INSIDE: Facts and Fun about the Festive Season

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EVERY MONDAY—PRICE ONE SHILLING

A HAPPY CHRISTMAS TO ALL OUR READERS

CONTINUING...ANOTHER ORIGINAL SERIAL STORY OF THE THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS SCHOOLBOY

BUNTER THE LION-TAMER!

By FRANK RICHARDS

THE STORY SO FAR

Harry Wharton and his friends are broke—so, of course, is Billy Bunter. They all want to go to Muccolini's Circus which is appearing in the district, and agree that the boy who is first to receive a remittance from home shall pay for all the seats. Bunter willingly agrees, because he has no hope of money from home. But a letter arrives for him and when he opens it, out falls a Postal Order! Bunter realizes with horror that instead of spending it on tuck, he will have to stand treat at the Circus. But the temptation of tuck is too great, and he sets out for the village. On a woodland path he is waylaid by a tramp. Desperately he hits out, and by sheer luck knocks the tramp down. The scene is witnessed by a newcomer, whom Billy Bunter recognizes as Marco, the lion tamer from the circus.

"Like to try a ride on his back?" asked Marco, and before Billy Bunter could refuse he was lifted on to the lion, who walked sedately around the cage.

"YOU'RE a plucky kid!" said Marco.

"Eh?"

Bunter blinked at him.

"Leago!" moaned the tramp. "My bones are a-going! I tell yer, you're cracking me blooming neck! Leago!"

"I ought to run you in for attacking this boy!" said the lion-tamer. "But you ain't worth the trouble!"

The tramp was no light weight, but the big man swung him into the air with ease, with a grip on the back of his collar.

Bunter blinked in wonder. Up went the tramp, swinging, and the lion-tamer swung him bodily over a thick oak branch that jutted across the path.

The tramp hung there, eight or nine feet above the earth, his tattered waistcoat resting on the branch, his legs hanging down on one side of it, his head and arms on the other. Folded over the branch, he gurgled horribly.

"He, he, he!" chortled Bunter.

"Gurrrggh!" gurgled the tramp. "Urrgh! Oh, my eye! 'Ook me down out of this, blow yer! Urrgh!"

"You'd better come with me, kid," said Marco. "You don't want to be in this wood when that brute gets going again."

"No fear!" said Bunter promptly.

And he followed the big man along the footpath, leaving the tramp to wriggle breathlessly along the branch and clamber down the tree. His gasps and gurgles died away behind, as Bunter and the circus man walked on and emerged from the wood on the side of Courtfield Common.

Far in the distance, towards the town, could be seen the circus camp—a huge tent, smaller tents, and parked caravans and lorries.

"I say, you belong to the circus, don't you?" asked Bunter. "I've seen your pictures on the posters—you're Marco, the wonderful lion-tamer!"

"That's right!" agreed Marco.

"Some of the fellows at our school have seen you in the circus," went on Bunter. "They say it's wonderful. The best thing in the show."

"They ain't far wrong," agreed Marco, with a complacent smile. "Old Mucky can say what he likes; but it's the lions they come to see."

"I say, the fellows will stare when I tell them that I've actually spoken to Marco, the famous lion-tamer!" went on Bunter.

The smile on Marco's broad, good-humoured face grew more expansive. It was clear that he liked this! In fact, he lapped it up.

"I was going to have a look at the circus," went on Bunter. "I'm thinking of bringing a party tomorrow—standing them a box!"

"Come along with me, then!" said Marco. "I'll show you the lions!"

Billy Bunter toddled across the green common by the side of the big man.

They reached the circus encampment. The evening performance was not due for a good time, and the public were not yet arriving. A fat man in a silk hat, with an eyeglass screwed in his eye, gave Marco a nod, and Bunter a stare.

"That kid's no good, Marco!" he said gruffly.

Billy Bunter blinked at him.

That remark seemed to him far from polite, and quite uncalled-for.

