

NEW SERIES OF COMPLETE STORIES.

Specially Written for "Pluck."



Circus Comrades

BY

HARRY DORRIAN.

CHAPTER 1.

A Fateful Meeting.

JACK TALBOT paused to listen. Thud, thud, thud! The sound of galloping hoofs echoed through the silence of the woods. It was early morning. The sunlight glimmered on the foliage of the great trees in Abbotsdale woods, and fell in dancing beams upon the wet grass. In the broad green "ride" through the heart of the wood the grass was still heavy with dew. Deep among the old trees, under the heavy branches, the shadows of night still lurked, not yet dispelled by the rising sun.

Thud, thud, thud!

The boy had been tramping steadily along the green ride, his hands in his pockets, his eyes bent upon the ground. There was a gloomy expression upon his face—a face handsome and manly, and which seldom wore any but a cheerful look. But this morning was not as other mornings to Jack Talbot. He had risen early, leaving his father still asleep in the little house in Abbotsdale, and gone out into the woods—to think. For a crisis had come in the boy's life, and at barely fifteen he was called upon to decide what he would do to win a place for himself in the wide world.

The thudding hoof-beats interrupted his thoughts. He looked back, wondering who was riding so early in Abbotsdale woods; and a look of surprise and pleasure came over his face as he saw the rider.

Surprise, because the rider was a mere girl, whom it was strange to see alone in the solitary woods at that hour. Pleasure, because Jack found a pleasure in everything that was beautiful, and the girl his eyes now rested upon was beautiful indeed.

A mere girl, younger than himself, yet she sat her horse, a big black Arab, with perfect ease and grace. Her face, rounded and fair, was almost childlike in its look of innocent enjoyment—enjoyment of the swift gallop through the scented woods in the keen, fresh air of the morning.

Jack Talbot drew aside, his eyes still on the rider. The girl glanced at him for a moment as she passed—a careless glance enough. The boy raised his cap, and she smiled—a pleasant smile. The next moment she was gone. The black horse, the graceful form in the well-fitting habit, disappeared down the long ride, and the thud of the hoofs on the turf died away in the distance.

Jack stood still for some moments. The rider had come and gone like a vision, but the fair face and the smiling blue eyes were firmly fixed in his memory. Who was she? he wondered. Probably some visitor at Abbotsdale Court—far enough removed from him, he reflected, with some bitterness. Between a guest of the squire of Abbotsdale and the son of the village carpenter there was a great gulf fixed.

Yet Jack could not quite forget the stranger's fair face, as he tramped on through the dewy grass. And yet he had quite enough to think of concerning himself. What was he to do? How was he to face the future?

A week ago he had been one of the happiest lads in Abbotsdale. He was at the top of the local National School, and he had had every hope of winning a public school scholarship. His head-master had noticed the boy's hard work, his determination to do his best, and had lent him assistance, and encouraged him in every way. One year

more, and the prize would be won. Jack was not conceited, but he knew what he could do—he knew what hard work could do for him. The Greyfriars Scholarship was within his reach, with common luck.

But his luck had failed him now.

It was not his fault; it was not his father's fault. It was just bad luck. But it came very hard. The boy tramped on, thinking it out. The sun was higher now; a warm gush of sunlight came down upon the broad ride, and the boy, in spite of himself, was cheered. On that bright, fresh morning gloomy thoughts were out of place.

He stopped at last. He leaned against a tree, with the sunlight on his face. It was a frank, manly face—a face naturally merry, and the lines of care were new to it. The twittering of the birds round him was the only sound in the deep silence of the woods.

"What shall I do?" muttered Jack restlessly. "What is there for me to do? I must help dad, that's certain. I shall have to give up the idea of the scholarship—that can't be helped. But—"

His reflections ceased suddenly. In the deep silence, from the other side of the huge trunk against which he was leaning, came the sound of a muttering voice.

"Stop 'ere, Ben!"

"Will she pass this way?"

"She must, to get back to the circus, and she may be by any minute now. Lay low."

Jack Talbot heard every word clearly.

The two rough voices were within half a dozen feet of him, but the speakers evidently had not the faintest idea of his presence there. He had been standing there a quarter of an hour or more, without a sound or a movement, and the two men had just come through the wood. It naturally did not occur to them that anybody might be on the other side of the big tree.

Jack did not stir. He heard the sounds of the two men settling down in the thicket, evidently for the purpose of watching the "ride" from a place of concealment.

There could be no mistaking their purpose. They were waylaying someone in the lonely wood—a woman, from what the voice had said. That was enough for Jack Talbot to know. Lad as he was, he knew what he would do, and the thought of danger made no difference to him. The best boxer and the finest athlete in Abbotsdale School did not know the meaning of the word fear.

The mention of the circus, too, did not puzzle him. He knew that a circus had arrived at Abbotsdale the previous day, and was pitched upon the common outside the town. He had seen the flaring posters on every hoarding and dead wall in Abbotsdale, announcing the arrival and the wonderful attractions of Signor Tomsonio's world-famed circus and hippodrome. There had been a performance the previous evening; but Jack had not gone. He was not in a mood at this time for a circus entertainment, nor had he much money to spend.

Someone who had left the circus was returning through the wood, and these two rascals were waylaying her; so much was certain.

After a few moments' silence, Jack heard the first of the two voices again.

"Catch the bridle as she passes, Ben—that's all. I don't want to show myself, but I'll let her hear that there's another man in the thicket—see?"

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"I see, Dave."

"If a whisper of this should get to the signor, he would— Well, never mind what he would do. But it would be the order of the boot for me. You understand? if the girl should say she has seen me—"

"It's all right! I suppose I can deal with a girl," interrupted the other contemptuously. "You needn't show yourself. I can manage easily enough. I wish I felt as sure that it was worth while."

"I tell you, man, her ring alone is worth more money than you've ever seen at once in your life, and she is almost certain to have her purse. She is never short of money. The signor has always been a fool with Miss Clotilde. Ah! Hark! I can hear her horse now!"

"Quiet, then."

Thud, thud, thud!

The staccato hoof-beats came echoing from the distance. Jack Talbot gave a start. Was it the girl he had seen, that mere child, whom these scoundrels were waylaying in the wood? His eyes glinted.

Thud, thud, thud!

There was a rustle as one of the rascals sprang out into the path; a jingle, a sharp exclamation, as the black horse was dragged to a halt.

Jack sprang out into the ride. For the moment neither noticed him. A burly man had his grip on the bridle, and the girl was looking down at him with a white, startled face.

"Release my horse, at once!"

"Not till you— Oh!"

The man broke off as a strong grip was laid upon his shoulder. He was swung round, and sent whirling. He crashed helplessly against a tree, and rolled to the ground, and lay there in the grass, blinking dazedly at the lad who had hurled him down.

CHAPTER 2.

The Handsome Man.

THE black horse, startled by the sudden attack, was rearing, and Jack Talbot sprang towards it, in fear that the girl would lose her seat.

But there was no danger of that. She sat unshaken in the saddle, and her steady hand on the rein quieted the horse. He pawed to a standstill.

"Look out for yourself!" cried the girl. "Oh, look out!"

The warning came just in time. The ruffian whom Jack had hurled into the grass was on his feet again now, and he was springing at the boy. Jack swung round to face him.

The rush of the burly scoundrel would have overborne him by its sheer weight, but Jack did not attempt to meet it. He darted aside, just ere the rascal reached him, and before his foe could turn upon him he drove his clenched fist fairly under the heavy jaw.

The ruffian gasped and tottered drunkenly, and the lad followed up the attack with a left-hander that sent him rolling in the grass.

Not for an instant had the boy flinched; his eyes were blazing, his teeth set, his cheeks flushed with colour. Very handsome and fit he looked then, the type of a fearless, athletic British boy.

The moment his assailant was down, Jack swung towards the thicket whence the rascal had come. He knew that there was another there; but the second man did not appear. There was a sound of rustling in the wood, which quickly died away, and Jack knew that he was gone. It was more probably fear of recognition than of the boy that had driven him away. Jack was glad enough to hear him go. One enemy at a time was quite sufficient.

The ruffian sat up in the grass dizzily. His head was singing from the terrible blows he had received—blows which it seemed impossible should have come from a mere lad. He blinked in a dazed way at Talbot.

Jack met his glance grimly.

"Get up, if you want some more," he said.

It was a bold challenge, for the rough was head and shoulders taller than the boy. But he had had enough. He rose slowly to his feet, his eyes glinting wickedly.

"You whelp! I—"

"Get away!" said Jack contemptuously. "You are lucky not to be arrested."

The rough gave him a savage look, as if meditating a fresh attack, and then, thinking better of it, plunged into the thickets and disappeared.

Jack turned to the girl, cap in hand.

She had alighted from the horse, holding her habit. She met him with shining eyes and glowing cheeks.

"Oh, how brave you are!" she said. "How brave and kind of you to help me! I—I was afraid he would hurt you."

Jack laughed.

"Well, I rather thought he would myself," he admitted.

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"He's a jolly lot bigger than I am. Lucky I got a drive in first. I'm glad I was here."

"I suppose he was going to rob me," said the girl, her lips trembling a little.

"Yes. There were two of them—I heard them planning it," said Jack. "They did not know I was leaning against the tree. The other bolted—he was afraid of being recognised by you."

"By me?"

"Yes."

Jack looked at her curiously. From what the men had been saying, he gathered that this girl belonged to the circus camped outside Abbotsdale, yet she was far from what he had imagined a circus-rider to be like. Yet there could be no mistake. One of the rascals had mentioned the name Clotilde, and Clotilde, the equestrienne, was announced on all the flaring circus posters that enlivened the old streets of Abbotsdale.

