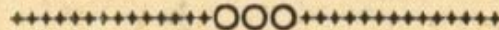


Jerry o' the Highway

A Rousing Romance of the Olden Times, Introducing Will o' the West, the Highwayman.

By REGINALD WRAY.

[Illustrated by E. E. Briscoe]



THE FIRST CHAPTER

"Haste to the Fair!"

RED ROGERS, the tinker, hurled the saucepan from him with a force that threatened to make a bigger hole in it than the one he had just mended.

"Jerry, you long-limbed loon! Jerry, you lazy, skulking lump of impertinence! Jerry you—— Oh, there you are, are you? Been with that carrotty-haired, red-faced, snub-nosed wastrel, Jo, I suppose. Just let me catch him hanging round my pitch, that's all," he cried, rising from the shaft of the tilted cart on which he had been sitting, and turning threateningly upon a merry-faced lad of about sixteen, who, his hands in his pockets, a battered three-cornered hat perched jauntily over one ear, had strolled out of the copse near which the travelling tinker had elected to pitch his tent.

"Well, what is it now?" demanded the boy.

"Pitch the tent, feed the 'oss, clean up the pots and pans, and mind you've something nice and tasty for supper," ordered the tinker.

Jerry looked at his father in dismay.

"I want to go to the fair," he objected.

"Then want will have to be your master," snapped Rogers, his red head bristling, as it

had a habit of doing when its owner was angry. "Think I'm going to leave all this valuable tinware lying about for any sneak thief to pinch? So you do as you're bid, an' no more lip."

"Shan't!" retorted Jerry.

Almost in one movement Red Rogers seized his son by the arm, a large stick from the ground, and brought the latter down with no little force upon the rebel's shoulder.

"You won't, eh?" he roared. "I'll—whack—show yer—whack—if ye won't—whack—I'll——"

He broke off and clasped his hand to his cheek, the flesh of which had been grazed by a well-aimed fir-cone.

Turning, his eyes fell upon a boy, with a tangled mass of red hair and a round merry face, who was standing some ten yards behind him. The boy was clad in a tattered shirt and a pair of faded knee-breeches, many sizes too large for him.

Too angry to realise that unless he was able to throw round a corner, the boy could not possibly have hurled the missile, Red Rogers released his son and made a dash at the newcomer.

"Run, Jo, run!" yelled Jerry excitedly.

The advice was unneeded, for the red-haired

one was already fleeing across the moor with Rogers, shouting blood-curdling threats, close at his heels.

"Sling your hook before the old 'un returns, Jerry," advised a merry, laughing voice from a tree on the boy's right.

The boy looked up, and saw a roguish, nut-brown face, surmounted by strands of silky black hair, with ripe, red pouting lips and a pair of laughing eyes as black as sloes.

"What, Mai, the gipsy! I might have guessed where the fir-cone came from. It was a passing good shot, for a girl," Jerry admitted graciously.

"But that's a better," retorted the girl in the tree, as a brown arm flashed from out the leaves and a deftly thrown blackbird's egg broke on the boy's forehead.

"That comes of having a yellow mop, instead of hair of a decent colour. Of a surety, Mistress Blackbird mistook your poll for her nest," laughed the girl, and vanished, springing from branch to branch with the agility of a squirrel.

"Haste, haste, haste to the fair!

Blind Tom, Will West, and I will be there," Jerry could hear her singing long after he had lost sight of her.

With a glance across the moor, which showed that Red Rogers had been brought to a standstill by shortness of breath, and was shaking his fist in impotent rage at the elusive Jo as he disappeared over an undulating ridge, Jerry plunged into the copse, and made off as fast as his legs could carry him.

Nothing short of being chained to a wheel of the tinker's cart would have kept him from the fair now; he knew that Mai had been sent to tell him that the best and truest friends he had in the world, Blind Tom, the fiddler, and Will o' the West, would be there.

It was true Will o' the West was a highwayman. But such a highwayman! Never has the King's highway been graced—or disgraced, if you choose—by such a wild, reckless, laughter-loving rascal.

A quip on his lip, and a smile in his eyes, he would rob a coach with a courtesy and grace all his own.

Huge rewards had been offered for his capture, dead or alive, but the peasantry

worshipped him, and though, doubtless, there were some whom the money might have tempted, they did not dare to injure the idol of the people, to say nothing of the fact that Will was far too clever, and Silver Sprite far too swift, for either to be easily captured.

Taking advantage of every hedge, dip in the ground, or clump of bracken that would hide him from the view of the outraged tinker, Jerry continued on his way for some three-quarters of a mile, a confused medley of merry voices, blaring trumpets, and hard-beaten drums growing louder at every step, until he topped a slight rise to find himself gazing down, with swiftly beating heart, upon a veritable town of canvas which had sprung into existence on the outskirts of the flourishing little town of Brantor since he had passed that way, three-days before.

A fair in the good old days was a very different thing to what it is in the present year of grace.

Brantor Fair was noted, far and wide, as the biggest thing of its kind in all the Western Counties. Hither came merchants from Russia with furs for the "Quality," spices from the East, wondrously carved woodwork from Central Europe, wines from France, silks from Italy—for it was then the custom for housewives to re-stock wardrobes and larders at the fair, and thus save themselves the long and perilous journey to London by road.

But it was not all business at Brantor Fair, as Jerry found when, having waited on the outskirts of the booths for the breathless but triumphant Jo, he made his way to the portion of the ground devoted to pleasure.

Here were sideshows enough in all conscience.

Two-headed girls, three-armed boys, five-legged calves, two-tailed pigs, fat women, thin women, giants and dwarfs, astrologers to cast your horoscope, "quacks" to cure every ill under the sun, dentists who performed their operations on a platform in full view of a grinning public, wrestling booths, boxing booths, gambling booths—to say nothing of a canvas "Theatre Royal," adorned with blood-curdling pictures of the fearful tragedies to be witnessed within, whilst on a platform outside stood the actors, clad in armour, in full state regalia of tinsel, or

as our old friends Harlequin and Columbine. As each booth had its leather-lunged attendant to draw the attention of the public to his own particular show, either by voice, the blaring of trumpets, or the beating of drums, the noise was deafening.

But no one seemed to mind the tumult, for all were in holiday mood.

Farmers and their labourers, miners from the tin mines, squatters from the moor, ostlers, grooms, herdsmen, shepherds, red-coated soldiers with stiff stocks, tail-coats and enormous shakos, home on leave; tramps from every part rubbed shoulders with the parsons from the adjoining villages, squires and their ladies, townsmen, clerks, and attorneys, with a sprinkling of the Quality from the surrounding estates.

Open-eyed and open-mouthed, Jerry and Jo wandered among the booths, stopping now and again to exchange rough witticism with wayfarers, gipsies, and others who, like themselves, were "Free of the King's Highway" or, in other words, had no permanent abodes.

THE SECOND CHAPTER An Interrupted Dance

JERRY and Jo did not linger amongst the booths.

Soon the quavering notes of a fiddle reached their ears. Hastening towards it, they found themselves in an open space where a number of people had gathered in a half-circle, before an oak-tree, beneath the spreading branches of which a stoutish man, clad in threadbare, but neat brown coat, corduroy breeches, and thick woollen stockings, was seated on an upturned cask, drawing music which spoke of a master hand from his instrument.

He had a frank, open face, a humorous mouth, and it was only that peculiar, alert appearance the blind often show that proclaimed him sightless.

Elbowing their way through the crowd, the boys stepped to the blind fiddler's side.

"What ho, Tom! How goes it?" demanded Jerry, glancing towards where Mai the Gipsy, clad in a dark, sequin-covered dress, her raven locks surmounted by a red, tasseled cap, was dancing with the ease and grace of a wood-nymph.

"What ho, my Prince of Tinkers," returned the blind man, in a deep, rolling voice. "Hast had thy fortune told?"

"Nay, Blind Tom, Mai has already seen to that. Only last week she told me that I might live until I was hanged—with luck," laughed Jerry. "Where's Will?" he added, in a whisper.

"Ask the fortune-teller. She's able to read your palm like an open book. If a man wants his sweetheart's love, she'll give him a potion; if he wants an enemy removed she'll show him how to make wax figures, and stick pins into them so that he'll waste away. She'll tell to a day when your rich uncle will die, or who stole the corn out of the sack Farmer Bossy took to the mill," replied Blind Tom, in such loud tones that Jerry knew he was speaking for the benefit of the crowd, for Blind Tom was an adept advertiser.

As he spoke he continued to play, whilst Mai circled round, keeping time to the music with her tambourine.

Suddenly she ceased dancing.

"I'll step it no longer without a partner," she declared.

A dozen young fellows pressed forward, each eager to be chosen as the spirited little fairy's partner.

Mai contemptuously waved them aside.

"Like to like, my masters! I dance only with Freemen of the King's Highway," she cried, with a rippling laugh. Then, snatching up her tambourine, she tripped lightly to where Jerry was standing, and dropping a mocking curtsey, cried:

"Trip a measure with Mai the Gipsy, Jerry o' the Pots and Pans?"

The boy hesitated, and glanced inquiringly at the fiddler.

"Toe-and-heel, lad; the fortune-teller can wait!" urged Blind Tom, sensing his dilemma.

Nothing loth, Jerry sprang into the circle of grinning spectators, whose cries were soon hushed as they gazed in admiring silence at the boy and girl. Their flying feet scarcely touched the short, green turf as they went through the mazes of an intricate dance which, truth to tell, Mai had taught the tinker's boy in many a hastily-snatched lesson when her caravan and the tinker's tilted cart had

chanced to be together, for these two were friends of long standing.

And a handsome couple they made. Though his clothes were shabby they showed Jerry's tall and straight figure to advantage, whilst Mai, nearly as tall, though some two years younger, looked, what indeed she was, a free, wild thing of the open.

"Heavens, what a dancer! She'd make a fortune at Drury Lane!" ejaculated a tall, elaborately dressed man of about thirty.

"But the boy! Look at the boy! He's the very lad we want," whispered his companion, who wore a shabby, black, full-bottomed coat, with frayed lace breeches of the same sombre material and plain cotton hose, all too short for his slender legs.

The tall man dragged his unwilling eyes from Mai's graceful form, and fixed them on the lithe, agile figure of her companion.

"He's a likely-looking youngster, friend Cawne, but no better fitted for the part than a score of others we have seen," he replied in guarded tones.

"It is well that you have an attorney with eyes in his head, Timotheus Trent!" growled Cawne, with a sidelong glance of contempt at his friend. "Canst see no likeness to anyone, in the lad?"

Timotheus Trent, secretary and factor to the late Lord Rackness, of Rackness Castle, in the county of Devon, shook his head.

"I grant you it's not a strong likeness, but I miss my mark if, when dressed in silk and brocade, with a cocked gold-laced hat on his head and a sword by his side, there'll be few who'll venture to swear he's not a Rackness born and bred!" continued Cawne.

For the first time Trent took more than a passing interest in the dancing boy.

"By my soul, you're right. Who is the brat? Where does he come from?" he whispered eagerly.

The question was answered more speedily than the speaker could possibly have anticipated.

With a roar that would not have discredited the renowned bull of Bashan—or any other bull, for the matter of that—Red Rogers burst through the crowd and made a grab at Jerry.

"Come here, you young varmint. I'll

teach yer to leave yer father to pitch camp, whilst you go kicking your heels about with a gipsy wench!" he cried furiously.

So unexpected was Red Rogers' appearance that he would doubtless have secured his truant son, had not Mai brought her tambourine down on his nose with a force that made the little brass discs rattle again, and caused the irate tinker to see stars.

Red Rogers staggered back, whilst Jerry, darting through the spectators, made off as quickly as his legs could carry him, darting round booths, through booths, and under booths, until, confident that he had thrown the tinker off his trail, he came to a halt, and, placing his fingers in his mouth, sent a loud, shrill whistle reverberating through the air.

It was answered by a scarcely less piercing reply, and a few minutes later Jo hastened up.

Jerry turned angrily upon him.

"Nice sort of a chap you are. The old 'un nearly had me that time!" he complained.

"I was listening to a brace of queer coves, who seemed kind of to know you, Jerry," returned his chum in aggrieved tones. "How was I ter know Red would be on you so quick-like?"

Jerry looked uneasily around. Jo and himself had a habit of making things lively in the places they visited, and he strongly suspected that many victims of his mischievous pranks would be quite glad to lay hands upon him.

"Who were they?" he demanded.

"One was Lawyer Cawne of Brantor. T'other, one of the quality, I should say, judging by his clobber," returned Jo, and proceeded to repeat the conversation that had taken place between the factor and the lawyer.

Jerry shook his head with a puzzled frown.

"Rackness? The name seems familiar," he mused.

"There's Rackness Castle down Exmouth way," suggested Jo. "I've heard tell as how old Lord Rackness—he as died the matter of a year ago—lost his only son, a kid of about four, who got away from his nurse. Some say as how he fell over a cliff into the sea, or was swallowed up in the quicksands near the mouth of the river, and some think he was



“The boy! Look at the boy!” said the tall man standing at the edge of the crowd. “He’s the very lad we want!” All unconscious of the interest he had aroused, Jerry danced on with Mai, the gipsy. (See Chapter 2.)

stolen by gipsies. Mercy on us, Jerry, what if you should turn out to be a real live lord?” he added excitedly.

Jerry laughed scornfully.

“Not I! Red Rogers is my father, sure enough!” he declared.

But the idea had taken root in Jo’s fancy, and he was loth to be laughed out of it.

“How do you know? You’ve only his word for it! ‘Sides, I’ve always said you weren’t one of us,” he persisted. “Lor’, wouldn’t it be fine if you were a lord, and——” He ceased speaking, and the excitement died out of his face as he continued, “I forgot. You’d leave the road, an’ all to do wiv it, and I’d never see you again. It aren’t in reason that you’d want to be seen with a ragged Freeman o’ the Highway, and you wearing gold lace and fine linen.”

“What do you take me for, Jo?” demanded Jerry indignantly. “If I woke up one morning to find myself King of England, I wouldn’t sit easy on my throne unless I had you on a chair besides me. Tinker or lord, Jerry Rogers isn’t one to go back on his friends.”

“Course you aren’t, Jerry. I knows that, and thank ye kindly for the promise,” cried Jo as seriously as though his friend’s good fortune was anything but a wild fancy.

THE THIRD CHAPTER Will o’ the West!

BY this time they had reached the outskirts of a fair-sized crowd that was gathered in front of a round-topped gipsy tent.

Here the fun of the fair seemed to have taken a more serious turn, to judge by the

lowering faces of many, though others were laughing loudly, apparently enjoying themselves to their hearts' content.

"A plague seize the old hag," growled a well-to-do citizen in sombre brown. "She promised to tell me how to double my fortune for a crown, and when I, like a simpleton, gave her the money, she told me to put double the amount of sand in my sugar before I sold it!"

