

Be on the Look Out for the Next Grand Plate, The Yorkshire Team, in Preparation,

THE VANGUARD LIBRARY. 1^D/₂



No. 5.

PUBLISHED EVERY TUESDAY.

1d.

THE STAR OF THE RING: A Circus Story.



The mustang was bucking savagely, but he could not unseat curly kit.

By **CECIL HERBERT.**

SIGNOR BENSONIO'S BAD LUCK!

Signor Ricardo Bensonio—known to his intimates as plain Dick Benson—sat upon the steps of a caravan in a decidedly downcast mood.

Bensonio's Circus was camped upon Netherby Common.

A number of lean horses were cropping the bare herbage of the common, and five or six vans were drawn up near the great circus tent.

The circus was a small one, and the most casual observer could have seen the signs of poverty that were visible about everything connected with it.

Time had been when Signor Bensonio's Circus and Hippodrome was a prosperous concern, and Signor Bensonio himself had sported a fur-collared overcoat, and smoked the

most expensive cigars, and offered them freely to his friends too.

But times were changed.

To those who live by catering for the public amusement, fortune is usually fickle: and Dame Fortune had been very fickle indeed to Signor Bensonio.

Of late years he had maintained a losing fight against ill-luck, and now at last he had to confess that he was on his last legs.

He had pitched his tent upon Netherby Common, and "processed" through Netherby village, and distributed glaringly printed bills in floods, in a desperate attempt to woo the fickle public, for a last throw of the dice.

See that your friends know what a jolly paper this is.

He had done his best: and done it in vain.

What was to be done?

The signor, sitting on the steps of the van, chewed the stem of an empty pipe, and reflected. Near by a number of the company were standing in a group, talking excitedly. At intervals the sound of a louder voice than usual came to the signor's ears.

"We're going to have our tin, or hook it." It was the voice of the Monarch of the Ring. "We're not going to work for nothing, mates."

"Course not," said the Second Sandow, the Strong Man of the Circus. "Why should we stick to a failing concern, that's what I want to know. Old Bensonio can't pay us, and he never will be able to pay us."

"That's so," chorussed a dozen voices.

Signor Bensonio heard the words, and he sighed.

It seemed only too true, but he thought they might have stood by him a bit and given him another chance. He would have stood by any of them.

The Monarch of the Ring looked round on the crowd.

"Are you all agreed?" he exclaimed. "If you are let's go in a body and put it plainly to the blessed fraud."

"Fraud, be blowed!" exclaimed Tommy Ducks, the "joey" of Bensonio's circus. "He's not that, and you know it, now. He's always done his best, and it's not his fault if he's fallen on bad times. Be fair!"

"Oh, rats to you!" said the circus rider, looking disdainfully at the clown. "Who asked you to speak anyway? Are you chaps coming to speak to Bensonio?"

"Yes, yes."

"Then follow my lead."

And Captain Bill, the Monarch of the Ring turned and strode towards the van on the steps of which the signor was sitting.

Signor Bensonio looked up quietly as they came crowding round him.

"Well, what do you want?" he asked, removing the empty pipe from his mouth.

"Our cash," said Captain Bill, insolently. "Why don't you pay up?"

"You know I would if I could."

"That's all very well. You owe us six weeks all round. What are you running a circus for if you can't pay the exes, that's what I want to know?"

"I've always done my best, mates," said the poor signor. "I've always paid as I went. No man could ever say I owed him money and didn't pay up. You all know how things have been lately. The public have got tired of us, I reckon. They won't come."

It was about the most unfortunate thing the harassed signor could have said.

The company fired up at once.

"The public tired of us!" howled Captain Bill. "Why, my trick riding act has always gone down everywhere till I came to this riding show."

"People used to cram the tent to see me!" exclaimed the Second Sandow. "You should see the crowds I've drawn in London."

"And my trapeze act——"

"And my Flying Fish turn——"

"And my performing parrots——"

"And my——"

"Oh! don't all talk at once," said the exasperated signor. "I know what you all want to say. You're a first-class company, and each of you is a splendid draw, and yet the public won't come to see you."

"It's the management," said Captain Bill.

"Decidedly the management," chimed in Antonio, the acrobat. "My trapeze act——"

"Oh! bust your trapeze act. It won't bring in the public. Haven't we processed all through Netherby three times, and distributed the last handful of our bills, and kept the steam trumpet blasting away like mad, and still they won't come in. I'm not blaming you, and it's no use your blaming me. We've had our time, and the public have had enough of us for the present."

"Then pay up and let us go," exclaimed Captain Bill. "I'd jolly soon get a new berth in London. I've had dozens offered me."

"Pity you didn't take a few of 'em, then."

"Are you going to pay up?"

"I can't, unless luck turns our way. When things began

to go wrong, I put it to you fair and square, and you agreed to stick it out. I've done my best since then."

"You ought to have managed better."

"What's the good of reproaching me? That won't make matters better. There's a chance of pulling ahead. To-night——"

Captain Bill struck his right fist into the palm of his left

"To-night be hanged! I shan't go on."

"You don't mean that, Bill Davis?"

"Yes, I do! Not another blessed turn till you've braced up, and that's flat. And if these others have got any sense they'll all say the same."

"So we do," exclaimed Antonio. "Not another turn till we've seen the colour of our money."

There was a shout of assent from all the rest.

Signor Bensonio looked round him with a haggard expression.

"Don't desert me, like this," he said, in a low voice.

"We're giving a good show, and luck may turn round. Circus life is full of surprises. Let's play the game out, anyway. All of you stick together, and give the best show you can to-night, and——"

"Not a turn unless we get our money."

"You know I've none to give you."

"Get some then. Borrow it!"

"The circus is pledged up to the hilt now. I can't raise a fiver on it."

"How do we know? We want our money."

Poverty and anxiety had made them cruel. The unhappy circus proprietor looked round on faces as hard and cold as the stones under his feet.

"Mates, I haven't been a bad sort to you——"

"Give us our due."

"A few good nights would clear it off. After all, what's due to you? A matter of a hundred quid or so."

"If it's so little, hand it over."

"We might make it in a week with luck, and——"

"Pay up!"

"Give us our money!"

"Swindler!"

"Fraud!"

Signor Bensonio turned deadly pale.

"I never expected to hear any of you call me that," he said, in a low voice. "Goodness knows I'm no fraud. You've lost by this, but you can get other jobs. I'm ruined! So you're all against me now?"

"No, not all, boss," exclaimed Tommy Ducks. "I stick to you, old man. You've been a good sort to us. I'm with you to the end, whatever it is."

"Thank you for that, Tommy," said the signor, with a suspicious glimmer of moisture in his eyes. "Thank you, Tommy. I shan't forget that you stood by me when all the others turned away. But a show can't be run on one man. Do you others mean what you said?"

"Yes, we do," said Captain Bill, sullenly and obstinately. "and by Jupiter if you don't brass up, Dick Benson, we'll have the law on you. You swindler!"

"You fraud!"

"You thief!"

The last came in a woman's shrill voice.

The signor turned red with shame and rage.

"By heaven," he cried! "You shall have your money, you shall have it to-night, if I have to rob it on the highway—hold your tongues, all of you. I say you shall have your cursed money to-night."

He strode away, pushing them to right and left. The group, looking rather shamefaced now, gazed at each other in silence, and slowly dispersed. Signor Bensonio, his face still quivering with passion, strode away in the gathering darkness, his heart on fire.

A hundred pounds that night!

He had said that he would have the money for them; but how was he to get it?

A TERRIBLE TEMPTATION.

"A hundred pounds!"

Signor Ricardo Bensonio muttered the words aloud, as he leaned upon the parapet of the little bridge over the Nether stream, and gazed into the dark waters below.

Night had fallen over Netherby Common and the surrounding woods.

He had said that he would get a hundred pounds that night, but how was he to do it?

It was that or ruin !
What was he to do ?
" A hundred pounds ! "

Black thoughts came into his mind as he watched the black water.

A plunge over the little bridge, and all would be over—the bitter fight against poverty, the bitter struggle to keep the wolf from the door, all would be over, and he would have peace at least.

Then he thought of his wife, the stout, good-natured signora, who had grown so anxious and worried of late years !

He could not desert her !

Yet, he thought bitterly, of what use was he to her, or to anybody else—he, a ruined and beggared man ?

He groaned aloud.

" Beggared ! Ruined ! "

" Perhaps I can help you ! "

The signor started at the sudden sound of a voice by his side.

He turned round swiftly, and saw a stranger standing by his side : a stranger whose coat was turned up at the neck, whose hat was pulled down over his brows, and whose face was half hidden by a black beard and moustache : a beard and moustache that the signor, accustomed to make-up, knew at once to be false, though they would have deceived an ordinary eye without difficulty.

A red flush of anger came into the signor's face as he gazed at the stranger.

" What do you mean by creeping up behind me like that ? " he exclaimed. " Who the dickens are you, anyway, sneaking up behind a man like a demon in a pantomime. "

The stranger laughed : a soft, purring laugh, which somehow grated on the nerves.

" Perhaps I am a demon, " he said, coolly, " though not a demon in a pantomime. But that is neither here nor there. You say you are ruined ! "

" That is nothing to do with you. "

" It may be : I can help you if I choose. "

The signor stared at him.

" Can you give me a hundred pounds ? " he asked, sarcastically.

" I could give you five hundred if I liked. "

Signor Bensonio laughed.

" I'd like to see the colour of the cash before I believed that, Mr. Whoever-you-are. "

" See it then, " was the unexpected reply.

To the signor's amazement, the stranger pulled out a roll of banknotes, from his breast, and held them before the eyes of the signor.

" There is five hundred pounds there, " said the stranger, carelessly. " Would you like to count them ? "

" Are you mad to show me all that money ? " he demanded, hoarsely. " Do you know that I am ruined this night for want of a hundred pounds ? "

" Yes, I know it. "

" You have in your hands five times the sum that would save me from ruin and beggary. "

" Exactly five times the sum, " agreed the stranger.

" You tempt me to do you a mischief, " cried the signor. " Go, go, while you may ! You tempt me to seize that money and hurl you into the stream. "

" You would not do wisely to yield to that temptation, " said the stranger, coolly, as he thrust the notes back into his breast, " for two reasons : first, because I carry a revolver, and would shoot you like a dog if you attempted it : second, because that five hundred is yours, without violence or robbery, if you choose. "

" You are mocking me. "

" I am speaking seriously and in deadly earnest. "

" If I choose ? "

" I should have said, if you choose to earn it. "

" Ah ! " cried the signor, quickly, " what dirty work have you for me to do, that you offer me so high a price for it. "

" Very little, for the figure : a simple action, that is all, without trouble or risk attached to it. "

" Then why do you not do it yourself ? "

" Because there is, as a matter of fact, a slight risk. " The circus proprietor clenched his hands.

" You speak very plainly, " he said, in hoarse tones.

The other shrugged his shoulders.

" Because I am a man of business, " he said. " If you are the same, it will not take us long to come to terms. "

The signor was silent.

The sum offered him was a large one, and it opened a dazzling prospect before him.

Bensonio's Grand Circus and Hippodrome saved from ruin : with capital enough to purchase new properties, engage new talent, and give the old show a fresh start !

It was a great temptation.

But what was the price he was to pay ?

There was the rub.

The signor had been through many experiences, and had roughed it on the road for more years than he cared to remember.

But he had always been an honest man, and no one had ever been able to say that Dick Benson had ever intentionally failed to play the game !

What was wanted of him ?

Some words, a recollection of a lesson in childhood, came floating into the mind of the circus proprietor at that moment.

What shall it profit a man, if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul ?

He was silent, a struggle in his breast.

The stranger watched him with a cynical smile.

