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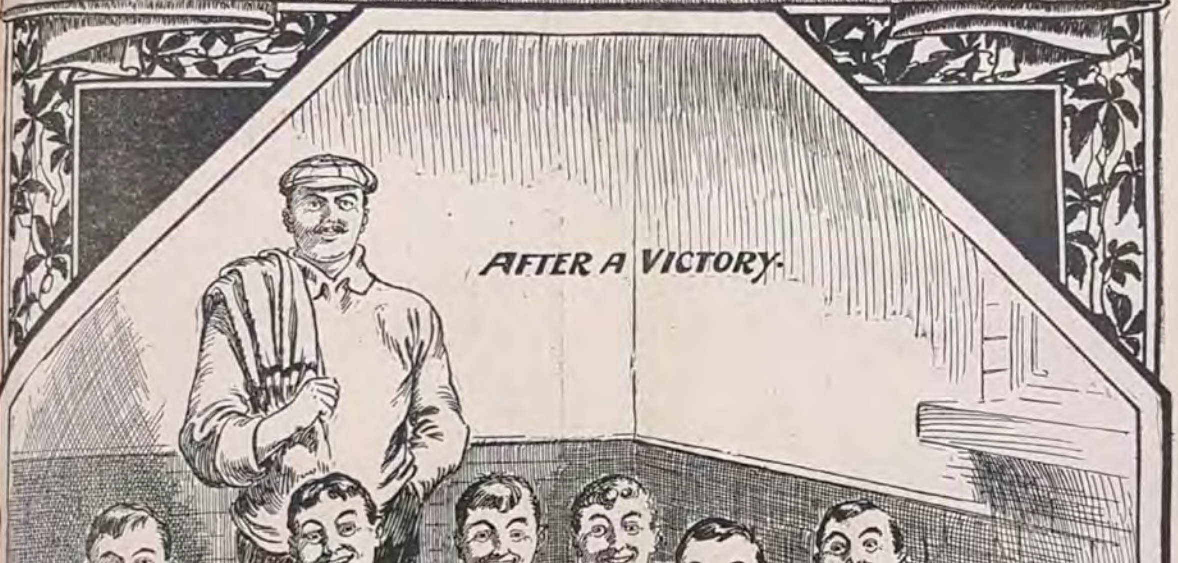
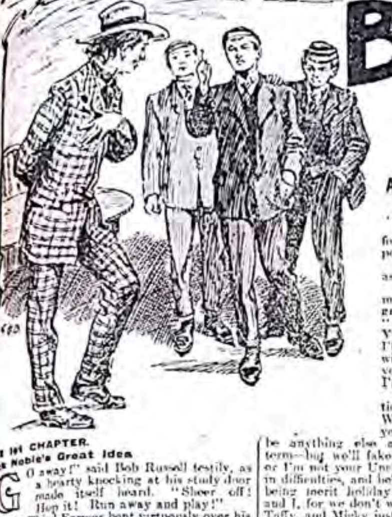


AFTER A VICTORY.

OUT TO WIN

A STIRRING TALE OF THE FOOTBALL FIELD & NELSON LEE.

No. 434. Vol. IX.] EVERY SATURDAY—ONE PENNY. [Week Ending September 24, 1910.



BILLY FLIPP'S BENEFIT

A COMPLETE STORY OF JACK NOBLE AND PELHAM SCHOOL.

THE 1st CHAPTER.
Jack Noble's Great Idea.

"GO away!" said Bob Russell testily, as a hearty knocking at his study door made itself heard. "Sheer off! Hop it! Run away and play!"

And the Third-Former bent virtuously over his task, which, by the way, consisted of two hundred lines for "cheeking" Mr. Slaney.

"I refuse to sheer off!" came a polite voice through the panels. "Let me in, you silly juggins! Something I want to jaw about," it added after a momentary pause.

Russell hesitated, and on his face was an expression of profoundest mental agony. If the owner of that voice was Clifford—as he was rather inclined to fancy—then Clifford was a considerably greater actor than he had ever shown signs of being. On the other hand, if it were really the only Jack Noble in person, then Jack was hardly himself this evening. It was not like him to make a speech when he wanted admittance; usually, one cheery word sufficed him. In his doubt, Russell may not be blamed for sticking obstinately to his table.

"Are you going to let me in?" demanded the voice. "If you're not, I shall turn the key from this side! I've got a pair of pliers, let me tell you!"