"Dan, the horse coper, turned as white as a sheet when she asked him why he painted out the white star on his bay cob's forehead," declared a bystander.

"That's the hoss he picked up in the forest over Exmoor way," whispered Jo.

Jerry nodded and thrust his way through the crowd.

Crouched before a smouldering fire, over which a tripod supported a steaming cauldron, was a woman muffled in a shabby black cloak, and a pointed hat, beneath which appeared stray curls of matted hair.

Nothing could be seen of the fortune-teller's face save a pair of dark shining eyes, which seemed to have a strong magnetic power, for the hardiest among the spectators turned pale whenever they were turned upon him.

"Oh, ho, Tom Winnel, it was a starry night for a ramble yester eve when you kissed Moll Sindors at the Four-Cross-roads," cried the old hag, pointing a long, claw-like hand at a gaping young rustic.

"Ho, Farmer Horrocks, land watered by orphans' tears brings forth evil weeds," she shrilled, addressing a thin, weasel-faced farmer amongst the crowd.

The farmer started as though he had been stung, and those present, who knew how he had defrauded his dead brother's children of part of their heritage, exchanged significant glances.

"Hold your tongue, you old witch, or I'll——" began the farmer, when the fortune-teller, interrupted him, saying, with a shrill laugh:

"Set your dogs on me, as you did on the blind beggar, until Will o' the West came up and thrashed decency into you."

Leaving the farmer to back shamefacedly away, she went on telling home truths about

men in the crowd, until shouts of rage drowned the laughter of the spared.

"She's a witch! She's got the evil eye!" cried two or three of her victims.

Then somebody shouted:

"Duck the old witch. Let's see if she can swim, cullies!" And as drowning witches was a popular amusement of the period, the cry was taken up on all sides, and those in front, pushed on by their comrades in the rear, surged towards the old woman.

But ere a hand could be laid upon her, she rose to her feet, and a gasp of amazement burst from the onlookers when they found that the wizened and shrunken form became a majestic figure, a good seven feet in height from the point of her sugar loaf hat to the ground.

"Avaunt, ye creeping curs, whose evil souls I have laid as bare as the moor in winter time. Avaunt, I say, lest I summon those to my aid who will tear you limb from limb," she cried shrilly, waving a long forked stick as though it was some magic wand.

Overawed the crowd shrank back.

"At her lads! What! Are you craven that the scoldings of an old hag frightens you?" cried the horse coper; and beside himself with rage, he rushed at the tall figure.

But ere his outstretched hands could reach her, a fist shot out from the black cloak and struck him a blow between the eyes that sent him reeling backwards.

The next moment the cap was sent hurtling through the air, carrying with it a grey wig, and the long cloak fell to the ground, revealing a tall, well-built young man of about four or five and twenty, with a pair of dark eyes, dancing with mischief, shining from a handsome, open face.

He was clad in a blue coat, rich with gold lace, beneath which could be seen a gay brocade waistcoat, and white small-clothes which disappeared in a pair of enormous riding boots, whilst at his side swung a gold-hilted sword.

Taking a three-cornered hat from beneath his arm, he held it above his head, crying:

"What-o, my masters, is this the witch you would duck? Methinks the truth is bitter, even from one's friends," he cried with a merry laugh.

His words broke the spell amazement had cast over the crowd, and, his infectious laugh sweeping away their ill humours, they burst into a loud cry :

“ Will o’ the West. The smartest high toby-man that ever cried ‘ Stand and deliver ! ’ on the king’s highway.”

Pressing his hat to his heart, Will bowed his response to the greeting, whilst those in the back of the crowd took up the cry :

“ Will o’ the West ! Will o’ the West ! ”

Suddenly the highwayman started, for, from the copse behind the gipsy tent had sounded, like a sinister echo, the cry :

“ Will o’ the West ! It is the scoundrel himself ! Seize him, men.”

At the same moment six horsemen, led by the Sheriff of the county himself and followed by ten well-armed men on foot, burst from amongst the trees.

Sir Aylmer Arden, the Sheriff, was a man of many inches, especially round the middle ; he was of a fiery temper and of a red complexion.

He was something of a fop, too, and on this occasion was clad in well-cut clothes of white silk, laced with silver braid.

It was not the costume he would have chosen for a bout with the famous highwayman, but he was at the Fair with a party from a neighbouring mansion, when a note had been thrust into his hand advising him to consult the fortune-teller if he would learn how to run Will o’ the West to earth.

Now there was nothing in the wide world Sir Aylmer desired more than to lay the elusive highwayman by the heels, for Will o’ the West was a veritable thorn in his flesh.

Twice had the daring highwayman bade him “ Stand and deliver ! ” on the king’s highway, and had flouted him so often that he had sworn to rest neither night nor day until he had seen him swinging from the gibbet outside Exeter goal.

Consequently he had lost no time in summoning as many of his men as he could gather, and in laying his plans to secure Will.

That the fortune-teller was none other than his hated foe had never for a moment entered his head, but he felt convinced that Will would be somewhere in the neighbourhood,

and was determined that this time he should not escape.

And neither did he.

With the rasping voice of the Sheriff ringing in his ears, Will turned and bowed courteously.

“ A very good e’en to you, Sir Aylmer. I am flattered by the attention you would show me, but other business calls me hence,” he cried with a merry laugh, as he sprang into the midst of the crowd, who opened to let him pass.

A look of anxiety swept into the Sheriff’s face, followed by a look of triumph, as he saw the noted highwayman struggling in the arms of four of his men, who, mingling with the crowd, had been waiting to cut off their prey.

Despite the odds against him, Will o’ the West put up a good fight for liberty, helped by his many friends in the crowd, who did everything in their power, short of actual violence, to embarrass his would-be captors.

Using the staves of their pikes to clear a way through the crowd, the footmen from the copse had soon formed into a compact body round their struggling comrades, whilst the mounted men, forcing their horses into the midst of the crowd, scattered them in all directions.

Finding further resistance vain, Will o’ the West ceased to struggle, and was hauled, none too gently, to his feet.

Throwing himself from his horse, the Sheriff waddled to where his prize, bound hand and foot, was standing in the custody of two stalwart men.

“ So, Will o’ the West, I’ve got you at last, eh ? You’ve had your last ride over the moor, my flaunting game-cock,” he cried exultantly.

“ I’ve been in your hands before, I believe, though such trifles are apt to escape one’s memory,” retorted Will carelessly.

“ Ay, but I’ll wager one hundred guineas you will not give me the slip this time,” cried the Sheriff, flushing at the recollection of how the wily highwayman had beaten him a few months before.

“ It’s a bet, and be sure, I will not fail to collect the money,” cried Will gaily.

The Sheriff opened his mouth to reply, but

ere he could do so he was alarmed by a cry of terror from the tent.

"Heaven guard us, what's this?" burst from his lips, as he saw the canvas slowly moving towards him.

The next moment the tent fell to the ground, revealing a magnificent silver-grey horse, saddled and bridled, and with pistols sticking from the holsters.

Then the Sprite caught sight of Will, and, with flashing eyes and bared teeth, rushed at his master's captors.

"Whoa, Sprite, would'st impale yourself on those pikes? Off to the moors, lass, I'll join you anon!" shouted Will.

Men said that Silver Sprite was almost human, and if she could not speak she could at least understand her master's commands.

Such indeed seemed to be the case, for she came to an abrupt halt within a few inches of the pikes, and stood, stamping angrily and threatening the pikemen with bared teeth, whilst her eyes seemed to flash flame.

It was then that Sir Aylmer made one of the great mistakes of his life.

Fearing lest so valuable a beast should escape his clutches, he seized her by the bridle.

A cry of warning came from Will o' the West's lips.

But it was too late.

Sprite seized her would-be captor's shoulder in her strong teeth, and, heavy man though he was, shook him as a terrier would a rat.

"Steady, Sprite, don't kill the worshipful Sheriff, or I lose my hundred guineas!" shouted Will.

At her master's orders the beautiful animal released her victim, and the Sheriff rolled on the grass.

Smarting with pain, Sir Aylmer rolled on to one elbow, and, dragging a huge horse pistol from a pocket inside his coat, aimed it at the horse's head.

And now, for the first time, Jerry found a chance of taking part in the game.

Foremost amongst Will's friends had been a sweep, who had left the marks of his grimy hands upon the face of more than one of Will's captors, until he had found the attempt hopeless, when he had fled, leaving his bag of soot behind him.

This bag now lay between Jerry and the prostrate Sheriff.

As Sir Aylmer drew his weapon, Jerry and Jo snatched up the bag and emptied its contents over the enraged man just as his finger closed over the trigger, with the result that the bullet skimmed harmlessly over Sprite's ears instead of lodging in her brain.

"Good lads, I'd have lief have lost my own life as have seen the mare killed," cried Will gleefully. "Up and away, or yonder white gull you have turned into a black raven will have you whipped at the cart's tail."

Almost before the words had left the highwayman's lips, Jerry and Jo had sprung on to the mare's back, and held on like grim death as the intelligent creature reared on its hind legs and pawed at the men who attempted to seize her, then, leaping forward, shot like an arrow from a bow over the moor.

Coughing, sneezing, and spluttering, Sir Aylmer Arden struggled to his feet, the white suit, of which he had been so proud, irretrievably ruined, but, feeling more keenly than anything the undoubted fact that, though bound and a prisoner, Will o' the West had so far scored the most points against him.

"After them, you slow-witted scullions!" roared he furiously. "Fifty guineas if you bring them back. It shall be the Plantations for the boys, my stable for the mare!"

"Bah! D'ye think tailors on horseback like you scum can catch Silver Sprite?" cried Will scornfully. "But lest they should lack encouragement I will e'en add to your fifty guineas, if they get within half a mile of her."

"You, at least, shall never see her again, unless it be on the day you are hanged, and then I'll be on her back!" thundered Sir Aylmer, shaking his fist in the prisoner's face, as his men galloped off.

Will greeted the threat with a roar of mocking laughter, which was so infectious that the whole crowd joined in.

"A mirror! I'll give half what I take from the next coach I stop to the man who will show his worship his own face in a looking-glass!" he shouted gleefully.

Sir Aylmer Arden shook with rage.

"Take the braggart to the lock-up, and woe betide ye if ye let him escape," he roared

furiously; then, springing on to his horse, forced his way through the jeering mob.

Truth to tell, he breathed the freer when he had left the crowd behind, for though he was Lord High Sheriff of the county, Will o' the West was King of the Highway, and the idol of the people.

With many an anxious glance at the hostile crowd the Sheriff's men closed round their prisoner.

"A rescue! A rescue!" shouted a dozen voices, and the guard lowered their pikes as the mob surged round them.

"Nay, lads, there's no need. Will o' the West has been trapped before, but has never yet been hung!" cried Will, his clarion voice ringing like a trumpet blast above the tumult.

Obediently the mob drew back, and the Sheriff's men, eager to get their prisoner away ere the crowd could change its mind, hastened at the double towards the town.

Accompanied by a booing, hissing, jeering multitude, they pressed through the streets, not daring to halt until they had deposited their prisoner safely in Brentor Round House, a red-roofed, stone building, which tradition said had once been the stronghold of a robber band.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

"Reynard's Away to the Hills, O!"

IN the meantime Jerry and Jo had sped swiftly away, untroubled by thoughts of their six pursuers who, be it said, never got within sight of Silver Sprite after she had topped the first rise in the undulating moor.

Confident that the intelligent beast would carry them to one of the highwayman's many hiding-places, where they could remain hidden until night rendered it safe for them to return to Brentor, Jerry made no attempt to guide her.

In this the young tinker showed his wisdom. Ere long Silver Sprite turned up a gurgling moorland stream, which ran at the bottom of a miniature gorge so overgrown with bushes and small trees that at times the boys had to lean forward to escape the clinging brambles overhead, until at last they reached a tiny lawn of rich, green grass, so hemmed in by

undergrowth that anyone could have passed within a couple of yards of their hiding-place without finding them.

Here the grey mare stopped, and the two boys slid to the ground.

"Oh, you silver beauty!" cried Jerry, stroking the splendid animal's arched neck. "It might have gone hard with us but for you."

The Sprite rubbed her velvety muzzle against Jerry's cheek, then sniffed at his pockets, for she and the boy were old friends, and she was seldom disappointed of a lump or so of sugar.

Nor was she kept waiting long for the dainty. Knowing that he would certainly meet Will o' the West at the fair, Jerry had several in his pocket—how obtained it is perhaps as well not to inquire.

Loosening the saddle-girths and taking the bit from the horse's mouth, Jerry left her to feed on the luscious grass, whilst he and Jo did ample justice to bread and meat, from a pair of wallets buckled to the saddle, washed down with water from the bubbling stream at their feet. Then, stretched on the soft turf, waited, with what patience they might, for nightfall.

It was already dark ere Jerry and Jo again clambered on to Silver Sprite's back, and set off on their great enterprise.

This was no more nor less than the rescue of Will o' the West, though how that feat was to be achieved they had no idea.

All they knew was that everyone in the little moorland town, except, perhaps, the Sheriff's immediate followers, would befriend them in their need.

But their greatest hope lay in Blind Tom the fiddler, whose keen wits they held in great respect.

Beneath the shadow of a small wood, some quarter of a mile from Brentor, Jerry drew rein.

"Stay by the horse, Jo, whilst I go to seek Blind Tom," directed Jerry as the two boys sprang to the soft turf by the side of the road.

"Hadn't we better both go? You know Silver Sprite never stirs from where she is left," suggested Jo, glancing nervously towards four cross roads, where he knew a suicide had been buried shortly before, with a stake through him to keep his restless spirit

from roaming over the countryside and frightening chance wayfarers out of their senses. "Sakes alive! what's that?" he added, as a hollow groan came from the wood close by their side.

Terror-stricken, the boys clung to each other.

They were no cowards, these two young ragamuffins, but they lived in an age when witches, ghosts, and evil spirits, were believed in by both high and low.

"It's—it's the suicide from the Cross Roads," stammered Jerry.

Again that awful groan caused the hair to rise on their heads, and Jo had already turned to flee, when Silver Sprite whinnied.

Jerry grasped Jo by the arm, and held him tight.

"Show yourself, Mai, we knew who it was from the first," he cried, too relieved to trouble about the truth.

"Skeery Jerry and trembling Jo

Run like rats if a girl say boo,"

trilled a musical voice, and the next moment the gipsy girl emerged from the wood.

"We didn't run," growled Jo.

"You would have done if Silver Sprite hadn't recognised me," asserted Mai, laying her soft cheek against the mare's velvety nose.

"But I haven't been waiting an hour or more to talk to a pair of frightened kids," continued Mai laughing. "Blind Tom sent me to meet two brave boys who would snatch Will o' the West out of the Round House, not a couple of trembling children."

"What have we to do?"

"How did Blind Tom know we would be here?" asked the two boys in a breath.

"Don't ask me how Blind Tom knows anything. P'raps the loss of his eyes has made him sharper than the rest of us," returned Mai seriously. "At anyrate, I can give you his message as we walk towards the town. Woods sometimes have ears, as well as walls."