" Well, " he said, at last, " what is your answer ? "

" Tell me what you want, " said the signor, with an effort. " I'm not in a position to pick and choose. What do you want me to do ? "

" Now you're talking ! I know your position as well as you do. You've been camped on Netherby Common for a week, and you cannot move without paying your debts. "

" It is true. "

" Unless you have a hundred pounds to-night you are hopelessly ruined. "

" I admit it. "

" With the sum I offer you could extricate yourself and your circus from all difficulties, and make a fresh start and a new bid for fortune. You are the kind of man to make your way, given a fair chance. "

" Thank you. "

" Not at all ; that is one of the reasons why I have selected you for my purpose. "

" I do not quite follow— " "

" It is easy to explain. I could easily get some ruffian to do the work I want done, at a much lower figure. "

" Yes, and I wonder— " "

" But such a man would blue the money in a short time, and would then think to himself that if he found out whom his employer was, he could put on the screw and blackmail him to a good tune as the price of silence. "

" That is very likely. "

" You are not that kind of man. Once given a good start, you will make your way in the world, and never think of hunting up my name and address to blackmail me. You are as careful of your good name, too, in your way, as I am of mine. "

" It is true, " said the signor, struck by the cunning of this reason ; " you believe that if I did this dirty work for you, you could rely upon me afterwards not to seek to find out who you are or to give you trouble. "

" Exactly. Am I right ? "

" Certainly you are ; but I have not yet said that I will do the work. "

" I do not think you are in a position to hesitate. "

" What do you want me to do ? "

" To meet me to-night at a certain hour— " "

" Yes, yes, for what purpose ? "

" And take from me a parcel that I shall give you. "

" Well, and what then ? "

" Then to pack up your traps and take the route, and leave Netherby. March away with your circus, and never return. "

" Easily done : but the parcel ? "

" Oh ! the parcel, " said the blackbearded man, carelessly. " Why, you will drop that into a river as far from here as possible. "

" And you will pay me five hundred pounds for that ? "

" Yes. "

" Then, " said the signor, hoarsely, " what will be contained in the parcel ? "

" The body of a child. "

Signor Bensonio turned deadly pale.

" The body of a child ! " he repeated, huskily.

" Yes : a little boy, about four years old. "

" Man ! Tell me the truth ! Is this a murder that you

have committed, of which you wish me to conceal the traces?"

"I have committed no murder."

"Then why—why—villain! do you mean that the child will be alive?"

"He will neither move nor speak."

"Demon! will he be dead?"

"He will be drugged."

"And I—I am to murder him?"

"You are to drop the parcel into a river, with a weight attached, and what follows is no concern of yours, or mine."

"Hound!"

The circus proprietor, with blazing eyes, sprang towards the stranger. He started back from the glimmering muzzle of a revolver.

"Don't be a fool! If you touch me I'll shoot you like a dog."

"Hound! Scoundrel! Assassin!"

"I will wait for you to get to the end of your vocabulary," said the blackbearded man, coldly. "When you are finished we will renew the discussion."

The signor gasped for breath.

He leaned his head against the parapet of the bridge, to cool his fevered brow upon the cold stone.

"Well?" said the stranger at last, icily.

"I refuse."

"You prefer ruin—you, your circus, your wife?"

Signor Bensonio groaned.

"Ruin! My God! Or murder!"

"Bah! what a word to use!" exclaimed the blackbearded man, shrugging his shoulders. "The boy will be senseless with the drug; he will die painlessly—it will take but a moment."

"Villain!"

The blackbearded man watched the changes in his face.

"Well, are you going to do it?"

"Yes."

"Good!" said the stranger, in tones of satisfaction. "You are sensible."

"Money down," said the signor, savagely. "Not unless the five hundred pounds is in my hands before the deed is done."

"My dear fellow, I am perfectly agreeable to that."

The stranger drew the roll of notes from his breast, and handed it to the signor. The circus proprietor received it mechanically.

"You trust me?" he said, in wonder.

The other laughed.

"Yes, I trust you, because you will not dare to break with me. If you do not keep your compact, I shall reclaim those notes—through the police."

Signor Bensonio started.

He had not thought of that.

"I have the numbers of the notes, you see," the stranger explained. "It will be easy for me to claim him and prove my ownership. If you failed me I should do so, and I should charge you with robbery and send you to penal servitude."

The signor clenched his hand.

"If you keep your word, you have nothing to fear," the blackbearded man continued. "I shall be as much interested in keeping the affair a secret as you will. The child disposed of, I shall be satisfied, and you can see that it will be to my interest to make no fuss."

Signor Bensonio nodded.

"Therefore, I do not fear to trust you with the payment in advance," said the stranger. "I can rely upon you to meet me here at the hour of eleven to-night."

"Yes," said Bensonio, in a low voice.

"Good! There is nothing more to be said."

The blackbearded man made a motion to depart.

"Stay!" exclaimed the circus proprietor. "Stay! Who are you? By what name are you known? What is the—"

The stranger looked at him coldly and keenly.

"My name is no concern of yours," he replied, "and it will not pay you to attempt to discover it. You may call me Nemo, if you wish." He smiled slightly. "That is all the name I shall ever be known by to you."

And he strode away, without turning his head again, and disappeared into the dark wood that fringed the river.

The signor stood looking after him for some minutes, wrapped in thought.

It was a terrible temptation that had been offered him? What wonder, if a man trembling on the verge of ruin, had succumbed to it?

At last, with slow steps, and his brow clouded with painful thought, the signor took his way homeward to the circus encampment on Netherby Common.

THE SIGNOR PAYS UP!

"Hullo! here's the boss!"

"He's got the money, of course?"

"S'pose he has picked up a hundred quid on the common."

"Ha, ha!"

"Well, if he hasn't brought the rhino, there won't be any performance to-night, that's all."

The signor heard these remarks as he came into the camp.

"Got the money, boss?" asked Captain Bill.

"Yes."

The answer, so coolly and quietly spoken, took them all by surprise.

They stared at each other, and at the circus master, and some of them wished they had been a little more patient.

"I'd like to see the colour of it," said Antonio at last, sceptically.

"Oh, rats to you!" exclaimed Tommy Ducks. "The boss is a man of his word. If he says he has the tin, he has it, and there's no two ways about that."

"You shut up, clown!" exclaimed Captain Bill. "Don't you shove your oar in when your betters are speaking."

"I wouldn't, captain, if I could see 'em."

"Have you got the money, boss? If you have, hand it over, and have done with it?" the trick rider exclaimed, turning to Signor Bensonio again.

"Come into my van, one at a time, and I'll pay you up to the hour," said Signor Bensonio, quietly.

"Who has been knocking down and robbing?" asked the trick rider, convinced at last that the "boss" was in earnest.

"I've been robbing no one, Captain Bill, but I shall jolly soon be knocking somebody down, and that will be you, if I have much more of your lip."

"I don't see where you got the money from."

"It's no business of yours, so long as I pay you."

The signor ascended the steps into his van. The signora, a fat and comfortable lady, albeit somewhat worried in expression now, looked up as he entered.

"Give me a pen and ink, my dear," said Bensonio. "I'm going to pay up the company."

The signora stared.

"What do you mean, Dick? You haven't any money," she said.

"Yes, I've come into a windfall."

"Dick! You—you haven't been—been——"

The signor gave a mirthless laugh.

"No, I haven't been drinking, old girl," he said. "I've had a windfall, as I said. Never mind that now. Here comes the hands."

Captain Bill was the first to ascend the steps of the caravan.

"How much do I owe you," said the signor, quietly.

"Twenty-five pounds, five bob," said the trick rider, with defiance in his tone, "and if you will settle that little account, my pippin, I'll be obliged."

"There's twenty-five pounds," said the signor, laying down two ten pound notes and a five, "and there's the five bob."

"They're good, I suppose," said Captain Bill, suspiciously.

"See for yourself."

The trick rider did see for himself, examining the notes with the most suspicious scrutiny, but he had to admit that they were genuine enough.

"Are you satisfied?" asked the signor, sarcastically.

"Yes," admitted the trick rider. "They're all right."

"Then just sign this receipt, and take yourself off."

The rider wrote out the receipt for twenty-five pounds five shillings.

"That's all right, signor," he said, heartily. "No offence I hope, over what we've been saying. The performance will come off all right to-night."

"No it won't," said Signor Bensonio.

"Eh? What's that?"

"The circus is going to take the road again at half-past eleven to-night, and there will be no performance."

"But I thought you said——"

"I haven't time now to listen to all you thought, Captain Bill Davis, and there are others waiting to be paid."

"Don't be ratty, signor. I'll get my traps ready for the route."

"You needn't trouble," said the signor, grimly.

"Eh? I need not trouble?"

"No. You are not coming with me."

"Not coming! What do you mean?"

"I mean that you're sacked—s-a-c-k-e-d, sacked," said the signor, with emphasis. "I've had a little too much of your lip, Captain Bill. Perhaps you won't be so free with it to your next boss, if he falls on hard times. Anyway, you're sacked, and the sooner you clear out the better I shall like it."

"Look here, boss, I don't want—"

"I don't care a tuppenny rap what you want, Captain. If you don't take yourself off at once I'll give you something you don't want, and that will be a thick ear."

Captain Bill looked dangerously at the circus proprietor for a moment, and then turned and went down the steps of the van.

Signor Bensonio smiled grimly.

It was some satisfaction to sack Captain Bill, who had been the head of the strike, and had caused most of the trouble.

Antonio the acrobat came in next.

He was a swarthy Italian, and he eyed the signor doubtfully out of the corners of his jetty eyes as he came in.

"I owe you eighteen pounds," said the signor.

"Si, signor. I hope—"

"Count those notes, and sign that receipt."

The Italian did so obediently.

"I've half a mind," said Signor Bensonio, "to send you after Captain Bill. But I'll give you another chance. Get out. Come in, Tommy Ducks!"

The acrobat retired, and the clown came in.

"I don't owe you much, Tommy," said the signor. "About fifteen pounds, hey?"

"Yes, boss. But I don't want it now. I could do with a pound to rub on with."

"That's all right, Tommy. I said I would pay up to-night, and I'm going to."

"Righto, boss, if you're set on it," said the honest clown. "I'm glad you found a gold mine when you were taking your constitutional this evening."

The signor laughed.

"There's your tin, Tommy. Take it!"

"Here, this is wrong; there's six fivers here," exclaimed the clown. "You've given me twice the amount, signor."

"You've got to take it all the same, Tommy. You stood by me when all the others were ready to tear me to pieces, and I shan't forget it."

"But look here, boss. I didn't do it for this—"

"I know you didn't Tommy, as I had not a sov. to bless myself with at the time," said the signor, grasping the hand of the clown; "but you did it, and now I'm in luck I'm going to shell out a bit, see?"

"Have you really come into a stroke of luck, boss?"

"Five hundred pounds, Tommy."

"Five hundred quid!" ejaculated the clown in amazement.

"Yes. Never mind how I got it. I didn't steal it. I am going to do work to earn it, and earn it well," said the signor, with a miserable laugh.

Tommy Ducks looked at him anxiously.

"Is there anything the matter, boss? I know you wouldn't touch money that's not your own. But—but—"

"It's all right, Tommy; now, you're keeping the others waiting."

The rest of the company came in one by one, and were settled with in full. A little over a hundred pounds had been expended by the signor; the remainder of the money he locked up in his strong box, which had not had such a sum in it for many a long year.

The signora had watched these proceedings in blank amazement.

Now that the signor was alone, she came towards him.

"Dick! Where did you get all that money?"

The signor avoided her eyes.

"It was given to me, Emily."

"What was it given to you for?"

"My soul," said the signor, with a bitter laugh. "I've sold my soul and conscience for five hundred pounds, Emily."

The signora came closer to him, and put her plump arms about his neck.

"Dick! I know that something terrible has happened. You never keep any secrets from me. Tell me what it is, Dick, dear."

"I can't," groaned the signor, burying his face in his hands, "I can't."

"You must, Dick. Why was that money given you? What are you to do for it?"

"It was given me by a demon in human shape," said the signor, hoarsely. "Emily, old girl, I can't tell you what I'm to do for it. You would hate me if I told you."

"You shall not do it."

"I must. I have parted with the money now, and if I fail my employer, it will be reclaimed, and I shall be charged with robbery."

"Dick! Tell me, tell me, I must know. Perhaps I can advise you."

"Impossible."

"Dick! You will tell me?"

"I cannot! I will not. Don't question me, it is useless." The signor rose to his feet, and put his wife's arm almost roughly aside. "Say no more, Emily."

"Dick—"

"Not a word, I tell you. You need not prepare any supper for me to-night. I am going out at a quarter to eleven. When I return, we take the road, so be ready."

"Where are you going?"

"I cannot tell you."

And to escape the anxious woman's questioning, Signor Bensonio left the van.

