bright!"

"Impossible!"

"I tell you it's so—honest injun, you ass!"

Frank released his minor in astonishment. He knew that Dicky would not say "honour bright" if he was romancing. Wharton's eyes were shining. He ran out of the study, and darted down to the hall.

There was his name, sure enough, and a crowd of juniors were gathering round to read it.

Harry Wharton's eyes danced.

"My hat!" ejaculated Bob Cherry. "You're in the team, Harry—you're playing in the first! Congratulations, old chap!"

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ONE
PENNY.

And Bob Cherry dealt his chum a hearty smack on the shoulder that nearly knocked him over.

"Wharton!" It was Courtney's voice. "I want you to play this afternoon. I suppose you can play for the First?"

Wharton grinned.

"Well, yes, I should say so!" he replied. "Johnny Bull can take my place against the Fourth—the Remove will walk over them, anyway—"

"Oh, will they?" said Temple of the Fourth.

"Oh, rather!" said Dabney. "I—I mean, rather not!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Then be ready at half-past two, Wharton," said Courtney.

"What-ho!" said Harry Wharton emphatically.

And, needless to say, he was ready.

THE SEVENTEENTH CHAPTER.

Folly!

"PAULA!"

The girl smiled softly, but a little sadly, as she gave Wingate her hand. It was upon the old village green of Courtfield, and they had met under the old beech-trees, now almost stripped of all their leaves. They stood in the dead leaves there, under the trees, shut off, as it seemed, from the outside world, the sun filtering through the bare branches over their heads. To Wingate all was sun and brightness; he had forgotten everything, excepting Paula, and he was more and more inclined every day to forget everything but Paula. But she?

It was easy enough to see from the expression in the quiet, sweet face what the girl's feelings were. To her, Wingate, with his kindness, his boyish, frank admiration, his boundless respect, and his brave, honourable heart, came like a ray of light from another world. For Paula could not help contrasting him with the men she met in the "profession." He was so kind, so tender, and yet respectful; all his ideas, thoughts, and feelings were so clean and wholesome. He was so different from—she thought of Mr. Vernon Tracy, and shuddered.

"You are cold, Paula."

"No," said Paula—"no. I am thinking. You have come very often to see me lately."

"It is kind of you to let me, Paula. It makes me so happy," said Wingate.

"I think, perhaps, it is not kind of me," said Paula. "If you spend so much time in

Courtfield you must be neglecting your other occupations. Did you not tell me once that you play a football match every Wednesday afternoon?"

"Yes," said Wingate.

"Then to-day—"

"There's another fellow in my place. It's all right."

"And last night you must have been home very late, as you saw me after the performance," said Paula. "Are you sure you will not get into trouble?"

"It is all right."

"But it is not good for you," she said. "But—but I leave Courtfield so soon, and—and I suppose we shall not meet again, and I confess that I like to see you."

"You do like to see me, Paula?"

"Yes, indeed!" said Paula, with a sigh.



"Paula!" The pantomime girl smiled a little sadly as she gave Wingate her hand. They stood in the dead leaves under the trees, shut off, as it seemed, from the outside world. (See Chapter 17.)

19
"THE DUFFER'S RETURN!" By FRANK RICHARDS.

"You must see me again after the company has left Court-field," said Wingate eagerly. "It will be easy for us to meet somewhere—"

She shook her head.

"You don't want to, Paula?"

"Yes, I want to, but it is better for you to forget me, and for me to forget you," said the girl quietly.

"I cannot do that, Paula! Paula!"—Wingate's voice trembled a little—"there's something I want to say to you—something I—I must say before I leave you—"

She gave him a startled look.

"What do you mean, George?"

"You look upon me simply as a boy, I suppose?" said Wingate slowly. "But—but— Paula, can't you see?"

The girl's face was pale and troubled.

"It was wrong of me to let you see me," she murmured.

"It was right," said Wingate, "and I must see you again. Paula, you think I am only a boy, but I am old enough to know when I have met the only girl I shall ever care for. Don't be angry with me, Paula! I must tell you!"

"My poor boy—"

"Boy!" repeated Wingate. "I suppose you are a little older than I—"

"Two years!" said Paula, with a sad smile.

"What is that? Nothing!"

"Little enough," said Paula. "But it means that I am a woman—and you are a boy! My dear, dear friend, you must not talk like that, or it will be impossible for me ever to see you again. It is folly."

"But it is not folly," said Wingate. "I know what my own feelings are like, and I'm not speaking without thinking. I shall never care for anybody else. I'm not asking you to become engaged to a fellow who's still at school. But if you think you could ever care for me, Paula—"

"Don't!"

The girl's voice was sharp, as if with pain.

"But, Paula—"

"Don't! I can't bear it!" Paula's face was white. "George, you must never speak on this subject again—never, or I cannot see you!"

"Paula!"

"I mean it," said the girl. "I was wrong to let you see me so often—wrong—wrong! But I did not think of this. My poor boy! You do not understand. But—but I was so glad to see you."

"You don't care for me then, Paula?"

"Yes, as a dear, dear friend, whom I shall always remember," said Paula—"as a brave, kind, and honest friend, so different from—from some friends. But that is all. And you must not talk on this subject any more."

"Paula!"

"You will make me angry if you do."

Wingate bowed his head.

His face was white, and his lips seemed tightly drawn. He was suffering, as a lad will suffer at the shattering of his first dream. But his brave, manly nature came to his rescue. Whatever he had to bear, he could bear with courage.

"Very well, Paula."

"Perhaps you think I am hard now," said the girl, almost in a whisper; "but when you are older you will understand."

"Paula!"

The church clock chimed out. Paula gave a start.

"I must go now!" she exclaimed hurriedly.

"But did you not say that there is no matinee this afternoon?" Wingate exclaimed.

"Yes; but there is a rehearsal."

Wingate gritted his teeth. Paula smiled faintly.

"There is a new scene to be introduced into the first house to-night," she explained. "It has to be rehearsed first, of course. I am afraid that I shall be late."

"I mustn't keep you," said Wingate. "I will walk with you to the theatre."

"Very well."

Wingate was silent as they walked to the theatre. They reached the building, and stopped at the stage door. Paula held out her hand.

"I—I suppose I must go?" said Wingate miserably.

"Would you like to see the rehearsal?" said Paula.

Her heart smote her as she looked at the misery in his face. If circumstances had only been different— But she would not allow that thought to enter her mind.

Wingate's face brightened up at once.

"May I?" he asked.

"The doorkeeper will take you in," said Paula. "I must run off now."

"Thanks! Thanks so much!"

The girl hurried away. A bell was ringing somewhere, and doubtless it was a signal. The doorkeeper led Wingate

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into the empty theatre. Very dark and dreary it looked, with dim half-light, only the stage lighted up ready for the rehearsal. The orchestra were in their places, and a fiddle was squeaking drearily. Shadows lurked round the auditorium—shadows and strange echoes.

Wingate dropped into a seat in the empty stalls. A fat man with an eyeglass was lounging there, and he turned a cold, sneering look upon Wingate, and the captain of Greyfriars turned away his head. It was Mr. Vernon-Tracy; and although his hands itched to be upon him, he did not want any quarrel with the blackguard there.

Some of the members of the orchestra glanced curiously towards Wingate, and there was some grinning and muttering among them. Wingate knew that they were discussing him, and he wondered why. A few muttered words came carelessly to his ears.

"It's the same young bounder!"

There was a chuckle.

"He's beginning early!" came in an amused whisper from the first violin to the cornet.

"Yes. He, he, he! Young idiot!"

And the worthy instrumentalists chuckled softly together, while Wingate sat with burning cheeks, and his eyes gleaming with anger and indignation. He understood enough from the whispered words to know what a vulgar and brutal construction was placed upon his friendship for Miss Paula—to these men, he was the same kind of low-minded "Johnny" as Mr. Vernon-Tracy—only he was "beginning early." Wingate sat with a sense of physical sickness as he thought of it, and realised that it was in the atmosphere of talk like this, and thoughts like these, that Paula must pass her life.

If he could only take her away from it—away from it all—

He broke into a low, miserable laugh at the thought. He was a schoolboy—a fellow in the Sixth Form at Greyfriars—a captain and a leader among his schoolfellows, but to men of the outer world only an inexperienced youth. He was helpless—helpless; and yet the poor lad loved Paula, as a lad loves for the first time when the heart is young, and all the world seems young with it.

THE EIGHTEENTH CHAPTER.

Wharton's Luck!

"WHARTON!"

"Ready?"

"Yes, rather!" said Harry Wharton. "Have Eversley come?"

"They're on the ground," said Bob Cherry.

And Bob linked arms with his chum and marched him off, as proud as a peacock of Harry's success. Bob Cherry would have been glad enough of a chance of playing in the First Eleven of Greyfriars himself; but there never was any jealousy or envy in his nature, and he rejoiced at Harry's good luck in the most whole-hearted way.

Harry, with a long coat on over his football things, walked down to the field with Bob, and a shout greeted him from all the juniors there. The seniors, perhaps, looked a little grim. Most of them agreed that Courtney must be "off his rocker" to play a Remove when their worthy selves were willing to fill the vacant place. But the juniors were enthusiastic. Fellows in the Second, the Third, the Fourth, and the Shell cheered Wharton as loudly as the Remove. He was a junior, and they were juniors, and they rejoiced.

"Of course, there are chaps in the Remove who play better than Wharton," Bulstrode remarked. "But it's a jolly good thing to have a Remove chap in the First, so give him a yell!"

"Hurrah!"

Wharton coloured with pleasure. That was the only thing he needed to make his satisfaction complete—that the other fellows should be as pleased as he was. Bulstrode slapped him on the shoulder. Bulstrode was privately of opinion that Courtney would have shown much more wisdom in selecting him, but he congratulated Harry sincerely enough.

"Go in and win!" he exclaimed. "Play up for the Remove, my son!"

"I mean to," said Harry. "But what about the Fourth-Form match, Bulstrode? You fellows don't seem to be ready for it."

Bulstrode grinned.

"We're chucking it, to watch this," he replied. "We don't see a Remove chap play in the First Eleven every day."

"Begad, no!" said Lord Mauleverer. "We're going to watch you, my dear fellow!"

Harry Wharton laughed.

"Well, I hope I shall give you something worth watching."

"I say, you fellows——"
 "Shut up, Bunter!"
 "Ahem! I was thinking," said Bunter, as Wharton joined the footballers outside the pavilion. "I was thinking——"
 "Rats!" said Bob Cherry. "Draw it mild!"
 "Oh, really, Cherry——"
 "Eversley look a fine lot," said Frank Nugent critically.
 "They're not so heavy as ours, but they look fast."
 "Begad, you're right!"
 "I say, you fellows, I was thinking that a junior playing in the First Eleven is a jolly great occasion——"
 "Right for once!" said Bob Cherry, slapping the fat junior on the back with such heartiness that Bunter staggered and trampled heavily on Hazeldene's toe.
 "Ow!" roared Hazeldene, pushing him off. "You ass——"
 "I'm sincerely sorry, Vaseline. It was Cherry's fault——"
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 "I was thinking that, as it's a special occasion, I shall stand a feed to celebrate it," said Billy Bunter, blinking at the juniors. "I shall devote the whole of my postal-order to it, and do the thing in really fine style."
 "Which postal-order?" grinned Bob Cherry. "The one that didn't come this morning, or the one that didn't come yesterday?"
 "Oh, really, Cherry——"
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 "I'm expecting a postal-order from a titled friend of mine, and——"
 "Greyfriars win the toss!" shouted Tom Brown.
 "Hurrah!"
 "They're beginning."
 "I say, you fellows——"
 But no one was listening to Bunter now. The game was beginning, and Harry Wharton was following up the rush of the Greyfriars forwards. The match was keen and hard from the very start.
 But the Eversley team were lighter than the Greyfriars men, and in a very short time they appeared to be getting knocked about.
 "They want more weight you know," said Billy Bunter sagaciously.
 "Yes; I think they'd do better if someone had sent them a postal-order!" grinned Bob Cherry.
 "Oh, really, Cherry——"
 "Shut up, you fat porpoise!"
 "Yes," said Lord Mauleverer. "Do desist, Bunter. Blessed if I can hear who's winning!"
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 Lord Mauleverer's joke went down very well. Even Billy Bunter himself smiled. A new idea had entered his head. He blinked at Lord Mauleverer.
 "I say, you fellows," he said. "What about a sweepstake on the match?"
 "If you don't chuck it," began Bob Cherry threateningly, "I'll——"
 "Oh, really, Cherry! A sweepstake's not half a bad idea, you know. Mauleverer could advance me the money to start it——"
 "Bravo, bravo, bravo, Wharton!" suddenly shouted all the juniors. "Skip it, old kid!"
 Billy Bunter shut up with an expression suggestive of "just my luck" on his fat face.
 "That's just my idea," he shouted. "A sweepstake on Wharton's chances of scoring!"
 But he might as well have addressed the moon as the chums of the Remove. They had eyes and ears for Harry Wharton only. Bunter's little excitement of a minute ago was very much a thing of the past. Harry Wharton was tearing down the field with the ball at his toes, and the chums cheered him to the echo.
 "I'll bet anyone a tanner he doesn't score!" said Billy Bunter.
 "You adipose rotter——"
 "Oh, really, Mauleverer——"
 "Shut up!" said Bob Cherry, his eyes fixed on Harry Wharton. "You couldn't pay Mauly, even if he took you on at your rotten tricks——"
 "Hear, hear!" said Bulstrode. "Now—now, Wharton!"
 But it was not to be. Eversley were a lighter team than the Sixth, but they were quite heavy enough for Harry Wharton. Beating one of their backs in grand style, he yet found the other man too good for him, and when he should have put in his shot he found himself sent flying on his back. He got a hearty cheer from all, nevertheless, as he sprang up again.
 Greyfriars were a winning side, it was easy to see. Relieved of the weight of Wingate as a passenger—for he had been nothing less in the Westmoor match—the Sixth team played like fellows who had received a new lease of life.

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They were more than satisfied with Courtney's selecting Harry Wharton. The plucky Remove was rendering invaluable service. What he lacked in weight, he certainly made up for in speed, as the Eversley men found to their cost. They were nippy players themselves, and they greatly appreciated the same quality in an opponent.

"Go it, Harry!" bellowed Bob Cherry, right across the field. "Make 'em sit up, kid!"

The Sixth roared with laughter. An enthusiastic friend was a thing they all liked.

For some time things settled down into pretty football, neither side gaining any advantage.

"Oh, this is all very well, but I want a goal!" said Bob Cherry. "Come on, Wharton! Raise the dust! Put it about! Rub us one in!"

"Raise the dust!" shouted the chums, thinking it a good word.

"I guess Bunter wanted to do that," observed Fisher T. Fish.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, really, you fellows! Let me explain——"

"Rats; you fat fraud! Can't you see Wharton's bringing it down for another chance?" said Bob Cherry. "In with it, Harry!"

Harry Wharton was indeed worth his place. The way he "diddled" four of the Eversley men one after the other brought cheer after cheer. But the same full-back proved too much for him again. He was robbed—the back cleared in brilliant style; and presently the whistle went for half-time, with neither goal "punctured."

The subject of conversation until the restart was Harry Wharton. On all hands it was agreed that the First were lucky to have included him in their side.

"And they'll think themselves luckier yet, if I'm any judge," said Bob Cherry.

And for once a prophet had honour in his own country. The Remove were with Bob Cherry to a man. As they put it, Harry Wharton was going to show the Sixth something they did not know in footer. Be that as it would, Courtney, North, and Walker now became conspicuous for the home side. Their passing and repassing excited great admiration.

Twenty minutes of pretty going had nothing but the Eversley half of the ground for its exhibition. The visitors were pinned consistently in their own half. They gave way slowly but surely before the victorious Sixth, till "at advantage ta'en," to use well-known words from Scott, Harry Wharton brilliantly intercepted a pass between two of the Eversley men, and a wild shout from the Remove announced that their hopes were realised.

Harry Wharton had scored.

"Carry me home to die! Did you see us do it?" yelled Bob Cherry.

"What-fo!"

Roars and roars of cheering greeted everything Wharton did now. Courtney added another; and when the whistle went, in ten minutes or so, the Remove made a wild stampede across the ground. Harry Wharton tried to get out of their reach. But it was no use.

"Chair him!" shouted Bob Cherry.

And up on to the shoulders of the Removes Harry Wharton went.

Greyfriars had won the Eversley match, in spite of the absence of their captain, and Harry Wharton had materially helped them to win—in the eyes of the juniors, at least. Harry Wharton was the hero of the hour.

They could not make enough of him. They carried him round the field on their shoulders, Wharton laughing and protesting; but it was no use. Even Coker, of the Fifth, joined in the ovation. Temple, Dabney & Co. roared themselves hoarse. It was a good day for Greyfriars, and a great day for Harry Wharton, of the Remove.

THE NINETEENTH CHAPTER.

At the Rehearsal.

MR. CECIL DE COURCY, the manager of the "Little Red Riding Hood" Company at the Theatre Royal, in Courtfield, did not notice the Greyfriars fellow sitting in the stalls. Mr. Cecil De Courcy was too busy and too bad-tempered to notice anything except what was going on on the stage. Not that Mr. De Courcy was a bad-tempered man, as a rule; but at times of rehearsals managers generally allow themselves a little latitude. They find such times trying, and so do their companies.

The "Red Riding Hood" company and the "Red Riding Hood" manager formed no exceptions to the general rule. Mr. De Courcy talked very plain English at rehearsal, especially to the members of the company whose services were not particularly valuable, and whom he could have replaced at an hour's notice. Little Red Riding Hood

herself was treated with much politeness, because she was "catching on" wonderfully well with the public, and because she was good-tempered and patient and painstaking.

But several other members of the company learned what the rough edge of Mr. De Courcy's tongue was like—though they knew it before, as a matter of fact. And some of the orchestra, too, learned things about their playing which they were by no means inclined to accept as statements of fact, though in their position they could not very well argue the point with Mr. De Courcy.

Wingate, sitting quietly in the half-darkened theatre, looked in wonder and interest upon a scene which was quite new to him, but which was everyday enough to Miss Paula Bell.

Mr. De Courcy had many things to try his temper. He was introducing new scenes and a new song into the pantomime, and there was little time for rehearsal. Mr. De Vere, who played the Wolf in the pantomime, was to do the new song, and he had had quite an argument with the manager about it. Mr. De Vere wanted to sing a real topper, and show off his baritone voice to the public, but the manager said—very truly—that the public came to a pantomime to be amused, and not to be inflicted with Jack Brown's baritone solos. When Mr. De Courcy was very bad-tempered, he would address Mr. De Vere as Brown—his real name—and the unfortunate Wolf never dared to respond by calling Mr. De Courcy Thompson, which was the name Mr. De Courcy had been baptised under.

And so the luckless Wolf, instead of moving the audience to sad tears by a song of the "Sailor's Broken Heart," was condemned to make them laugh with an absurdity on the subject of "Jackson's Check Trousers," which was a great blow to Mr. De Vere, who had hoped to make a hit somehow or other during the panto season with his fine baritone voice, which, as a matter of fact, was not half so fine as its owner believed.

As a consequence, Mr. De Vere was a little sullen, and he sang the song of "Jackson's Check Trousers" without any go in it, and the manager told him so. He did not tell him so in exactly those words. He couched his remarks in an interrogative form. He inquired sarcastically whether Mr. Brown imagined that he was employed as chief mourner at a funeral, and that, if so, Mr. Brown was very much mistaken. And Mr. Brown was very annoyed and sulky, and finally he broke down in the song.

Then Mr. De Courcy stamped.

"If you're going to do that to-night, Brown, I don't know what's going to happen to the show!" he exclaimed. "For goodness' sake, buck up!"

"It wasn't my fault!" growled Brown, alias De Vere, seeking a scapegoat. "How can a man sing to that cornet?"

"What's the matter with the cornet?"

"Oh, listen to it!" said the Wolf, as if that were enough.

The manager snorted.

"Begin again!" he said wearily.

The Wolf began again, and the cornet chipped in, at stated intervals, with snorts, which were supposed to represent the tearing of "Jackson's Check Trousers" when he caught them on a railing.

The "Check Trousers" were finished with at last, and then it was discovered that Miss Mirabel Tudor, the principal boy, was not on the stage at all. At which the manager raved, and sent a boy to Miss Tudor's dressing-room with a message, but the message was almost civil, for the principal boy was very popular with the public. Mr. De Courcy had to apportion out his bad-temper very carefully.

It would have been quite like Miss Tudor to "get her back up," and declare that she would not play—such is the effect of professional success upon some minds, especially feminine ones. All that Mr. De Courcy could not say to the principal boy he said to the supers and the Wolf. The Wolf writhed under criticisms of his voice until Miss Mirabel appeared on the stage, looking very haughty.

Miss Mirabel Tudor "walked" through the rehearsal, carelessly enough, with the proud consciousness of being able to get another "shop" at any minute she chose, having no fewer than three letters from managers in her bag.

Miss Paula Bell was almost as valuable in the company as Miss Tudor was, but there was nothing of that sort about her. She had too much common-sense to be puffed up by a little success, which might prove to be only temporary, after all. The manager confided to her that she was the only member of the company who had any "horse-sense," a tribute which was received by Miss Paula with a smile, and by the rest of the company in grim silence.

It was all like a new world to George Wingate, as he looked and listened.

Miss Paula, although it was "only a panto," was accustomed to putting all she could into her work, and that

was the way to succeed, whether in a panto show or a Shakespearian drama. Good work will always tell. And Wingate, as he watched her, and saw her patience and good temper and good sense, admired her more than ever. There was none of the pettishness and the jealousy and the sharp temper that most of the other artistes showed.

*Not that Miss Paula was playing for Wingate, either. It was clear from her keenness in her work that he was not in her mind at all, and that she had probably forgotten even that he was in the theatre.

The rehearsal was over at last, leaving the manager with a husky throat—which he immediately proceeded to lubricate at the bar—and most of the company with very bad tempers, which were gradually smoothed down in the same way.

"By Jove! She's ripping!"

Wingate started as he heard the words.

They were uttered by Mr. Vernon-Tracy, and from the look of the man, as his eyes were fixed on Wingate, it was clear that he meant the Greyfriars captain to overhear him.

His object was plain enough—he wanted to quarrel with Wingate again in the theatre, to make it impossible for the Greyfriars fellow to come there.

Wingate affected to hear nothing.

Very gladly he would have gratified Mr. Vernon-Tracy's desire, and given him a sound thrashing there and then; but he had Paula to think of.

The Greyfriars captain rose as the lights went out on the stage, and quitted the stalls. Mr. Vernon-Tracy looked after him with a sneering smile. Wingate divined, rather than saw, Mr. Vernon-Tracy's expression, but he would take no notice of it.

Mr. Vernon-Tracy went round behind the scenes with the manner of a man who had the freedom of the place, as undoubtedly he had.

Wingate slowly quitted the theatre.

Would he see Paula again? He hoped so. It was hard, it was bitter, to leave the theatre, and leave the way open for the man he hated.

But it was a consolation to know that Miss Paula disliked the "Johnny" thoroughly; and, after all, could he injure her?

Wingate walked up and down in the dusk on the opposite side of the street, waiting for Paula to leave the theatre.

He might at least walk home with her to her lodgings.

But he waited in vain.

Miss Paula did not appear. Presently a boy came out of the theatre, and looked up and down the street. He crossed over and came up to Wingate, with a slight grin on his face.

"Mister Wingate?" he asked.

"Yes," said Wingate.

"Note for you, sir."

He was a little boy, not more than thirteen, but there was the knowledge of thirty years in his thin, sharp face. He could probably have told George Wingate, the captain of Greyfriars, many things that would have astonished him.

Wingate's face flushed with pleasure as he took the note. It was undoubtedly from Paula! His heart beat strangely; it was the first time she had written to him. He felt in his pocket, but the boy was gone, without even waiting for a tip. Perhaps he had been instructed not to wait for an answer.

Wingate read the note in the light of a street lamp. Then his face became pale, and a haggard line came on his forehead.

It was from Paula, and it ran:

"My dear Friend.—I should be glad to see you again—so glad. But it is better not—better for both of us! After what you have said to-day, it would not be right for me to see you, and there are other reasons—for your own sake. But believe always that I shall remember you, and think of you with affection.—Always your friend,

"PAULA."

Wingate clenched the note in his hand.

Not see him again! Then that was the last time he had seen her—the last time he was to see her! He set his teeth. If Paula did not want to see him again, well and good. But what did she mean by those words—for his own sake?

Did it mean that Mr. Vernon-Tracy had threatened him—or her? Wingate's eyes blazed at the thought. Could she imagine that he was afraid of Mr. Vernon-Tracy—that the fat, bloated "Johnny," flabby from the effects of a reckless life, and late hours and drink, could hurt him? If that was her reason, he would see her again, in spite of her note! He crossed over to the theatre.

The doorkeeper, with kindly remembrances of the half-crown of a previous occasion, and modest anticipations of another, took in his name willingly enough. But it was

useless. Miss Bell was in her dressing-room, preparing for the "first house," and she begged to be excused from seeing him. Wingate sent in a brief note, only telling her that he must, at least, see her once more, and that he would wait till after the second house that evening. Then he left the theatre. He was in his place in the stalls when the first house opened that night, and he watched Miss Paula as she came on the stage. She did not glance towards him, but she knew he was there—he was sure of that! He thought that his presence there made her falter, and he was sorry.

Mr. Vernon-Tracy was in a box, and he saw Wingate, and gave him a deadly look. He left his box before the first house was over.

After the second house, Wingate waited for a chance of seeing the girl. She left the theatre with another artiste to go to her lodgings, and Wingate crossed the street and raised his hat. Miss Paula paused, and her friend, with a smile, walked on slowly to give her a chance to speak to the captain of Greyfriars.

Miss Paula's face was very pale.

"I told you I could not see you again," she whispered.

"Don't you want to, Paula?"

"Yes; but——"

"But what?"

"It is better not."

"Because of what I said?"

"Yes."

"I unsay it now, then—forget it. I will say nothing again, unless you shall give me permission," Wingate exclaimed eagerly.

The girl hesitated.

"There are other reasons—for your own sake!" she urged.

"You are thinking of that man—that scoundrel, Vernon-Tracy?"

Paula nodded.

"You think I fear him—that cad!" said Wingate.

"It is not only that."

"Ah! You mean that he is a friend of your manager's, and that he can make things uncomfortable for you in the theatre, Paula?"

"I was not thinking of myself."

"But can he?"

"I think not—now. I have been very successful with the public, and a London manager has made me an offer," said Paula slowly. "Things have changed somewhat during the past week or two. I am not afraid of him."

"Then how can his threats interfere with us?"

"My dear friend——"

"I can protect myself—and you!"

She smiled.

"You do not know how base he can be, George, if this—this friendship of yours were known at your school—to your headmaster——"

Wingate started.

"Dr. Locke would not blame me, if he knew all," he said.

"But would he know all—would he not form prejudiced opinions?" said Paula. "Probably he has a horror of the stage, and the pantomime does not rank very high, even among professional stage people. He would think that you were falling into the hands of an adventuress."

"Paula!"

"I must speak plainly; and, without knowing me, or the circumstances, he would be justified in making such a conclusion."

"But he knows nothing."

"Mr. Vernon-Tracy will tell him."

Wingate almost staggered.

"What—he has said——"

"That if I see you again he will acquaint your headmaster with the whole matter, and make it as black as he can."

"The villain!"

Paula smiled wearily.

"Yes—he is a villain! But you can see for yourself, George, that it must end now—our poor little friendship, harmless as it is."

Wingate clenched his hands hard.

"I did not wish to tell you this," said Paula gently. "I wished my note to be the end. But I have had to explain—to convince you. It is for your sake, George. This is our last meeting."

"If it is for my sake, Paula, I refuse to accept it," said Wingate steadily. "When I explain to Dr. Locke, he cannot see any harm in my friendship for you. And I shall risk it, anyway."

She shook her head.

"I shall not allow you to," she said. "You shall not risk, and, perhaps, ruin, your career, for the sake of a friendship that, after all, must end soon. On Saturday we leave Court-

field."

"Paula!"

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ONE
PENNY.

"Good-bye, my friend," said the girl, holding out her hand.

"Paula!"

"Good-bye! Good-bye!"

He held her hand in his.

"I shall see you again," he said steadily. "I shall see you again, if only to say good-bye before you leave!"

"No, no!"

Paula hurried on after her companion. Wingate, with his head bent, and a gloomy frown upon his brow, tramped back to Greyfriars. It was midnight when he reached the school.

THE TWENTIETH CHAPTER.

Wingate is Wanted!

"GOOD old Wharton!"

"Bravo!"

"Hurrah!"

Harry Wharton's study, in the Remove passage at Greyfriars, was crowded with enthusiastic juniors. The result of the Eversley match had been a triumph for the Remove. Even fellows who were not on good terms with Wharton, as a rule, like Bolsover and Vernon-Smith, rejoiced, and joined in celebrating the victory.

And it was a victory worth celebrating!

It was but seldom that even a Shell fellow was played in the First Eleven, and never a junior lower down in the school; but Courtney's experiment had been a success. Harry Wharton had played for the school, and he had been very useful to the side, and he had scored—scored a goal on his own.

No wonder the Remove rejoiced.

Such a victory could only be adequately celebrated by a big feed, and a crowd of juniors clubbed together to stand the feed. Billy Bunter offered to take the lead in the proceedings, and to stand the whole expense out of his postal-order, which he was expecting that very evening. All that was necessary was for Lord Mauleverer or John Bull to advance him the cash till the postal-order came.

Billy Bunter's offer was declined without thanks, and the Remove managed the feed without his assistance. His assistance in disposing of the good things, however, it was impossible to dispense with, for nothing would have kept Bunter out of the study on that occasion.

Wharton's study was crammed.

Billy Bunter, of course, had found a place; and, of course, Wharton himself was there, with Bob Cherry, and Nugent, and John Bull, and Tom Brown, and Fish, and Ogilvy, and Micky Desmond, and Bulstrode, and Hazeldene, and a crowd more fellows. Fellows were sitting down, and standing up, and leaning in the doorway, and crowding in the passage. It was very crowded, and very warm, but nobody minded. Good temper reigned supreme.

The juniors drank Wharton's health, and Courtney's health, and everybody's health, in lemonade and ginger-pop, and the proceedings were frequently punctuated with loud cheers for Wharton.

"Good old Harry!"

"Bravo!"

"Wharton ought to be stuck in the team for good," said John Bull enthusiastically.

"Hear, hear!" shouted Bulstrode.

"Begad, you're right, my dear fellow!" declared Lord Mauleverer.

"Hurrah!"

Harry Wharton laughed.

"Hardly that," he said. "Still, I'm jolly glad I did well for Greyfriars to-day, and glad you chaps take it so rippingly. But I jolly well wish old Wingate were his old self again, and playing as he used to."

"Yes, rather," said Frank Nugent. "Where is he now?"

"Gone out," said Bull.

"He spends a lot of time out of doors lately," Hazeldene remarked.

Billy Bunter blinked up from his jam-tarts.

"I say, you fellows, I suspect that Wingate goes to——"

"Shut up, Bunter!" said Mark Linley.

"Oh, really, Linley!"

"Have some more tarts, Bunter?" said Bob Cherry.

"Yes, thanks—ow!"

"Catch!"

But it was too late for Bunter to catch, and the jam-tarts stuck over his face, and the big glasses that adorned his fat visago were jammed.

"Owl Oh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yow! Oh, really, Cherry—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Billy Bunter wiped the jam off his glasses, and blinked ferociously at Bob. But his suspicions as to where Wingate went remained unuttered, which was Bob Cherry's object.

The celebration of the footer victory in Wharton's study continued past bedtime. Wingate did not put in an appearance, and Courtney was on too bad terms with the captain of Greyfriars to take on his duties. He would willingly have done so, so far as that went, but Wingate had asked Walker to see to it if he were not back by half-past nine.

Walker had promised to see the Remove off to bed; but Walker was very careless in the performance of his promises. Walker was in his study, playing a little game of nap with Loder and Catne and Valence, and he had forgotten all about his promise to Wingate. It was after ten o'clock when the Head of Greyfriars came along the Remove passage, and found the celebration in full blast.

Dr. Locke's face was very stern.

He had just dismissed a visitor, and the juniors would have been very much surprised if they had known who the visitor was. Dr. Locke had come up to the Remove passage, attracted by the merry voices there, and there was no doubt that the Removites were making a "row."

Bob Cherry had risen to make a speech when the Head appeared. He was facing the door, and he caught sight of the stern face of the doctor as it appeared in the passage.

Bob Cherry stopped abruptly.

"Go on!" roared the juniors.

"Buck up, Cherry!"

"On the ball, old man!"

"Shut up, you asses!" muttered Bob. "The Head!"

"Oh!"

"My hat!"

The sounds of jollification died away at once. The juniors jumped up at once—at all events, those who were sitting down. It rushed in upon their minds that it was long past bedtime, a fact they had completely forgotten until that moment.

Dr. Locke looked sternly into the study.

"Boys, are you aware of the time?"

"N-n-no, sir!" stammered Harry Wharton.

"It is past ten o'clock!"

"Oh, sir!"

"I am quite willing to believe that you did not notice the passage of time," said Dr. Locke quietly. "But it's a prefect's duty to see that you go to bed at the right time. Which prefect is seeing lights out for the Remove this month?"

There was no reply.

"Tell me, Wharton!"