"You belong to the circus?" he asked.

She nodded.

"So they were saying. One of them belongs to the circus, and he had brought the other brute here to waylay you."

The girl started.

"Are you sure of that?"

"They were saying so."

"Oh, how could he be so wicked?" murmured the girl.

"It is not safe to ride in so lonely a place alone," said Jack.

"Perhaps not; but I always ride in the early morning when I get an opportunity. But I shall certainly be more careful in the future."

She turned towards her horse again, and Jack patted the splendid animal's neck. Her face lighted up as she saw his action.

"You are fond of horses?" she asked.

"Yes, very. I ride whenever I get a chance—which isn't often," he added, with a smile. "Will you let me walk with you as far the end of the wood? It will be safer; that brute may be looking for another opportunity."

"I shall be very glad."

She placed her hand on the saddle, and Jack stooped to take the little foot. In a moment she was mounted, and she walked the black Arab along the grassy ride, Jack walking by the side of the horse.

The footpad did not reappear, and, as a matter of fact, Jack forgot his existence in a few minutes. The girl chatted cheerily with him, without any constraint in her manner, yet with a certain shy dignity that was very sweet. She spoke of the circus, and Jack, to whom that life was strange and romantic, listened eagerly. They were at the border of the wood before they knew they were near it, and Abbotsdale Common lay stretched before them, and in the distance, towards the town, the huge tent and the caravans of the travelling circus.

The circus camp was beginning to stir. The girl pointed to it with her riding-whip.

"That is my home."

"How jolly!" said Jack. "It must be ripping to be always moving about from place to place, seeing fresh sights and fresh people."

"Yes, it is very pleasant—sometimes. Sometimes not."

Her face clouded a little, and Jack, following her glance, saw that it rested upon a dark-faced, lithe-limbed young man in riding-boots, who was strolling towards them from the direction of the circus.

"One of your friends?" he asked.

"One of the circus company," she said, and Jack understood the distinction at once. "He is on the trapeze, you know. It is the Handsome Man."

"The Handsome Man?"

"Yes." She smiled. "That is his nickname—it is what everyone calls him. His real name is Carson."

Jack Talbot looked at the stranger.

Handsome he certainly was, in a dark, foreign way. His features were good, his teeth white and regular, his eyes black and gleaming. He wore his hair long, in thick, curly waves of black, over his collar. Handsome, undoubtedly, and there was reason enough for his peculiar title, but Jack did not like him, and he knew that Clotilde did not.

"Will you come in with me?" said Clotilde. "The signor would be glad to see you, to thank you for what you have done for me."

Jack hesitated a moment. Gladly he would have gone into the circus, and made the acquaintance of Signor Tomsonio. Not that he required any thanks for having defended the girl in the wood. But, boy-like, a glimpse into a new world had great attractions for him, but the time had been passing, and he knew that his father would be expecting him to breakfast in the little house in Abbotsdale, and it was a long walk yet.

The Handsome Man joined them before he could reply. He raised his hat to Clotilde with a graceful movement that seemed to have something of mockery in it, and stared rudely enough at Jack.

"You have made a friend, it seems, Miss Clotilde?"

"Yes." Clotilde turned to Jack. "You have not told me your name."

"Jack Talbot."

"Mine is Clotilde." She did not add the surname, for reasons which Jack did not know then, but knew afterwards. "Will you come in and speak to the signor?"

"The signor is busy," said the Handsome Man.

The girl gave him a flashing glance.

"I did not speak to you, sir!"

Carson smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

Jack Talbot coloured.

"Thank you, Miss Clotilde," he said, "I should like to, but my father will be expecting me. May I—may I see you another time?"

"Any time, so long as the circus remains at Abbotsdale," said the girl brightly. "I should always be glad to see you. Have you seen the performance?"

"No."

"Would you like to?"

"Very much."

"Where do you live?"

Jack coloured again. His address was not one to be especially proud of, though he had no cause to be ashamed of it, but under the keen, mocking eyes of the Handsome Man he was disinclined to utter it. But he gave it quietly, all the same.

"No. 1, Bull Lane, off the High Street."

"Then the signor shall send to you. Can you come to-night?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then to-night let it be. Good-bye!"

She gave him her hand, and Jack stood, cap in hand, as she rode away towards the circus. The Handsome Man lingered a moment or two.

"You seem to have made great friends with Miss Clotilde, my boy?" he remarked.

Jack looked at him without replying.

"Is it not so?"

"I don't see what business it is of yours whether I have or not," said Jack bluntly.

The Handsome Man laughed.

"Are you looking for a thrashing, my boy?" he said, in a soft voice that was strangely reminiscent of the purr of a cat.

Jack met his eyes fearlessly.

"I don't want to quarrel with you," he said, "but I'm willing to take all the thrashings you can give me."

The Handsome Man scanned him for a moment, and then, with another light laugh, turned away, and strolled towards the circus camp. And Jack, taking the path home to Abbotsdale town, strode away, thinking over his adventure as he hurried homeward.

CHAPTER 3. New Acquaintances.

JACK!

"Yes, dad!"

"You've been for a long walk," said John Talbot, as his son came in. Jack's face was flushed from the exercise, and his eyes were shining.

"I'm sorry if I'm late, dad. You won't mind when I tell you the reason."

Jack dropped into his seat at the little breakfast-table. Father and son always breakfasted together early, before Jack went to school and his father to his work. Jack could not remember his mother. Almost all his young life he had lived in the little house in Abbotsdale—a house in which three families found room, though most people would not have regarded it as spacious enough for one. But the poor cannot be choosers of their quarters.

Molly Malone, a fat, cheerful lady of the charing profession, who lived on the top floor, "kept house" for John Talbot in the intervals of her various engagements out of doors. She prepared breakfast for the two before she went out in the morning, and when father and son parted after breakfast they did not meet again till their evening meal.

A quiet, steady workman, John Talbot had always contrived to keep a roof over his head, and to bring up his son with better prospects than his own. Jack had had the best of training that his father could give him. He had grown up a strong, healthy, brave lad—a true British boy. John Talbot's quiet face would glow with pride at the thought of his son winning the scholarship and entering the great public school, and for a long time he had been putting aside little sums against the time when Jack should require his outfit for Greyfriars. Jack never knew how hard that task had been—and now all was gone.

John Talbot could work, and he could save, but he was not the man to take sufficient care of his money. A silk-hatted gentleman, with a plausible tongue, had convinced Talbot, by irrefragable arguments, that in some cases high interest for money was compatible with good security, with the result that might have been expected. Talbot was eager to increase his little savings for Jack's sake, and he had listened to the plausible tongue with a touching faith that such a nicely-spoken, well-educated gentleman could not be deceiving him, and his savings had been swept away, with those of a hundred more like him. The loss had almost stunned Talbot, and, as misfortunes never come singly, he had in the same week lost his employment. Trade had been very bad of late, and in Abbotsdale, as everywhere else, there were unemployed. Talbot had now joined the number, and Jack's prospects in a single week were overcast in every way.

Jack, indeed, felt more for his father's disappointment than for his own. He knew that he must leave school, and find work somehow. Like many steady, hard-working men who lose their employment late in life, Talbot seemed almost incapable of the efforts necessary for securing fresh employment. He was not the man he had been, and Jack realised it. It was upon the boy that the burden must fall now.

Jack was quite ready to face that, though he could not resign his ambitions without a painful wrench.

Somehow, Jack was feeling more cheerful and serene about it since he had met Clotilde. He hardly knew why. But the girl's kind, sweet face and soft voice seemed to comfort him, somehow.

Jack related his adventure over breakfast. John Talbot listened, but it was clear all the time that his thoughts were far away.

"It was like you, Jack," he said at last. "I am glad you were there. Have you been thinking about the future?"

"Yes, dad. I went out to have a think, as a matter of fact. There's only one thing to be done, of course. After all, I mightn't have got the scholarship, you know."

Talbot shook his head.

"You would have got it, lad."

"Mr. Chaloner thought I had a good chance," assented Jack, with a sigh. "Well, it can't be helped now. After all, you know, you would have had to keep me at school for a jolly long time before I was able to help you in turn, dad!"

"I had more than enough—only——"

"Don't speak about that now, dad," said Jack hurriedly, as his father's face clouded over. "That rotten swindler ought to be in prison!"

"It was I—I who was a fool!" said Talbot heavily. "But he talked so fair. And I never thought— Well, I was a fool, Jack!"

"No, you weren't, dad. He was a rascal, that was all. I hope I shall come across Mr. Augustus Wylie some day," said Jack, his fists tightening. "But never mind him. I've told Mr. Chaloner about it, dad, and he asked me to call on him to-day, and he'd advise me. I had better see him."

"That's right, my boy. I dare say I shall be home to dinner to-day. I've got a chance of a job for a few hours in the morning, in the timber-yard. Good-bye, my boy!"

Jack listened as his father's heavy steps went down the rickety stairs.

"Poor old dad!" murmured the boy. "He's more cut up over it than I am. Hang it, I must get something to do—and at once! But it's so jolly hard!"

There were many difficulties. Jack knew well that there was nothing to be done in Abbotsdale. In that quiet little town he had no chance, and his father had no chance. They would have to get to some larger centre. But John Talbot had a natural reluctance to leave the place where he had been born and bred, and had lived most of his days. Some old employer, too, was likely to give him something to do—something that would keep the wolf from the door. Jack felt that he would have to separate from his father—at least, for a time. But the thought was painful, and he did not like to speak of it.