"Right-ho! Ply away!" Russell chuckled silently, and opened his drawer. From its deepest recesses he withdrew a curious object—an object which resembled nothing so much as a glass tube, with indiarubber bulb attached, such as is used to fill fountain-pens. Was Robert about to fill a fountain-pen now? It looked like it, for he carefully dipped the point of the tube into his ink-bottle.

From the keyhole came a scraping, fumbling sound. On tiptoe Russell approached the door, and his hand, stained with noble evidence of honest labour, reached for the key. As noiselessly as if the metal were so much cotton-wool, the key was withdrawn from its cell, and something was inserted in its place.

"I shall be inside in ten seconds!" said the mysterious voice warningly.

The pliers worked desperately. Then there was a muffled exclamation, and Russell's good right eye informed its owner that they had been withdrawn, for the shape of the keyhole was suddenly painted in the light of the corridor gas. Hoping wicked hopes, Bob waited.

Ah! Once more the shape of the keyhole was blotted out. A low, tense breathing told Russell that the time for action had come. Thrusting the pen-filler as far forward as it would go, he squeezed the bulb.

A yell! A sound of frenzied dancing without! And Bob swiftly unlocked the door and stepped valiantly into the corridor—to stand there petrified.

"Great Jones!" he gasped. "Jack! Well, I'm——"

Mr. John Noble eyed him in mute reproach with one eye. The other was a mere blot of ink. Not content with effacing his eye, the base fluid had streamed down his cheek, coming to a decidedly slovenly full-stop half-way down his erstwhile immaculate collar.

"Half a mo'!" Russell nodded, and ran down the corridor, to reappear almost immediately bearing a bowl of water and a towel.

These he placed humbly on his table. And his chief, with never a word spoken, made use of them.

"All off?" queried Jack Noble at length. "Yes? Right—eh? Oh, dry up!" he rapped out, as his chum began to murmur apologies. "Don't waste time on that. I know you thought I was Cliffy. Pretty bad compliment that, by the way, but we'll let it pass. As I attempted to explain just now, I want to talk with you."

When Jack Noble looked as serious as he did now, there was only one thing to do, and that was to grant him the utmost attentiveness. Russell, therefore, strode across the room and re-locked the door.

"Read that," said Jack, fishing an envelope from his pocket.

Russell's face grew serious as he did so.

"Poor old Flipp!" he muttered, returning the grimy scrap of paper. "Poor old Billy Flipp! You'll help him, of course! I'll be glad to go halves with you, only I can't pay you till next term, Jack. I'm almost cleaned out!"

"We'll discuss the question of tin later, my son. We're most of us in your condition—could hardly be anything else at this late hour of the term—but we'll fake up some way of doing it, or I'm not your Uncle Noble. The poor chap's in difficulties, and he's got to be helped out. It being merit holiday to-morrow, we—just you and I, for we don't want to bother friends Mac, Taffy, and Micky just yet—will run out to Charbury and jaw matters over with Billy."

"Good old Jack!" Russell's eyes shone with affectionate admiration.

"Oh, rather! Your Uncle Jack's a noble—er, pardon, I didn't mean that! I should say, a fine fellow!" Jack went to the door, and paused to look back warningly. "Mind," he said, whispering, "that the sweet Cliffy doesn't get wind of this! Be careful!" Then he vanished.

Taffy Evans, the Welshman; Macalpine, the "Bra' Scottie," and Micky Murphy, of the Emerald Isle, were, separately and collectively, disgusted when their captain and his lieutenant slipped away immediately after breakfast the next morning. But they did not follow the unsociable ones, of course not. Jack rarely did things without a reason, they made haste to remind each other, and it was a pretty sure bet that this morning's conduct would quickly enough be justified. Was not their motto, "Trust in your Uncle Jack"? Of course! Then trust they jolly well would, to a man.

Besides, wasn't it possible that Jack's very desertion of them now might mean work for them later on? Oh, it had happened like that before! And his Welsh, Irish, and Scotch allies went off patiently to practise at the nets.

A two-mile walk brought Jack and Russell to the ancient village of Charbury. Charbury was not quite as extensive as London, and the chums had little trouble in unearthing the showman's marquee, which was their destination. The square, red-and-white striped structure stood on a piece of waste land. A flag, bearing the impressive name "Flipp," in green letters, flew gaily over the front of the tent.

"Where is the old beggar?" muttered Jack, as they strolled calmly into the stuffy interior. "Hi! Mr. Flipp! Show a light, Mr. Flipp!"

"Show a light?" came a pathetic voice from the far corner. "I honly wish Hi could! Billy Flipp's light 'as gone hout for good, hif you harsk me!"