"Wingate, sir!" said Wharton reluctantly.

"And he has not told you to go to bed?"

"N-n-no, sir."

"Have you seen him this evening?"

"No, sir."

"Do you know where he is?"

"No, sir."

"Very well; go to bed at once."

The Head walked away. The merry party in No. 1 Study broke up at once.

"Wingate's in for trouble," said Bob Cherry glumly. "The ass! He might have guessed that there would be trouble, sooner or later."

"Poor old Wingate!"

That was the general feeling in the Remove as they went up to their dormitory. Poor old Wingate!

"It's the panto, of course," Bob Cherry whispered to Harry Wharton, as they went into the Remove dormitory. Harry nodded.

"I suppose so," he said.

"The Head looked very ratty!" said Nugent.

"He's heard something," said Harry Wharton quietly.

Bob Cherry whistled.

"It will be rough for old Wingate, then."

"I'm afraid so. It was bound to come out in the long run. Wingate's been jolly reckless," said Harry. "I hope it won't be a bad row for him."

But as he remembered the expression on the Head's face, he felt that there was real trouble in store for the captain of Greyfriars. He would gladly have warned the senior what he was to expect, but he had no idea where to look for Wingate. He guessed that he had gone to the theatre in Courtfield, but he was not sure, and he might have left, if he had been there—he might be anywhere. There was nothing that the juniors could do.

Dr. Locke himself saw lights out in the Remove dormitory, and he was very grave. After seeing that the Removites were in bed, the doctor went downstairs with slow steps, and into

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the Sixth-Form passage. He knocked at Arthur Courtney's study, and entered.

Courtney was at work, but he laid down his pen, and rose to his feet at once at the sight of the Head.

"Wingate is not here?" said the Head.

Courtney's heart sank. In spite of the breach between him and his old chum, he was concerned for Wingate. Friendship does not easily die. Although he was on bad terms with George Wingate, Courtney would willingly have saved him from exposure. But it was clear now that something had come out—that something in connection with the pantomime had come to the knowledge of the Head. Courtney could read as much in the expression of Dr. Locke's kind, grave face.

"No, sir!" faltered Courtney.

"He is out?" asked the Head.

Courtney hesitated.

"I—I believe so, sir."

"You mean that you know he is?" said the Head.

"Well, yes, sir."

"He did not play in the match this afternoon, Courtney, I believe?"

"No, sir."

"Why not?"

"He wasn't fit."

"And he had another engagement?"

"I—I think so."

"Do you know where he is gone?"

"He didn't tell me where he was going, sir."

The Head regarded the prefect gravely. Courtney's eyes were on the floor.

"Do you know anything of an acquaintance Wingate has formed in Courtfield?" asked Dr. Locke slowly. "An acquaintance with a woman?"

Courtney coloured.

"I—I'd rather you asked Wingate himself about it, sir," he said.

The doctor nodded.

"Perhaps you are right, Courtney. But I have just received some information, from a man I cannot respect, and yet which appears to be correct. I wish to have the matter decided or confirmed, and Wingate is not here. However, you are right. I shall stay up for Wingate."

And the Head turned towards the door.

"I—I—may I speak a word, sir?" said Courtney.

"Certainly."

"I don't know what you've heard, sir, but—but if anybody has represented that Wingate has been acting in a rotten way, it's not true. I think he has been a reckless ass, and I've told him so, but there's nothing more than that in it."

"I am glad to hear you say so, Courtney. I sincerely hope that it will turn out that you are right." The Head paused. "If Wingate comes in before you go to bed, tell him I wish to see him in my study."

"Very well, sir."

"But do not stay up past your usual hour, unless you please. Good-night, Courtney!"

"Good-night, sir!"

Dr. Locke quitted the study. Courtney did not return to his work. He remained standing in the study, his face pale and troubled. He was thinking of his old chum, for now that trouble, perhaps disgrace, threatened George Wingate, Courtney could forget the quarrel, he could even forget the hasty blow that Wingate had struck, and his only thought was how to help his friend.

THE TWENTY-FIRST CHAPTER.

Chums Yet.

WINGATE tramped wearily towards the school, and he started as he came in sight of the old walls, and heard the last stroke of midnight booming out from the tower of Greyfriars. Not a light gleamed from the buildings, so far as he could see, as he unlocked the side gate. He locked the gate after him, and tramped across the Close, and then a glimmer of light came to his eyes. A light was burning in the Head's study, and gleamed from the window. There was a footstep in the Close, and Wingate uttered a slight exclamation as a form loomed up.

"Wingate!"

The Greyfriars captain halted, gritting his teeth. It was Courtney's voice. Wingate was weary in mind and body, and in no mood for sermons, and he was feeling bitter against Courtney—bitter, indeed, towards everything, towards everybody but Miss Paula. It seemed to Wingate that fate was very hard on him, and his whole nature rebelled against the position he found himself in—helpless, helpless!

"Oh, it's you!" he exclaimed sharply.

"Yes, Wingate."

"What do you want?"

"I've been waiting here since half-past ten to speak to you, George," said Courtney quietly.

"An hour and a half!" said Wingate. "It must be something important, then. Not about the Eversley match, surely?"

"No."

"Did Greyfriars win?"

"Yes."

"I'm glad of that," said Wingate. "But—"

"Never mind the footer-match now; this is more important," said Courtney. "I've waited here to see you when you came in, to warn you."

Wingate started.

"You waited here, to warn me?"

"Yes."

"To warn me of what? What has happened?"

"The Head knows."

"The Head!"

"Yes," said Courtney quietly, as the Greyfriars captain stood very still. "I thought I'd better warn you before you see him. He's waiting up to see you."

"Oh!"

"Somebody has told him all about it—I don't know whom. But I thought it better for you to be prepared."

"Vernon-Tracy—the scoundrel!"

"It might have been. I know the Head has had a visitor this evening. I did not know whom."

"Oh, it was Vernon-Tracy, right enough," said Wingate bitterly. "He threatened Paula that he would do it, and he has done it. I might have expected it."

"It's a bad business, Wingate. The Head was looking very grave about it. I thought I'd let you know, so that you wouldn't be taken by surprise."

"Thanks, Courtney, old man." Wingate hesitated. "I—I say, Arthur, I'm sorry for what happened the other night. I was a cad!"

"It's all right!"

"If you knew what I'd been through the past few days you'd be sorry for me, I think."

"I am sorry for you, old chap," said Courtney, holding out his hand. "As for what happened, I know you weren't yourself at the time, and it's all over. There's my fist, if you like to take it."

Wingate pressed his hand in silence, and they walked on to the house together. The light still gleamed from the Head's window. Courtney went to his room, and Wingate, with a firm step, went on to the Head's study. He was glad that Courtney had warned him. It saved him from being taken by surprise, at all events. But what was he to say? He remembered Paula's words—the doctor would place some prejudiced misconception on the matter. But even if he knew the facts as they were, what would he think? Could Wingate deny that he had neglected his duties, his studies, and the school sports of which he had been appointed the head—to follow strange gods?

How was he to defend himself? It was borne in upon Wingate's mind, as he made his way slowly to the Head's study, that he had no defence.

He knocked at the door with a firm hand. Whatever he had to go through, Wingate had the courage to face it.

"Come in!" came the deep voice of the Head.

Wingate opened the door, and entered the study. Dr. Locke was seated at his writing-table, and he raised his eyes to Wingate as he entered.

"Close the door, Wingate."

The Greyfriars captain obeyed.

"You may sit down."

Wingate did so! A hard and obstinate look was gathering upon the boy's face. He expected blame, reproach, perhaps threats of punishment. All that was hard and obstinate in his nature rose to the fore now. For Wingate was in earnest, and he was reckless now. He was prepared even to bid defiance to the Head—even to leave Greyfriars rather than listen to one word against Paula.

Dr. Locke fixed his glance gravely upon Wingate. He had a strong regard for the big, manly Sixth-Former, the best captain Greyfriars had ever had. And in spite of the brutal insinuations of Mr. Vernon-Tracy still ringing in his ears, Dr. Locke felt that George Wingate had not gone to the bad—that even if he had been careless, negligent, reckless, his brave and manly nature was still sound.

"Courtney says you want to see me, sir."

"Yes, Wingate. Where have you been?"

Wingate's lips hardened.

"To Courtfield, sir."

"To the theatre there?"

"Yes, sir," said Wingate firmly.

"You know that Greyfriars boys are not allowed to visit the theatre without asking permission, Wingate?"

"Yes, sir; but this is a pantomime, which you have allowed all the fellows to see."

"Very true. To come to the point at once, Wingate, I have received a visit from a gentleman who has seen you at Courtfield!"

A Mr. Vernon-Tracy, I suppose, sir?" said Wingate bitterly.

The doctor nodded.

"Yes, that is the name, Wingate."

"I thought so! The man is a scoundrel, sir!"

"I do not think it improbable. He certainly did not impress me favourably, Wingate, and I should, under ordinary circumstances, attach very little importance to what he might say. But it has been common knowledge at Greyfriars that for at least a week past you have neglected your duties as a prefect, and have neglected the sports, either not playing in the matches, or playing badly; and from my own observation in the Form-room, I am aware how you have neglected your studies. You have spent a very great deal of time out of the school. Where have you spent it, Wingate?"

The Greyfriars captain was silent.

"In Courtfield?" asked the Head quietly.

Wingate met his eyes fearlessly.

"Yes, sir."

"In company, I suppose, with the girl whose name Mr. Tracy mentioned to me—a Miss Paula Bell, of the pantomime company now playing at the Theatre Royal, in Courtfield?"

"To some extent, sir."

"Have you been to Courtfield excepting to see her, or in hope of seeing her?" asked the Head.

"No, sir."

"You admit it, Wingate?"

"I have nothing to hide, sir. My friendship with Miss Paula Bell is as honourable as my friendship for your own daughter, sir," said Wingate.

Dr. Locke coloured.

"I do not know this Miss Bell, and I am quite willing to believe that she is all you fancy, Wingate," he said quietly. "Heaven forbid that I should think hardly of anyone whom I have not seen; or should deny that a woman may remain pure and good even amid wretched and degrading associations. But—"

"Miss Bell is a dear, good girl, sir," said Wingate. "If you saw her, you would know it. I have protected her from that villain Vernon-Tracy, and for that reason he has acted in this treacherous way, whatever reason he may have given you."

Dr. Locke nodded.

"And it is merely a friendly regard that you entertain for this young lady, then, Wingate?" he asked.

Wingate was silent again.

"Answer my question, Wingate."

"I love her, sir!"

THE TWENTY-SECOND CHAPTER.

Blow for Blow.

WINGATE did not hesitate; the reply came straight and clear, with all the frankness and courage of his nature. And yet, even as he spoke, he realised how absurd it must seem to the doctor, and he would not have been surprised if Dr. Locke had laughed.

Dr. Locke did not laugh.

He understood the boy's nature too well for that. He knew that it was not ridicule that was wanted—it was kindness, patience, and forbearance.

He spoke to Wingate kindly and gently. And Wingate, who had been prepared to defy authority, and to oppose a sullen silence to blame or ridicule, was taken aback; and he listened with respect, and with a growing dismay. For the Head, with clear and calm reasoning, showed him how the matter stood. If he had blamed, if he had threatened, if he had been angry and impatient—Wingate would have found an answer ready. But he had no answer to give to calm and kind reasoning. The Head accepted his opinion of Miss Bell; there was no hint that he did not believe the pantomime girl to be all that George Wingate firmly believed her. But even so, he pointed out to Wingate the folly of the course he was pursuing. What would his people say—and what would Paula say if she knew what his people would say? And when Wingate confessed that Paula had already bidden him a final farewell, because he had spoken to her of love, the Head drew a sigh of relief, and urged him, as he cared for her, to acquiesce in her decision, and told him that obstinate persistence would result in as much unhappiness to the girl as to himself. And Wingate listened with growing dismay. He had not expected this. If the Head had been his father he could not have been more kind, more gentle. But through it all was the remorseless logic that shattered Wingate's vague dreams, and showed him how matters really stood.

Wingate rose at last, his face white as chalk.

"You will think over what I have said," said Dr. Locke. "Heaven knows I do not wish to be hard on you, my dear lad. But you must see matters as they are, and you must not ruin your career for an idle fancy, which, as you confess yourself, can come to nothing. If this girl is all you believe her—and I think so—she will persist in her resolution not to see you again—and you must let her have her way. I depend upon you to play a man's part, Wingate."

And the Head shook hands with the captain of Greyfriars and dismissed him.

Wingate went to bed.

But there was little sleep for the Greyfriars captain that night.

For long hours, in the darkness, Wingate lay awake—thinking—thinking—and the more he thought, the more clear it was in his mind that the doctor was right, that Paula was right, and that he was wrong, that his farewell to "Little Red Riding Hood," must come soon, and must probably be for ever.

In the morning Wingate rose, pale and unrefreshed, with weary eyes, and weary heart.

In the Sixth Form-room, the Head did not appear to notice anything. He hoped that the boy had fought and won his battle. Other fellows made remarks upon the captain's looks, but Wingate did not hear or heed.

Courtney was the only one who understood; and he did not fully understand—but he was sympathetic. Wingate felt a feverish desire to see Paula again, if for the last time. After school, he debated the matter in his mind. Should he go to Courtfield? He was still debating the matter in his mind as he passed through the school gateway, and found himself walking in the direction of Courtfield. But he did not enter the town. He slackened pace as the red roofs of Courtfield appeared in sight, and thought the matter out, with wrinkled brows.

He looked up sharply at the sound of a footstep on the dusky road.

His eyes gleamed at the sight of Mr. Vernon-Tracy.

Mr. Vernon-Tracy, arrayed as usual in silk hat and eyeglass, and fur-collared coat, was coming slowly from the direction of Courtfield. He had a thick Malacca cane in his hand, which he did not usually carry, and a grim smile curled Wingate's lips as he saw it. He guessed at once that Mr. Vernon-Tracy had come along the road, at that hour, for the especial purpose of meeting him, and triumphing over him, and that he had brought the weapon with him in case he should need it. He was more than twice Wingate's age, and bigger in every way; but he did not care to rely upon his hands. He had guessed that Wingate would come, in spite of his treachery in betraying the lad to Dr. Locke—and he had certainly guessed correctly.

He halted as he saw Wingate on the dusky road. A lamp shed a light on the spot where they met. Mr. Vernon-Tracy had been strolling up and down there for some time, waiting for the captain of Greyfriars to appear.

"Ah, you are here again, my young friend!" said Mr. Tracy.

Wingate looked at him steadily. His hands were trembling with the desire to seize Paula's enemy and his own, and thrash him. But he would not begin the trouble. For Paula's sake he would avoid a "row" if he could.

"Will you get aside, please?" he said. Mr. Vernon-Tracy had halted directly in his path, his hand closing more tightly upon the Malacca cane.

"No," said the "Johnny" coolly, "I won't! I've got something to say, and then something to do. I had the pleasure last night of acquainting your headmaster with some facts very interesting to him."

"I know your cowardly treachery, if that is what you mean," said Wingate scornfully.

Mr. Vernon-Tracy laughed.

"I trust you were flogged," he remarked.

"No, I was not," said Wingate calmly. "Not even punished in any way. You are disappointed to that extent. But I do not wish to speak to you. You are a scoundrel, and you poison the air for me. You are not fit to speak to. Get aside."

"Not yet!" said Mr. Vernon-Tracy. "I told Paula that I would set your schoolmaster to stop your nonsense, and that, if you did not answer, I would personally chastise you."

Wingate laughed.

"You have tried that before," he said. "You did not have much luck, did you?"

"Well, I shall try again," said Mr. Vernon-Tracy, "unless you return immediately to Greyfriars, and never come near the Red Riding Hood company again."

"Oh, don't be an ass!" said Wingate impatiently. "Do you think I am afraid of you? Get out of my path, or I will throw you aside."

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Mr. Vernon-Tracy did not reply. He gripped the heavy cane hard, and sprang at the captain of Greyfriars.

His intention was very plain. The road was a lonely one, and the stick gave him a great advantage over the Greyfriars lad. He meant to thrash Wingate, and he did not care how much he hurt him. But he reckoned without his host; Wingate was not a safe opponent to tackle, even with the advantage against him.

The heavy cane descended, straight for Wingate's head, but he caught the blow and turned it aside on his left arm. The blow made his arm ache horribly, and he could not restrain a cry of pain; but without heeding the agony he suffered, he leapt right at the fat man, hitting out with his right. The hard knuckles caught Mr. Vernon-Tracy on his fat chin, and he went over backwards as if he had been shot.

That one cowardly blow with the cane was all that he succeeded in delivering. For as he fell, Wingate was upon him, and he wrenched away the cane from the rascal's nerveless hand. The cane sang in the air again, but this time in Wingate's grip—and Mr. Vernon-Tracy, white with fear, made an attempt to run. But Wingate's left hand fastened upon the back of his collar, and wrenched him back.

"Let me go!" shrieked Mr. Vernon-Tracy. "Help! Let me go!"

Wingate did not reply.

His grip tightened upon the rascal's collar, and now the cane rose and fell with quick, stinging lashes.

Every blow rang across Mr. Vernon-Tracy's back with a crack like a carter's whip, and the fat man writhed and howled with pain.

His silk hat went in one direction, and his eyeglass in another; his collar was torn out, his necktie streamed in the air, and his boots ploughed up the mud of the road, as he struggled and wriggled in the Greyfriars captain's powerful grip.

But there was no escape for him.

The cane rained down upon his back, and he yelled and shrieked with pain, and finally for mercy.

There was a chuckle from the dusk of the roads, two men came in sight, walking towards the town. They were the "Wolf" of the pantomime, and Mr. De Courcy, the manager, who were walking back to the theatre in time for the "first house." They came suddenly upon the scene, and the aspect of Mr. Vernon-Tracy was so comic—to their eyes, at least—that they burst into a laugh. The swaggering manner of Mr. Vernon-Tracy had not made him friends in the theatre company, whom he patronised insufferably; and even Mr. De Courcy did not like him, though it suited him to keep on terms of friendship with the "Johnny." The Wolf grinned gleefully, and Mr. De Courcy laughed aloud. Wingate did not look at them. But Vernon-Tracy yelled to them for help.

"Take this young fiend away!" he shrieked. "Can't you see he's killing me? Help! Help!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Mr. De Courcy. "Ha, ha, ha!"

"He, he, he!" chuckled the Wolf.

"Help! Oh! Help!"

"Come, let him alone, youngster," said Mr. De Courcy, bethinking himself that he was on terms of friendship with Mr. Vernon-Tracy, after all. "Let him—"

"Stand back!"

"But—"

"Stand back, I tell you!" said Wingate fiercely. "This man has insulted me, injured me, and struck me with this cane. He is a dirty blackguard, too! I am going to thrash him till he's had enough."

"But look here—"

"You'll get hurt if you interfere with me."

Mr. De Courcy stepped back. The Greyfriars captain, especially with the heavy Malacca in his hand, was far too dangerous to tackle, even if the theatre manager had had a powerful motive for tackling him. He hadn't. He did not intend to risk being laid up and unable to play the wicked baron that evening, for the sake of a man whom he secretly disliked and despised.

"Well, it's not my biznai," said Mr. De Courcy, "and you seem to have begun it, Vernon-Tracy."

"Ow! Help!"

Lash, lash, lash!

"Yacoh! Help! Mercy! Oh, leggo! Let me off now! Oh!"

Wingate pitched the cane over the hedge.

"Very well," he said. "If you ask for mercy, you shall have it. But you had better keep clear of me in the future, you cowardly cad."

And he flung Mr. Vernon-Tracy from him, and strode away.

The fat man lay writhing in the road for some moments. Mr. De Courcy tried to keep a grave face, but the Wolf was openly giggling. The fat man staggered to his feet at last.

His face was black with passion. He was as savagely angry with the men who had witnessed his humiliation without interfering as with the schoolboy who had thrashed him.

"You hound!" he roared, shaking his fist in Mr. De Courcy's face. "You rotten hound! So this is your friendship, is it?"

"My dear fellow——"

"You cowardly hound!" bellowed the infuriated man. "And you think I'm going to use my interest with London managers for your benefit? Why, I'd rather smash up your rotten pantomime show, and drive you to the workhouse, you—you public-house comedian!"

Mr. De Courcy flushed with rage. That he had nothing more to expect from Mr. Vernon-Tracy's friendship was pretty clear, and he had no reason, therefore, to put up with his insolence.

He clenched his hand, and hit out at the infuriated man, and for the second time that evening Mr. Vernon-Tracy measured his length in the muddy road.

"Bravo!" chuckled the Wolf.

And the two men walked on, leaving the unhappy "Johnny" in the road, gasping for breath, and in a very dilapidated condition. Mr. Vernon-Tracy staggered up at last, and shambled away, feeling, as he would have expressed it, thoroughly "rotten," and realising savagely that his last visit to the "Little Red Riding Hood" Company had been paid. For he certainly could not enter Mr. De Courcy's doors again; and as Paula had no wish to see him outside them, it was not likely that he would meet again the girl who had been compelled to tolerate his persecution. Mr. Vernon-Tracy returned to his hotel aching in every limb, and in a most unenviable frame of mind; and two hours later he took the train for London, and the company at the Theatre Royal had seen the last of him.

THE TWENTY-THIRD CHAPTER.

Paula's Farewell!

"WELL, Wingate?"

The Head spoke softly and kindly. It was Saturday morning, and Wingate had stopped to speak to the Head just before morning lessons. Wingate's face was flushed.

"I—I haven't said anything about—about your talk to me the other night, sir," he said.

"No!"

"I have seen Miss Bell since——"

"Ah!" said Dr. Locke gravely.

"And I have promised to see her only once more—to say good-bye when the 'Red Riding Hood' Company leaves Courtfield, sir."

"That is right of you, Wingate."

"They are leaving this morning, sir. Have I leave to go over for an hour? It will be the last time."

"Yes, Wingate, I give you my permission. And I hope that we shall soon see you your old self again," said the Head kindly.

Wingate quitted Greyfriars as the other fellows were going in to class. The Greyfriars captain's face was pale, but calm. He had made up his mind to the inevitable. Paula was going out of his life, and he had to bear it as best he could. And Wingate was not one to whine and complain over what could not be helped.

Paula had given him permission to see her once more, when the company left Courtfield.

When Wingate arrived at Courtfield station, the pantomime company were going in to take their train. It was a cold morning, and the players were in coats and mufflers and shawls, and a queer party they looked, most of them.

Wingate picked out Paula's graceful figure at once. The girl was lingering outside the station, and she was looking for Wingate. Her face brightened as she saw him.

She held out her hand.

"So you have come to say good-bye!" she exclaimed. "I thought that perhaps you could not come. I am glad to see you again."

"Paula!"

The girl looked at him steadily.

"Perhaps we shall meet again, some day," she said.

"Some day, when you are older, and have forgotten your boyish fancies, my dear friend. And if we meet we shall be good friends, George, always good friends. And—and I don't want you to forget me."

"Paula, I'm not likely to do that!"

The girl sighed.

"It has made me very much happier seeing you while I have been playing here," she said. "I wish—I wish—but what is the use of wishing? Good-bye, my dear friend, good-bye!"

Mr. De Courcy looked out of the station.

"How long there?" he called out.

Paula smiled a little.

"Good-bye!" she said again.

"Good-bye, dear Paula!"

Wingate watched the girl take her place in the crowded train.

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ONE
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train with the pantomime company. He watched the train leave the station; he watched it down the line with a heavy heart and a choking sensation in his throat. The train disappeared; the last fleck of its smoke was lost on the frosty landscape; the pantomime company were gone. Paula was gone!

Gone!

Wingate left the railway-station with slow and heavy steps. Paula was gone, and it seemed to the lad that everything else was gone, too—the sunlight and the brightness of life, all was gone with Paula, leaving blankness and desolation. But he set his lips as he walked down the road to Greyfriars. He had to bear it, and he would not give way to the miserable thoughts that thronged his mind.

The next few days were dark days to George Wingate of Greyfriars.

But the cloud gradually lifted.

As the effects of the shock he had had passed away, Wingate became more like his old self, and Courtney saw the change in his chum with much satisfaction. On the following Saturday Wingate's name was down as usual in the list for the First Eleven match.

"You are playing, Wingate?" Courtney exclaimed joyously, as he came into Wingate's study.

The Greyfriars captain nodded in a somewhat shamefaced way.

"Yes, Arthur. I—I—I'm afraid I've been rather a silly ass, and—and the fellows have a right to complain of me for neglecting the game as I've done," said Wingate. "But—well, they sha'n't have any cause to complain in the future."

"Good enough!" said Courtney heartily.

Harry Wharton, of the Remove, met Courtney in the passage when he left Wingate's study a little later. There was a smile on Wharton's face.

"Want me for inside-right this afternoon?" he asked.

Courtney laughed.

"No; Wingate's playing."

"Jolly good!" said Harry. "I'll come and yell!"

And he did, with the rest of the Remove. The Greyfriars crowd watched the game that afternoon with critical eyes; but Wingate's play gave them no cause for grumbling. The captain of Greyfriars had never been more brilliant. It was as if his long "slack" had invigorated him for fresh efforts, and he scored again and again, amid loud cheers from all Greyfriars. And the Remove especially were enthusiastic. As Bob Cherry said, Wingate was doing as well as Wharton of the Remove could have done, and so the Remove cheered him to the echo.

Wingate was himself again. Not that he had forgotten Paula, his little friend of the pantomime company. As long as he lives George Wingate is not likely to forget "Little Red Riding Hood." The memory of Paula remains with him a sweet and pleasant memory, a memory now wholly pleasant, and an influence for good upon his whole life.

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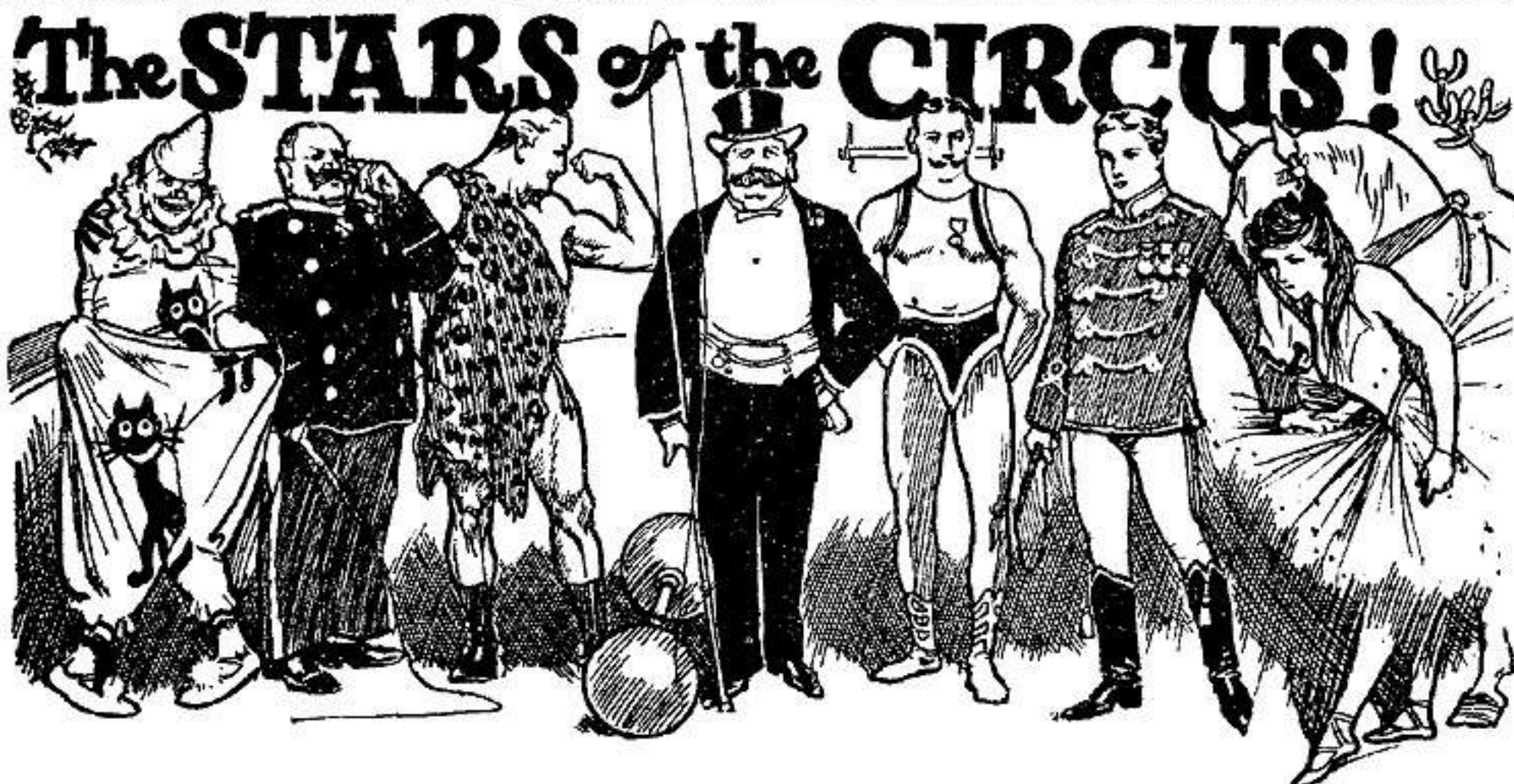
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THE FIRST CHAPTER. A New Chum!

"Is this Tomsonio's Circus?"

Joey Pye looked up.

The clown of Tomsonio's World-Famous Circus was sitting upon an inverted bucket, with a looking-glass before him propped on the wheel of a caravan.

Joey was trying the effect of some new red lines upon his chalked visage, and he had completed one side of his face to his satisfaction, and was admiring it in the glass when the stranger's voice interrupted him.

It was a fine day on Wayland Common, and the sun was shining cheerily, which was the reason why Joey Pye was doing his grease-painting in the open air instead of in the privacy of his caravan.

The clown looked round at the stranger, and rose from his seat upon the bucket.

The man who spoke to him was a powerfully-built fellow, with a somewhat serious but very good-tempered face, and a pleasant cast of countenance.

He was very shabbily dressed, and his boots were much worn, and everything about him indicated the man in hard luck, and spent with travelling.

"Where are you from?" demanded Joey Pye, with a frown that looked extremely comical upon his chalked and half-painted face.

The stranger looked at him.

"What on earth does that matter?" he said. "I asked you a question."

"And I asked you another," said Joey Pye cheerfully.

"Is this Tomsonio's Circus?"

"Where are you from?"

Then they looked at one another.

The stranger seemed inclined to be angry for a moment; then his face relaxed into a grin.

"I can see you are the mirth merchant of the show," he remarked. "I suppose you are an awfully funny beggar, and can't help it. I'm from the north, last."

"What I meant to imply by that question," said Joey Pye, with dignity, "was not what particular section of the earth's surface have you just crawled off, but what dim and distant benighted region have you been brought up in, that you don't know Tomsonio's Circus when you see it."

"Then this is Tomsonio's?"

"Look at me!"

"Well, I'm looking at you."

"I'm Joseph Montgomery Pye—the original Joey Pye."

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"Well!"

"Well!" repeated Joey, exasperated. "Have you lived at the North Pole, or on top of the Rocky Mountains? Have you burrowed in the Australian bush, or spent your life in an aeroplane? Do you mean to say that you don't know that Joseph Montgomery Pye is the champion mirth-merchant of the world, the delight and pet of the crowned heads of Europe, and that he belongs to Tomsonio's Circus—and that therefore—or ergo, in Latin—ergo, wherever you find Joey Pye you find Tomsonio's Circus?"

"Are you finished?" asked the stranger.

"Finished!"

"Yes. If you'd like to run on, I'll take a rest on this bucket. I'm tired; I've tramped a long way to-day."

Joey Pye's face relaxed.

"Why didn't you say that before?" he demanded. "I've hooped it myself, in my time, and I jolly well know what it's like. Sit down, and I'll get you something to drink. What'll you take?"

"Water."

"Anything in it?"

"Nothing, thanks!"

Joey Pye quickly brought a glass of water. He watched the stranger drink it, which he did with thirsty avidity.

"You're a wise man," he remarked. "I'm a strict teetotaler myself—except sometimes. I never take liquor unless my medical man orders it. He orders it three times a day—ahem!—most obliging medical man. Hungry?"

"Yes; but I didn't come here to beg a feed," said the stranger. "I'm looking for work."

"Work!" said Mr. Pye. "I've been trying for a good many years to find a way of living without work. Now here's a chap coming to look for it."

"I've been on the track of this circus the last two days. I was directed here. You are camping here?"

"Yes; two days on this pitch. Business isn't in top form in this part of the country."

"Sorry to hear it. Less chance of my being taken on."

Joey Pye shook his head.

"I'm sorry; the staff's full up, you know. I'll take you round to see Signor Tomsonio, if you like; but there are no hands wanted."

The other smiled.

"I'm not looking for a job in the stables."

"No? What's your little bit?"

"Trapeze."

"We've got a big trapeze artist—Jim Carson, the Handsome Man, as they call him. He's first-class in his line."

"I've heard of him. I think I could equal his show, anyway. Not that I want to do any man out of his job; I wouldn't do that. But if Signor Tomsonio had room for another—"

"If you had any special line to draw the public, it's poss.," said Joey Pye. "What's your name? Are you in the business?"

"Yes. I'm called Darrell—Herbert Darrell," said the other, with a moment's perceptible hesitation in his manner, which did not escape the notice of Joey Pye.

