

A SHILLING NOVEL FOR A HALFPENNY.

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THE PRINCE OF ACROBATS.



Nobby Niggs was about to bury the three points of his weapon in our hero's heart, when there was a sudden rush, and a light, boyish form flung itself across the prostrate acrobat.

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THE PRINCE OF ACROBATS.

By MORTIMER AUSTIN.

CHAPTER 1.

A BRUTAL EXHIBITION — RALPH MILBURN PUNISHES A VILLAIN—THE SERPENT QUEEN—A VENGEFUL FOE.

"Oh! oh! ow! ow! You're killing me! You're killing me! Ow! ow! ow-oh!"

The thin, weak voice ended in a piteous howl, and then came a deathlike silence inside the caravan, a silence broken a moment later by the dull "thud," "thud" of repeated blows, and a man's angry tones:

"Oh, you're shamming now, are you? You're making belief you've fainted? Take that, and that! I'll teach you not to go through your tricks properly, that I will!"

Again there was the sound of heavy blows, and the handsome, manly youth of nineteen, who stood listening in horror outside the van, hesitated no longer. With pale, set face and flashing eyes, he bounded up the steps, and flung open the door of the caravan.

A horrid scene of brutality met his indignant gaze. Standing over the half nude body of a boy of some twelve years of age, who was tied down spread-eagle fashion upon a large chest, was a burly ruffian, wielding a heavy horsewhip.

The intruder saw at a glance that the man had been drinking, and was beside himself with insensate fury. He was still mercilessly plying the cruel lash upon his victim's quivering flesh, which was scored with unsightly purple weals, heedless of the fact that the boy had swooned.

"You hound! You brutal coward!" cried the young fellow, and, springing forward, he caught the ruffian's uplifted wrist and arrested another blow. "Do you mean to murder him? Stop it, Nobby Niggs, stop your cowardly work!"

The man uttered a yell of rage at this interference, and, volleying forth a string of curses, tried to wrench his arm free. But the youth's grip was like iron, and finding he could not liberate his wrist, the bully struck savagely with his left fist at the other's face.

The young fellow saw the blow coming, and adroitly evaded it by a twist of his head; then, clenching his own fist instantly, he dashed it full into his antagonist's flushed and bloated face.

Nobby Niggs, for so the burly ruffian was called, staggered under the crushing force with which the blow had been dealt; and, ere he could recover himself, the youth had torn the whip from his hand.

"By the eternal, Ralph Milburn, I'll kill you for that blow!" roared the now thoroughly infuriated bully. And he made a wild dash at the seemingly slight and weak young fellow before him.

But slight though the latter undoubtedly was, his whole frame consisted of naught but muscle and sinew, toughened by acrobatic and gymnastic exercise, till they were like steel, for Ralph Milburn was the cleverest acrobat in "Criddle's Travelling Circus," to which the drunken ruffian, Nobby Niggs, belonged, in the capacity of clown.

Ralph did not flinch as Niggs made for him, but, throwing the hand that held the whip quickly over his head, brought the lash round with fearful force across his assailant's cheek.

The sharp thong "swished" and coiled itself round Niggs' head, literally blinding the fellow for the moment, and extorting from him an awful shriek of agony.

Clasping his hands over his terribly disfigured face, the ruffian reeled wildly forward, and fell crashing over the box that still held the senseless form of his boy-victim, just as there came the sound of footsteps on the ladder outside, and a number of men appeared in the doorway.

"Milburn, you here? What is the meaning of this uproar?" demanded Mr. Criddle, the proprietor of the circus, who was the foremost of the new-comers.

"Nobby Niggs has been ill-using little Willy, sir," answered the youth calmly. "I heard screams, and, guessing what was the matter, made so bold as to enter the caravan to put a stop to the brute's treatment of his son."

Mr. Criddle's eye fell upon the naked, lacerated back of the poor lad tied down upon the box, and his face hardened and his eyes flashed angrily as he turned to the discomfited bully, who had struggled into a sitting position, and was groaning with pain, while rubbing his smarting cheek.

