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PLUCK

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FIGHTING HECTOR'S QUEST

STREET

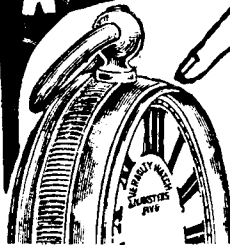


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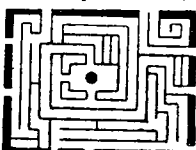
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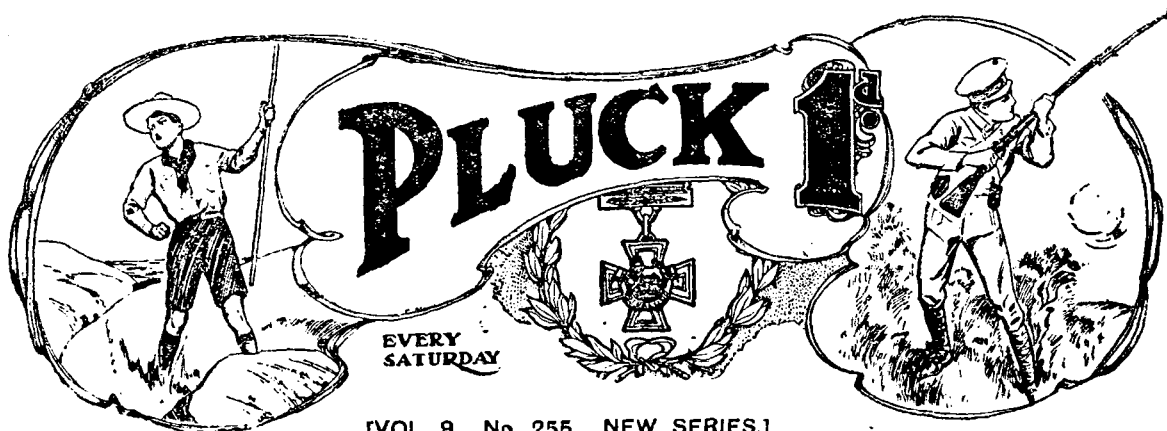
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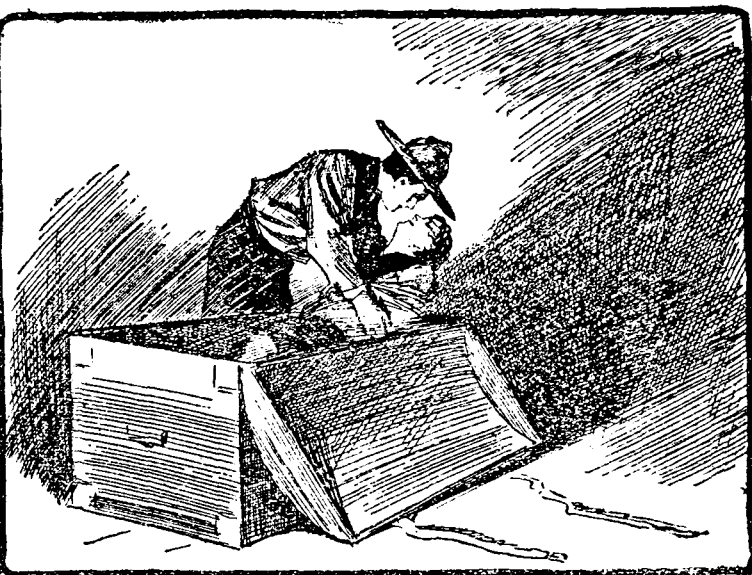


[VOL. 9. No. 255. NEW SERIES.]

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"FIGHTING HECTOR'S QUEST"



By JACK NORTH.

BOY SCOUTS ARE INVITED TO SEND THEIR PORTRAITS TO THE EDITOR.

CHAPTER I.

The Letter from Rotherhithe.

HECTOR DRAKE paused in his work, tilted his chair back—it was a cheap affair of the commonest kind, and creaked alarmingly as he did so—and took a look round the little apartment in which he was seated.

Although of manly type, sturdy and well-set-up, Hector was only a lad of about fifteen. But just now his bright, handsome face wore an expression of thoughtfulness far beyond his years.

To him every object in that room bore silent yet eloquent witness to its owner's noble self-sacrifice and firm, exalted purpose.

That single apartment—a garret under the roof of a mean house in a mean street "down Shadwell way"—was the chosen home and abiding-place of the Rev. Frank Arnold Howard, M.A., a man who had left his college with top honours, both in the fields of learning and of sport.

Above the tiny firegrate hung the bat with which he had made a century for the Dark Blue team at Lord's only the previous year. Near it were hanging two photographs—one of a handsome church, the other of a pretty parsonage—the home which the Rev. Frank Howard had resigned for this attic.

For, on leaving college, he had been appointed to what in common parlance is known as a "snug living," with a small but wealthy congregation, amongst whom he was highly esteemed and well liked.

Frank Howard had been happy enough in such congenial

surroundings. But the call had come to him to leave all and go down amongst the poor, and battle with them side by side. And he had left all and come.

It had been a stern battle to win a footing among people alien to him in all but the common tie of humanity; but Frank Howard was a born fighter, and he had won. The "Fighting Parson" was a household name in many a squalid home in that wretched slum.

Of these things Hector Drake was thinking as he glanced around the room.

It was scrupulously clean, but bare, very bare. The furniture consisted of a couple of chairs, a camp-bedstead tucked under the slope of the roof in one corner, the small deal table at which Hector was seated, and another near the window.

Mr. Howard sat at this when at home and at work. But he was absent that morning, and Hector, who acted as a sort of secretary to the Fighting Parson, was going through a big batch of correspondence, arrived by the early post, alone.

With one or two exceptions these letters were appeals for help.

Invariably it was financial assistance that was asked for. In most cases the writer left the exact sum to the "well-known generosity of Mr. Howard." In others the applicant would begin by naming an amount running into pounds, and end with the modest hint that anything down to eightpence would be acceptable.

The majority of the letters proclaimed the professional, cadger in every line, but some few were unmistakably genuine.

It was Hector's business to sort the wheat from the chaff, and in the few weeks he had been in Mr. Howard's employment he had become wonderfully expert at the work.

The professional begging-letter writer has a sort of style of his own, and Hector soon came to know his whine under all its guises, whether as the unfortunate tradesman robbed by a dishonest partner, the hapless widow with seven young children to keep and a paralysed arm, or the high-minded young governess thrown out of her employment because of her religious principles; Hector came to know him at a glance, and promptly throw his nicely—all too nicely—worded missive into the grate.

The genuine ones—or seemingly genuine, for it was not always easy to decide—it was his task to investigate.

This was delicate work, and not exactly to Hector's taste; but he did it, and did it well, as he would have done anything for the Fighting Parson.

After that brief, thoughtful pause, he resumed his work again, and soon became absorbed, for some of the letters were decidedly interesting.

He had got through the bulk of the batch, only some ten or a dozen letters remained to be examined, when he came upon one that struck him as having a character all its own.

The professional cadger generally uses stationery of good class—perhaps he buys wholesale and gets it cheap—but this envelope was of the commonest and cheapest kind. It was addressed in a laboured, childish handwriting, by no means easy to read. The professional never fails to write plainly, whether as a washerwoman or a bank-clerk. The postmark upon it was "Rotherhithe."

Hector did not hasten to open it. Instead he turned the envelope over and over, studying the outside with that curious interest we all display at times when a letter of somewhat unusual kind comes into our hands.

Just as he took up his knife and was about to slit open the envelope, something—it must have been a sort of instinct, for he had heard no sound—warned him that he was not alone in the room.

He turned with a slight start. A man was standing right behind his chair. A tall man of powerful build, roughly clad, not unlike a bargee, or a riverside hand of the lower class. But his face belied any sort of outdoor occupation, for it was sallow. It struck Hector, even in that first rapid glance, that there was something unnatural in this pallor. It did not look real.

"Beg pardon, mister," said the man; "fraid I startled yer."

He looked at Hector with a pair of deep-sunken, beady eyes, whose expression the boy did not like at all. It was meant to be apologetic, or even cringing, but behind it was something sinister, and, in fact, almost threatening.

But Hector Drake was not easily frightened. Just now he was decidedly annoyed by the fellow's unannounced entrance.

"Why did you come in without knocking?" he demanded sharply. "Who are you, and what do you want?"

Instead of answering any of these questions, the visitor himself asked:

"Where's yer gov'nor—the rev'rend gen'l'man? Ain't he at home?"

"No, he is not," answered Hector. "Step farther back, please. You need not crowd over my chair like that."

For the man was leaning right over him, peering eagerly at the letters upon the table. Hector, as he spoke, pushed him away—a push of decided firmness. The fellow glared at him, and half raised his hand. But he dropped it again, and said, with an awkward grin:

"All right, me boy, all right! Don't put yerself out. I ain't come here to rob yer, don't be afraid o' that!"

"I am not afraid of you at all," said Hector, quite truthfully. "But I want to know who you are, and what you have come here for. You can either tell me your business or walk out again. I am busy."

"See you are, me lad," said the man, with insolent familiarity.

"You've got a rare lot of letters there—all come by the morning post, I reckon—and I fancy there's one among 'em as didn't oughter be there. I'm going to 'ave a look!"

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" cried Hector, again pushing the fellow back, for he actually made an attempt to reach the pile of letters.

Again the man glared at him, and raised his arm threateningly. But he did not attempt to touch the boy. Perhaps he thought better of it.

Hector had risen from his chair, and stood with his back to the table covering the letters. He was a tall boy for his age, and just then he may have looked rather dangerous. It was not for nothing he had won the title of "Fighting Hector" at school, and kept it since.

Although by no means pugnacious, and not at all a quarrelsome lad, he was quick to resent any attempt to bully or threaten him; then his fighting-blood would very quickly rise, and he took very little count of odds. For some few moments he glared at the man, and the man glared at him in silence; then the latter said:

"Now, look here, me lad, don't you be a young fool and Pluck.—255.

NEXT SATURDAY: PLAYING THE GAME AND THE ROAD TO FORTUNE. Order your copy of PLUCK in advance. Price 1d.

make trouble, 'cos I've got a nasty way with me when I'm crossed. I tell you there's a letter among that lot as didn't oughter be there, and I want it back, see!"

"No, I don't see," said Hector quietly. "These letters are Mr. Howard's, and you are not going to touch them!"

The visitor's beady black eyes glinted very unpleasantly. He spoke with an ugly snarl.

"Oh, I ain't, ain't I!" he growled. "We'll see about that!"

He took a step towards the table. Hector knew that in a struggle he would stand very little chance, but he did not intend that the man should get a grip upon him. As the tall, burly fellow approached, he sprang up and struck him full upon the point of the jaw.

It was no light tap, for Hector knew how to put his weight into a drive, and this was one of his best, as he meant it to be.

The man reeled backwards, and went with a crash against the opposite wall. But it needed more than that one drive, given by a boy's fist, to knock out a fellow of his tough and powerful build. He recovered himself in an instant, and rushed at Hector with a muttered oath.

A second drive he swept aside with a force that nearly broke the boy's arm; the next instant he had him in his grip.

Hector Drake was no weakling, considering his youth, and he put forth the best that was in him then. But that best was as nothing against his burly antagonist's superior weight and strength.

The ruffian—for he was no less—drove the lad back against the table with a force that overturned it and scattered the letters upon the floor. Then, flinging Hector across the room, he darted down and snatched one of them up—he seemed to know well enough which to select.

With this in his hand he made a dash for the doorway—to collide heavily with someone who was hurriedly entering.

The impact was violent, and the man reeled backwards, the letter dropping from his fingers. Hector, who had risen to his feet, managed to secure it before the fellow could snatch it up again.

The Rev. Frank Howard—for the newcomer was none other than the Fighting Parson himself—stood in the doorway, completely blocking it.

"What is this?" he asked. "I heard a scuffle, and the sound of a fall—what does it mean?"

"This man tried to make off with one of your letters, sir!" panted Hector, still flushed and breathless from the struggle.

"And why?" said Mr. Howard, fixing his fine eyes full upon the man's sullen face. "If you thought to find money in them I fancy you would be disappointed."

The man made no reply; he was evidently taking the young clergyman's measure furtively from under his downcast eyelids, with an idea of rushing him and getting away. But Mr. Howard, in spite of the garb of peace he wore, looked the athlete, every inch of him; an exceedingly awkward customer to tackle.

The fellow changed his mind, and dropping into a tone of winning remonstrance, said:

"I ain't a thief, mister, and you've got no call to hint at such. I'm a pore man, I allows; pore but honest. And I've got a bit of decent pride of me own, I have, and that's what's brought me here."

"I do not understand you," said Mr. Howard quietly, still keeping his position in the doorway. "There is nothing particularly honest in attempting to take letters that do not belong to you."

"I allows that," said the man. "In the ord'nary way it's a thing I wouldn't go for to do now, not if I was paid to do it—me being a pore man, but honest; pore but honest, that's me!"

"So you said before," remarked Mr. Howard coldly; "but that does not explain a violent attempt to steal one of my letters."

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"It's like this 'ere, mister," said the man. "I'm pore, but I've got a bit of decent pride in me—"

"Don't repeat all that. Give your explanation, if you have any," insisted the clergyman.

"Well, it's this way, then, mister—only you needn't take me up that sharp!"

"Then speak to the point, man! Speak to the point!"

"Werry good, mister, werry good! Well, then, my name's James Rodwell, and you've got a letter from my darter this morning. I know she'd written it, and I seed it there on the table. It's a letter asking for help, and I won't have no charity from any man, although I am out o' work and sick and ill, and although I have got a dying wife at home and three children asking for bread, I won't have no charity, having a bit o' decent pride of me own though pore! I want that letter back!"

Mr. Howard looked at him with eyes that read him like a written page, and he mentally pronounced the verdict "rascal." He stepped aside from the door and pointed to it with extended arm.

"You will not have that letter," he said. "I do not believe a word of your story. There is the door, go!"

The poor but honest man glared at him with his shifty eyes, and clenched his fists. For a sick man he looked extremely truculent, and even murderous. But the young clergyman met his glare with a calm and steady gaze under which the fellow's own eyes drooped at last.

He growled an oath between his set teeth, then strode out of the door.

But they had not seen the last of him.

CHAPTER 2.

Out of his Bearings.

MR. HOWARD went out on to the landing and leant over the banisters listening, until he heard the street-door close and knew that their rough visitor was clear of the house. Then he came back into the room.

"Not hurt, Hector. I hope?" he said.

"No, sir; a bit shaken, that's all," answered the boy cheerily. "He got me pinned and threw me across the room. But I am glad he didn't get away with that letter."

"So am I," said Mr. Howard, "for although I don't believe his story, I think there is something at the back of it. I fear the fellow is a rogue."

"I'm pretty sure of it!" declared Hector. "And as to his being an invalid—why, he is as strong as an ox!"

"I thought he looked pretty fit for a starving man," laughed Mr. Howard. "And as for his pallor, that was obviously owing to a bit of make-up—and not very skilfully done, either. But let me look at that letter."

Hector handed it to him. The young clergyman glanced at it when he had opened the envelope with a smile of amusement at first, but this deepened into a look of graver interest as he read its contents.

"Read this, Hector," he said. "It is a curious letter, evidently written by a child, but I am inclined to think it is a genuine appeal for help—help that is sorely needed, too."

"Money, sir?" queried Hector.

"Oh, no; there is not a hint of that," answered the Reverend Frank. "But read it, and see what you make of it yourself."

Hector took the letter, and with some difficulty spelt his way through the clumsily-written, unpunctuated sentences. This is what its contents amounted to:

"Wharf Cottage,

"Greenbush Lane, Rotherhithe.

"Dear Mr. Reverend Frank Howard,—I am writing this to you, which I hope you won't think is cheeky, but because I am in great trouble and I haven't got anybody to help me, me being only twelve and a girl. Somebody told me of you and how you were so good and always helped anybody that hadn't got anybody else to help them. So I thought I would write and ask you to come and help me. But I can't tell you what's the matter here till you come, and oh it's awful! Please come and knock twice and then once again at the front door and kick the scraper and then I shall know it's you. Please come in the evening because then Mrs. Grynde is out.

"I am, yours most respectfully,

"TILLY RODWELL.

"P.S.—Mrs. Grynde is frightful."

"Well, what do you think of it?" asked Mr. Howard, as Hector came to the end, and stood with the letter between his fingers and a very puzzled expression on his face.

"I hardly know, sir," answered Hector, with thoughtful slowness. "It seems rather strange for a child of twelve to have no one near her to appeal to in her trouble; that is, if there is any trouble. For, of course, this might be only a childish freak."

"I do not think so," said Mr. Howard. "I am inclined to think that the letter is quite serious, and the trouble a serious one, too."

"Yet it does seem queer," said Hector doubtfully.

"I know it does," said Mr. Howard, "but then so does this man's conduct in coming here and trying to get that letter back, by force even, if other means failed. It suggests to me that this child's 'trouble' is something of a serious nature in which he is concerned. Perhaps he has some underhand scheme on the way and has the best of reasons for dreading outside interference."

"But he said he was her father," remarked Hector, "and in that case we should hardly have any right to interfere."

"True, quite true," said Mr. Howard. "But I doubt his word; I doubt half that he said. He may have been poor, but I very strongly doubt his honesty."

"He looked a perfect fraud, a regular bad lot to me!" declared Hector emphatically.

The Reverend Frank Howard smiled, but his face grew grave and thoughtful again as he said:

"I think we ought to look into this, Hector. I should be sorry, indeed, to turn a deaf ear to a genuine appeal for help, and as I have said, this strikes me as having a genuine ring about it. I should like you to go down to Rotherhithe and see this girl. I cannot go myself; I have several pressing things to see to here. But I know that I can trust to your good sense and discretion."

"Whon had I better go, sir?" asked Hector.

"This evening. It is not wise to go before since she names the evening as the safest time. I do not know whom this 'frightful Mrs. Grynde' may be, but evidently she is someone the child has cause to fear, and it is as well to be cautious for her sake. And, Hector—"

"Yes, sir?"

"You must be cautious for your own sake as well," added the young clergyman gravely. "This 'poor, but honest man' is a person to be on your guard against, I fancy. You will do well to avoid another encounter with him if possible."

"Trust me for that, sir!" said Hector, with a wry laugh. "I've no wish to feel the grip of that poor invalid on me again."

"Well, be careful, for I am afraid there is some danger in the errand," said Mr. Howard.

And then the subject was dropped, and other matters absorbed the attention of both until the evening. At dusk Hector set out upon his rather delicate, and decidedly difficult mission. It was easy enough to reach Rotherhithe, but it was quite another matter to find Greenbush Lane.

Rotherhithe is not exactly a country village of two or three streets, and Hector, who was a stranger in that neighbourhood, was somewhat at a loss how to begin his search.

He was a shrewd boy, and had the habit of carefully thinking out the piece of work he had in hand for the time being. Mr. Howard's caution had not been wasted upon him; he felt that this queer little mission of his required careful handling.

For this reason he was reluctant to make inquiries of strangers.

He might be close upon the spot for all he knew, and it was quite possible that the man who had visited them in the morning would set a watch to see if either he or Mr. Howard came there in response to the girl's letter. For that the fellow knew, or guessed, the nature of that letter Hector was perfectly convinced. His anxiety to secure it was proof enough of that.

He was a stranger in that part, and to be heard inquiring for "Wharf Cottage, Greenbush Lane" was to risk the success of his errand at the very outset.

For a quite different reason he decided not to adopt the familiar device of "asking a policeman." For aught he knew the police might be concerned in this very affair; in which case he would possibly be involved in an awkward situation and do no good at all.

He concluded to trust to his own resources and ask no one.

Greenbush Lane suggested something rural by the sound, but there was nothing rural about Rotherhithe as far as he could see, whatever there might have been in bygone days.

But "Wharf Cottage" hinted at the riverside, and toward the river he made his way. He soon found himself involved in a labyrinth of small turnings where mean, little houses of an old-fashioned type tried to hide their forlorn ugliness under the walls of great factories, whose huge chimney-stacks belched forth volumes of smoke and sent down a perpetual drift of sooty flakes upon the greasy pavement beneath.

He took this grimy maze in sections, and explored it street by street, court by court, but he came upon no Greenbush Lane.

Hector began to think it was a rather hopeless task, and that he had better ask someone for the direction after all. For the evening was wearing on, and he seemed as far off the object of his search as ever. But he had got into a part which seemed singularly deserted and quiet; a long alley between high walls. How he had turned into it he did not remember. He seemed to have drifted into it somehow out of the confusing maze of turnings through which he had been threading his way.

Hector came to a standstill and laughed, a little ruefully. It dawned upon him that he was practically lost.

It was dark in that alley, and it appeared to be as deserted

PLUCK.—255.

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of human life as a street in a city of the dead. He had come to the resolve to ask his way only to find that there was no one of whom to ask that information.

The alley wound its narrow, tortuous course behind him the way he had come, and it wound on in front of him, looking every inch of it much the same, and apparently leading nowhere in particular. After a few moments thought he decided to go back and try to find the turning by which he had entered this rather hopeless no-man's-land. It seemed little use to push on further that way.

But he found this by no means an easy matter.

The place was very ill-lighted, and seemed to be but little used as a thoroughfare, at all events at that hour of the evening. The high walls with which it was bounded enclosed a railway goods-yard on the one hand, the other being apparently the drying-grounds of some big bleaching works. Hector had passed through such a bewildering tangle of small courts and narrow alleys that he had no clear recollection of how he came into this one in particular.

He retraced his steps, keeping a bright look-out for any opening.

There seemed to be none. He was surprised to find what a long way he must have come down that alley without taking count of the distance.

At last, when he had begun to fear that he would be altogether too late to visit Wharf Cottage even if he succeeded in finding it that evening, he came upon a narrow opening breaking the monotonous run of the high brick walls.

Looking down it, he caught the gleam of lights reflected in water, and knew that it must lead to the riverside.

"This can't be the way I came," he decided. "It was not a turning from the waterside I came through; I should have remembered that, I'm sure, and—hallo!"

This last exclamation was jerked out of him by a rather violent blow in the small of his back.

He turned sharply. There was just light enough to make out the figure of a small boy—a mere wisp of a boy, in fact—who had just picked himself up from the stones, and stood rubbing his head with his hand; the operation producing a queer rasping sound, by reason of his hair being only a crop of reddish bristles about a quarter of an inch long all over.

"Hallo yerself, bust yer!" grunted this curious apparition. "Wot d'yer wanten go standin' about in the dark for, like a blessed pillar-box wot's walked away an' lost itself, eh?"

"Sorry if I hurt you," said Hector.

"Wot! I ain't 'urt now! Who said I was 'urt?" growled the small imp indignantly. "I'm Blazin' Billy, if yer wanten know! I'm tough as they make 'em, I am; an' it 'ud take a sight more'n a kid like you to 'urt me!" And he glared at Hector ferociously in the gloom.

CHAPTER 3. In the Hands of Brigands.

HECTOR laughed; he couldn't help it. This pale-faced waif, whose small, crooked head barely reached higher than his elbow, and whose ill-fed wisp of a body looked hardly substantial enough to withstand a decent puff of wind, was as full of fight and fire as a gamecock—a not uncommon thing in the London gutter-snipe, which is a fighting bird by instinct and force of circumstances.

"'Urt me! 'urt me—Blazin' Billy!" he growled at intervals under his breath. "'Urt me! Why, a railway injin couldn't do that! I'm tough, I am!"

"Well, you hurt me, anyway!" laughed Hector. "What was that you hit me in the back with? It was jolly hard."

"That was my head!" declared the imp, evidently much mollified by this tribute to his hard make. "No, kid, yer didn't 'urt me, or you'd 'a' been dead by this time. But you've been an' busted the spike of me 'elmet, blow yer!"

He stooped and picked up something from the roadway.

To Hector's no small amusement, it was an old "bowler" hat, brimless, and cut into the shape of a helmet. Blazing Billy gravely straightened the scrap of tin attached to the top of it for a spike, and put it on. It was a hat of generous size, and came well down over his shoulders, half-hiding his small face. The few inches of heavy iron curb-chain, when adjusted under his chin, almost completed the eclipse.

It must have obscured his vision to an inconvenient degree, and the rasping of that rusty iron chain against his chin could scarcely have been agreeable. But these were mere nothings, set against the glory of wearing the thing.