Five minutes later, Tommy Ducks came up the steps of the van and looked in.

"Hullo! Isn't the signor here?"

"No, Tommy."

The clown looked at her in astonishment, as he saw the tears on her plump cheeks.

"Why, signora! Not been rowing with Dick, surely?"

"No, no," cried the signora, hastily. "But—but there is some fearful trouble hanging over Dick, Tommy. Come into the van; I must speak to somebody, and you are the only one I can trust."

The wondering clown came into the van and closed the door.

"You can trust me," he said, impressively. "You can trust the original Tommy Ducks, every time, and find him a winner. What's the trouble?"

"You'll help me, Tommy? We've been on the road a good many years now together, and you've always been a good friend to Dick. A better friend than many of them who put on more side than you do, Tommy."

"I'll do anything I can, signora. But what's the trouble?"

"You know Dick has just come in with five hundred pounds in banknotes in his pockets, and when he went out he hadn't a pound with him."

"Yes. You could have knocked me down with a coke hammer when he told me."

"I don't know how he got it, Tommy, but—but—he has to do something in return for it, something terrible—something he dare not tell me." And the poor woman's voice broke in her misery and anxiety.

The clown's face became very serious.

"Tell me all about it, signora."

"He is going out at a quarter to eleven to-night, and when he comes back we are to leave Netherby; Common at once. There was nothing said before about leaving. Tommy, will you follow him when he goes, and see—see what he does—whom he meets—and if there is anything—anything—save him—from—from—crime."

"My hat, signora, I can't believe that the signor can be thinking about anything like that," said Tommy Ducks. "But it's certainly queer about that money. I'll certainly be on hand when he goes out to-night, and follow him like a giddy Indian trailer, and see all that happens. I promise you."

The signora pressed his hand.

"Heaven bless you, Tommy! Save my poor Dick: he's not himself to-day, and I fear that some wicked villain is leading him into some fearful deed."

"I'll keep an eye on him, signora. Trust me."

And Tommy Ducks left the van, greatly wondering. He little dreamed what he was to discover by watching the signor that night.

HOW TOMMY DUCKS SAVED THE SIGNOR!

Signor Bensonio strode through the darkness on the furzy common, with a black shadow on his face, and his lips set tight and hard.

He was going to keep his appointment with the mysterious stranger.

The signor, as his wife had said, was not himself. Worry and anxiety, and the danger he was now in of arrest if he did not keep his word to the stranger, had thrown him into

an unnatural state of excitement and savage recklessness.

He came out on the little bridge, and waited. The clock of Netherby village, across the common, chimed out the quarter.

There was a footstep in the darkness.

The form of the blackbearded stranger loomed up, wrapped in a dark cloak, under which he carried something hidden from sight.

He looked quickly at the signor.

"You are here in time. You are alone?"

"Of course," growled the signor, testily. "Did you think I should bring anyone with me on such an errand?"

"You were not followed?"

"Of course not."

"I thought I saw a shadow move at the end of the bridge just before I saw you."

"Nonsense. We are alone here."

The blackbearded man appeared to be satisfied.

"Where is the boy?" said the signor, harshly. "Quick, Master Nemo, or whatever you choose to call yourself. Let us get this over."

The stranger gave a low, sibilant laugh.

"Here is the child."

He opened his cloak, and passed a bundle to the signor. The circus master felt the breathing form of a child amid the wrappings, but no sound came from it.

"You have drugged him?"

"Yes."

"How long will it last?"

"Until morning at least."

"Good. We start on the road at eleven or soon afterwards. We are going by way of Milchester, and we shall pass the bridge over the Wye—"

"Good! Under the bridge at Milchester there are currents and depths," said the stranger, in tones of satisfaction.

"The body will never be recovered."

The signor put the child under his coat.

"Then all is settled?"

"Yes."

"Mind, I shall be near the Milchester bridge by the time you reach it, and shall see that the work is done. You must not fail me."

"Do you think I shall fail you?"

"No," said the stranger, with a slight laugh, "I do not."

"Then good-night."

"Good-night."

The blackbearded man who called himself by so strange a name disappeared into the gloom. The signor left the bridge and slowly took his way towards the encampment. He gave a sudden start and a startled cry left his lips as a tap fell upon his shoulder when he had almost reached the vans.

"It's only me, signor," came a husky voice from the gloom. "Only the original Tommy Ducks."

"Curse you, Tommy Ducks! What did you want to startle me like that for?"

"I want to speak to you."

"You can't now. Clear off!"

"I must."

"Get out! By George, I'll sack you if you don't sheer off at once."

"Sack me if you like," said the clown, sturdily. "I daresay I could get another job, though times are bad now. But I'm going to save you, you have always been a good friend to me."

"Are you mad? Save me—from what?"

"From yourself! From becoming a murderer! From the gallows, perhaps."

A deadly silence followed the clown's bold words.

The veins swelled on the signor's forehead; for a moment it seemed that he would hurl himself upon the clown and strike him to the earth.

Then suddenly a low groan broke from his lips.

"Tommy Ducks! You have spied upon me?"

"Yes, for your own sake."

"You have heard—all?"

"All that was said on the bridge, when you met that demon from Hades, yes."

"Go and betray me to the police," said the signor, bitterly.

"Turn against me like everybody else. Go!"

"I'm not going to turn against you, signor," said Tommy Ducks, sturdily. "I'm your friend through thick and thin, and the time will come when you'll thank Heaven on your

bended knees that I was by you this night to save you from becoming a murderer."

"Fool! The child is doomed; it was in the power of that scoundrel, and I could not discover its natural protectors if I would; it was doomed to death, and I—"

"And you can save it, now that it is in your hands."

The signor started.

It had not occurred to him in that light before.

"Tommy Ducks! Do you know that I have had five hundred pounds for this devil's work, and that I shall be arrested as a thief, and sent to penal servitude, if I do not earn the money?"

"If that villain who calls himself Nemo knows that you have played him false, yes."

"Well, he will know it, for he will be on the watch at Milchester Bridge."

"And he will expect to hear the splash?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well," said the clown, with a glimpse of his old humour, in spite of the terrible gravity of the situation, "there's no reason why he shouldn't hear one."

The signor started.

"Tommy! You mean—you mean——"

"I mean that it will be easy for you to drop a weighted bundle into the Wye from the top of Milchester Bridge, but there's no reason why the bundle should contain anything more than a lump of scrap iron."

"Tommy! Tommy!"

"And the signora, bless her heart, will take care of this poor little kiddy—oh, signor, how could you ever have thought of such a thing! How could you?"

"I was mad, mad, Tommy! I was driven wild——"

"Yes, yes, I know you were. But you won't do this thing for that human fiend?"

"No, I won't. God help me! I won't, whatever happens."

"That's right! You'll never regret that, signor, I promise you."

The signor set his teeth.

"Take the child into my van, Tommy. Tell the signora to look after it. But don't—don't tell her anything else—don't tell her what—what might have been."

"I won't."

The clown received the child, glad enough to get it safe into his arms, and hurried away towards the signor's van with it. Signor Bensonio proceeded to break up the encampment, and in half-an-hour the circus was on the road.

As the line of vans went winding along the dark country road, the signor rode upon one of the pack horses, with a large bundle before him. When the procession passed over Milchester Bridge, the signor dropped behind.

The vans passed on. Signor Bensonio halted, and rested his bundle on the parapet of the bridge. A dark shadow flitted near him.

Splash!

That single splash from the depths of the dark river was all. The signor cast his hands up towards the sky.

"And now I am a murderer."

Then he fled along the bridge. There was a chuckle in the darkness from a man who had overheard the exclamation. But the signor was grinning as he urged the old pack horse along after the circus. The words had been uttered to be overheard; but the circus proprietor had murdered nothing but a bundle of old clothes weighted with fragments of iron.

The signor overtook the troupe. He jumped off the horse and entered his van. The signora looked at him with a smile. His cheerful countenance reassured her if she needed it.

"Look at the child," she whispered. "How lovely he looks."

She had made up a little bed for the infant.

The signor, with a strange mingling of emotions in his breast, looked down at a pretty chubby face, and long lashes closed on plump cheeks.

The child was a boy of some four years.

"Who is it?" said the signora. "He is sleeping strangely; I think he has been drugged. Who is it? Whence did he come?"

The signor shook his head.

"I don't know. I only know that I have saved his life to-night; and that, please Heaven, I will always stand between him and his enemies."

And thus, strangely enough, the lad came to Bensonio's Circus; the lad who in after years was to be known far and wide as the Star of the Ring!

ANTONIO THE ACROBAT GETS WHAT HE ASKS FOR!

"Don't! Oh, don't!"

It was a cry of pain from childish lips.

"You young whelp! Are you going to obey me?"

"I—I can't! I'm too tired."

"Once more——"

"I can't!"

Then the crack of a whip, and a cruel blow, a cry of agony!

The daylight was streaming into the huge tent; the great banks of seats, at night time crammed with spectators, were empty and dreary.

The ring was deserted, save for two figures in tights and spangles.

One was a man of about thirty, with a dark hard face and unpleasantly glittering black eyes.

The other a boy of about ten, a chubby, sturdy little fellow, with blue eyes and flaxen hair; and a face unusually sunny, but now clouded with pain and fear.

The tears were rolling down his cheeks as the cruel lash of the whip caught him round his scantily-attired legs.

"Oh, don't, sir, don't!"

"Once more, are you going to try that trapeze? If you don't I'll cut the skin off your back."

"I—I can't."

The whip cracked again.

"Oh, don't! don't!"

"Hullo, hullo! what's the bother here?"

It was a cheery voice, and a peculiar figure came somersaulting into the ring.

It was Tommy Ducks, six years older than when we saw him last, but the same old cheery, jolly Tommy Ducks.

He came quickly towards the spot, more on his hands than his feet, but he was right end up as he stopped and looked at Antonio the acrobat and the boy he was so cruelly ill-using.

"What are you doing to that kid, Antonio?"

The Italian scowled at him savagely.

"Mind your own business, Tommy Ducks!"

The clown gave him a quiet look.

"I make this my business, Antonio, old dear. This kid is under my protection."

"Signor Bensonio has given him to me to train as an acrobat."

"But he hasn't given you permission to ill-use him."

"I train my pupils my own way."

"Which is by beating them with a whip, hey?"

"That's my business."

"Is it? It's mine too," said Tommy Ducks, cheerfully.

"Look here, I'm only the mirth merchant in this giddy show; I'm only Tommy Ducks, the clown. You are Antonio Antonini, the acrobat, and no end of a big gun. All the same, if you touch that kid again, I will start on you with both hands, and you won't know whether you've been through a mangle or run over by a motor-car."

The Italian shrugged his shoulders.

"Dog! If you dared to interfere with me I would lash you as I lash this insolent boy."

"Would you? Have you thought it out? Have you made your will, and written your last long farewell letter to your papa and mamma in the slums in Rome?" demanded the clown.

The Italian's face was suffused with rage.

"Hound! I am descended from the noblest families——"

"Descended a long way, I reckon, to have got as low as you are now," commented Tommy Ducks. "Still, I didn't hop in here to talk about your pedigree. I daresay it goes a long way back, as far back as a giddy monkey on a tree; and by Jove, there's a striking likeness between you and your ancestors, Mister Antonio Saffronillo Icecreamo."

"Go, you insolent rascal!"

"Rats!" said Tommy Ducks. "Now, fair and square, are you going to hit that kid again?"

"I am going to thrash him if he does not obey me."

"You have been working him too hard; he's half asleep now, and if he went up on that trapeze he'd be off again and break a limb."

"This is my concern."

"Antonio, you are a bore; you keep on repeating yourself. Must I say again that you are not to hit Curly Kit?"

"You can say what you like; I shall do as I like."

"And I shall do as you don't like," said the clown, impressively, "if you touch Curly Kit with that whip again."

The Italian sneered, and out of sheer bravado cut the whip

round the boy's little legs again. Curly Kit tried hard to suppress the cry of pain that rose to his lips.

The clown's face became black as night, with a look of anger that rarely came to the honest, rugged countenance of Bensonio's mirth-merchant.

"You cowardly hound!"

And Tommy Ducks hit out, catching the Italian on the point of the chin, and sending him with a crash on his back into the tan.