As she spoke the little gipsy girl moved towards the twinkling lights of Brentor, the boys, on either side of her, listening intently as she spoke, whilst Silver Sprite followed close behind them.

On the outskirts of the town the two boys lead Silver Sprite no to the moor, there to

continue their anxious vigil on the deserted countryside whilst the girl, avoiding the brilliantly lighted fair-ground, made her way by a succession of narrow, side streets—as familiar to the gipsy girl as her own woodland glades—until she came to the end of Brentor's main street, at the end of which rose the gloomy, loopholed walls of the Round House.

Crouched in the carved, wooden porch of an ancient house, she waited, unseen by the few passers-by, until, roaring out a rousing chorus, a score of men came arm-in-arm down the street.

As they approached, the Sheriff's men, who were gathered beneath a lamp which swung before the lock-up's solitary door, glanced apprehensively at each other, as though they feared a rescue.

But their fears were allayed when they saw that the newcomers were unarmed and in merry mood.

"Let's give Will o' the West a merry rouse, lads! It'll cheer him up for his journey to Exeter and the gallows on the morrow!" suggested one of the light-hearted band.

"Well spoken, Nick o' the Shears! And we won't lack music, either, for here comes Blind Tom!" cried another, as the blind fiddler, playing a merry lilt which set all feet shuffling, strode from out a by-street.

Pausing before the Round House door, Blind Tom ceased playing and, looking round as though his sightless eyes could see the features of those present, cried:

"I've done well to-day, my bold boys; so we'll e'en make a night of it! You drink at my expense!"

As he spoke he waved his bow, and two tapsters, each wheeling a barrow with a tapped cask of beer before him, appeared on the scene, and were soon busy pouring nut-brown ale into pewter pots, and handing them around to the thirsty crowd.

"A toast, gentles; a toast! To Will o' the West, king of highwaymen!" Then, as the Sheriff's men hesitated—not for lack of will to honour the toast, but lest spies should be about who would carry the tale to their master—he added: "An' ye who do not like drinking Will's health drink to the Sheriff. I care not who ye toast!"



“Avaunt, I say, lest I summon those to my aid who will tear you limb from limb!” cried the old witch, waving a long, forked stick as though it was some magic wand. Overawed, the crowd shrank back. (See Chapter 3.)

Thus urged, the Sheriff’s men emptied their pots with the best amongst the townsmen, whilst as the news of what was taking place near the Round House spread about, the crowd swelled until it filled the whole open space before Will o’ the West’s prison. Ere long all were quaffing deep draughts of Blind Tom’s beer, and shuffling their feet to the music of his fiddle.

“Mai! Mai!” arose suddenly from a hundred lips as, darting from out the porch, the gipsy girl whirled into the centre of the throng.

Those nearest her drew back with cries of

alarm as what looked like a slender rod with a big top which Mai carried, sent forth a shower of sparks, and a rocket soared into the air to burst high above the houses.

A long-drawn “Oh-o-o-o!” came from the spectators, for rockets were not so common then as they are now.

But their thoughts were swiftly drawn back to earth as Blind Tom struck up a wild, tuneful air, and Mai glided round a quickly-formed circle, on her toes, ere she threw herself, with the vigour that was her chief charm, into a pas-de-seul that held all on-lookers entranced.

At length she sank gracefully on one knee, to a thunderous roar of applause, accompanied by the jingle of coin as the delighted crowd showered coppers upon her, drowning the loud beat of a horse's hoofs for which the gipsy girl had been listening, even as she danced.

Springing lightly to her feet, Mai faced the fiddler.

"After a dance, a song, Tom!" she cried.

"Ay, ay, a song! One with a rousing chorus!" cried two or three voices.

With more haste than he usually showed, Blind Tom began:

"Old Mother Bubble-chock jumped out of bed!

Reynard's away to the hills, O! (roared the crowd.)

Out of the window she popped her old head! (sang Tom.)

Reynard's away to the hills, O!

John! John! John! the grey goose has gone; and—

Reynard's away to the hills, O! hills, O!
hills, O! hills, O!

And Reynard's away to the hills, O!"

chorused his audience, in a thundering shout that drowned all other sounds, as Blind Tom quite intended it should.

There are between twenty and thirty verses of the old Jacobite song, and Blind Tom struggled manfully through them all, his deep bass voice often leading the crowd on to sing the chorus over and over again until his throat ached and his mouth grew so parched that towards the end he was croaking like a raven.

But he cared nothing for that so long as his scheme worked, and he could save Will o' the West from the gallows.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER

How Will o' the West Cheated the Sheriff.

IN the meantime, Jerry and Jo had waited impatiently on the moor until Mai's signal rocket, bursting in the heavens, warned them that the time for action had come.

Jumping on Silver Sprite's back, Jerry helped Jo on to the crupper behind him and

headed the mare towards the town, where they arrived just as Blind Tom commenced the song intended to cover any noise they might happen to make whilst engaged on the difficult task before them.

Steering Silver Sprite close to the wall of the Round House, Jerry stood up in the saddle, a coil of rope over his shoulder, a stout axe in his leather girdle, and a saw slung behind his back.

Grasping the lead guttering that circled the old building, he braced himself against the wall whilst Jo climbed up his body to the roof.

Kneeling on the tiles, Jo dragged Jerry to his side, and, clambering a few feet to the right so that the débris should not fall on the waiting mare, they attacked the red tiles with their axes.

"Reynard's away to the hills, O!" roared the chorusing men before the Round House door.

Bang! crash! went the axes of the two boys on its roof.

A very few minutes sufficed to lay bare four rafters, which the boys tackled with their saws.

But this proved a long, tough job, for the rafters were of good old British oak that was hardened by time, and the perspiration was rolling in streams down their faces ere they had sawn a hole big enough for the highwayman to pass up when the time came.

But the song was already drawing to its close, and Jerry knew that they had little time to spare.

Tying one end of the rope from his shoulders to the nearest whole rafter, he flung down the slack end, which fell with a sullen thud on bare boards a short distance below the would-be rescuers.

But this Jerry quite expected, for Blind Tom had told him that immediately beneath the roof was a loft and trap-door through which they could gain Will o' the West's prison cell.

Dropping on hands and knees, Jerry groped about in the dark until he found a heavy iron ring.

But tug as he might, it was not until he

had called Jo to his aid that the two boys succeeded in throwing back the heavy door.

"Art there, Will?" cried Jerry, on hands and knees beside the dark opening in the floor of the loft.

"What, Jerry! So it is you who have aroused me out of the sweetest sleep I have enjoyed for many a long day, with your thumping and banging overhead," replied the light-hearted highwayman.

"It may have been that a tile or two slipped through our hands and aroused your highwaymanship from his slumber," laughed Jerry. "But haste ye! Blind Tom is nearing the end of his song, and Jo and I want to join in the final chorus. Can'st climb, Will?"

"Aye marry can I," came back the response, and Jerry dropped the slack of the rope into the cell.

Half a minute later, Will had gained the loft and was shaking hands with his two young rescuers.

"Gallant lads, I owe ye much for this, and when did Will o' the West forget to pay his debts?" cried the highwayman, then paused and listened intently, for during a comparative lull in the singing the night wind brought to his ears the sound of galloping horses.

"Quick, lads, out of this and mingle with the crowd. It's his worship the Sheriff, and a troop of cavalry come to escort me to Exeter," he cried, gathering up the rope, and throwing it down the outside of the Round House.

Without stopping to argue the point the two boys slid down the rope, and made off, followed by the highwayman, who hastened towards his mare which was whinnying a welcome to its master.

Lightly, Will o' the West leaped into the saddle.

"'Tis fine to feel you beneath me once more, sweetheart," he whispered, leaning over the mare's withers and playing with her ears. "Nay, lass, nay!" he added, as Silver Sprite scraped the ground, impatient to be off. "His Worship the Sheriff has ridden hot-foot to Exeter to see me, and it would show but ill-breeding to let him have his ride for nothing."

Keeping well within the shadow of the Round House, Will moved cautiously forward until he could see the crowd around Blind Tom, who lowered his fiddle, and, mingling with the crowd, disappeared, just as Sir Aylmer Arden rode up at the head of half-a-score mounted dragoons, each with his short, clumsy musket on his knee.

"Out of the way, ye scum, unless you want the flat of my troopers' swords across your backs!" shouted the Sheriff, as, followed by the dragoons, he forced his horse through the mob.

Tired after his long ride to Exeter and back, yet well content, inasmuch as he would soon have the elusive highwayman—who had so often slipped through his fingers—safely lodged in the County Jail, the Sheriff threw himself off his horse.

Bidding the corporal in charge of the men he had left on guard to throw open the door, he strode into the cell crying:

"Rouse ye, cut-throat and thief, my men await to take you for your last ride."

But his pleasantry was met with a silence that sent a thrill of apprehension through Sir Aylmer's veins.

"A torch! Quick a torch! I' faith there shall be whippings at the cart's tail to-morrow if Will o' the West has escaped," he added in a loud shout.

In fear and trembling, for well they knew that the Sheriff had both the power, and the will, to put his threat into execution, the Corporal and another of the Sheriff's men rushed into the cell with torches, which sent a ruddy glare over the wooden chair and stout table that formed the only furniture of the cell, but showed only too plainly that the highwayman had gone.

Almost besides himself with rage, Sir Aylmer Arden rushed from the Round House, and he literally foamed at the mouth when the crowd, swaying close on the heels of his troopers' horses, burst into a perfect tornado of laughter.

"Silence, ye fools, or by——" began the Sheriff, when he was interrupted by the shrill notes of a fiddle a little distance away, and a clear baritone voice singing:

"John, John, John! The grey goose has

gone, and Reynard's away to the hills, oh!"

The next moment, Silver Sprite, with her master in the saddle, leapt into the street.

Sweeping his three-cornered hat from his head, Will bowed gracefully to the Sheriff, then, wheeling round, darted off just as, in obedience to a rage-maddened shriek from the Sheriff, the troopers emptied their muskets in a useless volley at the spot where he had been but a moment before.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER

How Jerry Became a Peer

THAT night, Jerry and Jo slept the sleep of the just, though their couch was but dry leaves and their chamber a sheltered nook in the wood near which Red Rogers the Tinker had pitched his camp.

The knowledge that a grim reckoning awaited him when he presented himself at the tilted cart, which had been his only home as long as he could remember, troubled Jerry not at all.

He was as used to a thrashing as an eel is said to be to skinning, and deemed the excitement of the previous day well worth the whipping his loving father would surely bestow upon him.

Usually Jerry rose with the sun, but then he generally went to bed with the same, but it had been well after midnight ere he had fallen asleep and now the sun was high up in the heavens ere he awoke to the certainty that Red Rogers would have had to cook his own breakfast, and that would surely mean at least a dozen extra cuts with the ruffian's broad leather belt.

"Slash me, Jo, but I am in for it," he remarked lugubriously to his bed-mate as the two boys sat up, rubbing the sleep from their eyes. "You'd better lie low until the old 'un has taken it out of me, then, maybe, I can get you a bit of grub when he isn't looking."

To this Jo, somewhat unwillingly, agreed. Putting as brave a face on the matter as he could, Jerry strolled to the edge of the wood and peeped out, then pursed up his lips in a noiseless whistle of dismay.

Red Rogers was seated on the shafts of the cart, a thick slice of bacon on a plate, which

he balanced on his knees before him, and a handleless jug of steaming coffee by his side.

His dark, lowering face was full of danger signals. His eyes were blood-shot and heavy, whilst now and again, he drew his hand across his forehead in a way that told the boy that the man had drunk, not wisely, but too well, the previous night.

"Better get it over. That bacon does smell good," muttered Jerry as, rising to his feet, he scrambled through the hedge.

"Mornin', old 'un," was his filial greeting, as he paused at a respectful distance from his father.

"Where ha' you been?" demanded Red Rogers, his mouth full of bread and bacon. "Had any breakfast?" he added with unwonted consideration.

Jerry shook his head and eyed the plate wolfishly.

"Lay hold o' this. I aren't got no stomach for vittles this mornin'," returned his parent, holding out the plate.

Eagerly Jerry stepped forward, and thus placed himself within his father's reach, who, dropping the viands on the ground, seized him by the wrist.

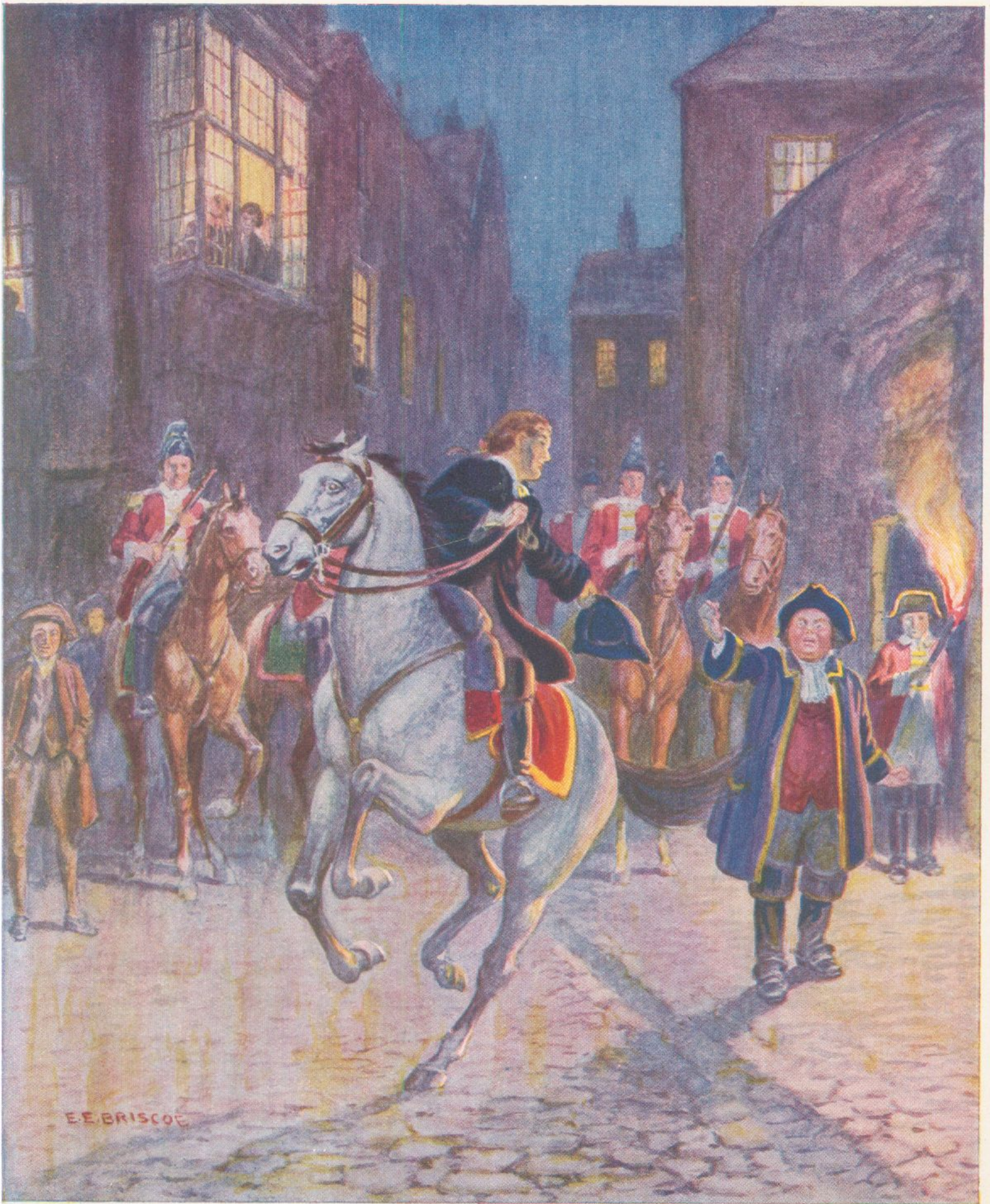
"Got ye, ye young varmint," cried the man exultantly. "Sakes, won't I lam ye. I feel just up to it this mornin'. Go to the fair, would ye? Leave yer poor old father to fend for hisself, and he with a head as big as Brentor Round House. I'll learn ye!"