In addition to this martial embellishment, Hector saw that he wore a belt around his waist contrived out of an old pair of braces. Through this was thrust a sword, made out of a bit of hoop-iron, with a wooden handle.

The limited area of his manly breast was completely covered by a piece of tin, which looked suspiciously like a greengrocer's price-ticket, scraped bright, and tied on with a bit of string. On this was daubed in black paint what was evidently meant to represent a skull and cross-bones.

The whole effect would have been very imposing only that PLUCK.—255.

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it was rather marred by the ragged knickers and bare, broom-stick legs underneath it all.

Hector took it all in, and laughed again. For the life of him he couldn't have helped that laugh.

A muffled voice growled from under the helmet.

"Look 'ere, kid, don't cher larf at me! I've laid out bigger 'uns than you jest fer grinnin' in the wrong place! I'm Blazin' Billy, I am, and I kill when I'm roughed up!"

Hector shut off his mirth by an effort, and said gravely:

"Sorry, old chap! I didn't mean anything by it. And now, could you tell me the way to Greenbush Lane?"

"Sort o' stranger round here?" queried Blazing Billy, with a curious grin, or as much of a grin as he could manage under that iron chain.

"Yes; I don't know the part at all," replied Hector.

"I'd 'ave bet on that, or yer wouldn't 'ave come down 'ere!" chuckled the small urchin under his helmet. Then he said aloud: "Oh, yus, I'll show yer the way. Come erlong with me, kiddy."

He strutted off down the alley, and Hector followed, glad that he had found a guide at last. They were making towards the river, and presently came out upon a sort of landing-stage—it could hardly be called a wharf—right at the water's edge, a gas-lamp fixed to an iron stanchion in the wall, the glass broken and the flame flickering in the breeze from the river, shed its wavering light upon a scene which surprised Hector and amused him not a little.

A group of boys, some ten in number, were seated around on old wooden boxes or empty cement-kegs. Each boy wore a belt of some kind, and had a sword or dagger of wood or tin thrust through it; and they sat in attitudes obviously copied with much care from the picture of "The Brigands' Cave" in some lurid publication of the "blood and thunder" type.

In the midst of the circle sat a bigger boy, who was evidently the chief of this band of terror-inspiring desperadoes.

He seemed to be about Hector's own age, but was taller; a long, lanky strip of a lad, with a long, pasty face, made additionally sallow by an enormous black moustache painted or charcoaled upon his upper lip. His head was adorned with a strip of an old red curtain, worn turban-fashion, and another strip of the same served as a sash around his waist. In this he carried a perfect arsenal of tin daggers and a big horse-pistol minus its lock.

This ferocious-looking individual raised his head as Blazing Billy appeared with Hector, and called out in a voice that was meant to be appalling in its depth:

"What-ho! Who comes?"

"'Tis I—Blazin' Billy!" answered Hector's guide, in a similar voice. "Behold, dread Bloodino, I bring a captive to enrich our coffers with ransom, or pay the penalty with his life!"

"Thou hast done well, my trusty lieutenant!" croaked the chief hoarsely. "Guards, surround the prisoner!"

The entire band leapt up with a tremendous flourishing of weapons, and before Hector quite realised the trap into which he had been led, he was completely hemmed in. He was not quite as frightened as he ought to have been to complete the effect; in fact, he laughed. Whereat the dread Bloodino—who in private life was known as Jimmy Kemp—frowned at him darkly.

"Dost know in whose presence thou doth stand?" he demanded, in a voice that must have hurt his throat to produce.

"No, I don't, and I don't particularly care," answered Hector.

"But I do know that some of you will get hurt if you don't stand out of the way and let me go. I'm in a hurry!"

The chief laughed a sepulchral laugh.

"Ha, ha! Stranger, tremble!" he growled. "Thou art in the dread power of the Brothers of Blood. I, Bloodino, their chief, have but to speak the word, and ten trusty blades shall drink thy life's blood and thy body be flung into yonder dark stream! But in pity for thy youth, we will permit thee to pay ransom for thy life. Got any fags about yer?"

Hector laughed. It was a queer climax for that dramatic flourish.

"No, I haven't got any fags," he said. "I don't smoke."

"Well, you've got money about yer. And out the price of a packet o' fags, or—or you'll get jolly well bashed!" said the chief, whose stock of stage-brigand talk seemed to have given out rather suddenly.

"I'll do nothing of the sort!" said Hector. "You're too young for smoking, and, anyway, I'm not going to pay for any cigarettes. Shut off this foolishness; I'm in a hurry, I tell you!"

The adventure had its funny side, but he was beginning to feel annoyed at the delay.

"You won't part up, eh?" growled the leader, getting off his soap-box. "Very well, then: you'll git a jolly good bashing, an' we'll shove yer 'ed in the mud—see?"

Hector was in an awkward fix. He could not get away without a fight, and the odds—ten to one—were rather long. The boys were mostly youngsters of Blazing Billy's age and

size, it is true, but there were several biggish fellows amongst them, and the leader was quite up to Hector's own size and weight, if not above it.

Hector felt that he was likely to get pretty roughly handled, and the risk of a ducking in the river—or, rather, the mud, which looked particularly black and greasy just there—was anything but agreeable, considering that he was a long way from home and still had his difficult errand to accomplish.

All this flashed through his mind as the band closed in upon him, headed by their leader.

Then an idea came to him swiftly, and he shouted out:

"Hold! Keep off half a minute!"

Hector Drake had a commanding way with him, and the boys stopped instinctively. He seized his moment promptly.

"Now, look here, you chaps!" he called out. "Ten to one isn't cricket—play the game! I'm willing to fight any one of you, but I can't take on the whole crowd. Pick out your man, and I'm ready!"

It was a sporting offer, and the London gamin, even in his lowest type, is always a sportsman to the core. The offer met with a murmur of approval. Hector hastened to add:

"Now what about that swell with the black moustache and the field-gun in his belt? He's the biggest of you, and I'm willing to take him on if he's agreeable."

The terrible chief of the Brothers of Blood stared at him. Then he said slowly, and with grim emphasis upon each word:

"See 'ere, kid! are yer lookin' fer sudden death? Fight me! Why, I've fought men, an' licked 'em!"

"All right," said Hector calmly; "it's my offer, and if I get licked I'll have to stand it, that's all. Only mind, I mean a fair fight with the fists! You'd better get rid of that 4.7 and the other things round your waist. And tell your chaps to stand out of it. It's just between you and me."

The brigand chief laughed grimly.

"Don't you worry about that, kid!" he remarked pleasantly; "they won't take any hand in this 'ere show, 'cepting to help pick up the pieces when I'm done with yer. I s'pose yer mother would like to have the chips?"

Hector smiled at this bit of bombast, and said:

"I'm going to chance all that. But let's make a bargain before we start. If I come out on top, I'm to go without any more bother, and, what's more, one of your chaps has got to show me the way to the place I want to find. Is it a deal?"

"Right-o, it's a deal," assented the chief. Then he added darkly: "Only yer won't want any place but yer family vault when I've finished with yer! Now then, kid; say yer little prayers an' git ready!"

But Hector's preparations were already complete. He merely took off his cap and handed it to Blazing Billy, who elected himself his backer. He did not trouble to remove his jacket, being rather doubtful what might become of it whilst he was engaged with his opponent.

The great Bloodino had no jacket to remove, being only in shirt and trousers. But he laid aside his arsenal of weapons, spat upon his hands, and announced himself as ready to begin.

The brigands had already formed a ring, and after a sportsman-like handshake, the two principals faced each other and the fight began.

CHAPTER 4.

Hector Finds a Useful Ally.

THE writer of this history of Hector Drake's adventures very much regrets that he hasn't a terrific combat to record in this chapter; an affair of some dozen rounds or so, with the issue hanging in doubt until the very last tremendous bout. But Hector being a character drawn from life, and these adventures of his being events that actually took place, he must keep to the facts.

The result of this fight was never in doubt after the first round: and there was only one.

It lasted exactly eight seconds. At the end of that time the brigand chief was lying on his back, gazing dreamily at the evening sky, and rather wondering what had happened to him.

Hector's one blow was not a hard or vicious one, but it was planted to tell, and it did tell. The Brothers of Blood, who had probably expected to see the stranger simply played with, a la cat and mouse, by their terrible chieftain, were too astonished to go and help him up. Hector himself crossed over and assisted him to sit up.

"Not much hurt, old chap?" he said. "Are you ready to go on?"

"N-n-no, I reckon I'm about fed up," the fallen desperado murmured dreamily. "Say—yer might have told me you was a pro!"

"Well, I'm not exactly," laughed Hector. "Only I've fought a bit, and you're not quite up to my form, that's all. Shall we call it a finish, then?"

"I reckon it's good enough for me, anyway!" breathed Bloodino, as he resumed his seat on his soap box, and seemed glad to get there. "Say, I'm going ter chuck being chief of this 'ere band from now on! You kin take my place, an' I'll give yer

my pistol an' all! My! But you're a bully fighter, you are!"

And the band murmured its approval.

"Thanks," said Hector gravely; "but I'm afraid I can't take it on. You see, I've never been a brigand chief, and I mightn't know how to run the business. Besides, I don't live around here. Now, who's going to show me the way to Greenbush Lane? I must be off."

There were several eager volunteers, but Blazing Billy announced that he was going to be Hector's guide, and offered personal violence to anybody who disputed that privilege with him.

At Hector's delicate hint he removed his tin breastplate and hoop-iron sword, and then they started; Hector parting with the Brothers of Blood upon the best of terms and carrying with him the undisguised admiration of every brigand among them.

Blazing Billy strotted gravely ahead for some distance, then he turned suddenly and said:

"Wot's yer moniker—yer front one, I mean?"

Hector told him. Blazing Billy appeared to meditate upon it. Then he remarked:

"'Ector? It's a fightin' sort o' name, ain't it? You oughter be called 'Fightin' 'Ector'—that 'ud be a bully name fer a chap wot can use his fives like you can!"

Hector laughed.

"Why, I used to be called that at school!" he said, "and it seems to have stuck to me ever since."

"It ain't surprisin'!" commented his small guide gravely. "An' wot's more, you'll find it's goin' to stick to yer for keeps. You've got the fightin' cut all over yer, you 'ave. An' you can use yer 'ands some! Why, I don't reckon I could knock yer out meself in less than five or six rounds!"

Hector tried not to smile, and succeeded, but it cost him an effort.

"Well, 'ere's Greenbush Lane, an' I reckon I'll cut off now, sonny," said Blazing Billy, as they turned into the entrance of a long, narrow street with a glimpse of the river at its further end.

Hector surveyed it all along its dreary length. Its name was evidently a survival of the past, for there was nothing suggestive of green bushes about it now. The houses that flanked it on either side were small and mean, and for the most part not over clean in appearance. They stood in rows, each exactly similar to its neighbour, and looked not unlike railway trains, backed into a siding and forgotten.

There were about a hundred of these houses on each side of the street, and to find which amongst them was Wharf Cottage promised, Hector thought, to be a long and tedious job.

"Stop a bit," he said, as Blazing Billy was about to make off; "do you happen to know a house about here called Wharf Cottage?"

The effect of this question rather surprised Hector. Instead of answering, Blazing Billy favoured him with a sharp stare of suspicion.

"Wot are yer going there for?" he demanded. "Are you a new 'un wot Caleb Pafton's put on the job?"

"I don't know what you mean," said Hector. "I never heard of any Caleb Pafton; who is he?"

"Who is he?" the small boy burst out. "Why, he's jest the worstest ole villun as ever lived—that's wot he is!"

"But what has he got to do with Wharf Cottage?" asked Hector.

"Why, everythin'!" exclaimed Billy; "that is, everythin' that's bad! Yer see, he used to be ole Jimmy Rodwell's for-man, but I reckon he's boss now, an' got the whole show in his own hands, 'cos the old man took to drink, or went wrong in his 'ed, an' he's been shut up in his room goin' on a year, an' this 'ere Caleb Pafton has had things all his own way, 'cos there's only Tilly to stand between him an' the ole man—"

"Tilly?" interjected Hector inquiringly.

"Tilly Rodwell," said Billy. "She's ole Jimmy Rodwell's gran'daughter, but she's only a gel—jest a kid of twelve or so, an' though she's got plenty of pluck an' grit, she can't do much agen Caleb Pafton an' Mrs. Grynede. I reckon she has a drefful time between the pair of 'em, poor kid! I wish I was big an' growed up, then I'd help her somehow!"

It was evident that Blazing Billy felt very strongly upon the subject.

His eyes flashed, and his small, pale face flushed under its grim as he spoke. Very plainly, he was a staunch champion of Tilly Rodwell's. Hector, who was no mean judge of character, decided that Blazing Billy was a boy to be trusted, and guessed, too, that he might be of no slight assistance in the strange task he had before him.

"Well, Billy," he said; "I have come to help Tilly Rodwell if I can. I want to see her; that's why I want you to show me Wharf Cottage. And perhaps I might want you to help me in other ways."

"You mean that—mean it straight?" cried Billy eagerly. "Take yer dyin'?"

"Of course I mean it," said Hector. And the eyes of the

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two boys met. Blazing Billy seemed satisfied with his scrutiny, for he held out a small grimy hand, as he said:

"Shake, Fightin' Ector! I know you're dead straight—white all through! An' I'm with yer solid! It's a deal!"

Hector gravely shook the small grubby hand; the pact was sealed between them.

"Now look 'ere," said Billy earnestly; "if you're goin' anywhere's near Wharf Cottage you will have to go cautious! Caleb Pafton don't want strangers around the place; he's got some game on that won't bear lookin' into. I reckon! There's him to watch out for, an' there's Mrs. Grynde. An' vot's more, Caleb Pafton has got a spy or two. You'll have to be jolly wide-o, or you'll fluke the whole thing at the start!"

"I will be careful, of course," said Hector. "Now lead on; we are losing time."

This conversation had passed almost in whispers as the boys stood in the shadow of a high wall at the entrance to Greenbush Lane. They now emerged, and Billy led the way down the lane, keeping some distance in advance. At the far end he stopped in a shadowed doorway and beckoned Hector to join him.

Hector did so.

"That's the place," said Billy, in a cautious undertone.

The lane terminated in a high brick wall, in the middle of which were a pair of big iron gates. Through the rusty bars Hector could see a sort of wharf, against which a barge was chafing on the rising tide. Beyond this the river glistened darkly, with here and there the lights of some craft at its moorings, or passing, unseen itself, up or down the stream.

Above the gates was a large board with the words—he could barely read them in the gloom:

Rodwell's Wharf.
Lime, Stone, and Cement."

A tall brick building, with an iron crane projecting from one of its walls—and looking in the gloom not unlike the beak of some gigantic bird of prey—closed one end of the wharf. Under its shadow nestled a small white cottage. It was to this that Billy pointed.

Hector looked at it with curious interest.

It had a suggestion about it of having been quite a pretty, countrified little place in its day, but that day was evidently long gone by. Its aspect was now forlorn and dismal; a home from which the home-spirit had long since fled. There was a little garden in front, but the few shrubs that remained within it were brown with dust and shrivelled by neglect. A creeper that had once, no doubt, brightened and adorned its walls, now hung from the eaves downwards like a ragged pall.

It seemed to crouch in a shrinking attitude under the tall building at its side, which overhung it with a threatening air.

"So that is Wharf Cottage, is it?" remarked Hector, after a brief, thoughtful survey.

"Yes, that's it," said Billy. "And now, I'll tell yer what; I'll have a look round afore you go near it. If Caleb Pafton is there, or there's any one on the watch, they won't take any notice of me, but they'd spot you at once, being a stranger."

It was a sensible suggestion, and Hector assented with a nod. Billy was not long gone, and came back to report that the coast was clear.

"I've seen Tilly," he said. "Mrs. Grynde's gone round to the spotted Cow—she won't be back this side of an hour—and Pafton ain't anywhere about, Tilly says. I told her that you'd come to help her, and she's jest wild to see yer! She's waitin' round at the back, it's safest there. Come on; I'll show yer the way."

Hector followed him across the road.

Both boys moved cautiously, but it was a dark, sombre evening, and the street being ill-lighted, they ran little risk of being seen. Billy pointed to a narrow passage at the side of the cottage furthest from the wharf.

"Go down there," he said in a whisper. "You'll find Tilly waitin' for yer. I'll stay here an' watch. If I see any one comin' I'll give yer the tip, see?"

He flattened his small body well back into the shadows of the high wall at the entrance to the passage. Hector passed on down it—to begin an adventure with stranger consequences than he dreamt of!

CHAPTER 5. Disappeared!

THE passage was very narrow and very dark, having the cottage on one hand, with the high brick wall upon the other. It ended in a small back-yard or garden, and Hector had no sooner arrived there than a slight, girlish form emerged from the shadows and approached him with a whispered "Hist! Don't speak loud!"

There was just light enough for Hector to make out a slim, childish figure in a badly-mended black frock, and a pale, eager little face, with a pair of large dark eyes peering into his own.

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"You are Miss Tilly Rodwell?" he said.

"Yes, that's me," replied the girl, "but"—here she favoured Hector with a longer and more searching stare—"but you're not a clergyman—you're only a boy!"

It was not a flattering remark, but Hector merely smiled, as he answered:

"Mr. Howard could not come himself, but he has sent me to see what the trouble is you spoke of in your letter, and we will help you if we can. But you must tell me plainly all about it, and please be as brief as you can."

The girl did not respond at once. She was still staring at him searchingly, and not without a touch of suspicion in her eyes.

But her scrutiny seemed to reassure her; no one could look into Hector Drake's frank and honest face and mistrust him long. She came closer to him, and began to speak in a low, cautious undertone:

"Yes, I will tell you all about it. I know you are someone I can trust. What is your name?"

"Hector Drake," he answered.

"Hector Drake," repeated the girl, "I sha'n't forget it. I like it; it sounds honest and straight! And now I'll tell you what's the matter here"—she jerked her little dark head towards the house at their backs—"I'll be as quick as I can."

She came closer still and laid her hand upon his arm with a confidence that touched Hector deeply; it was like that of a younger sister in her big, strong brother.

"You see, Hector, I'm the only one that lives here with grandfather," she began, speaking scarcely above a whisper. "Grandfather is Mr. William Rodwell, and that wharf and those barges belong to him. But he hasn't looked after the business for a long time. He has stayed up in his room for more than a year, and Caleb Pafton has charge of everything."

"Who is Caleb Pafton?" asked Hector, who had already begun to suspect that individual to be none other than their truculent visitor of the morning.

"He is grandfather's foreman," answered Tilly. "But oh, he's a wicked bad man, and I'm sure he means to cheat poor grandfather out of the business! And he knows that I think so, and that's why he hates me. But I'm not afraid of him," she added, with a proud lift of her small head. "I'm more afraid of Mrs. Grynde!" And she shuddered.

"Who is Mrs. Grynde?" Hector inquired.

"She is a woman that Caleb Pafton sent here," answered Tilly. "She comes in of a day, and she's supposed to look after grandfather, but I'm sure he would get all right again if only she would go away and leave him to me."

"Is your grandfather an invalid then?" asked Hector.

"I don't know," answered Tilly, with a puzzled air. "Sometimes, when Caleb Pafton is away, and Mrs. Grynde has made herself ill with gin, and has to stay at home, he gets better, and is quite nice and sensible, but when they come back he goes queer again directly, and is just like a great stupid child! I can't make out what they do to him because they never let me go near his room when they are there."

"But hasn't Mr. Rodwell any other relations, only you?" said Hector.

The girl's dark eyes glistened with tears as she answered: "There's my big brother, Dick; he used to be here, and, oh! it was better then. But he and grandfather had a quarrel—I'm certain Caleb Pafton managed that. Grandfather turned Dick out of the house a year ago, and he went and joined the Army, and oh! the worst of my trouble is about him."

"About your brother Dick? What has happened to him?" Hector asked.

"I don't know; something terrible, I'm afraid," said Tilly, who was actually sobbing now. "That's what made me write to Mr. Howard. I hadn't anyone else to help me, and I'd heard of him, and how good he was, from a girl I know who used to live at Shadwell."

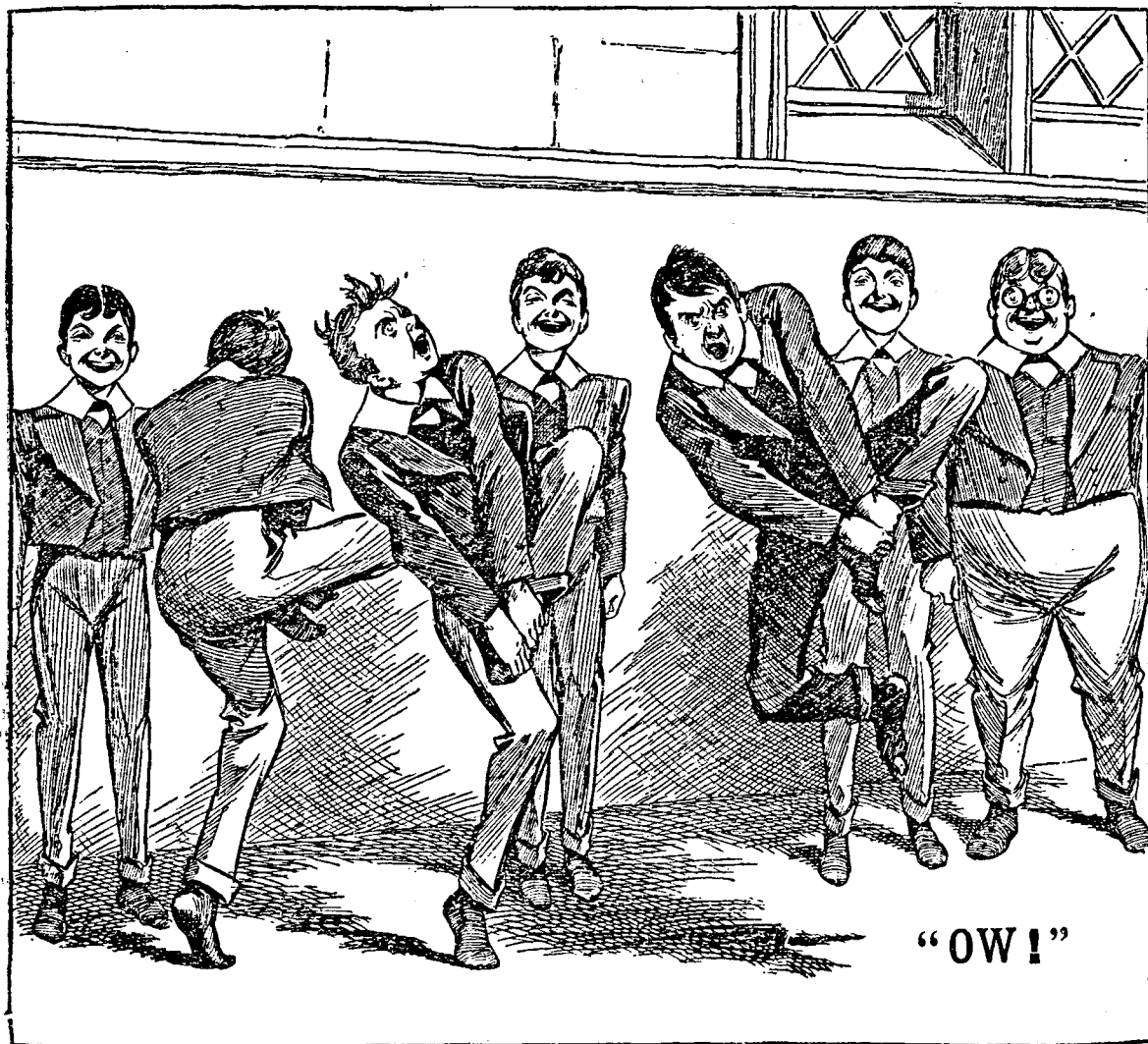
"But I don't understand. What makes you think something has happened to your brother?" said Hector.

"Why, you see, it is like this," said Tilly, making a brave effort to calm herself. "When Mrs. Grynde came here, and grandfather got so bad that I thought he was going to die, I wrote to Dick and told him all about it. He got leave and came home, and things were better at once. He sent Mrs. Grynde away, and Caleb Pafton didn't come near the place whilst he was here. Grandpa got ever so much better, and was almost bright and sensible again. But Dick's leave was up three days ago, and he started to go back to barracks. And that's the dreadful part of it, for he doesn't seem to have got back there after all!"

"Not got back to barracks!" exclaimed Hector, "what makes you think that?"