Antonio gave a bellow of rage.

In a moment he was on his feet, and rushing like a mad bull at the clown.

But Tommy Ducks had not followed the profession of a clown and tumbler the best part of his life without learning to dodge.

He avoided the Italian's rush, and gave him a tap on the side of the head in passing that sent him staggering against the centre tent-pole.

"Cospetto!" hissed the Italian.

He rushed at Tommy Ducks again.

The nimble, light-footed clown danced round him dodging his furious blows, and planting a tap or a rap here and there as opportunity offered, till the Italian was foaming with rage, and little Kit, who had watched the opening of the contest with fear for his companion, began to laugh heartily as he looked on.

"Cospetto! Diavolo! I will kill you!"

"Rats to you!" said Tommy Ducks, cheerfully. "You couldn't kill one side of me, old dear. There's one for your nose."

His knuckles came hard on the Italian's prominent nose.

"How do you like 'em. Much?" grinned Tommy Ducks.

"Have some more?"

"Hound! I will kill you."

"Rats!"

"Look out, Tommy Ducks!" screamed the boy. "Look out; he's got a knife!"

The warning came none too soon.

The Italian, beside himself with fury, was springing towards the clown again, and a bare blade glimmered in his hand.

"You hound!" panted Tommy Ducks.

A spurt of blood came from his fingers as the keen blade scratched along his hand. He sprang back, and stumbled. He fell, and the Italian in a moment more was upon him like a tiger.

The villain was mad with rage. He meant murder, and the life of Tommy Ducks hung by a thread.

Curly Kit, with a cry, sprang forward, and gripped the upraised arm of the Italian, and dragged it forcibly back.

In that moment, in seeing the peril of his friend, the boy had completely forgotten his terror of the savage Italian ruffian.

Antonio turned upon him like a tiger.

But Kit, with a wrench of his wrist, tore the knife away, and sent it whirling far into the empty seats round the ring.

"Brat! I will strangle you!"

Antonio gripped the boy, and bore him to the ground. And undoubtedly he would have carried out his threat, but for Tommy Ducks.

The clown was upon his feet in a moment.

In another, he had seized the Italian by the shoulders, and swung him off the boy.

With a twist he sent him crashing to the ground, and then stood over him with clenched fists and flashing eyes.

"Now, you cur, get up and take your gruel! Come on!"

The Italian glared up at him with eyes like a serpent, but he did not move.

"Get up, you murderous hound!"

"I will not—I——"

"Are you going to fight me or not?"

"No, curse you."

"You'll take a fight or a thrashing," said Tommy Ducks, looking round. "Kit, my lad, give me that whip."

Curly Kit picked up the Italian's whip and handed it to Tommy Ducks. The clown made the throng crack in the air.

"Now, Antonio, which are you going to take—the fight or the hiding?"

The Italian ground his teeth.

"Dog! If you dare to touch me with that whip——"

"I will show you that I dare, you scowling Don Giovanni," exclaimed Tommy Ducks, scornfully, and he brought the whip down with a sounding crack upon the savage Italian.

Antonio Antonini gave a fiendish yell.

"How do you like it yourself?" asked Tommy Ducks, with a grin. "You were giving the kid enough of it when I stopped you. Have some more?"

"Curse you—I will have your life—I will have——"

"You will have another like that."

And the whip came down again.

The Italian sprang up and leaped at Tommy Ducks like a tiger.

But at close quarters he was no match for the active clown, and in a few moments he was down again on his back, dazed by a terrific right-hander full on the point of the jaw.

He lay snapping his teeth and blinking.

"Curse you! I will have revenge for this."

"Rats!" said Tommy Ducks, cheerfully. "I think you've had about enough. Mind, if you lay a finger on Curly Kit again, I'll give you another dose. I've got a lot more where that comes from, so look out."

"I will kill you!"

"Rats! Come along, Kit, old dear."

And the clown led the boy from the ring. At the tent entrance they met Signor Bensonio who had been attracted thither by the noise of the quarrel.

"What's the rumpus, Tommy? Hallo, what have you been doing to your hand?" demanded the signor, in astonishment, staring at Tommy's cut hand, from which the blood was soaking through the handkerchief he had tied round it.

"Nothing, boss."

"You've hurt it?"

"No, I haven't."

"Come, come, what has happened?"

"Well, if you want to know, boss, I've had a little up-and-a-downer with Antonio, and he drew a knife. No harm done."

"The infernal blackguard! I'll teach him to draw a knife. What was the row about?"

"He was beating little Kit, and I chipped in."

Signor Bensonio stroked his beard.

"I've put Kit into his charge to be taught circus tricks, Tommy."

"You didn't want him thrashed with a big whip, I suppose," exclaimed the clown, indignantly. "That wouldn't be like you, signor."

Tommy Ducks, for the sake of old times, was privileged to speak his mind to the signor.

Bensonio only smiled.

"Kit hasn't complained of the signor so far, Tommy."

"That's because he's a plucky youngster, and doesn't complain about anything," said the clown, quickly. "I've had my suspicions, and now I've caught the brute in the act. Look at the boy's skin if you doubt me."

"He must learn how to earn his salt, Tommy."

"Oh! I'm willing to learn, sir," cried Kit, eagerly. "But—Antonio is so hard and cruel—and to-day I was so tired—"

"You should have told me about this before, my boy. Hallo, Antonio!"

The Italian acrobat came slouching towards them. One of his eyes was nearly closed, and his face showed plain signs of rough usage. The signor grinned slightly.

That grin on Bensonio's face infuriated the Italian.

"Signor Bensonio, your rascally clown has just assaulted me. Either he or I will leave the circus to-day."

The signor stroked his beard in a thoughtful way.

"He says you drew a knife on him, Antonio."

"Cospetto! He has used me brutally."

"You were beating Kit. I never gave you any instructions to use violence to the boy."

"I teach in my own way."

"A rather bad way, it seems to me."

"Am I to have reparation?" cried the Italian, fiercely.

"Is Tommy Ducks to be kicked out of the circus?"

"My dear Antonio, you know that I can't part with the original Tommy Ducks, the one and only champion mirth-merchant of this century and any other."

"He and I cannot remain together."

"Oh, don't say that! I should be sorry to part with an old pal."

"Either he must go or I shall," declared the Italian, growing more insistent as he saw—or thought he saw—that the signor was weakening.

"Come; you don't mean that, Antonio?"

"I do mean it, sir."

"Have you made up your mind?"

"Yes, yes, yes!"

"Either you or Tommy Ducks must go?"

"Yes, yes, yes!"

"Then if you come up to the office I will settle up-to-date."

"What?" cried the Italian, taken aback.

"You heard what I said?" asked the signor, with a grin.

"If you come up to the office I will settle up to date, and we'll cancel the contract."

"You mean that you prefer that—that clown, that tumbler, to me!"

"Well, rather!"

Tommy Ducks broke into a chuckle, and Curly Kit smiled. The Italian's come-down was so complete. Never had a bully looked more crestfallen.

"Perhaps I spoke in haste," he said, haltingly. "I will consider it."

"Oh! don't trouble; if you've made up your mind, Antonio, May as well cancel the contract; I've no objection, and——"

"I refuse to cancel the contract," yelled the Italian, livid with rage. "You will not be able to get rid of me so easily, signor."

"Well," said Signor Bensonio, his manner changing. "Hearken here, my man. No more of this brutality to Kit; no more of this knifing business. The next time there's a complaint against you, out you go, neck and crop, contract or no contract. So mind your eye. Come along, Tommy, and have a drink. Kit, you can run off; you're not under the signor's charge any more. I'll think out something for you to do."

Gladly enough Kit ran off. The Italian looked after him with a glance of savage hatred.

In Antonio Antonini little Curly Kit had an enemy who would do him all the injury he could.

CURLY KIT IN A NEW ROLE!

"It's all very well, Tommy Ducks," said Signor Bensonio as he sipped at his glass. "It's all very well, but what is the boy going to do?"

Tommy sipped at his glass and made no reply.

"We've taken him away from Antonio, who would have made an acrobat of him: or rather, you have, and I've let you have your way, like a silly soft-hearted fool as I am," said Signor Bensonio.

"That's so, signor: your heart is soft, I know: it matches your head."

"None of your chestnuts out of the ring, Tommy. Keep that for the great British public. They like it. I don't."

"There's no satisfying some people. But you were speaking about the boy?"

"Yes. If he's not going to be an acrobat, what is he going to be?"

"Something in the ring."

"What can he do?"

"Do? Have you ever seen him with the horses?"

"No, I can't say that I've noticed him particularly."

"Well, I have," said Tommy Ducks, "and I've thought things." He drained his glass.

"If you've thought anything with sense in it, Tommy, expound."

"Right. Another of the same, Miss, Signor's paying."

Bensonio made a grimace.

"Go on, Tommy."

"I've watched him with the horses," said Tommy Ducks. "He loves them, and they love him, rather. He rides like an American cowboy. Why don't you try him in the ring? If he turns out all right, how well it would look on the bills—the Boy Wonder——!"

Signor Bensonio grunted.

"Um, I know these Boy Wonders! I've had some!"

"I believe you'd find young Kit all right. Anyway, give him a trial. There's that Texan chap coming to-day to show you his cowboy act. Let young Kit try one of his mustangs."

"He'd get killed."

"Ask him if he'd like to risk it. Why, look at the young rip now."

They strolled out into the open air. Curly Kit was clinging to the back of one of the circus ponies, without saddle or bridle, and careering at a racing pace over the rough moor where Bensonio's Grand Circus and Hippodrome was pitched.

Signor Bensonio tugged thoughtfully at his beard.

The boy he had received so mysteriously from the hands of the stranger that night six years ago was growing up, and the signor did not know exactly what to do with him.

Fortune had changed with Signor Bensonio of late years.

Another Grand School Story: "THE BOYS OF FELLINGHAM," by John G. Rowe, Next Week.

That five hundred pounds, so strangely obtained, had marked the turning point in the career of Bensonio's Grand Circus.

Since then all had gone well, and the prosperity of the signor seemed likely to last.

He had considerably increased his circus and its attractions, and he was now thinking of a new addition to the Galaxy of Stars, as his company were described in big red letters on the show bills.

The addition was an American from Texas, who went by the name of Colonel Jim, and who had a really attractive turn with a troop of wild-looking bareback Texas mustangs.

The Colonel was to bring his horses to Bensonio's that afternoon, for the signor to look over the performance, and decide whether he would engage him: a certainty, if the turn was anything up to the reports the signor had seen of it.

"Perhaps you're right, Tommy," he exclaimed, as he watched the healthy, handsome lad, with a flush in his face and a sparkle in his eyes, careering over the moor on the barebacked pony. "I'll give young Kit a trial, anyway."

It came directly towards Tommy Ducks and the signor. The latter threw up his hand in a flash to scare it back.

"Shoo! shoo!"

The mustang swerved, but did not stop. Giving the two men a wide berth, it galloped on across the moor.

"Gone!" said Tommy Ducks. "It won't be seen again for some time, I fancy. Why—my hat!—there's young Kit after it."