"Nobby Niggs, you are a miserable coward and bully, to beat

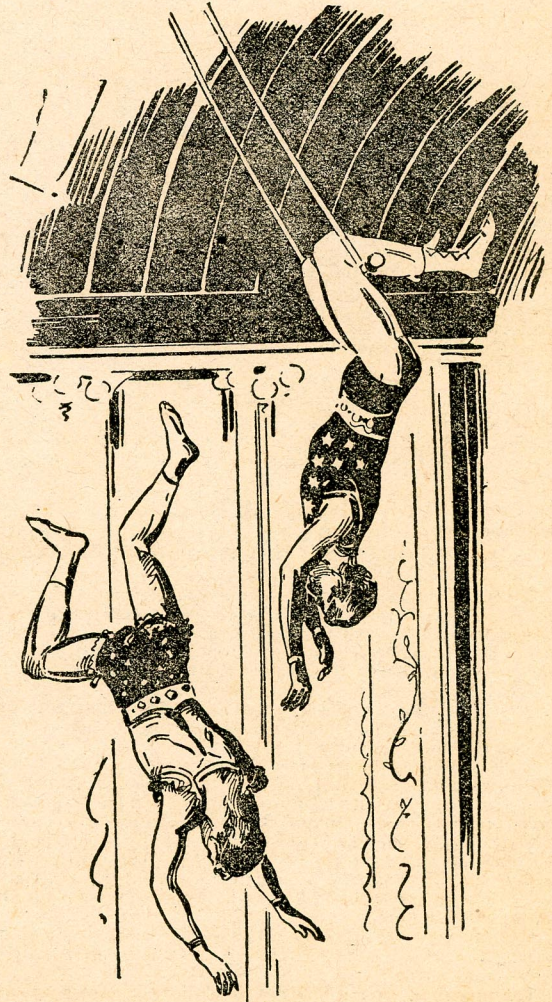
your son so! Spots, Twisto, release the poor little fellow, and take him to my van. Ralph, you did quite right to interfere between this ruffian's brutality and his helpless victim, and I am only sorry I was not by myself to administer a thorough thrashing to him. Niggs, you leave this circus to-morrow! Do you hear? I will not have such a ruffian in my employ. Be thankful I do not hand you over to the police to be dealt with as you richly merit."

Mr. Criddle and Ralph quitted the caravan, and followed in the wake of the others, who were carrying the senseless victim of his father's cruelty. The poor lad, whose back was one mass of bruises, was borne into Mr. Criddle's own van and laid upon a bed; and then the kind-hearted proprietor sent Ralph to an adjacent tent to bring Mrs. Criddle to attend the little sufferer.

Ralph found the proprietor's wife in company with Sylvia, the "Serpent Queen," a lovely, dark-eyed girl of eighteen.

As the young acrobat entered the tent, the tender light that shone from the girl's lustrous orbs, and the slight blush that rose to her cheeks, would have told its own tale to an observer.

When Ralph stated the object of his visit, touching as lightly as he could upon Nobby Niggs' brutality, Sylvia started to her feet with a low cry, and said:



Somehow the clown had missed the acrobat's hands; and he fell fully twenty feet into the net.

"Oh, the poor boy, the poor boy! Mrs. Criddle, I will go with you. That brute, his father, deserves hanging!"

The two women repaired to the caravan, and bathed and tended the poor young sufferer's hurts; while Ralph, who would faint have lingered near the caravan, so long as it held the Serpent Queen, reluctantly returned to his own quarters, and re-sought the rest from which he had been so rudely disturbed by the screams of little Willy Niggs.

In the morning Mr. Criddle came to him, and said that the clown, Nobby Niggs, was exceedingly sorry for what had occurred the previous night, and had asked him (Criddle) to overlook his conduct this once, and it should not occur again.

"I don't think he is a bad father to the lad," concluded the proprietor, "save when he has had a drop too much. If I keep my word and discharge him, I shall lose a good clown, and perhaps drive him altogether to the bad. For Willy's own sake, I would prefer to keep the father on. I could then have him constantly under my eye, and see he did not ill-use the lad."

"Yes, I agree with you, sir," replied Ralph. "It would be as well, perhaps, to keep Nobby Niggs on for his boy's sake."

"Ah, I am glad to hear you are of the same opinion," said Mr. Criddle, evidently much relieved. "I suppose, then, you will have no objection to shaking hands with Niggs and making friends again?"

"None in the least, sir. That is, of course, provided Niggs is willing to be friendly."

"I can vouch for that, for I have already approached him. He is waiting outside. Niggs!"

The burly fellow shambled into the caravan rather sheepishly, and looked, if anything, more brutal and repulsive than before. He cast a quick glance from under his overhanging brows at Ralph, and the latter, intercepting it, was thunderstruck at the deep malevolence contained in it.