At half-past twelve—the appointed time—Jack made his way to the house of Mr. Chaloner, the head-master of the National School. The master's house was a little red-brick villa near the school, and Jack had been there many times before. Many times the kind old man had helped him—as he was willing to help all his boys who cared for the pursuit of knowledge. There was a crowd of boys coming out of the school gates as Jack passed, and many of them greeted him; and a cheery-looking, fair-haired lad of fourteen clapped him on the shoulder.

"So you've left, Jack?"

Jack looked round.

It was his chum in the school—Bob Fielding.

"Hallo, Bob! Yes, I've left."

"Rotten!" said Bob. "Especially after you had been slaving so hard after that scholarship! Blessed if I would

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have done it! But you always were a beggar for work. Are you coming to the circus this evening?"

"I—I think so."

"Good! I'll call for you. Where are you off to now?"

"I am going to see Mr. Chaloner."

Bob yawned.

"My hat! Latin in the middle of the day?"

Jack Talbot laughed. His careless, volatile chum never took anything seriously; but his careless, high spirits were enlivening to Jack Talbot.

"Oh, no! That's over, for the present. Mr. Chaloner is going to give me some advice about the future."

"Worse still! Sorry! See you this evening!"

And Bob Fielding ran off.

Jack went up to the head-master's house, and was soon in the presence of Mr. Chaloner—a kind-faced, grey-haired old gentleman. He greeted the boy with grave kindness.

He, too, was disappointed by the change in his favourite pupil's prospects.

"Tell me exactly how you stand, my dear lad," he said, as he motioned Jack to a chair, "and I will give you my counsel."

Jack sat down.

"I'm afraid it's all up, sir. We have nothing left—or almost nothing. I've had a talk with my father. Everything's gone. And—and"—the boy's voice faltered a little—"dad seems to be quite broken up by it. I'm afraid it will be some time before he is in regular work again—if ever he is. I must do something. I only wish I knew what to do."

The school-master nodded.

"That is right, my boy. You are young for such a burden to fall upon your shoulders. But you are right."

"If you could help me to get a post of some kind, sir!" said Jack diffidently. "You might know of something. I'm not afraid of work."

"I know you are not, Jack," said Mr. Chaloner, with a bright smile. "I have seen you at work. I am afraid I can do little, but what I can do I will do. But I may be able to help your father."

Jack's face brightened.

"That's better than ever, sir. I can look out for myself."

"The post of caretaker in the schools will be vacant next week," said Mr. Chaloner. "You know the duties of the place—they are not heavy; but the wages, of course, are very small. It is a roof and daily bread, however. It may serve for the time. And as for you, I am sure, with your abilities and spirit, you will soon find something to do."

"It will probably be necessary for you to leave Abbotsdale, but you are more fitted than most boys of your age for facing the world. You have a strong character, and you have been taught to work and to do your duty, and there could not be a better training."

And Jack's heart was lighter when he quitted Mr. Chaloner's house, after a cordial handshake from the school-master.

With his father provided for, he felt that he could face world himself. And in a short time—who could tell?—probably he would be on the high-road to fortune. The hopes of youth are high, and present clouds could not prevent him from seeing a primrose path ahead.

Jack went down the old High Street, and turned into Bull Lane, with a cheery look on his face. Before No. 1 two men stood, and one of them was knocking loudly at the door. The house seemed to be empty, for there was no reply to the knock, and Jack paused to look at the two applicants for admission.

Bang, bang!

The rusty old knocker crashed down again and again.

The man who was wielding it was a little, fat fellow, whose plump round face expressed the extreme of kindness and good-nature. His cheeks were very red, and his eyebrows very dark. About his ears were traces of colour, as if his face had been painted, and all the paint had not been quite washed away. He wore a silk hat cocked on one side of his head, and an enormous flower in his button-hole. His waistcoat was of the most gorgeous colours, and it was crossed by a huge gold chain—a chain, at all events, that represented gold.

The other man was bigger—a man of medium height, but with a form the splendid development of which would have struck the most casual observer at once. He was evidently a man of immense physical strength, but his manner was quiet and good-natured, and there was not a hint of swagger about him. He stood watching the fat fellow with a grin on his stolid visage.

"You can't make 'em hear, Joey," he said at last.

Bang, bang!

"You'll have the door down, Joey!"

"Let it come down, then, Sammy," said the individual addressed as Joey. "I'm going to make 'em hear. Haven't I got the signor's message to deliver?"

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"But if they ain't at home——"

Bang, bang!

"Look here, Joey, don't be a duffer——"

"My name's Montgomery," said the fat fellow—"Monty to my friends!"

"Now then, Joey——"

"Oh, cheese it, Sammy! I'm going to make them hear!" Bang, bang!

Jack Talbot came up, laughing.

"I live here," he said. "Whom do you want to see? I'm afraid everybody's out, excepting myself."

The two visitors looked at him.

"And whom may you be, young 'un?"

"My name's Talbot—Jack Talbot."

The little man smote his thigh with a sounding slap.

"My only chapeau, it's the kid!"

Then, to Jack's amazement, the fat visitor seized him in a sudden grip, and hugged him, and then waltzed him round the pavement.

"Here, hold on!" exclaimed Jack, fully convinced that the stranger had gone suddenly mad. "Stop it, you ass!"

"Come to my arms, my noble youth!"

"Chuck it, you duffer!"

And Jack jerked himself loose. The stranger, gasping for breath, staggered back against his companion, who caught him by the back of the neck, and steadied him.

"Stand up, Joey!"

"Thank you, Sammy! Youth——"

"Oh, don't be an ass, you know!" said Jack.

"Ah, if you knew whom you were addressing, youth, you would, mahap, adopt a more respectful manner," said the other, with a great deal of dignity. "Look at me!"

Jack looked at him.

"Have you not seen this face before?"

"No."

"What, not on the hoardings—not on the coloured bills?"

"No," said Jack, looking puzzled.

The fat individual looked at his comrade, who was grinning.

"Such is fame, Sammy!" he said. "Here is a youth—apparently otherwise sane and intelligent—who has never heard of the famous mirth-merchant, the old, original chestnut-manufacturer, the delight of the crowned heads of Europe—Joseph Montgomery Pye!"

"Is that your name?" said Jack.

"That is my name, youth!" said the fat gentleman severely—"that is my name! I am the Pride of the Tan—the King of Funny Merchants! In short, I am the wheezowangler of Signor Tomsonio's World-famous Circus!"

"Oh," said Jack, "the clown!"

"Vulgarly so called, my gentle youth." He waved a fat hand towards his comrade. "Permit me to introduce my friend Samson, the Strong Man—the man who can break iron bars with his teeth, throw sledge-hammers a distance of two hundred yards, snap iron chains by expanding his chest, and—— What did you say, Sammy?"

"Liar!" said Sammy.

"Ahem! So you are Jack Talbot?" said Mr. Pye, turning to Jack, and changing the subject. "Come to my arms, my noble youth!"

Jack promptly dodged.

"Don't be an ass! If you've got anything to say to me, say it!"

"I have, my son. A message from Signor Tomsonio," said Mr. Pye impressively.

And Jack understood at last what his visitors had come for.

CHAPTER 4.

At the Circus.

JOSEPH MONTGOMERY PYE seemed very much inclined to recommence the waltz, with Jack for a partner; but the boy kept him at arm's length. Mr. Pye was evidently in a state of enthusiasm, of which Jack was the object—he did not know why.

"We bear a message from the noble Signor Tomsonio," said Mr. Pye. "Tell it not in Gath, whisper it not in the streets of Ascalon, that he was born Thompson. You are the kid—the real kid. You collared the catiff who was going to rob Miss Clotilde in the wood."

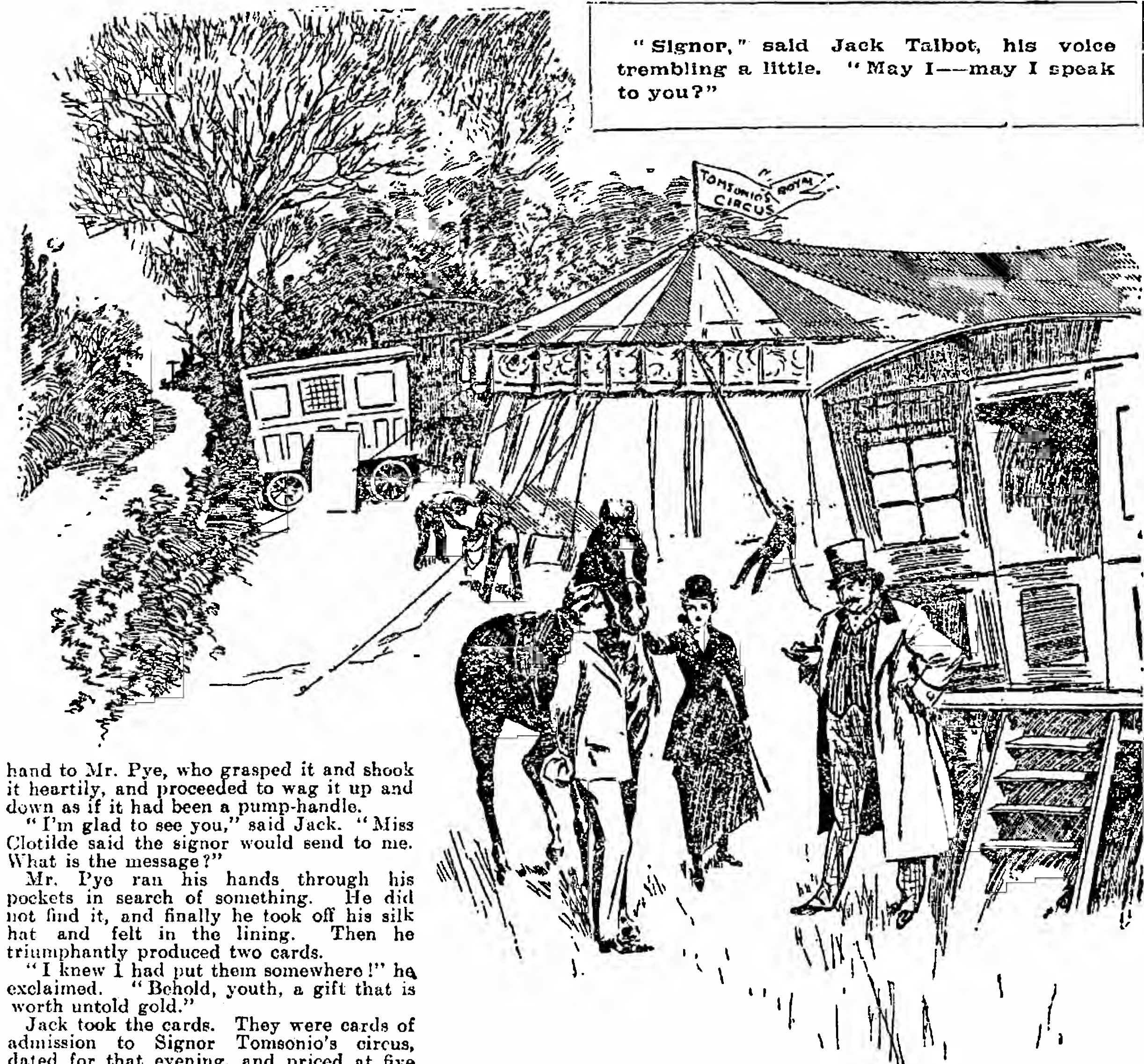
"I interfered," said Jack.