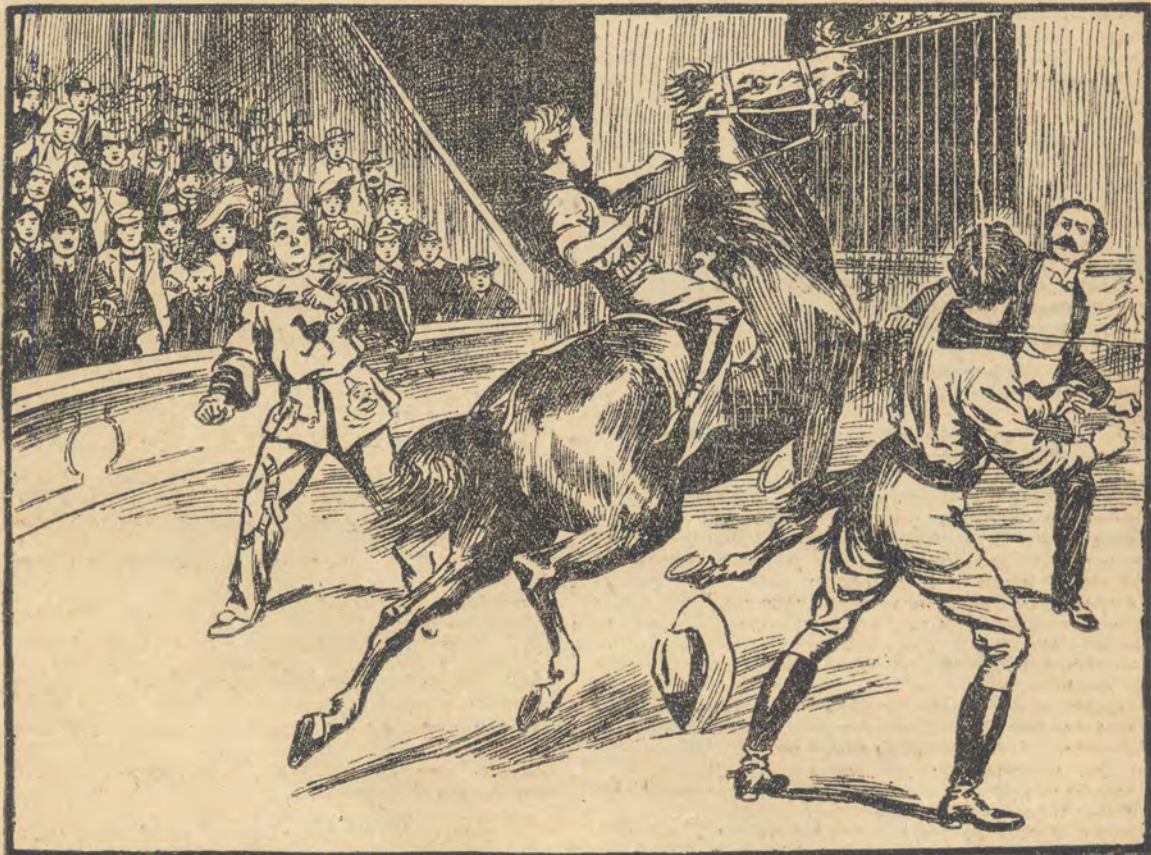
"Bravo!" shouted the signor. "Bravo, Kit!"

The handsome, fair-haired boy, careering across the moor upon the barebacked pony, had seen the escape of the mustang, and at once headed in its direction.

Curly Kit, for one of his tender years—he was but ten—was a splendid rider.

He had been brought up among horses, as it were, and Tommy Ducks was not the only one who had observed his love for them and influence over them.

Horses know by instinct when they are loved, and there were few four-footed beasts in Bensonio's Circus who would not do anything for Curly Kit, and not one that he did not



Signor Bensonio and Colonel Jim dodged the maddened horse.

"Hullo, there comes the hosses!" ejaculated Tommy Ducks.

A negro, mounted upon a mustang, was leading half-a-dozen others by the bridles. He seemed to have a great deal of trouble to keep his charge from bolting.

"That's Pompey, Colonel Jim's assistant," exclaimed Tommy Ducks. "He's got a handful with the hosses, signor. I wonder where the Colonel is. If that nigger ain't careful, some of them critters will get away, and from the look of them, they won't be caught in a month of Sundays if they once get loose."

It looked as if Tommy Ducks was right.

There was a sudden blare from a train whistle across the moor, and the startling sound set the horses bucking and "cavorting."

The nigger did his best to hold them in, but it was too much for him.

One of the mustangs, a big black one, with a wicked gleam in his eyes, suddenly wrenched itself loose, backed away and then tore off across the moor.

venture to mount when he chose.

He dashed at full speed after the escaping mustang, and the signor and Tommy Ducks waved their hats and shouted encouragement.

But it was soon clear that in point of speed, Kit's pony was no match for the wiry, iron-limbed mustang from the plains of Texas.

The animal made a gallant struggle to overtake the runaway, but gradually fell behind in the race.

Signor Bensonio uttered an exclamation of disappointment.

"The mustang will beat him, Tommy Ducks."

Tommy Ducks grinned knowingly.

"Wait and see, signor."

"But can't you see the pony is hopelessly out of the race," exclaimed Bensonio.

"Curly Kit knows he can't run him down, as well as you do," replied the clown, sagely. "He's heading him off against the wire fence."

The Yorkshire Cricket Team. Another Grand Plate, is in Preparation. Look Out For It!

"My hat! I didn't notice that."

The signor saw Kit's intention now.

A quarter of a mile away in one direction the moor was bounded by a high wire fence, bordering a private estate, too high for even the wild mustang to hope to jump.

Curly Kit was skilfully heading the mustang towards this, and trying to drive him into a corner where the wire fence joined a belt of trees into which the mustang would find it difficult to force a way.

Once driven into that corner, the mustang would be forced to turn round, and then would come the opportunity of the horse-catcher.

Tommy Ducks and the signor were now running towards the spot.

It had occurred to the clown that if Curly Kit succeeded in cornering the escaped mustang, he had its teeth and hoofs to fear, and the animal looked a very demon for temper and ferocity.

But, run as they would, the two men only arrived in time to see the finish.

The mustang, suddenly becoming aware of the wire fence blocking its flight, swerved off to the right, still at racing speed. A few minutes later the belt of trees blocked its path again, and then Kit easily drove it into the corner where the two joined.

Then the cornered animal turned round, pawing the earth with white foam clustering in its jaws. The look in its eyes was very wicked.

Kit did not seem to fear it.

He dashed up to the mustang, and the brute made an attempt to dodge. For a moment the two horses seemed about to collide: then the mustang was past, and Kit, wheeling his pony like a flash, was dashing along beside it.

Ten seconds would have been enough for the mustang to hopelessly out-distance the pony.

But two were enough for Kit.

With a nerve astounding in so young a lad, he swung himself to the mustang's back in full career, and alighted astride of the furious brute.

The pony ran free. Kit, now mounted upon the mustang, minus saddle and bridle, dug his knees into the animal's flanks and kept his seat.

Signor Bensonio gasped.

"Did you see that, Tommy Ducks?"

"I did, boss, I did."

"There's no boy in England, or in the world, could have done it, without going to the ground," exclaimed the signor. "The kid has risked his life, but—"

"But he's the best horseman I've seen for a dog's age, signor."

"And I, too."

Curly Kit was dashing back towards them on the mustang. He had no means of guiding the furious animal, but he stuck gamely to its back. The mustang was bucking savagely, but he could not unseat Curly Kit.

"Bravo!" yelled the signor, as the mustang and its rider passed him like an arrow.

"Hurrah!" shouted Tommy Ducks. "Hurrah for Curly Kit, the Star of the Ring!"

"The Star of the Ring!" said the signor. "My Hat, yes, that will fetch 'em, Tommy Ducks. The Star of the Ring! That goes on the bills this very evening—if the young rip doesn't break his neck this afternoon."

"He won't do that, signor," said Tommy Ducks, confidently.

The clown was right.

The mustang soon discovered that he had met his master, and he came to a halt at last, reeking with sweat and foam, near the circus camp, where the negro Pompey was waiting with the other horses.

A tall, loose-jointed man, with a goatee beard and a wisp of straw in his mouth, was staring at Curly Kit as if he could hardly believe his eyes, and as the mustang halted, the stranger rushed towards the boy.

"Say, sonny!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing on my hoss, hey?"

Kit touched his cap.

"I've just caught him, sir," he replied, respectfully. "He got away from the chap yonder, and I caught him on the moor."

"Yes, sonny, I saw you do it." The big American looked curiously at Kit, who was very quiet and calm after so exciting an adventure. "I say, sonny, know much about horses?"

"I love them!" said Kit, impulsively.

"Oh, yew do, do yew. What kind of a job have you got at this hyer cirks?"

"None now," said Kit, a despondent look coming over his face. "I can't get on with Antonio, and I don't know what I am to do. I don't want to be an acrobat."

"Hain't they got a job for you as a rider? Wouldn't you like it?"

"Wouldn't I just!" exclaimed Kit, with sparkling eyes.

"We'll see about that, rather," said the big American. "I'm Colonel Jim, I am, when I'm to home, which is in Texas. What's yew're call-by?"

"Curly Kit."

"Well, that's a queer handle, sonny. Hain't you got another?"

"I don't know what my surname is, sir," said Kit simply.

"Waal, I'm blowed!" said the Texan, in astonishment.

"Where was you raised?"

"I—I don't quite understand, sir."

"Whar was you raised—brung up, you know?"

"Oh! I was brought up in the circus."

At this moment the signor and Tommy Ducks arrived, rather out of breath. Curly Kit was still sitting upon the bare back of the now quiet and subdued mustang.

"Good day to yew, gents," said Colonel Jim of Texas, lifting his big hat to the signor. "I take it that you are Signor Bensonio. I'm Colonel Jim. You've seen my hosses, sircce. What do you think of them?"

"I think they will want some handling," said the signor, candidly.

The Colonel grinned.

"They will, some," he replied, proudly. "They will, sir. I'm the only man than can handle 'em, and only excepting Pompey the Great hyer, and he wouldn't venture on the back of Lone Star, the black mustang, would you, Pomp?"

The negro showed his teeth in a huge good-natured grin.

"No, sah, not if this child knows it, sah," he said, promptly.

"But this kid has ridden him to a standstill," said the Colonel, jerking his thumb towards Curly Kit. "I'll tell you what, sircce. I could work a big improvement in the turn with that kid in it. What do you say?"

"Just what I was thinking myself!" exclaimed the delighted signor.

"Oh, you was, was you? Then we shan't quar'l, signor."

"Oh, no, we shan't quarrel," laughed Signor Bensonio. "To be frank with you, Colonel, I think the mustangs will go down, and I particularly want you to take Curly Kit and give him a chance. You like the idea, Kit?"

"Oh, signor!" exclaimed Curly Kit.

It was all that he could say, but his look was eloquent.

The signor laughed good-naturedly.

"Then it's settled."

And that evening the flaring coloured posters of Signor Bensonio's Grand Circus and Hippodrome bore a new announcement in big type.

COLONEL JIM

and his Wonderful Mustangs
from

THE PLAINS OF TEXAS,

with

CURLY KIT!!!

the Boy Wonder,

CURLY KIT

The Star of the Ring!

COME UP!!!

in your Millions,

and see

THE STAR OF THE RING! THE STAR OF THE RING!!

Curly Kit!!!!

THE STAR OF THE RING!

!!!!!!

Naturally, some of the previous turns starred on the bills had to make room for the announcement of the fresh novelty.

Among others, the name of Signor Antonio Antonini, the acrobat, was reduced from six inch letters to one inch, a change that bred bitter rage in the breast of the vain Italian. But Antonio's personal feelings could not be considered just then.

Business was business. And Signor Bensonio found it good business just then to boom the new attraction, the Star of the Ring!

THE SUCCESS OF CURLY KIT!

"I think the tent will be full to-night, old girl," said Signor Bensonio to his wife. "How have you fitted up the kid?"

"Look at him," said the signora, with pride.

And she made Kit come forward for the signor to see him.

Mrs. Benson, otherwise Signora Bensonio, was as fond of little Kit as if he had been her own son, and very proud of the handsome, true-hearted lad.

She had done her best to make him look well for the evening's performance, and the signor admitted freely that she had succeeded.

Curly Kit was pleased with himself, too.

He was not by any means a conceited lad, but he was pleased by praise, and always did his best to deserve it.

Just now he was feeling extremely nervous as to his success in his first appearance in the ring, and a few words of commendation meant much to him.

"Good, good," said the signor. "You'll do, my lad. Not feeling nervous?"

"A little, sir," said Kit.

Signor Bensonio laughed.

"Well, I like you to admit it, anyway. But you've nothing to feel nervous about, Kit, my lad. You'll do. I know you'll do."

"Thank you, sir. I shall do my best."

"Here, Colonel, come and have a look at your assistant."

The Colonel grinned as he looked at Kit.

"Splendid!" he exclaimed. "He'll do."

"Hullo, here's Antonio." The signor and the Colonel were having tea together now in the circus proprietor's spacious caravan, and Kit always had his meals with them. The Italian looked scowlingly into the van. "Hullo, Antonio, have you come to look at Kit? Looks simply nobby, don't he?"

The Italian gritted his teeth.

"I have come to speak to you, signor!" he exclaimed.