But the next moment, Mr. Criddle exclaimed:

"Niggs, Mr. Milburn is as willing as yourself to make friends. Come, shake hands, and forget and forgive!"

Nobby stepped forward at once with outstretched hand, and Ralph, imagining that he might have been mistaken in his reading of the clown's glance, took the man's hand and shook it cordially.

"Ha, that is well!" said Mr. Criddle, smiling approval. "Now, Niggs, remember you must be on your best behaviour for the future. And if I catch you ill-using that poor little lad of yours again, I will—I will thrash you myself. Good-day!"

And the proprietor walked away from Ralph's caravan.

Nobby Niggs pretended to treat his employer's threat as a huge joke, but he failed signally to call up a smile. As the young acrobat closed the door of his caravan, the clown's face changed like lightning. A most savage scowl came over it, making the unsightly weal across his cheek, left by Ralph's slash with the whip the night before, stand out more than ever. A malignant fire gleamed in the bloodshot eyes, and he muttered under his breath:

"Curse you, Ralph Milburn, I will be even with you yet! Does the fool think I can forgive him for this?" And he touched the livid mark of the whip.

Then he slunk off again to his own van to hide his face from the eyes of the other members of the troupe.

CHAPTER 2.

IN THE RING—RALPH'S DARING ACROBATIC FEATS
—A PERILOUS LEAP—NOBBY NIGGS' TREACHERY
—THE ACCIDENT.

There was an afternoon performance at the circus, and it being a "fair" day in the village, the place was crowded to excess. Ralph Milburn, the "King of Acrobats," as he was styled upon the posters, was the chief attraction, and his popularity was run very closely by that of Sylvia the Serpent Queen.

Mr. Criddle was his own ringmaster, and Nobby Niggs and Sporty Spots, the two clowns, opened the performance with their practical jokes at each other's expense, putting the audience into the best of good humours.

Little did the spectators guess, though, that the rivalry between these two was in reality of anything but a friendly nature, and that the "whacks" dealt by each upon the other's person at every opportunity were frequently inflicted with vicious purpose.

Nobby Niggs hated his fellow-clown with all the venom of his vile disposition, for Sporty Spots, thanks to his smart repartees and quick wit, invariably scored in the ring against his rival, and succeeded in instituting himself in the audience's favour after a very few minutes.

He was a general favourite outside the ring, too, with the other performers, whereas, Nobby Niggs was as universally detested and disliked.

The foolery of the rival clowns was followed by some splendid feats of equestrianism and jugglery, and then a storm of applause rang out as Sylvia, looking more lovely than ever in her picturesque gipsy-dress, tripped lightly into the ring, with several small snakes twined about her neck and arms. A couple of men

followed her, bearing a large, iron-bound chest, which they set in the ring beside her.

Bowing her acknowledgment of the spectators' favour, the girl unlocked the chest and lifted the lid, whereupon several huge reptiles inside reared their ugly heads and began to crawl out.

There were little stifled screams from the fair portion of the audience; but without the slightest fear of the horrid creatures, Sylvia handled several of them, and, striking up a strange, weird chant, twined them about her waist, her arms, neck and shoulders. The snakes raised their heads above hers, and hissed loudly as she walked round, still chanting and gently patting their scaly coils.

Now she softly removed their clinging folds from around her person, and set them one after the other upon the ground. Then, taking a peculiarly-shaped, reed instrument from one of the ring-attendants, she began to play a strange, unearthly melody. The snakes raised their heads at the first few notes, and began to wriggle and undulate about the floor.

Louder and louder the melody swelled; the movements of the reptiles became more rhythmic, and now several began to balance themselves on their tails, and rock their heads to and fro in perfect time with the music.

Soon all the reptiles were dancing like this in a semi-circle around her, and the awed spectators sat spellbound, afraid seemingly to even breathe lest they should disturb the performance or distract the snake-charmer's attention.

Sylvia played now softer and softer, and then the music ceased altogether, while the snakes remained still poised upon their tails in the air.

There was not a sound from the audience, as the girl took up the perfectly motionless and seemingly torpid creatures one by one, and replaced them in the box. But as soon as she had closed and locked the lid, such a storm of cheering burst forth as nearly rent the canvas roof of the circus.

Another and larger box had been deposited beside her. This she now opened, and, uttering her former chant, helped forth from it a couple of pythons. Neither of these monstrosities could have been less than ten feet long, and in places they were thicker than a man's thigh.