The clown of Tomsonio's Word-Famous Circus was a keen observer.

"You may be called Darrell," he murmured to himself, noting at once how the man had worded his reply. "But your name's not Darrell, any more than mine is George Washington. But it's no biznay of mine."

"I've had some experience in the line," went on Darrell, to give him the name he gave himself. "I'd be willing to show the signor what I can do."

"Joey! Joey!"

It was a fresh, clear voice, and a handsome lad of about fifteen came round the caravan.

It was Jack Talbot—Jungle Jack, the boy tiger-tamer and rough-rider. He started a little as he saw the stranger.

"Oh, I thought you were alone, Joey!"

"This chap is looking for a job," said Mr. Pye. "Take him to the signor, Jack, will you, while I get this blessed paint finished?"

"Certainly!"

Jack glanced at the stranger.

"Will you follow me?" he said.

"Thank you!"

Jack led the way into the huge marquee that accommodated the spectators when the show was given. It was silent and deserted now, save for the signor and a couple of hands who were carrying out some instructions connected with the high trapeze. It was upon that trapeze that Jim Carson, the Handsome Man, gave his acrobatic performance—one of the greatest "draws" of Tomsonio's World-Famous Circus.

"Signor!"

Signor Tomsonio—otherwise known as Dick Thompson—looked round.

He glanced at the stranger, and then inquiringly at Jack Talbot.

"Well, Jackie?"

"I'm looking for a berth, sir," said Darrell, speaking for himself. "I suppose you are Signor Tomsonio?"

"That's me."

"Are you looking for a trapeze artiste?"

"Got one."

"But you want another?"

"Your mistake. Good-morning!"

"Won't you let me show you what I can do?" urged Darrell.

"My dear fellow," said the signor. "I'm sorry, but I've got a first-class artist in the trapeze line, and he's quite enough for one circus. I don't suppose you could show up in the same street with the Handsome Man."

"I'm willing to try."

"And if you could, you would want a salary as big as his, and the circus couldn't stand it," said the signor. "So you see it's no go."

"I don't want a big salary. My grub and a pound a week would be enough; and I undertake to do as well as your Handsome Man."

The signor laughed.

"If you could do as well as Jim Carson, you would be worth fifteen pounds a week, any time."

"I will do as well—or get out."

The signor looked at him keenly.

"You don't look as if you were gassing," he said. "But if you can do all that, what are you looking for a job at a pound a week for?"

Darrell shrugged his shoulders.

"Because I'm down on my uppers, as I told this lad."

"There's always room at the top," said the signor sententiously.

"Perhaps so; but one wants luck to get there. But is it a go? If I'm as good as your Handsome Man, you can take me on at a pound a week?"

"Yes, and glad to; but—"

"It's a bargain, then."

"Hallo! Here's the Handsome Man!"

Jim Carson entered the tent.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

On the Trapeze.

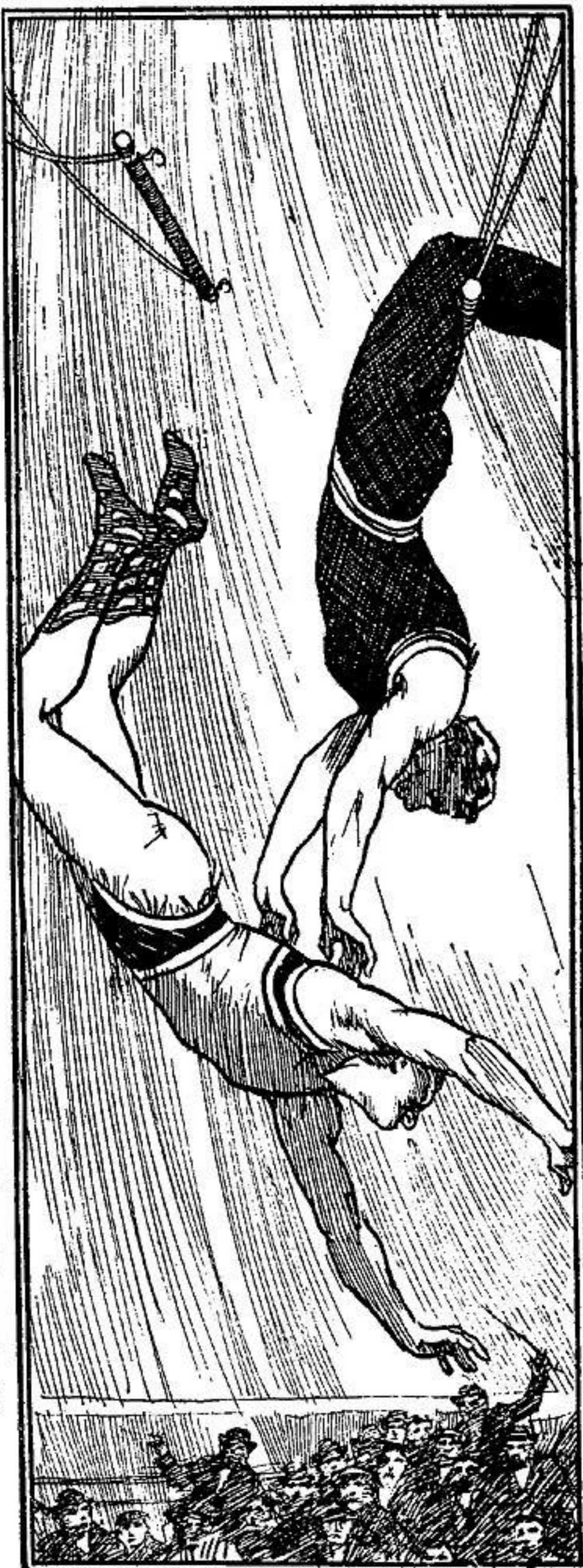
JIM CARSON certainly deserved his name of the Handsome Man. He was undeniably handsome, and he had a figure in which activity and litherness were combined with strength. But, handsome and graceful as Carson was, there was something that was not prepossessing in his looks.

A hard and cruel nature looked out of his dark eyes; and

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The Handsome Man launched himself through the air, and there was a gasp of horror from the audience as he was seen to miss the lower trapeze. But down swept Darrell's arm, and the next instant Carson swung safely in his powerful arms. (See Chapter 4.)

there were few who would have trusted the Handsome Man fully.

He glanced curiously at the stranger, and then turned to the signor.

"The trapeze finished?" he asked.

Signor Tomsonio nodded.

"Yes. Will you try it?"

"That's what I've come in for."

The Handsome Man was in fleshings and spangles, ready for the trapeze. He laid his hands on the rope that swung from the summit of the tent.

"By the way, here's a chap in your own line of business," said the signor.

The Handsome Man looked at Darrell again, and his eyes and whole look told of disdain as he noted the dusty garb and travel-stained boots.

"Down on his luck, I should imagine," he said, with a sneer.

"Well, a man may be down on his luck, and none the worse for that," remarked the signor. "I've been down on my luck myself. But he's in your line. Name of Darrell. What?"

"Never heard the name."

The stranger flushed slightly.

"It's not well known," he said civilly. "Certainly not as well known as your own, sir."

The Handsome Man nodded.

"I imagine not," he said. "I'm pretty well up in my business, and I've never heard of it. Are you taking on new hands, signor?"

There was a dangerous gleam in the Handsome Man's eyes as he spoke.

It was pretty clear that a rival in his own line, in the same circus, would not find a friend in the Handsome Man.

The signor laughed.

"Darrell undertakes to equal your show," he remarked. "I've promised to take him on if he does it."

Carson laughed sneeringly.

"I'm not afraid of that," he remarked.

"Oh, no! I don't suppose he can do it."

"I shall try," said Darrell quietly.

"You are welcome," said the Handsome Man. "I'm going through a new trick now. If you can equal it you're welcome to my place in the circus!"

"I don't want that. I want only a second place. I'm hard up, but I wouldn't take a job away from another man."

The Handsome Man shrugged his shoulders.

He swarmed up the rope, going up actively hand-over-hand till he almost disappeared in the great space overhead.

Jack Talbot was looking at the stranger. It struck him that the man's quiet tone of confidence meant more than the boastfulness of the Handsome Man. A soft hand was laid on the lad's arm, and he looked round to see Clotilde, the Queen of the Ring. The girl met his eyes inquiringly.

"A new comrade?" she asked, inclining her head slightly towards Darrell.

"I hope so," said Jack. "I like him, though I've only known him a few minutes. He has undertaken to equal the Handsome Man in his own line, and if he does the signor is going to give him a berth."

"He will be worth it, then?"

"Yes, rather!"

"Ah! Look—look!"

Clotilde's eyes were on the handsome acrobat, swaying in the dome of the tent.

There was little love lost between Jack Talbot and the Handsome Man, and Clotilde liked Carson even less than Jack did. But both of them looked on with great interest and admiration at the display above.

Carson was certainly a master of his profession, and he had a nerve of iron.

He was swinging to and fro on the highest trapeze now.

There was no net below, and a fall meant sudden and terrible death in the tan. But Carson's nerve was as calm as it had been while he was standing on the ground and talking to the signor.

He slipped backwards over the bar, and hung on by his knees, while the trapeze was swinging to and fro at a great rate through the air.

Then he slipped further back, and hung on with his feet hooked over the bar, still swinging rapidly through the air.

Suddenly he left the bar, and the onlookers below gave a gasp in unison.

The acrobat whirled through the air, turning a double somersault as he did so.

Then his grasp closed on the bar of the lower trapeze, and he was swinging to and fro by his hands, with perfect ease.

From the lower trapeze he dropped lightly into the tan.

The signor clapped his hands.

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"Splendid, Carson! Splendid! That will fetch 'em! What?"

The Handsome Man smiled.

"Let us see our friend do it," he said.

"He can't!"

"I'll try," said Darrell.

"You won't!" said the signor warmly. "It would be suicide. Of course you can't do it. What? Don't be an ass, man!"

"I am going to try!"

Darrell kicked off his dusty boots and removed his coat, and stepped to the rope, and swung himself up into the dome.

The signor nodded as he watched him go. He knew the unmistakable manner of the professional, and he began to believe in the stranger a little more.

"He knows the business, Jim!" said the signor.

The Handsome Man shrugged his shoulders.

"Let us see!" he said.

Darrell reached the trapeze.

He swung himself upon it, and every eye below watched him with the keenest interest. Joey Pye had come into the tent, and he nudged Jack Talbot.

"He knows the bizney, Jackie."

"I think so."

"The Handsome Man's nose will be out of joint. You mark my words, by gum!"

Jack nodded in silence, and his eyes never left the stranger on the trapeze. The Handsome Man was watching him, too, and his brow was growing darker and darker.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The New Acrobat.

DARRELL was certainly making good his words, as even the jealous-tempered Handsome Man had to admit to himself. In spite of the disadvantage of being clad in ordinary attire, Darrell showed himself a master of the trapeze.

He sat upon the bar and set the trapeze swinging, and then rolled backwards as the Handsome Man had done.

The signor drew a quick scared breath.

He fully expected to see the stranger come crashing down into the sawdust.

But it did not happen.

Darrell caught on to the bar by his feet and swung there in perfect security, and then he released one leg, and doubled it up, and swung on, holding by one foot only.

Clotilde turned pale.

Jack pressed her hand.

"There's no danger," he whispered. "The chap knows what he is about."

Darrell was shifting his foot further off the bar now.

He seemed to be hanging on only by the toes of one foot, and yet he clung to the bar like a limpet rock, all the time swinging to and fro.

Suddenly, as the Handsome Man had done, he left the high trapeze, and whirled through the air in a double somersault.

He caught the lower trapeze, not as Carson had done with his hands, but with his feet, and swung there hooked on head downwards.

Signor Tomsonio gave an involuntary shout.

"Bravo!"

And Clotilde clapped her little hands.

But the new acrobat was not finished yet.

He suddenly reversed his position, and clung to the bar with his hands, and set the lower trapeze swinging to its fullest extent.

Suddenly he quitted it, and whirled up, and caught the upper trapeze again, and swung on it with his hands.

He hooked one leg over the bar, and sat there, and looked down calmly at the spectators far below in the tan.

"Is that enough?" he called out. "Are you satisfied?"

"By George!" gasped the signor. "I should say so!"

"What-ho, by gum!" said Joey Pye. "Signor, old man, the fellow's a marvel! Snap him up! Snap him up, and get him to sign a contract!"

"I'm going to take him on."

"By gum, rather!"

"You can come down," said the signor. "That's all right! If you can do that in ordinary clothes at a moment's notice, I don't know what you can do when you're in form!"

Darrell smiled, and swung himself down to the tan.

The Handsome Man was standing silent and pale, with knitted brows. It was seldom that Carson met a man who was his equal in his own line of business. Carson was considered at the top of his profession, and he had often reminded the signor of the fact that, if Tomsonio's Circus did not treat

him, well, there were others. And he had shown letters, too, from managers anxious to secure him.

But the Handsome Man, like Lucifer, Son of the Morning, had fallen from his high estate now. If he told the signor that he would go unless something or other were done to please him, he could guess what the signor's answer would be now.

There was another man there ready to take his place.

Jealousy and anger swelled up in the heart of the Handsome Man as he stood silent. It was not only that the stranger equalled him—that would have been bitter enough—but the man surpassed him. Carson knew that he could not equal this man who had suddenly come from nowhere and usurped his place.

That was the bitterest blow of all to the pride of the circus acrobat.

The signor shook hands heartily with Darrell.

"Let me see. You said grub and a pound a week?" he remarked.

"Yes, sir."

"Now, look here," said the signor. "I'm an honest man—as honest as ever the hard times will allow a circus manager to be. You're worth more than that."

Darrell smiled.

"I know it."

"As a matter of absolute fact, you're worth ten times as much," said the signor.

"I shouldn't wonder."

"You could get it in London."

"I don't want to be in London."

"Oh, I see! You prefer a travelling circus?"

"Much."

"Well, I'll take you on. You see, you're worth ten pounds a week at least as a solo turn; but I have a star acrobat already under a contract. I can only afford to pay you as a second man, you understand?"

"Quite; and it's perfectly satisfactory."

"Then you can come into my office and we'll settle it."

"Good! If you think I'm worth more to you, and you like to give me a rise later, you can, you know; but so far, I stick to the bargain."

"Good enough!"

And Darrell followed the signor from the tent.

The Handsome Man walked away with a gloomy brow. Joey Pye winked at Jack Talbot.

"It's a big blow to the Handsome Man," he said. "It takes down his blessed conceit in a way it has never been taken down before."

"It's rough on him."

"Well, yes, it is; and a chap might feel sorry for him if he wasn't so conceited," assented Joey Pye. "He's got his knife into Darrell already. Did you see his look?"

Talbot nodded.

"Yes. I'm afraid there will be bad blood."

"I imagine so. But Darrell looks as if he can give as good as he gets—that's one thing; and I fancy he can take care of himself."

Meanwhile the signor was preparing a little document for Darrell's signature. The man from Australia signed it freely and unhesitatingly enough.

Signor Tomsonio looked at the signature, and then he looked at the sunburnt face of the new acrobat.

"Name of Darrell?" he remarked thoughtfully.

"As you see."

"Real name?"

Darrell shrugged his shoulders.

"Why not?"

"I've been in the showman business twenty years or so," said Signor Tomsonio slowly. "I think I know, or have heard of all the first-class men. There is no Darrell among them, that's all."

"Perhaps you are the first to recognise my merits as a first-class man," suggested Darrell, with a faint smile.

The signor shook his head.

"Oh, no! I can see that you are at the top of the tree, and have been for a long time," he said. "I like your looks, my man, or I shouldn't take you on trust like this."

"You know what I can do."

"True; but I don't know what you may have done."

Darrell flushed under his tan.

"I am an honest man."

"You look it, and I believe you. But where do you come from?"

"Nowhere in particular."

"You've been in the tropics?"

"Yes; Australia and the East Indies."

"Born there?"

"No!"

Darrell shut his lips. The signor looked at him hard. Darrell had stated that he came from nowhere in particular, and it was pretty clear that he would make no more definite statement than that.

"All right," said the signor. "I'm doing an unbusiness."

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like thing in one way, and a jolly good businesslike thing in another. You're taken on, anyway."

"Thanks!"

And the Man from Nowhere stepped out of the little office. He left the signor looking puzzled.

The Handsome Man was in the yard. Darrell hesitated a moment, and then crossed over to him.

"I want to speak to you," he said abruptly.

Carson looked at him grimly.

"The want is all on your side," he said, "but you can go on, I suppose."

"I haven't come here to interfere with you in any way," said Darrell earnestly. "I was down to bed-rock, and had to get something. I take second place in this show, and I sha'n't do anything to interfere with your rights as first man. I want to make that clear."

"Good!" said Carson.

"I mean what I say."

The Handsome Man looked at him with steely eyes.

"It will be better for you to mean it," he said. "If you interfere with me you will suffer for it, that's all."

"I don't want to interfere with you, as I've said."

"What did you come here for?" snarled the Handsome Man.

"I was down to bed-rock. And why shouldn't I come if I choose, anyway?"

"If you're in want of money, as far as that goes, I'd give you a five-pound note to take yourself out of the circus," said Carson.

Darrell shook his head.

"It's not enough—eh?"

"I don't mean that," said Darrell. "I don't want your money. That's what I mean. I'm on my uppers; but I don't want any money I don't work for. Besides, I've got a job here now, and I want to keep it."

"A job at a pound a week!" said the Handsome Man.

"It's better than nothing."

"You could do better in London. Why don't you?"

"That's my business."

Carson shrugged his shoulders.

"You may have reasons for keeping away from London?" he suggested.

Darrell coloured.

"Is that your business?" he asked.

"I may make it my business if you trouble me at all," said the Handsome Man, with a disagreeable smile. "I warn you to look out for squalls if you cross my path in any way. I am a dangerous enemy to make."

"I am not afraid of you. But I have said that I don't want to interfere with you, and I stick to it. I'm not the man to take another man's job away."

"So you think you could take my job away if you liked?" exclaimed Carson fiercely.

"You are putting the words into my mouth now. I never said anything of the sort."

"But you meant it."

Darrell drew back.

"I see it's no use talking to you," he said. "I want to live on good terms with everybody here—you and the rest. I hope you'll look on me as a friend, and not as an enemy. But as an enemy I shall not be afraid of you."

And he walked away.

Carson looked after him, with a savage fire glowing in his eyes. He was already the enemy of the Man from Nowhere—and a bitter enemy!

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Saved from Death!

SIGNOR TOMSONIO rubbed his hands as he stood in the ring that evening.

In the glare and flare of the naphtha lamps a sea of faces showed up round the great arena, and the band was sending forth more or less sweet strains as the circus-horses careered round the ring.

The signor had not had time to "bill" his new acquisition yet, but he had no doubt that Darrell would prove an attraction; and as the signor never lost time in business matters the new man was put into the evening's programme, to start at once.

"Full up to-night, Joey!" said the signor, as the little clown came somersaulting towards him over the tan and right-ended suddenly just in front of him, to the accompaniment of a cackle of laughter from the audience.

"Yes, rather!" said Joey Pye. "They know I'm here."

"Poof!"

"You'll never fail to fill a tent while you bill the name of the original Joey Pye," remarked the nirth-merchant of



Tomsonio's Circus modestly. "Hallo! I see some of the schoolboys here again!"

He grinned and made a profound bow towards a row of front seats taken up by a crowd of lads in school caps.

They were juniors from St. Jim's, a public school near Wayland, and they had paid frequent visits to the circus while it was in the neighbourhood. Only a short time before Signor Tomsonio had visited Rylcombe and Wayland, and he had done such good business that he had taken in the district again on his route—and the "houses" he drew showed that he had judged rightly as a business man.

Joey Pye recognised many old acquaintances among the boys in the row—Tom Merry and Jack Blake and Figgins and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and Monty Lowther and more of them. He removed his paper cap as he bowed; and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's, who was never to be outdone in politeness, rose to his feet and raised his glossy silk-hat in response.

"Sit down, Gussy!" said Blake.

"Wats, deah boy!" said D'Arcy cheerfully. "I suppose a chap is called upon to do the polite thing, isn't he?"

"Yes; but not to over-do it."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy turned his eyeglass upon his chum Blake with a withering look—which, however, did not seem to wither Blake visibly.

"Weally, Blake——"

"Oh, ring off!"

"I wefuse to wing off——"

"Hallo! There they go!"

The circus-horses were galloping round the ring, and now Jungle Jack and Clotilde, the Queen of the Ring, entered and joined in the gallop.

Clotilde, in her garb of white, sat her horse as if she were a part of the animal, and D'Arcy forgot his annoyance in watching her. D'Arcy of the Fourth was a great rider, and he had a keen eye for horsemanship.

"Bai Jove!" he ejaculated. "That's wippin'!"

"Yes, rather!"

"Bwavo!"

"Jolly good!"

And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy clapped his hands, with a reckless disregard of the beautifully-fitting lavender kid gloves he wore.

Jungle Jack and Clotilde were applauded to the echo, as they always were.

And when the cowboy act came, and Clotilde was carried off by circus hands disguised as Red Indians, and Cowboy Dick rescued her, with a thrilling spatter of blank cartridges from his revolver, the effect was electric.

The juniors of St. Jim's stood up in their seats and yelled, and most of the audience clapped as if by machinery.

After that came the trapeze act.

Jim Carson came lightly into the ring, and there was no doubt that he made a handsome and athletic figure in his tights and spangles.

He cast a glance round at the audience, most of whom greeted him with a cheer: but the St. Jim's juniors were silent. He was a clever acrobat; but Tom Merry & Co. knew, and did not like, the Handsome Man.

He swung himself up to the high trapeze, and then commenced the performance that usually thrilled and interested the audience.

But the Handsome Man was not quite himself to-night.

He swung clumsily on the high trapeze, and he almost missed the lower one when he shot through the air, and a thrill ran through the audience.

But as he swung by one leg they took it for granted that it was all intentional, and the thrill an "extra" thrown in by the performer, and they cheered and clapped.

"Bai Jove, that was wemarkably good!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy remarked.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"Looked to me as if he nearly muffed it," he remarked.

"Look at the signor," muttered Blake.

They looked at the fat face of the circus-master. Signor Tomsonio was looking upward at the acrobat, with a curious expression on his face. He watched the flights of the Handsome Man for a few minutes, and then turned to Joey Pye.

"What's the matter with him, Joey?"

The clown was looking serious under his paint.

"Blessed if I know, signor! He was drinking with the Doc this afternoon; but I've never known Jim Carson to take more than was good for him—he's too keen a hand."

The signor nodded.

"I know that, Joey, but——"

"He's not himself now, guv'nor."

"Anybody could see that."

"Call him down, then. He oughtn't to risk his neck. Jungle Jack will put in a bit extra with the tigers to fill up."

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Signor Tomsonio hesitated. He knew how the Handsome Man was likely to take any interference with his turn.

"Better let him alone," he remarked. "After all, he ought to know best whether he's fit or not. He was very much annoyed over Darrell being put on the evening bill, and he may have drunk a little too much, you know."

"Then——"

"But it's his own business."

"It may mean his neck to him, signor."

"If he can't look after his neck, Joey, I can't look after it for him," said the signor. "He's his own master."

And the clown nodded a dubious assent.

Darrell, in fleshings and spangles, and making a very athletic figure in them, came into the ring. The signor glanced round at him.

"Go up," he said. "It's time for your double turn with the Handsome Man."

Darrell nodded and swarmed up the rope. The audience watched him with interest—especially the juniors of St. Jim's.

"That's a new chap since we saw the circus last," Figgins remarked.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"He looks as if he knows his bizney."

"Bai Jove, yaas!"

Darrell reached the lower trapeze, and swung to and fro. The signor had arranged a turn in which the two acrobats joined on the trapeze and went through a performance together. He declared that they should rehearse it every day and make a really good thing of it. Carson had assented sullenly; but it was probably his chagrin in the matter that had led him to his rare indulgence—for there could be little doubt that strong liquor was the cause of his being so strangely unfit that evening.

Darrell swung on the lower trapeze, ready to receive the acrobat. Carson swung to and fro on the upper one, and suddenly launched himself through the air.

He was to catch the lower bar with his hands; but he had miscalculated.

The audience gave a gasp of horror as he was seen to shoot past under it.

But down swept Darrell's arm, and his grasp was upon the scarlet tunic of the acrobat, and Carson swung in his grip.

A moment more and he had dragged the helpless man up; and Carson, white, and trembling in every limb, was astride of the bar.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Bitter Blood.

IT had all passed in a flash, and it was some moments before it dawned upon the audience, and upon Carson himself, that a life had been risked and saved.

Then loud cheer on cheer broke forth.

Carson's miscalculation was plain to all eyes—he had been shooting away under the trapeze when Darrell grasped him. The acrobats were not using a net. But for the new acrobat's ready grasp, Carson would have shot down into the tan—to be crushed to instant death by the impact upon the earth.

He sat, weak and white and giddy, on the bar, supported by Darrell's strong arm.

"It's all right now," said Darrell.

"I—I——"

"You're all right!"

"I missed the bar!" muttered Carson.

Darrell nodded.

"And—and you saved me!"

"I am glad I was quick enough."

"I must go down!" muttered Carson hoarsely. "I must go down!"

"Let me help you."

Carson thrust him rudely away.

"Hang you! I don't want your help!"

Darrell compressed his lips. Carson slid down the rope, and dropped, white and shaking, into the tan. The signor gave a gasp.

"Thank goodness, Carson! I thought you were a goner!"

Carson did not reply. He turned away and strode sullenly from the ring. He was not in a condition to go on with his performance. His narrow escape had utterly shaken his nerves.

The signor stared after him.

"I suppose he's upset," he muttered.

"By gum," said Joey Pye, "I should say so! A man doesn't go through a thing like that without getting a shako up. I should say! It turned me cold for a minute."

"Me, too," said Samson, the Strong Man.

"The turn will have to be cut," said the signor, with a worried look. In the midst of a tragedy Signor Tomsonio would have thought of the business aspect of the case. He



The window opened, a night-capped head came into view in the gloom, and the voice of Taggles was heard in familiar husky tones: "Impudent young rascals! Go 'ome!"

was a kindhearted man, but business was a magic word with him, and covered a multitude of sins.

"Rubbish!" said Joey Pye.

"What?"

"Darrell can give as good a turn as the Handsome Man."

"By Jove! Yes!"

The signor made a sign to Darrell, who was looking down at him from the trapeze, and the new acrobat understood.

He immediately began to go through a performance that riveted the attention of every member of the great audience.

From one trapeze to the other he swung, and back again, turning somersaults in the air, swinging by his toes, till the audience were quaking and thrilling. And yet never for a moment was he near falling, so great was his lithe activity, so splendid was his nerve.

"Bwavo!" shouted Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, clapping his hands. "Bwavo! Huwway!"

Crack!

"Bai Jove!"

One of D'Arcy's immaculate gloves had gone. He surveyed the rent with dismay.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Jack Blake.

"Weally, Blake—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It is no laughing mattah. I uttably fail to see any cause for merriment in this howwid disastah."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors were cheering loudly. When the turn was over and Darrell retired, he had to answer his call three times before the audience would let him go.

His face was a little flushed as he finally left the tent, with a slap on the back from the signor to prove to him that he had fully satisfied the circus-master.

The Handsome Man was leaning against a post outside, his teeth clenched upon an unlighted cigar. He looked up, his eyes burning, as Darrell came out.

"So you are finished?" he said, in a low, unpleasant voice.

"Yes," said Darrell, pausing.

"You have taken my place."

"Not intentionally."

"I heard them yelling," said the Handsome Man, with a bitter smile. "Yesterday for me, to-day for you, to-morrow for someone else."

"Then why value the yelling?"

"And you saved my life," said the Handsome Man, unheeding. "I should have gone down to death if you had not held me."

"It looked like it."

"I hate you for it!"

Darrell shrugged his shoulders.

"I do not fear your hatred," he said. "I am no man's enemy, but I fear no man. I think we have said enough."

And he passed on.

The Handsome Man strode away from the light into the gloom behind the circus-tent—a gloom more in accordance with his feelings.

Then he turned and looked at the circus, with a savage brow.

The last turn was on, and the strains of the wheezy band

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ONE
PENNY.

were dying away, and ere long the great crowd would be pouring out of the big marquee.

The Handsome Man clenched his fist and shook it in the air, in the direction of the circus.

"I hate him!" he exclaimed aloud. "I hate him! I hated him the moment I saw his face in the circus! I will make his life here a burden to him! He has a secret! I will discover it, and it will be a power to use over him! I—"

"Bai Jove! What a spiteful wascal!"

Carson broke off suddenly.

Four youthful figures loomed up in the gloom, coming towards the ring entrance of the circus. They were the juniors of St. Jim's. Tom Merry & Co. had left their seats before the close of the performance, in order to greet their old friends of the circus before returning to St. Jim's. And thus they had come upon the Handsome Man.

Jim Carson gritted his teeth with rage. His wild tirade had been overheard by the St. Jim's juniors, every word of it.

He looked at them with glittering eyes.

"What do you want here?" he cried roughly.

"Bai Jove! We've come to visit our old friends," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, turning his eyeglass upon the Handsome Man, and peering at him in the gloom. "I need hardly remark, pewwaps, that we do not count you among them."

"You are not wanted here."

"That is for others to say, not for you," said Tom Merry quietly. "Come on, you chaps!"

The Handsome Man gave them a dark look.

But he did not speak again, and the St. Jim's juniors passed on, leaving him standing alone in the gloom, his hands clenched hard.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

Chums of the Circus.

"HERE we are again!"

The original Joey Pye uttered that familiar remark as he caught sight of the juniors of St. Jim's in the circle of light outside the tent.

Arthur Augustus raised his silk hat.

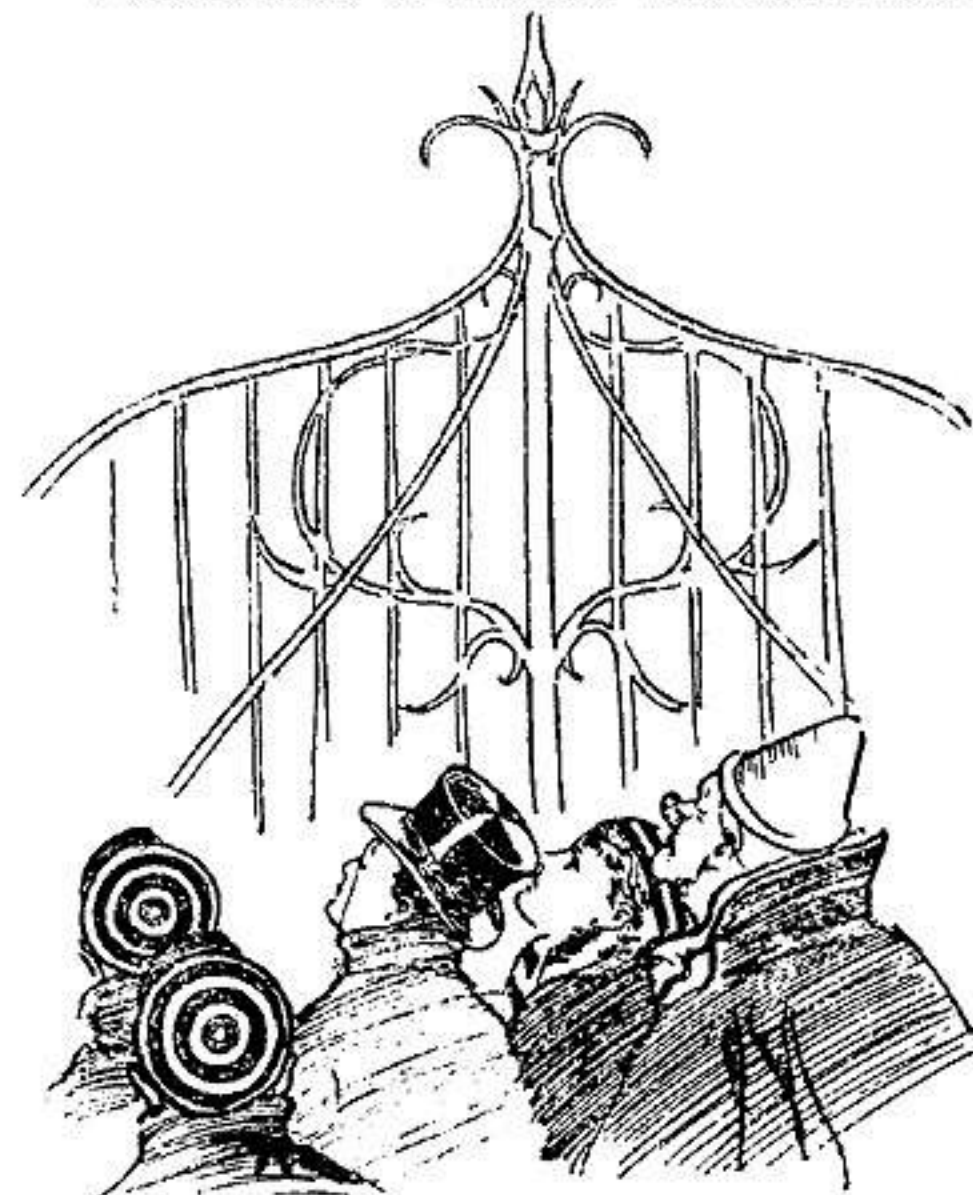
"Glad to see you, dear boy!" he remarked.

"Same to you, and many of 'em!" said Mr. Pye affably.