And a thin, weary-looking man slouched out from behind a mountainous pile of packing-cases and boxes.

The chums' faces were serious as they shook hands with him.

"Jolly glad you thought of us, Mr. Flipp," said Jack, breaking a rather painful silence. "Jolly glad! If there's anything we can do, get it off your manly chest, Mr. Flipp. As it's nearly the end of the term I'm afraid we're all of us pretty well bankrupt, but——"

The showman heaved a prodigious sigh.

"Hi'm sorry to 'ear that," he said mournfully, "for Hi 'ad 'oped you'd be hable to negotiate a—a bit of a loan. That was why Hi wrote to you, young gents; but, of course, you hunderstand that. Honly two sov'reigns. That's hall Hi want to clear me. It's like this. Hi owe Goliath, my strong man, twelve bob; Peter, the sword swallower, fifteen bob; and Nigger, my darkey man-of-all-work, thirteen bob. Well, they've hall gone hoff in a 'uff, swearin' they won't do another stroke till Hi've paid 'em. Hit's rotten! Hif they'd honly wait till Saturday Hi'd pay 'em easy. Hi know we should do thumpin' good business this week, bein' so close to Pelham. But no. The silly jugginses won't stay and 'elp 'earn their hown money!"

"So that's the trouble, is it?" Jack's eye met Bob's perplexedly. Each knew what the other was thinking. Noble, Russell, & Co. united could not scrape together more than a sovereign that term. "Don't you worry, Mr. Flipp. We'll see you through, if we have to stop up every night this week. You did us some good turns, you know, when you were down here last. Hid us up from Cliffy and his mob, for example. By Jove! I've got it!"

Jack suddenly began to dance wildly.

"What on earth——" began Bob.

"Oh, we're all on the earth! Roberto, what do you think of this, my lad? We're going to take the place of Mr. Flipp's—ahem!—artistes!"

Mr. Flipp started. Bob coolly observed that Jack was an ass.

"I'm quite serious, I tell you, Mr. Flipp," went on Jack placidly. "You do not seem to be—ahem!—aware that my friends and, pardon me, myself, boast theatrical talents that can only be described as marvellous! Now, all you've got to do is, get out a few posters."

"B-but what——" stammered the amazed showman.

"'The Juvenile Jeniuses'—that's our professional name, and don't forget to spell it with a 'J'—will give their celebrated mixed entertainment in this marquee to-morrow afternoon and Saturday afternoon," announced Jack. "You get out some good, glaring posters in the meantime. Oh—er—doors open two thirty, commence at three. I dare say," he added thoughtfully, "we could manage two performances each afternoon. However, we'll see how things go first. Now, don't forget—a mixed entertainment." And the captain of the Pelham Third sauntered to the opening of the tent, dragging the gasping Russell with him.

"By Joopiter!" cried Mr. Flipp, staring after them. "Hi believe you mean hit!"

"We do," returned Jack calmly. "We're going to give a jolly good show for you, Mr. Flipp—singing, conjuring, gymnastics, and—and my pal Mac will deliver a discourse in Scotch! Posters, mind! Come on, Bob. Oh, we sha'n't be back again this afternoon, Mr. Flipp! We must have a rehearsal, as I'm afraid we haven't given our world-famed show since King George's command performance!"

And the Pelham Juniors vanished, leaving the showman with suspiciously moist eyes.

THE 2nd CHAPTER.
Clifford, the Corrector.

CLIFFORD, captain of the Fourth, bent his arm to rub his aching back. His back was aching because for the last twenty minutes he had been cooped up between a rain-barrel and the rear wall of the school gymnasium. From time to time Clifford raised his head cautiously, and peered with one eye through the bottom of the dusty window.

"At last!"

Clifford uttered the expression in a dramatic undertone. A number of figures had suddenly crossed the floor of the gym., and the door banged behind the last of them.

Clifford ducked hastily as a pair of arms shot forward, apparently from nowhere. The upper sash of the window was noisily lowered.

"Good!" muttered the cock of the Fourth. "Now I sha'n't have to strain my ears quite so much!" He grinned as he once more brought his right eye into action, and suddenly forgot that his back ached horribly.

"Ma dear, guid Jack!" said a voice within the gym. Its tone was one of excitement.

"That's Macalpine," murmured Clifford, with satisfaction.

"Phwat iver's the bhoy talkin' about, at all, at all?" exclaimed a second voice.

"Micky Murphy," murmured Clifford, with slightly greater satisfaction.