"Exactly. Miss Clotilde has told the signor, and the signor has told us. Youth, you can command the services of Joseph Montgomery Pye, to the last drop in the bottle—ahem!—I mean to the last shot in the locker. If I had been there, I should have massacred the catiff."

It was easy to see, through the peculiar bombast of Mr. Pye's talk, that he was devoted to the girl rider of the circus, and that he was very kindly disposed towards Jack for the help he had rendered her. The same feeling was visible in the more stolid face of Samson. Jack held out his

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"Signor," said Jack Talbot, his voice trembling a little. "May I—may I speak to you?"



hand to Mr. Pye, who grasped it and shook it heartily, and proceeded to wag it up and down as if it had been a pump-handle.

"I'm glad to see you," said Jack. "Miss Clotilde said the signor would send to me. What is the message?"

Mr. Pye ran his hands through his pockets in search of something. He did not find it, and finally he took off his silk hat and felt in the lining. Then he triumphantly produced two cards.

"I knew I had put them somewhere!" he exclaimed. "Behold, youth, a gift that is worth untold gold."

Jack took the cards. They were cards of admission to Signor Tomsonio's circus, dated for that evening, and priced at five shillings each. The initials of the circus-master were pencilled on each card.

"Thank you very much," said Jack. "Please thank the signor for me. This is very kind of him."

"Priceless, my son," said Mr. Pye. "Priceless, although purchasable for the moderate sum of five shillings in the open market. For reflect what a treasure-house one of those tickets unlocks to you. The sight of the unequalled array of beasts in Tomsonio's world-famed circus and hippodrome, the high trapeze tricks of the Handsome Man, the tame tigers of Herr Biberach, the wonderful performance of Clotilde, the queen of the ring, the great feat—I mean feats—of Samson, the strong man, and last, but not least, the quips and cranks of the irresistible mirth-merchant, Joseph Montgomery Pye."

"Rats!" said the strong man.

"The performance starts punctually at seven," said Mr. Pye, taking no notice of his friend's remark. "Doors open at six-thirty. Come early, and avoid the crush. The seats are crammed every night, for this wonderful, moving, laughter-provoking—"

"Cheese it, Joey. You're not up outside the tent now."

"That's so, too," said Mr. Pye, breaking off. "One gets into the habit of these things, you know. Youth, you are coming?"

"Yes, rather," said Jack.

"Bring a friend. Tell all your friends to come. Admission at a figure to suit all pockets; but the performance itself priceless. The wonderful—"

"Chuck it, Joey."

"Certainly," said Mr. Pye. "How one does run on! Youth, you will see me again this evening, on the tan—you will see my friend Samson again. Sammy, let us march."

"Thank you very much for coming," said Jack.

The clown waved his hand airily.

"Not at all. It is a pleasure to do anything for Miss Clotilde, and the honour of your acquaintance is a sufficient reward. How's that for high, Sammy?"

"Rotten," said Sammy.

"My friend is unappreciative," said Mr. Pye, with a smile. "He is very strong in the limbs, but not in the—ahem!—head. He does not understand art. Do you, Sammy?"

"Bosh!" said Sammy.

"Adieu, my young friend."

"Good-bye," said Jack, "and thank you again!"

"Not at all."

And the little man linked his arm in that of the big man, and the two marched off, followed by the glances of most of the inhabitants of Bull Lane, who had been brought to doors or windows by the startling performances of Mr. Pye upon the knocker.

Jack looked after them with a smile.

He was very pleased with the gift of admission tickets to the circus, for he wanted very much to go, and he would not have felt justified, in his present circumstances, in spending money there.

The price marked on the cards surprised him. He had not imagined that there were such expensive seats in the circus tent. He did not know that Signor Tomsonio had expensive seats for the appearance of the thing, but filled them up at any figure when they would not fill at a high one.

John Talbot came in to dinner, and Jack showed him the cards.

"Go by all means, Jack," he said. "It was very kind of them to send the tickets. What did Mr. Chaloner say to you?"

Jack told him. His father nodded.

"It is very kind of him," he said. "I shall accept the place, for the present, at least. It will be something to go on with, while I am looking for something better, and that, I am sure, is what Mr. Chaloner intends. I will call there this evening, and tell him so."

Jack, in spite of the troubles which lay heavily upon his home, found himself looking forward eagerly to the evening's performance at the circus. Perhaps, indeed, it was through those very troubles. Trouble and worry are not natural to youth; youthful spirits bear up against them, and refuse to be bowed down for long. As the song says, what is the use of repining? What is done, cannot be helped; and it is better to look to the future than to the past.

Just after Talbot had left to go to Mr. Chaloner's, Bob Fielding came whistling into Bull Lane, and hammered at the door. Jack came down to meet him.

"Coming to the circus, Jack?"

"Yes; I'm ready. I'll get my cap."

"Come on, then; we don't want to be the last in. I've been hearing a lot about the show from chaps who went last night, and I want to get a good seat."

"That's all right—we shall have good seats."

"Not if we don't go early."

"It's all right, I tell you."

"Oh, rats!" said Bob. "I suppose you can't pass us into a box on your own influence, eh? Buck up!"

"But I can, old chap."

"Off your rocker?" asked Bob.

"No. Look here."

Jack held out his two tickets for inspection. Fielding looked at them, and gave a whistle.

"My word! You've blued ten shillings on tickets!"

"Hardly," said Jack, laughing. "Can't you see the pencil in the corner? They're complimentary tickets. Signor Tomsonio sent them to me."

"Oh, tell me a smaller one!" said Bob.

"It's a fact! I'll explain as we go along."

Jack fetched his cap, and the two went down the High Street together. As they went, Jack related the morning's adventure, and Fielding listened with considerable astonishment.

"My hat!" he said. "Some chaps have all the luck! You ought to help them find out the rascal who got away. You said it was someone belonging to the circus."

"Yes, he was, from what they said. I should know his voice again—his first name, too. The rough called him Dave, in speaking to him."

"You ought to see Tomsonio, and tell him. My hat! What a ripping name that is! Italian, of course."

Jack smiled as he remembered Mr. Pye's remark on the subject. The two boys reached the common, and the blare of several instruments came to their ears.

The dusk had set in, and the flare of naphtha lamps illumined a wide space on Abbotsdale common.

The band, composed of a drummer, a man with a wheezy trombone, and a violinist, were discoursing sweet music as the chums came up.

Crude as the music was, it sounded lively enough, and it drew a great many of the youths and maidens of Abbotsdale to the spot.

Outside the main entrance a curious figure was mounted upon a barrel, haranguing the crowd.

He was a fat person, in the loose garb of a circus "joey," with a paper hat and daubed cheeks, and he kept up an incessant stream of talk directed at the grinning crowd.

In the chalk and paint Jack would never have known him; but the voice and the style were unmistakable. It was Mr. Pye.

"Gentlemen, walk up! This is the world-famed circus and hippodrome of Signor Tomsonio. This is the door frequently crowded by the crowned heads of Europe. Come and see Samson, the strong, strong man. Come and see him break iron chains with his teeth, and burst cables by inflating his chest. Come and see Herr Biberach and his terrible tigers. Come and see Clotilde, the queen of the ring, and Carson, the king of the trapeze. Roll up, gentlemen! Come and see Pye—the original Monty Pye, the funniest, most excruciating mirth-merchant on the earth."

Jack grinned.

Mr. Pye was certainly not modest in his description of himself.

The clown ceased his harangue for a moment as the two boys came up. He gave Jack a wink.

"Glad to see you, young gentleman. But this isn't your entrance. Yours is the next door, among the nobs. Walk up!" he went on. "Walk up! This way for the wonderful bareback performance of the Queen of the Ring! Walk up!"

Jack and Bob went on to the next door.

"You know that chap?" asked Bob.

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"He brought me the tickets."

"He seems a jolly bounder. Here's our way in."