As he spoke Red Rogers tore the lad's ragged garments from the upper part of his body, and Jerry knew he was in for something extra in the way of a thrashing.

Still he wasted no words in what experience had long since taught him would prove useless attempts to soften the pumping machinery which did duty as a heart in Red Rogers' body; nor did he struggle much, for he knew the Tinker to be an expert in the art of holding on to a victim once he had him in his power.

"Come along. Ye won't know yer own back by the time I've done with ye!" roared Red Rogers, dragging the boy to the off-side wheel of the cart and tying him to it by his wrists.

"Now you're going through with it. Be



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WILL O' THE WEST TRICKS THE SHERIFF !
The Daring Highwayman Makes Good His Escape Under the very Noses of the Troopers !



The highwayman was struggling in the arms of four of the sheriff's men, but, despite the odds against him, Will o' the West put up a great fight for liberty. (See Chapter 3.)

sure to tell me if I don't hit hard enough," grinned Red Rogers, as he made the heavy leather belt whistle above his head.

Jerry gripped the piece of wood, he had thrust into his mouth to prevent him from calling out, between his teeth, and awaited the impending blow.

But it never came. Even as Red Rogers leant back to give additional force to the blow, a loud "Stop!" caused him to wheel swiftly round to find that Timotheus Trent and Simon Cawne, with both of whom he was well acquainted, had ridden up and were watching the white, but hard-set and determined face of the threatened boy.

"Service, gentles," said the Tinker subserviently tugging at a coarse lock of red hair that hung down his forehead.

"Fie, fie, friend Rogers, surely you would

not mar the child's fair flesh with that fearful belt?" expostulated the lawyer.

"Don't know that it's any business of yourn, Master Cawne. A man can surelie do what he likes with his own son," growled the Tinker sullenly.

"But is he your own son, friend Rogers?"

"On course he is. Haven't I got his birth certificate to show them as has the rights to see it?" cried Rogers, after a moment's hesitation.

"Look here, Cawne, it's no good beating about the bush. You take Rogers aside and talk things over with him, whilst I have a chat with our friend here," interposed Trent, dismounting and approaching Jerry, who gazed suspiciously at him. He had been called many names in his time, but "young friend" was certainly not one of them.

Simon Cawne nodded, and dismounting more slowly, took a well-filled leather bag from his pocket and jingled it as he beckoned Red Rogers to follow him a short distance from the camp.

"There, my lad," said Trent, as he cut the boy free. "Put on your shirt and coat, and then we can talk."

Wondering that anyone, least of all a gentleman like Timotheus Trent, who was known far and wide as the late Lord Rackness's factor, should want to talk to him on any conceivable subject, Jerry obeyed.

"Do you live in that cart, Jerry?" asked Trent, laying his hand on the boy's shoulder. Then, without giving him time to reply, he continued: "Do you know, we wouldn't let one of our dogs sleep in a place like that at Rackness Castle."

"Maybe not; but p'raps the dogs aren't none the happier for that," returned Jerry, feeling that it was incumbent on him to defend the only home he had ever known.

"Are those the only clothes you've got?" pursued Trent, ignoring Jerry's remark.

"Of course they are. What's the good of more? One can only wear one suit at a time!" retorted Jerry impatiently.

"Quite true, but I daresay you will change your mind before long," agreed Trent. "Now, who lights the fire, cooks the food, washes up the dishes, and cleans up generally?"

"Ye don't think the old 'un would do it, do ye?" demanded Jerry scornfully.

"No, I don't think he would," smiled Trent. "Now what do you say to living with me in Rackness Castle, having servants to wait on you, the best of food, the warmest of clothes, and as much money, in reason, as you can spend?"

"What do I say? Why, that either you ought to be in a madhouse for talking such balderdash, or I for listening to you," cried Jerry angrily.

"But it's not balderdash, Jerry. I mean it," cried Trent eagerly.

The boy looked incredulously at him.

"Why?" he demanded.

Timotheus Trent hesitated, then led Jerry towards the wood. Why, it is difficult to say, as there was no one nearer than Cawne and

Red Rogers, who were well out of earshot, except the broken-winded, broken-kneed old horse, and he could have been depended upon to have kept the secret.

"You have heard of Lord Rackness, Jerry?" asked Trent.

"The bloke that died a few months back?" asked the boy.

Trent nodded.

"You may have heard, too, that his only son was lost when he was a mere babe of three," he continued. "Some think he was swallowed up in a bog, others that he fell into the river and was carried out to sea. Others, including his late lordship, held that he had been stolen by gipsies. Be that as it may, nothing was ever heard of him again, and they say that Lady Rackness died of a broken heart."

Jerry was conscious of an unwonted lump in his throat, and his voice was suspiciously husky as he asked:

"What's all that to do with me?"

"I am coming to that directly," declared the factor impatiently. "Lord Rackness always believed that his son was alive, and when he died, left a will to the effect that unless the boy was found within a year and a day of his death, Rackness Castle, and all his property, save for a few unimportant legacies, is to go to various hospitals and charitable institutions throughout the western counties. If, however, the boy is found, I am appointed his guardian until he comes of age, when in the old lord's own words, 'his young lordship will doubtless deal generously with him according to his deserts.'"

Jerry looked up quickly.

"I see what you're driving at. You want me to help you look for him," he cried.

Timotheus Trent smiled.

"There is no need, my lad; you are the boy!" he declared.

Jerry regarded the speaker with wide-staring, incredulous eyes.

"Me?" he ejaculated.

"Yes, you," returned Trent. "At any rate, for the next five years; whether you are Lord Rackness or not after that depends entirely upon how much you offer Lawyer Cawne and myself to keep our mouths shut."

The last sentence came somewhat unwillingly from the factor's lips. He had wanted to keep the truth from the boy until the last, but Cawne had overruled him, pointing out that they would have a much greater hold on the boy if he was as deeply involved in the plot as they were.

Neither Trent nor the villainous old lawyer deemed it possible that Jerry would refuse their offer; consequently the former was taken aback when Jerry turned angrily upon him, crying:

"So it's a fake, is it? Then you may e'en get somebody else to do your dirty work! The old 'un has never been able to make me steal, beat me as he might, and I'm not going on the cross to do honest folks out of their rights for the likes of you!"

Trent turned white with rage.

"Don't be a fool, boy! I'll wager there isn't another lad living that would not jump at the chance," he cried.

"That is as may be, but——" began Jerry, when he was interrupted by a loud shout of "Cinch it, Jerry! Cinch it! Better be a lord for five years than a tinker all your life!" and Jo, almost beside himself with excitement, sprang out of the wood and seized his chum by the arm.

Jerry shook his head obstinately, and it was not until Timotheus Trent had assured him that Lord Rackness had neither kith nor kin to be defrauded out of their inheritance, that he gave a reluctant consent, just as Lawyer Cawne and Red Rogers joined them.

The tinker was in the very best of spirits. Jerry had never seen him so good-humoured before.

He seemed literally bubbling over with merriment.

"To the gallows wi' me if this aren't the rummiest thing I ever did see. To think that I've been a nussin' a real live lord in my bosom all these years, and never knowed it!" he roared, his hands thrust deep into his breeches' pockets, from which came a musical jangle of gold. "I've been a good father to ye, Jerry, no one can say I haven't. Not a day has passed since you were old enough to toddle, that I haven't lammed you for the good of your

soul. I've made a man of ye, and a lord as well! Ha, ha, ha! Ho, ho, ho!"

"Cease your babbling, fellow, and get ye gone!" cried Trent, impatiently. "You know what you've got to do?"

"Ay, ay, master. I've to pocket a pound a week, ax no questions, don't come within twenty mile o' Rackness Castle, and keep my mouth shut," grinned the tinker.

"And if you don't keep the last two conditions, friend Rogers, you may e'en whistle for the first," interposed Simon Cawne, a world of threat underlying the smooth, oily tones in which he spoke. "Hullo, who have we here?" he added, in alarm, as his eyes fell on Jo, who was talking earnestly with Jerry.

"Get thee gone, ye young varmint, or I'll tear ye limb from limb!" cried Red Rogers, moving threateningly on Jo, who would have made off had Jerry not detained him.

"Jo is one of the few friends I have in the world, and where I go he goes. If he stays behind, so will I; and ye may find another Lord Rackness!" declared Jerry, ignoring the tinker, and turning to Timotheus Trent.

"Impossible!" cried Trent.

But though he sought to show a score of reasons why Jo could not be received at Rackness Castle, and Red Rogers, fearing to lose the promised pound a week, used threats, entreaties, and abusive language, in about equal parts, Jerry refused to budge unless Jo went with him.

The only one who did not speak was Simon Cawne, and he, with a cunning grin, signed to the tinker to be quiet, and led the factor a little distance away.

"This comes of your talking secrets near a wood," he snarled as soon as they were alone. "I suppose the red-headed little rat overheard all you said to this tinker's boy?"

"How should I know what he overheard?" growled Trent sulkily.

"Anyhow, he has heard too much to be let go. We must take him to the castle, and get rid of him as quickly as possible. Trust bold Captain Blackbane to take him off our hands," suggested the lawyer.

Trent nodded an assent, and the pair of villains returned to where Jerry and Jo were

impatiently awaiting the result of the discussion.

"All right, my lad, have it your own way. Rackness Castle is but a gloomy place for a boy, and ye may be all the happier for having a companion of your own age with ye," said the factor indulgently.

Jerry shot a grateful look at Timotheus Trent, whilst Jo showed his delight by turning a succession of cart-wheels with bewildering rapidity.

"If your lordship will mount behind me, Lawyer Cawne will give your friend a lift, for we have a long ride before us," said Trent, flinging himself into the saddle.

Although not yet able to realise that what had just taken place that morning was not all part of a mad dream from which he would awaken to find himself still Jerry of the Pots, the boy thrilled as he heard himself addressed by the title for the first time, and grasping Trent's extended hand, swung himself on the crupper of that worthy's horse, not quite certain whether he stood on his head or his heels.

Jo grinned, but Red Rogers seated himself on the shafts of his tilted cart, and laughed until the tears rolled down his cheeks.

"What's the witless fool laughing at?" cried Trent angrily. "See that ye are well away from Brentor within the hour, or ye stand in danger of losing the weekly dole Lawyer Cawne has promised ye!"

Red Rogers nodded, apparently too overcome with laughter to speak; and wheeling round their horses the worthy couple, the boys clinging tightly to their waists, set off at a brisk trot.

When the horses were but dots in the distance, Red Rogers rose to his feet and, shading his eyes with his hands, muttered:

"Fooled 'em both! If yonder two knew what I know, they'd be as wise as I am. Ha, ha, ha! Ho, ho, ho!"

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER

An Established Claim!

"PINCH me, Jo. Pinch me hard! Ouch! I didn't tell ye to take a piece out of my leg!" cried Jerry, and, turning on his friend, he chased him

round the huge, luxuriously furnished bedroom in Rackness Castle into which the two boys had been escorted by bowing servants a minute before.

"Fanits, I'll never do as you ask me again," cried Jo dodging behind a tall-backed, old armchair near the carved oak fireplace.

"At any rate, I know now that I'm not dreaming!" declared Jerry laughing.

Jo grinned, then fidgeted uneasily.

Truth to tell, the short jacket and silk breeches of sombre brown cloth, stockings of the same hue, and shoes with plated buckles, cramped the limbs of one accustomed to the loose freedom of rags held together by pieces of string.

Nor were Jerry's gaily embroidered coat, sky-blue silk waistcoat, and stockings, more comfortable.

Besides, the fit was atrocious, for at four cross roads, two miles from the Tinker's camp, they had found a huge old-fashioned coach awaiting them, in which were two suits of different sizes Trent had brought for his new ward, the plainer of which had been given to Jo.

But a small army of tailors was to be sent from Exeter, who would fit out the two boys as became their new station in life.

Whilst the boys were changing, Lawyer Cawne had ridden on ahead to prepare for Jerry's reception at the Castle, with the result that the magnificent oak drive was lined with tenantry, whilst the whole staff of servants had been paraded beneath the fine marble portico before the castle, to welcome the new Lord Rackness.

As the coach rolled up the drive it was greeted by hearty cheers from the farmers, farm labourers, and as many of their wives and families as could be got together at such short notice.

As the heavy vehicle came to a standstill at the foot of a flight of marble steps the carriage door was opened by a footman, in gorgeous livery, who bent almost double in a low bow, when Jerry alighted leaning on Timotheus Trent's arm.

"Your future master, my good people. I need scarcely ask you to extend to him the same loyalty and willing service you gave the

late lord," said Trent, introducing Jerry to the servants, who responded with cheers, in which the shrill voices of the women mingled with the deeper bass of the men.