"Man Jack, what is it you're ramblin' about, whatever?"

At the sound of this third voice, Clifford chuckled, and rubbed his hands.

"Taffy Evans," he muttered happily. "Good indeed! They're all of 'em in it, as I expected! Oh, why, why aren't Prince and Marky, or some of those beggars here?"

As if in intelligent answer to this inaudible question, two heavy hands fell upon Clifford's shoulders, and that startled young gentleman screwed round to meet the curious and affable gaze of Messrs. Prince and Marker in the very flesh.

With his usual contrariness and ingratitude, Clifford angrily waved them away, and so fierce, so mysterious, were his gestures, that the rebuffed pair meekly obeyed.

They stood a dozen yards off, and watched their leader interestedly as he resumed his painful attitude of detective. After ten minutes, however, he straightened himself and stole on tiptoe towards them.

"That infantile ass Noble and his crowd are taking up theatricals, or a sort of theatricals," he said rapidly. "They're on the money-making lay, of course."

"It shall not be!" said Prince, gravely striking an attitude.

"No, it sha'n't. Just think! They've sucked up to some showman chap in Charbury, and borrowed his tent. Reckon they're going to fill it at twopence and threepence a head. Do you think," went on Clifford virtuously, "I'm going to have Pelham School disgraced by that sort of thing? No! I'm jolly glad I heard Noble fixing up that precious rehearsal in the gym."

Followed a brief council of war between the three. Then they linked arms and strolled towards the town, blessing the merit holiday which excused them from returning to school for tea.

At the beginning of the High Street the trio encountered Bayne and Bickett, but Clifford gave them no sign that there was, as Prince expressed it, business in hand, and the abandoned pair placidly continued their way.

Clifford conducted his men to the far outskirts of the old town, and suddenly ordered a halt outside an ancient and disreputable-looking hostelry, known to Pelhamites as the Star. Marker clutched his leader's arm nervously as that gentleman made a rapid dive for the swing doors.

"It's the kick-out if we're caught," he whispered fearfully.

"Pooh!" said Clifford. And throwing one arm around the conscience-stricken one and the other around Prince, urged them forward by main force. The risk of expulsion was, as usual, nothing to him.

The trio found themselves in the coffee-room. It was roomy and dusty and musty, and the stains on the round tables were not all coffee-stains, not by any means. The Star was not patronised by teetotallers, as a general rule. Indeed, Clifford had just explained that it was the favourite haunt of the third-rate "theatricals" who visited Pelham, when the door opened noisily, and a gentleman, who was unmistakably of that profession, entered.

Unmistakably, indeed! The gentleman was of medium height, remarkably thin, blue of chin, and long-haired. He wore a soft hat, a check suit that could almost be heard, and a flowing green tie—cravat, its owner would, no doubt, have called it. A short clay pipe protruded from the corner of his mouth, a pipe which, although it was empty, was even more audible than the check suit. And this striking person placed a mottled hand over the region of his heart, and bowed to Clifford.

"Hallo, Cripps!" said Clifford easily. "Hope you're well. Oh, shut up! I've no time to waste. It's like this. I knew you were in the town again, because I saw you the other day through that window. You're hard up, of course?"

"Broke to the wide," said Mr. Cripps dramatically. "Pro-ceed, I prithee!"

"I want you to find a couple of your pals—smartish chaps, mind, who can do a bit in the acrobatic way, and get up a show for the benefit of the villagers. Yes, only one performance, I expect, and I'll pay you a sovereign apiece out of the takings. Come over here."

And Clifford led his friend into a corner, and for some minutes they conversed in rapid whispers.

Then Clifford insinuated a coin into Mr. Cripps's palm, and the three Shellites cautiously made their way out into the street. As they sauntered along Clifford whispered to his companions as he had whispered to the actor, and, like that gentleman, Prince and Marker chuckled consumedly. There was no one like old Cliffy for putting a spoke in Jack Noble's wheel.

THE 3rd CHAPTER.
The Rival Show's Downfall.

"MON JACK, d'ye ken ye haven't told us yet what the nature of your ain bit performance is tae be? Is it a song, a Hieland fling, or what?"

Macalpine eyed his captain reproachfully as the band of Third-Form artists strode towards Charbury, and the scene of action.

They were all remarkably fit, in spite of the fact that they had consumed the midday meal at top speed, and they hoped to arrive at Billy Flipp's tent with a clear hour to spare before the doors—otherwise the flap—opened.