"Signor, here's our old friend Gussy! I suppose you kids are going to have supper?"

Tom Merry laughed.

"No offer refused," he remarked, "only we shall have to



"We've come home!" called out Tom Merry.
"Come and open the gate, Taggy, old man."
(See Chapter 6.)

buck up, to get back to the school. We have to turn up and pass the prefects, you know."

Joey Pye nodded.

"Right you are! This way!"

The juniors followed the clown into the supper-tent.

The circus company were mostly gathered there, and Tomsonio and Clotilde gave the juniors a warm welcome.

"We thought we'd give you a look in once more," said Tom Merry. "Gussy, of course, regards himself as an honorary member of the circus."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Glad to see you, lads!" said the signor, in his hearty way. "We're going on from here, but we shall return this way later in the season, and I hope we shall see you again then."

"You will," said Blake emphatically. "We shall not miss a chance of seeing the show, I can promise you."

"Wathah not!"

And the juniors joined cheerfully in the substantial supper that was pressed upon them by the hospitable signor.

Tom Merry rose at last. He had been chatting very pleasantly with Jack Talbot and Clotilde, reviving old recollections, and talking over old happenings.

Joey Pye and Samson, the Strong Man, rose also.

"We're going to see you back to the school," Joey Pye remarked. "A trot after supper will do us good."

"Wighto, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus. "Pway twot along!"

"Good-bye!" said Clotilde.

"Good-bye!"

And the juniors and their friends left the supper-tent. It was a good walk to St. Jim's, and the boys stepped out briskly. They had passes to allow them out late enough to see the performance to an end, but they were expected in by a certain hour. But Tom Merry was feeling rather afraid.

"You think you'll be late in?" asked Samson, as they now, that they had overdone it in staying for supper, came out of the wood into Rylcombe Lane.

"I rather think so. Never mind."

"Sorry—"

"Not at all!" said Arthur Augustus. "It's worth a bit of a wot to partake of the kind hospitality of our friends at the circus. It will only be lines."

They reached the gates of St. Jim's. The gates were closed, and there was no light to be seen in Taggles's lodge as they looked through the bars. Tom Merry pulled the bell, and a peal rang out through the silence of the night.

But Taggles's door did not open. The porter of St. Jim's had doubtless gone to bed.

Tom Merry rang again.

Ting-a-ling-a-ling!

A window was opened, and a nightcapped head came into dim view in the gloom. A voice was heard, in familiar husky tones:

"Gerroff! Gerroff!"

"Taggles! I say, Taggles! Taggy!"

"Impudent young rascals! Go home!"

"We've come home!" called out Tom Merry. "Come and open the gate, Taggy, old man!"

"Who are you?"

"Tom Merry—and the rest."

"Stuff!" said Taggles. "I was hordered to let in Tom Merry up to half-past ten, and it's nearer eleven now!"

"But—"

"You're an himpostor!"

"I tell you—"

"Go 'ome!"

Taggles's voice seemed to indicate that he had been drinking. There was a curious thickness in it. Taggles was much addicted to gin-and-water as a relaxation after his day's work was done, and the fact that his nightcap was worn over one ear, and that he had his waistcoat on as well, seemed to hint that the gin-and-water had been unusually potent.

"Taggles—"

"Go 'ome!"

"I say, Taggy, old chap—"

The window slammed down.

Tom Merry & Co. looked at one another in dismay. Joey Pye and Samson looked considerably concerned.

"He won't let you in!" said Samson.

"Looks like it," remarked Mr. Pye.

"We shall have to shin over the wall," said Blake. "Well, we've done it before, and I suppose we can do it again. But how we're to get into the School House—"

"Taggles has the House-key to let us in, you see," explained Tom Merry. "We belong to one House, Figgins to another. Taggles will have to come out with the keys!"

"We shall have to rouse him out," said Monty Lowther.

Joey Pye grinned.

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"Good! Let's climb in first and interview him on his native heath."

"Yaas, wathah!"

The juniors showed their companions the favourable spot for climbing the wall. Tom Merry & Co. had climbed it there many a time before. In a few minutes the whole party were within the grounds of St. Jim's, and stepping towards the porter's lodge.

Joey Pye reached up with the stick he carried, and gave a tap on Taggles's window. There was a snort from within.

Tap—tap—tap!

Another snort, and then the window was opened. Taggles's nightcap came into view again.

"Go 'ome!"

"Taggles, old man—"

"Go 'ome!"

"We want you to let us into the House—"

"You're an himpostor! Go 'ome!"

"Come out and—"

"I'm not coming hout!"

"Did any of you chaps drop that sovereign there?" asked Joey Pye, pretending to stare very hard at a spot on the ground under the window.

"No," said Tom Merry.

"You, D'Arcy?"

"No."

"You, Lowther?"

"Oh, no!"

"It can't have been Mr. Taggles, as he hasn't any sovereigns, of course—"

"Wot's that?" said Mr. Taggles, from the window.

"I'll keep it," said Joey Pye, stooping, and making a motion of picking up a coin. "Findings keepings, as it has no owner."

"'Old hon!" exclaimed Taggles, leaning out of the window. "That's my suvrin'."

"Eh!"

"I tell you that's my suvrin'!"

"Rats!"

"I tell you it's mine. I distinctly remember dropping it there," said Taggles. "You just 'and over that suvrin, or I'll come out to yer."

"Bosh!"

"I tell yer—"

"Oh, go and eat coke!"

That was enough for Taggles. They heard him stamping down the stairs a couple of minutes later, and then the lodge door opened. Taggles came out, attired in a pair of trousers and a greatcoat, with his nightcap still on.

"Now, then!" he exclaimed threateningly. "Where's that suvrin'?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Send it hover, or—"

"It's all right," said Mr. Pye cheerily. "There wasn't any sovereign; it was only a little joke to make you come out, you know."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

Joey Pye Manages It.

TAGGLES stared blankly at Mr. Pye for a moment, and then he frowned darkly. Gin-and-water had confused his faculties a little, but he was not to be done. He believed that there was a sovereign in the case; at all events, it suited him to believe it.

"'And over that suvrin," he repeated.

"There isn't one."

"That won't do for me. I see you pick it up. 'And it over!"

"My dear idiot—"

"'And it over! Findings keepins is stealing in the heye of the law," said Taggles. "You'll just 'and that suvrin hover!"

"But—"

"'And it over!" roared Taggles.

"Oh, very well," said Mr. Pye, fumbling in his pocket, and producing a "spoof" sovereign that was sometimes used in circus tricks, a "property" coin of the value of perhaps a farthing. "Here you are. You're a hard man, Mr. Taggles."

Taggles took the brass coin, and slipped it into his waistcoat pocket.

"Good!" he said. "You can't do me. Now get hout!"

"Excuse me," said Mr. Pye blandly. "Excuse me! I think you have something belonging to me in the neck of your coat."

"Eh!"

"Yes, look here."

Mr. Pye put his hand to the back of the astonished

Taggles's collar, and drew out a white ribbon. He drew it out and out, till yards and yards of it lay on the ground all around the astounded school-porter, and it was still coming out.

"W-w-w-w-wot!" gasped Taggles. "My heye! I—I—" "Dear me!" said Mr. Pye. "Fancy a man carrying about all this ribbon! There seems to be no end to it."

"My heye!" Taggles seemed to be dazed. The ribbon was unwinding endlessly. The juniors looked on with grinning faces. They knew that Joey Pye was the champion conjurer of Tomsonio's Circus, and that the ribbon proceeded from his sleeve in the first place. Joey Pye never travelled without his tools.

"My word," said Mr. Pye. "Here's something else, too." He took an apple out of Taggles's ear, or appeared to do so, and extracted an orange from under his chin.

"My 'at!" murmured Taggles. "More of them," said Mr. Pye, drawing apparently an inexhaustible supply of oranges from the breast of Mr. Taggles's greatcoat. "Astonishing!"

It was the same orange all the time, as a matter of fact, but to Taggles's bewildered eyes it seemed as if his coat must be simply stuffed with them. With a howl of amazement he unbuttoned the coat, and threw it open, expecting the rest of the oranges to pour out upon the ground. But none was there. Mr. Pye had apparently removed the last of them.

"My 'at!" said Taggles faintly. "Is this real, or is it a 'orrid dream?"

"By George," said Joey Pye. "He's a regular orange merchant. Look here!"

He stooped down, and produced orange after orange from the leg of Taggles's trousers.

The porter gazed on like a man in a dream.

"My 'at!" he murmured. "My honly 'at!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry.

"What a blessed lot of oranges!" exclaimed Mr. Pye. "What were you doing with them, Mr. Taggles, if I may make so bold to ask."

"My honly 'at!"

Mr. Pye extracted oranges from Taggles's trouser-leg, and then from his waistcoat pocket, the school-porter standing dazed the while. It was quite easy for the clown also to possess himself of the "spoof" sovereign during the process, without the porter having the faintest idea of it.

"It's—it's a 'orrid dream!" gasped Taggles. "It must 'ave bin the gin-and-water."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It must have been the gin-and-water," said Mr. Pye, with a shake of the head. "Sad—sad to see at your age, too, Mr. Taggles. I never touch intoxicating liquor myself, except when my medical man orders it. He orders it—ahem!—three times a day. Oh, Mr. Taggles! Beware of 'gin-and-water!"

"My honly 'at!"

"Are you going to open the House door?" asked Tom Merry.

"The—the 'ouse door!" said the porter dazedly.

"Yaas, wathah, we're waitin', Taggy, deah boy."

The dazed and astounded Taggles almost staggered as he moved away towards the School House. There was no resistance left in him.

He unlocked the School House door, and Tom Merry & Co., laughing, bade the clown and the Strong Man good-night, and then went in.

"Now for the New House," said Figgins, chuckling.

Taggles, like a man in a dream, led the way across the quadrangle, and admitted the New House juniors to their house.

"Good-night," said Mr. Pye. "Hope to see you again when we're this way once more. Mr. Taggles will see us out, won't you, Mr. Taggles?"

The porter grunted dazedly.

Between gin-and-water and Mr. Pye's curious tricks, Taggles had only a very dim idea of what he was doing.

"Good-bye," said Figgins.

And the New House juniors went in.

Taggles locked the door after them, and then blinked in a very strange and uncertain way at the mirth-merchant of Tomsonio's Circus.

"It was a 'orrid dream," he murmured.

Joey Pye chuckled.

"Show us to the gate, my good man," he said. "March!"

"You got in over the wall," said Taggles. "You can go hout the same way."

Mr. Pye shook his head.

"You'd better open the gate," he said. "Excuse me! Allow me!" He extracted an orange from Mr. Taggles's left ear, or appeared to do so, and the porter shuddered.

"I've got 'em!" he murmured. "It ain't beetles or rats this time. It's oranges. I've got 'em!"

Joey Pye took his bunch of keys from his unresisting hand. And, leaving the school-porter standing dazed, the circus

"I'll borrow these," he remarked. "Good-bye, Bluebell!" comrades walked down to the gate, chuckling.

Joey Pye unlocked the gates, and opened one side, and

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ONE
PENNY.

the comrades stepped out into the road. Taggles came staggering after them.

"Where's my keys?"

"Here you are, sonny!"

"You—you houtsider!" said Taggles, peering at Mr. Pye.

"I know ybu now. You're the conjurer from the circus."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Mr. Pye.

Taggles snorted with rage.

"You've been a-playing tricks on me!" he exclaimed.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The porter grasped his stick.

He made a wild sweep at Mr. Pye with it, but the nimble mirth-merchant of Tomsonio's dodged the blow easily.

"Give me my keys!" roared Taggles.

"Here they are, my son. Catch!"

Joey Pye tossed the clinking bunch of keys towards the school-porter. Taggles did catch them—upon his nose.

He gave a terrific yell as the keys clanked and clinked upon his rather prominent nose, and then jingled to the ground.

"Ow! Oh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Taggles rushed forward, brandishing his stick. Joey Pye skipped into the road out of reach. Samson, the Strong Man, reached out a powerful hand as Taggles rushed after the clown, and grasped the porter by the back of his collar. He lifted Taggles clear of the ground with scarce an effort, and sat him down in the gateway. Taggles gasped, and sat there, still gasping as the circus comrades strolled down the road, chuckling. It was some minutes before the St. Jim's porter rose dazedly to his feet, and went in and groped for the keys, and locked up the school gates once more.

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.

Trouble in the Ring.

"HERE we are again!"

That remark was made by Joey Pye as he right-ended himself after coming into the ring with a series of somersaults.

And the audience roared.

There was nothing original in the remark, but there was something exceedingly comic in Mr. Pye's way of saying it, and in the grimace with which he accompanied it.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Mr. Pye took off his paper hat, and bowed to the audience.

And they laughed again. They had mostly come to the circus for the purpose of enjoying themselves, and Mr. Pye was just the man to help them to do it.

Tomsonio's Circus had moved on from Wayland to another little town in Sussex, and was pitched upon a wide common. This was the first night in the new locality, and the attendance was very promising.

Flaring posters had preceded the circus, and a large audience had gathered to see whether the performance equalled the promises.

Mr. Pye made a droll face at the "people in front," and whistled. A donkey ambled into the ring, and trotted over to Mr. Pye.

He was a quiet and almost sleepy-looking donkey, but there was a look of intelligence in his eyes. He was Mr. Pye's trick donkey, who had accompanied the clown in many a wandering, in many a strange quarter of the world.

"Teddy!"

The donkey halted.

Signor Tomsonio, standing in the centre of the ring, resplendent in evening garb, with a wonderful waistcoat and a gleaming silk topper, cracked his whip. There wasn't any special necessity for cracking the whip just then—it was the force of habit with the signor. Teddy looked round suspiciously with one eye.

"Gentlemen," said Mr. Pye, "this is my donkey, Teddy—"

"Two of you, ain't there?" said a voice from the front row.

Mr. Pye looked round as the people laughed. Mr. Pye, like many great jokers, did not fully appreciate jokes against himself.

The speaker was a thick-set young man, who was seated in the front row with nearly a dozen other young fellows. They were evidently one party, and they were all smoking cigarettes. Signor Tomsonio had a big notice up that no smoking was allowed inside the tent, but the young men had apparently failed to see it or at least to heed it. As there were so many of them, and they looked as if they were ripe for mischief, they were not interfered with, and the clouds of smoke went up, causing a good deal of coughing in the row behind.

"I beg your pardon, sir!" said Mr. Pye, with great politeness. "Did you speak?"

"Yes, I did!" said the young man.

"Ahem! Let me see—you're Mr. Jones, aren't you?"

"No, I'm not! I'm Tom Benson," said the young man, "captain of the Barberry Rovers, if you want to know!"

"Thank you!" said Mr. Pye. "I don't want to know."

Mr. Benson turned pink.

"Don't give me any of your cheek!" he remarked. "I don't take any cheek from a blessed funny man in a circus!"

"Dear me!" said Mr. Pye, shrinking away with an expression of terror that made the audience shriek. "Pray keep off! I—I am quite frightened. Are you always as dangerous as that?"

Mr. Benson sat silent and glowered.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen," said Mr. Pye victoriously. "Teddy is going to show you his wonderful powers of perception. Teddy!"

The donkey put his head up.

"Is there a greater ass than yourself in the present company?"

Teddy lowered his head.

"Ha, ha, ha!" shouted the audience.

"You are quite sure, Teddy?"

Teddy wagged his head again.

"Can you point him out, Teddy?"

Another wag.

"Ladies and gentlemen, kindly observe Teddy while he points out a bigger ass than himself," said Mr. Pye. "Go it, Teddy! Allez!"

Teddy looked at the audience, and trotted slowly round the barrier.

He went slowly, seeming to scan the audience as he passed them in review. Once he hesitated, and seemed inclined to make for the ring-master, Signor Tomsonio himself, and the audience chuckled in anticipation. But Teddy trotted on, and finally came to a stop at the place where he had started from.

There he hesitated a moment, and then walked up to the barrier, put his head over it, and snuggled his muzzle against the chest of Mr. Tom Benson.

There was a roar from the audience.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Teddy retreated into the ring again, and gave a sonorous bray, as if in celebration of his success. Mr. Benson sprang to his feet in a fury.

The fellow next to him tried to pull him down.

"Don't make an ass of yourself, Tom!" he whispered.

"Let me go, Dick Sugden!"

"But—"

Benson jerked himself away, and clambered over the barrier. His face was red and furious. He had thrown his cigarette away, and was making for the clown, with the evident intention of inflicting personal chastisement upon him.

Signor Tomsonio came running forward.

"Get back, there! The public are not allowed in the ring."

"Bah!"

"What—what? I—"

"Get out of the way, you old fool! I'm going to thrash that cheeky clown!" roared Benson.

Signor Tomsonio almost staggered.

To be addressed like that in his own ring, where he was monarch of all he surveyed, was a new experience.

"What?" he said feebly. "What?"

Benson ran at Mr. Pye.

The clown waited for him with a grin on his highly-coloured countenance. He anticipated getting some fun out of Tom Benson. It was pretty clear that Benson & Co. were a clique well known in Barberry, and that young Benson regarded himself as being a person of considerable importance.

"Now, you funny beast, I'll give you a lesson!" said Benson, as he reached the clown.

He grasped at Mr. Pye, but the clown seemed to melt away from his grasp somehow. Benson stared as his hand swept the empty air. Mr. Pye was somersaulting a dozen yards away. He righted himself, and shook his finger at Benson in a way that threw the audience into convulsions.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Benson's own friends were laughing, too. Benson's face was crimson with rage. He felt that he was making himself ridiculous, but it would be more ridiculous than ever to leave the ring without inflicting any punishment upon the clown.

He made a fresh rush at Mr. Pye.

The clown waited till he was quite close, and then made a spring, putting his hands upon the astounded Benson's shoulders and clearing him completely.

He alighted in the tan behind the amazed youth, and winked at the audience, and there was a fresh roar.

Benson swung round.

He made a savage blow at Mr. Pye, and his fist swept the air. Mr. Pye had easily dodged the blow—he had not been clown, acrobat, and general tumbler for many years for nothing. The young man muttered something between his

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teeth, and sprang at the clown, grasping him in his arms in a savage grip.

"Now I've got you!" he muttered.

Mr. Pye nodded cheerfully.

"Yes, you've got me," he agreed. "There's only one little point you've overlooked—that I've got you, too!"

And Mr. Pye put his grasp upon the young man.

Tom Benson gasped for breath.

Mr. Pye, although Benson did not know it, was an accomplished wrestler, and he had locked his arms upon Benson in a way that rendered that impetuous youth quite helpless.

They swayed to and fro, watched with the keenest interest by the delighted audience.

Tom Benson struggled first to get his arms loose to hit at the clown. Then he tried to throw Joey Pye. Finally, he only strove to get loose. But he did not succeed. He had caught Joey Pye, and he had caught a Tartar.

There was no escape for him.

The comical face of the clown looked into his with a cheery smile as he struggled and swayed and gasped for breath.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the audience.

"Let me go!" gasped Benson, at last.

"Dear me! You are not so ferocious now."

"Ow! My ribs are going!"

"Oh, dear! Are you sorry for being naughty?" asked Mr. Pye, with a fatherly air.

"No! Ow! No! Lemme go!" yelled the hapless Mr. Benson.

"Are you sorry?"

"No—yes!"

"Very well," said Joey Pye. "As you have apologised so handsomely you can go!" And the clown released the unfortunate youth.

Benson, scowling furiously, clambered at the barrier. Mr. Pye kindly helped him over, with the result that he pitched headfirst among the legs of his friends. The audience roared again as he disappeared, only his boots and a pair of brightly-coloured socks remaining visible for the moment.

"Dear me! More trouble in the family!" said Mr. Pye, shaking his head sadly. "Will somebody kindly sort that gentleman out, and tell him that this isn't a ball, and he's not expected to reverse?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Sugden dragged his friend up. Mr. Benson's face reappeared, very red and dusty and glowering. He jammed himself down into his seat, and gasped.

"I'll be the death of that hound!" he muttered, between his teeth. "Wait till this blessed show is over, that's all!"

Mr. Pye kissed his hand to the glowering captain of the Barberry Rovers, and went on with his performance, which Mr. Benson watched with a sullen and savage countenance.

THE NINTH CHAPTER.

After the Show.

MR. BENSON was not in a humour to be pleased, as was perhaps natural under the circumstances, but the good folk of Barberry seemed to take very kindly to the show.

They cheered the turns with kindly vociferation.

Jungle Jack, the Boy Tiger Tamer, was always well received, and so was Clotilde, the Queen of the Ring. And the audience gave loud cheers to Jim Carson, the acrobat—the Handsome Man—and to Puggles, the tumbler, and to Samson, the Strong Man. Signor Tomsonio's fat face beamed with delight.

"We've found another good pitch, Joey," he confided to Mr. Pye, while the Handsome Man was performing on the high trapeze, watched breathlessly by the audience.

Mr. Pye nodded.

"Yes, rather, boss! But there's going to be trouble with some of them in front."

"What do you mean?"

"That fellow I joked with. Look at his face."

Signor Tomsonio glanced at Mr. Thomas Benson. The young man was sitting with a sullen scowl on his face, and his eyes were glinting, and never seemed to leave Joey Pye. It was evident that he was brooding over his wrongs, and meditating vengeance.

"Well, one chap doesn't count much, Joey," said the signor, with a laugh.

Mr. Pye, as a matter of fact, was not really very apprehensive about Mr. Benson's interview with him after the show. But Tom Benson meant business.

Tom Benson was a person of some importance in the little town of Barberry.

He had the misfortune to be the son of a very well-to-do man, and not to be under the necessity of working for a living. That in itself is bad enough for anybody, and it was especially bad for Benson, who had a weak and selfish nature,

and took all the pleasures of wealth without performing any of its duties.

Mr. Benson swaggered about Barberry, and was that most curious of all animals, a village man-about-town. He was the captain of the local football club, not because he played very good footer, but because his money made him popular, and he would have been an unpleasant enemy to anybody who had taken the captaincy out of his hands. He played in matches, and won them, against little teams that could not have stood up to a junior school eleven, but he swaggered on the strength of the Barberry Rover record as if he had won League matches.

For such an important young man to be made fun of in a circus by a common clown was an insult too outrageous to be borne.

Mr. Benson had been made to look small and absurd in the eyes of his townspeople and in the eyes of the footballers.

The club had been playing that afternoon, and they had come in a body to the circus afterwards, prepared to be treated with great distinction, and to make themselves rowdy and uproarious if they felt inclined that way.

And so Joey Pye's little joke with Mr. Benson had come very unfortunately.

Mr. Benson was plotting vengeance as he sat there with dark brows and watched the performance, and most of his comrades were quite ready and willing to back him up in having a little fun with a clown.

"We'll jolly well go round to the back when the show's over, or just before, Sugden," Mr. Benson remarked, "then we'll catch that clown beast coming out."

"What's the game?" asked another of the party.

"A little fun with that cheeky cad, Rogers. We'll yank him along and duck him in the horsepond on the common."

"Ha, ha!"

"Good egg!" exclaimed Sugden. "It will be funny. We'll stand the cad a drink afterwards, to show there's no ill-feeling."

"We'll stand him nothing," said Mr. Benson. "I've had too much of his cheek. We'll go in a gang and duck him in the horsepond, and then ride him on a rail round the common, and we won't let him off till he begs for mercy on his knees."

"Jolly good!"

And the young fellows chuckled over the prospect of the rag. Not all the party agreed to take a hand in it, but half a dozen were ready to follow Benson upon his adventure. They would not have been quite so ready if they had known how it was to end.

While the last turn was being performed, Benson & Co. left their seats, and made their way out of the circus.

Joey Pye's keen eye from the ring noted their departure, and he chuckled.

"They're gone, signor!"

"Eh? Who's gone?"

"Benson and some of his friends."

"All the better!"

"Oh, we shall see them again, after the show! I'm pretty sure of that," said Mr. Pye. "Not that I mind. I dare say we can give them all the fun they want."

But Mr. Pye was very much on the alert when he left the big marquee, when the performance was finally over, and the audience were streaming out.

THE TENTH CHAPTER.

Mr. Benson Looks In.

"**T**HERE he is!"

"Collar the cad!"

Joey Pye was stepping from the big tent by the staff exit, when Mr. Benson and his friends shouted out the words and rushed upon him from the shadows.

Joey Pye started back.

Before the grasping hands could seize him, he had backsomersaulted into the tent again, and was in the ring.

Tom Benson rushed in after him, with his followers at his heels.

"Collar him!" shouted Sugden.

"Here!" yelled Signor Tomsonio. "What are you doing here? Get out! The public are not admitted after the performance is over."

"Oh, go and eat coke!" said Benson. "We're going to duck that secondarily clown of yours in the horsepond. If you get in the way we'll duck you, too."

"What! What!"

"Clear out, you fat old duffer!"

"What!"

The signor could scarcely believe his ears.

The majestic Signor Tomsonio, for the second time that evening, was treated with the most outrageous disrespect in his own ring, and by the same individual! It was too much! The signor raised his fat hand, clenched it, and smote Mr. Benson on the nose.

Tom Benson staggered back, seeing myriads of gaily-dancing stars.

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NEXT
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ONE
PENNY.

"Oh!" he roared.

"There!" said the signor. "There! Now leave the circus, or I'll have you thrown out, you young ruffian!" Tom Benson did not leave the circus. He shouted to his comrades, and rushed at the fat ringmaster.

The others followed him with a shout of laughter.

In a moment Signor Tomsonio was collared, and knocked over in his own ring, and the young ruffians rushed on towards Mr. Pye.

Signor Tomsonio sat up.

He was dazed and bewildered, and for some moments it seemed to him like a horrid dream; but there he was, sitting in his own sawdust, and the young blades of Barberry village were chasing Mr. Pye round the ring.

And the signor opened his mouth and roared.

"Hallo, there! Samson!—Talbot!—Bibby!—Doc!—Tom! Bill!—George!—William!—Carson!—Puggles! Come here!"

The signor's voice rang far and wide, and the persons he called upon, already startled by the disturbance in the deserted tent, were rushing to see what was the matter.

They stared in astonishment at the scene they saw.

Signor Tomsonio staggered to his feet. He was covered with sawdust, and his fat, good-natured face was furious.

"Kick them out!" he spluttered. "Kick them out! Do you hear? Chuck them out!"

"Who are they?" exclaimed Jack Talbot, in amazement.

"What does it mean?"

"They're a set of young ruffians! Kick them out!"

"Go easy!" sang out Mr. Pye. "It's all right!"

The clown had seized hold of the long rope by which the Handsome Man swung himself up to the dome for the performance on the high trapeze.

He leaped at it and caught it, leaving the ground with a swing, and he swopt through the air as the Barberry Rovers rushed upon him.

Mr. Pye was grinning joyously. He was not in the least afraid of Benson & Co.

"Get down, you hound!" roared Tom Benson, coming to a halt as the clown swept away through the air.

Mr. Pye did not reply.

He came swinging back towards Mr. Benson, and his whole weight struck the young man upon the chest so suddenly that he could not escape the collision.

Tom Benson gave a gasp, and rolled over in the sawdust.

Mr. Pye, still clinging to the rope, went whirling, and caught Sugden with his feet, sending him sprawling, and then hurling over Rogers beside him.

The clown chuckled gleefully.

The rest of the gang crowded back out of the way, scuttling quickly enough out of the radius of the rope upon which the active clown was swinging.

Tom Benson sat up in the tan, rubbing his head.

He was too bewildered for the moment to know exactly what had happened. Mr. Pye, still swinging on the rope, passed him in the air, and gave him a gentle dig in the ribs with his foot in passing. Tom Benson gave a gasp.

"Hallo, cocky!" said Mr. Pye. "Are you tired?"

"Oh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Sugden helped Tom Benson to his feet. Benson was looking utterly dazed and bewildered. He blinked in a very uncertain way at Mr. Pye.

The clown bowed profoundly.

"Thanks very much, sir! Will you do that again?"

"You—you—"

"I should really like to see you do it again," said Mr. Pye, with an air of great interest. "It's a new thing, you know, in my own line of business."

"I'll—I'll smash you!"

"Oh, you couldn't smash an egg!" said Mr. Pye, grinning. "That's no good, that idea of yours. You couldn't fight a boxing kangaroo, you couldn't!"

Mr. Benson made a blind rush at him.

Joey Pye skipped out of the way, gave Mr. Benson a tap on the nose in passing, and then faced him again at a few paces distance, smiling serenely.

Mr. Benson rubbed his nose and stood still.

He might as well have chased a will-of-the-wisp or an eel as the elusive Mr. Pye, and he was beginning to realise it.

"Better chuck it," advised Mr. Pye. "It's no good. You can't fight any better than you can play football."

"What!" roared Mr. Benson.

"Do you play footer?" asked Mr. Pye, in innocent surprise.

"You—you circus beast! I'm captain of the Barberry Rovers."

"My word! By gum! What game do they play—Association hop-sotch, or Rugger marbles?" asked Mr. Pye, with an air of great interest.

"You worm!" gasped the exasperated Mr. Benson. "I

only wish I had you on a football-field, that's all. I'll show you!"

Joey Pye slapped his thigh with a report like a pistol-shot.

"Good wheeze! I never thought a chap like you would be able to think of a good dodge like that."

"What do you mean, you toad?"

"You'd like to see me on a footer-field?"

"Yes, rather!" said Tom Benson venomously.

"Then you shall!"

"What?"

"I challenge you to a match," said Mr. Pye. "The Circus Eleven—captain Joseph Montgomery Pye—against the Barberry Rovers, skippered by Mr. Tom Wilson."

"Benson, you beast!"

"Sorry—skippered by Mr. Tom Benson, you beast!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I suppose you're being funny," said Mr. Benson, after a pause. "I'd like nothing better than to get eleven of you on a footer-ground."

"Accept the challenge, then."

"Oh, draw it mild, Joey!" said the signor.

Joey grinned at the ringmaster.

"It's a good wheeze, signor."

"You can't play footer."

"You haven't seen me," said Joey Pye, with great dignity. "Wait till you've seen me on a footer-field before you say I can't play."

Mr. Benson laughed scoffingly.

"On a footer-field! Do you know the difference between a football and a goalpost?"

"Certainly," said Mr. Pye, beaming. "I'm good at conundrums. One's made of wood, and the other's made of leather. Now, do you know the difference between your head and a goalpost?"

"Eh?"

"There isn't any. They're both made of wood."

"You worm!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'll undertake to raise an eleven in the circus that will knock the Barberry Rovers sky high," said Mr. Pye. "We'll play you on Saturday afternoon—that's the only Saturday we shall be in Barberry—"

"I'd jolly well like to," said Mr. Benson. "We'd give you a holy time."

"What-ho!" grinned Sugden.

"But I don't suppose the weather will be decent for one thing," said Tom Benson, "and you couldn't play, for another."

"Oh, you're trying to crawl out of it, are you?"

"Crawl out?"

"Yes. As for the weather, we can play under cover. We'll mark out a football-field inside this blessed tent. Goodness knows it's big enough!"

"Well—"

"Look here, Joey—" began the signor.

"Oh, leave it to me, signor!"

"But—"

"Don't you see what a draw it will be?" whispered Joey to the signor. "A football-match in the afternoon, you see, with the local team. We charge for admission, of course, and everybody will come."

"My hat!"

"C'chez-vous on?" asked Joey, who sometimes relapsed into French of a peculiar kind, since the time when Tomsonio's Circus had made a tour of the Continent.

The signor grinned.

"Yes, Joey."

"You like the idea?"

"First-rate."

"Good! Well, what do you say, Ben Tomson—"

"My name's Benson, ass."

"Ah, I keep on forgetting, Mr. Benson-ass. What do you think? Will you meet the circus eleven, or will you confess before all the town that you're afraid?"

"Afraid!" roared Benson.

"Exactly!"

"If you mean business, we'll meet you, and give you the holiest licking you've ever had in your lives," shouted Benson.

"Good! That's all we ask."

"Saturday afternoon then?"

"Yes; kick-off at three, regardless of the weather."

"Good! You'll remember this."

And Benson & Co. marched out of the tent, Benson fuming with rage, and the others glad enough to get gone without any rough handling from the circus men.

Joey Pye was looking extremely pleased with himself. Jack Talbot gave him a dig in the ribs.

"Of all the giddy asses—" he began.

"Hallo, talking about yourself again!" sighed Mr. Pye.

"Why don't you get on to some other subject?"

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Talbot laughed.

"You are a first-class ass, Joey. Where are you going to get your circus eleven from?"

"Haven't given the matter a thought," said Joey cheerfully, "but we'll scare up an eleven from somewhere."

"Well, you duffer!"

"We should be licked to the wide," exclaimed Samson, the Strong Man of the circus.

"Never mind. If it's a draw to the public the cash will come in, and that's the most important point, eh, signor?"

"Yes," said Signor Tomsonio promptly. "You don't often talk sense, Joey, but you're right on the mark that time."

"But I really don't see why we shouldn't lick them," said Mr. Pye. "To judge by their looks, they spend more time playing billiards than football."

"Well, that's so."

"And there's enough of us to raise an eleven."

"But how many of us play football?" demanded Jim Carson, the Handsome Man.

"Well, some do."

"Yes, but the rest?"

"They can learn."

"Who'll coach 'em?"

"I will!" said Joey Pye, with a great deal of dignity. And there was a general chuckle.

THE ELEVENTH CHAPTER.

Joey Pye Sets to Work.

JOEY PYE was in deadly earnest, however.