The boys entered, showing their tickets to an attendant, and were conducted into the best seats in the spacious tent. In the five-shilling seats there was ample space, and the seats were covered with faded velvet, and were very comfortable. They were numbered, and Jack found that his seats were reserved at the front, where he had a splendid view of the whole arena, and the galloping horses would be within reach of his hand if he stretched it out.

"Ripping!" said Bob, as he settled down. "By George, I've never had such jolly good seats at a circus before. This is what comes of having a friend at court. Hallo, here comes a foreign monarch, at least."

It was not a foreign monarch, but it was a very imposing personage who came along the row of seats to speak to Jack Talbot.

A gentleman of ample figure, with a more than ample chest, in evening clothes, and a white waistcoat. His diamond studs flashed and glittered as he moved, perhaps too brilliantly to be real. His face was fat and jolly, and he had a moustache which, from the way it was curled, evidently took up a great deal of his time. Jack guessed whom it was before the stranger spoke.

The gentleman in the white waistcoat bowed.

"Master Talbot, I suppose?" he said.

"Yes, sir."

"Permit me to introduce myself—Signor Tomsonio, proprietor of the circus. I have heard from my—my ward, Clotilde, how you served her this morning, and I wanted to thank you. You were a plucky lad to interfere as you did. I had the pleasure of sending you cards—"

"Thank you very much for them."

The signor waved a fat hand.

"Not at all. I am glad and honoured to see you here, my young friend. I hope you will like the performance. But you are sure to like it. There are few who could see the performance of Tomsonio's Celebrated Circus without enjoying it. I think I may say that. What?"

"I am sure of it, sir."

"After the performance, perhaps you would care to join us at supper—you and your young friend," said the signor.

"You are very kind."

"We will not keep you late, you know; and Samson will walk home with you to see you safe to your door."

"Thank you very much, sir. We shall be glad indeed."

"Yes, rather!" chimed in Bob. "What-ho!"

"Good. Then remain where you are after the performance, and I will send for you."

And with another graceful bow the signor departed. Jack and Bob exchanged glances.

"What a ripping chap!" said Bob Fielding.

And Jack nodded.

The thought came into his mind at that moment that he would not regret all that he had lately lost, if he could have been a member of the circus company under the command of Signor Tomsonio, to travel from town to town in Merrie England with Clotilde for his comrade.

CHAPTER 5.

The Queen of the Ring.

THE circus was gradually filling.

The blare of the band, the flare of the naphtha lights, and the eloquence of Joseph Montgomery Pye attracted the youth of Abbotsdale in large numbers. The cheaper seats were soon crowded, and the more expensive ones pretty well filled.

Jack Talbot was waiting eagerly for the performance to begin. He was very curious to see Clotilde again, in her character of Queen of the Ring. There was a thud of hoofs on the tan as three or four horses were turned into the ring. Signor Tomsonio's circus was about to begin the performance for which, according to the signor, the crowned heads of Europe had often shown a marked partiality.

Thud, thud, thud!

The beat of the hoofs on the tan was music to Jack's ears. Always, from his earliest days, he had been fond of horses, and he knew a great deal about them. In the school holidays he had frequently worked on the farms round Abbotsdale, and he had made the most of his opportunities. He could have ridden any colt in the county without a saddle. As he watched the horses galloping round the ring the thought came into his mind again—what a life that would be for him.

With a series of hand-springs and somersaults a plump but active figure bounded into the arena, and there was a ripple of hand-clapping.

It was Mr. Pye.

With his daubed face, his pointed hat, and his flowing bags, Mr. Pye made a most comical figure, and his grimaces were more comical still. He commenced a dialogue of the

most personal character with the signor, whose majestic figure was resplendent in the glare of the light, and ancient as most of his "wheezes" undoubtedly were, they raised roars of laughter among the audience, from the irresistible way Mr. Pye uttered them.

Jack soon found himself laughing heartily, and once or twice the clown glanced towards him, with a wink that made him laugh more heartily still.

There was a buzz in the audience when a big black Arab, with a figure in white mounted upon his back, appeared at the ring entrance.

With a fresh blare from the band, Clotilde cantered into the arena.

The girl's name was on all the posters that made the old streets of Abbotsdale glow with colour, and it was evident that she was a favourite with the public. Jack watched her eagerly. He had half-expected to see the usual circus rider, in fluffy muslin and spangles, and somehow the idea of that had jarred upon him; but Clotilde came now as a vision of beauty and grace.

Clotilde retired at last, and there was a cheer as the Handsome Man made his appearance.

Jim Carson deserved that curious title more than ever in his fleshings and spangles. There was no doubt that he was a fine figure of a man, and he looked handsome indeed as he strode into the ring.

He glanced at the audience, slightly bowing in acknowledgment of the applause, as if he considered it his due.

For a moment his glance rested upon Jack Talbot, and Jack knew that the acrobat had noticed his presence there.

Then he caught the rope that swung from the swinging stage in the dome of the great tent, and went up hand over hand with wonderful agility.

He disappeared into the air, and eyes strained to follow him.

High up, so that he looked strangely small to the gaze, he swung from the rope to the stage, that swung and rocked as the acrobat clambered upon it.

Then he caught the trapeze-bar.

There was a deep breath from the audience as the trapeze swung away, and the form of the Handsome Man floated in mid-air.

The audience cheered Carson loudly, and yet they seemed relieved when the act was over. He had kept their nerves in a state of tension all the time, and the entertainment was more painful than pleasant. Yet they cheered him generously, and the acrobat's face flushed with pride as he took his call. There was a swagger in his motions as he walked out finally that brought a grin to the daubed face of Mr. Pye.

Signor Tomsonio hurried away to the ring entrance, and Joey Pye turned a series of somersaults round the ring, and made a pretended effort to climb the rope to the trapeze, which sent the audience into convulsions of merriment.

The next item on the programme was Herr Biberach, the German tiger-tamer, but there certainly seemed to be some delay.

Several minutes elapsed, and Mr. Pye continued to keep the people amused, and finally the signor re-entered, looking red and flustered.

The band gave a loud blare, and in the midst of it the great cage containing tigers was wheeled into the arena.

There was a loud cheer to greet the tigers, and the big, fair-haired, ruddy-bearded German who walked in beside the cage.

Jack looked keenly at the tiger-tamer.

Herr Biberach passed close to the place where Jack sat in front as he strode after the cage, which was drawn round the ring to give the audience a close view of the two tigers.

Jack was at no loss to guess the cause of the delay then.

The German's face was puffy, there were rings under his eyes, and the eyes were heavy and drooping. His face was made up, but the make-up could not quite disguise the signs of late indulgence. Jack knew that the German had been intoxicated at the time when he should have taken his turn, and the shifting, glassy eyes of the Tiger Tamer showed that he was hardly himself yet.

Jack looked at the tigers.

There were two of them, male and female, both splendid beasts. They were growling as the cage jolted along on wheels, drawn by a couple of horses. They did not seem to be in the best of humours.

CHAPTER 6.

The Tiger Tamer.

JACK TALBOT drew a deep breath as he watched the big German enter the cage. He knew that the Tiger Tamer should have fastened the cage door after him, but Herr Biberach did not fasten it.

He had unlooped a chain fastening when he entered; he

closed the door behind him, but the iron catch did not snap, and the chain was left hanging loose.

Few, probably, of the audience noticed it, or, at least, took special note of it. But Jack was keen and observant. His expression as he watched the German made his companion glance at him.

"What's the matter, Jack?" Bob asked, looking at him.

"He hasn't fastened the door."

"That's the worst of having a front seat," said Bob, with a wry face, as he glanced round at the crowded seats behind. "We shan't be able to bunk. But I expect it's all right. The tiger must be safe, or he wouldn't go into the cage."

"They don't look safe."

"Oh, I expect they're made to growl, for effect," said Bob carelessly.

Jack did not reply.

He was uneasy, and yet he did not care to show his uneasiness. He was not afraid, but he could not help shivering as he thought of the possible effect if the tigers should get loose in the arena.

The shrieks, the trampling crowds, the wild rush for safety—he could picture it all in his mind's eye.

But the thought of danger seemed to be in no mind but his own.

The people were craning their heads forward, eagerly watching the tigers and the bold man who had shut himself in the great cage.

If Herr Biberach had been in a fit state for the performance, all would doubtless have been well. But Jack knew that he was not in a fit state.

His eyes never left the great cage. The tigers were showing signs of restlessness, and the Herr seemed to have his hands full with them.

He cracked his whip, and the animals shrank from it, and then, after several tricks which brought rounds of applause from the spectators, he held up a paper hoop for the tiger to jump through.

This was a regular part of the performance, and the bursting of the tiger's huge head through the paper was always greeted with "hands."

But just now the tiger seemed to be in an obstinate mood. Probably, with the keen instinct of animals, he had detected that his master was not in his usual state, and he grew rebellious in consequence.

Instead of jumping through the hoop, the tiger retreated towards the tigress, and both of them showed their teeth and growled.

A thrill ran through the spectators.

This might be part of the show, but if so it was very realistic, and certainly both the animals were looking surly enough, and the growls would have been terrifying had they been outside the iron bars of the cage.

Herr Biberach's face flushed with anger.

He shouted to the tiger in German, and cracked his whip, but still the animal refused to jump.

The German's hand went up, with the whip in it, and the thong descended in a terrible lash across the flanks of the tiger.

Signor Tomsonio gave a gasp.

"The mad fool!"

His words were justified. A terrible roar burst from the tiger, and he launched himself forward, straight at the tamer.

The German seemed to be completely taken by surprise by the attack. His dulled brain had not realised that the animals were in a sulky and savage mood. He was knocked over headlong by the spring of the tiger, and fell heavily upon the floor of the cage, and the tiger stood over him, growling.