It was Jack's intention to conduct a second rehearsal, not that he doubted his troupe of Juvenile Jeniuses, but simply to give Billy a taste of their quality. It was the general opinion that the showman ought not to be kept in suspense a moment longer than could be helped.

"Ma braw, bonnie Scottie," said Jack, "I will allay your anxious fears. My turn is to be—well, I call it 'Baiting the Bear.' Now I hope you're satisfied?"

"Indeed, an' I'm no' satisfied at all," returned Mac. "What in the name of Sanger and Barnum is 'Baiting the Bear'? Ye have no bear that I ken of."

Jack grinned, and held aloft the big green-baize bag he had been carrying slung over his shoulder. Mac, Murphy, Russell, and Taffy Evans crowded round as if they expected to see a small bear jump from its depths. Jack had been irritatingly silent regarding the contents of that bag.

"All that's necessary is in here," said he. "And that's all I'm jolly well going to tell you now, 'cos there isn't time. Come on!"

Arm-in-arm, the celebrated Juvenile Jeniuses rounded the bend that would bring them to the hapless Mr. Flipp's marquee.

"Hallo!" Jack stopped suddenly, and pointed. "That's funny! What on earth has the old beggar shifted the show to the other side of the road for? It was on the right side yesterday."

"It's on the left now, anyway," began Russell. Then he screwed his face up into a

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worse frown than Noble's. "Why, I'm jiggered if it's Billy's tent at all! Look, there's Billy bang opposite to it!"

It was startling enough. There stood Mr. Flipp's marquee, its green-lettered flag flying gaily in the breeze, exactly where it had stood yesterday, and on the opposite piece of land was a second tent, which might have been the other one's twin, so closely did it resemble it in size and shape.

"Investigate!" cried the juniors' captain. And they raced along full pelt.

They almost brought Mr. Flipp to the ground. He was standing, a picture of woe and grief, in the middle of the narrow road, his hands deep in his pockets, and his tall hat on the back of his head, staring at the rival erection as if it fascinated him.

"Hit wasn't 'ere when Hi went into my caravan last thing last night," he said mournfully. "When Hi come out 'smornin' there it was—sprung hup like a blessed mushroom. Ho, hit's sickenin'. Hit is! What do the bounders want to queer my pitch for like that? They can't do theirselves any good unless they git all the trade, which they won't, 'cos there ain't enough people to go round."

"No, there ain't," said Jack thoughtfully. "Well, I'm going to have a squint at the rotten thing. And I don't see any sign of whoever's in charge of it. Come with me, Bob. You other chaps had better have a look round Mr. Flipp's show, and get yourselves accustomed to it."

They obeyed grumblingly. But the showman did not accompany them. Hands still in his pockets, he slouched after Jack and Russell.

There were a number of posters stuck up on the front of the strange tent, and those posters were discouraging. They promised the world too great attractions. Performing fleas, the greatest contortionist of the age, a comedian from one of the principal London theatres, and a gentleman who drew pictures with his toes—to name a few. The whole "Galaxy" was "Presented by the Mysterious Mr. X."

Jack's heart sank. This meant ruin, disaster. Mr. Flipp would not get his two pounds.

And there was precious little time on hand, even if he had formed a plan to move the opposition away, or prevent them from giving their performance. Already a few villagers were strolling up, anxious to secure the most comfortable seats. Naturally, Flipp was nothing to them. They would patronise the show which offered the most attractions, and the posters that Mr. Flipp had manufactured were dull and insignificant in face of those over the way.

Jack gritted his teeth. What could be done?

"Here," he muttered. "I'm going inside to see if anyone's about. The beastly show didn't stick itself up! I dare say the whole miserable troupe are inside—probably squinting through and laughing at us."

He strode boldly to the opening, and vanished within. As he did so, a sharp face darted into view in the aperture, rolled a questioning glance at Russell and Mr. Flipp, and instantly withdrew. Suddenly satisfied, Bob urged the showman away. That face could be left to Jack.

Jack fixed his gaze coolly on it as the owner came towards him in the roomy tent, and the junior was conscious of a sickening odour of beer.

"So you're another of—hic—Mas'r Clifford's pals, are yer?" The fellow smiled pleasantly. "Awri'. Make yerself at 'ome. We shall be—hic—startin' the show d'rectly."

One of Master Clifford's pals! Jack started mightily. What did the man mean by that?

Altogether on his guard, Noble artfully drew him out, and inside of ten minutes he had learnt—well, more than he wanted.