The next morning he was busily at work on his idea. It occurred to the original Joey Pye that, in the coolness and calmness of the morning hours, Tom Benson might regret having accepted that challenge to a football match in the big circus marquee.

There is an old proverb that it is well to build a bridge of gold for a flying enemy; but that was not Joey Pye's idea. He did not mean to let the Barberry Rovers escape, even if they wanted to.

The match would be a tremendous draw for the circus, and it was such a novel idea that people were certain to flock from all quarters to see it. And as the Barberry Rovers were the football team of Barberry, all Barberry, consisting largely of their brothers and sisters and cousins and aunts, would be bound to come. Those who had already visited the circus would visit it again for the sake of the match.

Hence it was determined in Joey Pye's mind that Tom Benson should not be allowed to get out of the match if he desired to do so.

First thing in the morning, Mr. Pye, in ordinary attire, with a common or garden bowler hat, as he described it, sped off to the local printer.

There, at a speed that made the local printer's men's heads swim, new circus bills were rushed off the presses.

Within two hours men were pasting them up on every tree, fence, and dead wall in Barberry.

"GREAT ATTRACTION AT TOMSONIO'S CIRCUS!"

"FOOTBALL MATCH IN THE ARENA!"

"THE CIRCUS ELEVEN MEETS THE BARBERRY ROVERS ON SATURDAY AFTERNOON!"

"THE LEAGUE OUTDONE!"

"ROLL UP IN YOUR THOUSANDS AND SEE THE CIRCUS FOOTBALLERS!"

Thus ran the circus bills, and thusly, for there was much more of it that we need not reproduce here.

All over Barberry the townsmen read the notices, and wondered, and determined to come to the circus to see the Barberry Rovers lick the circus footballers.

Mr. Pye took a stroll through the streets of Barberry to see the effects of his handiwork.

He grinned delightedly at every fresh poster, and returned to the circus to a late breakfast, extremely well satisfied with himself.

Tom Benson would find it hard to escape from the cleft stick now.

If he declined to live up to the challenge, fresh bills pasted all over Barberry would apprise the townspeople of the fact that, for reasons best known to themselves, the Rovers had sneaked out of the match.

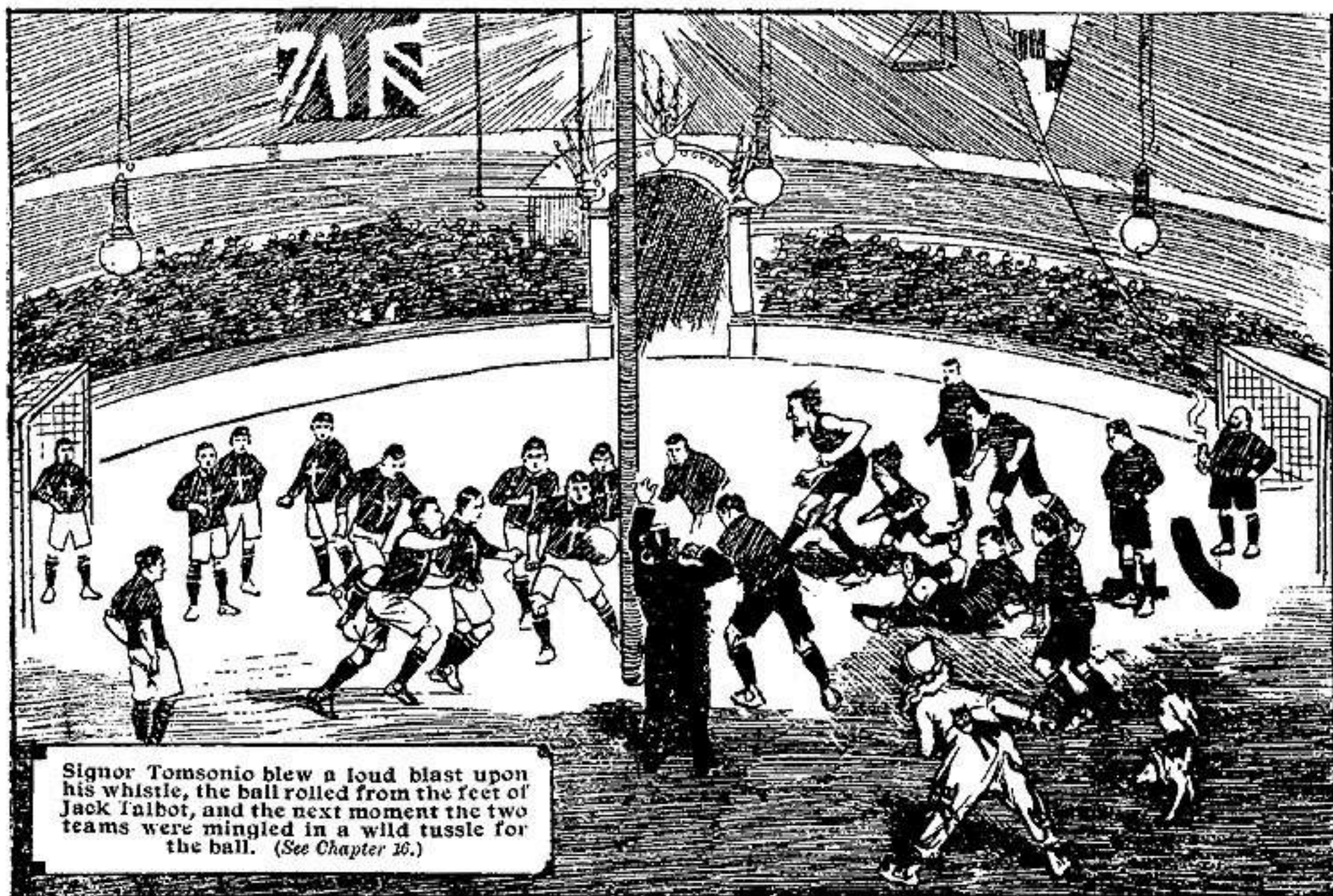
Joey Pye held the upper-hand now.

Without facing endless ridicule, Tom Benson & Co. could not get away, and they simply had to come up to the scratch.

After breakfast, Joey Pye set to work forming up his eleven.

Saturday was not far off, and there wasn't much time to prepare for the match which was to be played before the elite of Barberry.

Jack Talbot, of course, was the first fellow Joey tackled on the subject.



Signor Tomsonio blew a loud blast upon his whistle, the ball rolled from the feet of Jack Talbot, and the next moment the two teams were mingled in a wild tussle for the ball. (See Chapter 26.)

The Boy Tiger Tamer had been a keen footballer at school, and he had not forgotten his skill, and he had often mentioned to Joey Pye his regret that footer came so little in his way nowadays.

Joey Pye went into the tent where the tiger's cage was kept, and found Jack teaching Julius a new trick, while Herr Biberach, the owner of the tigers, sat outside the cage and contentedly smoked his pipe.

"Morning!" said Joey Pye, coming in on his hands, and righting up just in front of Herr Biberach, causing the stout German to grunt with affright.

"Ach!"

"How are you this morning, Bibby?"

"Ach! I am all goot."

"All wool, and a yard wide, I suppose," said Mr. Pye blandly. "Good! I thought something was wrong last night; we didn't have to carry you to your caravan."

The German removed his pipe and shook his head solemnly. "Dere is no more of tat," he said. "I gifts up te trink for goot. I tinks tat I have now been off te trink for a long time, and I neffer touches him again after, ain't it?"

"Good for you!" said Joey Pye heartily. "I'm off it myself, as a matter of fact. I never touch it except when my medical man orders it. Luckily, he orders it three times a day. But I came here to talk biznay, Talbot."

"Go ahead!" said Jack.

"Let those blessed tigers alone, then."

"Oh, all right!"

Jack patted Julius on his huge head, and came out of the tiger's cage, closing the heavy iron door behind him. Very fit and handsome the young tiger-tamer looked.

"I want to put your name down," said Joey Pye, taking out a pocket-book and a stump of pencil, and wetting the latter.

"Good! What is it, a testimonial—you're going to present me with a purse of a hundred guineas?" asked Talbot innocently.

"I'll present you with a thick ear if you start being funny," growled Mr. Pye. "That's my biznay. There's no room for two funny men in one circus."

Jack Talbot laughed.

"Well, what's the business, Joey?"

"It's about the football."

"Oh, all right!"

"You'll play?"

"Of course!"

"Good!" Mr. Pye put the name down. "As a matter of fact, the name is down."

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of fact," he went on, lowering his voice, "I want you to captain the team. But I'm keeping that dark at first, as some of the duffers might object to being skippered by a kid, you know."

Jack nodded.

"It's in your hands, Joey."

"Right-ho. I'll put down Herr Bibby as a reserve."

"Ach! I tinks—"

But Mr. Pye did not wait till the Herr had told what he was "tinking." He hurried out of the tent in search of fresh recruits. Samson, the Strong Man, met him outside, and the clown immediately caught hold of the Strong Man's sleeve.

"Just the pippin I was looking for," he remarked.

"What do you want, Joey?"

"I want you to play in my eleven."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There's nothing to cackle at that I can see!" exclaimed Mr. Pye indignantly. "This is a serious football match, same as a League affair."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, blow your ha, ha, ha! Can't I say anything without your supposing that it's a blessed gag?" said Mr. Pye warmly. "It's just as our old friend Gilbert says, an accepted wit has but to ask you to pass the salt, to set the table in a roar. But really it's quite serious this time, Sammy; no gags. I want you to play."

"Oh, I'll play!" said the Strong Man, with a broad grin. "Put me in goal."

"No, I shall play you at full-back," said Mr. Pye meditatively. "You're strong and heavy, if you haven't much sense—excuse me."

And Mr. Pye hurried off.

The Handsome Man was sunning himself on the steps of his caravan, and rolling a cigarette. The Handsome Man smoked at all hours of the day and night. Joey Pye crossed to him, working up a friendly smile for the occasion.

"I say, Handsome, that was a splendid turn of yours last evening."

"Really?"

"Yes. The public simply reared."

"Did they?"

"They shrieked," said Mr. Pye solemnly. "They clapped till their hands must have been sore. It's curious how they take to trapeze acts, but they do."

"What do you want?" asked the Handsome Man crisply.

"Eh?" said Mr. Pye, a little taken aback.

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"What do you want?"

"Well, I was going to ask you——"

"You can go and ask your grandmother, if it's money," said the Handsome Man, with a grin. "Borrow it of the signor."

"Who wants your blessed money?" said Mr. Pye indignantly. "I was going to make you a good offer, the kind of offer a chap doesn't get every day, I can tell you."

"Go ahead!"

"I suppose you've played football in your time?"

"A good while ago," said the Handsome Man.

"Good! You remember the rules of the game—enough to play it, anyway," said Mr. Pye. "Of course, my team is only amateur, and not supposed to be up to League form."

"Your team?"

"Exactly! Will you join it?"

The Handsome Man laughed.

"So you're sticking to that wheeze?"

"It's not a wheeze; it's grim earnest, and all Barberry knows before this that we're meeting the locals on Saturday."

"Well, I don't mind playing, if you make up anything like a decent eleven," said the Handsome Man.

"Good!"

— — —

THE TWELFTH CHAPTER. Getting Together the Eleven.

"DOC!"

The little old man looked up with weak, bleared eyes. He was a curious old fellow, the man who was called the Doc in Tomsonio's Circus. What he had been in the past no one knew; but he was now general utility man to the circus, and he performed his work well, whenever he was not under the influence of liquor, his only vice. Sober, the Doc was a quiet, inoffensive man, and he had charge of the education of Miss Clotilde, whom Jack Talbot usually joined in her studies. Intoxicated, he furnished a great deal of thoughtless fun to the circus, for he would babble in half a dozen languages, and had been known to recite Homer "by the yard," as Mr. Pye described it, to an audience of amazed and grinning stable-hands.

"Doc, old man, I want you."

The Doc, who was sitting on a waggon-shaft, with a book in his hand, nodded to the clown. The book was an *Æschylus*, and Mr. Pye could understand it about as well as he could understand Sanskrit or the picture-writing of the Aztecs.

"Jolly interesting, that must be," he remarked. "What the dooce are you reading now, Doc?"

"The Seven Against Thebes."

"My hat! Why don't you try something a little more modern, like the 'Sporting Reporter'?"

The Doc smiled.

"But I want you, old man," said Mr. Pye seriously.

"You're a University man?"

The Doc started.

"How——"

"Oh, I guessed it!" said Mr. Pye serenely. "Now, as a Varsity man, you must be able to play the game."

"What game?" asked the Doc, staring.

"Football."

"Football?" said the Doc.

"Exactly! The Circus Eleven, captained by Joey Pye or another, are meeting the Barberry Rovers on Saturday. We want you to play."

"You are joking."

"Never more serious in my life. Blessed if I see why a chap must always be supposed to be joking because he happens to be a mirth-merchant," said Mr. Pye. "You might as well suspect a baker of being always baking something, or a hatter of making hats at every blessed moment in the day."

The Doc laughed.

"But I am too old to play, Joey."

"Not a bit of it. You're not as old as you look, for one thing," said Mr. Pye shrewdly, "and you probably know as much about the game as the rest of us put together, excepting Jack Talbot, for another."

"But——"

"No buts," said Mr. Pye decisively. "Life's too short for buts. You're going to play. I've got Talbot and Sammy and the Handsome Man already. Look here, we'll put you in goal, so as to save you a lot of running. You'll play?"

"If you think I'm any use——"

"I shouldn't ask you if I didn't."

"Then I'm at your service."

"Jolly good! I'm going to get Darrell, too; I know he's a good man."

Mr. Pye put down another name in his notebook, and walked off in a satisfied humour. He felt that he was getting

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on with his eleven. Clotilde, the girl rider, met him outside the big tent. She was leading her black Arab, Mahomet, from the tent, where she had been teaching him tricks in the ring.

The young girl gave Joey a bright smile.

"How is the eleven getting on, Joey?"

"First chop!" said Mr. Pye. "I've got four good men so far. I wonder——" He paused, and closed one eye, and looked critically at Clotilde out of the other.

The girl looked at him in surprise.

"You wonder what, Joey?"

"Whether it would do?"

"Whether what would do?"

"They're talking a lot about votes for women," said Mr. Pye thoughtfully. "They'll have the vote soon; that stands to reason. Now, if women can vote, why shouldn't they play football?"

"Football?" said Clotilde, laughing.

"Yes. You would make a splendid member for the eleven," said Mr. Pye. "I wonder—but I suppose it wouldn't do."

"I'm afraid it wouldn't, Joey."

"No; I'm afraid there would be too much tackling," said Mr. Pye, shaking his head, "and the tacklers mightn't break away immediately the whistle went, either."

Clotilde laughed and coloured, and Mr. Pye went on in search of fresh victims. He found Puggles, the tumbler, tying himself into knots in the big marquee, and he pounced upon him at once.

"You play football, Pug?"

Puggles stared at him.

"Football? No."

"But you have played—in your early youth, in the dim and distant realms of the shadowy past?" urged Mr. Pye.

"I'll put you down; you're my fifth recruit."

"But I haven't said I'll play."

"Never mind; I've said so, and that's more to the point. I'll put your name down. Lemme see! You're a jolly good runner. I remember the time the Herr was a little elevated and he got after you with a spade. You did some sprinting then that would have done you credit on the cinder-path. Have you ever been forward?"

"No; I'm generally considered backward in society."

Mr. Pye groaned.

"Have you ever played forward in a football team?"

"No; I've played forward at a ball in cricket," said Puggles.

Mr. Pye stared at him.

"That's the second time," he said darkly. "The third time will be sudden death! Now, I'm going to put you down as inside-right for my team."

"Oh, all serene!" said Puggles resignedly. "Anything for a quiet life. But I don't believe the Barberry Rovers will rove this way on Saturday."

"If they don't," said Mr. Pye, "we're going to give them a showing up that will make them sing small before all Barberry. I shouldn't be surprised to receive a letter or a visit from Benson the Great, telling me that the match is off. Then I shall have something to tell him."

"Joey! Joey!"

It was a voice calling outside the tent.

"Hallo! Houp-la!"

"Here's a visitor for you."

Mr. Pye grinned.

"I can guess whom that is," he remarked. "I think there's going to be some fun."

He stepped out of the tent. Mr. Tom Benson strode up to him, with a face aflame with anger.

THE THIRTEENTH CHAPTER.

Scratched!

TOM BENSON was evidently annoyed.

His round, pimply face was red with anger, and his eyes were sparkling. He seemed to find some difficulty in breathing; at all events, he was breathing very hard.

Mr. Pye met him with the most innocent manner possible.

"Good-morning!" he exclaimed. "How do you feel after the dissipation of last evening? A bit next-dayish, I suppose?"

"Look here——"

"I suppose you're rather anxious about the footer match?" rattled on Mr. Pye glibly. "It's all right. My eleven is getting on splendidly."

"I want to tell you——"

"Oh, we'll be ready! You can rely on the Tomsonia Ramblers."

"The match is off!"

"Rats!"

"I was excited last night," said Tom Benson. "I've

thought better of it, and I'm not going to let my team meet a gang of circus strollers."

"Too late, my son!" said Mr. Pye serenely. "The match is settled!"

"It's off!"

Mr. Pye shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, if you're afraid to meet my team——"

"Ha, ha! You fool!"

"You will take the consequences," said Mr. Pye. "I'm sorry to see that you haven't any grit. Look here! If you change your mind again and decide to meet us, we'll be ready and the match can come off as arranged."

Tom Benson laughed scornfully.

"I'm not likely to change my mind."

"Better change it if you get a chance; it's a rotten cranky one, and a new one might go better," said Mr. Pye seriously.

Mr. Benson strode away without replying.

Joey Pye grinned after him serenely. He did not seem much put out by this abrupt scratching of the match he had announced to all the neighbourhood in flaming posters of red and blue and green.

"Well, it's off, Joey," said the signor.

Joey Pye looked round.

"What's off, signor?"

"The football match."

"Not a bit of it."

"But the chap refuses to play," said Signor Tomsonio. "I suppose you can't catch the Barberry Rovers by the scruff of their necks, and march them into the football-ground in that way?"

"Yes; I think so, in a way," said Mr. Pye. "Anyway, I think the match will come off, and I'm going to keep my team up to form."

"But how?"

"Oh, you'll see, signor!" said Mr. Pye. "I must rush off now."

"Rush off! What for?"

"Business!"

And with that terse and somewhat unsatisfactory explanation, Mr. Pye rushed off.

It was to the local printer's that he went.

He gave his orders, saw that the presses were set to work, and left the printer's office with a satisfied grin on his face.

Within the hour billstickers were at work all over Barberry.

Over the flaring posters of the circus announcements were pasted strips of paper bearing an inscription in black, which showed up well against the bright colours behind.

The slips bore the words:

"FOOTBALL MATCH POSTPONED!

OWING TO AN ATTACK OF NERVES ON THE PART OF THE ROVER CAPTAIN!

BARBERRY ROVERS IN A STATE OF BLUE FUNK!

ROVERS INTEND TO GIVE UP FOOTBALL AND TAKE TO MARBLES INSTEAD!

Any Kids Willing to Exchange Marbles and Noah's Arks for an Association Football, Please Apply to the Office of the Barberry Rovers.

By Order."

The inhabitants of Barberry read the notice, rubbed their eyes, and read it again, and laughed loud and long.

Mr. Pye walked up and down the streets of the town, watching the billstickers at work, and grinning over his wheeze.

It was not long before Tom Benson learned what was going on.

When he saw the bills that were staring at the Barberry folk from all the walls and fences, he stamped with rage.

Every acquaintance he met asked him whether his nerves were better, and whether he had yet obtained a Noah's ark in exchange for the Rovers' match football.

THE FOURTEENTH CHAPTER.

Football Practice!

"ON the ball!"

It was Joey Pye who uttered the words.

Joey Pye was in fine form now.

It was the morning after the placarding of Barberry. The evening performance at the circus had been crowded.

The billing of Barberry had been talked of far and wide, and all the local inhabitants had heard of Tomsonio's Circus by this time.

The signor rubbed his fat hands and grinned when he saw the people pouring in, and he slapped Joey Pye appreciatively on the back.

The clown's wheeze was evidently destined to be a success, THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 200.

Next Tuesday's number of The MAGNET will be the usual price, 1D.

and will contain a splendid, long complete story entitled: **"THE DUFFER'S RETURN!"** By FRANK RICHARDS.

NEXT
TUESDAY,

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ONE
PENNY.

as far as the advertisement part went, and the signor was willing to back him up to any extent now.

And so, on the following morning, when Joey Pye called together his team for practice, Signor Tomsonio was as keen about it as Joey himself was.

It was a fine cold morning, and the open common was an excellent place for practising football, and Joey Pye had purchased a brand-new Association ball in Barberry, having obtained fifteen shillings from the signor for that purpose.

Joey Pye came out of his caravan with the ball under his arm.

"Look here, I'm ready for practice!" he exclaimed. "You fellows buck up. I suppose you're ready, Talbot. You ready, too, Darrell."

"Yes, rather. Here's Sammy, too."

"I'm ready, Joey," grinned the good-natured giant.

"Have you got all the eleven?"

"Well, there's myself, and Talbot, and you, and Puggles," said Mr. Pye, "that's four. Then there's the Doc, that's five, and the Handsome Man, that's six. Then there's Darrell, who will make a splendid back; and we'll put Bibby in goal."

"Ach! Himmel!"

"That's eight. Then there's three of the hands who can play some sort of footer. We shall have to take them in."

"Good!"

"I'm going to bring 'em all out to practice now."

And Joey Pye did.

Some of the team were not up, and some were already occupied; but the mirth-merchant of Tomsonio's World-Famous Circus was not to be denied.

He roused them all out, and rushed them off to the open common, where the ball was soon in play.

Jack Talbot was the only fellow there who could play anything like footer, though the Handsome Man would have made a good player with practice.

Jack was soon called upon to give instruction to the rest, as he was evidently the only fellow who knew anything about the game. But that was not pleasing to the Handsome Man.

All Carson's old jealousy of Talbot more than revived when he saw the handsome lad cutting so fine a figure in the eyes of the circus company, while his own clumsiness provoked smiles.

"Is that kid the captain of the team, Pye?" he called out.

Joey Pye hesitated.

It was clear that Jack Talbot would have to be captain, if the eleven was to have the slightest chance of success against the Barberry Rovers; and at the same time Joey knew that petty jealousies might be aroused by placing a boy of fifteen in the position of captain over grown-up men.

Jack, fortunately, was not the kind of fellow to get anything like a swelled head, and he was likely to be tactful; but it was pretty clear that there would be trouble with Carson at least.

And as Carson was the next best to Jack himself—though a long way behind—that was decidedly unfortunate.

"Well, you see, Carson——" began Joey diplomatically.

The Handsome Man cut him short.

"Is that kid to captain the team?"

"I think it had better be left to the team to decide," said the harassed Mr. Pye. "What do you fellows say?"

"Ach, I tinks tat Shack is to poy!"

"Jack's the boy for work, Jack's the boy for play," said Samson, bursting into melody.

"Of course," said Puggles. "Jack knows the game, and plays it well. What's the good of Joey captaining when he doesn't know a football from a fiddlestring!"

"Here, look here, Puggy!"

"Well, you asked for an opinion, Joey."

"Hands up for Jack as captain, then?"

Every hand but Carson's went up. Talbot was almost a universal favourite, and it was quite plain that he was the only possible captain.

Jim Carson's brow clouded darkly.

"Well, if you think I'm going to be skippered by a kid just out of the nursery, you're making a big mistake," he said.

"Now, be reasonable, Carson."

"Bosh! I'm out of the team."

"Look here——"

"Enough said."

And the Handsome Man thrust his hands deep in his pockets and strode away. Joey Pye gave Jack a comical look of consternation.

"There goes our second best forward," he said. "Never mind. We'll play Tommy, the stable-boy. He won't be a jealous, troublesome ass, anyway."

Jack looked troubled.

"Look here, Joey, I'll drop out if you'd rather have Carson. It's all one to me, though I should like to play. If you'd rather——"

"My dear kid, I'd rather have you than fifty Carsons, though he would have been useful," said Joey Pye. "That's all right. Get on with the washing. I'll whistle to Tommy."

The new recruit was called in, and practice recommenced. It was unfortunate that the Handsome Man was gone, in one way, but fortunate in another, for certainly the team pulled together much better now that the discordant element was eliminated. Perfect good humour and willingness reigned, and that is a very great thing in a footer eleven.

Certainly there was a great deal of wild rushing and tumbling, and fumbling and stumbling and kicking, that took more effect upon the atmosphere than upon the football. But, as Joey Pye considerably remarked, you couldn't expect everything at once; and a beginning eleven could not jump into League form in an hour.

Upon the whole, Joey Pye was quite satisfied with the result of the first practice, and he led his team back to breakfast with improved appetites and cheerful grins.

Breakfast, needless to say, was done full justice to.

The meal was scarcely finished when Tom Benson arrived at the circus, accompanied by Sugden. Sugden was grinning, a contrast to the frowning face of his companion.

Joey Pye met them with a graceful bow.

"What can I do for you, gentlemen?" he asked. "Any further preliminaries to suggest for the match?"

"I've scratched the match!" said Mr. Benson savagely.

Joey Pye grinned.

"If you choose to stick to that, Mr. Benson, all the neighbourhood will know the reason why."

"You circus clown——"

"Shut up, Tom," said Sugden. "Look here, Mr. Pye, those bills you've had stuck up all over Barberrry will have to come down."

"Rats!"

"They're making us the talk of the town, and the whole countryside," said Sugden. "It's too bad."

"Play the game, then."

"Well, you see——"

"Play the game. You accepted the challenge, and then you tried to crawl out of it, after we had made our announcements to the public, too!" said Mr. Pye indignantly. "Do you call that playing the game? By George, if you don't meet us on Saturday, I'll make the whole county laugh at you, if it costs a small fortune in bills and printing and paste."

"Look here——" began Tom Benson furiously.

But Sugden caught hold of his friend's sleeve and stopped him.

"Shut up, Tom!"

"Yes, but I say——"

"Oh, cheese it! Look here, Pye, Benson's willing to withdraw that about scratching the match, and we'll meet you on Saturday as arranged, if you'll have those ridiculous posters taken down or covered up."

Mr. Pye grinned.

"Does Benson say the same?"

"Yes!" growled Tom Benson.

"Oh, all right! I'm agreeable," said Mr. Pye. "I only want you to keep to the bargain, that's all. Meet us as arranged, and all's plain sailing."

"You'll have the posters taken down?"

"I'll have them covered up, which is the same thing."

"Right-ho!" said Sugden, in great relief. "For goodness' sake have it done as quickly as you can. We shall be the laughing-stock of the whole county. As a matter of fact, all of us were willing to keep to the fixture, and it was only Benson who wanted to scratch."

"You're a sportsman," said Mr. Pye. "I'll have the posters covered up as quickly as I can get fresh ones turned out. Mind, on the new posters, I shall have a big announcement that the Rovers are meeting us, after all, on Saturday afternoon, as originally arranged. There will be a jolly big audience, and if you don't turn up, they'll know why. I'll have posters over the whole blessed county to show you up."

"We'll turn up," said Sugden fervently. "For goodness' sake give us a chance."

"Right you are."

And the two visitors departed. When they were gone, Mr. Joseph Montgomery Pye indulged in a prolonged and joyful chuckle.

"I rather thought I'd bring those fellows up to the scratch," he remarked. "What do you think now, signor?"

"I think you're a genius, Joey," said Signor Tomsonio, with a grin. "What?"

"And for once," said Mr. Pye solemnly—"for once, signor, I must admit that I am in full and complete agreement with you."

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READ the grand new story of the Chums of St. Jim's, entitled:

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THE FIFTEENTH CHAPTER.

The Football Match I

JOEY PYE meant business. Any member of the circus eleven who had taken the matter in a humorous spirit soon discovered that.

Joey meant that his team should win if it were at all possible; and if it could be made possible by practice and hard work, that these should not be wanting.

And practice and hard work were the lot of the circus eleven during the following mornings.

Joey Pye was up early and late with his eleven, keeping them hard at it.

The signor backed him up heartily, and every man in the circus was eager to see the team improve, and get into form to inflict a defeat upon the Barberrry Rovers.

There was no doubt now that the match would take place.

The Rovers had been so completely covered with ridicule by Joey Pye's device that if they had scratched the match at the last moment their lives would not have been worth living in Barberrry.

Joey Pye knew what he was about. He knew that the match would come off, and he meant to be ready for it.

And the eleven certainly did improve wonderfully.

Every moment that could be spared from the performances and the usual work of the circus was spent in passing, kicking, dribbling, and sprinting.

Jack Talbot was the keenest and most enthusiastic of all.

Much as he liked the circus life, there were some things of his earlier days that he missed at Tomsonio's, and football was one of them.

And he threw himself into the work now with ardour.

His football had always been good, and he now soon recovered, with practice, all his old skill, and he succeeded in imparting a considerable amount of it to the others. He was good-natured and patient in instructing, and so wanting in anything like "side" that men old enough to be his father learned of him quite willingly.

"We shall beat them, Jacky," said Mr. Pye, as they walked back to the circus in the dusk, after a last practice on Friday evening. "What do you think?"

Talbot smiled.

"Well, I haven't seen them play, and I don't know their form," he remarked; "but I certainly think that there's most likely more bluster and bounce about them than good play. That's what Benson looks like, anyway."

"You're right, Jacky. We shall lick them, and send them home with diminished heads," said Mr. Pye, with a grin. "And, to judge by the swelledness of Benson's head, it wants diminishing a little."

"We'll do our best to diminish it, anyway."

"We will, by gum!"

And the whole team, and the whole circus too, looked forward anxiously to Saturday afternoon.

There was no doubt that pretty nearly all Barberrry and its vicinity would be at the circus for the match.

Whenever the circus eleven had been at practice, crowds of the villagers and townspeople had gathered round to watch them, greatly interested, generally passing remarks which showed that their faith in the Barberrry Rovers was pretty strong.

Seats at the circus were at a premium now.

All the reserved seats were sold off by Friday morning; and the signor, with an eye to business, reserved the front rows of the cheaper seats at an increased figure, and sold all of them off, too.

Even then, hours before the time fixed for opening the doors, crowds began to assemble round the big marquee on Saturday.

The signor looked at the gathering swarm, and rubbed his fat hands, and chuckled a fat chuckle.

"We'll be crammed, Joey," he said—"simply crammed!"

"Talk about sardines," said the mirth-merchant solemnly.

"Why, the inside of a sardine-tin won't be in it with the tent when that lot get in!"

"I'm going to referee," said the signor.

Joey Pye stared.

"Referee?"

"Certainly!"

"What do you know about football?"

"Enough to referee."

"My hat!"

"I've watched football matches," said the signor warmly.

"So long as you blow the whistle once every five minutes, that's near enough."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look here, Joey Pye——"

"Well, award us all the penalties, whatever you do," said Mr. Pye. "Perhaps they'll bring their own referee."

"In that case, I don't see why we shouldn't have two."

"Two!" said Mr. Pye faintly.

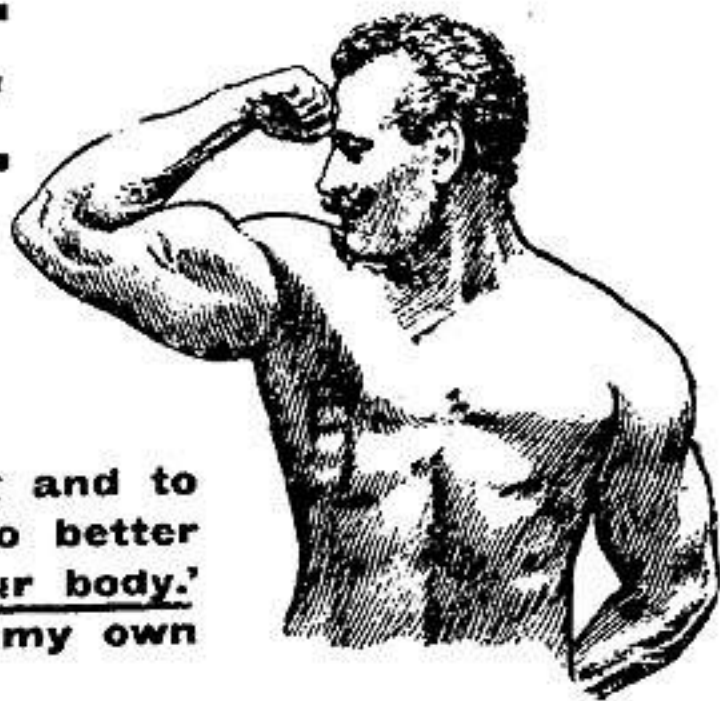
"Yes; same as they have umpires at cricket and hockey."
 "But—but—"
 "Nuff said. What? I suppose I could referee a football match, and we could take one end of the field each, same as at cricket."
 "Signor, you'll be the death of me. Look here, you'll have to leave the refereeing alone if they bring one."
 "Bosh!" said Signor Tomisio.
 And he looked very determined.
 The Barberry Rovers arrived in a big brake, and they were cheered by the crowd that was swarming outside the tent. The doors were open now, and the public were streaming in.
 The reserved seats were already filled, and the people were swarming into the others. It was evident that the tent would be crowded to the utmost of its capacity, and that then a large number would be left standing outside.
 The ring had been prepared for the football match.
 The ground was marked out with white chalk lines, and the goals had been erected on opposite sides of the arena.
 The audience looked on as the elevens came into the ring with keenly interested eyes.
 The Barberry Rovers were in white knickers and blue shirts, and they looked a passable set of footballers. The crowd cheered them loudly, and Tom Benson bowed to the cheering. Benson was looking a little better-tempered than when the circus company had seen him last. Upon reflection, he was not averse to playing a game before so large a crowd, and showing his fellow-townsmen what he could do in the way of wiping up the ground with the circus eleven.
 The circus eleven wore red shirts, and, oddly assorted as they looked, they certainly seemed all fit.
 The audience grinned at them, and it was not surprising, for a team ranging in age from fourteen to fifty-five was decidedly odd to look at.
 But there was good stuff in the odd-looking team, as the good folk of Barberry were to find out ere long.
 Joey Pye attracted more glances than any other member of the circus eleven.
 The rest were in football garb, but Joey Pye had insisted upon playing in his circus attire, bags and paper hat complete.
 Tom Benson stared at him as he came into the ring.
 "What on earth does that mean?" he demanded.
 Joey looked at him innocently.

