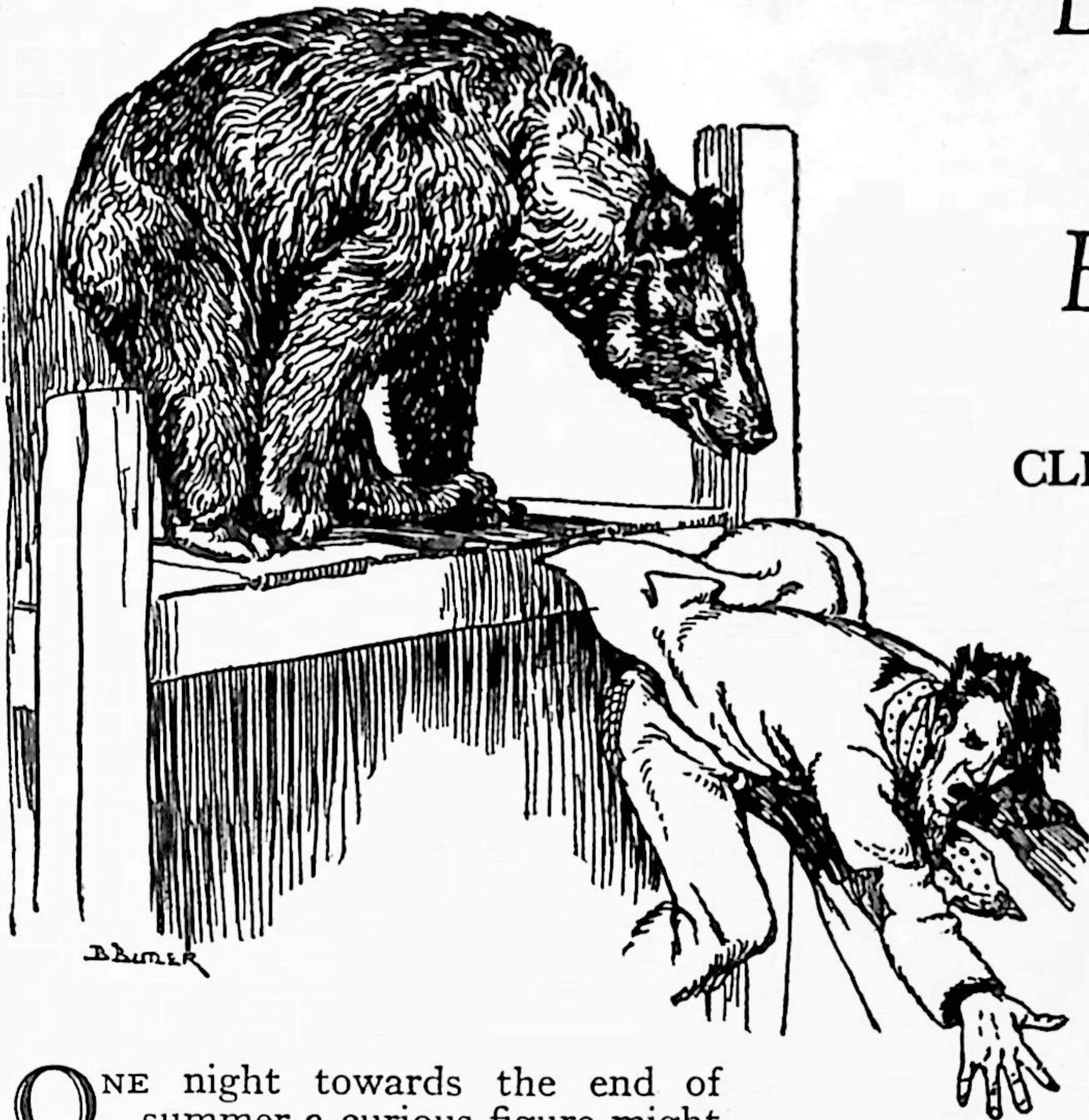


BILLY the BEAR

By
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It is unfortunate for two rascals that Billy the bear should be looking for his master on the night they intend to rob a farm, for Billy takes a well-earned rest at that farm Then the fun starts!

ONE night towards the end of summer a curious figure might have been seen shuffling along down the lane, for the most part a grass track, which led through five miles of rough woodland to the farm of Mr. Topling at Tagg's End.

Actually, only one individual did spot the strange form, and that was Jarge Trimmings, as he was going slowly home to his cottage on the marsh, and the sight fair gave him the shivers, as he explained afterwards at the Wheatsheaf.

"Night, matey," said Jarge. There was no reply, and Jarge ran to get away from the visitant, which looked so mysterious. The last thing he recalled was seeing a dim, dark outline as of a big, bulky man standing and gazing at him.

Jarge went as fast as he could,

for though brave in daylight, the night awed him, and there was no moon.

The stranger did not worry his head any more about the fugitive, but ambled on, now raising himself to take a look, now ambling along on all fours, stopping at a corner where there was a signpost, and squatting for a moment as if to read what the signpost had to say.

The stranger was a bear—an affable, well-conditioned bear, and it was doing its best to find Jacob Savary, its friend and owner, the traveller and artist who had brought it with him from foreign parts. The two had been separated at a seaport, and since the afternoon Billy the bear had been doing its best to trace its

comrade and proprietor, for it felt lost without him in a strange land.

Billy hitched up its lumbering legs again and plodded on through the sleeping countryside, snuffling as it went. Though the bear had not the least suspicion of the fact, it was heading straight for the pile of old buildings which were described as Topling's Farm. It had trotted so far that it was now feeling very hungry and also a sense of weariness.