"Because yesterday a big blue paper came here by post," said Tilly; "it came from the headquarters of his regiment at Aldershot. It said—oh, I can't tell you just the words, but it meant that he hadn't reported himself at the end of his leave, and if he was not back in barracks within twenty-four hours he would be posted as a deserter and a warrant issued for his arrest."

Hector was silent for a moment after she finished speaking.



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He well knew what a serious business it was, and could hardly think what to say.

"And you have not the least idea where he can have gone, or what might have happened to him?" he asked, at length.

"No—not the least!" sobbed Tilly. "Only I know he would never, never desert. He liked the Army too well. Besides, if he had broken his leave at all he would have stayed here with me. He was dreadfully sorry to have to go and leave me alone again."

"At what time did he go? Try, if you can, remember exactly," said Hector.

"He left here the evening before last, at eight o'clock," was Tilly's assured reply.

"Then he should have reached Aldershot well by eleven o'clock that night," Hector reflected; "there is something ugly in this."

But he did not voice this foreboding aloud. To comfort Tilly he said, in a tone as cheery as he could assume, "You must not worry too much about it, you know, Tilly. It is quite likely that your brother was taken with some slight illness on the way, and had to lay up somewhere for a few hours; such things happen to the strongest of us at times."

Tilly only shook her head.

"But where is he?" she asked mournfully.

"I will try to find him, I promise you that, and Mr. Howard will help me, I know," said Hector. "And, meanwhile you must not worry about him. It is sure to turn out all right."

But he was very far from feeling the cheery confidence he assumed. Dick Rodwell's strange disappearance had a decidedly

sinister look to him, taken in conjunction with the rest of the girl's story. His thoughts instantly flew to Caleb Pafton. The man was a villain, he felt sure of that, and quite capable of disposing of the young soldier if he stood in his way.

But Tilly caught eagerly at the hopes he held out.

"You will try to find him," she cried, pressing both her little hands upon Hector's arm; "oh, that's splendid. Because I know you will never give up till you have found him—you look that sort of boy. But start at once—don't wait a moment," she added, with childish impulsiveness.

Hector got from her what particulars he could, which were meagre enough. Tilly knew that her brother was a private in the 3rd Battalion Home Counties Rifles, then stationed at Aldershot, and that was about all.

She gave him a word portrait of her brother in vivid, childish tones, and with these scanty materials to guide him Hector had to be content. He thought it was likely to prove a rather hopeless task, this search for a man who had gone, and left no clue in his going, but he spoke with cheery hopefulness as he bade Tilly "good-bye."

"Now, keep your heart up, and don't you fret," he said. "You will hear from me before long, and it's sure to turn out all right, see if it doesn't! And—"

He broke off, feeling a tug at his jacket. Blazing Billy's voice whispered in his ear:

"Cut like winkin'! Mother Grynde is comin' down the lane, an' Caleb Pafton's with her."

Tilly had caught the words. She urged Hector into the passage with a push of her hand.

"Don't let them find you here," she whispered tremulously; "Get away at once. I must go and let them in."

"Come on!" hissed Billy, under his breath, pulling Hector down the passage. "Now keep back a bit," he whispered, drawing him into the shadow of the wall as they reached the entrance; "don't make a sound."

It was a needed caution, for just then two persons came by, passing them within reach of an outstretched hand. Both were near enough for Hector to see them fairly well, in spite of the gloom. One was a woman—a big, powerfully-built creature with a coarse, red face, which spoke of anything but a temperate life. Her companion—Hector recognised him at once—was his visitor at Shadwell that morning.

For a moment Hector feared that they might turn into the passage. But they passed on to the front of the cottage, and presently a thundering rat-tat resounded from the street door.

"That's Caleb Pafton," grunted Billy. "He allus knocks 'sif the house was his own, an' I reckon he fancies it is a ready. Come on; let's cut across the road to that doorway. Safer than tryin' to get down the lane afore they've gone in."

The two boys stooped low and ran, swiftly, but noiselessly, across the road to the shadowed doorway on the farther side.

They saw the street door of Wharf Cottage open and caught a glimpse of Tilly's small pale face between the two figures upon the doorstep. Then they heard the woman's coarse voice, as she exclaimed angrily:

"So you've come at last, 'ave yer? Pretty time you've kept us waiting, you lazy minx! Now get along up to bed—sharp!"

Then followed the unmistakable sound of a sharp blow. Hector's blood boiled up at that, and he made to dash across the road. But Billy held him back with both hands.

"Jest you stay 'ere, an' don't do anythin' so rotten foolish," he whispered imperatively.

"But the woman struck that child!" exclaimed Hector, trying to pull himself away.

"I know, I know," growled Billy, keeping a tight hold upon the skirts of his jacket; "an' it ain't the first time either! But you can't do anythin' now—see? If you go an' chip in now you'll fluke every blessed chance of really helpin' her—spoil the whole show at the start."

Hector could not fail to see the sound sense in that. He had to bottle his wrath and submit, watching, with compressed lips and clenched hands, as Pafton and Mrs. Grynde went in and the door closed upon them.

Billy turned to him, and said:

"Now, Hector, what you want to do is to clear right away now, afore they come out again. You can't do any good waitin' around here to-night. An' don't you worry about Tilly, I'll look after her," he added proudly. "I'll bring some of the gang down close handy; I allus do that when them two is in the 'ouse, an' Tilly knows it. If they get too rough on her she'll cut out an' come to us, an' we'll take care of her, you bet. Now, come on. I'll show yer the way out of the lane."

Hector made no demur to this, but he had formed a resolve which he thought best not to mention to his small, fiery friend.

Blazing Billy, if he told him what he intended to do, would either try to dissuade him from it, or want to join him. And as the adventure he had in his mind was one of considerable risk, he preferred to attempt it alone.

CHAPTER 6.

Hector Takes a Bold Step.

THE two boys walked together as far as the top of Greenbush Lane, and there parted—Blazing Billy to return and call up a detachment of the Brothers of Blood for night duty on Tilly Rodwell's behalf, and Hector, as Billy supposed, to make his way back home.

But Hector had no such intention just then; he had further business in Greenbush Lane. He felt that he had come upon the first threads of a dark web of plot and mystery, which perplexed whilst it interested him intensely. He was reluctant to leave the spot until he had at least made some attempt to learn more.

He had resolved to help Tilly Rodwell if it lay in his power, and the first step towards that end was, he thought, to obtain some clue to Caleb Pafton's underhand schemes.

It might be possible to do that by the bold move he had in his mind, and also, as he ventured to hope, to light upon some clue as to the mysterious disappearance of Dick Rodwell.

Before he parted with Blazing Billy he asked, in a casual tone:

"Where does Caleb Pafton live—at the wharf?"

"No, he don't live there," answered Billy. "I dunno' where he hangs out."

"Is the wharf left to look after itself at night, then?" inquired Hector.

"You bet it isn't!" replied Billy with emphasis. "The Spider's allus there o' nights."

"The Spider?"

"He's the watchman there," said Billy. "We calls him PLUCK.—255.

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the Spider 'cos, 'cos—well, he's jest like a spider, runnin' out on yer if yer go near the place, jest like a spider when a fly touches his web! An' he's a bad lot, too—the right sort for Caleb Pafton. He's got eyes all round the back of his head, has the Spider, an' ears that can hear a flea cough a mile away. Oh, I tell yer, you've got to watch out if you're thinkin' of doin' a bit o' fishin', or havin' a dip off Rodwell's wharf. You won't dodge the Spider!"

And Billy shook his head in solemn warning born of bitter experience.

Hector laughingly disclaimed any intention of indulging in either pastime. But he did not mention that he was resolved to visit Rodwell's wharf for quite another purpose, and take his chances of an encounter with the Spider.

He waited only until Billy, after leaving him, had time to get some distance away, then he retraced his steps to the other end of Greenbush Lane.

This was a move needing considerable caution, for he had to pass the front of Wharf Cottage, with the risk of being seen should Caleb Pafton or Mrs. Grynde come out, or either of them be watching from the window: a contingency not at all unlikely, since Pafton would be doubly on his guard against the approach of strangers after the sending of Tilly's letter.

But Hector was a boy-scout, and his training helped him immensely here.

He moved with a light, almost noiseless tread, fitting from one point of cover to another, like part of the shadows through which he glided. It is only fair to him to say that all this Red Indian caution was not a little distasteful to him. His frank and courageous spirit would have preferred a bolder and more open method of setting about his task. But he was now fighting cunning with cunning; in caution lay his sole chance of success.

On reaching the shadowed doorway where he and Billy had taken cover before, he paused and took a good look at the front of Wharf Cottage.

Not a light shone from any of its windows. It might have been deserted, or all its inmates asleep, for any sign of life it showed. But Hector felt pretty sure that Caleb Pafton and Mrs. Grynde had not left. He had never been far enough away to have missed the sound of their footsteps had they come out and passed down the lane.

But his business did not lie with the cottage just then; he meant to penetrate to the adjoining wharf.

During his talk with Tilly Rodwell she had pointed to a window on the upper floor at the back of the cottage, and told him that was the window of her grandfather's room. Hector had noticed that the blind was up and the top portion of the window open, for the autumn night was close and oppressive, with but little air. A light, the only one visible in the house, had shone from that room.

But Hector had taken note of more than these details.

The rear wall of the tall building on the wharf abutted on to the cottage, and he had noted that an unglazed aperture, or loophole, in this overlooked that very window, so that a person stationed there might easily get a side-view of the interior of the room.

The building, from its appearance, looked like a storeplace for whiting or cement, and seemed hardly likely to be protected by locks and bolts. If he could get into the wharf it ought not to be a difficult matter to reach that loophole, he thought. Anyhow, he meant to try—Spider or no Spider!

He cautiously approached the high wall which shut off the wharf from the lane.

It hardly looked promising, being about ten or twelve feet high, and topped with a jagged chevaux de frise of broken glass that glistened wickedly under the murky night sky.

The iron gates were closed, and secured with a chain and padlock. Although tall, and crested with unpleasant-looking iron spikes, suggestive of torn clothes and lacerated hands, they promised an easier climb than the wall.

But Hector decided not to risk it; his dark figure would be too distinct against the open bars.

He examined the wall at the corner where it joined the blank side of the last house in the lane. As he had half expected to find, there were marks here upon the brickwork of feet that had scaled it before—perhaps small intruders of the "Brothers of Blood" variety, bent upon fishing, or taking a dip from the wharf.

The glass at that end of the wall was broken away for the space of some twelve inches or so. Hector decided that it promised the best chance.

It was no easy matter to scale that wall, with nothing but a shallow hole here and there for a foothold or a grip for the fingers. Only a cat, or a London street boy, could have entered upon such a task with a light heart.

Hector Drake belonged to neither order of prowling animals, but he had determination, and no small amount of agility. After one or two ugly slips, and a fall from halfway sheer to the pavement, he managed to get his hands upon the top of the wall.

The rest was comparatively easy.

He pulled himself up and sat astride of the wall between two aggressive-looking clumps of broken glass. From this position, well screened by the shadows of the house adjoining the wall, he took a survey of the wharf.

It seemed to be deserted.

Kegs of cement stood about in pyramids, with here and there a pile of bricks or tiles. There were heaps of lime under a shed at one side, and a dingy coat of lime covered everything, like a London street after a shower of snow. This in itself gave a sort of lightness to the place which was by no means favourable to Hector's purpose. His dark figure would show up all too plainly against that greyish-white background as he crossed the wharf, as he must do, the building he had to reach being upon the farther side.

But the risk had to be run unless he abandoned the attempt altogether, and that he had no thought of doing.

He gave a final look round before leaving his perch upon the wall. He might have been in a corner of some deserted city for any sign of life he saw.

The barge that lay moored there creaked dismally against the sodden timbers of the wharf, and the night wind moaned with weird complainings through its cordage. Far off across the river came the sound of a church bell chiming the hour, and he heard the distant splash of oars, or the rattle of a chain as some craft came to anchor in the dark stream. But these and the restless lapping of the tide upon the shore, were the only sounds that broke the stillness.

It was all weird enough to chill the courage of a timid lad, but Hector Drake was not of that sort.

He dropped off the wall noiselessly on to the stones below. His great fear was that a watch-dog might be there; not that he feared its teeth, it was the warning bark he dreaded.

But no sound followed, and he knew that no dog was there, for the animal would have scented him the instant he touched the ground.

This re-assured him not a little, and he began to steal forward stooping and making short quick runs from each pile of kegs or bricks until he reached the foot of the building. It was very dark under its shadow, but Hector's eyes had now grown accustomed to the gloom, and he soon made out the door of rough planks that seemed to be the only entrance to the place.

It was closed, but a cautious touch told him that it was merely latched, not locked or bolted.

So far, so good; but now came the most critical moment of all.

It was just possible that the Spider, instead of patrolling the wharf as he should have done, had turned into the building to have a bit of a nap; night-watchmen have been known to do such things, as Hector was well aware.

In the case he would be dropping into the spider's web with a vengeance! It would be no easy matter to scale that high wall in a hurry, with an active man in pursuit. And he had Billy's word for it that the Spider was very active indeed.

He might be captured; there might be a bit of a fight. As far as that went, Hector was willing to take his chance, but it meant the complete breakdown of his plans for helping Tilly Rodwell at the very outset: that was the risk he feared.

With these thoughts swiftly running through his brain, he laid his finger gently on the latch, lifted it, and, pushing the door open with a careful hand, stepped into the dark space beyond.

CHAPTER 7.

What Hector Saw and Heard from the Loophole.

HECTOR started, and quite a small chill ran down his spine.

Upon all sides as he entered were what appeared to be row upon row of ghastly white faces, all turned towards him and staring at him in the murky gloom.

The next moment he felt inclined to laugh, for he knew them to be nothing but balls of whiting placed upon wooden racks to dry. These racks seemed to reach from the floor halfway up the building, which was simply a square brick tower floored across midway up its height.

Standing by the open door, he took a good look round before venturing further in. There was no watchman visible in this lower portion at least. The racks offered no sort of wook for slumber, and the middle of the floor was clear but for a large square vat, evidently used for mixing purposes.

Hector closed the door carefully, but without latching it.

A square of murky light shone in one corner of the floor above his head, and faintly revealed the upper treads of a wooden ladder. He crossed the stone flags on tiptoe, and felt for the foot of the ladder with his hands, for now that the door was shut the place was pitchy dark. He found it after some groping, and began to mount up cautiously, throwing his weight upon the sides of the ladder so as to avoid making it creak.

It was not an easy climb, or a very safe one, for the pitch of the ladder was steep, and there was no handrail. A single

false step—likely enough in that absolute darkness—meant an ugly fall sheer to the stone flags below.

It was no small relief when he reached the top—and, raising his head and shoulders through the square opening, felt the heavy warm night air blowing in his face.

This came from the river, through a large arched opening, which he could see—a shape of murky light—at some distance from him across the floor he had now reached. The top of an iron crane made a black blot in the middle of this, and looked not unlike the head of some monster, leaning out and peering into the night.

Opposite to this, and nearer to him, was a smaller aperture, the loophole he had seen from the back garden of the cottage below.

Hector looked around him, striving to make out what sort of place he had arrived in, before leaving the ladder. He could see but little, for it was even darker up here than in the chamber below. Dimly, where the light of the night sky fell, he could make out the shapes of some kegs piled in pyramids, and the uncouth outlines of some bags of cement, looking in the gloom unpleasantly like headless and dismembered bodies.

Beyond this all was absolute blackness. A score of Spiders might have lurked there and Hector been none the wiser.

But he did not let that trouble him. Leaving the ladder, he crept across to the loophole, and, kneeling upon the floor, cautiously peered out. He was startled to find himself much closer to the window in the rear of Wharf Cottage than he had expected, and still more startled to discover the faces of Caleb Pafton and Mrs. Grynde within a few feet of his own.

The lower sash of the window was raised, and the pair were seated there at a small table, upon which stood a fat, black bottle and a couple of glasses.

Mrs. Grynde had evidently just replenished her glass, for it was full. She raised it to her lips and drained it at a draught, then reached out for the black bottle. But Caleb Pafton drew it back, and said with a grin:

"No more, old gel. Bust me if you ain't a demon for the lush! But you'll 'ave to keep sober for a bit; I want to talk business."

Mrs. Grynde sat up with a sniff of virtuous indignation, and tried to look unnaturally sober and alert. Caleb Pafton grinned again as he said:

"Now listen to me, mother. I shall be away for a day or two—got to take a load of stuff down Basingstoke way. I'll 'ave to leave things 'ere in your 'ands, and mind you keep sober! If you go and fluke things now, just as we've got 'em all nicely fixed, it's good-bye to your chance of sharing the luck when it's all settled! And wot's more, I'll—I'll murder you if you do!" he added, with a sudden gleam in his sunken eyes.

He had raised his voice in those last words. The woman shot an uneasy glance into the interior of the room, and said hastily, in a low undertone:

"Hist! Don't speak so loud!"

Caleb Pafton gave a dry, harsh laugh.

"Oh, that's all right!" he said. "He won't hear us. I've fixed him safe enough for a bit. Thunder! didn't he suck the gin down! And he never seemed to notice anything queer about the flavour, neither!"

Mrs. Grynde stared at him, then said:

"You've been and put something in it? Now mind, I ain't going to be mixed up in mur—"

"Shut up, you fool!" growled Pafton. "D'y'e think I'd do anything like that? No, it's just a little something to keep him silly like till I've settled my business with him. And I'm going to settle it to-night afore I go. Now what you've got to do, Mrs. G., is to keep him fed up with the booze while I'm gone; don't let him get his head clear, so as he can talk sensible if any strangers come poking their noses in here. That parson Tilly went and wrote to may come here at any time. Hang the brat! I'd like to skin her for going and doing it!"

"Leave her to me, I'll take it out of her!" said the woman, with a malicious grin that made Hector's blood boil to see. Caleb Pafton also grinned as he said:

"Well, I'll leave this bottle—there's nearly a quart in it now—in the cupboard yonder after I've put the proper dose of stuff in it. And you keep the cupboard locked, mind! Don't let him get at it himself—we don't want anything sudden to happen, with a beastly inquest!" Mrs. Grynde shuddered. "And mind you keep off touching the booze out of that bottle yourself!" added Pafton, with that hateful laugh of his, "or you won't live to draw yer old age pension, I can tell yer!" Mrs. Grynde shuddered again. "And you'd best leave all sorts of booze alone while you're in charge here," continued Pafton, looking at her darkly, "'cos I tell yer, if you go and fluke this business at the last, just when I've got it nearly finished, I'll—well, you'll be sorry for it, that's all!"

The woman sniffed, a sniff half defiant, half timid. There is a complete language in sniffs used by persons like Mrs. Grynde. "There's no call to threaten me," she said. "You needn't

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be afraid that I'll spoil the business, as you call it. What you've got to be afraid of is what Dick Rodwell, the soldier, will do. He's fairly on to your game already."

Caleb Pafton again indulged in a laugh.

"Oh, him!" he chuckled. "He's all right; he won't trouble us, I've seen arter that!"

"What! You don't mean you've—" began Mrs. Grynde. "No, I don't, confound you!" snapped Caleb Pafton. "Don't I keep telling yer that sort of thing ain't in my line? I don't want to run my head into a ring o' rope when there's no need for it. And there's no need here. No; I've just put him away somewhere snug. And I've fixed it so that when he does come out he won't remember where he's been nor how he got there. And he'll be lagged for deserting and get six months in quod. And when he comes out of that it'll be too late for him to spoil my little game, I warrant yer! It'll be all settled and done with by then!"

"The villain!" murmured Hector, as he listened to this cold-blooded confession, or rather boast. "So it is as I guessed. Pafton is at the bottom of Dick Rodwell's disappearance! I wonder where the scoundrel has shut him up!"

He got a clue to this in the next few moments. Mrs. Grynde looked at Pafton in mingled awe and admiration.

"My word, but you are a deep 'un!" she breathed. "I hope it ain't anywhere about the wharf here, because that ain't safe!"

"D'ye think I'm a fool!" chuckled Pafton. "No; I know a better place than that!"

He leant towards Mrs. Grynde and sunk his voice so low that Hector had some difficulty in following his next words:

"No, the lock-house on the old canal just above Frimley. He's as safe there 'sif he was clean out of the world. No one goes there once in a donkey's age, and they'd never find where he's hid if they did."

He then drew a small paper packet from his pocket, undid it, and emptied its contents—a greyish powder—into the fat, black bottle. This he corked again, and after giving it a vigorous shaking, took it with him as he crossed into the farther part of the room. When he came back to the table he handed a key to Mrs. Grynde with the remark:

"There, I've locked the stuff up in the cupboard, and there's the key. I've got another myself. Mind you don't forget what I told yer—let him have it reg'lar. And you can go now. You won't be wanted here any more to-night."

Mrs. Grynde got up, rather unsteadily, and disappeared from the table, and from the house itself, as Hector judged, for he heard the distant click of the street door latch a few moments later.

When she had gone, Caleb Pafton took the lighted candle which had been standing upon the table, and with it in his hand, crossed the room.

Then, for the first time, Hector saw that the two plotters had not been alone. There was a third person in that room; one around whose head that very plot was being hatched, whilst he lay there unconscious of it all!

CHAPTER 8.

Caleb Pafton Shows his Hand.

THE light of Caleb Pafton's candle revealed a bed at the further side of the room, a common camp bedstead, covered with clothing which even at that distance struck Hector as being far from clean in appearance.

Upon it lay an old man, his white hair and beard long and matted with neglect. His face was gaunt and haggard, and of a pallor so unnatural that Hector for a moment feared that he was gazing upon the features of a corpse.

But as Pafton paused at the bedside with the candle in his hand, the old man opened his sunken eyes and stared wildly at the light, then at the man who leant above him.

"Awake, guv'nor? How goes it now?" said Pafton.

"Ah, it is you, Caleb!" exclaimed the old man, who, as Hector readily guessed, was none other than William Rodwell, Tilly's grandfather. "Where have you been this long time?"

"Why, yer see, guv'nor, there ain't room for me and Mister Dick in the house at the same time," answered Pafton, with an ugly grin. "Whilst he's here I clears out to save trouble; see? But him being gone I comes back, and here I am, guv'nor, and I says agen, how goes it?"

Old Rodwell raised himself upon his elbow by a great effort, for he seemed very feeble. He seized Pafton's wrist with a skinny, corded hand, drew him down, then said, in a whisper full of sly cunning:

"Have you brought any brandy? I've had not a drop for days! Oh, days and days! Dick was kind and good, but he would not give me a drop. No; although I prayed for just one drop he would give me none! Oh, it was cruel, cruel! You know I need it, Caleb. My old blood runs thin and cold; my limbs tremble and my heart grows faint like death. Brandy is life to me. I cannot live without it; and he would give me none!"

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"O' course you needs it, guv'nor," said Pafton soothingly. "You ain't young, and o' course you want somethin' to buck you up now an' agen. Mister Dick knows that all the time, but maybe he don't want you to buck up. Maybe he'd rather you pegged out, so's he could chuck up the Army an' come an' make ducks an' drakes of this 'ere business an' the bit o' money wot you've saved. An' wot 'ud become of Miss Tilly then?"

The old man did not appear to hear half of this cunning speech. His head had fallen back and he seemingly slept again. But he roused himself as Pafton ceased speaking, and eagerly exclaimed:

"You have brought some brandy! Quick, give me some! Give me some!"

"Yes, I've brought some of the real stuff, an' you shall have a drop, guv'nor," said Pafton. "But only a drop now, mind, 'cos I've come to talk business, an' I wants you to keep a clear head for a bit."

He crossed to the cupboard and brought out the fat, black bottle and a glass. The old man watched him with eager, glistening eyes as he filled it; then snatched it from his hand and drained it at a draught.

"Ah, that is life, new life!" he cried, holding out the tumbler with a trembling hand. "More, Caleb, more!"

"Not a drop more jest now, guv'nor," said Pafton; "I tell you I want to talk business an' you'll have to keep a clear head. Arter that you can have another swig, if you like."

"A little more now, Caleb—now!" cried the old man imploringly, half rising on the bed and stretching out his shrunken arms towards the bottle.

But Caleb Pafton corked the bottle and then replaced it in the cupboard. The wretched old man implored, raved, and threatened by turns, then fell to sobbing like a child; all of which had not the slightest effect upon Caleb Pafton, who calmly dropped into a chair by the bedside and sat there with folded arms; an ugly grin upon his sinister features.