"What does what mean?" he asked.
 "That rig-out."
 "My professional costume, my dear sir. The usual rig-out of the original Joey Pye," explained the clown.
 "You're not going to play like that!"
 "Why not?"
 "You're a rotten mountebank!"
 "Go hon!"
 "You're a howling ass!"
 "Encore!"
 "Look here—"
 Joey Pye covered his face with his hands.
 "Can't, my dear Benny. You must wear a mask, or a fire-screen, or something, if you want me to look there."
 Sugden chuckled, and Tom Benson turned crimson with rage. He clenched his fist, and made a step towards the clown, but Sugden pulled him back.
 "None of that now, Tom."
 "I'll break his confounded neck!"
 "We're here to play— Come, be reasonable, or we shall get the crowd against us."
 Tom Benson growled.
 "Oh, all right! After all, we can lick them at footer, and give that clowning beast a hard knock or two in the process."
 "Line up," said Mr. Pye cheerfully.
 Jack Talbot came forward. Tom Benson looked at him with an expression of extreme superciliousness.
 "Who's this kid?" he asked.
 "Pray allow me to introduce you," said Mr. Pye gracefully. "This is Jack Talbot, otherwise known to fame as Jungle Jack, the King of the Tigers. He is the captain of the Circus Eleven."
 "Are you ready to toss?" asked Jack quietly.
 "Yes!" snapped Benson.
 They tossed. Jack Talbot won the toss, and elected to kick off, and the teams lined up for the tussle.

(Continued on page 44.)

MR. SANDOW'S ADVICE TO BOYS WHO WOULD BE STRONG.

"To those boys who are ambitious to be strong and to develop a robust, healthy constitution, I can give no better advice than this: **'Study your diet and exercise your body.'** These are the two maxims upon which I founded my own physical development." EUGEN SANDOW.



Mr. Sandow's message will be read with eager interest by every boy who takes a proper pride in himself, and who rightly hopes to become a strong and healthy man—a worthy unit of the great British Empire.

There is need, however, to emphasise the first part of Mr. Sandow's advice—"Study your diet."

Physical exercise can help you little if you do not first of all supply your body with the necessary material for its development.

Cocoa was one of Mr. Sandow's own body-building helps in the days when he was transforming himself from a condition of physical weakness to that splendid perfection of physique for which he is now famous.

What helped Mr. Sandow will help you, especially as in his HEALTH AND STRENGTH COCOA you get a Cocoa more nourishing and more digestible than the old-time cocoas. (You can get a 1lb. tin for 7½d.)

You probably do not like ordinary cocoa. SANDOW'S COCOA, however, is very different. Its flavour is so irresistibly delicious that once you try it you will prefer "a cup of Sandow" to any other.

This "drink-diet" Cocoa will supply your system with the material for its growth and development—steadily building healthy flesh, sound bone, and strong muscles.

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SANDOW'S HEALTH AND STRENGTH COCOA is a brain-builder as well as a body-builder, and you cannot choose a liquid food which will be of greater assistance to you. It helps brain-development, and gives you just that "extra brightness" which will make your school-master or your employer pick you out as "a brainy lad."

Try the Cocoa and do your companions a good turn by telling them of it. SANDOW'S HEALTH AND STRENGTH COCOA is sold in 1lb. tins, 7½d.; 1lb., 1s. 3d. 1lb., 2s. 6d., at Grocers', Provision Dealers', Chemists', and Stores. If unable to get it locally, you can obtain a supply *post free* by sending direct, enclosing the necessary amount in P.O. or stamps to Mr. Eugen Sandow, Elephant & Castle, London, S.E.

THE SIXTEENTH CHAPTER.

The Winning Goal.

SIGNOR TOMSONIO glanced round the crowded tent, and put his whistle to his lips. The signor was to referee, but he was not clad in the usual garb of a referee. He wore his usual evening-dress, with a blazing waistcoat and a tremendous gold watch-chain, and a silk hat perched on his well-oiled locks.

His whip was tucked under his arm, for the old ring-master would have felt quite lost without his whip.

He blew a loud blast upon the whistle, and the Soccer ball rolled from the foot of Jack Talbot.

Then the Barberry Rovers made a rush, and in a moment the two teams were mingling in a tussle for the ball.

"Go it!" shouted the audience delightedly. "On the ball!"

"Buck up, Barberry!"

"Go it!"

"Hurrah!"

The Barberry Rovers seemed to carry all before them at the start.

They rushed through the defenders of the circus goal, and slammed the ball home into the net, unresisted by Herr Bibby, who was keeping goal, and seemed hardly to know what to do between the posts.

The audience yelled with glee.

"Hurrah!"

"Goal!"

"Goal, goal, goal!"

The teams lined up again. The Barberry Rovers were grinning gleefully now. But Jack Talbot's face was hard and determined, and there was a glint of battle in his eyes.

"Keep together, men," he said, in a low, clear tone. "Don't get hurried, and don't be shoved off the ball. If they shove, shove them, and don't get off the ball. We're going to beat them."

"Bravo, Jackie!"

And Jack kicked off again.

Again the Rovers came sweeping down, but this time they did not carry matters before them so easily.

Jack Talbot succeeded in capturing the ball, and he broke away with it, and then was seen what the Rovers' form was really like when they were opposed to a really good player.

Talbot streaked through them like a knife through butter, and brought the ball up to the goal, and slammed it in before the goalkeeper knew what was happening.

There was a gasp of surprise from the audience.

"Goal!"

Mr. Pye rushed frantically up to Talbot, and slapped him on the back.

"Hurrah, Jackie! Didn't I say we'd knock 'em? Hurrah!"

And Clotilde, watching from the staff entrance of the tent, clapped her little hands, and added her voice to the round of cheering.

"Goal! Bravo!"

And for the rest of the first half the Rovers, try as they would, could not beat the circus team. Talbot's side did not score again, but they defended their goal manfully, and the Rovers were always in the greater danger.

And it was slowly borne in upon the minds of the audience that the Rovers were not the invincible team they had always been supposed to be in the neighbourhood, and that the circus footballers had a chance, after all.

The interval came none too soon for the Barberry Rovers, who had been kept hard at it, and were growing fagged from a gruelling game.

In the interval, Joey Pye grinned at his reflection in a glass, and touched up the grease-paint, which had been somewhat disturbed by a profuse perspiration.

"Score's even, Jackie," he remarked. "What did I tell you?"

"Well, what did you tell me, Joey?" said Talbot, laughing.

"I told you we'd win."

"We haven't won yet."

"But we're going to."

Talbot nodded.

"I really believe you're right, Joey. One thing's jolly sure—the Rovers are getting about as pumped as they can be, and most of us are fresh."

"What-ho!"

Jack was seen to be right when the teams lined up again for the second half. Playing billiards at all hours of the night was not conducive to good form at footer; neither was drinking and smoking cigarettes. While, on the other hand, the life of hard work that fell to the lot of the circus men had the effect, for the most part, of keeping them fit, and making them sound in wind and limb.

And, to the astonishment of the audience, and the amaze-

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ment of the Rovers themselves, the circus eleven began to walk over Benson & Co. in the second half.

The first goal scored after the interval was taken by Jack Talbot, who kicked it clean from mid-field.

The circus were two to one.

Then the Rovers really bucked up, and fought desperately to equalise; and at last, as the game drew near its close, they succeeded.

A second goal was taken by the Rovers, and the score was level. And there were five minutes for the teams yet to play.

Five minutes!

"Time enough to win!" said Jack Talbot.

And Joey Pye said:

"What-ho!"

But the Rovers were fighting hard now. Tom Benson, the swelledness of his head considerably diminished now, had almost given up the hope of winning, but he was determined that the circus should not win, and he packed his goal for defence.

The circus attack was incessant, however.

And now there were loud yells from the audience, which showed that sympathy was veering round to the circus side.

"Play the game!"

But the Rovers said nothing, and went on defending stolidly. Jack Talbot led a desperate attack, but the ball was cleared to mid-field again. Again Jack rushed it goalward. He was charged heavily by Sugden, and went down, and Joey Pye captured the ball and rushed it on. Tom Benson rushed across his path, and found himself lying on his back, and Joey Pye sent the ball whizzing in.

But the goalkeeper was on the alert now.

Out came the leather whizzing from his ready fist, and a Rover back-headed it off; but another head was ready to meet it—Jack Talbot's.

The ball shot back from Talbot's head like a pip from an orange, and was in the net before the goalkeeper knew that it was returning.

Joey Pye gave a frantic yell:

"Goal!"

"Hurrah!"

It was goal!

The circus was three to two.

Then the whistle went!

The Barberry Rovers looked at one another, with sickly expressions, and quietly withdrew. The audience cheered the victors loudly.

Joey Pye, taking the cheers all to himself, bowed to the ground, and then, apparently overbalancing himself, turned heels over head, and turned three successive somersaults before he could get right again, at which the audience yelled more loudly than ever.

The circus footballers had scored; and the advertisement had been such a splendid one that crowds came from far and near to see them, and Signor Tomsonio decided to remain another week on the same pitch, to reap all the harvest.

THE SEVENTEENTH CHAPTER.

A Surprise for the Handsome Man.

JOEY PYE chuckled as he looked round the big marquee in the evening.

The circus-tent was crammed to its fullest capacity.

Money was being turned away at the doors—a fact gratifying to Signor Tomsonio in one way, though not in another. It showed what splendid business the circus was doing.

And Joey Pye, with his usual modesty, took all the credit of that splendid business to himself.

The shouts which greeted Joey Pye showed that the audience had not forgotten his exploits as an amateur footballer:

"Go it, Joey!"

"On the ball!"

"Play up!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

While Joey was still keeping the audience in a roar the Handsome Man entered the arena.

Handsome enough the acrobat looked in his fleshings and spangles—a fine figure of a man, active, alert, strong, and graceful.

But the handsome face was clouded, as it had often been of late.

The coming of the new acrobat, Darrell, had brought those clouds to the face of Jim Carson; and, in spite of his care to spare the feelings of the Handsome Man as much as possible, Darrell had not been able to avoid making an enemy of him.

For there was no doubt that, good as the Handsome Man undoubtedly was in his profession, the new-comer was better.

Darrell, with a consideration hardly to be expected among rival artistes before the public, did everything possible to

spare the Handsome Man. He knew that he was "second man" on the trapeze, and he did not want to put Carson's nose out of joint with the public.

But that did not suit the signor.

Personal feelings were all very well, but it was absurd to allow them to interfere with business—that was Signor Tomsonio's view of the matter.

Darrell could do things on the high trapeze—things that made the "people in front" stare and catch their breath in terrible fascination. If he could do them, he should do them; and if the Handsome Man did not like it he should lump it. That was the signor's way of putting it.

In spite of his own desire, therefore, Darrell was put more and more before the public, and the Handsome Man consequently fell a little into the background. It was hard for Carson to realise that his hold upon the public and upon the signor was less secure than he had deemed.

But he was realising it, and the thought made him regard his rival with a deadly hatred. The fact that Darrell had saved his life on the trapeze made no difference to that—it made his hatred keener, if anything, to be under an obligation to his rival.

Darrell understood the feelings of the vain, jealous man perfectly, and carefully avoided any ground for a quarrel; yet to the other members of the circus company it seemed inevitable that it must come sooner or later.

The signor had elaborated a new act on the trapeze, which the acrobats carried out together. The Handsome Man slid from the upper trapeze, to be caught in the hands of Darrell on the lower one—a terribly dangerous performance, especially as it was carried out without any net.

The Handsome Man did not wholly like it, and he had hinted a doubt of Darrell's nerve; but he feared to be considered a "funk." If he had shown the white feather, his chance of retaining the premier position would have been utterly gone.

And, to do him justice, he had plenty of courage, and was willing to run any risk to keep his place in the public eye.

"Signor!"

It was the Handsome Man who spoke; and Signor Tomsonio stopped on his way to his van, with a troubled look on his fat countenance.

The show was over, the lights were out, the great tent plunged into darkness. The signor had had his supper, and smoked his last cigar, and was about to go to bed. The Handsome Man met him as he went towards his van.

"Hallo!" said the signor. "Good-night, Jim!"

"I want to speak to you."

"Oh, all serene!" said the signor resignedly. "How long will you be?"

"Look here—"

"If it's going to be an argument I'll light another cigar, that's all," said the signor, taking out his case. "Chap must do something." He seated himself on the lowered shaft of the caravan and lighted the cigar. "Now go ahead, old man!"

The Handsome Man stood before him, his eyes glittering in the starlight. It was plain that he was making a great effort to keep his passion under control, but the circus-master did not seem to notice it. As a matter of fact, the signor was too accustomed to the endless jealousies between artistes, especially those in the same line of business, to allow the matter to trouble him much—and he guessed easily what was coming now.

"It's about that new-comer, Darrell," said the Handsome Man at last.

"Oh, Darrell! What about him? Isn't he well?" asked the signor.

"Do you think I care a hang whether he is well or not?"

"Well, I do!" said Signor Tomsonio. "I care a good deal. He's a jolly useful man in the circus. What?"

"Is he more useful than I am?" asked Carson savagely.

"Oh, I don't know—well, no!"

"Would you rather part with him or with me?" exclaimed the Handsome Man, looking the signor directly in the face.

Signor Tomsonio blew out a cloud of smoke.

"Is that a conundrum?" he asked.

"Don't jest with me, signor."

"Well, I'm hardly prepared to answer the question," said the signor slowly. "Darrell is a splendid performer, and I've got him cheap—dirt cheap."

"Is he as good as I am?"

"Well, yes, if you want plain English, he is," said the signor, driven into a corner. "He's quite as good."

The Handsome Man gritted his teeth.

"Then you don't want me?"

"Oh, yes, I do!"

"I suppose Darrell can take my place?"

"I suppose he could, at a pinch," agreed the signor coolly.

"Oh, then I can go?"

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NEXT
TUESDAY.

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ONE
PENNY.

"I don't want you to go, Carson. You've been with me a long time—you're one of the old brigade."

"Either that fellow goes or I go!" exclaimed the Handsome Man, in a choking voice. "I will not stand him in the circus any longer!"

"You forget your contract."

"Contract, or no contract, I go if that man does not!"

"Well, to be frank, I won't hold you to your contract if you want to break it," said the signor. "If it's to be cancelled, I've no objection."

The acrobat shook with rage.

"You mean, now that you've got Darrell?"

"Well, yes."

"You would put him in my place?"

"If you leave me—yes."

"And you are willing for me to leave you?" exclaimed the Handsome Man, taken aback.

"Be reasonable! I don't turn you out; but I don't ask you to stay if you want to go. If you care to go—go!"

"You mean it?"

"Haven't I said so?"

The signor smoked stolidly; and the Handsome Man strove to calm himself. His ultimatum had missed fire.

The signor did not care whether he stayed or went.

It was a terrible blow to the pride of the Handsome Man, and it let in a new light as to his real position in the circus.

His value was not so great as he had believed; and it was still less since a man had joined the circus who was able to supply his place if necessary.

The signor grinned a little through his tobacco-smoke.

The Handsome Man had swanked a great deal in his time, and more than once the signor had chafed under his manners, and borne with him patiently for business reasons. Those reasons no longer existed. It was a certain amount of satisfaction to Signor Tomsonio to bring the Handsome Man down out of the clouds, as it were.

There was a long silence.

The signor smoked his cigar out, while the Handsome Man stood with knitted brows, the colour coming and going in his face.

Signor Tomsonio threw away the stump of his cigar and rose from his seat on the shaft of the caravan.

"Well," he said, "have you finished?"

The Handsome Man started from a black reverie.

"You mean all that?" he asked. "I can go, and Darrell can take my place?"

"It is for you to settle."

"And you are indifferent?"

"Quite!"

The Handsome Man gave him a dark look.

"Very well!" he said, in a low voice.

He turned on his heel and strode away. The signor looked after him grimly for a moment, and then entered his caravan.

"What was it?" asked the signora, looking up, as her husband came in. "I heard Carson's voice—he sounded angry."

"Oh, he's on the subject of Darrell again! He says he'll go if Darrell doesn't."

"And you told him—"

The signor shrugged his shoulders.

"That he could go if he liked. I'm fed up with his airs and graces—and Darrell is the better man of the two. What?"

"He will not go," said the signora.

Signor Tomsonio grinned.

"I don't think he will. He's got too good a berth to jump out of it all of a sudden like that. What?"

And Signor Tomsonio was right!

THE EIGHTEENTH CHAPTER.

An Accident on the Trapeze.

THE next day the Handsome Man did not mention the matter again to the signor.

Apparently he had decided that he would not, after all, cancel his contract with the proprietor of Tomsonio's World-Famous Circus.

The signor grinned a little to himself, but he said nothing. He was not the kind of man to use an advantage over anybody. The Handsome Man had been shown his place, and that was enough.

But even Signor Tomsonio, experienced as he was in the variety world, and accustomed to the bitter jealousies and savage animosities of rival artistes, did not fathom the depth of hate and rancour in the heart of the Handsome Man.

He did not know what black thoughts were passing through

Carson's mind, or the acrobat would not have been allowed the choice of staying or going.

Carson took the matter very quietly.

He was very silent that day. But he frequently had sullen fits, and no one took any particular notice of that.

He was unusually civil to Darrell.

The new man was a little surprised at first, and distrustful; but he soon showed an answering cordiality, and it was evident, from his manner, that he was only too willing to get on well with Carson and with everyone in the circus.

Joey Pye observed the two chatting together during the afternoon, and shook his head. Jack Talbot looked at him as he noted his expression, curiously.

"What's the matter with you, Joey?" he asked.

"Nice and friendly, ain't we?" said Joey Pye, closing one eye.

"We! Who?"

"Look at them!"

"Oh! Darrell and the Handsome Man!"

"Exactly!"

"Well, all the better, surely, Joey?"

"Yes; very valuable if genuine, as somebody says somewhere," said Joey Pye. "Who was that ancient Johnny who said that he feared the Greeks when they came with gifts in their hands? By gum! If the Handsome Man was as friendly as that to me, I should be looking out!"

Jack laughed.

"But he may have made up his mind to make the best of it, Joey."

"Possibly."

"But you don't think so?"

"Not much!" said the clown emphatically. "Still, it's no bizney of mine!"

Jack nodded.

Even if Carson's new manner was humbug, as was only too probable, it certainly was nobody's business but his own and Darrell's.

And Jack, in his own work, soon forgot about the Handsome Man.

Jack and Clotilde were practising a new act that afternoon, as there was no performance, and it occupied all their time and their thoughts.

When the time of the evening performance came, Talbot was thinking of anything but the bitter blood between the two acrobats.

When the time came for the trapeze turn, and the Handsome Man and Darrell came into the ring together, the signor smiled a little.

Jim Carson was on time, as usual.

He was looking very quiet, and the usual swagger of his demeanour was conspicuous by its absence.

The talk of the previous evening had not been without its lesson to him, the signor thought. And Carson was certainly more tolerable without his swank.

Carson did not seem to hear the cheers which greeted his appearance. As a matter of fact, they were quite as much for Darrell as for himself.

The two acrobats climbed up to the trapezes, and Joey Pye stopped in his tumbling to glance after them.

"It's a good turn, Joey," the signor remarked. "The audience like it. What?"

Joey Pye nodded.

"They do," he said.

"It was a stroke of luck Darrell coming here."

"For you—yes."

"Well, for him, too," said the signor.

"I don't know."

"I shall give him a rise in wages, of course, if he keeps on with the public like this," Signor Tomsonio remarked.

"I wasn't thinking of the wages, signor, though you certainly have got him cheap," said Joey Pye, in a thoughtful way.

"Business," said the signor, with a fat chuckle—"business! I gave him what he asked. But what are you scowling about?"

"I was thinking——"

"Well, don't, if it makes you look like that in public. Look jolly. Think of the audience. They're very patient with your wheezes, so look pleasant. But what were you thinking about, by the way?"

"I was thinking that if I were Darrell I shouldn't care to trust my life into Jim Carson's hands this night," replied the clown, very deliberately.

The signor started.

"Rot!" he exclaimed hastily. "Rot, Joey!"

"You can call it rot if you like, and I suppose Darrell would say the same," replied the little clown. "I've got my own opinion."

"Rubbish!"

"Well, call it rubbish, of course! Mustn't interfere with bizney, anyway," said Mr. Pye, with a shrug of the shoulders.

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"Look here, Joey——"

"It's too late now, anyway," said Mr. Pye, with a glance at the two acrobats, who were already swinging on the trapezes.

"It's rot, Joey!"

But there was a shade of anxiety in the signor's face now, though he had so energetically characterised Mr. Pye's misgivings as "rot."

"It can't be possible!" he murmured. "Carson wouldn't be such a villain—such a mad fool, either! Joey's an ass! It's rot!"

But the signor's fat face was anxious, all the same.

The two acrobats were swinging to and fro.

Darrell was on the high trapeze now, and he was to launch himself from it and be caught by Jim Carson on the lower one. It was the reverse of the previous evening's performance.

Darrell certainly seemed to have no misgivings at all.

He was looking very fit in fleshings and spangles, and quite cool and collected, and his look showed that he enjoyed his work, and was putting his heart into it.

If he had had any doubt of the good faith of his brother acrobat, the Handsome Man's cordiality that day had doubtless removed it.

At all events, there was not the slightest perceptible trace of uneasiness in the manner of the new acrobat.

Darrell swung steadily to and fro upon the high trapeze.

He let go with his hands, and hung by his feet, still swinging steadily.

The audience drew a quick breath.

The moment of the terribly risky act was approaching.

Darrell was to let go suddenly, and shoot down to the lower trapeze. And if by any chance Carson should not catch him——

The thought was sickening.

Death on the hard ground was the only possible finish in that case, or, at all events, it seemed so.

Darrell swung on, gaining speed.

Suddenly he flew from the swinging bar.

Onward and downward, turning a complete somersault in the air, and shooting down to where Jim Carson swung on the lower trapeze, with hands stretched ready to catch him.

Ah! It was all right! The signor drew a deep breath——

But no!

What had happened?

Good heavens! The acrobat was not caught! He was shooting on!

Accidentally or purposely, Carson had fumbled somehow, and his hands had not caught those of the acrobat as he swept downwards.

Darrell had missed the lower trapeze.

There was a wild shriek from the audience as the acrobat, missing the trapeze, shot towards the ground.

THE NINETEENTH CHAPTER, The Shadow of Death.

"GOOD heavens!"

"He's falling!"

"He's killed!"

The audience were all on their feet. Men were ghastly white, women were shrieking and fainting.

The signor, in the tan, seemed turned to stone.

In that one second all seemed to live a lifetime of terror.

The hapless acrobat was shooting past the lower trapeze. Could anything save him now—anything short of a miracle?

But the miracle happened.

For the acrobat was shooting, as it chanced, exactly towards the swinging rope by which Carson had climbed to the lower trapeze.

He must pass close to it—almost touch it! If he but saw it! If he but caught it!

He did.

Before the first wild shriek of horror had died away, Darrell's grasp was on the swinging rope, and he was whirling through the air—upwards now—his impetus on the rope sending it swinging high as he clutched.

It scored through his hands, cutting and scoring them. But that was a trifle. His grasp fastened tighter, and he swung.

Swung to and fro—dazed, with brain whirling, but living—safe!

"My Heaven!" muttered the signor

Joey Pye breathed close to his ear:

"It was murder, signor!"

"Hold your tongue, Joey!"

"But you know it was!" muttered the clown.

Darrell was swinging to and fro with the dangling rope, slowing down now. The Handsome Man was still swinging on his trapeze.

Darrell slid to the ground

In spite of his nerve, the strong acrobat was shaken, and his face was deadly white, his eyes shining strangely.

"Thank Heaven!" muttered the signor. "Safe?"

"Quite safe," said Darrell, in a shaken voice.

"Good luck!"

The signor looked at the Handsome Man, still swinging to and fro on the lower trapeze, but sitting on the bar now and holding the side ropes. The Handsome Man was as pale as Darrell.

"Come down!" said the signor.

Carson did not seem to hear.

"Come down!" shouted the signor. "Do you think the performance is going on after that? Come down, you bungling fool!"

Carson slid to the ground.

The signor fixed a blazing look upon him—a look from which the Handsome Man seemed to shrink.

"What have you to say, Carson?"

The Handsome Man was recovering possession of himself, as his reply showed.

"Nothing, signor. Only that accidents will happen."

"Accidents?"

"What else?"

"Was that an accident?"

The Handsome Man shrugged his shoulders.

"What else do you think it was?"

"Get out of the ring!"

The Handsome Man gritted his teeth.

"Is that the way you speak to me, Dick Thompson?"

"Get out of the ring!" shouted the signor.

"The people will hear you."

"Let them hear! Get out!"

The Handsome Man, with gritting teeth, strode to the ring exit and disappeared. The signor touched Darrell on the arm. The audience, relieved to find that there had been no tragedy after all, were settling down into their places again. Some of the women had been carried out.

"Speak to them and say you're safe, Darrell," said the signor. "Then you'd better get off. You'll want a pick-me-up after that. Thank Heaven it's no worse!"

Darrell nodded.

He turned to the audience, and in a wonderfully cool voice, considering the circumstances, he told them that he was not hurt, but that he would not go on with the turn, if they would excuse him, after what had happened.

The audience cheered him loudly.

They fully realised the pluck he had shown, and they cheered him to the echo as he made his bow and retired.

He passed Jungle Jack at the ring exit, and Jack grasped his hand.

"Thank Heaven you got off so cheaply!" he exclaimed.

"I turned cold all over."

Darrell pressed his hand.

"It was a narrow shave," he said.

"You won't perform with Carson again?" asked Jack anxiously. "Not that act, at any rate."

Darrell smiled grimly.

"Hardly."

"Do not trust him."

"I shall not."

"It's horrible to suspect him of playing a devil's trick like that on purpose," said Talbot. "But don't trust him."

"It's all right, my lad; I don't mean to," said Darrell reassuringly.

And he strode on. Jack Talbot and Clotilde rode into the ring, and the audience, in their delight at the riding act, soon forgot the incident of the trapeze, which had so nearly been a terrible tragedy.

But Signor Tomsonio did not forget.

He was anxious for the evening's entertainment to be over, and he was glad enough when the last turn had been acted out, and the lights were lowered, and the great crowd poured out of the circus-tent.

Joey Pye joined him as he strode from the ring.

"You're going to speak to Carson, signor?"

"Yes," said the signor shortly.

"Order of the boot, eh?"

"Yes."

"Good!" said Joey Pye, with unmixed satisfaction.

The signor looked for the Handsome Man in the supper-tent and in the yard, but he was not there. Then he went to Carson's van. A light was burning there; and there he found the Handsome Man.

Carson looked up with a nod as the signor came into the van. He was sitting on his bed, smoking a cigarette, and reading, or affecting to read.

He did not appear to notice the black frown on the face of the signor.

"Hallo! Sit down," he said. "Smoke?"

"No."

"Ahem! That was a bad business in the ring this evening, signor," said the Handsome Man quietly.

"A very bad business," said the signor grimly. "Bad for the circus, and bad for you."

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ONE
PENNY.

"Yes; it doesn't enhance a man's reputation, an incident of that sort," agreed the Handsome Man, with a nod. "Of course, it was Darrell's fault."

"Darrell's fault?"

"Yes. He missed my hands."

"You missed his, you mean."

"I suppose it would be a delicate point to argue out," the Handsome Man remarked, in a thoughtful sort of way. "There's really no telling which it was, actually. I suppose Darrell will think it was my fault, and I shall think it was his."

"You don't think anything of the sort," said the signor bluntly. "You know jolly well that it was your fault."

"What?"

"And it's pretty clear that you did it on purpose."

"Signor."

"That's plain English, isn't it?"

"Quite plain," said the Handsome Man, with a sneer. "Plainer than it would pay you to repeat in the presence of witnesses, while there's a law for libel in the country."

"Nuff said," said the signor abruptly. "After what's happened, you can't expect Darrell to act with you again."

"I don't care whether he does or not."

"When will you be ready to leave the circus?"

The Handsome Man assumed a reflective look.

"Leave the circus?"

"Exactly."

"You want me to go?"

"Of course I do."

"Very good. You haven't forgotten that there's a little matter of a contract," the Handsome Man suggested.

"You yourself proposed to cancel it yesterday."

"Yesterday isn't to-day," said the Handsome Man coolly; "any more than to-day is to-morrow. It doesn't suit me to leave the circus."

The signor's teeth came together hard.

"You refuse to go?"

"Yes," said Carson coolly.

"After what has happened?"

"That makes no difference to me."

The signor breathed hard through his nose. The Handsome Man watched him with a gleam of mockery in his eyes.

"Of course, I will break the contract if you make it worth my while," he remarked, in a drawling voice. "It will cost you two thousand pounds, though."

"Don't talk rot!" said the signor irritably.

The Handsome Man shrugged his shoulders.

"Those are my terms."

Signor Tomsonio left the van without replying. He could not trust himself to speak again just then. The Handsome Man looked after him with a sneering smile, and lighted a fresh cigarette.

THE TWENTIETH CHAPTER.

Joey's Idea!

"JOEY!"

"Here we are again," said the clown cheerfully, as the signor came up with a thoughtful frown on his face. "What's the trouble, signor? Wherefore that frowning brow?"

Joey Pye was chatting with Jack Talbot in the supper-tent, as he finished his cold bacon and beans.

"Anything wrong, signor?" asked Talbot quickly.

"Yes." And then Signor Tomsonio repeated the interview he had just had with the Handsome Man.

"I'm helpless in the matter," concluded the circus proprietor. "If I break the contract, he'll drag me into the courts, and get his damages, too; for, after all, we've only got suspicions against him, and can prove nothing."

"That's true," said Mr. Pye.

"But to associate with such a man!" cried Jack Talbot indignantly.

The clown winked.

"Not so fast, Jackie. He can stay if he likes, but there's nothing to force anybody to associate with him."

The signor started a little.

"By George, Joey! It's you for ideas!"

"What did I always tell you?" said the clown cheerfully. "The Handsome Man is staying—good! But if the whole company sends him to Coventry—"

"Good!"

"I don't know that my sending him to Coventry will matter much, as he has never condescended to take much notice of a mere mirth-merchant," said Mr. Pye, with a grin. "But I don't suppose any fellow in the circus will want to have much to say to him now."

"You're right, Joey."

"Ain't I always right?" asked Mr. Pye modestly.

"Yes, sometimes," said the signor. "It's a good idea. I won't put any coercion on anybody, but anybody who speaks to the Handsome Man again will do it off his own bat. I sha'n't."

"And I certainly shall not, unless it is to tell him what I think of him," said Jack Talbot.

"Same here."

"And here, too," said Samson the Strong Man, who had been listening to the talk without speaking, so far. "Let him be sent to Coventry."

"Hear, hear!" said Mr. Pye.

And when the word went round among the circus company, there was found no one to raise his voice against the clown's suggestion.

The Handsome Man might refuse to leave the circus if he liked, but if he stayed in it he was not likely to have a cheerful time there.

It was some little time later that the Handsome Man came into the supper-tent.

Supper there was finished, and many of the company had gone to bed, but a few were remaining.

These went quietly out as the acrobat came in.

Carson glanced after them, but he did not yet realise what it meant. He went to bed a little later.

In the morning Carson was up late, as he generally was.

He came out of his van looking as neat and sprucely dressed as usual, and apparently quite undisturbed in his mind by the unfortunate happening of the previous evening.

He passed Joey Pye in the yard, and gave him a patronising nod, and Joey Pye immediately turned his back.

The Handsome Man frowned.

"Good-morning!" he said, as he met Samson the Strong Man.

Samson looked at him and turned on his heel.

The Handsome Man stared after him, the colour flushing into his face.

He was beginning to understand.

"Puggles," he began, as he met the tumbler near the circus-tent.

"Yes, I'm coming," called out Puggles, in answer to an imaginary call from someone within the big marquee, and he rushed off.

Carson gritted his teeth.

There could be no further doubt on the subject. He was generally believed to be guilty of an attempt on Darrell's life, and no one wanted to speak to him.

He strode savagely away in search of the signor.

He found Signor Tomsonio having breakfast in a tent with the signora and Clotilde. The fat circus-master looked very uncomfortable as Carson came in, his face flushed with anger. Signor Tomsonio did not want an unpleasant scene before his wife and Clotilde; but there was no avoiding it now.

"What does this mean?" exclaimed the Handsome Man furiously.

Signor Tomsonio was silent.

"You heard me, signor?"