There was a wild shout from the people. Women shrieked, and men stood up or jumped upon the seats to obtain a view of what was going on in the cage.

Jack Talbot set his lips. What was to follow? He remembered the unfastened door of the cage.

Half unconsciously he clambered over the barrier that separated the seats from the sawdust of the arena. Bob Fielding caught him by the shoulder.

"Jack, stop! Don't be an ass!"

Jack nodded quickly, and paused, standing just inside the barrier. The audience were still shouting excitedly. Signor Tomsonio and Mr. Pye had rushed to the cage, and half a dozen of the circus employees had dashed in. They were surrounding the cage, but their presence and the excitement only seemed to enrage the tiger more. He placed his foot upon the breast of the fallen man, and gave a hollow roar that rang through the circus tent like thunder.

"The hot irons—quick!" gasped the signor.

And some of the men rushed to obey.

Herr Biberach was lying quite still under the paw of the

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tiger. He was not unconscious, but his eyes were glazed with fear. His glance was fixed upon the men outside the cage, but he did not cry for help; he did not move. The terrible shock of the attack had completely sobered him. He knew that a sound, a motion, might cost him his life. He lay still, and the tiger growled, and glared at the men outside.

The signor turned to the audience. The excitement was growing fearful.

"Keep your seats, ladies and gentlemen! Keep your seats!"

But a great part of the audience were already crowding to the exits. Others were calling and shrieking confusedly, and the noise excited the tiger more. There was another roar that seemed to shake the tent.

"The bars here!" said Samson, who, with most of the circus company—the male part of it—had hurried upon the scene. The entertainment was forgotten; a man's life was in danger!

"Jack!"

Bob Fielding called out after his chum as Jack crossed the tan towards the cage. The boy did not look back.

"Jack, don't be an ass! Remember the door's unfastened!"

But Jack hurried on. Bob hesitated a moment, casting a glance towards the exit, but he would not desert his chum. He jumped into the arena and hurried after Jack, his heart beating like a hammer.

There was a deep growl from the cage.

Samson and Mr. Pye had a couple of red-hot bars in their hands now, with the flaming ends thrust through the bars of the cage, one on either side.

The tiger sniffed at the glowing metal, and retreated, and Herr Biberach's still form was left for the moment untouched.

The tiger growled and snarled savagely, and the tigress was adding now to the fearful chorus.

The signor was white as death.

"Get out, Biberach," he muttered through the bars, A man ran up with another hot iron, and the signor thrust it through the bars, almost into the face of the tigress, who was coming forward. The animal snarled and hung back, but her eyes were flaming.

"Biberach! Man, move! We can't keep them off for long!"

But Biberach did not move; he did not reply. The signor looked at him quickly. He muttered an oath. For the German's eyes were closed. His face was white and hard. He was insensible. He had fainted! Signor Tomsonio groaned aloud.

If the Tiger Tamer had been able to reach the door it might have been opened and closed while the tigers were held back by fear of the hot irons. Now, what was to be done? Who was bold enough to enter the cage and brave the wrath of the terrible animals, growing more infuriated every moment?

"Carson, get him out!"

The Handsome Man started.

"What!"

"Quick, drag him out!"

The acrobat shrugged his shoulders.

"Are you mad? It is death to enter the cage!"

"It is death for Biberach to stay there!"

"It's the drunken fool's own fault!"

"You won't try?"

"Rather not!"

"I will go!"

It was a quiet voice—a boy's voice.

The Handsome Man looked round in savage surprise.

The speaker was Jack Talbot.

Jack's hand was already on the door of the cage.

CHAPTER 7.

At the Peril of His Life.

"STOP!" cried Signor Tomsonio.

Jack looked at him anxiously.

"There's no time to stop—let me try!"

"Stop, I tell you! Take this iron from me, Jim Carson—hold it—while I go in! A boy sha'n't risk his life while men stand by."

The Handsome Man bit his lip till the blood came. He was no coward, as his performance on the trapeze had shown, yet he shrank from the fearful danger of the tiger's jaws.

Jack's hand, as it fell upon the cage door to open it, was steady. The boy was not afraid. He had acted upon an impulse, but he did not flinch as he came nearer to the danger.

"Hold on, signor," muttered Pye. "Hold on! The boy can do it better than you—it needs to be quick!"

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The signor hesitated.

There was a low growl from the tigress—he had unconsciously lowered the bar.

The animal made a movement towards the still form of the tamer.

"Look out, signor!"

Signor Tomsonio raised the bar again, and the tigress hung back. But she was evidently not to be restrained for long. And Samson and Joey had all their work cut out to keep back the male beast.

"I will go in," said Jack quietly.

And he opened the cage door.

Then, for a second, a terrible thrill ran through him, as he faced the bloodshot eyes of the savage brutes at close quarters, with nothing between but the wavering, red-hot bars, which might be braved and knocked aside at any moment by the tigers.

But he set his teeth hard, and advanced into the cage. Keeping his eyes fixed upon the animals, he stepped quietly to the insensible tamer, and—still with his eyes upon the tigers—he stooped and caught hold of him. The bulky German was heavy—too heavy for Jack to think of lifting. The boy caught him round the shoulders, and lifted the head and body, and drew him towards the door, the legs trailing in the straw.

It was the work of seconds; but it seemed like ages.

Jack reached the door, his heart beating like a hammer, his breath going thick and fast.

Bob Fielding sprang forward to help him drag the German out. It had been done so quickly, so steadily and quietly, that the animals had made no motion to interfere—and the glowing irons had been between the boy and the red jaws.

But as the insensible German was dragged out of the cage, the tiger gave a savage growl and plunged forward. The red-hot irons seared his skin, and he surged back again with a terrific snarl. But the pain maddened him.

"The door—quick!" yelled the signor.

The boy and the rescued German were outside. The Handsome Man sprang to the door and dragged it shut after them, and the iron latch clicked. Then he sprang back, only just in time to escape the tearing claws of the tiger as it crashed upon the door.

Then followed a terrible yet fascinating sight. The baffled brute, deprived of his victim, and utterly unrestrained now, made fearful efforts to break out of the cage. He tore at the bars, lashed himself with his tail, and uttered roars that echoed through the circus-tent, and effectually banished the last of the audience who had ventured to remain. A cry rose that the tiger was loose, and there was a general rush to escape.

The tiger was not loose, but the strength of the iron bars was tested, as the great brute tore and raged within.

The men round the cage drew back from the bars; and safe enough as they were now, with the door fastened, more than one face turned pale at the sight of the fury raging within the bars.

Herr Biberach moved in the sawdust and sat up dizzily. Samson held his head, and he blinked round in stupefied amazement.

"Ach! Vat is all tat?" he gasped.

"You've had a narrow escape," said the signor sternly.

"You owe that to yourself; but you owe your life to this boy."

The German looked at the cage, and turned pale.

"Ach! I tink I vas killed!" he muttered. "How is it tat I am out of te cage?"

"This lad pulled you out."

The German, still blinking dazedly, was helped away by several of the circus hands. Signor Tomsonio held out his hand to Jack.

"Give us your fist, my lad," he said, in a voice full of feeling. "You've saved that fool's life—and saved Tomsonio's World-Famed Circus from getting into all the papers under the heading of 'A Terrible Tragedy.' That sort of thing doesn't do a circus any good. What?"

Joey Pye chuckled.

"You're right, signor, as you always are. Might have had to shoot Julius, too, which would have been worse than the Terrible Tragedy."

And the signor laughed. The tension was relaxed. The tigers' cage was wheeled out of the arena, and the growling and howling of the furious animals died away in the distance.

Signor Tomsonio glanced round the deserted tent.

"They're all gone!" he grunted. "Well, it was the last turn, so they haven't missed much. I shall have to make an announcement, though, that the Tiger Tamer isn't hurt. My lads, you are having supper with us. Come this way."

And the signor moved out of the ring, followed by Jack and Bob. Jack was still shaking a little with excitement, and his chum was in high spirits. It was a new and

exciting adventure to them to have supper under a canvas roof with a circus company.

"Plucky lad," said Samson, the Strong Man, as Jack walked away with his chum and the signor. "Splendid young fellow, Carson!"

The Handsome Man showed his white teeth.

"What a fuss to make about him."

Samson stared at him.

"Well, I should think so, after what he's done. He's saved Biberach's life, anyway."

"Bah! It was not worth the saving."

Samson chuckled.

"Perhaps not; but you won't make Bibby think so. Anyway, the kid risked his life, and he was the only one here that cared to do it."

"Rats!" said Mr. Pye. "You'd have gone in, Sammy, if you hadn't been holding the iron bar. You know you would."

"I hope I would," said Samson. "I don't know."

"So would I," said Mr. Pye. "In fact, I was just going to call to the doc. to take my bar, and I'd have nipped in. What did you say?"

"I said 'liar.'"

"Look here, do you mean to impugn my veracity?" demanded Mr. Pye. "If so—"

"Well, if so?"

"Oh, it's all right, that's all," said Mr. Pye. "What's friendship, if you can't call your friend names when you want to. Joking apart, it was wonderful plucky of the kid, and he deserves a tin medal."

"What foolery you talk!" growled the Handsome Man. "The boy was a cheeky brat to thrust himself forward. In another moment I should have gone in—"

Mr. Pye winked solemnly at the canvas dome.

Samson muttered something which sounded remarkably like the monosyllable which had roused the momentary ire of Mr. Pye.

Carson looked at them for a moment, scowling, and then stalked away. As a matter of fact, he would never have ventured into the tiger's cage, and he knew it. And in his heart was a bitter dislike of the boy who had shown more courage than he, a grown man, had shown.