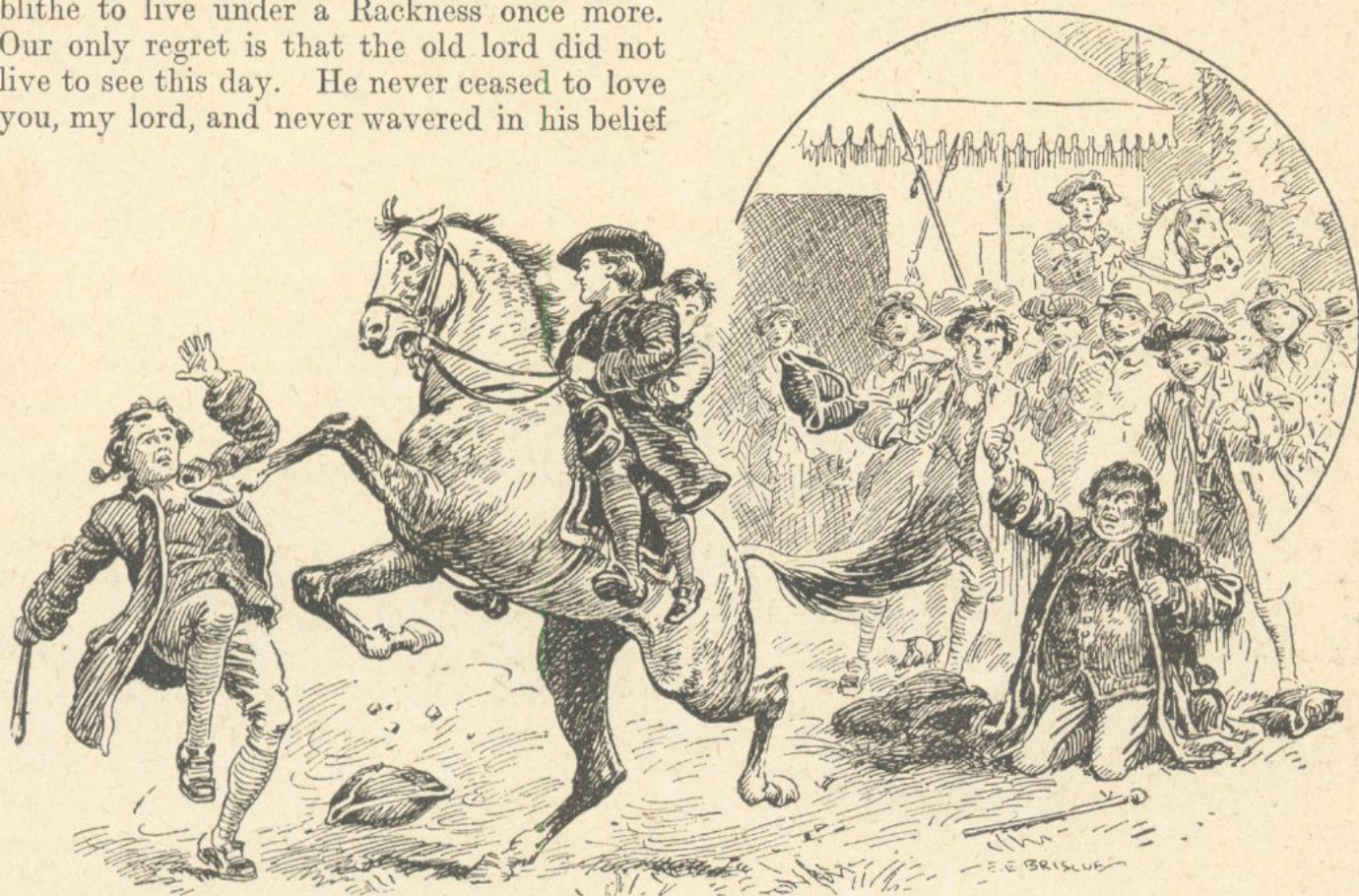
Then a stout, dignified, old gentleman—who Jerry thought must be at least an archbishop, but whom Trent whispered was Jasper Mond, the butler—stepped out from the centre of the crowd of servants.

"Welcome to the castle, my lord. There is not a man or a woman amongst us but is blithe to live under a Rackness once more. Our only regret is that the old lord did not live to see this day. He never ceased to love you, my lord, and never wavered in his belief

the boys during the drive to the castle, but it answered its purpose, and the two boys passed into the big entrance-hall, where Cawne met them with bows and smiles of welcome as he led them into the dining-room, where a sumptuous banquet awaited them.

Jerry went through that repast like one in a dream. Even Jo was so awed by the magnificence around him that, though fearfully hungry, he scarcely ate a dozen mouthfuls.

The signs of wealth on every side—the silver



Jerry and Jo hung on as the intelligent horse reared on its hind legs and pawed at the man who attempted to seize it. "After them, you slow-witted scullions!" roared the sheriff. "Fifty guineas if you bring them back!" (See Chapter 3.)

that the son he had lost would return. It's glad he would have been to have seen what an out-and-out Rackness you are," he said earnestly.

"Thank ye kindly, Master Mond. Now call up the clodhoppers and fill 'em to the bung wi' old October ale," returned Jerry, jerking his thumb over his shoulder towards the crowd, who had followed close behind the chaise.

This was not exactly the speech which Trent had been at no little pains to instil into

on the huge, polished oak sideboard; the snow-white cloths and napkins; the dishes laden with huge joints, poultry and game; the perfectly trained footmen, and the respect with which both Trent and Cawne treated him—at least when the servants were in the room—seemed so unreal to Jerry that he expected every minute to wake up and find himself sleeping in his rags beneath the gipsy tinker's cart.

"Perchance your lordship is weary, after your long journey, and would like to retire to

your chamber for a short while," suggested Trent, when the last course had been cleared away. "Show his lordship and Master Joseph Wattle up to their rooms, Jenkins," he added, without giving the boy an opportunity to reply.

Accustomed to obey—unless it suited his humour to do otherwise—Jerry followed the man up a broad flight of stairs and along several corridors, hung with priceless tapestry, like one walking in his sleep until at length the man threw open a door and ushered him into the bedroom, where we found him at the beginning of this chapter.

For some time after Jo had so effectually assured his friend that he was not dreaming, the boys were engaged examining their unaccustomed surroundings, peering into chests of drawers, opening huge oak chests, which they found full of rich clothes, exploring cupboards, any one of which would have held Red Rogers cart, horse and all, and tracing out the faded pictures in the ancient tapestry which adorned the walls.

Then they went to the open casement and looked out upon as fair a scene as is to be found in all wide Britain.

Before them was a park, studded with magnificent oaks, over which herds of half-tame deer roamed at will, and beyond a vista of thatched cottages, long, well-built farm-houses, and well-cultivated fields.

A thrill of pride swept through Jerry's veins. "Mine, all mine!" he ejaculated, half to himself, half to his chum. "To think of it! This morning I awoke a tinker's boy; this afternoon I am a lord!"

A scornful laugh and an oily chuckle caused him to turn round, to find that Timotheus Trent, and Simon Cawne, had entered the room.

"It will be well if you bear that ever in mind, Jerry o' the Pots, or you may go to sleep one night lord of Rackness Castle and its broad acres, and awaken to find yourself the tinker's boy once more," sneered Trent.

"Or, maybe, not even that. I have known a starving woman hung for stealing a loaf of bread. What would they do to one who steals a noble castle and the rents accruing thereunto?" interposed Cawne, regarding the astonished boys with a threatening grin.

"Might ha' known there was a catch in it somewhere," ejaculated Jo.

"Silence, gutter snipe, or I'll have the lackeys whip you out of the castle!" fumed Cawne.

Jerry turned fiercely upon the angry man.

"You forget the lackeys you speak of so glibly are in my employ, Master Cawne. Have a care, lest I tell them to show you the door," he said in tones of cold displeasure and with a dignity that caused the two villains to gasp.

Trent burst out laughing, but there was more uneasiness than merriment in his mirth.

"Ho, ho, Jerry o' the Pots! Hast heard the fable of the crow that pretended to be a peacock? He was only a measly crow when they robbed him of his gay tail!" he cried. "Hallo, what maggot's got ye now?" he added in alarm, for Jerry had thrown off his gold-laced coat and embroidered waistcoat.

"I'd rather be a true crow than a false peacock," returned Jerry.

"Don't be a fool, boy. We are too deep in this matter to draw back now!" cried Trent in dismay.

"What's that to me?" retorted Jerry. "Find some other boy to make mock of. I prefer to be a tinker's brat."

As he spoke he continued his disrobing, whilst Jo reluctantly followed his example.

In vain Trent and Cawne raved, swore, threatened, and entreated in turns.

They had made a public acknowledgment of Jerry as the long lost Lord Rackness, and, though they could, of course, declare that they had made a mistake, it would be impossible to bring forward another claimant before the year and a day mentioned in the late lord's will had expired.

"What is it you want, hang you?" cried Trent at last.

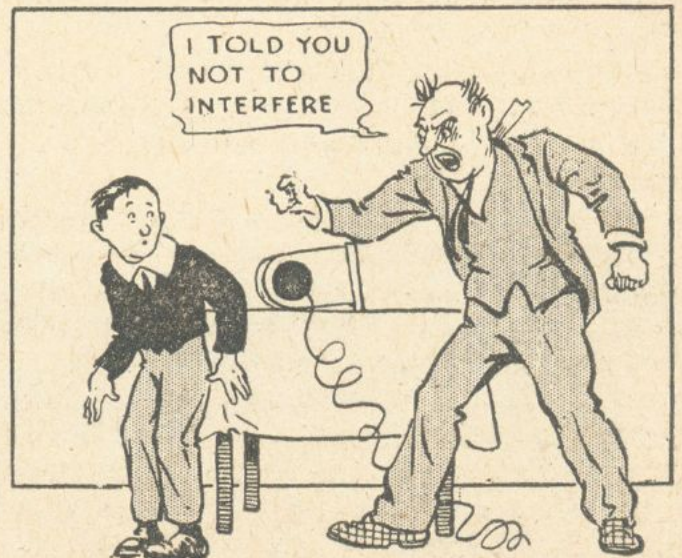
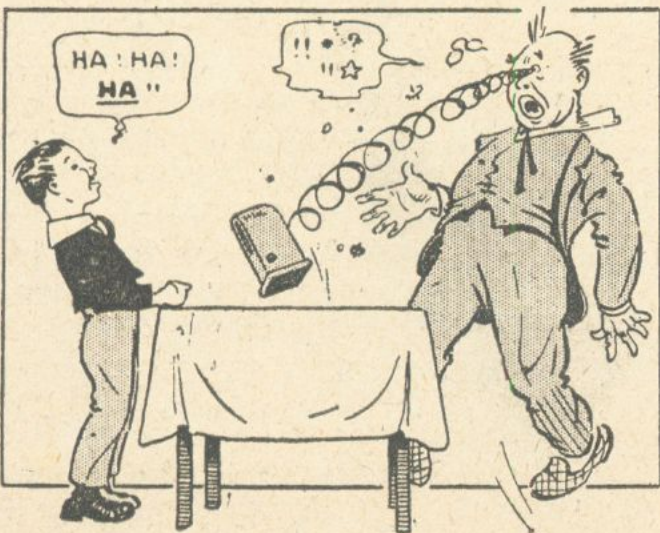
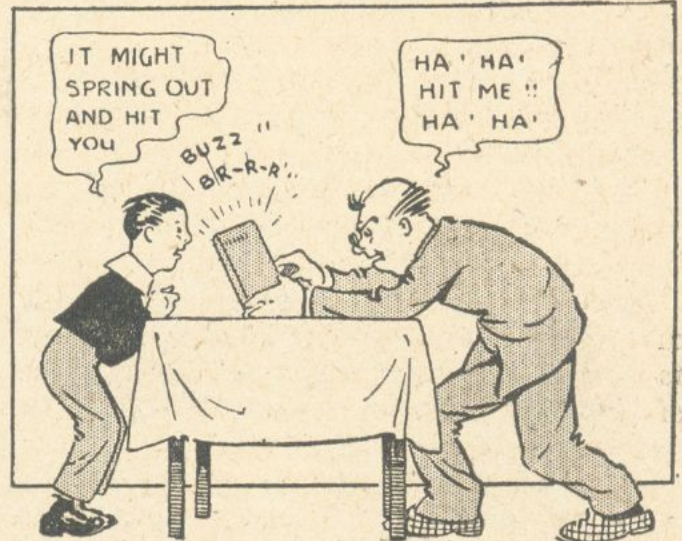
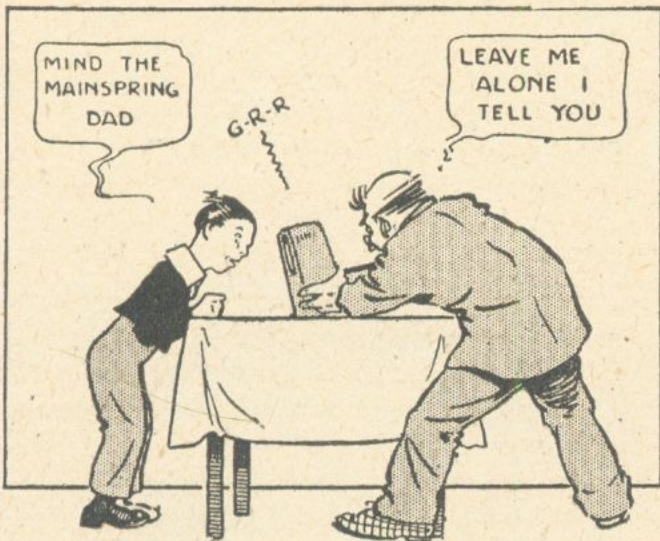
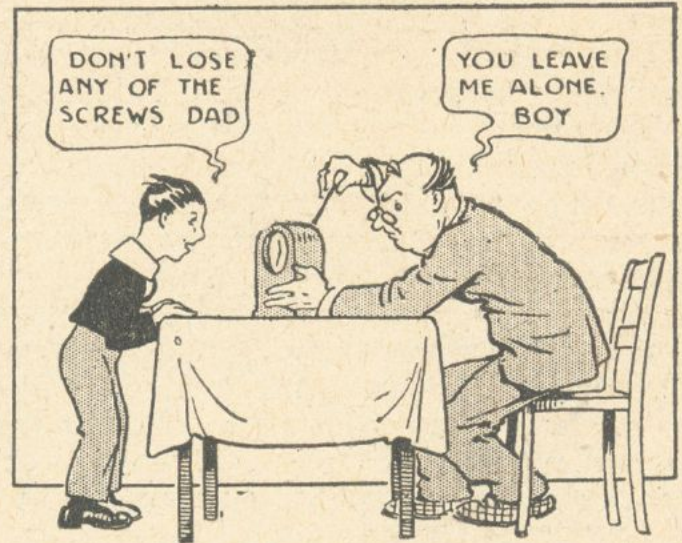
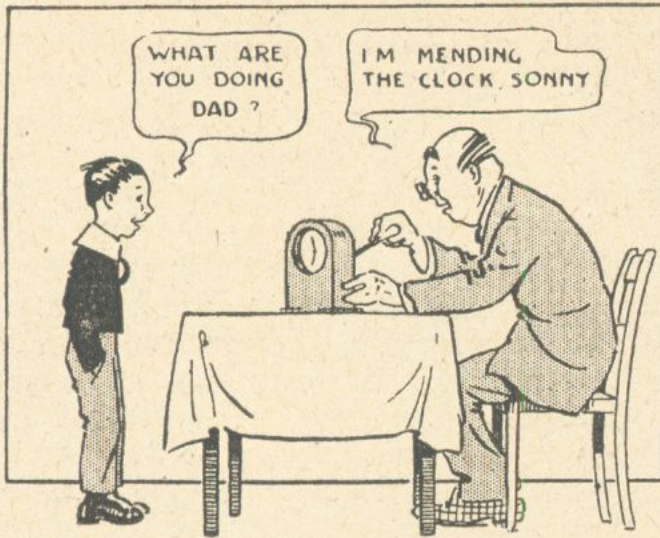
"If I am to be a lord I'll be treated as such, and old parchment face must keep his place," replied Jerry, forgetting his new-found dignity.