"Yes, I heard you, Jim Carson," said the signor determinedly, "and I'll ask you to speak in a more moderate tone in the presence of ladies."

Carson gritted his teeth.

"Then tell me what it all means."

"What are you talking about?"

"You know well enough. There is some plot against me, and you are at the bottom of it, of course."

The signor looked at him squarely.

"If you mean that you're being cut, Jim Carson, I'm not surprised; I should be surprised if you weren't," he said bluntly. "It's no good brawling about it. You can leave the circus if you like."

"This is a scheme to drive me away, without cancelling the contract."

The signor shrugged his shoulders.

"You yourself proposed to cancel the contract the other night," said he. "Well, I take you at your word."

The Handsome Man did not reply to that.

"I suppose the accident last night is the reason," he said.

"Yes; the accident, if you choose to call it by a fancy name."

"You believe it was not an accident?"

"All the circus does."

"It was an accident."

The signor gave another shrug.

"And you, signora," said Carson, turning to Mrs. Thompson. "Do you believe that I let Darrell fall on purpose?"

The signora looked very uncomfortable.

"I am afraid you let your temper get the better of you," she said.

"You mean that you believe I let him fall on purpose?" said the Handsome Man savagely.

"Well, yes."

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Carson ground his teeth.

"You can leave the circus when you like, Jim Carson," said Signor Tomsonio. "But I can tell you that so long as you stay, this will go on. You're sent to Coventry; and if ever a fellow deserved it, you do! Now, will you oblige me by getting out of my sight?"

The Handsome Man clenched his hands.

But there was nothing more to be said. Jim Carson strode away with lowering brows. For one day more he bore the general scorn and aversion of the circus company. Then he took his departure; and, as Mr. Pye put it, there wasn't a wet eye in the circus when he went.

THE TWENTY-FIRST CHAPTER.

Gore is Puzzled.

"HERE we are again!"

Joey Pye made that time-honoured observation, but it was not in the ring this time. Joey Pye was seated on the back of a donkey—with his face to the tail—forming part of the circus procession on the long, white, country road.

The procession was passing the gates of St. Jim's.

The grey old tower of the school rose against the leafless trees, and towered above the gaunt branches.

Jack Talbot looked up as Joey spoke.

The clown waved his hand towards the school.

"Here we are again!" he repeated.

"St. Jim's!" exclaimed Talbot.

Joey nodded.

"Yes, we're on the old ground again."

Jack glanced towards the school.

The gates were open, and a group of juniors stood in the old arch. There was a general shout from them as the circus procession was seen.

"Tomsonio's!" shouted Tom Merry.

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Tomsonio's Circus!"

"Hurrah!"

Mr. Pye took off his clown's cap with his usual grace.

"Yes, here we are again!" he exclaimed. "Glad to see you, my sons! Are you glad to see your Uncle Joe?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Hurrah!"

"You're stopping in Rylcombe, of course?" exclaimed Blake of the Fourth.

Mr. Pye nodded.

"One night only," he remarked.

"Bai Jove! We shall be able to see the circus once more before we bweak up for Chwistmas," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Are you aware, deah boy, that we bweak up for the Christmas holidays to-morrow?"

Mr. Pye grinned.

"The fact cannot be unknown to all the inhabitants of these isles, upon which the Union Jack never sets," he replied.

"Weally, deah boy!"

The juniors laughed.

"Oh, don't rot!" said Monty Lowther. "And don't you dare to pull Gussy's aristocratic leg. How dare you pull a leg which came over with the Conqueror!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Lowthah!"

"We're stopping in Rylcombe, and we'll be glad to see you all!" exclaimed Signor Tomsonio, waving his hand.

"And mind you come in on the nod—all of you."

"Wats, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus. "We pay at the door. And we'll come in our thousands, bai Jove."

"Yes, rather," said Gore.

Joey Pye looked at George Gore.

He had not forgotten the occasion upon which Gore had been rude to Miss Clotilde, and he had not forgiven it, either.

Gore understood his look, and coloured.

There was a considerable difference between Gore now, and Gore as he had been, but, of course, Joey Pye did not know of the improvement that had taken place in the bully of the Shell Form at St. Jim's.

"That is, I'll come if I'm welcome," said Gore. "I know what you're thinking of, and I'm jolly sorry."

Mr. Pye's face cleared at once.

"Bygones are bygones on this joyous occasion," he said. "Come in your thousands! Come in your myriads! Come in your Sunday clothes! Come in—"

"Oh, ring off, Joey!" said Jack Talbot, laughing. "Keep that for the ring."

"My dear babe!"

The juniors stood aside, and waved their hats as the circus procession passed on. Darrell, the acrobat, looked out of one of the caravans.

Gore glanced at him.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed.

Joey caught his eye.

"Hallo!" he said, in his turn. "Do you know Darrell—our Darrell?"

"Darrell," repeated Gore. "No, I don't know that name, but—"

The acrobat disappeared into the caravan.

The circus procession passed on, leaving the juniors still waving their caps in the road till it disappeared in the direction of Rylcombe.

George Gore stood with a puzzled expression on his face. Tom Merry clapped him on the shoulder as the juniors turned back into the gateway of St. Jim's.

"No good being offended with Joey, Gore," he said. "You were a rotter, that time, you know—excuse my plain speaking—and Joey didn't know that you'd changed."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I—I wasn't thinking of that," said Gore.

"What's the twouble, then, deah boy?"

"That man—Darrell, he called him."

"Have you seen him before?" asked Tom Merry.

"I—I think so."

"In the circus?"

"Oh, no."

"An old acquaintance?" asked Blake.

"I—I don't know!"

And Gore walked away by himself, his brows knitted with a very puzzled expression.

The juniors looked after him in surprise.

"What the dickens is the mattah with Goah, deah boys?" said Arthur Augustus, turning his eyeglass upon the retreating form of the burly Shell fellow.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"Blessed if I know."

"He was stwuck by the acwobat chap."

"Was he?" asked Lowther. "Where?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Lowthah!"

"We'll make a party up to visit the circus to-night," said Blake. "It's ripping to be able to see it again before we break up for Christmas."

"Yaas, wathah!"

And so the rest of the juniors of St. Jim's thought, when they heard that the circus was at Rylcombe again.

Meanwhile, the procession wound on to the village. There it camped on Rylcombe Common.

Joey Pye, when the arrangements for camping were over, strolled over to Darrell's caravan. The King of the Trapeze, as Signor Tomsonio's bills described the acrobat, was sitting in his caravan alone, with a gloomy frown upon his face. Fortune had changed very much with Darrell since the first time Joey Pye had seen him.

Darrell was the greatest draw in the circus now, with the exception of the Stars of the Circus, Jack and Clotilde. Signor Tomsonio, always generous to his company, had raised Darrell's salary to about half what he was worth, and the acrobat was drawing ten pounds a week now.

He had a caravan to himself, and dressed well, though quietly, and it was known that he saved more than half his salary every week, a contrast to most of the circus company, with whom it was, as a rule, easy come and easy go.

THE TWENTY-SECOND CHAPTER.

Gore's Little Party.

TOM MERRY looked out of the doorway of the School House of St. Jim's. The afternoon's lessons were over, and the early winter night had set in. A fall of snow had covered the ground with a powdery mantle of white, and the old elms were moaning in the wind. The cab from the station came grinding up the drive, and a portly form alighted and came puffing into the School House.

Tom Merry saluted the visitor respectfully. He recognised Mr. Gore, the father of Gore of the Shell. Mr. Gore had twice before visited St. Jim's, and the juniors did not like him particularly. They knew that he was very hard on Gore, and they did not like his heavy and dictatorial manners. But Tom Merry was always respectful to his elders, and he would gladly have propitiated Mr. Gore for his son's sake.

Mr. Gore seemed to be in an unusually good temper. Perhaps even his iron nature relaxed a little at Christmas-time.

"Good-evening, lad!" he exclaimed genially.

"Good-evening, sir!"

"Is my son here?"

"In his study, I think, sir," said Tom Merry. "May I show you the way?"

"Thank you, my boy!"

And Mr. Gore relinquished his snow-powdered coat and hat, and followed Tom Merry up to the Shell passage.

Tom Merry knocked at Gore's door, and opened it.

"Your father, Gore, old man."

Then he retired. Gore of the Shell came forward to meet his father. His face brightened at the unusual good-humour he saw in the parental face.

Mr. Gore looked round the study, and accepted the arm-chair his son dutifully pulled out for him.

"George?"

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ONE
PENNY.

"Yes, father!"

"I am satisfied with you."

"Thank you, father."

"Yes," said Mr. Gore magisterially. "I am glad to say, George, that the reports I have received lately from Dr. Holmes have been very favourable."

Gore felt relieved.

When he saw his father, he generally received a lecture; but he had to admit that he generally deserved it.

"I'm glad to hear it, father," he said meekly.

"I have been keeping an eye on you, George," said Mr. Gore. "I am now satisfied with you. According to what I hear, you have given up your bullying ways, and have made good friends instead of bad ones."

"Yes, father."

"Very well. I have come to take you home with me," said Mr. Gore. "Dr. Holmes will give his permission for you to leave to-night, instead of to-morrow."

Gore's face fell. He was thinking of the circus.

"Thank you, father!" he faltered.

Mr. Gore looked at him sharply.

"Don't you want to leave to-night?" he demanded.

"We were going to a circus—"

"Circus!"

"Yes, father; but it's nothing. I—I don't mind missing it," said Gore eagerly.

The old gentleman smiled.

"But you sha'n't miss it, George," he said. "We will go to the circus, and take a later train from Rylcombe. I will come with you."

"Oh, father!"

"The circus is at Rylcombe, I presume?"

"Yes."

"Then that is settled," said Mr. Gore genially.

"You—you are very good, father!" faltered Gore.

"You will always find me good if you deserve it," said Mr. Gore, frowning. "Have you ever deserved it, until lately?"

"I—I suppose not."

"You suppose! Don't you know?" roared Mr. Gore irascibly.

"Ye-es; I know!" said Gore hastily.

"Very good," said his father, calming down again—"very good! What time does the circus open?"

"Seven."

"Very well; I shall take you, and if any of your friends care to come, I will stand treat. After all, it is Christmas-time."

"Father!"

"Well?"

"May I—I ask you a question?"

"Of course you may!"

"Have you had any news of Uncle Dick?"

Mr. Gore frowned.

"No, George."

"Not a word?"

"Not a word!" said Mr. Gore. "You remember what I told him, George? You were present at the time. I am a man of business. I told him that there was no room in my business for a man who indulged in foolish sports and pastimes, and allowed his accounts to get into confusion. Were they not my words?"

"Yes, father."

"I said I never wished to see him again, unless he was earning a good salary by his own efforts," said Mr. Gore. "Go to your sporting friends, and earn a good living at some sport, and then come back to me, and I will shake hands with you as an affectionate brother." That was what I said."

"I heard you, father."

"And he went—to the dogs, I suppose," said Mr. Gore. "He was always shiftless. I heard some rumour that he had work in a show. I suppose his careless habits prevented him from getting on in it, whatever it was. I shall keep my word, George. I shall never see him again until he is in an independent position. Then he can come back again into the business if he wishes. Not till then."

"Would you like to see him, father?"

Mr. Gore hesitated.

"Well, perhaps I should," he said. "I am a business man, however, and I never allow personal feelings to interfere with business. But it is true, George, I sometimes think of him at Christmas-time. After all, we were boys together."

A half-wistful look, strangely at variance with the usual expression of his bulldog features, came over Mr. Gore's face for a moment. He seemed ashamed of the momentary weakness, however, for he rose to his feet.

"I am going to see the Head!" he exclaimed. "I shall be ready for you at half-past six, George. Bring all your friends who care to come."

"Yes, father."

And Mr. Gore tramped heavily out of the study.

Gore looked into Tom Merry's study a few minutes later. The Terrible Three—Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther—were packing. There was no preparation on the evening before breaking-up for the Christmas holidays.

"Hallo!" said Tom Merry cheerfully.

"My pater's coming to the circus," said Gore.

"My hat!"

"He wants to stand treat to all the chaps who come," said Gore. "All my friends! You're friends of mine, ain't you?"

Monty Lowther fell upon his neck.

"My dear, dear friend—" he sobbed.

"Oh, don't be an ass!" said Gore, laughing. "You'll all come, then—with my pater?"

"Yes, rather!" said Tom Merry. "Much obliged!"

"Good! That's settled, then!"

And Gore went along the passage to other studies. Gore had never been exactly popular, but it was surprising what a number of friends he found he had this evening. By the time he had finished, at least twenty juniors, all claiming personal friendship with George Gore, were ready to go to the circus with Gore senior.

THE TWENTY-THIRD CHAPTER.

"Saints" at the Circus.

THE fall of snow kept many of the country people from coming to the circus that evening. But most of the villagers of Rylcombe turned up. Entertainments were not common in the quiet little Sussex village. And crowds of fellows from St. Jim's came—seniors and juniors. Mr. Gore and his party, numbering over a score, arrived in good time, and Mr. Gore, with quite a princely air, paid for a row of the best seats.

Tom Merry & Co. lined the front row as the performance began, and Mr. Gore sat in their midst, beaming with unusual good-humour.

"Bai Jove!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy whispered to Jack Blake, of the Fourth. "Gosh's patah isn't such a bad chap, aftah all, you know!"

Blake grinned.

"He's ripping!" he said. "I never expected him to come out strong like this, though. I suppose it's the effect of Christmas?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Here they come!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Hurrah!"

The juniors cheered lustily as Jack Talbot and Clotilde rode into the ring, and went through their performance of horsemanship.

The big marquee rang with applause.

Jack and Clotilde had to take several calls before the enthusiastic audience would let them go, and the loudest cheers came from the juniors of St. Jim's.

Then came Samson, the strong man, who was also accorded a rousing reception.

Mr. Gore sat with a good-humoured smile upon his face.

The happiness that comes of making others happy was, as a rule, strange to the hard and determined man of business, but he was feeling it now.

It was, as Blake suggested, perhaps the effect of Christmas-tide, when even the hardest hearts lose somewhat of their grimness.

The old gentleman clapped and applauded as heartily as the juniors, and he rose considerably in the estimation of the "Saints" thereby.

"Here comes Darrell!" exclaimed Blake.

"The King of the Trapeze!"

"Haven't seen him before," said Figgins, of the Fourth.

"Never mind; give him a yell!"

"Hurrah!"

Mr. Gore looked at the acrobat as he came in and bowed.

The old gentleman gave a start.

"Bless my soul!" he exclaimed.

"Seen him before, sir?" asked Tom Merry.

"I—I really do not know. It seems impossible that— But, of course, it is only a chance resemblance!" exclaimed Mr. Gore.

"Hurrah!"

The King of the Trapeze bowed to the loud clapping and cheering.

Then he swarmed up the guide-rope, and began his performance upon the high trapeze.

The audience watched him with the breathless interest that the acrobat's performances always evoked.

Signor Tomsonio grinned to Joey Pye with great satisfaction as he noted the eager faces and craned necks of the "people in front."

"Doesn't he go down—hey, Joey?" said the signor.

Mr. Pye nodded.

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"He does—he do!" he replied. "Beats the Handsome Man hollow!"

"Yes, rather, Joey!"

"He doesn't seem to be quite in form to-night, though," said Joey.

"Is there somebody in front he doesn't want to see?"

Mr. Pye shrugged his shoulders.

"He's a mysterious beggar," said the signor thoughtfully.

"He's been with us a good time now, and he's never let on a word as to where he's come from."

"His own bizney, ain't it, signor?"

"Certainly! But—"

"Hurrah!"

Clap, clap, clap!

The breathless turn was over.

The King of the Trapeze stood in the tan again, bowing his acknowledgments to the ringing applause.

"Bravo!" said Signor Tomsonio himself.

The juniors of St. Jim's clapped loudly.

"Bai Jove! He's a wondah, you know!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "He must have a splendid nerve, you know, to do these things on a high twapeze! I couldn't do that myself!"

"Go hon!" said Blake.

"Weally, Blake—"

"Not without your silk topper falling off, at any rate!" said Monty Lowther solemnly.

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Darrell retired from the tent, but the applause was so loud that he had to come back again, and take his call.

He came back reluctantly enough.

Mr. Gore was on his feet now.

His gaze was fixed upon the acrobat.

As Darrell retired again Mr. Gore turned to his son, who was watching him curiously.

"George!"

"Yes, father?" said Gore.

"You noticed that man—Darrell?"

"Yes."

"Does he remind you of someone?"

"Yes, father."

"Very good!" said Mr. Gore. "I understand, Merry, that you are acquainted with the circus people—on friendly terms with them?"

"Yes, sir," said Tom Merry.

"Had you any idea of seeing them after the performance?"

"I thought of doing so, sir. Signor Tomsonio wants us all to go to supper with him and the company in the supper-tent."

"May I come?"

Tom Merry smiled.

"We shall be only too glad, sir, and I am sure Signor Tomsonio will be pleased."

"Very good!" said Mr. Gore.

He did not speak again during the rest of the performance, but he remained with a very thoughtful expression upon his face. His mind was evidently busy.

THE TWENTY-FOURTH CHAPTER.

Darrell's Secret.

WHITHER bound?" demanded Mr. Pye. The performance was over, the lights had been turned low in the great tent, and the audience were crowding out.

Mr. Pye had waylaid Darrell, the acrobat, on his way to his caravan. The King of the Trapeze paused as Joey spoke to him.

"I'm going to my caravan," he said abruptly.

"For why, my son?"

"Bed."

"Tired?" said Joey Pye sympathetically.

"Well, yes."

"Come and try a bottle with your uncle."

Darrell shook his head.

"It's rather rotten, you know, quitting the festive board just when the guests are coming," said Joey Pye. "The boys will be there to supper, and they will be keen to see the King of the Trapeze."

Darrell smiled faintly.

"They must make up their minds to the loss, then," he said.

"But why, my good sir—why?"

"Look here, Joey!" said Darrell abruptly. "I don't want to meet the—one of them, at all events. And—and did you notice a fat gentleman seated with the boys during the performance?"

"Yes."

"He might come round with them, as they're all in a party—"

"Yes? Suppose he does?"

"I don't want to meet him."

"Creditor?" said Mr. Pye, with much feeling.

Darrell laughed.

"No."

"You don't owe him anything?"

"No, of course not, you ass!"

"Then why shouldn't you want to meet him?"

"Look here, Joey—"

"You didn't run away with his best gal, I suppose?" suggested Joey Pye. "You haven't bagged his gags and inflicted them on a long-suffering public—"

"Don't be an ass, Joey! I don't want to see him, that's all. If I'm inquired after, say I'm gone to bed."

"I'll say anything you like, my son," replied Mr. Pye.

"But I wish you would adorn the festive board and quaff the ale when it is pink with your affectionate Uncle Joe. But if you won't, you won't—Hullo! Here we are again!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

The crowd of juniors, with the portly figure of Mr. Gore in their midst, came up. Joey and Darrell were standing in the full glare of the naphtha lights from the supper-tent, and there was no escape. Darrell turned his head a little.

"Supper's nearly ready," said Joey Pye cheerily. "Walk right in! Come in your millions—come in your motor-cars! Come—"

"Excuse me!" It was Mr. Gore's voice. "May I have a word with you?"

He was speaking to Darrell.

The King of the Trapeze was about to walk away, after a nod to the juniors, but the voice of Gore's father arrested him.

He paused.

"Certainly," he said, in a low tone.

"I think I have seen you before," said Mr. Gore.

"Of course you have!" said Joey Pye. "The King of the Trapeze has been the ornament of the circus ever since the Handsome Man received the High and Most Honourable Order of the Boot."

But Mr. Gore was not listening to Joey Pye.

His gaze was fixed upon Darrell, trying to read his features in spite of the grease-paint that still adhered to them, and of the shadow of the broad, slouched hat that the acrobat had pulled over his face.

"Have I not met you before, Mr.—er—Darrell?" said Mr. Gore.

"Really—"

"I thought I knew you when I saw you in the ring."

Darrell was silent.

"George, did you not know him, too?"

Gore nodded at once.

"Yes, father. I knew him when I saw him on the road this afternoon. That was why I asked you in the study about Uncle Dick."

Darrell started.

Mr. Gore came towards him, and held out his hand.

"You are my brother Richard!" he said. "Dick, we parted on bad terms. I thought you were to blame, and you thought I was—perhaps both of us were a little in the wrong. But it is Christmas-time now, Dick—the time to forgive and forget."

Darrell hesitated a moment.

He pushed back his hat, and the light shone upon his clear, handsome face, pale now under the grease-paint upon it.

His eyes met Mr. Gore's.

"I never expected to hear you speak like that," he said.

Mr. Gore smiled.

"I never expected to hear myself speak like it, Dick," he said.

"You told me—"

"Many unpleasant things I have been sorry for since," said Mr. Gore.

"You told me," said Darrell unheeding, "never to see you or speak to you again unless I had won my way into a staple position by means of my athletic skill and my prodigal way of life. You never expected me to succeed."

"Dick—"

"But I have done so."

"I—"

"I had three hundred a year in your business. I have five hundred a year now. If things go well I shall double it. Have I satisfied you?"

"You have, and more. But—but I was sorry for what I said, Dick, and if I had found you in rags I should have been glad to see you," said Mr. Gore. "Won't you take your brother's hand, Dick?"

Darrell grasped his hand.

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, breaking the silence of the juniors. "Bai Jove, deah boys, I wegard this as weally we-markable!"

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ONE
PENNY.

THE TWENTY-FIFTH CHAPTER.

A Merry Christmas.

JOEY PYE said that he had said so all along.

The mystery of Darrell, the acrobat, was explained now.

But that Joey Pye had foreseen such a denouement, and that he had said anything of the sort all along, was a statement which Samson, the Strong Man, characterised as "rot."

Joey generally had said everything all along, as a matter of fact.

Darrell told the signor and Joey and Samson the story afterwards—how he had been in his brother's business, and how the irksome restraints of the office had troubled his wandering nature, and how he had been reckless, careless, neglectful of business, till at last there was trouble, and the brothers parted on bitter terms.

But it was forgotten and forgiven now.

Even in Darrell's most cheerful moments there had always been a cloud upon his face, but that cloud was lifted now. He admitted that he had been wild and unreliable in earlier days, but the wild nature was very affectionate, and he had felt the parting from his people keenly.

He was going to his brother's house for Christmas now, and on that day the circus would miss him. There was, of course, to be no performance of the circus on that day.

"I congratulate you, sonny!" said Mr. Joey Pye, slapping the acrobat on the shoulder. "But I hope you are not going to chuck the trapeze and go back to the desk."

Darrell smiled, and shook his head.

"He can't!" said Signor Tomsonio promptly. "There's such things as contracts, Joey, my boy, and I'm not parting with Darrell."

"I don't want to go," said Darrell. "I've been down on my luck more than once in my strolling life, but I feel as if I'm in port now."

"Well expressed, my son!" said Mr. Pye, taking a deep draught at his tankard. "You are in port, and I'm in beer—ahem!"

Darrell laughed.

"I shall stick to the circus," he said. "So long as you want me here, signor, I stay, and so long as all our friends are here I don't think there'll be a happier family than Tomsonio's Circus Company."

"Right-ho!" said Jack Talbot. "And I hope we shall stick together for a long time."

"Yes, indeed!" said Clotilde softly.

"What-ho!" said Mr. Pye, dreamily taking the signor's tankard, his own being empty. "What-ho! Them's my sentiments—"

"But that's not your beer!" growled the signor.

"Christmas comes but once a year!" said Mr. Pye, with a sigh. "Our young friends here"—he bowed to Tom Merry & Co.—"our young friends are breaking-up to-morrow. Gentlemen, there comes a time when we must all break up, but may that time never find us without a can of beer and a pipe of baccy!"

And Mr. Pye finished the signor's beer to that hearty toast.

Mr. Gore shook hands most heartily with his brother when they parted, and Darrell walked to the station with Gore and his father.

Tom Merry & Co. tramped home to St. Jim's in great spirits.

"Jollay nice people, you know!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy remarked. "And fancy Goah findin' his uncle there! I wegard that as we-markable."

And the juniors agreed that it was.

Darrell's face was very cheerful as he came back to the circus after walking to the station with his elder brother and his nephew.

Joey Pye gave him a cheerful grin.

"All sereno?" he asked.

Darrell nodded.

"Yes, all sereno," he said.

Darrell went into his caravan. Mr. Pye walked back towards the supper-tent with Jack Talbot. Packing was going on over all the encampment—the circus was to take the road again at dawn.

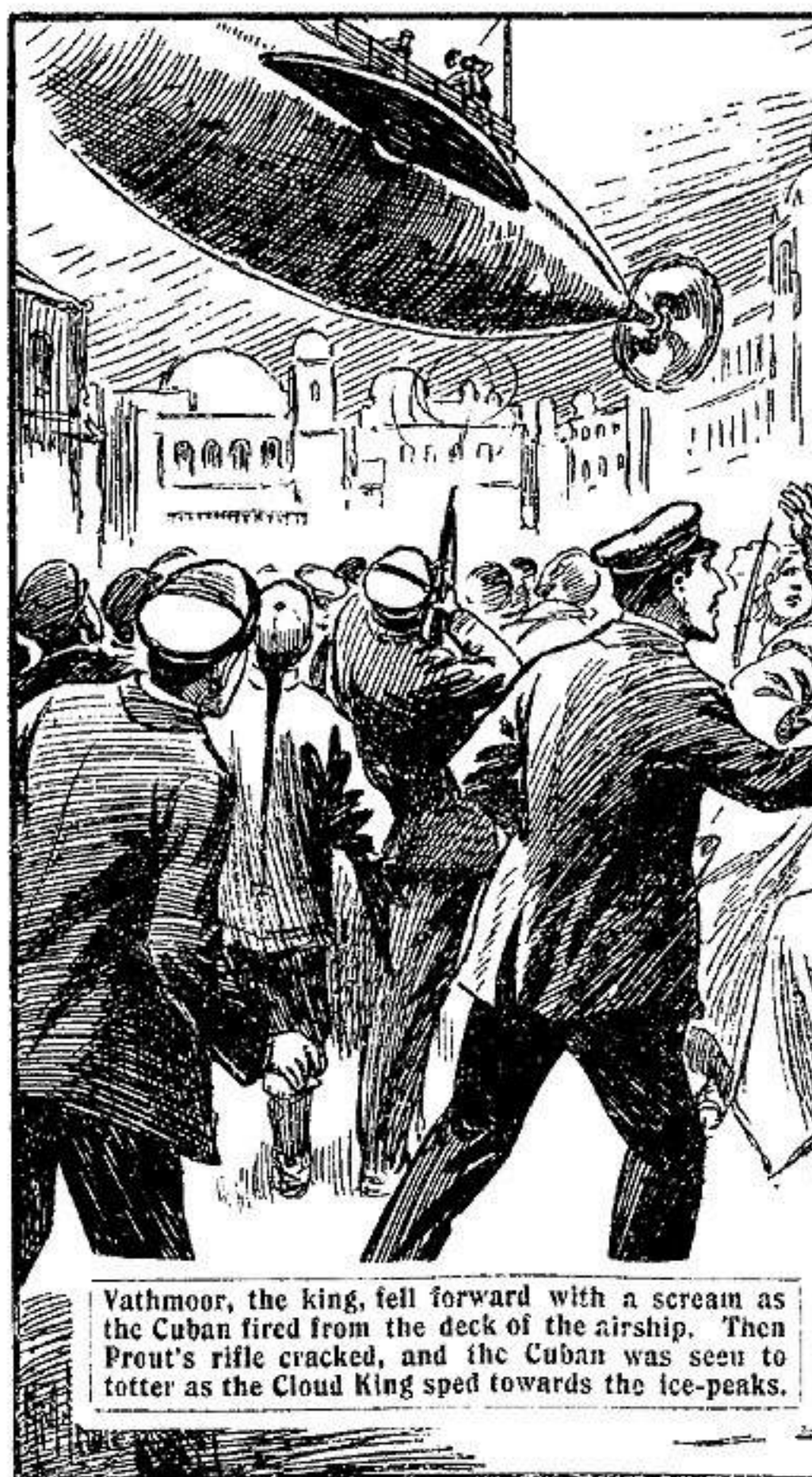
"Here to-day and gone to-morrow," said Mr. Pye; "but so long as we're all together what does it matter?"

"Good-night, Jack, and a Merry Christmas!"

And Christmas, when it came, was merry enough at Tomsonio's Circus.

THE END.

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Vathmoor, the king, fell forward with a scream as the Cuban fired from the deck of the airship. Then Prout's rifle cracked, and the Cuban was seen to totter as the Cloud King sped towards the ice-peaks.

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When Professor Hugley, the renowned American scientist, startles the world by announcing that he is off to find the North Pole in his wonderful air-craft, the Cloud King, there is only one man who dares to enter the lists against him on behalf of Great Britain, and that man is Ferrers Lord, the famous millionaire and inventor. Lord pits his wonderful submarine, the Lord of the Deep, against the Cloud King in the most amazing race the world has ever seen; the goal is the North Pole, and the prize a million pounds!

The preliminaries are soon settled, a judge is appointed to accompany each of the competitors, and the great race commences.

With Ferrers Lord are Ching-Lung, Rupert Thurston, and Gan Waga, an Eskimo, while Hugley is accompanied by Paraira, a Cuban, and Estebian Gacchio, a huge negro. These latter soon show themselves in their true colours, and the Cloud King no sooner reaches the region of ice than Hugley, and such of the crew as are loyal to him, are murdered, and Paraira and Gacchio assume control of the airship.

Ferrers Lord reaches the Pole through an underground tunnel which he discovers, and finds there a beautiful city called Shazana. They are welcomed by Vathmoor, the king. The Cloud King arrives at the Pole exactly twenty-four hours twenty-eight minutes after the Lord of the Deep, and the papers, certifying that the race has been fairly won, are signed, in the presence of Vathmoor. Ferrers Lord arrests Gomez Paraira and Estebian Gacchio for murder on the high seas, but Paraira escapes to his airship. "Board her! Board her!" shouts Ferrers Lord to his crew, as the Cloud King rises from the ground.

(Now go on with the story.)

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Too late! With a whirr the vessel left the earth. Paraira leaned over the rail, revolver in hand. He fired, and a scream answered the shout.

It came from the lips of Vathmoor, the king. He fell forward over the little table to the ground, his armour clanking as he fell. Then Prout's rifle sprang to his shoulder.

Crack!

They saw the Cuban totter forward; they heard his cry. Figures moved across the deck carrying a body. Prout rarely missed. Ferrers Lord was kneeling beside the king, watched by hundreds of frightened eyes.

It had all happened with amazing quickness. The frightened citizens looked on in stupefaction. Vathmoor lay where he had fallen. The winged vessel was speeding backward toward the ice-peaks, and Estebian Gacchio was a prisoner.

"By hoky!" growled Prout, shaking his fist at the Cloud King. "A nice clean job we've made of it to let 'em wriggle out of our hands like that! Never mind, we've got the black haythen, at any rate."

A dark, angry frown was on the millionaire's face. He raised Vathmoor to his seat.

"Is it bad?"

"No, Ching. The chain-armour was too tough for the bullet. I should say he has broken a rib or two, all the same. Give me your flask, and get me a litter of some kind."

"THE DUFFER'S RETURN!" By FRANK RICHARDS.

His eyes were stern as they met the prince's glance.
"It's a black day for Shazana," he drawled meaningly.
"Prout, Maddock, keep the people back there!"

A sullen, threatening murmur ran through the crowd. They thought their king was dead. They began to string their bows and shake their spears threateningly. The millionaire shouted to them that their king was still living. A few drops of brandy forced between the clenched teeth brought the king to himself. He stirred and opened his eyes.

"Where am I? I feel strange and dizzy. What has happened?"

"An accident, king," said the millionaire. "Take courage! It was not we who harmed thee, but thy people look at us blackly. Tell them, Zedi, that we are thy friends."

Leaning heavily on the millionaire's strong arm, Vathmoor tottered to his feet.

"My children," he said, "be not angry with these strangers, our guests, for they are my friends. Our foes are they who came in the strange bird-vessel. They came as robbers and pirates to steal our treasures. But these be friends of thy king. We have eaten the same bread. Treat them, then, my children, as guests to be honoured."

They raised a hoarse cheer. A litter was brought, and the king, who was half fainting, was lifted on to it.

"Back to the ship!" said Ferrers Lord. "Take that murderer with you—No, he had better go to the palace!"

"Why to the palace?" asked Ching-Lung. "He might slip through our fingers."

"I will explain when I return. I have my reasons."

He tore a sheet of paper from his notebook and wrote on it:

"To Senor Gomez Paraira,—Your comrade, Estebian Gacchio, whom I have arrested for murder, is imprisoned in the palace. If you make one hostile movement against the city, he will be shot immediately, without trial."

"FERRERS LORD."

He pinned the paper to the flagstaff.

"But there are a thousand chances to one he will see this," said Thurston.

"We will make sure of his seeing it," said the millionaire quietly. "You struck hard, Ching. The cur is still unconscious!"

A litter was obtained, and they carried Gacchio to the palace. The Lord of the Deep lay submerged in the channel.

A telephone had been rigged from the vessel to the shore. She rose as Ferrers Lord spoke his message into the instrument. They went aboard, and she sank again.

"Gentlemen," drawled the millionaire, bowing, "may I request your company in the state-room in half an hour?"

Ferrers Lord went below, but the others remained in the wheel-house, talking together.