CHAPTER 8.

A Rascal Punished.

"CLOTILDE!"

The girl rider was in the entrance of the big supper-tent. Her expression showed that she had heard of what Jack had done, as she greeted him. She held out both her hands to him impulsively.

"How brave you are," she said quietly. "You saved Herr Biberach's life. Oh, I wonder that you were not torn in pieces!"

"I'm jolly glad I wasn't," said Jack, smiling. "It only lasted a few seconds."

"I've brought our young friends to supper, Clotilde," said the signor; and Jack introduced his friend.

And then they were presented to the signora, to whom Jack took a liking at once. There was nothing Italian about Signora Tomsonio excepting her name. She was a stout, ruddy-faced, cheerful-looking lady of forty-five, who evidently regarded the signor as the greatest man on earth, bar none, and Clotilde as the next most important person under the sun.

The supper-tent presented a cheerful scene. Jack and Bob were seated near Clotilde, and Joey Pye was on the other side of Bob; and he kept that youth in a continual succession of explosions by his remarks. Jack talked to Clotilde, to the signor, and to the signora. Strange as the scene and the company were to him, all was delightful. The favoured members of the company were admitted to the signor's supper-table; of the rest, some supped in their own caravans, others in another tent. Samson and the Handsome Man came in soon after supper had commenced, and sat down, the acrobat casting a far from friendly glance towards Jack Talbot.

Signor Tomsonio caught the dissatisfied frown on the brow of the Handsome Man, and he consoled the handsome acrobat in a way that was not conspicuous for tact.

"It's all right, Carson," he called, across the table. "Don't be downhearted. There are a lot of fellows who'd think twice about going into the tiger's cage, I can tell you. Joey here wouldn't have gone in for love or money—"

"Oh, draw it mild, signor!" said Mr. Pye. "I was just about to rush in—"

"Bosh! Sammy, too, would have thought twice. Wouldn't you, Sammy?"

"Yes, rather!" said Sammy, with his mouth full of pie.

"And I didn't like the idea," said the signor. "I suppose I should have done it, if the boy hadn't; but I felt like a jelly, I can tell you. I wouldn't blame any man for feeling a bit of a funk just then."

Carson flushed crimson.

"I was not in a funk," he said savagely.

"Well, no, not so bad as that, of course," agreed the signor. "You didn't want to go in, that's all. I don't blame you."

"I should have gone in if that impertinent puppy had not thrust himself in," said the Handsome Man angrily.

Jack reddened, and the signor started to his feet.

"That's not the way to speak to a guest of mine, Jim Carson. Get out of this tent!"

"I—"

"Get out!"

"But—"

"Outside!" roared the signor. "By James, sir, if you don't hop out I'll throw you out, you—you worm!"

The Handsome Man, gritting his teeth, stepped outside the tent. There he shook his fist, behind the canvas, in the direction of the supper-party.

Jack was looking very uncomfortable. The Handsome Man's outbreak hardly surprised him; he had the character of the acrobat pretty well "weighed up."

"I'm sorry this has happened, young sir," said the signor, in his stately way. "Jim Carson can't bear to be outdone. He turns yellow if he hears anybody being praised. He'll be sorry presently. I apologise for him."

"It's all right," said Jack. "Don't mention it."

And that unpleasant incident was soon forgotten. The supper-table, rough and ready as it was, was laden with excellent viands, and Jack had not often made as good a supper. He soon found himself laughing and talking in the merriest mood, and Clotilde laughed and talked, too, with a gaiety that was very charming.

The signor insisted upon Jack giving an account of what had happened in the wood that morning, on his first meeting with Clotilde.

His brow darkened as he heard that one of the ruffians had belonged to the circus, and had escaped unseen.

"The worm!" said the signor. "Then you wouldn't know him if you saw him, lad? To think of my having such a worm in my employ! I'd give a ten-pound note to know which it was!"

"I didn't see him, sir."

"Ah! Then there's no chance—"

"I should know his voice if I heard it, sir," said Jack. "I should like to help you to find him out. It won't be safe for Miss Clotilde as long as the scoundrel remains with you."

"That's it! But if you didn't see him—"

"I heard his voice, and I think I should know it again, sir. I heard the other man call him Dave, too."

The signor started.

"That settles it! There's only one Dave, as far as I know, among all the hands. I'll have him up after supper, and you can hear him speak."

"Certainly."

And when the cheery meal was over, the signor left the tent, and the others followed into the flare of the naphtha lamps, by the light of which packing was going on. For the stay of the circus at Abbotsdale was brief; the town was worth, in the signor's estimation, only two performances, and the second had been given that night. The affair of the tiger, too, would have made any further stay on the pitch unprofitable. The almost endless paraphernalia of a travelling circus was being stacked and packed, preparatory to taking the road.

"Tuttle," shouted the signor—"Dave Tuttle!"

A rough-looking man, of burly form and slouching gait, came in answer to the call. Jack looked at him keenly, and he saw that the man gave a start on catching sight of him.

"Yes, sir!"

"Come here, Tuttle."

The man approached.

"Where were you this morning, Tuttle?"

"I was doing my work, sir, I s'pose."

"Did you go out early?"

Tuttle hesitated for a moment.

"I—I went out to see if I could snare a rabbit, sir."

"Ah!" The signor turned to Jack. "Do you recognise his voice?"

The boy nodded at once. The voice was perfectly familiar to his ears—the tones were those of the ruffian who had laid in ambush in Abbotsdale Wood for the girl rider, and who had escaped unseen while Talbot was tackling his confederate.

"Yes, sir!"

"You are certain?"

"I could swear to it."

The man cast a furtive glance at Jack. The signor, who had his whip in his hand, made a suggestive motion with it.

"You can get!" he said briefly.

"What do you mean, sir?"

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"I mean that you're sacked!" exclaimed the signor, his eyes sparkling. "I mean that if you're more than two minutes getting off this pitch, I'll make this whip sing round your ears. You tried to work a robbery on Miss Clotilde this morning in the wood—that was the rabbit you went out to snare, you thief! You're bowled out. It would serve you right if I gave you into custody. I won't do that; but you don't stay in this circus. Get off!"

"It ain't true——"

"It's true enough, you scoundrel," said Jack hotly. "You can't look me in the face and say it isn't. I was on the other side of the tree when you were waylaying Miss Clotilde, and I heard what you said to the other brute."

The man's eyes gleamed.

"You spy, you——"

"I was not spying, you cad; I was there before you came," said Jack contemptuously. "But you've given yourself away now."

Tuttle bit his lips; his unguarded exclamation had, indeed, been all that was wanted to convict him, though the signor was sure enough already.

"Get out, Tuttle!"

The man cast a savage glance at Jack. His flushed face showed that he had been drinking; and doubtless it was that predilection for strong drink that had led him to the attempted robbery.

"I'll make that young hound pay for his spying!" he snarled, between his teeth.

"Are you going?"

"I'm going, but——"

The signor lost all patience. The whip curled round the legs of the ruffian, and he uttered a yell.

"Now be off!"

"Hang you! I——"

Lash, lash, lash!

Tuttle skipped and ran, and the long lash made active play behind him, accelerating his flight. The signor followed him twenty yards or more, laying on, and then he returned, panting a little with his exertions.

"We shall have to get a new hand to-morrow," he said.

"I dare say we can pick one up on the road. Well good-bye, young sirs; and thank you again, Talbot, both for what you did this morning, and what you have done to-night."

And the signor shook hands heartily with the two boys.

Samson and Joey Pye were to walk home with them. Jack shook hands with Clotilde, and there was a cloud on the girl's fair face.

"Good-bye!" she said. "I suppose I shall never see you again."

Jack's face clouded too.

"I hope you will," he said quickly. "I am sure of it! I wish you were not leaving Abbotsdale in the morning. What time do you start?"

"Seven o'clock."

"Would you care for me to come to say good-bye?"

"So early?" said Clotilde, with a smile.

"I should like to come."

"Then I shall be glad to see you."

"Thank you; I shall be here. Good-bye!"

And Jack raised his cap, and they parted. With Samson and Mr. Pye, the boys walked home across the common. It was fortunate that the strong man of the circus was with them, for on the edge of the common a savage face looked out from behind a bush, and a clenched fist was shaken at the unconscious Jack. But as it was, Dave Tuttle did not venture to show himself.

Jack and Bob parted in the High Street, little guessing at that moment for how long their parting would prove to be. Samson and Mr. Pye accompanied Jack to his door, and there, after speaking to John Talbot, they left him. Jack's father had waited up for him.

"You have had a pleasant evening, Jack?" he asked.

The boy's eyes glistened.

"Ripping, dad!"

And he recounted what had happened. John Talbot listened to Jack's very modest tale with a smile of pride upon his face.

"It was like you, my boy—it was like you!" he said.

"Good-night, my boy!"

And Jack Talbot went to bed to dream that he was a circus rider, and was careering round the ring at full speed with two tigers in hot pursuit, and the Handsome Man holding hoops for him to jump through.

CHAPTER 9. Comrades.

JACK was up early the following morning. The circus was leaving Abbotsdale at seven. Clotilde had told him, to take the road to the next town, where they were to arrive in time to get ready for the next evening's performance. Jack had a keen desire to see

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his new friends once more before they left the place, and vanished from his sight—for ever? For ever, in all probability. What chance was there that he would ever see them again? That day was to begin in earnest the hunt for employment—the dreary search for work which might fill up weeks, and would leave him little leisure to think of anything else. As he dressed, he thought with a sigh of the circus, and wished that that life might be his.

Suddenly he gave a start.

A new idea had flashed into his brain—an idea that made him change colour with excitement.

"My hat!" he exclaimed, aloud. "Why not?"