It was a miserable instance of the degrading power of drink, and Hector witnessed it with mingled feelings of disgust and pity.

The old man's fit of sobbing gradually wore itself out, and he sank back as if exhausted. Pafton raised him and propped him with a pillow.

"Now look here, guv'nor," he said; "let's talk business. The sooner it's over, the sooner you gets another drink, see?"

This seemed to rouse old Rodwell.

"Yes, yes! Let us get it over!" he cried. "What is it you wish to say?"

"Why, it's jest this, guv'nor," began Caleb Pafton; "it ain't for me to set a man agen his own flesh an' blood, but Mister Dick's a rank waster, an' you know it—"

"He is my only daughter's son," the old man broke in, with some momentary return of a long lost dignity and manhood: "he is my daughter's child, and I love her children as I loved her whilst she lived, and love her very memory to-day. If you have merely come here to speak against him you had better go—now, before you anger me!"

He sat himself bolt upright in bed, and pointed to the door.

Hector saw Caleb Pafton turn away to hide the savage scowl upon his face. He had made another false step, and knew it. But he was far too cunning a rogue too be easily non-plussed.

"I ain't come here to speak agen him," he said, in a tone of humble protest, "but I've come to speak the truth: being a honest man wot 'as done his duty by yer these twenty years, an' means to try an' do it to the last."

"Yes, yes," exclaimed old Rodwell impatiently, with his eyes fixed upon the corner cupboard that held the fat, black bottle; "yes, yes! But this business you spoke of—what is it?"

"I'm a-comin' to that," said Pafton. "You say Mister Dick is your daughter's child, an' you loved him for her sake, but wot about Miss Tilly? Ain't she your daughter's child as well? An' don't you love her?"

"I do!" exclaimed the old man fervently; "Heaven knows I love her with all my heart and soul; wretchedly as I have failed in my duty towards her!" he added, with a groan.

"Werry well, then," said Pafton, in a bolder tone, as one who had a strong card to play; "have you thought, guv'nor, wot will happen when you're gone? You're old now, an' can't last long in the nature of things. Well, I'll tell yer wot'll happen; Mister Dick will smash up this business in a month, an' burn away the bit o' money you've put by like a drop o' fat on a hot stove! An' what will become of Miss Tilly, then? She'll die a beggar in the streets—that's wot'll happen to her!"

Old Rodwell groaned again.

"I fear there is some truth in that," he said. "But what can I do? Advise me, Caleb; my brain is clouded with weakness; I cannot think clearly. Tell me—what had I better do?"

"I'll tell yer wot to do, guv'nor," said Pafton, laying his hand upon the old man's arm: "leave the business in my hands to manage for Miss Tilly till she comes of age—just leave a pound or two to Mister Dick, an' no more, 'cos he'd only

waste it. I've done my duty by yer faithful these twenty years, an' I'll do my duty faithful by Miss Tilly; I will, s'help me! I'll see that she never comes to want! 'Cos I loves that child 'sif she was a daughter o' me own!" added the rogue, brushing his hand across his eyes to wipe away an imaginary trace of emotion.

Rodwell turned away, and Hector was surprised to see a smile—a smile of cunning—appear upon the old man's face.

But the smile had disappeared when he turned to Pafton again, and said:

"Yes, yes; it would be best. It shall be as you say."

"Better fix it in black an' white, guv'nor," said Pafton. "It 'ud be safer for Miss Tilly's sake."

"I'll think it over," said old Rodwell, with a show of returning impatience. "I can talk no more now; I am growing faint. Give me some more brandy—quick!"

"Well, jost a leedle drop then, guv'nor," said Pafton.

He fetched the bottle and glass from the cupboard and poured out some more spirit, which the old man drank off in a single gulp. After restoring the bottle and glass to the cupboard once more, Pafton resumed his seat and drew a folded paper from his pocket.

"Now here's a little dockermant wot I've had drawd up all fair an' square by a lawyer," he said; "a lawyer wot's a sort of friend o' mine an' can be trusted to do the thing right

induce the wretched old dotard to sign away the whole of his property into the scoundrel's hands.

The boy's heart swelled with rage and indignation; as he thought of what the success of that dastardly plot meant to Tilly and her brother. He was hard put to restrain himself from calling out aloud to the old man not to sign the paper.

Caleb Pafton got up and went towards the fireplace. This was out of Hector's line of sight from the loophole. But he saw Pafton suddenly pause, then turn and make for the door, saying as he went:

"We'll leave that for a bit, guv'nor. I'll be back in a minute."

Then he disappeared from the room.

Hector rather wondered at this sudden movement, but any thought of danger to himself was driven from his mind by the strange conduct of old Rodwell the instant Pafton had gone from the room.

The old man got up from the bed; his wasted form tottering with weakness, but his eyes aglow with a light that was scarcely sane. He began to mutter aloud; so loudly that the listening boy could clearly hear each word.

"The brandy! He has left it here, and the key is in the lock! Ha, ha! Now for a long, long drink! No—stop!" He passed his hand across his brow, as if to clear away a cloud that rested there. "No! That makes a fool of me, and I have to act first; then I will have a long, deep drink! But I must



At the unmistakable sound of a sharp blow, Hector made to dash across the road. But Billy held him back. "Jest you stay 'ere, an' don't do anythin' so rotten scollish," he whispered, imperatively.

s'n' tight. All you've got to do, guv'nor, is to stick yer name at the bottom here, an' the thing's done; Miss Tilly's safe for good an' all!"

"A paper!" exclaimed the old man sharply. "I must read it before I sign it. Give it to me!"

He snatched the paper from Pafton's hand, but after poring over it for some few moments he shook his head and said:

"I cannot read it; my eyes are too weak."

Caleb Pafton grinned as he took the paper from the old man's hand; he had plainly known that such would be the case.

"It doesn't matter, guv'nor," said the rogue, in a tone of offended virtue; "I tell yer it's all drawn up straight an' proper, but if yer can't trust me arter twenty years of faithful dooty, why—there's an end to it! It's only for the girl's sake arter all, an' if you cares to let her starve, why, I can't help it, that's all!"

He put the paper in his pocket and got up as if to go away, but old Rodwell caught him by the sleeve.

"Stop!" he cried. "I'll sign it! There is a pen and ink upon the chimney-shelf, I think. Bring them to me."

Caleb Pafton grinned behind the old man's back. The triumph of his scheme was well in sight now! What that scheme was Hector could readily guess; a deliberate plot to

act whilst my head is clear. He thinks me a fool, an easy dupe, but he will find that the drunken old dotard is a match for him yet!"

He then went off into a cackle of laughter, which to Hector was by no means pleasant to hear, for it was the weird mirth of a madman.

CHAPTER 9.

Hector's Double Deed of Daring.

THIS fit of imbecile laughter seemed to exhaust the old man, or the drugged spirit was already beginning to assert its power, for his eyes closed and he leant against the bedpost, swaying as if about to fall.

But he roused himself as though by a powerful effort of the will, and that strange light of weird cunning again shone in his eyes. He began to mutter aloud as before:

"The black tin box—it is not safe under the bed. Should I sleep too soundly he might search there and find it! I must think of a safer place."

He pressed his hand to his brow, then chuckled again as if a shrewd idea had come to him. With trembling haste he thrust his arm under the mattress of the bed and drew out a small flat tin box.

"The chimney!" he muttered. "It will be safe enough

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there, and I will whisper to Tilly where to find it when I am gone. Caleb Pafton—the old drink-soddened fool is more than a match for you yet!"

With the box clutched in his hands he crossed to a part of the room out of Hector's view. When he came back he was chuckling softly to himself, and the light in his eyes was madder than ever. His hands were black with grime.

He tottered across to the cupboard and came back with the black bottle in his hand. The glass stood upon the table beside the fluttering candle. He filled the tumbler to the brim and drank it off at a single draught: choking as the fiery spirit caught his breath. Then, with a spluttering laugh he filled and drained it again.

It was not a pleasant sight, and Hector turned away, sickened. "I can do no good by remaining here longer," he murmured to himself. "I had better get back to Shadwell and tell Mr. Howard what I have seen and heard. His help is needed if Pafton's wicked plot is to be defeated in time!"

He left the loophole to make his way out of the place. But as he reached the top of the wooden ladder, he drew back sharply with a start. He heard the click of the door-latch far below; then the sound of voices.

The first was Caleb Pafton's, raised in savage anger: "A cursed fine kind of watchman you are! Where've ye been, eh?"

Then came a second voice, which Hector guessed to be that of the "Spider."

"I ain't been away more'n a minit, boss! Nobody couldn't 'ave got in 'ere. You must-a-dreamt it!"

Caleb Pafton swore, and growled angrily: "Dreamt it, did I? I tell yer I saw the loophole up there in the looking-glass over the fireplace in the old man's room, and there was a noy's face looking out of it, staring straight into the room."

"One of them river-rats, that's all, I expect," said the Spider. "No! It was the boy I saw at Shadwell! He's been sent here to spy, an' I reckon he must have heard every word what passed between Mrs. Grynde an' me, 'cos we were sitting right at the window."

"You didn't let out to her that we'd got young Rodwell shut up here, did yer?" asked the Spider anxiously.

"In here! So Dick Rodwell is shut up in this place!" murmured Hector, keenly excited by this bit of chance information in spite of his own decidedly awkward position.

"Tell her!" grunted Pafton. "D'yer think I'm a fool! I don't trust Mrs. Grynde more'n need be, I can tell yer! No; I told her he was in a lock-house on the old canal up Frimley way. But this cursed boy has heard too much; he don't get away from here to tell the tale!" the ruffian added, with grim meaning in his tone.

"He can't get away," said the Spider, "not unless he chucks himself out o' the loophole, an' he ain't likely to do that! No; we've got him safe as a rat in a trap! Come on!"

The ladder creaked as the two men began to ascend. Hector drew back. His heart was beating fast, but his nerves were steady and his head cool and clear. He did not mean to be captured without at least an attempt to escape.

He ran to the larger loophole overlooking the river, and peered out. The dark water washed the foot of the building fifty feet below; the chain of the great iron crane was hauled up close to the head, and far and beyond his reach. There was no hope of escape that way.

He dashed to the smaller opening that looked on to the cottage below, and reached it just in time to witness a terrible spectacle!

Old Rodwell, his eyes glaring with the wild light of madness, was dancing a frenzied dance with the big black bottle in his hand.

As Hector reached the loophole, the old man lurched against a table, overturning it with the lighted candle, which fell—still burning—upon the floor. At the same moment the bottle fell from his hand, shivered to atoms.

An instant later the wretched old creature was enveloped in flames!

Hector's action was the result of a lightning impulse, without a pause for thought; never afterwards could he clearly remember how he did it.

A wooden beam, with a pulley and some few feet of half-rotten rope, projected from the upper part of the loophole. Hector swung himself out with his hands upon the beam; then, seizing the rope, clambered down. It ended some six feet short of the cottage roof, but Hector—with reckless daring possible only in moments like this—set himself swinging, then let go, and caught the gutter with his hands.

He hung there a breathless instant, then released his hold and dropped on to the window-sill below.

The next moment he was in the burning room. Old Rodwell had dropped to the floor—dead, or merely unconscious, Hector could not tell which. But he saw to his amazement that the old man held the black tin box tightly clasped in his hands; his last thought ere his senses left him had been for that!

The woollen dressing-gown which Rodwell was wearing had PLUCK.—255.

not readily caught in the flames, but it was smouldering, and Hector, snatching a blanket from the bed, wrapped it tightly around him, smothering the fire.

Then he lifted the old man's wasted form in his arms, and stooping low to avoid the flames which now filled the room, dashed to the door and kicked it open with one blow of his foot.

As he reached the street door, it was burst open from without, and he found himself face to face with Mr. Howard.

"Take him from me!" cried Hector, thrusting his burden into Mr. Howard's arms. "There is a child in the room upstairs!"

A shriek of terror from the upper part of the burning house reminded him that Tilly was still there.

The cottage—built chiefly of wood, and tinder-dry with age—was now well alight. Hector heard Mr. Howard call to him to come back, but he did not heed.

Suddenly remembering that if he perished in the perilous attempt he was about to make, the secret he had won would perish with him, he shouted to Mr. Howard:

"Dick Rodwell is shut up somewhere in that wharf!"

Then he plunged back into the burning house.

All that followed was ever afterwards but a lurid dream to Hector. He remembered mistily that fierce battle through the smoke and flame to the room above, and how he fought his way back, inch by inch, with the child clasped tightly to his breast to protect her face from the flying fragments of fire; the sweet coolness of the night wind when he reached the open air once more; the hoarse cheers of the crowd that had already gathered; Mr. Howard's deep and fervent "Thank God! thank God!"

Then all the rest was blankness.

It was on the evening of the third day following that terrible night when Hector returned to a sense of this world and its affairs.

He found himself—strangely weak, but not at all uncomfortable, except for a tremendous hunger—lying upon Mr. Howard's bed in the familiar room at Shadwell.

His sister Madge and Mr. Howard himself were seated at the bedside.

They silenced the eager string of questions he at once began, and would not permit him to talk; for although not seriously hurt, his tremendous exertions on that memorable night had left him extremely weak, and it would be some days yet before even his hardy frame regained its former strength and vigour.

But in response to his eager pleading, Mr. Howard told him all that had followed after that dramatic moment when he staggered out of the burning house with the rescued girl in his arms.

Tilly Rodwell, it seemed, was but little the worse for her grim experience, save for the effects of shock, from which she was rapidly recovering under the care of some friends of Mr. Howard's in the country.

But the remainder of the story had its dark and tragic side. Old Mr. Rodwell was dead, having probably died of heart failure even before the flames had reached him. He must have been dead, said Mr. Howard, even when Hector lifted him from the floor.

For good or ill, Caleb Pafton's career was also at an end.

The flames, driven by the night wind, had rapidly seized upon the tall building on the wharf, the upper part of which was largely constructed of tarred wood. Pafton and the man known as "Spider" were upon the top floor, and, seized with panic, attempted to rush down the wooden ladder. The Spider managed to reach the ground, and, as it was supposed, made his escape by the river, for he was not seen again.

But Caleb Pafton was less fortunate. The ladder, already partially burnt, broke under his weight. He fell, breaking his neck, and dying instantly.

Dick Rodwell was found, bound and gagged, in a cellar under the wharf, and was safely brought out only a few moments before the entire building fell in ruins. He returned to his regiment on the following morning, and was placed under arrest as a deserter. But his release soon followed when Mr. Howard, who accompanied him, explained the strange cause of his outstayed leave.

The worthy Mrs. Grynde must have thought it best to make herself scarce; for she vanished, and was not seen or heard of again.

The black tin box—now safe in Mr. Howard's possession—was found to contain a brief, but perfectly lucid, will, by which old Rodwell left the whole of his property and a considerable sum of money to his two grandchildren, Tilly and her brother, in equal parts.

Thus the baffling of Caleb Pafton's vile plot was, at least, one good result of Fighting Hector's strange quest.

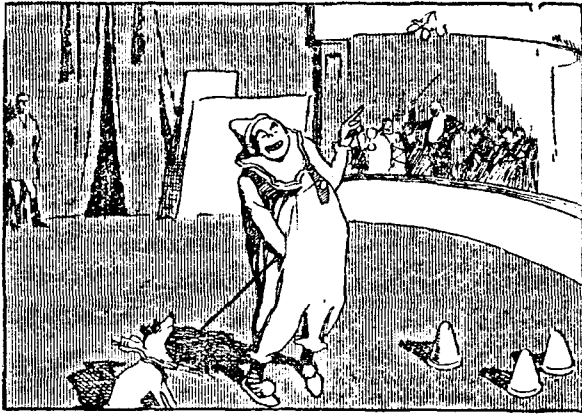
THE END.

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Complete in this issue.



CHAPTER 1.

Signor Tomsonio Is Pleased.

SIGNOR TOMSONIO, the genial proprietor of Tomsonio's World-famous Circus and Hippodrome, tapped Joey Pye on the shoulder, with a beaming smile. And Joey Pye, the wheeze-wangler and general mirth-merchant of Tomsonio's Circus, grinned at him with a grin that was equally beaming.

"Looks like business here, Joey!" said the signor.

"And Joey said:

"What-ho!"

The circus had pitched its tents—or, to be more exact, its tent and caravans—on the wide, heathy expanse of Rylcombe Common. Away in the distance, over the tree-tops, rose the grey old tower of a well-known public school—St. James's School, more familiarly known to the inmates thereof as St. Jim's. Night was falling upon Rylcombe and its wide common and deep woods, and the naphtha lamps of the circus were blazing, and the strains of a wheezy band were calling to the inhabitants of Rylcombe the announcement that Tomsonio's was open, and that all were welcome.

And it was not only the village lads of Rylcombe, and the labourers of the country-side who heard the wheezy strains and were attracted thereby.

Fellows in St. Jim's caps were crowding round the tent—and it was the sight of the school caps and the neat Eton jackets that called forth the signor's beaming smile and his genial remark.

It did indeed look like business!

Joey Pye, as was his custom, had posted himself outside the entrance to the great circus tent, and was waxing eloquent in a description of the wondrous entertainment provided within. A group of the schoolboys had gathered round, listening to his remarks, and grinning in good-humoured reply to his broad grins.

"Walk up, gentlemen!" said Mr. Pye, as the signor stepped back into the entrance, contentedly watching the stream of all sorts and conditions of visitors that poured in past the pay-box, clinking down silver and coppers with a continual clink that was very musical to the ears of the circus proprietor. "Walk up, gents! Extra special entertainment to-night, on account of being in the neighbourhood of the greatest of public schools of England!"

"What-ho!" said a sunny-faced, curly-haired lad of about fifteen. "Any extra charge for soft sawder?"

"Bai Jove!" said a particularly elegant-looking junior, whose silk hat had the most perfect shine that ever shone from a silk hat, and whose necktie was tied in a way that betrayed a master hand. "Bai Jove, Tom Mewwy, I wegard the gentleman as havin' given a weally accurate description of the old coll, you know!"

"Yes, rather, Gussy!" grinned another junior, whose cap was on the back of his head, and whose hands were in his trousers-pockets. "The gentleman is quite right!"

"I am quite sewious, Blake! I wegard St. Jim's as bein' weally at the top of the public schools of England! I dare say the gentleman has seen Eton, and Winchester, and Wugby, and knows what he is talkin' about, too!"

"I should say so, gents!" said Joey Pye, with a solemnity of visage that contrasted strangely with the paint upon his jolly face. "Being brought up at Rugby myself, I know!"

"Bai Jove! Were you brought up at Wugby, deah boy?" asked the elegant junior, with a great deal of interest.

Joey Pye nodded.

"I was, sir! I was brought up on a charge of havin'—ahem! I was brought up, I mean to say—ahem—"

THE . . . CIRCUS HERO.

A Grand, Long, Complete Tale of
Jack Talbot and Clotilde.

BY
HARRY DORRIAN.



"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But was discharged without a stain on my character," went on Joey Pye, grinning at the surprised look on the elegant junior's face. "I was brought up at Winchester, too—a misunderstanding about some fowls!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Therefore I can speak with authority!" said Joey Pye. "I have never been brought up here yet—"

"Funny beggar!" said Jack Blake. "I think we'll go in. This chap alone is worth the tanner!"

"Make it the bob seats, gents! Joey Pye is worth a bob at least! You can take his word for it—the word of Joseph Montgomery Pye!"

"Bai Jove! I don't quite undahstand that chap! Was he pullin' my leg, Blake?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Was he pullin' my leg, Tom Mewwy?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, you know—"

"Oh, come in!" said Blake, drawing his elegant chum into the circus entrance. "There that chap goes again! He must have a pair of iron-bound, automatic lungs!"

"Walk up, gentlemen!"

Bang, bang, bang! from the drum, and squeak, squeak, squeak from the fiddles, groan, groan, groan from the trombone.

"This way, gents! This way to Tomsonio's World-famous Circus and Hippodrome! This way to see Jungle Jack, the King of the Tigers! This way to see Clotilde, the Queen of the Ring! This way to see the Handsome Man, the world's most famous acrobat, who thinks more of himself than anybody else in the world! This way to see Samson, the Strong Man, break cocoanut ice with his teeth! Walk up, walk up!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Gentlemen representing the famous public schools of the country are especially welcome!" went on Joey Pye, as a fresh group of St. Jim's fellows came up. "Come and see the performance of Julius and Julia, the famous tigers—an education in itself! Come and see—"

"My hat! What a flow of gas!" exclaimed a somewhat disagreeable-looking junior. "What the dickens do you know about us, you monkey?"

Joey Pye looked at the youth with a gleam in his eye. The fellow's intention was to be insolent, and he evidently considered that a chap in an Eton jacket and a silk hat had a right to treat a circus clown as he pleased.

"Walk up, gentlemen, and others! All are welcome! when I say 'Walk up, gentlemen,' it's only a figure of speech, sir. You are welcome, too!"

The disagreeable-looking junior turned crimson, and there was a roar of laughter from the other fellows.

"Ha, ha, ha! He's got you there, Gore!"

"Go it, you funny merchant!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Low cad!" said Gore, who was generally known at his school as the cad of the Shell—the Form he belonged to.

"Low circus cad—"

"Walk up, gentlemen!"

"Look here, you low bounder—"

Joey Pye covered his face with his hands.

"Oh, no! You don't catch me looking at a chivvy filk that, sir! You ought to wear a mask, or a fire-screen, or something before you ask people to look at you!"

Gore scowled furiously, and there was a fresh yell of laughter from the St. Jim's fellows; but he could think of

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no immediate reply, and the crowd was pressing on from behind. He passed into the tent in a very bad humour indeed.

Joey Pye chuckled. He was generally able to take care of himself in a wordy warfare, and he had certainly had the best of it with Gore of the Shell.

A crowd of fellows in St. Jim's caps poured into the tent, and it was clear that the news of the circus had spread over the school, and that the boys had resolved to "do" Tomsonio's in force while it was in their vicinity.

It was past locking-up time at the school, but they had leave evidently, and there was a master in the crowd, who appeared to be in charge of them. He was a big, broad-shouldered fellow, with a good-humoured face. Joey Pye caught sight of him as he came up in the midst of a group of older boys—Fifth or Sixth Form fellows—and at once gave a fresh turn to his discourse.

"Walk up, gentlemen! The best show in the world! High-toned, as well as ripping—ripping, as well as high-toned! Innocent fun—funny, without being vulgar! A show to which any girl can bring her mother, without fear of the old lady being shocked—a show to which any boy can bring his school-master! Walk up!"

The big Form-master smiled, and gave Joey Pye a nod as he passed in. It was Mr. Railton, House-master of one Houses at St. Jim's. He had come, of course, to look after the boys, not at all to see the circus. The boys knew that; but in their own minds they added, "I don't think!"

Signor Tomsonio grinned with pleasure at the sight of the crowds pouring into the tent. The younger boys were leap-frogging over the backs of the seats, sliding and scrambling along in competition for the best rows. It had evidently been a good speculation of the signor's, this idea of pitching his tents near a big school.

The stout gentleman stood at the ring-entrance now, resplendent in his inimitable waistcoat and silk hat, with the inevitable cigar in his mouth. A handsome lad of fifteen stood near him, looking at the inpouring crowds with almost equal satisfaction. It was Jack Talbot, the Boy Tiger-tamior.

"Looks like business, Jacky!"

Jack nodded.

"It does, signor! It was a ripping idea, coming here!"

"It was my idea," said the signor modestly. "What Dick Thompson doesn't know about business would go into a very small space. Nice lads, too—I like their looks!"

"Yes, most of them."

Jack Talbot glanced at the schoolboys with a slightly wistful expression. He was happy in his present life—happy in his comradeship with Clotilde, happy in his success before the public—but he never quite forgot that he had had a chance of going to a public school with a scholarship—a chance that he had lost through no fault of his own. But for that stroke of ill-luck, he would have been a fellow now like one of these—thinking only of preparing for the battle of life in the future, instead of fighting that grim battle before he was fifteen!

And yet—

There was a tap on his arm, and he glanced round into the bright face of Clotilde. The young girl was smiling happily, and at that moment all Jack's regrets vanished. For Clotilde had been as a sister to him ever since he had joined the circus, and at that moment it was borne in upon Jack's mind that, if he went—even if he had gone to a palace—he would not have been happy unless Clotilde was there.

"We shall have a good audience to-night, Jack!"

"Looks like it, Clotilde," said Jack, with a smile. "Those fellows seem to enjoy the idea of coming to a circus!"