"Speak away! I've got ten minutes for my tea," said the signor, helping himself to a plateful of shrimps. "You can talk all the time if you like, Antonio, unless Colonel Jim wants to say anything."

The Colonel grinned.

"No, I'll attend to the tea and shrimps," he said. "Go ahead, Dago. I won't interrupt. You look as if you had got something nice and pleasant to say."

The Italian acrobat's scowl became blacker.

"Signor Bensonio, I wish to speak to you alone."

"Rats!" said the signor. "We've got no giddy secrets that I know of. Get it off your chest, Antonio, whatever it is."

"I want to speak to you in private."

"Can't be did; no time; come later."

"Later will not do; it must be before the performance."

"Shout it out now; then; come, get it over."

"You have taken my name off the bills," growled the Italian, seeing that there was no help for it, and that he must air his grievance in public or not at all.

"No, I really don't think I've done that, Antonio. Another cup of tea, Emily, please."

"Well, you have put it in absurdly small letters."

"My dear chap, I wanted room for new announcements, and something had to go."

"I demand that my name—"

"Another cup of tea, Colonel Jim?"

"Waal, I say so. Thanks."

"Signor, I insist that my name—"

"Some more shrimps—"

"I don't mind if I do."

"Signor, I demand that—" yelled the Italian, gesticulating with fury.

"Pass the salt, colonel."

"Will you listen to me?"

"Hallo!" said Bensonio, turning towards the furious Italian. "Are you still there, Antonio? What have you been talking about?"

The Italian choked with rage.

"I demand that my name be put upon the bills in larger letters than the name of that beggar's brat there."

Curly Kit turned scarlet.

"Anything else you demand, Antonio?" asked the signor, looking dangerously quiet.

"I demand that."

"And you want an answer?"

"Yes, sir, at once, at once, I insist!"

"You shall have it at once? I'm boss here. That's my answer. What I say, goes. Understand that? Get out of this caravan?"

"Then you refuse?"

"Yes. Now clear out. I've had more than a little too much of you."

"You will regret this, signor."

"You will regret it, Antonio, if you don't mind your manners. You've been with me a good many years, and I don't want to sack you."

"Sack me!" shrieked the Italian, foaming with fury.

"Yes. If you don't keep a quiet and civil tongue I shall sack you, and sharp, too. Your contract has run out, and I can fire out when I like. I don't want to, but mark my words, you've got to mend your manners, or out you go."

"Cospetto!"

"I suppose that's a swear word in Italian," remarked the signor, rising. "You forget there's a lady present, Antonio, my man. Out you go!"

He caught the acrobat by the shoulders and slung him down the steps of the caravan.

Antonio was accustomed to falling upon his feet, so he was not much hurt when he reached the ground, but he stood for some moments jabbering with fury ere he took his departure.

Colonel Jim grinned hugely.

"That's the way to handle such cattle, signor," he said, heartily. "The black-jowled Dago will be all the better for that."

"I hope so," said the signor. "He's getting too much out of hand lately. I'm rather fed up with Antonio; and if he doesn't mind his P's and Q's, he'll go."

Little Kit remained silent.

He was sorry to be the cause of the Italian's anger, and his dispute with Signor Bensonio, but, of course, he was not to blame.

The Italian had made an absurd exhibition of himself, and he had deserved something worse than merely being slung out of the caravan.

But Antonio's woes were not ended yet.

His turn came on before that of the Texan and his mustangs, and he found that it had been cut considerably short to make room for the new turn.

As the signor had not docked his pay, and as the Italian had frequently grumbled that he had more than his fair share of the entertainment on his hands, Antonio certainly had nothing to complain of.

But it was a fresh wound to his vanity, and he put it all down to Curly Kit's account.

He hated the boy rider with a poisonous hatred, and whenever he saw him his eyes glittered like a venomous snake's.

Tommy Ducks noticed it, and he said to himself that it would be advisable to keep a wary eye on the movements of the Italian acrobat.

Antonio, in his rage, and hate, was quite capable of doing some injury to the boy rider if he found a safe opportunity.

The tent was crammed when the new turn came on.

Bensonio's Circus was doing very well on its present pitch, and the judicious billing of the new turn during the afternoon had had its result.

Folk had come from far and near to see the Boy Wonder, the Star of the Ring, in his act with Colonel Jim and the Texas mustangs.

Curly Kit felt a strange sensation as he looked into the tent, from the point where he was to make his entrance with the colonel, at the sea of faces.

Right round the huge tent they rose, tier on tier—faces, faces, faces!

So many faces—some clear—some indistinct—all expectant. How could he face so many people?

He felt a slap on his shoulder, and turned his head with a start, to see the colonel by his side, looking very dashing in his ranchero dress.

"Hullo, Kit! Feeling fit?" said the big American, smiling at him.

"Yes," said Kit, doubtfully.

"You must keep your pecker up, sonny," said the colonel, seriously. "If you get afraid, and let the horses see it, there's no telling what they will do."

Kit flushed.

"I'm not a bit afraid, sir."

"Good! I know you're a plucked 'un, my boy. Stick to that!"

"I will, sir."

"You remember all I've taught you this afternoon?"

"I think so, sir."

"Of course, you haven't a big part to-night," said the colonel, "but if you do well, and take with the public, you'll have more of the business put down to you, and if you're worth it, the signor will begin to pay you a regular screw."

"I'll do my very best, sir."

"That's the cheese."

And the big American patted his curly head.

A little later came the cue for Colonel Jim and his mustangs, and into the ring they came with a wild flourish of hoofs and tossing manes.

Six splendid mustangs, almost as wild as when they roved on their native prairie, dashed round the ring, and standing upon the two centre horses, a foot on each, was the colonel, guiding them only with his voice and the crack of his whip, for they were bare of bridle or rein, or any trappings whatsoever.

Had they been the usual circus horses the feat would have been a good one, but with wild, swift mustangs it became a feat of splendid horsemanship.

Twice round the ring the mustangs went careering, the colonel erect, cracking his whip, and from the crowded tier of seats came a loud cheer.

It was followed by a shout, taken up on all sides.

"The Star of the Ring!"

"Where's the Star of the Ring?"

"Good biz," chuckled the signor to Tommy Ducks. "I knew that would fetch 'em."

And the clown grinned.

"Didn't I tell you so, boss?"

And Tommy Ducks turned a treble somersault, and very nearly got run over by the galloping mustangs, in his exuberance of spirits at his own display of wisdom.

"The Star of the Ring!"

Curly Kit bounded into the arena.

For a moment he stood there, a handsome boyish figure, and raised his big hat to the audience who gave him a cheer half of surprise at his extremely youthful appearance.

Then the six mustangs abreast came thundering past him.

A cry arose; it seemed certain that the boy, standing in the path of the thundering horses, would be trampled under foot and killed.

The spectators sprang up in their seats in sudden anxiety. But it was needless.

Curly Kit was all right.

The horses were almost upon him when they parted, and three swept on either side, and the colonel, stooping as he passed, caught the boy and lifted him upon the next mustang. Curly Kit sat astride of the steed, and dashed on with the Texan.

Right round the ring, and then he rose erect on the bare back of the black mustang, and stood there while the six raced on.

Now the colonel sprang to the ground, and Kit had the six horses to himself, and he handled them as well as the colonel had done.

First on one steed, then on another, sometimes sitting, sometimes standing, sometimes with a foot on either of two horses, while the circus rang with cheers.

It was wonderful work for a boy; and it required a splendid nerve and courage.

"Hurrah!"

"Bravo!"

"The Star of the Ring!"

"Bravo!"

So shouted the spectators, and a deafening roar of cheering followed the mustangs and their rider when at length they were turned out of the exit from the ring, and the colonel raising his big sombrero, followed them.

Signor Bensonio slapped Tommy Ducks on the back.

"Good wheeze, Tommy, good wheeze! The Star of the Ring is a success."

"The Star of the Ring!" muttered Antonio Antonini, between his teeth. "To-morrow, perhaps, there will be no Star of the Ring. We shall see!"

THE BUCK-JUMPING ACT!

Whatever savage thought the Italian had in his mind, he did not find an opportunity to put it into practice.

He did not dare to attack Kit openly, and he had no chance

so far of doing any treacherous ill-turn to the boy for whom he nourished an unreasonable hatred.

Every evening Curly Kit appeared in the ring in his new act, and was received with boundless applause.

And day by day, too, some improvement in the act was devised, giving Kit more of the business, and as he was an apt pupil, every performance added to his skill and self-reliance.

The Star of the Ring he indeed was now.

There were few in the circus who envied him his success; but the hatred of the Italian grew more bitter with every passing day.

For Curly Kit's success led to a "fattening" of his part, and as the show could not keep on all night, the signor had to make room for it by "cutting" some of the less popular parts of the entertainment.

And there was no doubt that Antonio's trapeze act was a long one, and that some of the less mannerly of the audience constantly interrupted it with demands for the appearance of the Star of the Ring.

To the Italian, whose conceit was inordinate, this was gall and wormwood.

"Where's the Star of the Ring?" bawled a stout countryman, one evening, when Antonio was only half through his turn, "Where's the Boy Wonder?"

The demand was taken up in different quarters.

"That's all right, old man, but we've seen it before."

"Bravo, Antonio; but where's the Star of the Ring?"

"Take that man off and send on Curly Kit."

This, of course, was rude and unfeeling but audiences who have paid to be entertained are generally set on getting what they consider their money's worth; and there was no doubt that, as Tommy Ducks put it, the great B.P. were getting fed up with Antonio's acrobatic feats.

And so the signor was not long in deciding whose turn he should cut down to make room for a longer act for the Star of the King.

But the Italian was beside himself with passion at the cut.

His protests were in vain.

"What's the good of giving the British Public what they don't want?" asked the practical signor. "The B.P. aint a baby to be given what's good for it, whether it likes it or not. I'm sorry to cut your turn—"

"It's the second cut in a few weeks."

"I'm sorry, but it can't be helped. What's a man to do? They want the Star of the Ring, and the Star of the Ring they'll have, or know the reason why. The B.P. is a funny animal," said the signor, disrespectfully referring to the British Public in those terms. "They're yelling for Curly Kit to-day. They may be howling for you to-morrow. They're a funny animal, and you never know your luck. But a man who makes his living by catering for 'em has got to give 'em what they want, just when they want it. That's business, and it money that makes the mare go, Antonio, old dear."

"I object—"

"I don't mind your objecting. I'm not an unreasonable man. But I've cut your part because the B.P. want more of Curly Kit, and less of you; and that settles it."

The Italian ground his teeth.

"Ah! it is all the work of that infernal brat. I will have my revenge upon him."

The signor's brow grew very stern.

"You'll do nothing of the kind, Antonio."

"Do you dictate to me," hissed the Italian.

"Yes, I certainly do in this matter," said Signor Bensonio, significantly. "You hate that boy not for any fault of his own, but simply because you were cruel to him, and were licked for it, as you deserved. Now he's cutting you out with the public. That can't be helped; it's all in the way of business. Why, when you came to me, six or seven years ago, I cut the Strongest Man on Earth's business down by one half. You didn't see anything to complain about in that. He grumbled but he didn't make all this fuss. Indeed, I believe I remember you crowing over him."

"That is nothing to the point—I—"

"It seems to me to be very much to the point. You're lucky that I don't cut down your screw along with your part. I could do it, and you know very well that nine out of ten circus bosses would. But I can afford to do the fair thing, and I can afford it partly because of the big crowds the Star of the Ring is bringing in every evening."

"Then you have made up your mind—"

"Yes, and that ends it. And mind you, Antonio; no

bullying or brutality to young Kit. I've got my eye on you; and it will mean trouble; bitter trouble.

The Italian did not reply.

But the savage glitter in his eyes as he walked away boded no good to the Star of the Ring.

If Antonio Antonini found an opportunity of injuring Curly Kit, he would not be long in taking advantage of it? Could he find one? That was the thought that now occupied his whole mind.

And the Italian's opportunity was to come.

A new development of the Star of the Ring's turn was a "bucking act," in which the boy gave a representation of horse-taming on the plains of Texas.

The big black mustang, Lone Star, was just the steed for the purpose, for he was still in a more than half untamed state, and indeed no one in Bensonio's save Curly Kit and the Colonel dared attempt to mount him.