Lawyer Cawne's sallow face turned yellow with suppressed rage as he drew the factor aside, and a whispered consultation ensued.

Presently Trent turned to Jerry with a forced smile.

"Come, come, boy, we depend too much

LEAVE IT TO FATHER!



LEO BERNARD

on each other to be at loggerheads. I only feared lest you should get puffed up with pride owing to your rise in life and forget to whom you owe it," he said genially, holding out his hand.

Jerry hesitated, then, fearing lest he should already have been ungrateful to one who, whatever his motives, was doing so much for him, he grasped the extended hand and shook it warmly.

"Fair dues atween mates, an' you'll have no cause to complain of me or Jo," he said, lapsing into the mode of speech to which he had been accustomed.

A knock came at the door.

At a sign from Trent, Jerry hastily resumed his coat and waistcoat.

"Come in!" cried the factor, as Jerry arranged his ruffle before a mirror.

A footman entered.

"Sir Richard Averley's compliments, and, as the late lord's oldest friend, he would be the first to welcome his lordship to his ancestral home," he announced.

Trent and Cawne exchanged uneasy glances.

Sir Richard Averley was the most important man in the county, and if he accepted Jerry as the real son of Lord Rackness no one else would dare dispute his decision.

But they need not have been uneasy, for no sooner did Jerry—Jo had been discreetly left upstairs—enter the room than the stately, grey-haired old baronet advanced towards him with outstretched hands, crying:

"A Rackness! A true Rackness! Welcome to your own at last, my lad! Would that my old friend had seen this day!"

Jerry flushed guiltily, and attributing the boy's confusion to natural modesty, the baronet turned to Trent and asked him where, and how, he had found the boy.

Jerry listened to the cleverly interwoven mass of truth and lies with which Trent answered the question, in speechless amazement, for it was all so plausible that he would have found it difficult to have contradicted the scheming factor had he wished to have done so.

"Were there no papers or other means of identification on the child when this man Rogers found him half-dead by the side of the road?" asked Sir Richard.

"You forget, Sir Richard, that he was clad in filthy rags, for the gipsies—or whoever first stole him—had stripped him of his fine clothes. Besides, was it likely that a child of four would be entrusted with papers?" explained Trent.

"True, true!" agreed the old man. "It is fortunate for you, young sir, that you carry your birth certificate in your face, or you might have been a tinker's boy all your life, and Rackness Castle would have been sold to any rich London tradesman with money enough to buy it."

"It is, indeed, sir, and I will try to live up to my new station," said Jerry in somewhat shaky tones.

His heart had gone out to the kindly old man, and, for the first time, shame of the deception of which he was guilty crept into his heart.

"Well spoken, lad!" cried the old baronet. "You and I will be great friends, I can see. I go to London to-morrow, but on my return you must come to Averley Court and be introduced to her ladyship. She will love you for your mother's sake, for they were great friends. Now, Trent, what about making his young lordship secure in his saddle. There is none to dispute the title, so it should be an easy matter. Leave it to me, and I will see it through for you," he added, turning to the factor.

Timotheus Trent breathed a sigh of relief.

He had feared the legal formalities necessary to establish Jerry as Lord Rackness would expose the truth, but if the claim was made by so influential a man as Sir Richard Averley there would be few inquiries made.

Nor was he disappointed, for about a fortnight later a courier from London arrived at Rackness Castle, bearing Royal Letters Patent confirming a decision of the High Courts which established Jerry as Lord Rackness of Rackness Castle.

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER

How Jerry found the Secret Staircase

JERRY soon found that being a lord was not all roses.

It is true he wore the richest clothes, slept on the softest down, ate of the very best

had numberless servants to wait on him, horses and dogs—in fact, everything he would wish for, but he missed the wild, free, open-air life of the king's highway; the merry, shiftless folk who tramped the roads; and the wild, dare-devil pranks with which Jo, Mai and himself used to enliven the countryside whenever they chanced to meet.

Not that he and Jo missed many of the opportunities of fun that came their way, and though they soon became prime favourites with the servants inside and the farmers and labourers outside the castle, their various pranks—too numerous to mention in this short history—went far to lighten the humdrum existence that had obtained in the castle and its precincts ere their arrival.

Jerry and Jo occupied adjoining bedrooms connected by a convenient door, which allowed them to spend many hours together, when Jonathan Strowse, their puritanical tutor, was fast asleep.

One night it happened that Jo was more restless than usual, whilst Jerry was sleeping as sound as a top.

Consequently he did not welcome the appearance of his chum by his bedside an hour or so past midnight, although Jo had thought out a merry jape which must assuredly end in the utter discomfiture of the tutor.

“Oh, go and boil your pate!” cried Jerry, turning over in his bed.

“’Twould be as soft as yours an’ I did,” retorted Jo. “Now, listen, Jerry—when Master Strowse sits him down the cane will spring back, and hit him——”

“Like that, and that, and that!” roared the infuriated Jerry, springing up in bed and belabouring Jo with his pillow until that worthy retreated, hastily, into his own room.

But it was only to arm himself. The next moment he had returned, and Jerry springing out of bed, a right royal pillow-fight was soon being waged with unexampled fury. Presently Jerry, who had driven his chum up against the wainscoting at one end of the room, aimed a mighty blow at his head with his pillow.

Jo ducked, Jerry lost his balance, and his hand struck a knot in the oak panelling with a force that caused him to drop his weapon, the better to suck his bruised knuckles.

“Truth, Jo, I’d as lief have——” he began, then ceased speaking to gaze in amazement at the wall, for his fist had struck a secret spring, and the wainscoting had slid back, revealing the entrance to a secret passage leading he knew not where.

With a suppressed whoop of joy Jerry took a wax taper from the mantelpiece and, lighting it at the rush candle which did duty as a night-light, proceeded to examine the secret passage.

Immediately before them was a narrow flight of stairs down which they crept, every nerve a-tingle with excitement.

The staircase ended in a large crypt, to the walls and pillars of which hung rusty iron rings, chains and shackles, showing that in the “good old days” it had been used as a prison, or, perhaps, a torture-chamber, by the former lords of Rackness Castle.

At the further end of the crypt was a second flight of stairs, which they ascended for perhaps a dozen steps until they found themselves in a low tunnel. It was not a pleasant place, for the stone sides and roof were dotted with fungi of a hundred different shapes and hues, whilst the pavement struck cold and damp to their naked feet.

But the boys paid little heed either to the cold or to the numerous toads and lizards with which the place was infested, and which would have sent boys less hardily brought up, scampering back to their beds.

Pressing on they at length came to an iron-studded door.

It was locked and barred, but they experienced little difficulty in wrenching the bolts from the rotten wood.

Thrusting open the door, and moving a screen of ivy which had hid it from view, they found themselves at the foot of a ruined Norman tower some two hundred yards from the castle.

As the tower was surrounded by brambles, they retraced their steps, then closed the sliding panel, and sat up for the greater part of the night discussing how best to make use of their discovery, and forming plans for the future.

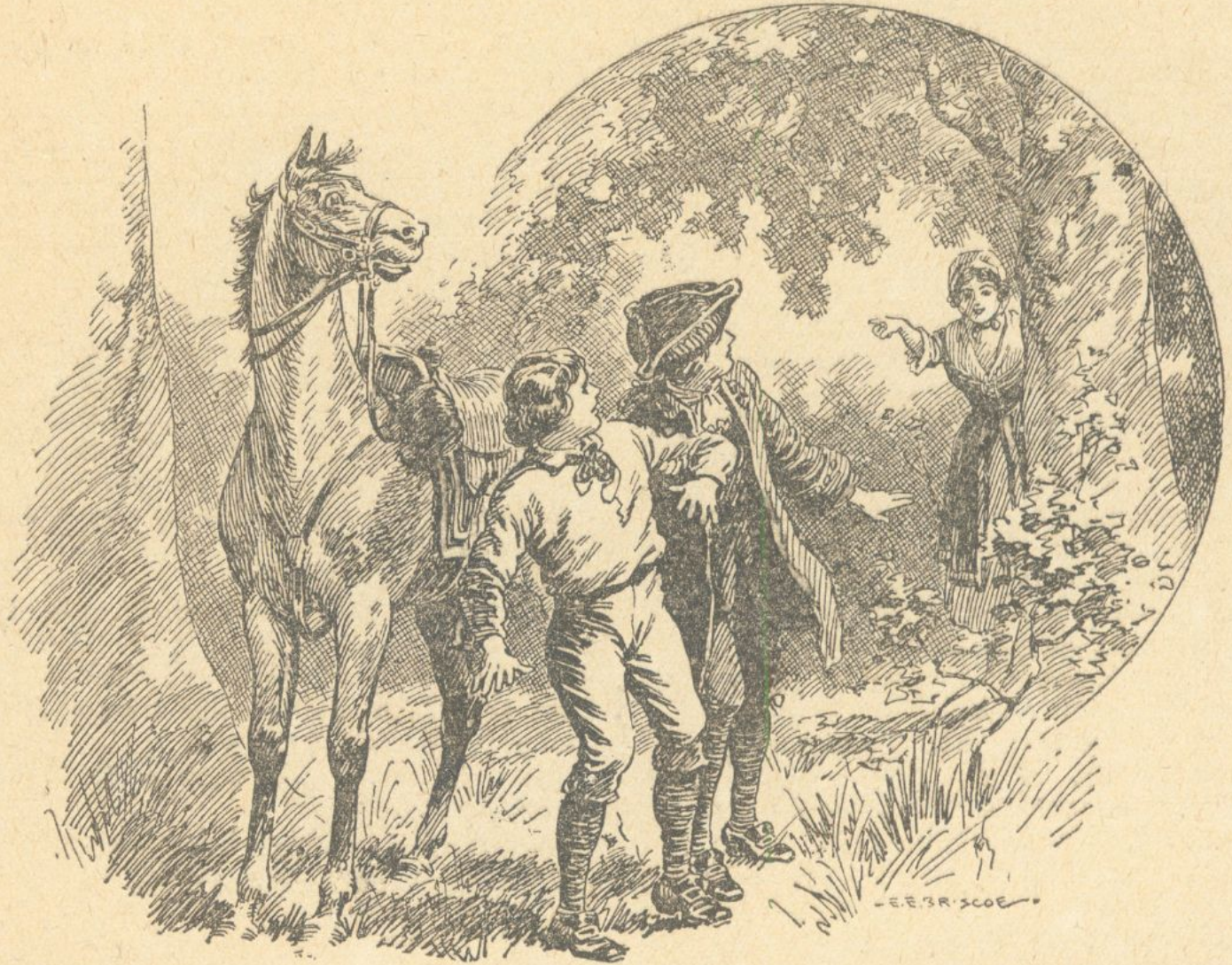
The secret staircase enabled them to enjoy their old, free life once more. Three or four

nights a week they would slip out of the castle, when everyone was fast asleep, and, afoot or mounted bareback on ponies taken from the adjoining pastures, would scour the country, revelling in their freedom, and occasionally meeting Mai, the Gipsy, Blind Tom, the Fiddler, and other old friends.

To Blind Tom Jerry unbosomed himself

I will see that ye come to no harm," he replied.

Of the highwayman, Jerry saw but little, but heard much, for his wild pranks, his daring feats, and his unstinted generosity to the poor was the constant theme of the Free-men of the Road with whom the boys foregathered during their midnight trips, when Trent and Simon Cawne believed them sleeping peacefully in their beds in Rackness Castle.



Again an awful groan caused the hair to rise on their heads, and Jerry and Jo had already turned to flee when Silver Sprite whinnied. The next moment Mai, the gipsy, emerged from the wood. (See Chapter 4.)

of his doubts as to whether he ought to remain at the castle as the impostor he felt himself to be.

"I feel I am living a lie, Tom," he said. "Besides, at any moment I may be flung upon the highway again."

But Blind Tom only laughed.

"Stay where ye are, lad. Ye have as much right there as another, and Will o' the West and

THE NINTH CHAPTER

How the Smugglers came to Rackness Castle.

AND so three months slipped by. With Trent and Cawne Jerry found it impossible to make friends, especially as the lawyer took no pains to hide his hatred of Jo.

Truth to tell, Simon Cawne suffered much

at Jo's hands, for the boy was always playing tricks on him, and making him ridiculous in the eyes of the servants until, at last, he determined to put his original plan into execution, and get rid of one who might easily prove an obstacle to their plans when Trent's guardianship came to an end, and the property ripe for division.

One night Jerry and Jo were making their way over the moors to a secluded combe in which they had left their ponies, after a visit to Mai's camp, when the former, who was leading, sank behind a clump of furze, signing to Jo to do the same.

His quick ear had detected the shuffling of many feet, and he feared lest the newcomers should prove to be one of the bands of outlawed men that infested the West Country.

Presently a man with a cask on his shoulder came into view. He was followed by another, and yet another, until Jerry counted no less than twenty men, clad in the red caps, reefer coats, short, striped skirts and tall boots of seafaring men, and it needed not the cutlass which each ruffian carried at his side, or the brace of pistols thrust into his broad leather belt, to warn the boys that they were smugglers.

With a warning squeeze on his companion's arm Jerry sank lower amongst the furze, for well he knew that they would get but a short shrift if the smugglers discovered them.

Despite their danger it was with difficulty that Jerry repressed an ejaculation of surprise when he saw the long, lank form of Simon Cawne bringing up the rear of the procession.

By his side strode a huge ruffian, as fat as the lawyer was thin, whose belt bristled with knives and pistols. He had a red, weather-beaten face, a broad nose, and an enormous mouth, set with four huge yellow teeth, like the fangs of a famished wolf.

Nor was his appearance improved by an enormous black patch worn where his left eye had been at some remote date.

It was Captain Blackbane, smuggler, wrecker—ay, and pirate, if the opportunity served.

In fact, so sinister a reputation did the smuggler chief enjoy, that Jerry would have made off as soon as it was safe to move but that some instinct warned him that Lawyer

Cawne's presence boded no good to Jo or to himself.

Waiting until the smugglers had been swallowed up in the darkness, Jerry and Jo followed as swiftly as caution would allow.

But it was not easy, even for Jerry and Jo, bred on the moors as they were, to keep to a straight line in the dark, and when, ten minutes later, they stopped on the summit of a small hill and looked around them, no sign of the smugglers could be seen.

"Bust the luck, they've given us the slip!" ejaculated Jo in disgust.