"It is more novel to them than to us!" said Clotilde, laughing.

"Yes, rather!"

"What—the tent's full?" said the signor. "What—there'll be crowds turned away; crowds jostling in vain for an entrance to Tomsonio's World-famous Circus and Hippo! What! Where's the duffer, Pye? Where's that wheezemonger? Where?"

A little form came along in a series of somersaults and suddenly straightened up just in front of the signor—so suddenly that Signor Tomsonio started back in alarm.

Joey Pye grinned into his startled face.

"Here I am, signor."

The signor gasped.

"You confounded ass!"

"Well, you asked for me!"

"Get into the ring, and work off some of your stale gags," said the signor. "I'll send the horses in by the time they're ready to massacre you."

But Joey Pye only grinned. That was the signor's playful way of putting it. He knew very well that Signor Tomsonio wouldn't have parted with him for untold gold.

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Many a long year had the two been on the road together, sharing ill-fortune as well as good, and the signor, when he was in a good temper, admitted that Tomsonio's wouldn't have been Tomsonio's without the original Joey Pye.

Joey tumbled into the ring with a yell that brought an answering yell of delight from the audience, and proceeded with his "gags." Stale enough some of them were, doubtless; but in the limelight the stalest of gags have a certain amount of novelty to an audience that does not go with the express intention of finding fault. And Joey Pye had an inimitable way with him, and the way he told a story would almost have moved an Egyptian mummy to laughter.

"Bai Jove," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, in the "bob" seats, screwing his eyeglass into his eye, and looking on at Joey with great interest. "I wegard that chap as bein' a vewy funny beggah, you know!"

"Well, you ought to know," assented Blake.

D'Arcy turned his eyeglass upon his chum.

"Weally, Blake, I do not wholly compwehend that we mark!"

"Never mind."

"I wefuse to nevah mind—I mean, I do mind. Pway explain. I am afwaid you intend that we mark to be impertinent. I should be sowwy to have to thwash you in such a public place, deah boy; but—"

"I mean that, as a funny merchant yourself, you ought to be a judge of funny merchants."

"I uttahly decline to be wegardad as a funnay merchant. I—"

"Dry up! Here come the bosses!"

"I wefuse to dwy up. I—"

Thud, thud, thud!

The heavy circus horses went thudding round the ring, and the show had begun. D'Arcy contented himself with giving Jack Blake a wrathful look, and turned his attention to the show.

CHAPTER 2.

The Tiger Tamers.

THE show provided by Tomsonio's World-Famous Circus was a very good one; remarkably so for the money.

It was possible that the signor exaggerated when he declared that the crowned heads of Europe had jostled one another for entrance to his circus. But the show was certainly doing good business.

"Give the B. P. a good thing, and they get to know it, and come again," the signor was fond of saying. And it could not be denied that the British Public came to his show in liberal numbers.

The entertainment was certainly about the best of its kind; and the kind, too, was good. Signor Tomsonio maintained that a circus was about the best show that could be given. He was prejudiced upon the point, perhaps. But the signor would say that, with the modern stage given up to problem plays, in which unhealthy people are made to explain unhealthy views of life in an hysterical manner, a circus was the only place where you could get healthy, wholesome entertainment.

And wasn't it better to see a clever chap perform a clever trick on a good, well-fed horse, than to see stage people doing and saying things which no one would ever dream of doing or saying in real life. Therefore the signor plumped for the circus.

And, indeed, the array of attractions on the circus bills was a long and an impressive one, and it was made as impressive, too, as big type and printer's red ink could make it.

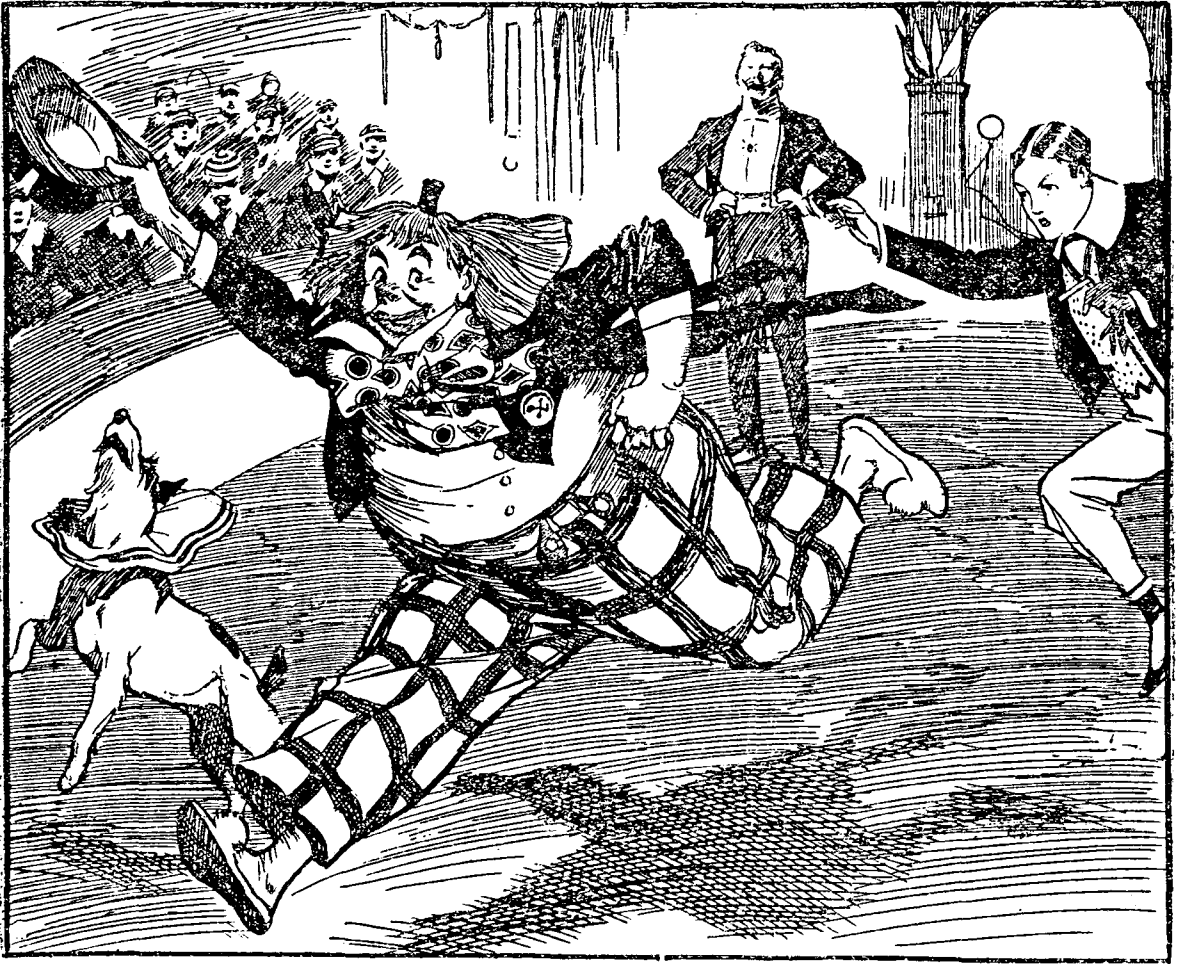
Signor Tomsonio cracked his whip with pride as he ambled into the ring. Whether he was needed there or not, he was always there, with his wonderful waistcoat, his splendid topper, and his whip. His jovial face was alone worth the charge for admission.

The fellows from St. Jim's cheered every item as it came on. They were there to enjoy themselves. From the seats behind Tom Merry, Blake, and D'Arcy came the loudest shouts of appreciation, and they were mingled with the barking of an irrepressible mongrel.

D'Arcy looked round once or twice in remonstrance.

Behind, a few rows back, were a group of Third Form fags, and among them was Wally, the younger brother of the elegant Arthur Augustus. Wally had a smudge of ink on his nose, his hair was untidy, and somebody else's cap—much too large for him—was on the back of his head. Wally evidently was not following in his major's footsteps in the matter of looking after his personal attire.

The minor met his brother's glance, but it did not seem to affect him much. He winked at Arthur Augustus whenever he caught his eye, a proceeding that brought the pink of indignation to the cheeks of the swell of the Fourth Form.



"Stop, you wottah!" gasped the swell boy from the audience. "Stop and give me my toppah!"

"Pway don't make so much wow, Wally!" called out D'Arcy at last.

"Oh, don't you begin, Gus!" said Wally, in a tone of patient remonstrance, as if he had spoken on the subject before.

"Weally, Wally——"

"Ring off, there's a good chap!"

"I wefuse to wing off. What have you bwrought that wotten mongwel here for, Wally? He's not allowed in the circus."

Wally chuckled.

"I brought Pongo in under my coat. Why shouldn't he come to a circus? You come."

"You young ass——"

"Hallo, here come the tigers! Shut up, Gus!"

The big tiger's cage was being wheeled into the arena.

Beside it, handsome in his tight-fitting attire, plentifully adorned with spangles, walked the boy tiger-tamer, Jack Talbot, known on the circus posters as Jungle Jack. Very handsome and fit the lad looked, and the St. Jim's fellows looked at him with great interest.

"Bai Jove, he only looks a kid!" remarked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"About our age, I suppose," Tom Merry observed. "I like the chap's looks. Is he really going into the tiger's cage?"

"Looks like it."

"He must have a nerve!"

"Oh, rats!" said Gore, who was in the next seats behind, joining in the talk. "Of course, the tigers aren't dangerous. If they were, he wouldn't go in."

"I suppose they're not dangerous to him, if he can handle them; but they look jolly dangerous," said Tom Merry.

"Rats! Of course, they're as tame as white rabbits!"

"Tigahs are nevah as tame as white wabbits, Goah."

"Rats!"

"If you say wats to me, Goah——"

"Order, Gussy! Don't spoil the show!"

"Sowwy, deah boy!"

The cage stopped in the middle of the arena. Julius, the big tiger, put his muzzle through the bars of the cage, as far as he could get it, and growled.

Tom Merry shivered a little.

"That sounded like business," he remarked.

"Oh, rot!" said Gore.

"Do shut up, Gore!"

Jack Talbot stepped to the door of the cage. He opened it, and strode in, quietly and calmly, with no sign of either nervousness or swagger about him. Herr Biberach followed him. The Herr closed the door of the cage with an unsteady hand. Signor Tomsonio noticed it, and murmured under his breath:

"He's been drinking again, the dummy!"

Jack Talbot noticed it, too, as soon as the German was in the cage with him. It was the one weakness of the big, good-natured German; but it was a terrible weakness for a man in his line of business. But it was not Jack's place to judge him. He had been kindness itself to the circus lad.

"Sit down, Herr," said Jack, pushing the big German towards a bench inside the cage, which had been placed there, as a matter of fact, in case it should be wanted for the Herr. Jack had more than once carried through a whole performance alone, with the Herr sitting on the bench and looking on with glassy eyes.

But Herr Biberach was not in a placable mood this evening.

"I nod sits down, ain't it?" he remarked.

"But——"

"I tinks I takes to pizness, ain't it? I am to tiger tamer."

"But, look here," whispered Jack, in fear lest the audience should detect that there was something amiss in the tiger's cage, "leave it to me?"

"Are you der master here?"

"No, of course not, Herr!"

"Don leave him to me."

"What are you going to do?"

"I tinks I teaches dem some new tricks."

Jack stared at him helplessly. To think of teaching the tigers new tricks when they were before the audience was just the freak that might enter an intoxicated man's brain. The Herr had forgotten where he was, and he had forgotten, too, that he had lost his hold on the tigers. They did not obey him as of old.

"Give me dat whip!"

"The—the whip?"

"Ja, mein poy. Am I te tiger tamer, or are you te tiger tamer?"

"You are; but—"

"Den give me tat whip."

Jack handed the Herr the whip, and exchanged a helpless glance with Signor Tomsonio, who had advanced close to the bars of the cage.

The signor whispered shrilly to the German:

"Bibby, Bibby!"

The tiger tamer turned a glassy eye upon him.

"Yat you talk?"

"Give Jack that whip!"

"Nein, nein, Mein Herr!"

"You ass," whispered the signor fiercely, "you've been drinking again! We've had trouble with the tigers in public too often lately. If there's trouble again, you'll never enter the cage any more, you savvy that?"

"I tinks I am te tiger tamer."

"Get out!"

"I nod gets out!"

"Leave the cage!"

"I nod leaves him!"

"You—you drunken idiot!"

"I tink I teaches dem some new dricks."

"Oh—oh, you unspeakable idiot!" gasped the signor. "Take the whip away from him, Jack, and bundle him out!"

"I nod bundles out, ain't it?"

Jack hesitated. It was not pleasant to lay hands on a kind master, and, besides, a tussle in the tiger's cage was the most dangerous thing possible. If the tigers should break from control—

"Herr Biby, give me the whip!"

Herr Biberach made the thong crack.

"I teaches dem some new dricks," he said, with the obstinacy of a drunken man. "Come up, dere, Julius! Allez, allez!"

And the lashing thong swept the side of Julius with a stinging cut, and there was a reverberating roar from the tiger. In a flash he was springing forward, and Herr Biberach went to the floor of the cage, with the tiger's open jaws gleaming within an inch of his face.

CHAPTER 3.

Jack Talbot's Pluck.

THERE was a shout among the audience.

The delay in the tiger's performance had given them a hint that something was wrong in the cage, and the fall of the German told them that it might be a tragedy.

Many of them were on their feet now, staring in terror towards the big cage, and there was a babel of voices. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy put his leg over the barrier to leap down into the arena, and Tom Merry dragged him back.

"Where on earth are you going, Gussy?"

"I feel I ought to be on the spot."

"You ass!"

"I refuse to be called an ass."

"Stay here!"

"I decline to stay here. What is required now is a fellow of tact and judgment, and—"

"You'll only get in the way."

The swell of St. Jim's paused.

"Do you weally think so, Tom Mewwy?"

"Of course!"

"Bai Jove, in that case I will wemain here! Bai Jove, look at that chap! There's pluck for you, deah boys!" gasped D'Arcy.

His eyes were fastened upon Jack Talbot.

Julius had levelled the dazed German on the floor, and was standing over him with gaping jaws. The lash, painful and undeserved, had roused the animal's rage, and over Julius, too, Herr Biberach had no authority now. The

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tiger's huge jaws were open, and the terrified eyes of the German stared wildly into them.

The terrible shock was enough to sober Herr Biberach.

"Jack, save me!" he cried.

And Jack Talbot did not hesitate. He sprang forward, and in a moment his arms were flung round the tiger's neck, and the huge head of Julius was dragged forcibly backwards.

Julius roared angrily. But the clasp round his neck did not relax, and Jack forced him back, his own face close to the tiger's, the hot steam of Julius's breath on his skin.

Signor Tomsonio gasped for breath. The audience were spellbound.

The amazing daring of the lad's action petrified them. It needed only a snap of Julius's huge jaws to close the career of Jungle Jack for ever. And Julius was excited and angry.

For a second it was even chances, and grim death looked Jack Talbot in the face.

But the peril passed. Julius roared again, and drew back. The terrible teeth did not meet in the throat of the boy tamer.

Jack did not falter, though his heart was throbbing. He pushed the tiger back and back, Julius yielding slowly and sullenly.

Herr Biberach gave a curious whimper on the floor, and fainted.

Jack released the tiger, and picked up the whip. At the gesture of command, Julius shrank away to the far end of the cage. He was quite under control again now.

Jack stepped backwards to the door, never taking his eyes off those of Julius, and opened it with his left hand.

"Quick!" breathed the signor.

Puggles, the tumbler, and Joey Pye darted in, and dragged the insensible German out of the cage, and Joey signed to Jack to follow.

The lad shook his head.

"Better come," whispered Joey anxiously. "The tiger turn can be cut."

Jack smiled.

"It's all right."

"But—"

"Don't worry, Joey. I'm all right, and I'm going through the performance."

And the clown gave it up.

The door was closed, and the Herr was taken away. Signor Tomsonio cleared his throat and turned to the audience.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am sorry that Herr Biberach has been overcome by—an attack of weakness, due—due to something he has been eating."

"Or drinking," called out a voice.

And a laugh followed. The signor welcomed the laugh; the tension was relaxed.

"He is not hurt," he went on, "and the usual performance will be gone through by the celebrated boy tiger tamer, Jungle Jack."

"Hear, hear!" shouted Blake.

And the audience cheered.

"Bai Jove," said D'Arcy, "the kid must have a nerve to go through the performance after what's just happened, deah boys!"

"Yes, rather."

All eyes were turned upon the tiger's cage.

Jack Talbot was a little dubious in his own mind as to how the tigers would act, after what had occurred; but he allowed no sign of irresolution to appear in his face.

He went through the tiger act quietly and calmly.

Julius was like a lamb. He knew his true master, and the great beast, too, was fond of Jack. Jack had a gift of making animals attached to him. Julius went through his performance with great credit. He jumped over ribbons and through hoops, and he ambled round the cage, carrying Jack in his mouth by his waist-belt.

Round after round of applause greeted the turn. It was not only the performance, though that was good; it was the fact that Jack was going through it just after the outbreak of the tiger.

When it concluded at last, the cheers were thunderous. Jack had to take his call three times before the audience would finally allow him to retire.

When he left the ring at last, he found Herr Biberach outside the tent, looking very white and shaken. The signor had been speaking to him, and Signor Tomsonio could speak very much to the point when his temper was roused.

"Ach! I am sorry, Shack!" said Biberach, laying his fat hand on the boy's arm. Jack looked at him with a cheerful smile.

"It's all right, Herr."

"Nein, it is nod all right, pefore. Vat you talk? I puts your life in danger mit to tigers, ain't it?"

"It's turned out all right."

"You might have been keel."

"Never mind. You've been awfully decent to me, Herr," said Jack earnestly. "I wish you'd be a little more careful on future occasions, for your own sake, that's all."

The Herr shook his head dolefully.

"Dere will be no future occasions, Shack."

"How's that?"

"The signor say so."

"Oh! What does he say?"

"He say tat I nefer allow to enter to tiger's cage in public again," said Herr Biberach dismally. "He mean it, pefore. He have vat you call to pack up."

Herr Biberach meant that the signor had his back up. Jack was not surprised at it, and he could not help feeling that the signor was right. At the same time, he was sorry for the Herr.

"He is right, too," went on Bibby. "I am not safe mit te tigers, Shack. I was a fool. I tink I was vun pig fool."

"If you would be more careful—"

The German shook his head.

"It is too late. But I tink to signor is right, and I not kick. I nefer go into te tiger's cage again in te ring."

"Perhaps you are wise."

"You vas te tiger tamer now, Shack. But you not forget te old Sherman who taught you apout te pizness."

"You are always first, and I second, as far as the tigers are concerned," said Jack quietly. "I'm not likely to take the bread out of the mouth of a man who has stood by me. You take the signor's salary, and you pay me as your assistant, however much of the show I may take. That's settled."

The Herr pressed his hand.

CHAPTER 4. The Queen of the Ring.

MEANWHILE, the circus was proceeding, amid much enthusiasm from the audience, especially that part composed of the boys of St. Jim's. The acrobatic turn of Jim Carson, the Handsome Man, was received with great applause, and the acrobat was gratified with getting as many calls as Jack Talbot. After the Handsome Man had retired, Puggles, the tumbler and juggler, had his innings; and then came the turn of Clotilde, the Queen of the Ring.

Jack Talbot stood in the ring entrance as the girl rode in, and she gave him a smile in passing. The big black Arab horse rubbed his muzzle against Jack's arm.

"Good luck, Clotilde!"

And the girl nodded and smiled.

She cantered into the arena, and all eyes were turned to the fair face and the graceful form, in its dress of flowing white, gathered in a sash, which made Clotilde look even younger than she really was, and bore out the statements of the circus posters about the Child Equestrienne.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "What a wippin' gal, you know! How well she wides!"

D'Arcy had a keen eye for good horsemanship. The juniors of St. Jim's watched Clotilde with great interest.

"Older than she looks, I'll bet," said Gore, with a sneer.

"They all are. That's paint on her face, too."

D'Arcy turned his eyeglass upon Gore.

"I wegard that as a cad's wemark, Goah."

"Oh, you shut up!"

"I wufese to shut up. You are a beastly wottah."

"Rats! I don't suppose she's much class, either," went on Gore, for the amiable purpose of irritating the elegant junior. "I expect she goes about in rags when she's not before the people."

"You have no right to expect anything of the kind."

"And drinks, too," said Gore, with a wink at his chum Mellish, as great a cad as himself. "Drinks like a fish, I expect."

"Yes, rather," said Mellish.

"You wottahs!"

"Don't talk to them, Gussy," said Tom Merry. "They're not worth it. They're a pair of rotten cads, anyway."

"Look here, Tom Merry—" began Mellish.

"Oh, shut up, or I'll lick you when we get outside the circus."

And Mellish thought he had better "shut up."

The girl was riding round the ring, quite unconscious of the remarks of the St. Jim's juniors.

Clotilde was a perfect rider. She could do almost anything with horses, and it was not surprising that the audience watched her spellbound.

She rose to her feet upon the bare back of the Arab, urging him to full speed; and then two other horses were turned into the ring, and they galloped round upon either side of the big black horse.

Then the girl passed from one back to another with the graceful lightness of a fairy, the three horses speeding round at a gallop, and without the aid of a saddle or a bridle. She passed over and through the barmers held for her by Signor Tomsonio and the mirth merchant, Joey Pye, amid loud applause.

D'Arcy did not seem to be able to take his eyeglass off her.

"Bai Jove!" he said, a dozen times. "How she wides!"

"Ripping!" said Tom Merry.

"I am sure she is an awfully nice gal," said Arthur Augustus. "I think she is almost as nice as my cousin Ethel. Her face is not painted. I looked at it particularly when she passed close."

"Of course it isn't."

"Rats!" said Gore.

"And she is certainly not more than fifteen years old," said D'Arcy, with a withering look at the cad of St. Jim's.

"She is a wippin' gal."

"Bosh!"

"Weally, Goah—"

"Jolly good idea to ask her out, after the circus," said Mellish in a whisper to Gore, but loud enough to reach D'Arcy's ears. "You can ask a girl of that sort, you know."

"Good!" said Gore. "We could have some supper at Cook's pastry shop, eh? The fellows will be in at all times to-night, and we sha'n't be noticed, staying out."

"Right-ho!"

D'Arcy was turning round to make a remark, but Jack Blake pulled him down into his seat again.

"Don't be an ass, Gussy," he whispered. "They're only trying to draw you."

"If they're thinkin' of insultin' that nice gal, I—"

"It's only gas."

"They deserve a thwashin' for speakin' like that, anyway."

"You can't make a row here."

"No, wathah not, I suppose."

And D'Arcy sat down and restrained his wrath.

Clotilde finished her act amid thunders of applause.

D'Arcy was wearing a big rose in his coat, and as the girl halted—almost opposite his seat, as it happened—and bowed to the applause, he detached it and threw it into the ring.

It fell close before the big Arab, into the sawdust.

In a moment Joey Pye picked it up and passed it to Clotilde, who took it in her hand with a smile, and a nod of the head towards the boy who had thrown it.

Then she cantered out of the ring, the rose still in her hand.

"Bai Jove!" said D'Arcy, much gratified. "How jollay wippin' of her to keep the wose, deah boys."

"What I say about that is—" began Gore.

D'Arcy turned on him.

"Don't say a word, Goah."

"I—"

"Shut up!"

"I—"

"If you say a word, Goah, I will dwag you fwom your seat and thwash you," said the swell of St. Jim's. "Not a word, mind."

And D'Arcy looked so dangerous at that moment that Gore forced a laugh, and relapsed into silence, letting the subject drop.

"Hurrah!" roared Blake, waving his cap. "Hurrah!"

"Bravo!"

Clotilde waved her hand, with the rose in it, to the audience, as she rode from the ring. The audience were still cheering.

Blake threw up his cap in his enthusiasm, and it fell upon the head of an old gentleman a dozen seats away, and it caused that old gentleman to make remarks about boys which were decidedly unflattering to boykind.

Blake needed something to wave, and as his cap was gone, he jerked off Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's silk hat, and waved that.

D'Arcy started up wrathfully.

"Bai Jove! Give me ny hat!"

Blake was waving it round his head.

"Hurrah!"

"You uttah ass! You'll spoil the nap—you'll bwreak the bwim!"

"Hurrah!"

"Give me ny toppah, you uttah duffah!"

"Hurrah!"