Why not?

Jack dressed with feverish haste, donning the best that was in his scanty wardrobe. An exciting idea was in his brain—a thought that made his eyes gleam, his cheeks glow.

Why not?

He left the house quietly, so as not to wake his father. Molly Malone was up and doing, and was busy with a pail of water and a scrubbing-brush on the stairs, and she gave him a cheery good-morning. Jack responded in high spirits; the idea that was in his brain made him very cheerful. It might come to nothing, but—it might come to something—it might come to much!

He hurried through the silent streets of Abbotsdale, and down the lane to the common. The last quarter before seven was chiming out from the church when he arrived at the circus camp.

All was in activity.

The horses were harnessed to the caravans; the great tent had been struck, and was packed away; Clotilde was standing with her hand on the rein of the black horse, evidently intending to ride when the procession started.

The final preparations were being made for departure in the cool of the sunny morning, and the signor was standing outside his caravan, talking to Clotilde, and sipping a huge cup of hot coffee that he held in his hand.

The girl glanced once or twice in the direction of the town, and her face lighted up as she caught sight of Jack.

The boy came up breathless, and raised his cap to Clotilde and the signor. The latter gave him a cheery grin.

"You've come to see us off?" he said.

"Yes, sir, and to say good-bye to Miss Clotilde again."

Signor Tomsonio laughed.

"Say it then, my lad; we're off in ten minutes. Another cup of coffee, missis—I mean signora, for Jacky."

The ruddy face of the signora looked out of the caravan with a pleasant smile, and she handed out a cup of coffee, which Signor Tomsonio passed to Jack. The boy thanked him, and drank the coffee; it was pleasant and invigorating. His heart was beating almost painfully, and the coffee helped to brace him. He felt that the next few minutes would decide his fate—perhaps for a lifetime.

"Signor!" His voice trembled a little. "May I—may I speak to you?"

Signor Tomsonio looked at him in surprise.

"Certainly, lad; go ahead."

"I—I—I——"

Clotilde looked at him curiously. A thought came into her mind that Jack had something to say which he would say more easily in her absence.

"I will get Mahomet saddled," she said, leading away the black horse.

The signor's eyes were fixed on Jack's face.

"What is it, lad?" he asked, kindly enough. "Can I do anything for you? You've only got to ask. I owe you a lot."

Jack flushed crimson.

"Oh, sir, don't put it like that! If I thought you—you could think I considered myself entitled to anything, I—I—I could not——"

The signor laughed his jovial laugh.

"Don't be troubled about that, lad. If I thought you were that sort of fellow, I should have offered you a five-pound note last night. But what is it? What can I do for you?"

"I'll tell you, sir." The boy cleared his throat, and went on quietly; "You sacked a man last night, and I heard you say that you wanted someone to fill his place, sir."

Signor Tomsonio nodded.

"That's right. Do you know somebody who wants the job?"

"Yes, sir."

"If it's a reliable fellow, he can have it," said the signor. "I shall be glad to be saved the trouble of picking up a new hand at the next town. You never know what you get in a hurry. Do you know what the job is like?"

"No, but——"

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"It needs a strong chap—the work is general packing, helping with the horses, helping put up and take down tents, cleaning out caravans—plenty of work, and hard work, too, and the salary is ten shillings a week and grub. Will that suit the chap you're speaking of?"

Jack's eyes danced.

"Perfectly. He's not afraid of work."

"Good! But where is he—we're just starting, and I haven't time to wait for anybody."

"He's here."

"Here!"

"Yes, sir."

The signor cast a glance round him and looked puzzled.

"I don't understand you, lad. Where is he?"

"Here, sir—standing before you."

Signor Tomsonio stared blankly at him.

"What? You?"

"Yes, sir."

"You are joking."

"I'm quite serious, if you are willing, sir," said Jack, eagerly. "I—I'm looking for a job, sir. I'm fond of horses, and I've had a job before looking after them—in the school holidays, sir. If you'd take me on I'd show you that a boy can work as well as a man, sir."

"My dear lad—"

"Don't refuse, sir. As for the wages, I would be quite willing to take less, as I'm only a boy."

The signor stared at him, gulped down the rest of his coffee, and stared at him again.

"I suppose you mean this," he said at last.

"Yes, sir. I'm looking for a job, as I said."

"I'd be glad to take you," said the signor, dubiously, "but you don't know what the work is like, lad. It's hard—hard for a man. You're a brave, plucky lad—but you're only a lad. You couldn't do it."

"I could try, sir."

The signor slapped his thigh.

"Well, bless my boots, if I don't give you a chance," he exclaimed. "If you're looking for a job, as you say, there's no reason why you shouldn't try it. If you find it's too much for you, you can chuck it up, and I'll pay your railway fare back to Abbotsdale. That's fair."

"Quite, sir."

"Have you any parents, lad?"

"My father, sir—he will be glad I've got work so soon."

"H'm! You'll have to have your father's permission before you come," said the signor. "I'd better see him."

"But you are starting—"

"That's all right—the circus doesn't move very fast on the road—I shall overtake it fast enough in my trap."

The signor called out an order. A trap was brought round—a rather handsome affair, with a fine horse between the shafts. Meanwhile, Jack hurried away towards Clotilde, to tell her the good news. The girl looked at his glowing face with a smile.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Good news!" said Jack. "Good for me, I mean—but—would you like me to come with the circus, Miss Clotilde?"

The girl laughed.

"I should like it—but is it possible?"

"Quite possible."

"But how—"

Jack explained.

Clotilde's face grew more serious.

"You don't like the idea?" asked Jack, his own face falling a little. "I—I thought you might like me to come."

"I shall be very glad if you come. But—but you will have to work very hard, you will have to live very roughly, and mingle with very rough men—"

"I shan't be on a bed of roses wherever I go," said Jack, with a laugh. "I am the son of a workman, and I'm not afraid of work. Besides, I shall work my way up to something better. I can ride—I may be riding in the ring one of these days."

"That would be splendid."

"Come here, lad."

Jack pressed Clotilde's hand, and hurried away to join the signor. He stepped into the trap, and the circus-master drove away. The procession set out, with a rumble of heavy vehicles and a tramp of many animals; while the light trap bowled along into the waking town of Abbotsdale.

The signor said little during the drive; he remained sitting upright, with the ribbons in his hands, a big cigar, unlighted, between his teeth. Jack directed him, and the trap swung at last into Bull Lane. Jack's father was looking out of the window, and he looked amazed at the sight of the circus-master and the trap. Jack led the way

into the house. He presented the signor, and John Talbot saluted him respectfully. Signor Tomsonio held out a fat hand, covered with rings, and Talbot shook it, and asked his guest to be seated.

The signor looked at his watch.

"I can spare just five minutes," he said. "Mr. Talbot, your boy tells me he is looking for a job. There's a job vacant in my circus. It's hard work, and not over liberal pay—times are hard. There's a chance, though, that a hard-working and honest lad may rise to something better. What do you say? Are you willing that he should come with me?"

John Talbot looked at his son.

"That is for Jack to decide," he said. "For my part, I can only thank you for your kindness."

"I don't want to leave you, dad," said Jack, and his voice faltered a little, "but there's no choice in the matter. I've got to get a job—and I'm not likely to get one in Abbotsdale. I'd rather go with the circus than get anything else, too."

John Talbot bowed his head.

"Then let it be so. I go to-day into the post Mr. Chaloner has been so kind as to find for me, Jack—and so our little home here would be broken up in any case. Go, my lad, and God bless you wherever you go. I know you will not forget your old father."

"Never, dad," said Jack, and his eyes were moist; "and if I get on, dad,—and I will get on—we shall be together again, and you'll never want for anything in your old age."

John Talbot smiled faintly.

"That is spoken like my own lad," he said. "But don't worry about me, Jack—I am provided for now. But you will get on, I am sure of that—if honesty and courage can help a lad forward, you will get on."

"Then it's settled," said the signor, rising. "Pack your things, lad, and I'll take them in the trap. Sharp's the word."

It did not take Jack Talbot long to pack his things. His possessions were not many. A battered travelling-bag held them all, including his football. The signor waited in the trap, under the curious gaze of half Bull Lane, with a tactful delicacy leaving father and son to say their adieux alone.

When Jack came out of the house, his face was a little pale, but he was very quiet. He mounted into the trap and the signor drove off.

The trap rattled out of Abbotsdale, and along the high road in the direction taken by the World-Famed Circus.

In about an hour the circus came in sight, and the trap joined the procession, being taken in tow by one of the caravans, into which the signor mounted. Jack met the astonished glance of the Handsome Man as he alighted from the trap, and ran cheerily towards the place where Clotilde was riding her black Arab. The Handsome Man stopped in his path.

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

"I am doing nothing at present," said Jack, coolly. "I am going to work."

"What! You are coming to the circus?"

"Yes. Signor Tomsonio has taken me on."

The Handsome Man seemed scarcely able to believe his ears. Jack left him standing, biting his lips, and ran to Clotilde. She met him with an eager smile.

"You are coming?"

"Yes."

"I am so glad."

He walked beside her horse.

"We shall be friends," said the girl, in her soft, winning tone.

"I hope so, Miss Clotilde—but—but—"

"But what?"

"You are Clotilde, the Queen of the Ring—the biggest attraction of the circus. I am a baggage hand—a nobody at all. I—I don't know whether I have a right to speak to you."

She reached her little hand down to him.

"Whatever you are, and whatever I am, we shall be comrades," she said.

And Jack pressed her hand, his face glowing. Her words came from her heart—and they were true—for many a long day, in many a strange scene, under many a sky, those two were to be true and staunch comrades!

THE END.

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