"Seems like it," admitted Jerry. "Let's try the Woodman's Rest. I've heard Red Rogers say Bowline Bill, the landlord, is hand and glove with the smugglers, and that his liquor is all the better for never having paid a penny for duty."

Jo agreeing, the two boys raced down the hill and across the moor. Presently they struck a winding road, along which they ran, until at length they came in sight of a tumble-down, thatched shanty, before which swung a creaking sign.

On the road before the inn stood a wagon, in which the smugglers had hidden the casks beneath a load of peat ready to be carted inland in the morning.

On horseback near the wagon was Lawyer Cawne, who was in the act of shaking hands with Captain Blackbane.

"Do what ye like with the brat, captain," Cawne was saying. "It's all the same to me whether you chuck him overboard or sell him to the Plantations, so long as I never again set eyes on his red head."

"Then the Plantations it shall be. A boy such as you describe should fetch fifty pounds in the American colonies," returned the smuggler.

And with a callous laugh Cawne galloped off.

Realising that there was nothing more to be learned there, whilst some unlucky chance might betray their presence to the smugglers, the boys stole away, and, regaining the combe in which they had left their ponies, rode thoughtfully back to Rackness Castle.

"Forewarned is forearmed, Jo. It shall go hard with us if the villains take one without the other, and I warrant they will not be

over eager to meddle with Lord Rackness of Rackness Castle," said Jerry as they emerged from the secret staircase shortly after midnight.

But when, after sunrise the following morning, for tired out after his night's expedition, Jerry slept later than usual, he burst into Jo's room crying:

"Now, sluggard, are going to sleep all day?" he was alarmed to find the bed empty and Jo nowhere to be seen.

Thinking that his chum had already risen and gone for a walk before breakfast, he turned to the door, to find it locked and bolted on the inside, a precaution they had both adopted since the discovery of the secret passage, lest anyone should enter during their absence.

Then for the first time he noticed that the window was open.

Hastening to it he looked out, and his worst fears were realised when he found the ivy beneath the stone sill torn and bent, as though a heavy weight had been lowered from the window.

Dumbfounded and dismayed, the boy stood gazing round him, uncertain how to act.

Captain Blackbane had struck at once, and had struck home, and merry, light-hearted Jo was already on his way to the living death of an American plantation.

Jerry had very vague ideas about America. All he knew was that it was somewhere beyond the sea, where the off-scourings of the prisons, rebels taken in arms against the king's majesty, and, now and again, innocent people whom their relatives wanted out of the way, were sent to work as slaves on the plantations.

And it was to such a fate Jo was doomed!

"Not if I can help it!" muttered Jerry, shaking off the depression which had for the moment robbed him of strength to move or think.

Hastening back to his room, he drew on breeches, stockings, and shoes, then hastened downstairs.

A footman on duty in the hall stared in amazement at the half-clad figure that sped down the carved oak staircase.

"Where is Mr. Trent?" it demanded.

"In the library with Lawyer Cawne and your lordship's tutor," replied the bowing servitor.

Throwing open the library door, Jerry burst into the room.

"What have you done with Jo?" he demanded.

Cawne and Trent exchanged uneasy glances, whilst Master Strowse held up his hands in pious horror.

"Fie, fie, your lordship! Is that the way to——" he began.

"Silence! And leave the room! My business is with yonder oily scoundrel!" interrupted Jerry, pointing to the lawyer, whose face turned first white then flamed with suppressed fury.

The tutor looked questioningly at Trent, for, as Jerry's guardian, the factor was master in that house.

"Close and lock the door," commanded the factor, answering the unspoken question.

"Now, boy, what is the meaning of this unseemly behaviour?" he added, turning on Jerry with a threatening frown.

"Jo's gone, and——" began Jerry, when Trent interrupted him with a brutal laugh.

"Well, an' I'm not surprised. He will find himself more at home with his tramping friends than he has ever been in Rackness Castle," he replied. "Beshrew me, but I'll e'en tell Mond to see what silver is missing from his pantry."

Jerry would have flown at Trent's throat in his rage, but realising that he could not fight all three, he turned on Lawyer Cawne, saying:

"You know that Jo has not left the castle of his own free will, for I heard you agree with Captain Blackbane to kidnap him!"

Simon Cawne turned livid.

"You lie, you young whelp. I have not seen Captain Blackbane since——" he began.

"Last night at the Woodman's Rest," interrupted Jerry. "No need to ask me how I got my information, suffice it that I know it is so."

"Methinks you know too much," snarled Cawne furiously.

"Ay, too much for you two conspirators, and what I know the whole world shall know."

Bunter Plays Cricket!



By DICK PENFOLD

BUNTER waddles to the wicket,
Everyone remarks :
" Billy Bunter's playing cricket,
Now you'll see some sparks ! "

Bunter fancies he's a Trumper.
He exclaims with glee :
" When the ball comes, I shall clump her
Over yonder tree. "

Billy smites with vim and vigour,
Down the wickets go !
Billy cuts a sorry figure
(Note his look of woe).

Umpire points to the pavilion,
Billy starts to sob :
" Meant to make a merry million,
But I've got a ' blob ' ! "

Bunter tries his hand at bowling,
Takes a mighty run ;
Flannelled fieldsmen, lurching, rolling
Hold their sides with fun !

Does the leather strike the wicket ?
Nay—the umpire's nose !
Victim mutters, " Call this cricket ?
Hellup ! " Down he goes !

Bunter tries to catch a " skier,"
Waits with open hands ;
Higher soars the sphere and higher,
Billy boldly stands.

" Catch it, Billy ! " chuckled Wharton,
" Hold it ! " Smithy said.
Ball descends with loud report on
Billy Bunter's head !



Billy Bunter's in the sanny,
Shed a silent tear ;

Hurree Singh (in Hindustani)
Gives him words of cheer !

Unless Jo is brought back unharmed before nightfall, I will go to the nearest magistrate and tell him that I am——”

“Silence!” roared Trent, springing forward.

Seizing the boy by the throat he thrust him backwards on to a table.

Jonathan Strowse was his tool, but not his accomplice, and he had no wish to introduce a third party into his scheme who would doubtless demand a share of the Rackness estate which Simon Cawne and himself hoped to divide between them when Jerry came of age.

“Mr. Trent, sir, for Heaven’s sake mind what you are about!” ejaculated Strowse, hastening from the door.

But Cawne thrust him back, and, leaning over the struggling boy, drew a small bag made of skin from his pocket and pressed it against Jerry’s mouth and nose.

Immediately Jerry’s struggles grew fainter, until at last they ceased altogether, and he lay so still and motionless that Trent staggered back crying:

“Good heavens, I have killed him!”

Cawne smiled as though in keen enjoyment of the other’s evident terror.

“He is in a trance, caused by the wonder-working preparation Old Elspha, the witch of the Moors, sold me. ’Twas well I had it by me, or nothing but death would have silenced his tongue. It was the contents of this same little bag that sent his fellow scallywag to sleep and enabled me to lower him from the window without arousing his lordship yonder,” he explained in a low whisper.

Trent breathed a deep sigh of relief.

“But when he awakens?” he asked in the same guarded tones.

“He must be confined to his chamber until we have persuaded him that it is to his interest to hold his tongue,” replied Cawne significantly.

A few minutes later the footman in the hall was startled into activity by the tutor rushing from the library, crying:

“Water! Quick! His lordship has fainted!”

Barely had the footman hastened off on his errand, ere Trent, carrying Jerry’s unconscious form, hastened across the hall and up

the staircase to the boy’s room, closely followed by Cawne, whilst Strowse remained behind to take the unwanted water from the menial and hasten upstairs with it.

When, some five minutes later, the three men descended the stairs, they found the hall filled with an anxious group of servants.

“It’s naught, my good people. His lordship somewhat outgrows his strength. A day in bed will do him good,” explained Trent, and, greatly relieved to find that the boy they had all grown to love was in no danger, the servants dispersed about their various duties.

THE TENTH CHAPTER

How Jerry met Will o’ the West.

THE last rays of the setting sun were streaming through his bedroom window when Jerry slowly regained consciousness.

His head ached, his throat felt on fire, and his limbs ached strangely.

For some minutes he lay wondering where he was. Then the scene in the library came back to his memory, followed by the racking recollection that Jo, his one and only boy friend, had been kidnapped.

With a moan of despair he sprang up in bed. The next moment he had thrown himself back on the pillow, as a key grated in the lock, and, through almost closed eyelids, he saw Timotheus Trent and Simon Cawne enter the room.

Jerry’s first impulse was to spring up and dart from the room ere the scoundrels who had robbed him of his chum found out that he was awake.

But recent experience had taught him that his slender frame was no match for the two scoundrels, and he determined to recourse to cunning where strength had failed.

Lying perfectly still, he heard the invaders of his room approach to the side of the bed; then heard Trent say, in quavering tones that told he was far from at ease:

“He still sleeps. What if the witch’s simples prove too powerful, and he never awakens?”

“Then a certain Timotheus Trent will be swinging in chains on Exeter gallows ere the month is out,” laughed Cawne mockingly.

"An' I do, thou shalt swing with me," was Trent's vicious retort.

"That is as may be," returned the other carelessly. "At any rate, we will not take our last ride in the tumbrel just yet, for old Mother Elspha swears that unless the bag of simples is held too long beneath the victim's nose, he will recover in under twelve hours, and by that time Blackbane's lugger, with that red-headed bantling on board, will be far away, for he sails at high tide."

Jerry had to summon every ounce of determination of which he was possessed, to restrain himself at the villainous old lawyer's callous words, but he succeeded in keeping as still as before, until, greatly to his relief, the precious pair took their departure, locking the door behind them.

Only waiting until he felt assured Trent and Cawne would not return, Jerry sprang lightly out of bed, and rushed to the door between the two rooms.

It was locked, and when he hastened to the window he almost burst out laughing when he saw Jonathan Strowse, muffled in a great coat, standing in the shadow of a tree a dozen yards away, and realised that he had been stationed there to make sure that

Lord Rackness did not take into his head to leave the Castle by way of the casement.

Locked doors and guarded windows did not trouble Jerry, for, as the reader knows, he had simply to press the knot in the wainscot-

ting, and the sliding panel slipped back so that he passed through and carefully closed the secret door behind him.

Five minutes later he had reached the old Norman tower. Following a path Jo and he had made through the undergrowth, he ran as swiftly as his legs would carry him in the direction of the distant sea.

As he ran the leaden feeling slowly left his legs, and his head ceased to ache as the keen evening air swept the after-effects of the noxious fumes he had inhaled from his lungs.

On he ran, puzzling his brain for some plan by which to help Jo, if the fates were propitious, and he reached the smugglers' lair before the lugger sailed.

But rack his wits as he might, he could not see how he, a mere boy, could, unaided, rescue his chum from a score or more of well-armed men.

Had he had time to seek out Blind Tom, or, still better, Will o' the West, he knew he could depend upon both their sympathy and their help.

But Blind Tom had disappeared from his usual haunts, and none could tell whither he had gone. As for Will o' the West, when Jerry had last heard

of him, he had been running before a hue and cry, after having held up the London coach on Bagshot Heath.

"Ah, well, I must e'en do my best," he thought, as he cleared the last fence of the



Grasping the lead guttering that circled the old building, Jerry braced himself against the wall whilst Jo climbed up his body to the roof. (See Chapter 5.)

cultivated land and landed on the open moorland that stretched, for a good ten miles, right to the sea.

Before him gleamed a long, white road, along which he sped, for it offered better going than the ankle-deep heather of the moor.

Suddenly he felt a thrill of something approaching fear run through his veins, as the dull beat of a horse's hoofs on the roadside behind him fell on his ears, and the thought that his flight had been discovered, and that this was a horseman sent to haul him back to the castle, swept through his mind.

Despairing, he cast a swift glance behind him.

The next moment he had turned, and was running towards the horseman, crying :

"Will! Will o' the West, what good fortune has sent thee to me?"

A minute later the rider had drawn rein, and the highwayman's smiling face and laughing eyes were fixed in astonishment on the panting boy.

"What, Jerry o' the Highway—I cry your lordship's pardon, my wits must surely have gone a-roving—'tis the Right Honourable Lord Rackness now!" cried Will o' the West, doffing his plumed hat in a mocking bow.

"Jerry to you, Will. In faith I wish I was still but Jerry o' the Pots to all. But let me mount thy crupper, Will, and I will tell ye all as we ride to Tor Head Bay!" cried Jerry, breathlessly.

"To Tor Head Bay, is it? Methought I was riding to a certain four cross roads, six good miles from the sea," laughed Will. He loosened his foot from the stirrup, nevertheless, to allow Jerry to mount.

Waiting for no further invitation, Jerry clambered up behind the highwayman, who gave Silver Sprite the rein, and they were soon clattering merrily along the road.

As they rode, Jerry related all that had happened at Rackness Castle, ending up with an impassioned plea for the highwayman's help.

"Help thee, lad, aye that I will, the more readily for that Blackbane is a scurvy rogue, ready for any dirty work an' the pay be high enough. 'Tis true I have a certain debt to collect of the Lord High Sheriff, whose coach

should pass Danbury Four-cross roads about midnight; but business before pleasure, and maybe I will have time for both," was the highwayman's ready reply; and Jerry felt happier than he had done since Jo's disappearance, for he looked upon the boy's rescue as good as accomplished.

Half an hour's steady canter brought them to a wooded combe. Passing through they came to a small inlet, overshadowed by the precipitous headland which gave the place its name.

Miles from any human habitation, and surrounded by cliffs honeycombed with caves, it had been a favourite resort of smugglers for hundreds of years.

As Will drew rein beneath the shadow of the trees, he laid a restraining hand on Jerry's arm, pointing with the other to where a number of men were passing from the caves to a large boat drawn up on a narrow stretch of sand between the sea and the cliffs, carrying empty casks, that were, doubtless, intended to be refilled with French brandy.

A mile from the shore a low-lying, rakish lugger lay, hove to, in the light of the rising moon.

"Bide thee here, Will. I go to find Jo," whispered Jerry in the highwayman's ear.

"Aye, lad, 'tis best so. We do but grope in the dark until we know where to look for him," agreed Will. "Take this, lest ye find him bound," he added, thrusting a sheath knife into the boy's hand.

Sliding to the ground, Jerry gained the shadow of the beetling cliffs, and crept swiftly, but cautiously, towards the smugglers, until at length he crouched beneath a jagged rock that guarded the entrance to the smugglers' cave.

So close was he to the path from the cave to the sea, that by stretching forth his hand he could have touched one, or the other, of the ruffianly crew, as they passed backwards and forwards between the boat and their hidden lair.

Eagerly Jerry peered to right and left in search of some sign of his missing chum, but in vain; and his heart fell, for he feared that poor Jo was already aboard the lugger.

But the next moment his doubts were set

THE ELEVENTH CHAPTER

“Stand and Deliver!”

at rest, for he heard a deep voice within the inky darkness of the cave, say:

“Rise up, ye red-headed little imp; they'll teach ye to dance to a livelier step on the plantations, I'll warrant!”