Blake waved the topper with so much energy that it flew from his hand, and alighted in the sawdust of the arena. D'Arcy gave a yell.

"You feahful ass!"

"Sorry. You see—"

"I wegard you as an idiot. Pway give me ny hat, deah boy."

D'Arcy leaned over the barrier, and gesticulated to Joey Pye, who had picked up the topper. Joey Pye turned it over and over in his hands, examining it carefully, and the audience, in anticipation of a joke, watched him with growing grins.

"Pway hand me my toppah."

"Is this your hat, sir?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I congratulate you, sir. The real thing—Lincoln and Bennet, and the very latest curl to the brim," said Mr. Pye.

"Yaas, wathah, deah boy! Pway hand it ovah."

Mr. Pye approached the barrier.

"Certainly, sir. I think we have met before—you are the young gentleman who was interested in my scholastic career, I think."

"I saw you at the door, gassin', if that is what you mean."

"Yes, that is what I mean," said Mr. Pye blandly.

"Pray allow me to place the hat on your head, my dear sir."

"Weally, deah boy, I am quite able to do that myself."

"But it would be an honour to me."

"Yaas, I suppose it would," assented the swell of St. Jim's innocently. "You may put it on my head if you like, you duffah!"

"Pray lean forward, then."

"There!"

D'Arcy leaned forward, lowering his head for Mr. Pye to reach it with the hat. Joey came up to him, with the topper in his hands. At the last moment, with a quick movement, he removed the paper fool's cap from his own head, and placed it upon D'Arcy's—and donned the silk topper himself and strolled away.

D'Arcy raised his head again, for the moment unaware of the trick that had been played him. There was a yell of merriment on all sides.

CHAPTER 5.

An Unrehearsed Turn.

"H A, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What's the joke, deah boys?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The aspect of D'Arcy, in Etons and high collar, fancy waistcoat and gold chain and lavender gloves, with the fool's cap stuck on his head, was utterly ludicrous.

The contrast between the paper cap and the rest of his attire was so strikingly incongruous.

The swell of St. Jim's could not see his own head, of course, and he hadn't the faintest idea what was the matter.

He gazed round him in astonishment, and his expression of wonder caused louder shouts of merriment to burst forth.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Ho, ho, ho!"

"Tom Mewwy—"

Tom Merry was leaning back in his seat, shrieking helplessly. Blake was almost doubled up. From behind, Wally was roaring as if for a wager.

All the audience who could see D'Arcy were convulsed, and the rest were rising to the feet and craning their necks to see what was going on.

D'Arcy gazed about him, and caught sight of the clown in the ring grinning under the silk hat.

Then the truth burst upon him in a flash.

His hand groped upwards, and he jerked off the paper hat, and stared at it with an expression that brought fresh yells from the people round him.

"Bai Jove!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The impertinent wascal!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

D'Arcy turned his eyeglass upon the grinning Joey.

"You uttah wascal! Give me my hat!"

"Ho, ho, ho!" roared Joey Pye. "If this isn't the funniest wheeze for a dog's age! Ho, ho, ho!"

"You howwid wottah!"

D'Arcy jumped over the barrier and rushed upon the clown to recover his silk hat. Joey Pye watched him coming; but when the junior's outstretched hand was within a foot of him, he suddenly scuttled off.

D'Arcy rushed in pursuit.

Signor Tomsonio collapsed against a tent-pole, gasping with laughter. He was not likely to stop the wheeze, which was throwing the audience into convulsions. It was an unexpected "turn," but it was "going" better than any

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NEXT

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of the regular business. None of Joey Pye's regular and stock jokes had ever made the people yell like this.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Tom Merry. "Gussy will be the death of me!"

"He ought to join a circus, you know," said Blake, almost weeping.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Go it, Gus!" roared Wally, standing upon his seat, with his shaggy dog under one arm, and waving the other frantically. "Go it! Put her through!"

"Hurrah!"

"Two to one on Gussy!"

Even Mr. Railton was laughing heartily. Arthur Augustus was in deadly earnest. He meant to recover his topper.

Joey was leading him a dance round the ring.

Every now and then he allowed the swell of St. Jim's to almost overtake him, but he always wriggled away from the outstretched hand like an eel, always in time.

Right round the ring they went, Joey in flight, and the swell of St. Jim's in hot pursuit. The audience almost wept with laughter.

"Stop you wottah!" gasped D'Arcy. "Stop!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Give me my toppah!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I will give you a feahful thwashin'."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The swell of St. Jim's put on a big spurt. He ran the clown up against the barrier, and it seemed to him that he had Joey Pye then.

"You uttah ass, give me my hat!"

Joey watched him coming, and then suddenly turned a double somersault, sailing fairly over D'Arcy's head, and alighting beyond him.

D'Arcy jumped.

He gazed round for the clown, wondering what had become of him. The people shrieked.

"Bai Jove! Where is that wottah?"

"Your hat, sir," said Joey Pye, who thought he had taken the wheeze far enough.

D'Arcy swung round.

There was Joey Pye, presenting him the topper, kneeling on one knee in an attitude of great humility, as if addressing a sovereign lord.

"Your topper, sir."

D'Arcy took the hat.

"I wegard you as a wottah," he exclaimed. "Pway get up and put up your fists! I am goin' to give you a feahful thwashin'."

"Eh?"

"I am goin' to thwash you."

"What?"

"Thwash you!" roared D'Arcy, pushing back his cuffs. "Get up!"

Joey Pye rolled in the sawdust in an ecstasy of terror.

"Help! Help!" he roared. "Police! Territorials! Army! Navy! Help!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Get up, you boundah!"

"Help!"

"I am not goin' to hurt you vewy much. But it would not be consistent with my dig to let you off without a thwashin'."

"Help! Fire! Slaughter! Burglars! Germans! Help!"

"You uttah ass!"

"Rescue! Fire! Invasion! Help!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Pway don't make that wow, you ass! I will let you off the thwashin'."

Joey Pye wriggled upon his knees, and seized D'Arcy's hand, and bedewed it with grateful tears.

"Thanks, my lord," he said brokenly. "If you had slain me—"

"I was not goin'—"

"If you had slain me, my wives and families would have been left widows and orphans," said Mr. Pye, weeping.

"It isn't a thing that orphan happens."

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the audience.

"Get up, you uttah ass!"

"I must weep my gratitude. If I have tears, I must prepare to shed them now. If my wives had been widowed, and my families—"

"I wegard you as a wottah," said D'Arcy; and he jerked his hand away, and walked back to his seat. His chums received him almost in hysterics, and the whole tent roared and roared over the unrehearsed turn till they could laugh no more.

CHAPTER 6.

'An Invitation for Clotilde.

"I RATHER wish the girl would come in again," Gore remarked, as the circus drew towards its finish. "I wanted to see her."

"So did I," said Mellish.

"I rather thought that she looked at me."

"So she did," said Mellish, who did not particularly want to flatter Gore's conceit, but who wanted very much to irritate D'Arcy. And he knew that Arthur Augustus could hear every word. From behind, Mellish could not see D'Arcy's face, but he could see that the tips of his ears were growing pinker and pinker.

"Do you think so, Mellish?"

"Yes, rather."

"When she picked up that rose——"

"She thought you threw it, you know."

"Very likely."

"And she gave you a sweet, chocolate-creamy, ask-me-out-to-supper look," said Mellish.

"By Jove, I believe she did."

Arthur Augustus turned round.

"You wotten cads!" he said.

"Hallo, ass!"

"I wêfuse to be called an ass——"

"Dummy, then."

"Blake, leave go my arm. I am goin' to thwash these wottahs."

"You can't make a row here," said Blake. "Lick them when we get back to St. Jim's, and I'll lend you a hand."

"That's the idea," said Tom Merry, with a scornful glance at the cads of the school. "They want a hiding badly."

"Pewwaps it would be bettah to leave it till we are in pwivate."

"Of course. Take no notice of them."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Gore grinned at his chum.

"Here, it's about time we went out," he said. "I must see about ordering supper, you know, if we're going to ask Clotilde. What a stunning name!"

"Ripping!"

"And a stunning girl!"

"Oh, yes! We shall get on as merrily as anything."

"Come on, then!"

The two juniors made their way out of the circus. There was a tumbling turn in progress, and in getting out before the close, they disturbed a good many people, but Gore and Mellish were not the kind of fellows to care for anything of that sort. As a matter of fact, they extracted a certain amount of amusement from troading on the feet of old gentlemen, and bumping against the back hair of old ladies.

Arthur Augustus turned his head to look after them as they went. Then he looked rather anxiously at his companions.

"I say, deah boys——"

"Here, shut up, and let's see this chap," said Blake. "We paid to come in, you know, and we want to see the entertainment. We can hear you talk gratis when we get back."

"Weally, Blake——"

"Dry up."

"Gore and Mellish have just gone out."

"Let 'em go!"

"They were talking about insultin' the young lady widah."

"It's only gas."

"You don't think I had bettah go aftah them and thwash them?"

"No, ass. Stay where you are."

And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy stayed where he was. Blake was used to caddish talk from Gore, and he did not attach much importance to it. But, as a matter of fact, the cads of St. Jim's were in earnest.

As Mr. Railton had consented to go to the circus in charge of the boys, they had permission to stay to the finish, and most of them were doing so. While the remainder of the performance took place, Gore and Mellish were free to do as they liked.

They left the tent, and made their way round it to the camp of the circus caravans and waggons, and ventured as near as they could to the ring exit.

Mellish was beginning to feel a little nervous, but Gore was quite in earnest. Mellish knew perfectly well that Clotilde had not even noticed their existence, and he was quite keen enough to see that the girl rider was not the kind of girl to be asked out to supper by a stranger. Gore did not care about it. It had never occurred to him to be courteous to anyone whom it was in his power to treat with insolence.

"I say, old chap," said Mellish uneasily, "it was a rag, I know, getting D'Arcy's back up. But it's no good going on."

"Rot!" said Gore.

"We sha'n't be able to see the girl——"

"I'm going to."

"She would be insulted——"

"Rats!"

"Well, do you mind if I cut off? I'm—I'm rather sleepy, and I—I'd like to get to bed. It's past our usual bed-time, you know."

Gore turned on his companion, and took him by the collar, and shook him till his teeth rattled.

"Ow!" gasped Mellish. "Chuck it! Ow! Don't be a beast!"

"There! Take that!"

"Ow!"

"And if you say another word about going, I'll knock your cowardly head off."

"Ow! Groo!"

"I'm going to see the girl, and you're going to back me up. See?"

"I—I was only joking, of course. I shouldn't think of deserting you, Gore."

"You'd better not think of it, that's all."

Mellish put his collar straight, his eyes burning. Gore led the way on, and they came into a patch of light from the great tent. A shadow crossed their path.

The Handsome Man—the acrobat they had seen in the ring—stood in their way, looking at them with his black, scintillating eyes.

"What do you want here?" he asked.

Gore started.

"I—I—we—that is——"

Carson laughed lightly.

"Go on!"

"We—we came to see one of the performers," stammered Gore. "We—we wanted to speak to that chap with the tigers. I forget his name."

"Jungle Jack?" said the Handsome Man unpleasantly.

"Yes, that's it!"

"Are you a friend of his?"

"Oh, no! I'm not likely to be the friend of a circus boy," said Gore. "I—I mean," he went on, stammering, remembering that he was speaking to a circus performer—"I—I mean to say——"

"You'll find the boy in that tent," said the Handsome Man.

He was very near pitching Gore neck and crop out of the camp, but he refrained. The boy was rude and insolent, but business was business. Throwing him out might have a bad effect upon the business done during the next few days, and that would not be pleasing to the signor.

And the Handsome Man, shrugging his shoulders, strolled away. Gore breathed with relief. He had no wish, of course, to see Talbot; he had lied to the Handsome Man. He was careful to avoid the tent in which Carson had told him that he would find the young tiger-tamer.

"Get this way, Mellish."

"All right," said Mellish sullenly.

"I wish we could find somebody who would take us in," grunted Gore. "I don't like the look of that chap we've just spoken to. One of the hands might take us to the girl, if we tipped him."

"Very likely."

"Hold on! Hush! Look here!"

Clotilde came out of the supper tent, and crossed towards her caravan. The cads of the school saw her clearly, and they crouched into the shadow of a van.

She was coming almost directly towards them, and if she were not alarmed, Gore would only have to step out to speak to her.

"Quiet!" muttered Gore.

"Right you are!"

Clotilde, unsuspecting of the presence of the two juniors, came straight on. Gore suddenly stepped out into view.

The girl, startled by his sudden appearance, gave a little cry, and stopped.

Gore raised his cap.

"Miss Clotilde——"

The girl recovered herself in a moment. Her calm eyes dwelt upon the face of the cad of St. Jim's.

"Who are you?" she said. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to speak to you," said Gore, without replying to her first question.

"Well, what is it?"

"I saw you in the circus this evening," said Gore, as agreeably as he could, but he could not banish the patronising tone from his voice. "I liked your performance very much."

"Thank you."

There was no mistaking the coldness of the girl's tone, PLUCK.—255.

and Gore flushed. There was a slight grin upon Mellish's face. He was not sorry for the discomfiture of his companion.

"I thought it was ripping," said Gore uncomfortably.

"Thank you. I must go."

"Wait a minute. I want to speak to you. I thought you noticed me in the tent. I rather thought you looked at me—that you smiled at me."

"You were quite mistaken," said Clotilde quietly.

"I threw you a kiss," said Gore.

Clotilde coloured.

"Will you kindly go?" she asked.

Gore scowled. There was no mistaking that rebuff, and it roused all the evil in the cad's heart.

"Oh, come, not so much of that nonsense!" he said. "I suppose a chap can speak to a circus girl without being treated to grand dame airs?"

"I should think so!" chuckled Mellish.

Clotilde looked at them steadily.

"You are intruding here," she said, with a quiet dignity that should have made Gore ashamed of himself, but which was far from having that effect upon the bully of the Shell. "You are blocking my path. Will you please go?"

Gore snapped his teeth.

"No. I won't, unless I choose."

Clotilde drew a quick breath. Jack Talbot was in the tent she had left, and she knew that she had only to call to him.

Jack would have been on the scene in about two seconds; and then it would have fared very hard with the cad of St. Jim's.

But it was for that very reason that Clotilde did not wish to call him. She shrank from the idea of violence; and she did not wish the visitors to be hurt, rude and insolent as they were to her.

Her silence was mistaken by Gore.

"Come, come!" he said, with a more agreeable look. "I know how much this sort of talk is worth, you know."

"I don't understand you."

"I want you to come to supper," said Gore, who thought that he was doing an extremely doggish thing in asking a circus-girl out to supper. "It will be a decent spread; and I want you to come. I do, really!"

"You are very kind."

"You'll come?"

"Certainly not!"

"But—"

"You have no right to ask me. You are insulting."

Gore laughed disagreeably.

"I suppose you are very seldom asked out to supper by a fellow of my class?" he said, with a sneer.

"You are right."

And Mellish giggled again. The meaning in Clotilde's reply was not to be mistaken.

Gore felt that somehow he was getting the worst of it, and his anger rose.

"Look here—"

"Will you let me pass?"

"No. I—"

"Very well!"

Clotilde turned quickly, and walked back the way she had come. She moved so swiftly that she was gone almost before the cad of St. Jim's could make a movement. She disappeared into the supper-tent; and Gore, with a muttered exclamation of rage, sprang after her.

Mellish dragged him back.

"Don't be a fool!" he muttered. "You—"

"Let me go!"

"You remember that Tiger Tamer chap is in there?"

"By Jove, yes!"

And Gore paused. He did not want to run against Jack Talbot at that moment.

Mellish pulled him by the sleeve.

"Let's cut, Gore."

"Shut up!"

"We're finished here."

"I'm not! Hang you, you can go if you like!"

Mellish did not wait to be told twice. He scuttled off into the darkness and joined the crowd that was now pouring out of the tent, the performance being over.

Gore did not stir.

CHAPTER 7.

After the Performance.

SIGNOR TOMSONIO pushed his silk hat further back upon his head, and smiled a beaming smile at Joey Pye. The crowd was pouring out of the great tent by several exits, and the great rows of seats were assuming a deserted appearance. The circus hands were already extinguishing the lights. But the signor's fat face was very satisfied. It had been a most successful evening, and a good augury for the rest of his stay in the neighbourhood of Rylcombe.

"Good business!" he said to Joey Pye. "We shall put in a week here, and draw a full house all the time."

And Joey Pye grinned and nodded.

"It shows what an education will do for a fellow!" he remarked.

The signor stared.

"How do you mean?"

"The keen appreciation of good and original humour shown by public schoolboys," said the clown seriously. "Didn't you notice how they simply swarmed in? Didn't you observe the hands I got?"

"Blessed if I did!" said the signor. "It was their manners, my boy—they put up with you all right—they've been taught politeness."

"Now, look here, signor," said Mr. Pye warmly. "I—"

"Lights going out, Joey. Come and have supper."

"Never shall it be said that the original Joey Pye refused such an invitation," said Mr. Pye, as he followed the signor to the supper-tent.

The big circus-tent was plunged in darkness.

Outside, the crowd dispersed slowly, crowds of villagers making their way into Rylcombe; some who had come farther taking the footpath through the wood to Wayland.

Mr. Railton marshalled his boys to march back to St. Jim's; but it was not easy for the house-master to collect stragglers.

He did not know how many boys had come with him, as a matter of fact. Whether all had joined the homeward procession was not to be known till calling-over in the houses at St. Jim's.

And, in fact, there were several stragglers. Gore was one—and the cause of the others.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's, had turned his eyeglass inquiringly upon the boys as they turned into the lane, and he had missed Gore from the ranks.

Mellish was there; and D'Arcy walked over to him to speak.

The cad of the Fourth showed a strong inclination to avoid the interview; but D'Arcy was not to be denied.

"Pway don't wun away, Mellish," he said quietly. "I want to speak to you."

"Crewe was calling me—"

"Let him call! Where is Goah?"

"Gore?"

"Yes, Goah! I pwesume you know the name?" said D'Arcy, with heavy sarcasm.

"How should I know where he is?"

"You left the circus with him."

"Yes; but we parted since then."

"Where did you part?"

"Oh, near the tent!"

And Mellish turned to walk off.

D'Arcy stretched out his hand, and fastened two neatly-gloved fingers and a thumb upon Mellish's ear.

"Ow! Leggo!"

"Pway weinain here, then, till I have finished speakin' to you."

"Ow! All right!"

"Where did you leave Goah?"

"I've told you!" said Mellish sullenly, rubbing his ear.

"Now, pway pay attention to me, Mellish. Fwom the wemarks I heard you and the othah cad makin' to one another, I had a suspish that you meant to insult a young lady belongin' to the circus."

"Oh, rats!"

"If you say 'wats' to me, Mellish, I shall give you a feahful thwashin'!"

"Well, lemme alone, then!"

"I wegard it as extremely pwob that Goah is now hangin' wound the place in the hope of seein' that young lady, and speakin' to her," said Arthur Augustus. "In that case, as a decent chap, I am bound to uphold the honah of the school by thwashin' Goah."

"Well, go and look for him!"

"Where is he?"

"I don't know."

ANSWERS

ONE PENNY.

Every Tuesday.

PLUCK.—255.

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"I am afwaid I cannot take your word, Mellish. It is a nowwid thing to doubt anybody's word, I know; but I have known you to tell an untwuth. If you would tell an untwuth once, you would tell anothah untwuth. I cannot, therefore, tweek you as a gentleman."

"Look here—"

"I am pwetty certain that you know where Goah is. Pway acquaint me with his whereabouts, and do not make it necessawy for me to thwash you."

Mellish snapped his teeth. He was bigger than D'Arcy; but he would as soon have fought with a bull as with the swell of St. Jim's. D'Arcy might be soft in some things, but he was remarkably hard in others; and he was a well-known hard bitter when his temper was aroused.

"He was round behind the big tent," said Mellish sullenly.

"Ah! I thought so!"

"Lemme go! The fellows are going off!"

"He went there to speak to the young lady?"

"Yes!"

"Has he spoken to her?"

"Yes!"

"What did he say?"

"He asked her out to supper."

"The cheeky wottah! And she—"

"She pretended to be in a temper, and walked away."

D'Arcy gave him a scornful glance.

"How do you know she pwetended, you mean wottah? Doesn't it occur to you that she was pwobably weally annoyed at familiawity fwom a diswespectful boundah?"

"Oh, rats!"

"I am afwaid it's no use speakin' to you, Mellish. A chap like you ought to be squashed undah a steam-wollah—that's the only way to cure you of bein' a cad!"

"Have you done?" growled Mellish.

"Goah is wemainin' there now?"

"Yes, over there among the caravans."

"What for?"

"To speak to the girl again, I suppose. She's got his back up."

"Oh, I see!"

"Well, I'm going!"

"Go, then, you wottah!"

And Mellish went.

Two forms loomed up in the gloom, and two pairs of hands grasped Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

Tom Merry of the Shell, and Blake of the Fourth Form had come to look for him.

"Here he is!" exclaimed Blake, administering a shake to the swell of St. Jim's. "Here the bounder is!"

"Bump him!" suggested Tom Merry.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Bump him!"

"I wefuse to be bumped!"

"What have you been keeping us waiting for?" demanded Blake. "We've been looking for you up and down, and round about!"

"I have been extwactin' information fwom Mellish."

"What about?"

"Goah!"

"What has Gore been doing?"

"He has been pwessin' his wotten familiah attentions upon Miss Clotilde of the circus, and he is hangin' wound the cawavans to see her again."

Blake's brow darkened, and so did Tom Merry's.

"The bound!" said Tom Merry.

"The cad!"

"I'm goin' to look aftah him, deah boys. Will you come?"

"What-ho!"

"For the honah of St. Jim's, we must show these circus chaps that we know how to tweek a lady, in any wank of life, with pwopah respect."

"Yes, rather!"

"We will get Goah away without a wow if poss, to keep up appeawances, you know, but in any case we will get him away; and then we will wag him for his wotten conduct."

"Good egg!"

"Come on, then, deah boys."

And Arthur Augustus led the way to the circus camp, while the rest of St. Jim's fellows marched off towards the school with the House-master. As they approached the caravans, the sound of a disturbance fell upon their ears.

CHAPTER 8.

Caged.

"HERE, you clown chap!"

Joey Pye gave quite a jump. He had been to his van, which he shared with Samson the Strong Man and "Jungle Jack," and was returning towards the tent where the signor was at supper, when a form stepped out of the shadow of a caravan and accosted him.

Now, Joey Pye certainly was a clown, though he preferred to style himself a mirth-merchant; but he did not care to be addressed as a "clown chap," and there was a tone, too, in the speaker's voice that put the mirth-merchant's back up at once.

But Joey Pye turned to him very politely. Joey Pye was always most polite when he was most dangerous.

"Yes, sir? Did you speak, sir?"

Gore came into the light.

"Yes. Wait a tick!"

"Certainly, sir."

Mr. Pye recognised Gore now. Twice before he had noted him during the evening. He wondered what the junior wanted there.

"You're the clown, ain't you?" said Gore. "Look here, do you want to earn half-a-crown?"

Joey Pye's eyes glittered.

"Oh, yes, sir!" he said, in a honeyed tone. "I would do a great deal for half-a-crown!"

"Well, I'll stand that, if you'll do me a favour."

"Pray go on, my lord! You are a lord, aren't you?"

"No," said Gore.

"Dear me! I should have taken you for a lord. My mistake."

Gore looked at him rather uncertainly.

"I want to speak to Miss Clotilde," he said.

"Oh!"

"I've asked her to come out to supper with me."

"You—you've asked her?"

"Yes, and she won't come."

"Oh!"

"Of course, it's all rot! She'd like to come, but this is the usual bunbug," said Gore, who prided himself upon knowing a great deal about girls. "I shall look after her all right. If you could get me a chance to speak to her, I could fix it. Can you manage it?"

"For half-a-crown?" said Joey Pye reflectively.

"Yes."

"Come this way!"

Gore followed him eagerly. Joey Pye had not said that he would do it, but Gore did not doubt for a moment that the clown wanted to earn the half-crown.

Gore followed him past the lighted tent. Jack Talbot was standing at the entrance waiting for Pye, and he glanced at them both curiously.

Joey led the way onward, into the gloom of the encampment, and entered a dark tent. Gore followed him in.

"Is she here?" he whispered, in wonder.

"This way, sir!"