Matters had taken an alarming turn, for at last Paraira had openly shown his hand. Van Witter alone rather took the Cuban's part than otherwise. He protested that Ferrers Lord had gone too far.

"I guess I know a bit about the law," he drawled. "I admire and respect Mr. Lord, and I am proud to call him my friend. But in a case like this all nations have the same law. This Gacchio murdered a man on the high seas. Now, any court of justice, for the needs of justice, would say that any vessel travelling in the air was exactly the same thing as one travelling in water."

"We don't want to deny that," said Thurston.

"Waal, let me get on a bit further. The law which all civilised nations accept under these circumstances is this: When a man commits a crime on a vessel, his captain may put in at any port where there is a recognised court of justice, and there hand his prisoner over to be tried. But you can't call Shazana such a place. I say Lord acted wrongly in using force. He ought to have made Paraira promise to deliver up the prisoner at the nearest civilised port. I say the Cuban did quite right to resist."

Ching-Lung and Thurston smiled at each other.

"It sounds very nice, old chap," said the prince; "but you'll change your views pretty soon—eh, Rupert?"

The telephone-bell tinkled.

"You're wanted below, gentlemen!" said Prout, saluting. Ferrers Lord was standing with his back to the fire, smoking a cigar.

"Please sit down," he said.

He paced up and down, with his hands clasped behind him.

"Sir Clement," he said slowly, "I received one of your messages. I regret that I was unable to help you at the time. I have a question to ask you. What is your candid opinion concerning the death of Professor Hugley?"

"That he was murdered by Gacchio and the Cuban!"

"What?" roared Van Witter, leaping to his feet.

"That he was murdered!" said the pale-faced baronet. "I am convinced of it. I have lived a life of nameless horror on that ship. Of course, I have no proofs, but the

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NEXT
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ONE
PENNY.

circumstances speak for themselves. The other men, who died mysteriously, were the only honest men in the crew. The rest are hang-dog villains, the scum of gaols!"

"But in the name of everything that is impossible, why should they murder Hugley?"

"I think I can answer that question in a way that will astound you," said Ferrers Lord quietly. "Now that the race is won, I can speak openly. Gacchio and Paraira belong to the League of the Circles."

Van Witter whistled. He had often heard of the great secret society and the enormous power wielded by it.

"Practically the League now owns the Cloud King. They wanted poor Hugley out of the way. Their first plan is to make Cuba independent. Their first blow will be struck against your own fleet."

The startled Yankee whistled again.

"And, by hokey," he said, "I was sticking up for the two blackguards just now!"

"I think I told you you would change your mind," said Ching-Lung.

The millionaire paced the room again.

"Gentlemen," he drawled, "I want your best advice. Matters have reached a crisis. Paraira may be dead, though such fiends take a lot of killing. He and his ruffians must be furious at losing the race. They will do one of two things—either abandon Shazana at once, or attack the city and loot it. We have been made welcome here, and I consider we owe Vathmoor a return for his kindness. What shall we do? Think well before you answer. We are not a match for the Cloud King. Shall we risk our vessel and our lives in trying to aid Vathmoor, or shall we sail at once and leave Shazana to its fate?"

"Stay!" cried Ching-Lung. "We're not going to run away!"

"And what do you think, Rupert?"

"By Jove," answered Thurston, "I'm with Ching! Stay, by all means!"

The millionaire smiled. He had been certain of their replies before he put the question.

"The choice does not lie with us," he drawled, "but with our guests."

"Waal, I guess you can put me down as a lodger!" drawled Van Witter.

Sir Clement Morwith fidgeted uneasily in his chair as he saw them looking at him inquiringly.

"Gentlemen," he said, "you'll think me a coward!"

"I hope not!"

"But you will! I am a coward! Those awful weeks aboard that death-ship have broken me down. I start at a sound—at a shadow. My nerves are utterly shattered and run down. Besides, I am an English statesman. I do not think we are justified in taking the law into our own hands, except in self-defence. Of course, I have no real say in the matter, but I protest against it. I will stay, with pleasure; but I shall be a mere spectator, and take no part."

He bowed and left the room.

"The coward!" said Rupert contemptuously.

"Do not think it, Rupert," said the millionaire, shaking his head. "The man is ill, and I cannot wonder at it. Sir Clement is no coward but a brave man. Let him do just as he likes. I have nothing to do with the law at all. Do you feel any qualms, Van Witter?"

"Never a qualm," laughed the Yankee, "but a big thirst! Let's break a bottle of wine in honour of the declaration of war!"

Ching-Lung rang the bell, and the champagne was brought.

"Here's wishing that the blackguards won't clear away South!" said Van Witter.

Thurston slapped him on the back.

"That's the way to talk! Fill up again! Here's to the happy day when we hang Paraira and his crew!"

"Hear, hear!" cried Ching-Lung.

"And may that day come quickly!" drawled Ferrers Lord. "It will be a happy one for the earth! Ching, I want you to write me out a few messages. The post leaves in half an hour."

"What kind of messages, old chap?"

"Duplicates of the one I left on the staff. Here's a copy. While you are doing that I will get the postmen ready."

He took a box and a small iron bottle from the drawer. The box contained a couple of dozen toy balloons, packed flat, and the bottle compressed hydrogen-gas, one of the lightest and most buoyant gases known to science. The balloons were made of gold-beaters' skin, one of the few substances almost impervious to gas, and much superior to varnished silk.

As he inflated balloon after balloon from the bottle, they soared up to the ceiling.

"So those are your postmen?" said Van Witter.

"Yes. I arranged with poor Hugley that if either of us

got into serious difficulty, we should let out a lot of these aerial messengers, so that we could help each other if possible. They will come in useful now. Paraira is certain to find one of them. No doubt it will be labour in vain. I am afraid his love for Gacchio will not keep him from attacking the town. He could wreck it in a few hours."

Ching-Lung looked up from his writing, and, pursing his lips, began to blow softly.

The balloons, unable to rise any higher, hung motionless against the ceiling.

"It's a ghastly idea!" said the American. "Nobody but a fiend incarnate would think of massacring these poor people! What will he get by it?"

"Treasure," drawled Ferrers Lord. "The city is full of it."

"And we can't stop him?"

"Only by sheer luck. We can't fight an airship. There are a few doubtful chances in our favour. The machinery was never really perfect, and Morwith informs me that they have had great trouble with it from the start. If the machinery failed and they had to come to ground, then, of course, we should have every advantage. It is a slender hope, however. In the air she is too strong. We have no chance."

Thurston burst into a laugh.

"Ching doesn't seem to think so. Look at his answer to your last remark."

They joined in the laugh as they glanced up. The balloons had ranged themselves across the ceiling, forming the one word: "Rats!"

"Then you imagine we have a hope, prince?"

"You bet!" grinned Ching-Lung. "They'll try to torpedo us, but they can't follow us under water. We can dodge about until we catch them napping."

"And long before we do that," said Thurston, "Shazana may be a smoking ruin."

"I am afraid so," drawled Ferrers Lord sadly.

The balloons were captured, and a slip of paper attached to each one by means of a silk thread.

Ching-Lung mysteriously extracted a fan from the champagne-bottle, and began to wave it in the air.

The balloons circled round him so swiftly that he looked as if he were standing in the centre of a rapidly revolving wheel.

They followed him out of the room, up the companion-way.

The vessel rose to the surface, and the glass door was opened. The Cloud King had vanished and the sky was blue and speckless. A soft breeze was gently rippling the water.

Still the balloons fluttered round Ching-Lung, obeying every wave of the fan.

"Let them go!" drawled Ferrers Lord.

"Off with you!" laughed the prince.

The little flotilla soared upwards into the clear air, and, fanned by the perfumed breeze, drifted away towards the glistening peaks. Ferrers Lord looked sadly at the city.

"Lovely Shazana!" he muttered. "City of wonders and beauty! What will be your fate?"

Ching-Lung touched him on the shoulder. It was like an answer to the question he had whispered to himself.

Poised over the ice peaks, black, threatening, and terrible, hung the Cloud King!

The First Shot at Shazana.

Almost as swiftly as it had appeared, the vessel had sunk swiftly out of sight. With his arm hanging in a bloodstained sling, his handsome face livid and distorted with pain and rage, Gomez Paraira stared at the city.

The agony of the wound made him curse and gnash his teeth. It was like a red-hot needle searing and burning his flesh. He had only been roughly and clumsily treated, and the fierce pain maddened him.

In the wheel-house his followers were drinking heavily. He had been cursed and threatened when he expostulated with them.

He had not the giant negro to stand by him now. The men had dreaded Gacchio, but they were not afraid of him.

They sang, and yelled, and laughed, and drank. Paraira knew that it was dangerous to interrupt them in their carouse.

If he angered them, a knife-stab, or a pistol shot might end his life. They had got beyond him. Drink turned them into wolves.

One of the little balloons floated past, and he bellowed for a net. He was told, with a volley of oaths, to go and get one for himself. He whipped out a revolver, and knives were dragged out of their sheaths.

"You dogs!" he yelled, and he levelled his revolver.

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A bottle, hurled by one of the men, struck the weapon from his hand.

"Well thrown, Jose Carajo! A neat shot!"

"You dogs!" snarled the maddened Cuban. "I could lash the life out of you!"

"We might lash it out of you, capitano! We are all equal here—eh, comrades?"

"All equal, Carajo? We should think so! We'll have no bullying, senor. Yes, we are dogs, and we have teeth! Keep your weapons in your belt, capitano. Bah, drink with us!"

Paraira turned on his heel, cursing. He could do nothing with them in their present temper. It was wise to let them alone and let them drink themselves to sleep. What he dreaded was a fatal fight amongst them. He could not afford to lose a man. He was short-handed already.

No one was at the wheel, and only the suspensory screws were working to keep the vessel up.

She hardly moved at all in the light, wavering breeze. He got a light net attached to a long bamboo pole. A balloon was floating within easy reach, travelling a little faster than the aeronef.

After one or two failures he secured it. An evil smile crossed his lips as he read it. Then he broke into a callous laugh.

"So they think that a threat like that will keep me back! Caramba, as if I care a jot whether Gacchio lives or dies! Let them shoot him! And yet he was useful to me. Death of my life, I will send an answer! Jose!"

"What do you want?" growled a voice.

"Rouse yourself, man! They say they will shoot Gacchio if we fire at the city!"

There were roars of drunken laughter.

"It will be one the less to divide the loot among!" growled Jose. "Caramba, the sooner the merrier! Fill your glasses, comrades!"

And then he began to sing:

"For to-night we'll merry be,
To-morrow we'll be sober."

"Take the wheel," said Paraira, "and I'll send back a message. After that you may drink until you poison yourself!"

Jose rose with a growl. A second man grumblingly tied four pieces of string to the corners of a handkerchief, and weighted it with a cartridge, forming a little parachute. Paraira scrawled a message. With her pinions beating the air the aeronef neared the city.

The little parachute went sailing gracefully down.

"Curse those rags!" snarled the Cuban, pointing to the flags flying in the market square. "Turn the gun on them!"

The gun was run out and trained. With a roar it spat out its shell.

A cloud of dust and smoke arose, which the breeze slowly swept away. Paraira uttered a cry of triumph.

The shattered flagstaff had toppled over, and the flags were ablaze.

Night fell and the Lord of the Deep lay at the bottom of the channel, snugly protected by torpedo nets. Every now and again her brilliant searchlights pierced the water, and circled slowly round.

Ferrers Lord had taken every precaution for the safety of his vessel. He knew that he was fighting against a crafty and implacable enemy; he knew that Gomez Paraira would give his right hand to destroy the Lord of the Deep.

A torpedo attack was what he dreaded. Though the nets would protect the vessel, an explosion might block up the channel and imprison them, leaving them helpless.

Ferrers Lord did not intend to be caught like a rat in a trap. At eight o'clock the vessel moved towards the open sea, rising at intervals, like a duck, to watch for her foe.

Strange lights—the lights of the aurora—occasionally flickered across the sky, and danced over the ice peaks.

The millionaire himself was at the helm. Ching-Lung, Van Witter, and Thurston stood beside him.

"I should like to run ashore," said the prince, as the vessel leapt to the surface. "Do you think it's too risky?"

"No," drawled the millionaire; "it's too dark for that. I intend to go ashore myself and see the king. You may come with me, Ching, if you wish it. Rupert can look after the boat. I am still very uneasy. Paraira puzzles me. It is strange that he has not already commenced his attack on the town."

"How do we know he isn't dead?"

"No such luck, I reckon," drawled Van Witter. "But how will you go ashore?"

"In the launch," answered the millionaire. "Get ready there to move the nets, Rupert," he added, glancing at his

watch. "It's exactly eight-thirty. Rise every half-hour. When you see two lights on the quay, you will know we are returning. Now, Ching, don't forget your revolver!" The Lord of the Deep sprang to the surface, and the nets were folded back.

Then the launch was dropped noiselessly into the water, and as she sped away in the direction of the dark city the vessel sank once more beneath the placid water.

"It may be that Paraira is badly wounded," drawled Ferrers Lord as they sped across the water towards the city of Shazana. "If that is so, of course, the attack will be delayed, for he is surely not mad enough to trust the command to one of his blackguardly pirates!"

"Then you expect him to attack and loot the city?" asked Ching-Lung.

"I do, old chap. I turn sick at the thought of the horrors that must follow. It would be a good thing if we could persuade the king to evacuate the town."

"With all his people?" asked Ching-Lung in surprise. "Where could he go to?"

"They would be safe among the ice peaks. And yet the idea is horrible. The best thing I can advise the king to do is to come to terms with Paraira. All these villains want is treasure. To save his city and the lives of his subjects he ought to give everything up. But I fear it is no good trying to persuade him or make him understand the deadly meaning of shells. He would laugh at us if we told him that a handful of men could knock his city about his ears in a few brief hours. We can do no more than our best."

Ching-Lung sighed as he conjured up the awful vision of slaughter and destruction. The pale aurora danced for a moment behind the peaks, and lit up the sky.

"Hark!"

They stared upwards with a strained gaze. A faint humming noise filled the air. High above them sailed a black shape. It was not moving in a straight line, but round and round in an irregular circle.

"Nobody at the wheel," said the millionaire. "That explains it, Ching. The wretches are all drunk!"

"And yet we cannot get near them!" growled the prince. "It's galling! Are they out of range?"

It was hard to judge the distance in the uncertain light.

"I am afraid so," drawled the millionaire. "This gives me hope. Paraira cannot argue with those drunken fiends, for they would think no more of knifing him than drinking a glass of rum! By Jove, are they fighting among themselves?"

A pistol shot sounded, followed by yells, oaths, and a faint scuffling of feet.

Then a shrill scream of unutterable fear and horror rang through the night. A dark shape rushed down towards the sea. There was a splash, and silence.

"It was a man," said Ching-Lung hoarsely.

"One foe the less, Ching," he drawled. "An insult, a knife-stab, and death. That is how the brutes settle their quarrels. By Jove, he is not dead! Here, Ching, what are you going to do?"

Ching-Lung had heard a dull, gurgling moan. He flung off his blouse and wide trousers.

"I'm going to save him, if I can!" he said quietly.

"Would you save a venomous snake, Ching?"

"No; but I'd save a man, if I knew he was going to attempt to murder me the next instant."

Ferrers Lord was silent. The prince bent forward to listen. No sound came now but the buzzing of the Cloud King's suspensory screws and the faint lapping of the waves.

At the King's Palace—Escaped—The Unavailing Search for Estebian Gacchio—Ching-Lung Hears a Suspicious Sound—Ambushed and Captured—The Fiendish Cruelty of Gacchio.

Ferrers Lord smiled as Ching-Lung lowered himself into the water and swam noiselessly away.

Ten minutes passed, and the prince's hand caught the rail.

"Well?" asked the millionaire softly.

"I can't find the poor beggar."

"I hardly thought you would. He must be dead. A fall from such a height is fatal."

"But I heard him moan."

"So did I," drawled Ferrers Lord; "but that was ten minutes ago. You are a brave lad, Ching! Come in and dry yourself. You'll find towels in the locker. This seems to have frightened them into silence up there on that ghastly acroest."

Ching-Lung rubbed himself down and donned his clothes. His teeth chattered, for though the water was warm, the air was chilly. Shazana was wrapped in darkness, like a dead city, as they swept up the channel.

Then sentries kept them for a moment while the news of their visit was sent to the king.

"The king bids you enter, O slayer of the bears!"

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NEXT TUESDAY, The "Magnet." LIBRARY. ONE PENNY.

His majesty was reclining on a heap of cushions, and he feebly gave Ferrers Lord his hand.

Then there was a sudden shouting. Men appeared at the far end of the room carrying a figure in their arms.

"It's the man we left to guard Gacchio!" said Ching-Lung.

The millionaire's chin squared grimly.

"Yes," he drawled. "That is true."

They laid the body on the ground at his feet. He stooped over it. The face was hideously blackened, the eyes protruding, the tongue half bitten through.

"Strangled!" said Ching-Lung.

"Garroted! And Estebian Gacchio has escaped!"

There was no time to ask how Estebian Gacchio had escaped. The body of the man was still warm. Clearly the murderer could not be far away. Instant action was necessary, and Ferrers Lord was not the man to delay.

He snatched a torch from one of Vathmoor's warriors, and whipped out his revolver.

"Search—search!" he cried.

Torches flashed red on spears and naked swords as the body-guard rushed from the palace, and the torches shone red in the shrubbery of the gardens. Shout answered shout threateningly. Their angry voices told that Gacchio would receive no mercy if captured. His last crime had turned every man against him. They would hack him to pieces.

Ching-Lung's eyes were blazing with hate and anger. He had not forgotten the cruel murder of poor Lugard, and to shoot the negro down like a dog would be too merciful a justice. He outstripped them all, and plunged into the darkness of the garden.

He was a hundred yards ahead before he realised the folly of his action. Gacchio might be lurking anywhere, ready to spring, and Ching-Lung remembered the negro's superhuman strength. He heard Ferrers Lord's ringing voice.

"Come back, prince!" he called.

Ching-Lung reluctantly obeyed. The torches blazed like a row of lamps across the garden, the warriors standing in line ready for the word to advance.

"We are going to beat the ground properly and systematically," drawled Ferrers Lord. "All the chances are against his escape, unless he swims the channel. The draw-bridge is up, making the palace an island. We must hunt him as we hunt a wild beast."

He shouted an order. The line advanced through the dense shrubbery.

Spears stabbed down into every patch of cover that could conceal a man, and arrows hissed into the branches of every tree.

Slowly the man-hunters moved on. They gained the edge of the water. Again Ferrers Lord shouted.

The line re-formed and crossed to the left, stabbing with their spears and twanging their bows. Again the water, glowing crimson in the torch-glare, checked the advance. Then they split into half, and examined every archway and dark corner of the palace fruitlessly.

They met again on the other side, and beat the sloping terrace that ran down to the sea. They paused, baffled.

"He has made a swim for it," said Ching-Lung bitterly.

"I fear so, prince; but we must not despair. Go back to the Lord of the Deep, like a good fellow, and bring all the dogs we have. You do not mind, do you?"

"Mind!" said the prince. "I would walk to the end of the world barefooted to catch the murderer!"

"But be careful, Ching."

Ching-Lung laughed as he sped away. The millionaire glanced at his watch in the torchlight. The third half-hour would be up in six minutes. Ching-Lung would be just in time to signal to Thurston.

The prince kept to the path, and crossed the rustic bridge over which he had been thrown by order of Princess Nara, daughter of Vathmoor, King of Shazana. All his wonderfully-trained senses were alert. He ran noiselessly, for his felt slippers made no noise on the gravel.

Behind him the sky was red with the glow of the flaring torches, before him the darkness was like dark velvet. Every leaf hung motionless in the strange calm of the night, but the sea surged up on the pebbly shore with a restless sighing. He passed the pavilion where he had first heard Nara's voice. Faintly came a noise that brought him to a sudden stand, and made him catch his breath. It was the creaking of the door. So Estebian Gacchio was there!

Ching-Lung sank down and vanished like a ghost. He lay still for a moment, hardly daring to breathe, and wondering what to do. Should he go back and give the alarm? If he did so they might lose the murderer, for he might take to the water before they could surround the pavilion.

Gacchio was armed, for the dead sailor's revolver had vanished. In his eagerness Ching-Lung flung every thought of caution to the winds. Softly as a snake he glided forward,

his ears strained, and the pupils of his slanting eyes dilated in an effort to penetrate the darkness.

Little by little the outlines of the pretty pavilion became clearer. He could dimly see the windows and the pillars of the porch. Again he paused, with clenched teeth.

Rustle, rustle, rustle!

The sound was behind him. It was like the noise a finger-nail makes when it scrapes against cloth. And then he heard a panting, and the rustle, rustle once more. The blood began to boil in his veins. He felt that he was close to his foe. Estebian Gacchio had abandoned the pavilion, and was making for the sea. The next instant all doubts were set at rest as Ching-Lung's hand found a leather belt.

Rustle, rustle, rustle!

Worming forward as an eel worms through the water-weeds, Ching-Lung followed the sound. To spring up might have been fatal, for his yellow blouse might have betrayed him. He must sight his foe first, and then—

He held his revolver in his teeth by the trigger guard. The rustling grew fainter. Estebian Gacchio knew his work well. A dozen times his skill had saved his life when pursued by the Spanish in the woods and cane-brakes of Cuba.

Ching-Lung quickened his pace. The rustling had ceased. The next instant he bit his lip, and blamed himself for his clumsiness as a twig snapped noisily under the weight of his knee.

For a time he lay as still as death, his keen eyes peering through a clump of bushes. All was silent.

Then inch by inch he lifted his revolver. Ten yards away was a tree with low-spreading branches. Something black, shadowy, and round rose slowly—a man's head. It was followed by a pair of shoulders. In the gloom the figure was strangely indistinct, but it struck Ching-Lung that there was something odd and unnatural in the way it moved.

One of the arms seemed to be sticking out stiffly, and the other hung down at the figure's side. The man's back was turned towards him. He steadied his revolver. He could have shot the fellow dead. He had intended to, but now, at the crucial moment, he hesitated.

He could not shoot a man who was not facing him—he could not pull a trigger unless the chances were equal, and it was life wagered against life. Bitterly as he hated the man, though by every law of Heaven and man Estebian Gacchio deserved to die, Ching-Lung could not shoot.

"Hands up!" he cried. "I have you covered! Hands up!"

There was no answer—the figure did not move.

"Hands up, Gacchio!"

A giant figure rose like a ghost behind him; a blow from a huge fist struck Ching-Lung senseless to the ground. With a snarling laugh Estebian Gacchio seized his prisoner by the legs and dragged him towards the sea.

He looked back. Again the lights were flashing among the trees, again the angry shouts of Vathmoor's warriors rang through the trees.

"You dogs!" snarled the negro. "I have killed one of you to-night, and another is about to die!"

He raised Ching-Lung in both hands high above his head, and, planting one foot firmly, bent his muscular back for the throw.

His head was bent. His eyes caught sight of the tethered launch below him, and, with another laugh, he lowered his massive arms, and flung Ching-Lung like a sack over his shoulder.

"Carajo!" he growled. "Fortune favours the bold! Death of my life, Gacchio, fickle fortune smiles on you at last!" He spat in the direction of the advancing torches. "Snarl and snap, you curs, and howl in vain! Caramba! The game has caught the hunter to-night. Hang you, your city shall smoke for this!"

He leapt down into the launch, untethered her, and turned her seawards. He found a screened lamp burning, and opening the slide a little way, examined his prisoner. Ching-Lung was quite unconscious.

"You yellow imp!" growled the negro exultingly. "I'll make you rue the day you were born!"

A glance told him that some time would elapse before Ching-Lung would recover. Fastening the tiller amidships, and checking the speed, he looked round for a rope. There was rope in the lockers in plenty, tools, and two blocks of wood.

Gacchio grinned with fiendish delight.

(Another grand, long instalment of this thrilling adventure serial will be contained in next week's number of "THE MAGNET" Library. Order well in advance—Price 1d.)

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London, E.C.

YOUR EDITOR'S GOOD WISHES!

The first thing I have to say to you this week, my readers and friends, is that it is my sincere and heartfelt wish that you will, one and all, enjoy a very Merry Christmas and a Bright and Happy New Year! The festive season is nigh upon us now, and thoughts of Christmas and its attendant delights are in everyone's mind. The time is therefore a fitting one to introduce our Grand Christmas Double Number, which is now in your hands. The eagerly anticipated Bumper All-Story Number of our grand little paper is now an accomplished fact, and if it meets, as I am confident it will do, with the approval of my chums, I shall feel more than amply requited for the labour and care I have lavished upon the preparation of it.

NEXT WEEK'S GRAND FEATURES.

For next Tuesday, when, of course, THE MAGNET will return to its usual size and price, Frank Richards has written a special complete Greyfriars story, entitled:

"THE DUFFER'S RETURN."

You will all guess at once what it is about. Yes, Alonzo Todd comes back to Greyfriars! I know how welcome this news will be to hundreds of my readers who have inquired after the good-natured "Duffer" during his absence, while the amusing and original circumstances under which

"THE DUFFER'S RETURN"

takes place, will, I know, cause this story to rank with Frank Richards' very best.

In addition to the above-mentioned splendid story, you have next week to look forward to a

GRAND NEW AND ORIGINAL COMPETITION

for which I am offering as many as

50 MONEY PRIZES!

Altogether, next Tuesday's issue of THE MAGNET will be one that no reader should on any account miss, so please make sure of getting it by

ORDERING IN ADVANCE.

FROM THE WEEK'S POSTBAG.

Here are two pleasing little letters from one of my chums and his sister, both staunch readers of the famous companion papers, THE MAGNET and "The Gem" Libraries. Master George Leo writes as follows:

"40, Kent Road, Blackpool."

"Dear Editor,—My sister and I take 'The Gem' and THE MAGNET Libraries every week. We were very interested in the pranks Figgins & Co. played upon Tom Merry & Co. in 'The Gem'."

"I do wish old Inky would return in THE MAGNET, and Alonzo Todd as well. I hope Dick Penfold will be 'true blue,' as Wally would say, and become a chum of Bob Cheery and Harry Wharton & Co."

"I would very much like to correspond with a constant reader of both 'THE MAGNET' and 'The Gem.' My sister also requests me to ask you to please help us to find one. I will now close my letter, wishing your paper every success. With many thanks from

GEORGE R. LEO.

"P.S.—I must not forget to praise the serial 'Deen Sea Gold.' I would like to change places with Dick Dauntless."

And here is Miss Edith's little note:

"Dear Editor,—I write these few lines to say, as my brother has evidently forgotten it, that I quite agree with E. Nelis's idea, published in 'The Gem,' of having a 'chat page' in THE MAGNET."

"The elegant Gussy and his rascal of a brother Wally are my favourite characters in 'The Gem.' I think it is extremely funny for Fatty Wynn to sell his side for a steak-and-kidney pie.—With many thanks, yours truly,

EDITH LEO."

Many thanks to you both, Master George and Miss Edith!

THE EDITOR.

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£10,000 PRIZES
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XMAS AND NEW YEAR CARDS.

We give you Free a real Talking Machine, Watch, Accordion, Rifle, Football, Auto Harp, Clock, Cinematograph, or any other valuable Present which you can select from catalogue containing over 300 Free Prizes; also a box of 100 Toys, Games, and Tricks. Simply send us your name and address, and we will send you an assortment of beautiful Xmas and New Year Cards, with folders. Sell or use what you can at one penny each. You need only sell or use 12 cards, and we reward you with prize from list. We trust you 28 days with cards. **IT COSTS YOU NOTHING TO TRY.** Don't delay. Write at once.

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written by a man who knows boy nature thoroughly. Sixteen pages of wholesome humour, happily illustrated, and in addition a "Manual of Arms," "A Few Hints on Shooting," and "The Target and How to Score." Of course it tells about the Daisy Air Rifle, a "real" gun for boys, that furnishes endless amusement and at the same time gives that true training and development of hand, nerve and eye that makes for healthy, successful manhood. The "Daisy" is modelled after the latest hammerless rifle and shoots accurately, using compressed air instead of powder. No smoke, no noise, and perfectly safe in the hands of any boy.

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MARTIN CLIFFORD

—Author of "The Stars of the Circus," also writes a Splendid, New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co., entitled

"THE RAIDING OF THE RIVAL SCHOOL,"

in this week's number of

"THE GEM" LIBRARY. 1D.

Every Thursday.

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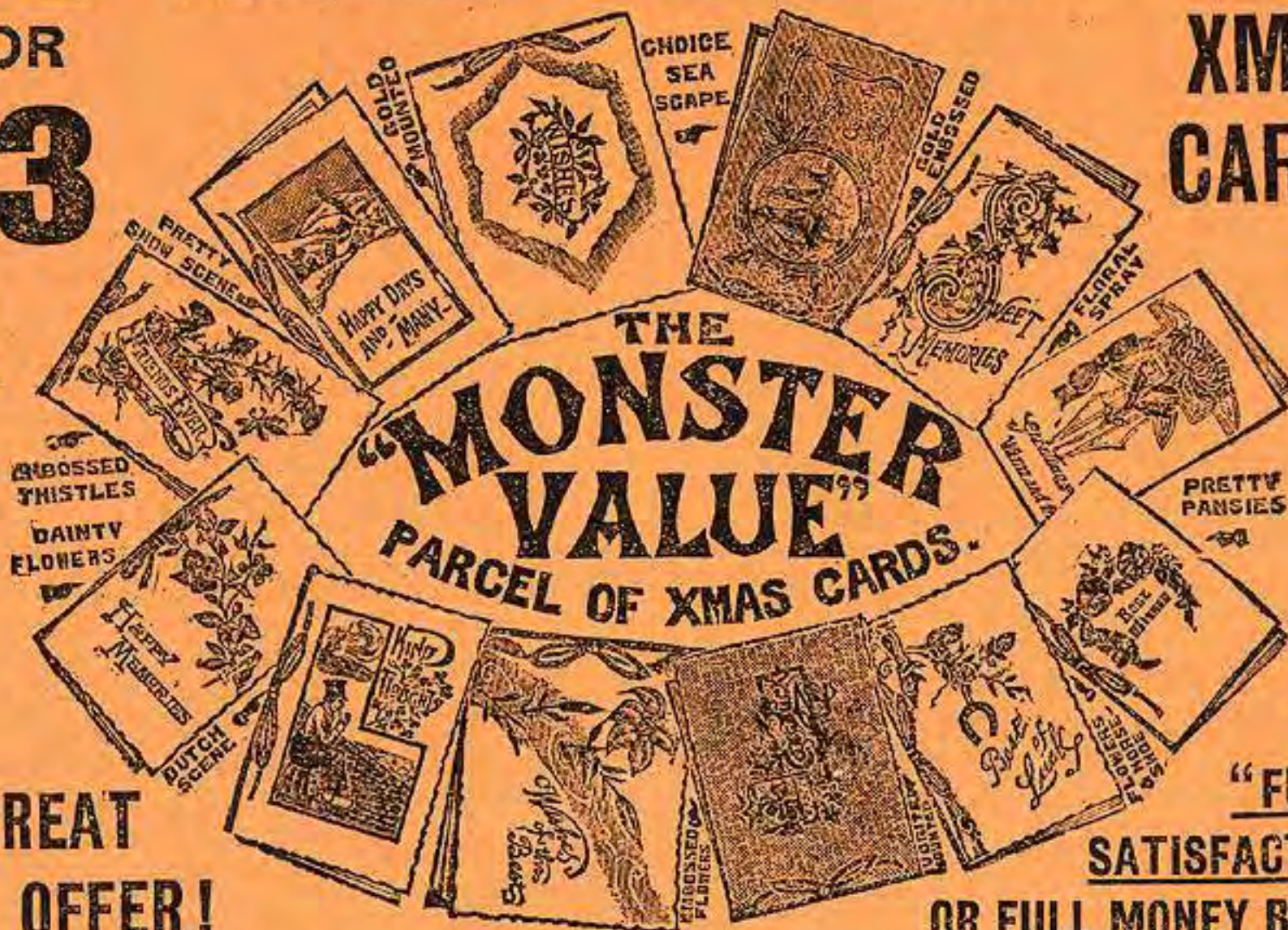
READ THIS TESTIMONIAL!

Thousands similar constantly reach us; numbers of which are printed in our catalogues. Write for same right away.

M—P. C. MITCHELL, of 40, Clayton Road, Peckham, London, S.E., writes:—"A friend of mine (a shopkeeper) was very much surprised at the prices of your Cards and other things, saying they were much cheaper than she can buy them wholesale." See below. 7/6 for 1/3!

25

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CARDS**



**A GREAT
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The Cards in this Parcel are **ALL BOOKLETS**, finished with **SILK CORD** or **RIBBON**. All are of the Favourite and Popular "Private Greeting" Style, and if bought in the usual retail way would cost 7/6, but we do a wholesale system trade direct to the public. (See Testimonial above.) Those not writing for this parcel will be missing something really good. There are cards for all tastes, nearly all are expensive **ART PARCHMENT** Cards, including **GOLD-MOUNTED, PHOTO-MOUNTED, EMBOSSED, VIEW, FLORAL**, etc., favourite designs (twelve of which we illustrate in miniature), and all are **ART TINTED**, or in **NATURAL COLOURS**, and all different. **FREE ENVELOPES**. To save you trouble and expense, envelopes are sent free for all Cards that will not go in ordinary envelopes.

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* Please write Mr., Mrs., Miss, or Master, etc., in front of your name.

**7/6
FOR
1/3
POST FREE**