He guessed that the silk-hatted man was Signor Muccolini, the proprietor of the circus, and he took a dislike to him on the spot. But Marco's reply enlightened him as to the cause of the circus-master's remark.

"This ain't my new boy, Mucky!" answered the lion-tamer. "I ain't found one yet! This is a young gentleman from the school, and I'm going to let him see the lions!"

"Oh!" said Signor Muccolini, and he walked on.

"This way!" said Marco, and he led his young friend into the annexe, where the animals' cages were parked.

A deep-throated, thunderous roar woke the echoes, as Marco stopped before the bars of a cage.

"Oh!" gasped Bunter.

"That's Caesar!" said Marco, as a huge, maned head approached the bars from within. "Tame as a rabbit! Stroke his head."

"Eh?"

"He likes it," said Marco.

"Oh!" gasped Bunter.

Caesar, the big circus lion, might like having his gigantic head stroked—but Billy Bunter did not like the idea of stroking it. Very much indeed he didn't!

Marco put his hand through the bars and stroked the great head. Then he glanced at Bunter, evidently expecting him to do the same.

Clearly, the lion was tame enough. But the great jaws looked to Bunter like a cavern. He repressed a shudder.

"Think—think he'd like it from a stranger?" he stammered.

"Try him!" smiled Marco. "Some kids wouldn't do it, but you've got plenty of pluck, from what I've seen of you."

Something made Bunter play up. His fat hand went between the bars, and he stroked the lion's head. Immensely to his relief, Caesar evidently did like it.

"Good man!" said Marco. "By gum! I can tell you, kid, old Mucky himself wouldn't do that! You're not afraid of lions!"

"N-n-no- fuf-fuf-fear!" gasped Bunter.

"I'll take you into the cage with me," said Marco. "I'm just going to feed him. Come with me."

THE FOURTH CHAPTER

In the lion's cage!

HE was taking it so completely for granted that Bunter was not afraid, that the fat Owl contrived somehow to screw up his courage to the sticking-point, rather than let himself down.

But his fat heart almost died within his podgy breast as he stepped into the cage with Marco.

He knew that there could be no danger, or the lion-tamer would never have dreamed of taking a schoolboy into the cage. Still, it was possible that Marco was mistaken at that point! At least, it seemed so to Bunter, as he blinked at the terrific jaws and claws of the huge lion.

Caesar came across the big cage to meet his master.

Bunter would have backed behind the lion-tamer as the huge animal approached. But he could not stir. Terror glued his feet to the floor.

"That's right!" He heard Marco's voice, like a fellow in a dream. "Always look an animal in the eyes! That's right!"

Evidently Marco did not realize why Bunter was standing glued. He handed the fat junior a huge plate of meat.

"Give it to him, lad!" said Marco. "Bit of an experience for you to have fed a lion in his cage, what? And Caesar will like you, after you've fed him."

A deep boom came from Caesar's cavernous throat. No doubt it was a sound of happy anticipation; but to Bunter's terrified ears, it sounded like a roar of ferocity. He dropped the plate and the beef rolled under the lion's nose.

Caesar gobbled it.

That was rather a relief to Bunter, who had been in awful and fearful expectation of being gobbled himself!

Fascinated by the sight, at such close quarters, Billy Bunter watched the lion feed. Marco pulled the door shut. The clang of it sounded like the knell of doom to Bunter.

"Can't be too careful!" explained the lion-tamer. "Caesar likes wandering—he wouldn't do any harm, but he would get out if he could. He got away once, and we had a lot of trouble getting him back."

"Oh!" gasped Bunter.

Once he was safe through this, the fat junior realized that it would be something to brag of in the Remove passage! He had been in a cage with a lion—he had actually fed the terrific brute! But he wished that it was safely over.

"Now I'll show you some of his tricks," said the good-natured lion-tamer. "Look!"

Marco made a sign, and the lion rose on his hind legs. He seemed, to Bunter, to tower to infinite height, and the fat junior hardly breathed.

"Dammi la zámpa!" said Marco.