Still, the fearless young girl handled these as she had done the smaller snakes, and with that nonchalance and apparent disregard of danger that had deservedly earned for her the title of the "Serpent Queen."

The pythons raised their heads and leered at the spectators with their bright, malignant eyes; but Sylvia uttered a call, and instantly they glided up to her and began to rapidly coil themselves about her waist, shoulders, and neck, intertwining their own bodies, and simultaneously rearing their two ugly heads above hers.

She stood thus only for a single minute, for the weight of the monsters was too great to sustain for any length of time, even though they supported themselves on their tails.

This ended Sylvia's performance, and after a few more feats of bareback riding and somersault turning, it was Ralph Milburn's turn.

Little Willy Niggs should have appeared to help our hero in some of his minor feats, but the poor lad was still lying weak and ill in Mrs. Criddle's motherly hands, while his back was covered with unsightly bruises, so that he was unable to lie down upon it.

Ralph gave first a very clever exhibition of tight and slack rope walking and dancing. He stood upon his head upon the rope, hung from it by his feet, and turned somersaults round it, holding on only by his knees.

Once he pretended to fall, but merely slipped astride the rope, and, twisting a leg round it, gracefully recovered his footing upon it.

Cheer upon cheer greeted each fresh feat from the admiring audience, and now the daring young acrobat proceeded to essay his most perilous performance amid breathless silence from the crowd.

One of the clowns had to ascend a ladder and hang by the knees from a trapeze, in readiness to catch him as he leaped a space of fully fifteen feet with the impetus acquired by a swing upon a horizontal bar.

Sporty Spots it was, as a rule, who caught him; but Nobby Niggs whispered to Mr. Criddle as they stood together in the ring:

"Let me catch Mr. Milburn, sir, to prove that I owe him no ill-will for last night."

"Are you sure you can?" asked the proprietor, rather anxiously. "There is a great risk for the acrobat, if you miss him."

"Oh, never fear, Mr. Criddle, I shall not miss him; and, besides, what risk can there be with the net below?"

"Very well," assented the proprietor, though still in a somewhat dubious tone.

Nobby Niggs at once rushed towards the ladder, and, scrambling up it like a cat, swung himself on to the trapeze, and,

after turning a few somersaults round it, dropped head downwards, holding on to the bar only by his knees.

Ralph, balancing himself gracefully on the slack-rope in mid-air, saw that it was Nobby Niggs who was to catch him, but whatever feelings of dismay and apprehension may have crept over him as he prepared to take the leap, his face betrayed nothing.

Swinging the rope gently to and fro, and still cleverly maintaining his equilibrium upon it, he leaped suddenly into the air, amidst the most painful suspense on the part of the spectators. He caught a light trapeze, hung from the crossbeams of the roof, and, swinging himself lightly up on to the bar, stood upright, grasping the ropes on either side.

Then he set the trapeze swinging backward and forward until it nearly touched the canvas roof. Then, after one of its backward swings, and just as it was beginning to fall forward again, he took a flying leap from it, turned a complete somersault in mid air, and dropped like "a bolt from the blue" straight for the outstretched hands of Nobby Niggs.

No one afterwards could really tell how it happened, for Niggs was seen to throw out his hands and clutch at Ralph's as they shot within an ace of his.

But somehow the clown had failed to catch the acrobat's hands, and, with an awful plunge, the latter dropped fully twenty feet into the net. There was a sharp crack, and the net collapsed bodily under his weight, and precipitated him headlong into the ring upon the head of Mr. Criddle below.

A cry of horror went up from all who witnessed the accident; but this was not the only one, for the next moment a piercing scream rang out, and Nobby Niggs was seen to fall like a stone to earth, while the trapeze, freed suddenly from his weight, swung back almost to the roof.

The clown struck the ground with a sickening thud within a few feet of where Ralph, apparently none the worse for his fall, and the ringmaster were already struggling to disentangle themselves from the broken net.

But Nobby Niggs lay still and motionless in a heap upon the ground; and now, as the attendants came running anxiously forward, several women in the audience fainted, and men leaped over the barriers into the ring to lend assistance.

But neither Ralph Milburn nor Mr. Criddle appeared in any way hurt, though Nobby Niggs was stunned. He was carried into the dressing-room, and Ralph, to reassure the audience that he was all right, consented to go through a few more tricks upon the tight-rope. However, a close observer might have noticed that his face was slightly drawn, as if he really were suffering pain. And when at last he left the ring amidst deafening applause, he staggered, and would have fallen had not Sporty Spots caught and supported him.