"Right-ho!" he said carelessly. "I'll be back in a tick, Mr.—— What name did you say?"

"Cripps," acknowledged the beery one genially.

And Jack bolted.

"Here, Bob, Mac, you chaps!" He gathered the Juvenile Jeniuses round him, and pushed Mr. Flipp away, because he was too close. "What do you think? Cliffy's at the bottom of that show!"

All gasped; only Mac placidly murmured:

"I'm nae surprised."

"Yes. He's tipped three broken-down actor outsiders to get it up, for the sole and special purpose of messing our performance. The fellow I spoke to—he's drunk—mistook me for Prince, and told me everything. Now, what are we going to do?"

Despite their fury, the juniors' brains worked busily. The vanquishing of the Shellite was ever hard work. Clifford was a foeman worthy of the deepest counter-cunning. Moreover, it was only reasonable to suppose that Bayne and Birkett—to say nothing of Prince and Marker—would be close at hand, and waiting for their leader's battle-cry.

"There's only one way." Jack's face was set determinedly. "Follow me, all of you, and look as innocent as you can, so as not to draw the crowd after us. Not you, Mr. Flipp; you go in and finish getting things ready."

"Finish gettin' ready!" gasped the showman. "Why, you never mean——"

"Oh, yes, we're going to give our show all right," said Noble tersely. "You don't think we're going to be done by a rotter like Clifford, do you?"

The juniors pushed their way through the knots of villagers, and came to a standstill at the rear of the rival tent. There were no prying eyes to see them there; the Charburyites had eyes only for the mysterious Mr. X's posters. One or two voices could be heard quizzically inquiring how it came about that there were two shows, instead of the one they had been expecting.

"Now," said Jack quietly, "there's no one inside, so you needn't be afraid to do what I tell you. Cripps is at the door, and Cliffy and the others are all jawing, and getting themselves dressed up, yonder." He jerked his head towards a roofless, square tent, composed of a wide sheet, stretched round four poles. "All of you got pocket-knives?"

All of them had—rather!

"When I give the word, saw through the ropes on this side, and stroll over to Billy's tent as if nothing had happened. Get safe, and start making-up for our show as fast as you can. We don't want to keep people waiting." And Jack winked. "Ready?" he whispered, when his men had each selected a rope. "Now!"

For possibly twenty seconds nothing happened; then Mr. X's—or Clifford's—marquee quivered uncertainly, lurched sideways, and collapsed like the proverbial house of cards. It went down with a great rending and tearing of canvas, and the big centre-pole struck the earth joyously, as if glad of a rest, amid the host of smaller uprights.

And a roar went up from the startled natives of Charbury.

"Great Scott!" cried Jack, for the benefit of those slow-thinking folk. "It's a mercy we happened to be on this side, you fellows, for we'd have been smothered! Whew! How on earth did the thing manage to come down like that!"

A gentleman in corduroys and a ten-year-old hat observed that that was what puzzled him, and he voiced the opinion of the multitude.

Jack had been worrying about the precise extent of that multitude. As far as he could roughly figure it out, there were about fifty people—too few, if Mr. Flipp's tent was to be filled twice that afternoon.

"Now, bolt for it!" cried Jack, pointing wildly to Mr. Flipp's tent.

His chums paused, irresolute. Clifford and Marker were scrambling to their feet, and Prince was rolling back his right shirt-sleeve.

"Collar those fellows, someone!" bawled Clifford. "They're the ones who cut down—— Urr-rr-ouch!"

Jack had sprung at him like a tiger, stifling the remainder of the accusation. True or false, such a cry would have brought the crowd upon the accused ones with a fury which was most certainly not to be desired.

Still, thought Jack desperately, there was no reason why his men should not profit by Cliffy's cue. The captain of the Third opened wide his mouth.

"Hi!" he shouted. "Help us hold 'em, all of you! These are the chaps!"

And his chums took up the cry, drowning by numerical superiority the frenzied counter-cries of the Shellites.

There was a rush. For a few moments it looked as if Clifford & Co. would be very badly man-handled. But Jack was everywhere at once, giving orders with the coolness of a veteran police-inspector.