Then came the thud of heavy sea-boots on the beaten path, and Jerry felt his heart beats quicken as the huge form of Captain Blackbane bulked from out the darkness.

His right hand grasped a ship's lantern; his left, the side nearest Jerry, rested heavily on Jo's shoulder, whose white, scared face showed ghastly in the lantern's flickering light.

Every muscle strung to its highest tension, the boy waited until the smuggler was abreast of where he crouched, then, swift as thought itself, his right hand shot forth, and a howl of rage and pain burst from Blackbane, for Jerry had drawn Will's sheath knife across his wrist, causing him to release his hold of his prisoner.

“Quick, Jo, run!” whispered Jerry, seizing his chum by the arm and drawing him into the shadows.

Jo needed no second invitation, and the next moment the boys were running for their lives, screened by the inky shadows of the cliffs that towered above their heads.

A pistol barked, but the bullet went wide, and almost ere the smugglers had recovered from the panic into which their captain's shout and pistol shot had thrown them, the boys had reached Silver Sprite's side.

“Up, lad, up! The ruffians will be round us like bees, in a minute, unless we can show them a clean pair of heels,” cried Will, bending down and dragging Jo on to the pommel of his saddle, whilst Jerry clambered nimbly on to the crupper.

Wheeling round, Will o' the West sent Silver Sprite clattering up the narrow path to the head of the combe, the beat of her hoofs drawing a dozen bullets from the smugglers that whistled harmlessly amongst the trees.

“Keep your heads down, lads,” cried Will o' the West. “Let the scoundrels waste their ammunition!”

They reached the summit of the cliff untouched, and, with a joyous laugh, Will put his mare's head to the moor.

“**W**HITHER art going, Will?” demanded Jerry, as, leaving the road by which they had come, Will o' the West cantered northwards.

“Hast forgotten what I told ye about Danbury cross roads and the Sheriff?” returned the highwayman gaily.

“And ye will let us help ye, Will?” cried Jerry eagerly.

“Ay, by hiding 'neath a hedge until it is all over. I' faith it would never do for my Lord Rackness to stop a coach ere he has grown a beard,” was the laughing reply.

“What if I care not to go back to the castle, Will? Of a truth I like not the false position I hold, nor the false friends by whom I am surrounded. The freemen of the road are poor and rough, but, at least, they are loyal and true,” said Jerry thoughtfully.

“Ye may never be a freeman of the roads again, Jerry. A lord's a lord, a tinker's a tinker, and——” began Will seriously, then broke off to add hastily, “But more of that anon. Yonder are the cross roads, and, if my ears do not play me false, I hear the roll of coach wheels in the distance.”

Touching Silver Sprite lightly with his heels, for the spirited mare never needed the spur, Will took his station beneath a huge tree where four roads met, and awaited the coming of his prey, whilst, in obedience to his instructions, Jerry and Jo sprang on to a huge limb that stretched half-way across the road, where they lay, waiting expectantly, as a coach, drawn by four horses, lumbered towards them.

When yet the heavy conveyance was within a dozen yards of the cross roads the boys saw Silver Sprite spring at a bound into the centre of the road, and heard her rider's ringing challenge:

“Stand and deliver! 'Tis Will o' the West commands!”

As the name of the famous highwayman fell on their ears the postboys drew their horses back on to their haunches. Then, as the lumbering coach came to a halt, each rider slid out of the saddle, and stood grinning by

the side of the road, certain that no harm would befall him.

"What's this? What's this? Who dares stop the Lord High Sheriff on the King's Highway?" shouted a red-faced, much-bewigged man, thrusting head and shoulders through the carriage window.

"'Tis Will o' the West, your washup!" answered one of the postboys.

"Ay, Will o' the West it is, come to collect the hundred pounds you lost to him at Brentor Fair," cried Will, edging to the side of the coach and clapping a pistol to the sheriff's head. "Hand out the brown leather wallet I can see in your breast pocket, it spoils the set of your worship's London-made clothes."

For a moment the sheriff hesitated, but the touch of the cold muzzle of Will's pistol against his forehead brought him to his senses.

Trembling in every limb, he obeyed.

"There is five hundred pounds in notes there, and our wager was but for a hundred pounds," he remonstrated feebly.

"Ay, I guessed you would not leave the Squire of Denevale until you had plucked him clean," returned Will carelessly. "But, for all that, I take but what's my own."

"Ay, I have always heard Will o' the West was a right good sportsman and the prince of good fellows," cringed the sheriff; albeit in his heart he was registering an oath to rest neither day nor night until he had brought the daring highwayman to the gallows.

Will laughed softly.

"I thank thee for thy good opinion, sweet sheriff. Perchance the poor of Exeter will share your good opinion of me when my agents distribute the four hundred that I have collected, over and above the trifle you have so honourably paid on demand, amongst them. Mount, lads, and take the good sheriff hence—the night air is bad for one of his choleric temperament," he added, turning to the delighted postboys.

Grinning more than ever, the postboys sprang on to their horses.

"Scoundrel, thief, footpad, robber! Thou shalt hang for this!" roared the sheriff, as the carriage began to move.

Much more he said, but the postboys whipped their horses to a gallop, and the coach continued its interrupted journey.

"Drop on to the mare's crupper, lads. We have much to do and far to ride e'er morning breaks," cried Will, guiding his horse beneath the branches from which the boys had been admiring spectators of the highwayman's simple methods.

"What, more coaches to cry 'Stand and deliver!' to, Will?" asked Jerry as, with Jo holding him tightly round the waist, he clung to Will's sword-belt.

"Nay, lad, my night-riding is over," returned the highwayman with a sigh. "There's a bright-eyed lass awaiting me in London, and she loves not my wild pranks, so I must e'en give up the road, and live respectable for the rest of my life."

"An' will I never see you again?" asked Jerry.

"Ay, lad, many a time and oft, I hope, for it is in my mind that you and Jo shall ride to London with me," declared the highwayman.

"To the end of the world an thou wilt, Will; and young Lord Rackness shall disappear as suddenly as he came," replied Jerry earnestly.

"And abandon your lordship, and all that it means?" asked Will, as the mare sped lightly over the moor.

"With a light heart. I am tired of masquerading in a station to which I can lay no claim," was Jerry's reply.

Will o' the West nodded his approval, and for some minutes they rode on in silence.

"This is not the way to London, Will, for yonder is Rackness Castle, and that should be miles on our right," cried Jerry, after a time, pointing to the stately pile, with its countless towers and chimneys rising above the surrounding trees.

"Those who ride with Will o' the West must travel the way he chooses and obey him without question," replied Will.

Jerry said no more, though he wondered greatly when, leaping the sunken fence which surrounded Rackness Park, the highwayman drew rein close to the Norman Tower.

"Hasten to your rooms by the secret

passage, dress in riding-garb, pack each a suit of your finest clothes in a travelling wallet, and meet me here in half an hour!" commanded Will.

The boys would have questioned their friend; but remembering his demand for obedience, slipped to the ground and disappeared through the secret door.

Half an hour later they were back, each carrying a well-filled wallet, which they had secured without interruption, though the state of their rooms, the sound of loud, excited voices, and a clatter of hoofs as horsemen dashed from the courtyards and stables, warned Jerry that his flight had been discovered, and that men were scouring the country in search of him.

They found Will o' the West awaiting them with two led horses, on which they mounted, and easily avoiding the mounted grooms who were hunting for the missing lord of Rackness Castle, they had soon placed that ancient mansion far behind them.

THE TWELFTH CHAPTER

How Jerry met the King.

JERRY looked at Will o' the West with an expression in which amazement struggled with dismay.

"What, go to Court? I, Jerry o' the Pots, present myself before the King as Lord Rackness? Why, the imposture would be

discovered' at once, and they would send me to the Tower as a tinker's son, who strove to pass himself off as a lord!" he cried at last, as he looked round the private room in a fashionable London inn, to which the highwayman had brought Jo and himself the previous night.

"It might so fall out an' you *were* a tinker's son; but as it happens, Trent told the truth, though he thought he was lying, for you are the rightful son and heir of the late Lord Rackness," declared Will smiling.

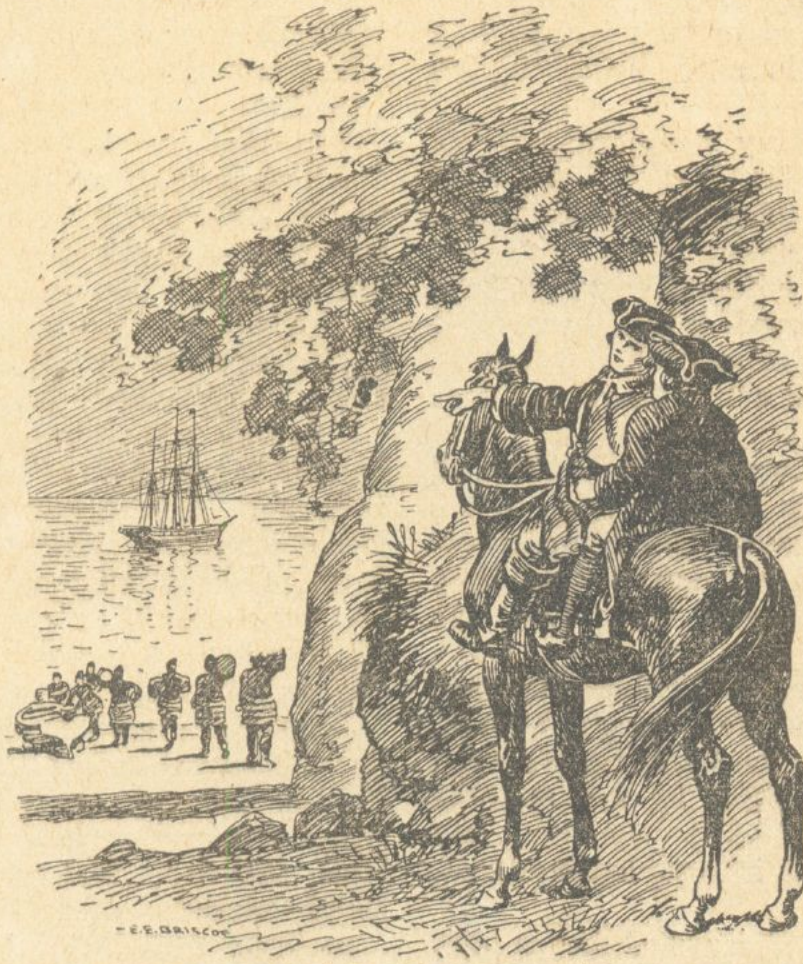
"Hast brought me here to mock me?" demanded Jerry indignantly.

"It is the truth I tell thee, lad. Red Rogers is dead, but ere he died he sent for Blind Tom and confessed that he had stolen you from the castle when a child of four, because the old lord, your father, had sentenced him to be whipped at the cart-tail as a rogue and a vagabond. He kept the truth from Cawne, hoping to be able to blackmail him later on. But the pound a week the

precious pair of villains, Cawne and Trent, allowed him, proved his undoing, for he drank himself to death, fortunately confessing the truth ere he died, as I have told you, so you need have no qualms in presenting yourself before his Majesty, King George," explained Will.

"But, Will——" began Jerry, when the highwayman interrupted him.

"But me no buts!" as Will Shakespeare



Will o' the West pointed to where a number of men were passing from the caves to a boat. "Bide thee here, Will! I go to find Jo!" whispered Jerry in the highwayman's ear. (See Chapter 10.)

has it. Do my bidding, Jerry. It is the last request Will o' the West may ever ask of ye," he interrupted, laying his hand affectionately on the boy's shoulder.

"An' you put it like that, I can do no other than agree," replied Jerry. "But surely Jo accompanies me?"

"'Twould never do to part Jerry and Jo," laughed Will. "But I must be gone, for I have to seek the King myself, and crave a free pardon. Within the hour a carriage and outriders will be here to take my Lord of Rackness to Court in a state befitting his exalted position."

Without giving Jerry an opportunity of questioning him further, Will hastened from the room, leaving the boys gaping at each other in absolute bewilderment.

Jerry scarcely knew if he stood on his head or his heels. The astounding information that he had been Lord Rackness all the time he thought he had been acting the part almost took his breath away.

He had only just begun to regain his usual self-control when he was thrown again into a state of utter bewilderment by the entrance of a footman, clad in the Rackness livery, who, bowing low, announced: "My lord, the carriage waits!"

Like one in a dream, Jerry followed the man to the tavern-door, where a gorgeous coach, all glass and gilt—like the Lord Mayor's coach of the present-day—drawn by four splendid horses ridden by gold-laced postilions, and with two mounted men in livery in attendance, awaited him.

For many a day, Jerry had but a dim recollection of entering the coach and being driven through the streets to St. James' Palace, where a magnificent individual in the Royal livery and carrying a gold-headed staff, took charge of him, and after escorting him through what seemed interminable richly furnished corridors, thrust open a pair of handsome double doors and announced in solemn tones: "Lord Rackness of Rackness Castle seeks audience of the King."

Had he possessed the strength, Jerry would have turned and fled when he saw that the room was crowded with a brilliant assembly of ladies and gentlemen, but he continued to

advance into the room, half expecting to wake up and find it all a dream, when he saw—and then he felt sure he was dreaming—Will o' the West, in full Court dress, coming towards him.

"Will o' the West, here!" he gasped.

"Not Will o' the West, Jerry, but Sir William Kingsley, who, for the sake of the free, wild life the Road offered, became a highway man in his spare moments," replied the Court gallant with Will's own merry laugh. "But come, the King has ordered me to conduct you to him immediately on your arrival," he added.

The next moment the bewildered boys found themselves walking between a double file of lords and ladies to a raised dais, on which was seated a stout, good-natured-looking man, with a number of jewelled orders on his breast, whom Jerry knew must be the King, for he was the only one seated, though a more unkingly person Jerry had never seen.

"So this is zee boy of zee tinker, who a lord has become, hein?" said the good-natured monarch. "I have your tale heard, my goot leetle gentleman, and it has made me to laugh. I like not those men Trent and Cawne, and my officers shall what you call lay them by the heels, is it not so? But you shall be of Chancery a Ward. That pleases you, eh?"

Jerry made some reply—what it was he never knew, but it evidently pleased the King, for he laughed mightily, and bade Sir William Kingsley bring "zee funny leetle tinker-lord to lunch that day," that he might hear more of his adventures.

So Jerry and Jo lunched with the King, who directed that Will o' the West, in other words, Sir William Kingsley, should act as Jerry's guardian until the High Court of Chancery should confirm him in the office.

But, as if they had not had surprises enough for one day, another awaited them when Sir William took them to his house in Pall Mall, where they found Blind Tom and his fiddle awaiting them, and learned that he was a highly valued retainer of the young baronet, who had joined his patron in all his wild escapades to act as his almoner.

THE END.