He held out his hand to the lion! Caesar held out a great paw! They shook hands!

"Now you ask him for his paw!" said Marco. "Use the same words—'Dammi la zámpa!'—he's accustomed to it."

Bunter shuddered.

But he repressed his shudders. It was clear to him now that he was in no danger—and when danger was absent, Bunter could be bold. Still, it was in a very gingerly manner that he held out a fat hand to Caesar.

"Dammi la zámpa!" he said.

And he uttered the command in an exact imitation of the lion-tamer's voice. That was an easy trick to the Greyfriars ventriloquist. He hoped that the familiar tones would have a soothing effect on Caesar—not that that good-tempered beast needed soothing.

Marco gave a start.

His own deep voice was very unlike Bunter's natural squeak. But the fat ventriloquist had reproduced it exactly.

"Say! Do that again!" exclaimed the lion-tamer.

Bunter grinned.

"Dammi la zámpa!" he repeated, again in exact imitation of the lion-tamer's voice.

"That's a clever trick!" said Marco. "By gum, if you were looking for a job, young man, you're the boy I want."

Caesar took Bunter's fat hand in his huge paw. For a second, Billy Bunter's fat heart seemed to miss beating. But the next moment, he was quite reassured. Caesar shook hands with him, as he had done with his master.

"By gum!" said Marco. "Say, kid, what's your name?"

"Bunter!"

"You're at school?"

"In the Remove, at Greyfriars."

"You ain't looking for a job, then?"

Bunter grinned.

"Hardly!"

"I'd start you at a good salary!" said Marco. "You see, I have a boy with me in the performances—and the last kid was got away from me by another show. They ain't so easy to get in this line of business. It wants pluck, and plenty of it! It would suit you."

"So far as that goes, yes!" agreed Bunter cheerfully. "I'm pretty well known at Greyfriars for my pluck."

"If you leave school," said Marco, "you let me know! You've got a job waiting for you, if ever you want one. Like to try a ride on his back? I'm a bit too heavy, and I've had to cut that since my boy left me. But you——"

"I don't weigh much," said Bunter. "But——"

Marco grinned.

"You don't weigh anything like me, anyhow," he said. "Try it on!"

By that time Bunter was reassured. He was still a little uneasy, but he made no demur as the lion-tamer lifted him astride of Caesar's back. The lion walked sedately round the cage, with Bunter on his back, clinging hold of the mane.

"Now, if you're in a hurry to get back to school——" said Marco.

"Oh! Yes! You see——"

"If you had time, I'd like you to have tea in my caravan," said Marco.

"I'm not in such a hurry as all that!" said Bunter promptly.

"Come on, then!"

Bunter had made friends with the lion. He was no longer afraid of Caesar. Still, he was rather glad when he was once more on the safe side of the grated door.

He was still more glad when he was seated in Marco's handsome and roomy caravan and an attendant brought in tea from the mess tent. It was quite a nice tea, and there was plenty of it.

Best of all, when he got into Marco's car, to be driven back to Greyfriars, his pound was still in his pocket. He had fed up to his fat chin and it had cost him nothing, and that pound was still intact, after its many perils. It was a happy and satisfied Bunter that whizzed back to Greyfriars School.

But that was by no means the end of Billy Bunter's connection with Muccolini's Circus—or with Caesar the lion!

CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

SOLUTION TO CROSSWORD (from page 9)

The message: "HAPPY NEW YEAR TO ALL READERS"

ACROSS: 1. Static; 5. Janus; 11. Pyramid; 13. Lolly; 14. Norway; 16. Dorset; 24. Mimicry; 25. Haste; 26. Sepal; 27. Nettle.

DOWN: 2. Tapir; 3. Tay; 4. Canada; 5. Jewel; 6. Needles; 7. Stray; 8. Chopin; 12. Moa; 15. Road map; 17. Ova; 18. Tassel; 19. Crayon; 20. Times; 21. Local; 23. Easel; 25. Hit.