Curly Kit was given ample instruction in his new part by the long-limbed Texan, and he picked it up with a quickness and facility that delighted Colonel Jim.

"That kid's a born hossman," the Colonel confided to Signor Bensonio. "Mark me, he'll be drawing his twenty quid a week when he's a bit older, he will. Why, he can do things already with that black mustang that I should never dream of doing."

"He's a treasure, and I'm not denying it," the signor assented.

"What did you pick him up for?" the Texan asked, curiously. A shade crossed Signor Bensonio's face.

Any allusion to the origin of Curly Kit always brought back to him that fearful night at Netherby, as clearly as though it had all happened only the day before, instead of six or seven years ago.

On that night he had trembled on the verge of a terrible crime, and Tommy Ducks had saved him—saved him from a crime, and from lifelong remorse and misery.

For the signor had not been himself when he contemplated that act.

When he had become calm again, and could think the matter over quietly, he had wondered at his own weakness and wickedness in dreaming of doing the terrible deed exacted of him by the mysterious blackbearded stranger.

It was all past, long past, yet a shadow always came over the signor's jolly face when it was recalled to his mind, and he felt a pang at his heart as he thought of what he might have been, but for the providential interposition of Tommy Ducks.

He did not reply to the American's question.

"Where does he come from?" asked Colonel Jim.

"I found him," said the signor, briefly.

"Then you found a prize-packet," said Colonel Jim, emphatically. "An orphan, I suppose?"

"I believe so."

"He'll be a credit to the cirks," said Colonel Jim, changing the topic, much to the signor's relief. "The Star of the Ring will be known all over the country some day, you mark me. He's getting on first-rate with that bucking act, and he'll take the public by storm."

"I'm sure I hope so."

A little later a new announcement appeared on the circus posters.

It was to the effect that the world-famous Star of the Ring would appear in an entirely new and novel horse-taming act, showing how the wild mustangs were tamed on the boundless plains of the real Wild West.

Kit had by this time quite lost his nervousness in facing a big audience.

He was almost always cheered, and the public appreciation of his fine horsemanship of course, inspired him, and gave him confidence and self-reliance.

He enjoyed his new way of life, and took to horse-riding, as the Colonel put it, like a duck to water, or a Red Indian to whisky.

He had almost forgotten the miserable days when he had been under the dominion of Antonio Antonini, the Italian acrobat. He saw little of Antonio now.

Whenever he caught sight of the Italian, he found a black scowl of hatred on his swarthy face, and he knew that the acrobat hated him and would injure him if he could.

But he believed that he was now out of the power of Antonio, and had nothing to fear from him.

He was to find out his mistake.

The night of his first appearance in the Famous Bucking Act came.

Antonio's curtailed turn was over, and he had retired from the ring, but stood at the staff entrance watching for the new act with savage, jealous eyes.

The Star of the Ring came in "cavorting" on the back of the black mustang.

He was greeted with a loud cheer.

Then hundreds of pairs of eyes watched him as he went through the new act.

The black mustang did its best to throw its rider, and Curly Kit went through all the tricks of a Texan horse-tamer.

It was no sham fight, either, for the black mustang was doing its best, and the struggle between the horse and the boy was hard and prolonged.

Lone Star reared and plunged, capered and "cavorted," rolled over in the tan and sprang high into the air, all four feet leaving the ground, but still Curly Kit stuck to him like a limpet to a rock.

It was a splendid exhibition of horsemanship, and the youthful exponent of the great art was cheered to the echo.

Curly Kit finally left the ring almost exhausted, but with his face flushed with pleasant excitement.

He passed the Italian as he went off.

Antonio's black eyes were glittering with a strange expression.

While he watched the buck-jumping act a new idea had flashed into his evil brain: an idea which seemed to promise him the revenge he thirsted for upon the English boy.

It was a cowardly, cruel, treacherous plan that had come into the Italian's mind, but it did not commend itself to him any the less upon that account.

He walked away chuckling to himself over it.

A little later, as he heard the signor and Colonel Jim discussing Kit's success, he chuckled again like some evil gnome.

"The act has taken," the Colonel cried, enthusiastically. "The people like it, and will like it again. You must make it a regular turn, signor."

"Rather," said Signor Bensonio. "No two ways about that."

"What did I tell you?" chorried the clown. "When it comes to real good advice, the original Tommy Ducks gets there, every time."

And the signor nodded assent.

"Pretty fagged, lad?" he asked, when he met Kit, after the boy had changed his ring attire for some more ordinary raiment.

"Yes, sir. But I like the work," the lad, said, eagerly.

"Good: I'm glad to hear it. You'd like it made a regular turn?"

"Oh, rather, sir."

"Then that's settled. Now, Kit, my lad, you've been with me over six years, and you've had your bread and cheese with us, and made yourself useful doing little things for the signora and me. I think you've earned your keep."

"I've tried to, sir."

"But now you're in the ring, and fetching the public in every night in hundreds, your keep and a little pocket-money aint enough."

"I don't ask for anything more, sir," the boy said, quickly. "Your kindness to me is more than I could ever repay, if I worked for you for a hundred years."

The signor laughed.

"Good, Kit, all the same you must have a screw now that you're well earning it. Mind, I'm not going to pay you money to waste. There's no reason why you should spend much more than you've been spending, except upon costumes for the ring. You will have a pound a week dating from this Monday."

Curly Kit's eyes opened wide.

The sum seemed an enormous one to him.

"A pound a week, sir."

"Yes, and you can open an account in the Post Office Savings Bank, and save up all the money you don't need to spend. I know you're a careful lad, or I shouldn't pay you a screw, Kit."

"I shall be very careful, sir. And thank you so much."

And the very next day Curly Kit paid a visit to the nearest post-office with the signor and the Colonel, and the savings account was opened in great state.

Curly Kit had a little bank-book all to himself, with the sum of one pound entered in it, and he felt as proud as any king or emperor in the wide world.

Like most boys, he could be very careful with his money when he had a bank-account to put it into, for which he was himself responsible.

And the pleasure of watching this little nest-egg grow every week was a very keen one to him.

But there was trouble ahead for Curly Kit, in the midst of his triumph and good luck—black, bitter trouble, to come from Antonio Antonini.

ANTONIO'S REVENGE: IN THE SHADOW OF GRIM LEATH!

Pompey the nigger started and yawned

The light was dim in the canvas stables: the horses were quiet.

It was evening, and it wanted about half-an-hour to the commencement of the circus performance in the big tent.

Most of the performers were already preparing for their turns, and Curly Kit was in the dressing-room he shared with the good-natured Colonel, getting into his natty cowboy garb.

Pompey, the fat and jolly negro, always slept in the stable, to keep an eye on the horses, and he was quite at home with them.

He was taking a doze now on the heap of straw, till the Colonel should come in and see about taking out the mustangs for their turn in the ring.

Pompey was a heavy sleeper and as he had not the faintest suspicion that any kind of mischief was brewing, he was naturally quite off his guard.

He awoke at some slight sound, however, and looked drowsily round the stable.

The horses were in their stalls, most of them quiet, but he heard a restless movement from Lone Star, the black mustang.

"Quiet dere, old hoss," called out Pompey. "What's de matter wid you?"

The mustang still shifted restlessly.

Pompey rose to his feet.

As he did so he caught a moving shadow in the dim light, and stepped quickly towards it.

"Hallo, dere, who are you?"

The shadow stopped.

Pompey came closer and recognised Antonio Antonini.

The Italian's swarthy face was somewhat pale, and his eyes glistening.

"What are you doing here, sah?" asked Pompey, who had no liking for the swarthy, savage-eyed man from Italy.

"I came to look at the horses, *mió amico*," said Antonio, civilly. "There is no harm in that, I suppose."

"No, not dat I know ob," agreed Pompey. "But people aint allowed in de stable widout permission, so you had better travel."

"Very well."

The Italian walked out of the canvas stables.

Pompey shook his head solemnly: he neither liked nor trusted the Italian. He looked at Lone Star. The black mustang seemed strangely uneasy.

Pompey patted his head.

"All right, old hoss?"

The mustang jerked its head away and snapped its teeth. Pompey withdrew his hand very quickly.

"You am in a bad temper to-night, old hoss," he remarked. "I suppose it was dat ugly Dago upset you."

And Pompey, thinking nothing further of the occurrence, returned to his heap of straw and went fast off to sleep, and did not stir again till the toe of a boot, poking him forcibly in the ribs, awakened him once more.

He started up and rubbed his eyes.

"Get up, yew lazy rascal," said the Colonel. "I want the hosses. Think the British Public are goin' to wait for the buck-jumping act till you've had your nap out?"

Pompey grinned.

"Dat's all right, old hoss, sah. Won't be a jiffy."

Curley Kit was there, looking at the black mustang.

He did not quite like the look in Lone Star's eyes.

"Has anything gone wrong with Lone Star, Pomp?" he asked.

"Noting dat I know ob, sah."

"He doesn't look quite himself."

"Dat Italian came in here a while ago sah, and I tink his face worried de hoss."

"He didn't give him anything?" asked the Colonel, quickly. "Nothing to eat?"

"No, sah."

"Mind you never let that fellow get at the hosses, Pomp."

"I'll watch him, sah."

"Come on, Kit, lad."

Kit mounted the black mustang. The animal seemed to

be strangely restive, but it submitted to bit and bridle. Kit rode it to the circus entrance, and cantered into the tent.

The great tent was crowded.

Tier on tier of seats rose against the canvas walls, crammed with spectators.

The fame of the Star of the Ring's new great buck-jumping act had spread, and folk had come from near and far to see him.

Kit swept off his big hat in response to the loud, ringing cheer that greeted his entrance into the arena.

"Ladies and gentlemen," cried Signor Bensonio, who was there in all the glory of evening dress, startling waistcoat, and long whip. "Ladies and gentlemen, Curly Kit, the Star of the Ring, the youngest circus rider in this or any other empire, will now give his startling, novel, new and life-like representation of buck-jumping and horse-taming in the boundless wilds of the Far-Far West."

The audience cheered this announcement.

Then the buck-jumping act commenced.

It was not many minutes before Curly Kit realised that something was wrong with the black mustang.

The horse was accustomed to doing its best to unseat its rider, in order to make the act realistic, and Kit had sometimes been called upon to put forth his best efforts to keep control of it.

But he had always succeeded. To-night, for the first time, a doubt flashed into his mind as to whether he could be sure of doing so.

The horse seemed to be growing furious.

A white foam was gathering on its mouth, and its eyes seemed to be turning. It showed a strength and ferocity new to Kit's experience, and once or twice it snapped savagely at the boy's legs with its sharp, white teeth.

The audience took it all as part of the show, but Colonel Jim and the signor knew better, and their faces had grown very serious and anxious.

From the staff entrance of the tent the Italian's swarthy face looked upon the scene with a grin of triumphant malice.

The struggle between horse and rider grew more terrible each moment.

Kit's face was pale now, his eyes gleaming. His hands were on the rein like iron, but he felt as if his arms were being wrenched out of their sockets.

The mustang bucked and reared and plunged, and standing on its hind legs, fell over backwards upon its riders.

Colonel Jim's teeth came together with a sharp click.

From the audience came a cry of horror.

Then a burst of cheering, as it was seen that the boy rider had sprung clear in time, and was standing beside the mustang as it rolled in the tan.

In a flash the black steed was on its feet again.

Equally swiftly, Curly Kit was upon its back.

The horse gave a shrill squeal of rage, and started round the ring at a tremendous pace, Curly Kit striving in vain to hold it in.

Signor Bensonio and Colonel Jim and the clown dodged the racing horse, their faces pale as death.

"It's mad," gasped the Texan. "Mad as a March hare! The horse is mad, and it will kill him."

The audience were looking on with wild, startled eyes.

They realised at last that there was something more than a show here.

Round and round at tearing speed, with clattering hoofs and tossing mane!

Curly Kit gave up the attempt to hold in the mustang, and contented himself with keeping it to the ring. Once or twice the brute showed a strong desire to jump the barriers, and Kit's heart was sick at the thought of the injury and death that would ensue if the fiendish brute crashed down in that crowd of people.