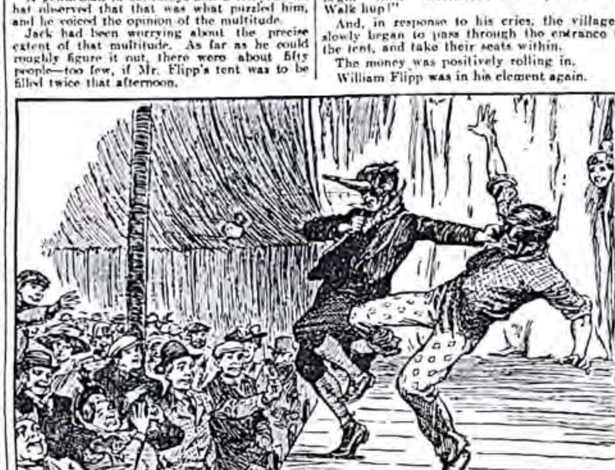
"Bring them this way," he said, indicating Mr. Flipp's tent. "Stand back, please, you ladies and gentlemen!"

"This way!" shouted a familiar voice, as captors and captives passed through the ever-growing crowd. "Walk hup—walk hup! The celebrated Juvenile Jeniuses are habout to begin their world-renowned performance. Walk hup!"

And, in response to his cries, the villagers slowly began to pass through the entrance to the tent, and take their seats within.

The money was positively rolling in.

William Flipp was in his element again.



A large and hard carrot, flung by an unknown hand, caught Prince painfully in the left eye. In his anguish, Prince shot out his fist and neatly doubled his fellow Mullah up.

But with the downfall of the rival theatre an inspiration struck Noble. He beckoned to an intelligent-looking youth, who was betraying an alarming tendency to inspect the remains of the cords that were still fixed to the tent-pegs.

"Here's a shilling for you," whispered Jack. "Now, do you think you could run back to the village and tell a good yarn? Go and let everybody know there was an opposition show stuck up opposite Mr. Flipp's, and, somehow, the blessed thing's fallen in a heap! Make all your pals come and have a look."

"Bah gum, I will that!" The shilling had vanished into a capacious pocket. "It won't 'arf do old Flipp a bit o' good, will it? Ho, you see me bring 'em up, mister!"

"That was a good wheeze," grinned Bob, as the youth vanished at a trot. "That ought to —— Great Jones, here comes Cliffy and his gang! Scatter, you chaps!"

But that command outraged every instinct of Jack Noble's band. Instead of retreating, they drew together, and Clifford, Prince, and Marker came at them in a mad-bull rush, blindly hurling aside those onlookers who stood gaping in their path.

"Collar the little beasts!" panted Clifford, himself making a ferocious clutch at Fighting Mac's arm. "Hang on to 'em!"

The next moment the valiant leader of the Shell was lying on his back, wondering what magic power had changed Mac's disengaged arm into a mule's hind leg. Marker lay beside his captain, for his own part uncertain whether Jack Noble or Taffy Evans had tripped him in that base manner.

Jack was the tripper. He had caught sight of reinforcements hurrying up to the enemy's ranks—reinforcements in the shape of the beery Mr. Cripps, with two other gentlemen of similar appearance.

THE 4th CHAPTER.

The Great Performance.

"DON'T be afraid of hurting 'em, my sons!"

Jack grinned as he stood by and handed lengths of stout cord to Russell. Held by Macalpine, Taffy, Micky, and Mr. Flipp himself, the captured Shellites were speedily trussed up in Bob's trickiest knots. Their prison was the canvas dressing-room behind the stage.

As for Mr. Cripps and his fellow-professionals, they had discreetly vanished.

"They'll wriggle out of them ropes, I don't think," observed Mr. Flipp, as the last noose was slipped. "Now Hi place my heye to this slit what hoverlooks the hauditorium, and Hi see—— Whurroo! Sardines ain't in it, boys!"

The Third-Formers echoed his delighted exclamations. The tent was packed with people; and judging by the voices on the outer side of the canvas, there would be a healthy crowd for the second "house"—thanks to that brilliant idea of Jack's.

"We'll make a start," said Jack. "Buck up, Bob!"

Bob was busy at a cracked looking-glass. His fingers moved rapidly over his face, and soon burnt cork had done its work, and Russell was a nigger of the blackest hue. A very high collar with pointed ends, a bob-tailed coat, with many brass buttons, and a glossy top-hat, completed his disguise.

"Juvenile Jenius Number One," announced Mr. Flipp, "will render a coon song. Werry pathetic this is, ladies and gents."

There was no accompaniment, not even a banjo. Undaunted by the fact that, behind the back curtain, most of his colleagues had fingers in their ears, Russell began.

At the end of the first verse the audience sat unmoved; only a few feet fidgeted. A worried look began to dawn on Mr. Flipp's face.