Gore passed on. In the pitchy darkness of the interior of the tent Gore stumbled against the clown, and received a push. He fell with a startled exclamation, and the next moment he heard a click.

He sprang up in vague alarm.

"What's that? Where are you?"

Joey Pye's chuckle came back from a distance.

He was leaving the tent. Gore dashed in the direction of the chuckle, and reeled back with a cry, as he collided with the iron bars.

A wild terror shook him, like a leaf in the wind. He clung to the bars, shook them, and shouted.

Where was he?

That the clown had been fooling him he knew now, of course. But where was he? In a cage—locked up within iron bars.

A wild beast's cage?

There was a smell of animals round him, and Gore quivered with horrible fear. He remembered the tigers.

He left off shaking the iron bars, and looked round him, with dilated, terrified eyes.

He expected every second to hear a movement near him, to see green eyes glimmering in the gloom.

But there was no sound—no movement.

He reassured himself at last, and as his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, he found that he could see a little, dimly and uncertainly.

The cage was empty, save for himself.

But he was a helpless prisoner.

The door of the cage, formed of iron bars like the rest, was locked on the outside with a padlock, from which the key had been taken.

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What was the clown's object in imprisoning him like this?

Doubtless as a punishment for his insolence. Gore ground his teeth. What a fool he would look if the fellows knew!

It was useless to shout. He was glad now that the cries he had given in his first terror had drawn no attention to him; for, if anyone came, how was he to explain his presence there?

He had to wait till Joey Pye chose to let him out.

How long would that be?

He thought of the calling-over in the School House at St. Jim's, and of his being missed and searched for, and he ground his teeth again. But he was helpless; he could only grind his teeth and wait.

Meanwhile, Joey Pye had strolled out of the tent, chuckling. He joined Jack at the door of the supper-tent, and met his inquiring glance with a grin.

"Where's the chap I saw with you?" asked Jack, in surprise.

"In the leopard's cage," said Joey Pye.

"The leopard's cage!"

"Yes; the old cage, you know—where the leopard used to be before he joined the leopard majority."

Jack stared at him.

"What on earth have you shut the fellow up in a cage for?"

"For his cheek. He came here to see Miss Clotilde."

"Clotilde!"

"Yes; he's spoken to her already. Going to treat her to a supper, the cheeky young cad!" said Mr. Pye.

"Offered me half-a-crown to get her to speak to him again! Me! Half-a-crown! Not a fiver, you know—not even a half-sov. Half-a-crown!"

"But—"

"Nice young gentleman, he is," went on the clown—"very nice! About fifteen or sixteen, I suppose, and thinks he's a gilded johnny round a stage-door already."

"The young fool!"

"Exactly; young rascal, too! He thinks he can patronise Clotilde—our little girl! The silly worm! He can stay in the cage till we've finished supper, and then we'll kick him out! I don't like to lay hands on a boy, or I'd have given him a hiding there and then. An hour in the cage will be about the mark."

Jack could not help laughing.

"Serve him right!"

"Now let's grub!"

They turned into the tent.

"And now I understand why Clotilde came back," said Jack, with a frown, as he glanced towards the girl, who was sitting beside the signor. "She went to her van—and changed her mind and came back. I suppose that worm stopped her, and perhaps wouldn't go away! I wish I'd known!"

Joey Pye nodded, and they sat down at the supper-table. The table was rough-and-ready enough, being merely formed of long boards laid upon wooden trestles, but there was no fault to be found with the supper. There was a huge ham and unlimited cold beef, and good bread-and-butter and cheese, and ale for the elders.

Jack wore a thoughtful look as he ate his supper slowly. That Clotilde should be treated lightly made his blood boil, and he was greatly inclined to go to the cage and let the cad out and thrash him. That Gore was bigger than he was, and probably a good boxer, did not trouble Jack. In a case of defending Clotilde, he would have tackled half a dozen Gores quite cheerfully.

"Hallo!" ejaculated Mr. Pye suddenly.

A slim and graceful form, in extremely well-fitting attire, appeared in the lighted opening of the tent. An eyeglass gleamed in upon the supping party, and a silk hat was gracefully raised.

"Good-evenin'" said the pleasant voice of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

And he came into the tent, followed by Blake and Tom Merry.

"Good-after-supper!" said Joey Pye cheerfully. "How did you do? Nice evening after the morning, isn't it?"

D'Arcy looked at him a little dubiously.

"Pway excuse this intvusion, deah boys!" he remarked. "My fwends and I have come here actuated by a sense of duty."

"Go it!" said Tom Merry.

"On the ball!" said Blake heartily.

"I wegard that as wathah a fwivolous expressioe, undah the circe., Blake!"

"Go ahead, Gussy!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Or perhaps you had better leave it to me."

"I wefuse to leave it to you!"

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NEXT

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"Then cut in!"

"Gentlemen—"

"Hear, hear!" murmured Joey Pye.

"Gentlemen—"

"Bravo!"

"Gentlemen—"

"Encore!"

"Let him speak, Joey, you ass!" said Jack, laughing. And the clown grinned and subsided, and allowed the swell of St. Jim's to continue.

CHAPTER 9.

D'Arcy Explains.

CLOTILDE was looking towards them now, and so was the signor. They wondered what the three juniors from St. Jim's could want. Jack Talbot had looked dark for a moment, but a single glance had been sufficient to assure him that the trio were not of Gore's kidney. Blake and Tom Merry looked hearty, wholesome, cordial-natured schoolboys, as they were, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was evidently much the same, with a dash of Chesterfield and Sir Charles Grandison thrown in.

"You see, the mattah stands like this," said Arthur Augustus. "I am afraid there is a fellow belongin' to our coll. here."

Talbot and Mr. Pye exchanged glances.

"Indeed!" said Joey.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"What sort of a chap?" asked Mr. Pye gravely. "Long or short, dark or light, pink or green?"

"A chap about my own size," said D'Arcy, quite unconscious of the fact that Gore was a good two inches taller, "but wathah wuff and clumsy. Not vewy good-looking—"

"But like you in other respects?" asked Mr. Pye seriously.

"No; only in size!"

"Was he labelled?"

"What?"

"Labelled?" said Mr. Pye. "It's not much use inquiring for lost articles unless they have been properly labelled."

"Weally, deah boy—"

"Oh, cut the gags, Joey!" said Talbot, laughing. "You know jolly well whom he's referring to."

"Then he is here?" said D'Arcy.

"Yes."

"I twust he has caused you no annoyance."

"In what way?"

"I am afraid he came here to make an impertinent ap-powach to familiawty with a young lady here," said D'Arcy. "He is an uttah wottah, and I am afraid that he may have allowed himself to tweat a lady here with disrespect. That is why we came to look for him. I twust we are in time. We are goin' to take him back to the coll. and give him a feahful thwashin', and at the same time we wish to apologise most sincerely in the name of the school for any wudeness he may have been guilty of."

"That's the music," said Tom Merry.

"What-oh!" added Blake.

Jack Talbot's face softened.

"That's jolly decent of you," he said. "As a matter of fact, the fellow has come here, and he did have the cheek to make himself obnoxious."

"I am extvemely sowwy."

"That's all right. If you've come for him you can have him. Joey has locked him up in an empty cage to keep him out of mischief, but you can have him."

"Certainly," said Mr. Pye, with a graceful wave of the hand. "Anything to oblige. You can have him and welcome."

"Vewy good."

"I say, seriously," said Tom Merry, "we're awfully sorry a chap belonging to our school should have come here and acted caddishly. We shall rag him for it at St. Jim's, I can tell you!"

"Oh, that's all right!"

And Joey Pye slipped out of the tent to release Gore. Jack Talbot pointed to the bench along the rough table.

"Won't you sit down, gentlemen?"

"Thank you vewy much!"

"Pray do," said Signor Tomsonio, "I am very happy and honoured to welcome you to my table, young gentlemen. If you have not supped, I should be very happy if you would join us."

"You are awfully good."

There was the sound of a scramble outside the tent. Gore was coming—but not in a way that was agreeable to himself. The juniors looked towards the opening of the tent. Gore marched in, with the clown propelling him from behind, with a grip of iron on his collar.

Gore's face was furious.

He had not enjoyed his imprisonment in the cage; but

being marched out in this manner and shown up in public was still less agreeable.

"Here he is," said Mr. Pye. "He wanted to slip away when I yanked him out; but I thought I'd deliver him safe and sound."

"Let me go!" spluttered Gore.

The signor stared at him in astonishment.

"Who is this?" he demanded.

Clotilde had quietly slipped from the tent. Cad as Gore was, she did not want to witness his humiliation, and she knew that he would feel it more keenly under her eyes.

"I found it in a cage," said Mr. Pye blandly. "What were you doing in the cage, sir?"

"You low circus hound!"

"Hold your tongue, Gore!" said Tom Merry sternly.

"I won't!" roared Gore. "I'll say what I please. You're a set of low, travelling circus cads, and not fit for a gentleman to touch, or I'd lick you."

Jack Talbot's eyes gleamed.

"That's enough," he said quietly.

Gore snarled.

"Don't talk to me, you—you tramp!"

"You come here to insult a young lady," said Jack quietly. "You've got off more lightly than you deserve. Now you are insulting me. If it were not for your friends here, you should be sorry for it. As it is, you can go."

"Thank you!" sneered Gore. "I'd like you to make me sorry for it, you low hound! You're not fit to touch, or I'd thrash you where you stand."

"Shut up, Gore!"

"Rats!"

"Goah, I wegard you as a wotten cad!"

"Bah!"

"Come along at once, or I shall thrash you. I promise you that we shall wag you feahfully at St. Jim's for this wotten conduct."

"I'll tell those chaps what I think of them before I go," said Gore savagely; "they're a set of dirty tramps. As for the girl—"

Smack!

Jack Talbot's open hand came across Gore's mouth with a crack like a pistol-shot. The cad of St. Jim's staggered back, white as chalk, save where the blow had fallen, and there the skin burnt crimson.

"Bwavo!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I wegard that as pwecisely the pwopah thing to do, undah the circs."

Gore panted for breath.

"You—you low cad—take that!"

He fairly hurled himself upon Talbot.

But Tom Merry grasped him and dragged him back.

"None of that, Gore."

"Let me go!" shrieked Gore.

"Bah!"

"I am going to smash him!"

"Oh, let him come on!" said Talbot scornfully. "He's welcome to smash me, if he can."

"Let me go!"

"Let him go," grinned Mr. Pye. "Come out behind the tent, and let him stand up to Jackie. It's really what he wants."

"I'll fight him!" howled Gore. "Let me go!"

"Bai Jove! Bettah let them have it out, Tom Mewwy!" Signor Tomsonio nodded.

"The young sweep wants a licking," he said. "I've a good mind to lay my horsewhip round him. What? Come this way!"

And the circus-master strode from the tent, and the others followed.

CHAPTER 10. Well Licked.

JACK TALBOT'S face was as hard as iron, and his eyes glittered. His hands were itching to be at Gore. Gore was equally enraged, and eager for combat. He was the bigger of the two, and he did not think for a moment that a circus-boy would know anything about fighting, except in a rough-and-tumble manner. He was determined to avenge all his mishaps of the evening upon Jungle Jack.

The tent interposed between them and Clotilde's van. Jack did not wish the girl to have any knowledge of what was going forward. In the glare of the naphtha lamps they stripped off their jackets and faced one another.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy looked a little worried as he saw how much bulkier Gore was than his adversary.

"I say, Tom Mewwy—"

"Hallo, Gus?"

"Do you think, pewwaps, I had bettah fight Goah instead? He's bigger than the circus chap."

Tom Merry laughed.

"He's bigger than you, too, Gussy."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Besides, it's the circus chap's quarrel, not yours; and I don't suppose he would let you take his place."

"If I insisted—"

"Besides, he's hot stuff," said Tom Merry. "He's not as big as Gore, but he's good all through. He's as strong as a kid could be, and look at his muscle! Scound in wind and limb, old chap—not a sign of flabbiness."

"Yaas, that is twue."

"I rather think there is a surprise in store for Gore."

"Bai Jove! I hope so!"

A dozen or more circus hands had gathered round to see the fight. Signor Tomsonio looked on grimly. He had confidence in the boy tiger-tamer. The Handsome Man joined the crowd, and Herr Biberach. The German was standing a little unsteadily, and there was a good-natured, vacant grin on his fat face.

"Time!" said Mr. Pye.

And without the preliminary of shaking hands, for which neither felt inclined, the fight commenced.

And it was a fierce and a hard fight.

Cad as Gore certainly was, and a bully, too, he had a certain amount of dogged pluck; and when he was in a rage he did not care if he was hurt.

Jack was plucky, steady, resolute; and he would have been killed rather than have given Gore best in that encounter.

The result was that it was a terrible one, and more resembled the combats of the prize ring rather than a bout of fisticuffs between boys.

Four rounds were fought through, and both showed prominent signs of hard punishment.

Jack's nose was streaming red, and Gore's eyes were both assuming a dark colour. Cuts and bruises were there galore.

In the fifth round Gore seemed to have somewhat the best of it. His weight and his length of reach were telling. Joey Pye looked a little anxious. He had taught Jack Talbot to box, and Jack had proved an apt pupil. But his education in that line was far from finished. But in the sixth round an upper cut from Jack's right laid Gore on his back with a bump.

He came up to time, but he was looking decidedly groggy.

Mr. Pye breathed more freely.

"Jack wins, Sammy!" he murmured to the Strong Man, and Samson nodded assent.

Three more rounds were fought out, and then Gore was simply staggering. But he went on doggedly and savagely.

"Bai Jove!" remarked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I nevah wegard Goah as havin' so much gwit, you know. He's stickin' it out."

"I fancy this is the last round, though," said Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah!"

Bump!

Jack's right caught Gore full upon the mouth, and he went down heavily.

"Time" was called, and called again, but he did not come up to the scratch.

"Our man wins," said Joey Pye. "Hurrah for Jack!"

"Bwavo!"

Gore staggered to his feet at last. He cast an evil look round through his half-closed lids, put on his jacket without assistance, and walked unsteadily away, without a single word.

Signor Tomsonio turned to the St. Jim's boys.

"I am sorry this has happened," he said; "but—"

"Pway don't mention it, my deah sir! The blame was entirely on Goah's side, and it is our place to apologise, in the name of the coll."

"Hear, hear!" said Mr. Pye.

"I trust you will join us at supper, young gentlemen," said the signor.

The St. Jim's juniors looked at one another.

"I don't think we—"

"You had bettah leave it to me, Mewwy," interrupted D'Arcy.

"Shut up, you ass!" muttered Jack Blake.

"Blake!"

"Well, don't be so rude another time, Gussy. Fancy interrupting Tom Merry like that!"

"Was I wude, deah boy?" said D'Arcy.

"Well," laughed Tom Merry, "I was just going to explain to Signor Tomsonio that if we stopped to supper, it would make us fearfully late in getting back."

"I should have put it more politely, Mewwy," said D'Arcy. "But what you have said will suffice."

"Ha ha, ha!"

"You dummy!"

"Well," said the signor, "if you will stop to supper you will be made very welcome."

"I don't think we had better, sir."

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NEXT SATURDAY: PLAYING THE GAME AND THE ROAD TO FORTUNE.

Signor Tomsonio held out his hand, and Tom Merry grasped it.

"Good-bye, my lad!"

"Good-bye, sir!"

"Ta, ta!" said Joey Pye, shaking D'Arcy's gloved hand.

"Adieu, deah boy!"

And the St. Jim's juniors stepped out towards the school on the hill.

Jack Talbot, the young tiger-tamer sighed as he saw the three forms disappear in the night.

"What ripping chaps!" he murmured.

CHAPTER 11.

The Search for Pongo.

I DISTINCTLY saw a mystewious figure jump into the hedge, deah boy."

"You couldn't have done."

"Blake!"

"It's your nerves, Gussy," laughed Tom Merry. "You don't think anybody would jump into a hedge just because we happened to be coming along the road, do you?"

The three schoolboys, who had refused Signor Tomsonio's invitation to partake of supper in the banqueting-tent of the circus, were nearing their school, when D'Arcy alarmed his two chums by suddenly clutching hold of their arms, and telling them that he had seen a mysterious figure jump into the hedge at the side of the road.

"It's that tiger-show upset your nerves, Gussy," said Blake.

"Well, I can pprove my assertion!"

"How?"

"By badgewing the fellah out of his hiding-place, deah boys."

"Right-ho! Come along."

The three chums got on to the grass along the side of the road, and crept stealthily along.

"Mewwy!"

"Yes!" whispered Tom.

"Are you there?"

"Oh, no, fathead; of course not! I'm in the dormitory fast—"

"Don't be an ass, Mewwy!" interrupted D'Arcy, in a whisper.

Blake and Merry grinned, but refrained from bumping the swell junior.

"Well, what have you stopped for, you dummy?"

"To let you know my plan of action, deah boys," whispered D'Arcy.

"Go on, Gussy!"

"This is the ideah," continued D'Arcy. "I have carefully marked the spot where the mystewious figah disappeared in the hedge."

"Yes."

"Well, you two must stop heah as the woserve, so to speak. Meanwhile, I will pwoceed to dig the wottah, whoever he is, out of the hedge."

"If there's anybody there, you had better let me go," said Blake.

"No, no, deah boy, leave it to me, and if I want any help I will call out."

"You had better let me go, Gus!"

"No, Mewwy. I am the leadah in this wag, and you must obey my commands. Now, be weady when I call."

"Right-ho!" whispered the two juniors, as D'Arcy crept along the side of the hedge, and eventually he disappeared in the darkness.

Tom Merry and Jack Blake waited patiently for some time.

"Hlist!" whispered Tom Merry. "What's that?"

A confused murmur of voices came from the hedge, in the direction where D'Arcy had disappeared.

"Come on," said Tom Merry, his face very white, but set grimly. "Some scoundrel may have Gussy on his back."

"And strangling him!" shivered Blake.

The two chums jumped to their feet, and rushed along the side of the hedge.

"We're coming, Gussy!" yelled Blake. "Hang on to him!"

"Yes, come along, deah boys, and dwag us out!"

"Hallo! Where are you?"

"Heah, deah boys!"

"Where?"

"In the ditch. Huwwy up, Mewwy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Come along, you kids!" came a second voice from the ditch. "Get me out first, and I give you leave to drown Gussy."

"Wally!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and his young brother, Wally, were wedged tight in the ditch, and Tom Merry and Jack Blake had a hard job to get them out.

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NEXT

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"You silly ass, Gussy!" shouted Wally excitedly, as he scrambled to his feet. "What in the dickens did you want to dash at me in that ferocious manner for?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You silly tailor's dummy!" yelled Wally.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy put his monocle to his eye, and glared at his minor.

"Wally," he said authoritatively, "did you address me as a tailor's dummy?"

"Of course I did, you ass!"

"Then I can't overlook such impertinence, and I intend to give you a most severe thwashing!"

"Go hon!" laughed Wally. "You know, Gussy, what it is; you're far too cheeky for a Fourth-Form kid!"

"Wally, you dare to talk in that wepwehensible way to your eldah bwother!"

"Well, what on earth did you want to dash at me like that and bowl me into the ditch?"

"What were you hiding in the hedge for, then, at this time of night?" asked Gussy.

"Because I'm going back to the circus."

"Going back to the circus! Why, what do you mean, you young wascal?"

"What I say," replied Wally, with a smile. "I'm going back to the circus!"

Tom Merry caught hold of the younger D'Arcy by the scruff of the neck.

"Look here, kid, you are going back to bed at once, and if you have—"

D'Arcy stepped forward, and caught hold of Tom Merry's hand.

"That will do, Mewwy," he said. "You can give me cwedit for looking aftah this young wascal alwight."

Tom Merry smiled.

"Right-ho, Gus," he said. "I hope you will give him a 'terrible thwashin'!"

"No, no, deah boy," said D'Arcy. "We will heah what the young wascal has got to say first."

"Let me go, you rotters!" yelled Wally, struggling to get away.

"Why are you going back to the circus?"

"Because of Pongo!"

"Your beastly mongrel of a dog!" said Blake. "You are not going to try and sell him to the signor, are you?"

"No, dummy!"

"Then, what d'you mean 'because of Pongo'?"

"I've lost him," said Wally, with a peculiar choke in his voice.

"Lost Pongo?"

"Yes!"

"Where?" exclaimed the three juniors in chorus.

"Up at the circus, I think," said Wally. "I thought poor old Pongo was following me when we came out; but he evidently didn't, so I waited till we got back to the coll., and when I found he hadn't turned up I dodged old Railton, and was coming along here when I saw you chaps."

"Well?"

"I dodged into the hedge," continued Wally, "and I'm hanged if this tailor's dummy of a brother of mine didn't dash at me as if I was an escaped convict, and we both got wedged into the ditch."

D'Arcy cleared his voice.

"Look heah, you chaps," he said. "You go on to the coll., and I will go along to the circus with Wally. It's beastly late; but I should be beastly sowwy for young Wally to lose Pongo, doncherknow. The kid's awfully attached to him."

"Yes," said Tom Merry. "Pongo's like a second brother to him."

Gussy glared at Tom.

"Weally, Mewwy, I don't think—"

"No, we know that," interrupted Jack Blake. "But, look here, Gussy, let's all go back with this young scamp of a brother of yours. We ate sure to find Pongo in the circus somewhere."

"Vewwy well, Blake," said D'Arcy. "It's extwemely wippin' of you."

"Don't mention it, ass. Come on!"

And the four juniors trudged on back to Rykcombe Common.

As they neared the circus a terrific roar from the tigers caused the chums to stop.

"Bai Jove, deah boys!"

"Come on, kids," said Wally. "You don't want to be funky about a roar from a caged beast."

"I am not funky, Wally."

"Then, what are you stopping for?" said D'Arcy minor, with a grin.

"Well, you never know, do you?"

"What d'you mean, Gussy?" said Tom Merry.

"Look heah, you fellahs," exclaimed D'Arcy, "that beast

may have escaped from its cage! If it has, I think I had better go on ahead, and warn you if I see anything."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Mewwy, I think that is the best thing to do undah the circs."

"Ho, ho, ho! Come on, chaps," laughed Tom Merry. "Fancy Gussy going on ahead, and warning us if he sees anything of the wuff beast!"

"Yes, come on," said Wally impatiently. "As it is, we shall get in a confounded row when we get back to the coll."

The four juniors walked round the large tent where the circus performance had taken place earlier in the evening, and they approached the encampment of caravans.

"Halt!"

It was Jack Talbot's voice, and Tom Merry recognised it at once.

"It's only us!"

Jungle Jack advanced, and looked closely at the four chums.

"What do you want?" he said. "I thought you had gone."

"So we had," laughed Tom Merry; "but we met one of our chaps—this kid here—who has lost his mongrel—"

"Pongo?" corrected Wally.

"Well?" smiled Jungle Jack.

"I think he must be hanging about the circus somewhere," said Wally, continuing the explanation Tom Merry had started. "And I want you to give me permission to have a boss round."

Augustus D'Arcy adjusted his monocle and stared at his minor.

"Weally, Wally," he said, "I pwesume you mean by 'boss,' to have a search wound."

"Of course, you dummy! What do you think I meant?"

Jungle Jack had a hard struggle to suppress his mirth as he saw Arthur Augustus D'Arcy blush for his young brother's slang. However, the pain of his swollen face caused by Gore's fists, helped him to restrain his laughter, and he turned to Tom Merry.

"If you chaps will come with me, we will have a look round," he said.

"Rather!"

"It's very good of you," said Tom Merry. "Come on, chaps."

Jack Talbot pulled out a lamp from one of the caravans, and lit it.

"I think we had better have a look into the large tent first," he said, walking towards the gigantic canvas circus-tent. "We shall probably find the rascal in there fast asleep in the ring."

D'Arcy turned to Wally.

"I think you ought to thank this circus chap for being such a bwick, Wally," he said. "It seems a lot of unnecessary trouble to take for a mongrel."

Jack Talbot turned to D'Arcy.

"You needn't thank me, really," he said cheerfully. "I am very pleased to join in the search, and shall be very upset if we can't find Pongo."

"By the way," exclaimed Jack Blake, "what was the reason for that awful row a few minutes ago?"

"What row?"

"Some beast's roar," explained Jack Blake. "We thought it sounded like a tiger."

"It was a tiger," replied Jungle Jack, with a frown.

"It was Julia, and the signor, Joey Pye, and myself dashed over to their cage when we heard it. Somebody has struck Julia on the paw with an iron bar or something."

"The brute!" muttered Blake.