As it reached the farm, the scent of something caused it to feel interested. It was the aroma cast forth from a heap of rotting apples, windfalls thrown into a corner of a yard. To a hungry bear even time-expired apples are better than nothing.

The apples finished, the bear gave a grunt and started inspecting the place. The dwelling-house had no lights, but the bear wanted no illumination to enable it to find a roomy old barn which smelt of hay. It felt its way to the bottom of some steps and pattered up these to an open door.

A number of large turkeys only gobbled drowsily from their yard, the farther side of the big barn; but the soft movements of the bear did not spoil their slumber.

These turkeys were regarded by Farmer Topling as his mainstay, for farming had been extra bad of late, with crops failing and taxes heavy. The world had not, as a matter of fact, gone any too easy with Mr. Topling, for disappointments had been tumbling over one another.

The chief one lay in the fact that his old Uncle Josh, who had lived at the farm for years until he died, leaving his nephew everything, had omitted to say where a certain box of valuable silver things had been put. The old fellow had been a wonder for hiding things.

The bear was thoroughly well satisfied with the look of the barn.

The place might have been made for him. He nosed about, then walked round in a circle before lying down to rest.

Very shortly the bear was asleep, dreaming of its travels with the professor who had made a friend of the shaggy animal.

But though all was peace inside the barn, broken merely by Billy Bruin's snores, matters were quite different in the world outside.

That very night had been chosen by two miscreants, Tinker Blake and his comrade Barney, to raid the farm of Topling, and get away not merely with the turkeys, but with the box of silverware. They had discovered the hiding-place of the treasure. The two in the guise of pedlars had paid many a visit to the farm, and they knew that the box of pots and spoons had been concealed in the flooring of the old barn.

In a field adjacent the pair of rascals had a car ready. But what they did not know was that a bear had selected the barn for its sleeping quarters on that particular night.

The bear was a light sleeper. It did not take much to wake him from his slumbers on this occasion. For a long time he had lived a thoroughly domestic life, having the daily companionship of Savary. He was thus ready to resent the unfamiliar, and the shadow of Barney cast on the barn wall by the lantern the intruder carried, was not only unfamiliar, but evil-looking.

Barney was a shaggy person singularly displeasing to the eye, for he wore a curious tuft of beard which seemed to be suspended by ropes from underneath his chin.

His shadow on the wall was simply grotesque, and the bear rose from his hay bed and growled out his dislike.

"Hurry up!" muttered Tinker Blake, putting his head above the top



Looking for somewhere to sleep, Billy ambled to the bottom of some steps and pattered up these to the door of a roomy barn.

of the stairway. "What's biting you? You know where the stuff is."

"Help!" groaned Barney, backing to the barn wall with the bear nosing him quietly.

"Haven't got cold feet, have you?"



came savagely from Tinker, who was eager to get to the turkeys.

Barney gave a smothered moan.

"It's a blessed menagerie up here!" he quaked.

"Blessed grandmother!" mocked Tinker, diving into the barn.

The bear backed into the hay as he saw the newcomer, and Tinker held up his lantern.

"Nothing here!" he rasped. "What are you scared stiff about?" He crossed the barn and deftly levered up a board, thrusting his hand into the cavity disclosed and dragging out a biggish box. "Here's the stuff!" he chuckled. "Lend us a hand. We'll get this to the car first, and—"

Something soft suddenly nudged Tinker Blake behind. He turned his head, let out a howl of fear, and tried to rise. He failed, for the bear gave him a rude shove and sent the fellow sprawling in the hay.

The two rogues thought now far less of the booty than of flight, but their luck was dead out. The bear was between them and the only exit—the door to the stairs.

Tinker gave a shriek as the bear hugged him. It was not the howl that made Bruin let go, for he was not a nervous bear, but the sight of Barney trying to slip away.

The next moment the big animal had flung Tinker back into the hay, where he lay moaning though not the least bit hurt really, and was tackling the escaping Barney, tripping him and then jumping on him.

The bear seemed uncertain in his mind as to whether the two intruders were really mischievous, or whether they had merely been sent for him to play with. He warmed briskly to the new sport, and rolled them over whenever they attempted to gain the door.

Finally he edged them to the little platform above the stairs and kicked them overboard in methodical

fashion, with the gesture of one who had perhaps had enough. Then, thinking better of it, he dropped down between the pair, ready to foil any attempt at escape.

The frightful hubbub, had stirred Mr. Topling from his beauty sleep in the farmhouse twenty yards from the scene. Taking alarm, he appeared at his bedroom window, springing a police rattle.

In normal circumstances it would have been as futile to sound a rattle and expect the police to hear in those solitudes as it would be to whistle for a taxi at the North Pole. But the conditions all round were unusual, for it so happened that the owner of the bear, Savary himself, had been much upset at losing his friend, and had interviewed the police, explaining that his bear was at large. Thus it was that a fast car was swinging down the road past the farm, in it a police inspector and the famous traveller, while a uniformed man drove.

"The call is from Topling's farm," said the officer of police. "I wonder what's up!"

They were soon to know. The car swung down the rough track which led to the farmhouse and the headlights revealed a strange sight.

"Why, there's my bear!" cried Savary joyfully.

The bear, apparently feeling its job was done, gave a grunt and ambled over to its master; and Topling, who had dashed out of the house, soon gathered what was happening. The two rogues were too utterly dumbfounded to offer resistance, and they were for the county gaol. The joy of Mr. Topling was extreme, for there lay his box of treasure broken open on the floor of his barn, and there, all safe, plump and sound, despite the night alarm, were the turkeys, with lots of pleasant days before them ere Christmas came.