It was awful. Concerned, as the song was, with love and honey and moonbeams, and other commodities of that sort, it should have been rendered in any other style than Russell's. It should have been warbled—crooned—[illegible]. Russell gargled—rasped—bleated—[illegible] massacred the thing. To crown all, he could only remember half of the words.

"H-help!" breathed Mac, collapsing on the ground, and feebly waving his arms. "I canna bear it! Help! I winna bear it!"

The others sank beside him as the appalling performance continued.

"Listen!" cried Jack, as Russell launched recklessly forth on the third verse. "Hear that? By George, it's all right! They think it's meant to be a burlesque!"

"Hooray!" came a deafening shout from the twopenny seats. "Hooray! Bravo! Ongcore—ongcore!"

And the delighted one relapsed into tearful, helpless laughter, while everybody else took up the applause.

By the time Russell had reached his last chorus the din was indescribable. The Charburyites rocked and rolled with stamping mirth, and some took up the refrain and treated it worse than the performer did.

Bob had to repeat his effort from start to finish before they were satisfied.

"Ugh, the miseries!" he growled, as he finally retired. "But I'll be revenged on you, you laughing jackasses, anyway! If you try to do anything funny, Jack, I'll give 'em the tip that it's serious, hanged if I won't! Me sing a comic song, indeed!"

But Jack was whispering eagerly in Mr. Flipp's ear, and Bob addressed the remainder of his growl to the looking-glass.

"The next hitem on the programme," announced the showman gravely, "will be the Two Mad Mullahs of Muckville—[illegible] the Shells with the Rotten Hegge inside! Procured hat henormous hexpense, ladies and gentlemen!"

It was a canny idea of Jack's—this one of making the captured Shellites useful. But none of the audience recognised in the "Mad Mullahs" two of the lads who had been pounced on for wrecking—oh, fie, Jack!—the rival show. If Prince and Marker had been presented on that stage innocent of make-up, there would probably have been an ugly scene.

The pair, their faces weirdly besmeared with Russell's burnt cork, were shoved on to the little platform.

"What did you say they was going to do, Master Noble?" Mr. Flipp was puzzled, although he had himself so glibly announced the turn.

"Nothing!" chuckled Jack. "They're mad, ain't they? They just stay there for a bit, and then the folks'll start badgering 'em for not doing anything, and most likely the two beggars'll get mobbed. If they ain't mad now, they will be then, so there's nothing to complain about!"

Prince scowled at Marker, and Marker scowled at Prince.

"Can't make a bolt for it!" growled Marker, in an undertone. "Young Noble's given the tip to half a dozen of those louts in the front row. I'm just going to take it easy!"

"Speak up, please!" called out a stout old lady at this juncture.

"Oh, you shut up!" snapped Prince. "Go home, you—you balloon!"

"There, now! Did you 'ear that?" demanded the old lady indignantly. "Sir—you a-settin' next to me, I mean—are you going to 'ear a lady insulted like that?"

"What time did you say the balloon was going up?" asked Prince, rather more loudly. "Shouldn't waste too much gas beforehand, you know!"

The Shellite broke off abruptly. A large and hard carrot, flung by an unknown hand, had caught him painfully in the left eye. In his anguish, Prince shot out his fist and neatly doubled his fellow Mullah up.

From that moment, the turn baffles description. Jack's prophecy was gloriously verified. Marker hurled himself on his comrade in distress, and together they rolled upon the stage, all legs and arms. At short intervals, some missile—a turnip or a cabbage—would follow the pioneer carrot with deadly effect.

"Jehoshaphat!" wept a burly farmer. "There goes my last button! Oh, lor', look at that! Did ye ever see sich actin' in all your born days?"

"No-never!" cackled a thin labourer. "Oh, crumbs! See, that underneath 'un's got's teeth in t'other's ear! Kee-hee! Na'ral ain't the word for it! You cud a'most swear they reely was mad, couldn't ye?"

All too soon for the audience's pleasure, Marker and Prince were exhausted. They lay motionless side by side. And suddenly mysterious hands came out from the black [illegible] and dragged the two marvellous actors from the boards, amid cheers that made the tent shake.

Then Taffy appeared, laden with cricket stumps. Gravely the Welshman selected three from the pile, unlaced one of his shoes, and asked the company impartially to lend him a watch and chain.

With this heterogeneous collection he juggled brilliantly, the stumps coming finally to rest in his hands, with the shoe falling upon his outstretched toes, and the watch-chain swinging from one ear.

After which Mac gave an exhibition of

(Continued at the foot of page [illegible].)