"Yes," continued Jungle Jack, "Julia isn't hurt very much, but the signor and Joey Pye are still over there. We were just sitting down to supper."

"What a cad a chap must be to hit a caged tiger!" growled Wally.

"Yes," replied Jack Talbot. "And if I catch the culprit to-night, I'm afraid I shall have to have another fight."

"Bwavo!" murmured Gussy.

"We shall have to clamber under the canvas here," said Jungle Jack. "I'll get under first with the lamp, and then it will be easier for you chaps."

The boy tiger-tamer clambered under, and Tom Merry and Jack Blake went next.

"Go on," said Wally. "You next, Gussy. Dust before the broom, you know."

"What do you mean by that, you wascal?"

"Oh, dry up, Gus! I want to find Pongo," replied Wally, clambering under.

Jack Talbot steadied the light, waiting for Arthur Augustus.

"Come on, Gussy!" shouted Tom Merry.

"I'm coming, deah boy!" grunted D'Arcy, clambering under the canvas, and taking great care not to dirty his hands. "But don't huw-way me too much."

Jungle Jack laughed, and led the way across the bug-tent.

"Was Pongo a valuable dog?" he asked.

"No, rather not; he was worth—"

"Shut up, Blake," interrupted Wally D'Arcy. "Yes, Jungle Jack," he continued. "Old Pongo is a valuable dog to me, and I can't make out where he has got to."

"Well, he doesn't appear to be in here, does he?"

Wally tried his shrill whistle once more.

"Pongo, Pongo, Pongo!"

"Weally, Wally," said Gussy, at last, "I think the gov. would buy you anothah and bettah dog if you asked him. Aftah all, you know, Pongo wasn't what might be termed a handsome dog."

Wally grinned.

"No," he said, "It's the ugly things in this world which are best. Now look at you, for instance, Gussy. I think—"

"Weally, Wally!"

"You're a ripping sort of lunatic, really, you know, Gus!" finished the younger D'Arcy.

Ha, ha, ha!"

Jungle Jack wiped away the tears of laughter which were rolling down his cheeks.

"Come along," he said. "I think we had better get outside this tent, and go and have a look in the animal-tents. We have four dogs, and Pongo may be sleeping in one of their kennels—or, rather, tubs."

The five searchers scrambled out of the big tent, and once more stood in the open.

"Try that whistle of yours again, kid," laughed Tom Merry.

"Right-ho!"

Wally gave his own original shrill call, and the chums waited expectantly.

An answering bark came from the other side of the circus encampment.

"Hurrah! That's old Pongo, for a dead cert."

"I'm vewy pleased to heah it, Wally," said the elder D'Arcy. "But I do wish you would give up that tewwible way of expwessing yourself."

"Oh, shut up, Gus!" replied Wally, dashing off in the direction from which Pongo's bark had sounded.

"He's over by the tiger-tent, there!" exclaimed Jungle Jack excitedly. "I wonder— Great Scott, I wonder if he has!"

"What's that, deah boy?" gasped D'Arcy.

"I'm only wondering," replied Jungle Jack.

Wally gave another whistle, and Pongo's answering growl came from the back of the tent wherein the tiger-cage, containing Julius and Julia, was.

"Come on, old boy!" exclaimed Wally. "Come— My only hat!"

"Why, what's up?" said Tom Merry.

"Why, look! Can't you see old Pongo's got a prisoner?"

A man was standing with his back against the wheel of a caravan, and his face was very white. He gave an ugly smile, however, the next moment as he caught sight of Jack Talbot.

"The Handsome Man!" gasped Jungle Jack.

"Yes, you young scoundrel. I suppose this is some more of your doing!" hissed Carson.

"Why, what do you mean?"

"You know what I mean well enough," he said, advancing towards the boys; but the next instant he jumped back as Pongo growled threateningly.

"I am sure I do not know what you are talking about," answered Jungle Jack.

"Oh, yes, you do! I suppose you're going to try and deny setting this dog on to me?"

"That's a lie!" exclaimed Wally, catching hold of Pongo's big leather collar.

"Silence, boy!"

"Rats!" replied Wally, stoutly.

"Do you want me to give you a thrashing, my lad?" hissed the Handsome Man.

"Should like to see you try it on when Pongo's here."

Jack Talbot stepped nearer the Handsome Man.

"You saw me fight that cad who insulted Miss Clotilde?" he asked.

"Yes, and was only sorry to see the result."

"That does not concern me," laughed Jack Talbot.

"What I want to know is where you got to after the fight?"

"Why, what do you mean, you young scoundrel?"

"What were you doing in this part of the circus to be attacked by this dog?" demanded Jack.

"I have as much right as you have to be here."

"Then why do you require a mallet?"

Jim Carson looked down at his feet, and his face went deathly white.

"What—what do you infer, you—you cad?" he stuttered.

Jungle Jack looked straight into the eyes of the Handsome Man.

"I infer," he said deliberately, "that it was you who struck Julia on the paw with that wooden hammer. But, thanks to this dog, you have been found out in your villainy."

"You would tell the signor that story?" hissed the Handsome Man.

"Yes, I would——"

"I would give you in charge of the police, you cad!" growled Wally, interrupting Jack Talbot.

Jim Carson clenched his fists, until his knuckles stood out in great white knobs.

"You will pay for that—that insult, Jungle Jack!" he muttered.

Wally had picked Pongo up, and he now had the mongrel in his arms, as though he were nursing a baby.

Jim Carson could contain his fearful temper no longer, and, seizing the opportunity, he made a violent dash at Jack Talbot.

The two circus performers went to the ground with a terrible crash, and for a moment the St. Jim's boys were dumbfounded.

"Come on, chaps!" shouted Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah! Come on—wescue!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy excitedly.

Pongo made a frantic effort to break away from Wally's grasp, but the junior hung on and left the fighting to his four seniors.

Tom Merry, Jack Blake, and D'Arcy fell on to the Handsome Man, who was savaging Jungle Jack in a cruel manner.

Blake managed to get hold of the desperate man's right arm, and he hung on tenaciously.

"Well played, deah boy!" gasped Gussy. "I've got hold of one of his legs!"

"You silly dummy," roared Tom Merry, "that's mine!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—ah, that's got the boundah!"

The Handsome Man struggled hard, but he was gradually worn down, and when Jack Talbot managed to scramble out of the medley Carson had not got an ounce more of breath in his body.

"You young fiends, let me get up!" he gasped.

"Rather not!" laughed Jack Blake, seating himself more comfortably on his prisoner's back.

"I will not punish you if you clear away from the circus!"

"Go hon!"

"No, and I will not say anything to the signor about Jungle Jack!" hissed the Handsome Man.

Jack Talbot laughed outright.

"No," he said, "I don't suppose you will say anything to Signor Tomsonio about me!"

"I won't, really!" gasped Jim Carson.

"I will, though, you cad!" said Jungle Jack fiercely.

"There is no doubt about it that you struck Julia on the paw, and I am going to get the signor over here!"

"Go on, deah boy!" said D'Arcy major, who still had hold of Carson's right leg.

"We'll hang on to the cad all right while you go!" added Tom Merry reassuringly.

Jungle Jack frowned.

"I think I'll go," he said. "The cad ought to be punished if he did strike Julia. Anyway, I'll go and get the signor."

"Yes, do, by all means! Buck up!" said Tom Merry.

Jack Talbot disappeared round the corner of the tiger-tent, and the four St. Jim's boys waited patiently.

"Look here, you lads," muttered the Handsome Man, "I'll give you five shillings each if you will let me go. I will make it ten shillings each if you will swear that this is a put-up affair by Jungle Jack!"

"Shut up!"

"Yes, you scoundwel," said D'Arcy, "if you say anothah word about payin' us to let you go twee, I shall be undah the painful necessity of giving you a tewwible thwashin'!"

"You!" replied the Handsome Man fiercely. "You, a mere kid, give me a thrashing!"

"Yaas, deah boy—er—I mean, you low scoundwel!"

"You've never seen our Gussy when his blood's up!" said Jack Blake, with a threatening scowl. "Why, he could—hallo, here comes Signor Tomsonio!"

"Well, well, upon my word!" said the circus proprietor in a loud voice, as he came up to the struggling mass on the ground. "What on earth does all this mean?"

"It's these young scoundrels!" muttered the Handsome Man.

"Jim Carson!" gasped the signor.

"Yes, sir," said Jack Talbot, "and I have reason to believe that he was the cad who hit poor Julia on the paw!"

The proprietor of the World-famous Circus and Hippodrome frowned.

"Is that so, Jackie, my lad?"

"I'm afraid it is, sir," replied Talbot. "I'm very sorry I have to say anything about it, but it's a cad's trick, and he should be punished for it if he did it."

Signor Tomsonio looked puzzled.

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He did not know what to say to Jim Carson, for the Handsome Man's performance in the circus was one of the biggest "draws," and it would be a serious matter for him to dismiss Carson.

The signor turned to Joseph Montgomery Pye, the clown.

"Look here, Joey," he said, "what shall I do?"

"Ask the Handsome Man!"

"Let this chap get up, you fellows," said Tom Merry.

"Right-ho!"

And the next moment Jim Carson scrambled to his feet.

"What have you been up to, Carson?" demanded the signor.

"I don't know what you mean, sir," replied the Handsome Man. "What are you alluding to?"

"Well, did you strike Julia on the paw?"

"I can easily explain that," said Jim Carson, with a smile which made Joey Pye's blood boil with anger to see.

"Go on, then!"

"It was like this. I had left my pipe in the tiger's tent, and after the fight between Jungle Jack and that schoolboy I went to fetch it. I was carrying my mallet with me, and as I passed the cage I unconsciously just tapped it along the bars. Julia's paw must have been through the cage, and my mallet hit the beast."

"Well?"

"Of course, it roared out, and that fiend of a dog was in the tent, and it chased me out!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Wally.

"Go on," demanded the signor.

"I ran up against this caravan-wheel here," continued the Handsome Man, "and the dog threatened to bite me whenever I attempted to pick up the mallet, which I had dropped."

"Liar!" muttered Joey.

"What did you say?" said Jim Carson, with a scowl.

Mr. Pye looked astonished.

"Nothing," he said. "I only just said what beautiful weather we are having for the time of——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Signor Tomsonio was relieved that the incident had been explained so glibly. He did not believe for one moment that the Handsome Man had spoken one word of truth. However he decided to let the matter rest as it was, and he turned to Jim Carson, who was glaring at Joey Pye.

"Look here, Carson," said the signor. "It was very unfortunate Julia happened to have one paw out of the cage when you happened to hit it with your mallet, so the next time you go into the tiger's tent it would be safer for you not to carry a mallet. Don't you think so?"

"Yes, signor," replied the Handsome Man. "It was all very unfortunate."

"It was!" muttered Joey.

Jim Carson growled out a "Good-night," and strutted off. "Well, my lads," said Signor Tomsonio, "now that we have been kept away from our supper for so long, I hope you will accept if I invite you once more!"

Tom Merry nodded to his chums. They were already very late for calling-over, and so an extra half-hour would not matter so much.

"Thank you very much, sir!" he said. "We should be very pleased."

"Yaas, wathah!"

And they adjourned to the supper tent. Jack Talbot chained Pongo up to a guide rope outside the tent, and joined them there, looking pleased and cheerful.

It was a very pleasant supper, and the chums of St. Jim's enjoyed it.

When it was over Jack Talbot and Joey Pye walked with them part of the way to the school, and they parted on the most friendly terms. Tom Merry, Blake, D'Arcy, and his young brother Wally walked on to St. Jim's, content to face the prospect of "lines" for being so late; while Jack and the clown returned to the circus.

"Good lads!" said Joey Pye. "I like them."

"Yes, rather." Jack looked very thoughtful as they entered the circus encampment. "Do you know, Joey, I came quite near going to a school like St. Jim's?"

"Did you? Then you're sorry you lost the chance, I fancy."

They were passing near Clotilde's van. A soft voice came through the darkness.

"Good-night, Jack!"

"Good-night, Clotilde!"

They walked on towards their quarters. Jack had not replied to the clown's remark. But now he shook his head.

"No," he said, "I'm not sorry; I'm jolly glad to be with the circus."

And the original Mr. Pye smiled a smile

THE END.

(I shall be glad if you will let me know what you think of this series of Circus Stories—a postcard will do.—The Editor.)

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Without science the use of the fist is a danger both to giver and recipient. The chance blow, that brings disaster and damage beyond repair, carries with it the punishment of the aggressor, and the law does not recognise the plea of ignorance.

The scientific use of the fist helps right to might, and the physical state of fitness required reacts on the mind, and the cultivated boxer is not by any means debarred from being a cultured gentleman.

Before a "left and right" ready for action the bully invariably retires, and the trained boxer, boy and man, is sometimes enabled to defend the weak and protect mother, sister, sweetheart and wife by a mere display of his knowledge, and the strength that he has remains untested.

JACK BROUGHTON



INTRODUCTORY.

FROM the days of savagery and of prehistoric monsters, man has of necessity contrived to educate himself in some form or another of self-defence. The stone axe or primitive weapon of iron and bronze, each have served their turn, until in later years, and by gradual process, these rude instruments of attack and defence have given place to the pike, broadsword, rapier, pistol, and many other arms, both weird and wonderful in construction and capacity, for inflicting harm to an enemy.

To-day, most of the weapons not intended for actual warfare are kept in some place where they can do least harm, and the curios of shape and of value repose in museum glass-cases, and the pistol and dagger of a mighty chieftain may be found resting in undisturbed quietude next to other relics of bygone times—such as a piece of fine lace, or an illuminated missal.

For personal protection, in civilised countries, few carry anything in the form of a weapon, but it is the peculiar trait of the Britisher, quick to resent a liberty, to rely on the strength of his arm, the quickness of his eye, and the scientific placing of a blow from his fist, as a means of resenting an insult or chastising a wrongdoer. And while he seeks to inflict a just reward, he does not desire to gratify a mean desire for revenge. The stiletto and the poison-cup are beneath his contempt.

The French have a sort of hotch-potch of boxing and kicking they term "la savate," but it is a poor thing in comparison with the manly and humane science that we have made our own.

A Britisher* will take his part,
With courage prime, and noble heart,
Either forgive, or resent offence;
And bang-up in his own defence.
No sword nor dagger, nor deadly list;
And rise or fall, but by his fist!
The battle's o'er—all make amends
By shaking hands, becoming friends.

From the early necessity of actual self-preservation have sprung boxing, wrestling, and all manly sports.

The physical fitness and hardness that came as the result of being constantly in mimic warfare, kept man in a condition that in these civilised and law-abiding times can only be approximately reached by the practise of some exercise.

Boxing, with its attendant training, ranks very high, and it is due to such men as Jack Broughton, Henry Pearce, Tom Sayers, and hosts of others, that the art of pugilism has reached its present stage of perfection.

In furtherance of right, in vindication of honour, so dear to all sons of the Empire, the use of the fist, more or less scientifically, has had for advocates men of Royal blood and noble lineage. Even Dr. Johnson himself, the learned man

* In the original verse "Britisher" is printed "Englishman," but in deference to those to whom the word does not convey the inclusion of those born under the emblems Shamrock, Thistle, and Leek, the writer has chosen the more comprehensive term.

of letters, did not disdain to administer a sound drubbing to an insolent brewer, in Fleet Street.

A fair and square man-to-man conflict has often been the means of wiping away bad blood, and—

—all make amends,
By shaking hands, becoming friends.

Boxing, as distinguished from a rough-and-tumble fight, has been growing slowly and steadily in favour and in science for some 160 years; and I shall presently tell the unvarnished tales of the men whose undoubted pluck and bravery in the ring has caused their exploits to be handed down to the present day. The various accounts will be taken from reliable sources, and my readers may rely on their authenticity.

It must be noted that in the old days boxers fought with a savage determination to win, and with their bare fists.

The brutality of this phase of boxing cannot be gainsaid, and the six-ounce glove now reduces the force of the blow that broke many a fighter's jawbone; and as it was a common occurrence for the combatants to leave the ring practically unrecognisable, it is well for the present-day boxer, if he has any pretension towards the classic type of face, that such is the case.

While the question of brutality arises, it may be well to compare the use of the bare fist with that of the rapier. A certain duellist, a so-called man of honour, of French origin, was guilty of the meanest and most despicable practices, yet when called to account he killed his man in duel and by committing murder, it was nothing less, since he was a past-master at his game, vindicated his own tarnished and loathed character. It was the custom of the time, and at the hands of the practised, systematic dueller the innocent were sacrificed. The insult was wiped out in the blood of the injured party, whereas a bout with the fists would have resulted in nothing worse than a pair of black eyes and a swollen nose. But it is probable that a man of this duellist's kidney would have run away, for it is a common characteristic of a certain class of men, that they would rather bo run through the body with a skewer of steel, than risk a good pummelling.

The dread of the avenging fist keeps many a cad in inactivity and subjection, and the evil in his heart never comes to anything, and we must not forget that this use of the fist in preference to the deadly knife is a habit particularly British.

JACK BROUGHTON.

This boxer, whose portrait, taken from an old print, will be found at the top of this page, has been acknowledged as the father of the British school of boxing, and to him is due the initiative move that set the art of pugilism in the direction of becoming a science.

In the days of Jack Broughton, boxers lived up to the maxim: "Never take an unfair advantage of your antagonist," but they fought with a fierceness that showed they were out to win; and if their battles were not marred by the savagery and relentlessness of the earlier fights, it was

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due to the introduction by Broughton of style and science, as opposed to brute force pure and simple. Before, it was he who could stand up and simply take punishment without flinching who captured victory, even if eventually he had to crawl or be carried away.

Jack Broughton brought brain to the aid of muscle, and such is the science of boxing to-day, that a quick brain is as necessary as a powerful pair of arms.

This pioneer soon convinced opponent and audience of his superiority, and he became a man of note in the boxing world.

The personal appearance of Broughton had a good deal to recommend him to popular favour, for his face showed the signs of a nature that was manly and had nothing to conceal. He was of great natural strength, five feet eleven in height, fourteen stone in weight, and his good temper and generosity of disposition insured him the friendship of all who could appreciate the man and the boxer.

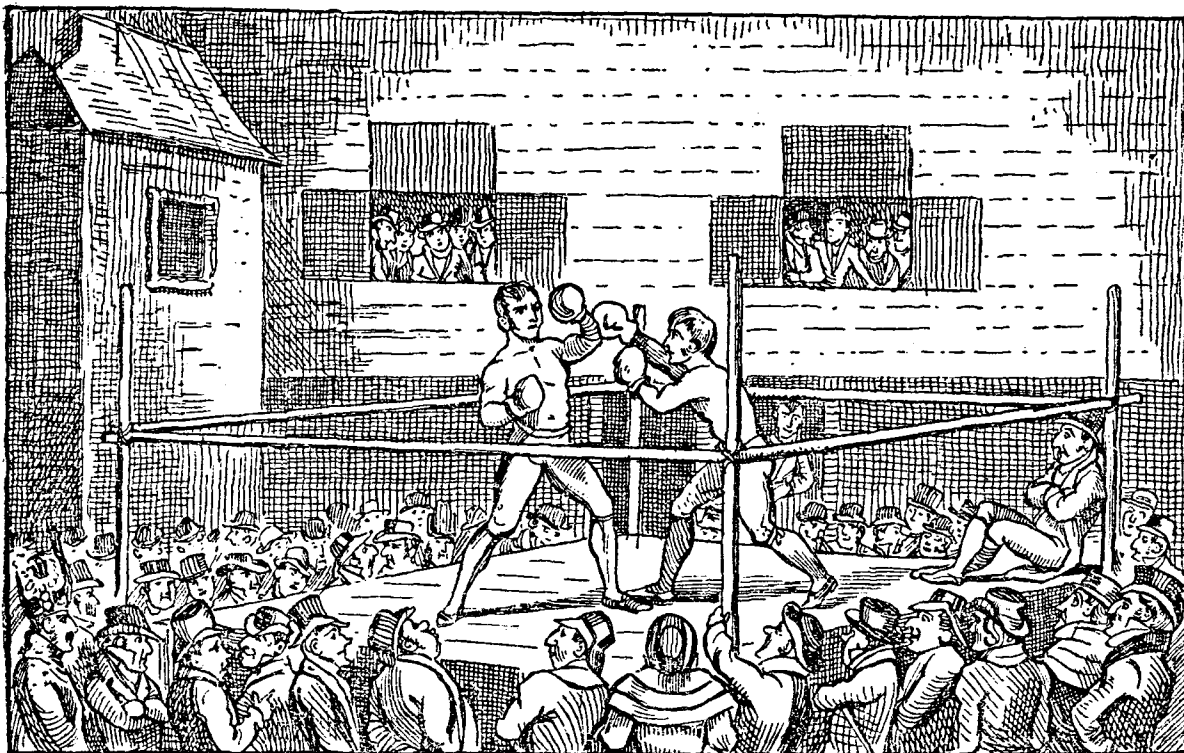
Of Jack Broughton and his career I shall give a full account later on; at the moment I must speak of one, Fig, who, previous to Broughton, obtained some notice by literally fighting his way to the front.

Fig, who also favoured the cudgel, relied, in boxing, on

pation on the slow-moving canals of his native land, created a stir by offering to break the jawbone of any opponent who would dare to fight him. This boast, coupled with threats to capture the laurels from British soil, brought immediate response.

The Venetian was truly of prodigious strength, and owned an arm that was not only remarkable for size and strength, but for its length, and it had sent so many of his own countrymen to the surgeon with jaws to be set, that none were left with hardness enough to face him. His fame preceded him, and his onslaught was described to be irresistible. Such were his own countrymen's opinions that he was backed for a large sum. Fig was requested to make a match, and when the question was raised as to the possibility of being able to find one capable of serving out the doughty gondolier, the instructor laughed.

"Found," exclaimed Fig, "ay, my master's plenty; but I don't know, d'ye see, as how that 'ere's truth about his breaking so many of his countrymen's jawbones with his fist. Howsomdever, that's no matter, he can't break Bob Whitaker's jawbone, if he had a sledge-hammer in his hand. And if Bob must knock under—why, before this here outlandish waterman shall rule the roost, I'll give him a Fig



This illustration is taken from an old print, and is interesting inasmuch as it depicts one of the earliest of battles in the ring fought out with gloved fists.

his strength to win through, and a good many who stood up to him went down before his ferocious onslaught and punishing blows. It was at Fig's Amphitheatre that the celebrated Captain Godfrey displayed his prowess in the ring before Royalty.

Captain Godfrey pays a tribute to the power of Fig's fist in his book dedicated to his Royal Highness the Duke of Cumberland, thus:

"I have purchased my knowledge with many a broken head, and bruises in every part of me. I chose to go mostly to Fig, and exercise with him, partly, as I know him to be the ablest master, and partly, as he was of rugged temper, and would spare no man, high or low, who took up a stick against him. I bore his rough treatment with determined patience, and followed him so long, that Fig at last, finding he could not have the beating of me at so cheap a rate as usual, did not show such fondness for my company. This is well known by gentlemen of distinguished rank who used to be pleased in setting us together."

Fig's Academy prospered, and he turned out many promising pupils in all the many branches of the art of self-defence. Then came an event by which Fig was caused to exclaim, "I'll give him a Fig to chew!"

A certain Venetian gondolier, tired of his peaceful occu-

to chew which perhaps he'll find some trouble in swallowing!"

After this the match was soon made.

Bob Whitaker, selected to uphold Britain's prestige and take down the Venetian, was somewhat of an awkward boxer, an athlete, and possessed of any quantity of pluck, celebrated for his throwing, and he had a habit of falling upon his prostrate antagonist with all his weight.

The cross-buttock, and many other means of bringing about the discomfiture of an antagonist were allowable in these days. In due course, the changes that have taken place in the rules governing the art of boxing will be told.

At length the important day arrived for the contest between the Venetian and Britisher, and a noble company packed a full house at Fig's Academy to witness the set-to.

Silence prevailed after the stago was cleared, and it was only broken when the Venetian appeared, smiling and confident, and his countrymen and followers burst into loud cheers. He instantly prepared for the fray, and his enormous arm and giantlike proportions caused feelings of uneasiness in the minds of the partisans of Bob Whitaker. But this worthy made his appearance a few seconds later, cool and steady, and was greeted with a round of applause.

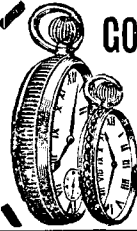
("Famous Fighters" again next Saturday.)

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