Round and round, still keeping to the ring! But the madness of Lone Star seemed to be increasing to a fearful pitch. Again it essayed to rush at the barrier, and again Kit dragged it in, exerting every ounce of his boyish strength. He felt that the struggle was growing too much for him; that soon the maddened mustang would succeed in its object.

There was one chance!

If he could drive the mad brute out at the exit, he could allow it to exhaust its fury on the open moor, without danger to anybody but himself!

Of his own danger he did not even think!

His only idea was to get the mustang out of the arena

without the terrible catastrophe that grew more fearfully certain every moment.

As the horse raced round past the exit Kit dragged on the rein.

The mustang refused to obey the touch, and careered on.

"God grant the way is clear!" murmured Kit, as he prepared for a second attempt.

The exit should have been clear.

No one had any business to be in the way there: and he was not to know that the Italian, his eyes glittering with spiteful anticipation, was crouching there behind the canvas flap, watching for the destruction of the boy he hated.

Round again at a mad gallop!

Again they came by the exit, and Kit, with set teeth and an iron hand, drew the mustang to it irresistibly. He knew it was the last chance; his last ounce of strength was spent in that terrible effort to avoid disaster.

The black mustang obeyed.

Through the exit they went careering madly—and there was a terrible cry, a terrible groan of agony!

Curly Kit only knew that he had ridden over someone crouching there in the way—he had no time to think about it.

The horse dashed on, and the skilful hand guided it to the open moor, and there under the stars the battle was fought between rider and horse.

And slowly, exhausted by the efforts of its own fury, the mustang gave in, and at length it stood trembling and shaking, but subdued, and the exhausted boy breathed deeply with relief.

He slipped from the mustang's back. Colonel Jim rushed to him, and they led the black mustang to its stable and secured it there. The horse was still trembling and shaking.

"There has been foul play here," said the colonel, in a low

voice. "Heaven be praised for your escape, my boy. The mustang was drugged."

Kit started.

"I thought it had gone mad!"

"So it had—for the time. Something was given it to eat—something containing some exciting drug—and I know who did it."

"Antonio!" cried the boy.

"Yes. You remember Pompey saw him here."

"The villain! The scoundrel! He may be a murderer—what has become of the man who fell under Lone Star's hoofs as I came out? Is he much hurt?"

"He is crushed—crippled—and dying. Cannot you guess who it was?"

Kit drew a deep breath.

"Not Antonio!"

"Yes, Antonio. He was skulking there, watching you—watching for your death. He found his own—it is Heaven's justice."

Curly Kit was silent as he left the stables with the colonel. A few minutes later they were looking down upon the shattered form of the Italian. A doctor had been hastily summoned, but he could do nothing. Antonio Antonini was dying.

He caught sight of Kit, and a blaze came into his black eyes. But he could not speak, and in a few minutes, without a word, he expired. Kit's bitter enemy was no more; he had fallen into the trap he had set for the boy rider, and paid dearly for his wickedness with his life!

* * * * *

Many a struggle and many a triumph yet awaited the young circus rider in the course of his career; but of these we hope to tell in other stories of the adventures of Curly Kit, THE STAR OF THE RING!

THE END.

Auntie's Nephew.

By S. CLARKE HOOKE.

"Your name?" demanded Mr. Smithers, speaking in his customary sharp manner to a new boy. He was a slimy built lad with fair, wavy hair, and innocent-looking blue eyes. He would have made a remarkably pretty girl, but he appeared to be rather too delicate and gentle to come to Norman-height.

"Willie, sir!"

"Pshaw! Surname?"

"William—sir."

"Did you hear me ask for your name?"

"Yes, sir! It is William. Auntie calls me Willie when she's pleased with me and William when she's vexed. You would like Auntie, sir. She's not married and—"

Willie's voice was drowned by howls of laughter, and when Mr. Smithers could make himself heard, he kept the whole class in for half an hour.

"Don't you know what a surname is, you—you simple boy?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then what is yours?"

"William—sir."

"Dolt! That is your Christian name."

"Yes, sir."

"Then how can it be your surname?"

"If you please, sir, I don't know. You can either call me Willie or William, sir."

"The boy is a perfect idiot. What is your father's name?"

"Willie, sir."

"His other name?"

"John, sir."

"Will you tell me his surname?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell me, you—you—Tell me."

"William—sir."

"Boy!" roared Mr. Smithers, seizing him by the coat collar and shaking him violently, "will you tell me your father's other name?"

"Boohoo! He hasn't gug-got any other. If Auntie was here you wouldn't shake me like this."

"If you don't tell me your name I shall cane you."

"It's William—sir, but if you don't believe it, you can call me Smith."

"Is your surname Smith?"

"No, sir."

"What is it, then?"

"Williams—Willie Williams, sir. That's papa's name, so it is Auntie's."

"Why did you not tell me your surname was Williams?"

"If you please, sir, I did, about half-a-dozen times, only you would not believe me."

"Go and sit down," snarled Mr. Smithers, who began to wonder whether the misunderstanding was through his own fault or Willie's.

That simple youth seated himself next to the bully Snaggs, who immediately began chaffing him. Suddenly Snaggs burst into a roar of laughter.

"Write five hundred lines," cried Mr. Smithers, "now go on construing."

"I couldn't help laughing at what the kid said."

"What did he say?"

"Why, that if his Auntie had seen you shake him like that she would have put you across her knee and spanked you."

Howls of laughter rent the air. Mr. Smithers seized his cane.

"Is it true that you said that, boy?" he demanded.

"No, sir."

"You did say it," cried Snaggs.

"Indeed, I did not, sir. He ran a pen into me, then laughed, and—"

Mr. Smithers thought he knew how the land lay. Seizing Snaggs by the back of his neck, he gave him an awful thrashing. Willie moved to another seat.

"Ha, ha! Hark at Snaggs howling," laughed Tom Lorn "I say, Willie, did you say it?"

The Yorkshire Cricket Team, Another Grand Plate, is in Preparation. Look Out For It!

"No. I never used the word 'spanked.' I said she would have 'slipped' him. He hadn't got the words correctly, but he's got the caning all right. I am quite satisfied."

"My eyes! He'll be cheerful when he meets you outside, Willie. I'll advise you to give him a wide berth."

"Isn't he amiable, then?"

"He is not, Willie; and when you come to consider, you have scarcely gone the right road to make him particularly amiable with you."

"I don't care," blubbered Snaggs, who looked very much as though he did care. "You have no right to hit me for nothing."

"I have struck you for gross impertinence and for having told me a deliberate falsehood. You tried to make me cane that lad because you know he is simple."

"He's an abominable young liar," cried Snaggs. He took a little license knowing he would not be caned a second time. "He's not so simple as he looks. I believe he was only mugging you about his name. He wanted to make you appear ridiculous."

"Take care what you are saying, boy."

"You made me repeat what he said, then caned me for his words. Look there! He has just said something to Tom Lorn about you, and made him laugh. Why don't you thrash Lorn for it?"

"You empty-headed lout. If you speak to me in that insolent manner, I'll flog you again. What did that boy say to you, Lorn?"

"Well, sir!" exclaimed Tom, "if it is all the same to you I would rather not repeat it."

"Why not, boy?"

"I don't want to be landed with consequential damages, sir."

"What did you say, Williams?"

"If you please, sir," answered Willie slowly, "any little remark I made in confidence could have no possible interest to you."

"I insist on knowing what you said?"

"Would you mind telling me, sir, what you will do if I won't tell?"

"Yes. I shall cane you."

"Thank you, sir. Now would you be so kind as to inform me what you will do if I do tell you?"

Willie asked the question so deferentially, and looked so remarkably innocent that Mr. Smithers was a little deceived. He answered:

"That depends entirely on what you said."

Willie took a penny from his pocket, and tossed it up.

"It's heads, so if you please, sir, I'll tell. I remarked: 'It's principally tailway.'"

"I don't understand you. Is that what he said, and what you laughed at, Lorn?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did you say to him first?"

"We are not making much headway with this lesson, and he answered: 'It's principally tailway.'"

"I don't believe it," cried Snaggs. "You make him tell you what he said to me."

"Sir!" exclaimed Willie, looking very virtuous, "I don't think you should be ordered as to what to do. You have punished a boy for making a very rude remark, and I think he should be satisfied. I know I am."

"Step forward, Williams," ordered Mr. Smithers.

Then he put some questions to Willie, who answered correctly. Even when he asked more difficult ones the answers were all right.

"Come, my lad!" exclaimed Mr. Smithers, "we shall get on satisfactorily. I see you are well advanced. Where have you been taught?"

"At home, sir. By a tutor. He was a very clever man, only he had a slight misunderstanding with Auntie."

"Pshaw!"

"It caused me to receive a thrashing and to be sent to this school."

"What did your aunt do?" inquired Mr. Smithers, who was of an inquisitive turn of mind.

"Why, sir, my tutor received a letter purporting to come from Auntie. It was a love letter. She has money. The tutor hadn't. So he thought he'd have some, and Auntie. He found her in the drawing room. 'Beautiful creature,' he said—he wasn't a very truthful man—I love you' Then

he clasped her in his arms. This riled the old geyzer, and she clumped him over the napper and toed him out of the room."

"Silence, boys!"

"Unfortunately, my father came into the room and heard me laughing under the sofa, then he happened to find a copy of the letter in my room. He is an impulsive man. That's why I came here."

"Do you mean to say you wrote such a disgraceful letter?"

"No, sir. I never said a word about it. My father didn't say much, but he did a good lot. Made me feel like that chap you've been larruping feels; but it will get all right in a day or so."

After that Mr. Smithers kept his eye on Willie, but that guileless youth behaved so remarkably well, and answered all questions so accurately, that before the class was over he became quite a favourite with the master.

"You'd better keep by Bob and me, Willie," said Tom, when the lesson was finished. "Snaggs will be on the prowl. Come into the gymnasium, and if he wants to fight, I'll fight him. You see, I'm a bit bigger than you, and he's a lot bigger than either of us."

"Can he fight?"

"Yes! He hasn't very much science, but he hits plaguery hard, and he's as vicious as a tiger. He's following us in, and dashed if he isn't bringing some of his chums. Willie, I'm afraid you are going to get socks."

"Now, you young blackguard," cried Snaggs, getting down a fencing stick, "I'm going to give you an awful thrashing."

"Please don't," said Willie, picking up another stick.

Snaggs made no verbal reply, but struck at Willie with all his strength. The blow was dexterously guarded, and Willie caught him one on the elbow that made him yell, then dancing round Tim, he delivered some cuts that must have painfully reminded the bully of Mr. Smithers.

Snaggs made a grab at the stick, but Willie struck him over the knuckles.

"Will you fight me?" howled the bully.

"If you please, I will."

"Shut that door, you fellows. I'll show you."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom. "If he shapes at boxing as well as he does at fencing, it strikes me he'll show you We back Willie, don't we, Bob?"

"Rather! He's a scorcher. Pull off your coat, old chap."

"Auntie said I was to be careful not to catch cold."

"Did she teach you fencing, Willie?"

"No, my father. He taught me boxing, too. I used to practice on the butcher boy, until his master and my father stopped it. You see, the butcher's boy used to use rump steaks to cure his black eyes as he went on his rounds, and one day one old jossler, who had ordered rump steak for dinner, found that blessed butcher boy flopping it across the left optic. And, one morning, when the governor wanted to take me to church, I'd got two such jolly black eyes that he couldn't. Come on, Snaggs. I won't hurt you. Bet I sew him up first round."

Judging by appearances it looked a foregone conclusion. It was! But not as the spectators expected. Willie hit hard, and he was as active as a monkey. He planted three blows in Snaggs' wind, then he caught him one under the jaw a fourth in the wind, and the fight was finished.

There was not a mark on the bully; but he had had five blows too many.

"I'll—I'll give you a thrashing later on," he panted.

"Auntie says when I begin anything I must finish it," observed Willie, winking at Tom. "We will finish the fight now. Then start another one to-morrow."

"I shan't fight any more now."

"You haven't got half the pluck of that butcher boy. Are you beaten?"

"Of course not."

"Then every time you get up I'll knock you down. Start!"

"Look here——"

"Are you beaten?"

"I'm not going to stand——"

"Are you beaten?"

"Curse you, yes!"

"Al right. Get up. And when you feel like fighting again take my tip and go and fight Auntie."

THE END.