"You are hurt, then, Ralph?" said the kind-hearted clown anxiously.

"Oh, it is nothing!" feebly gasped the other. "One of my ankles is sprained, that is all."

The next moment his head fell forward upon the shoulder of Sporty Spots. He had fainted.

CHAPTER 3.

SYLVIA HAS SUSPICIONS OF NOBBY NIGGS—SPORTY SPOTS MAKES AN ALARMING DISCOVERY—THE MIDNIGHT PANIC—"THE LIONS ARE LOOSE!"

Sporty Spots and one or two of the other actors carried Ralph to the dressing-room between them, and at once set to work to try and bring him round.

Though he had sprained his ankle in the fall, he had pluckily and gamely endured the intense agony it caused him as he went through his after feats, simply so as not to let the public know that he really had been hurt.

The result was that the ankle was now swollen to such a size that his tights had to be ripped open with a knife.

Sylvia Clayton, the Serpent Queen, heard from one of the attendants of his injury, and at once hastened to see if she could be of any assistance. She applied wet cloths to the sprain, and had the sufferer removed to his own caravan and laid upon a couch. Then she sat by him and bathed the injury from time to time as tenderly as a sister or a mother might.

Her presence greatly soothed Ralph, and enabled him to bear the pain with fortitude.

"Thank you—thank you, dear Sylvia!" he repeated again and again, as she hovered about his cramped couch like the angel of mercy she was.

"By the by, how is Nobby Niggs? Is he—is he—"

"Very much injured, were you going to ask, Ralph?" she inquired, as he broke off the sentence. "No, he dislocated his right shoulder, that is all. The doctor is with him now. Ralph, my dear boy, do you think he missed you on purpose? It looks dreadfully suspicious, after the quarrel you had with him last night."

"Oh, no, Sylvia; I don't think he is capable of that! That, you know, might have meant my death, but for the net."

"Little use the net was, save that it broke your fall somewhat," the girl answered, with pale face and gleaming eyes. "Mr. Criddle cannot account for its breaking as it did either, and said it seemed stout and firm enough when tried a few hours before. Could it have been tampered with at all?"

"Oh, no, no, Sylvia! What can have put such notions in your head? Believe me, Nobby Nigs really seemed anxious to catch me, but he was a few seconds too late, that was all. I feel sure the man would not be so base as to deliberately try in that way to kill or maim me."

"Mr. Criddle should not have allowed him to take Sporty Spots' place."

"But he asked to be allowed to do so as a special favour, so Mr. Criddle told me, just to show that he bore me no ill-will for last night."

"And this is the result," responded Sylvia quietly. "Ralph, dear, I firmly believe it was no accident, but a deliberate attempt on the part of that scoundrel to kill you! I never liked the man, and I know well he is not one to forgive so easily. Even the grease-paint could not altogether hide the mark across his face this afternoon; and do you think he can bear any goodwill to the man who placed it there?"

"There, there, dearest, don't say any more! Even if it were no accident on his part, I think he came off the worst. But I myself really think he did his best to catch me; and so let us talk about something else."

It was a well-known fact to all the performers in Criddle's Circus that Ralph Milburn, the clever young acrobat, and Sylvia Clayton, the Serpent Queen, were lovers. They had plighted their troth some weeks before our story opened, and were both looking forward to shortly being able to fix the happy day.

On account of the accidents Ralph and Nobby Niggs had met with, neither were able to take part in the performance that night, and the audience were greatly disappointed because of the daring acrobat's non-appearance, many standing up and leaving the theatre in disgust. Their money had to be returned to them at the doors, and Mr. Criddle called down anything but blessings on the head of Nobby Niggs as the cause of so heavy a loss. In vain the proprietor had introduced a clever contortionist and another fairly good acrobat, the public clamoured for Ralph, and, as he could not appear, would not stop to see the end of the performance.

Mr. Criddle was beside himself with anger, and vented all the vials of his wrath upon Niggs, who vainly protested he could not help what had occurred. However, the patronage of the circus was practically destroyed in that particular town, and as Ralph's ankle could not possibly be right again in less than a fortnight, Mr. Criddle determined to travel further afield.

It was the night before the camp was to be broken up, when Ralph, as he lay upon his couch, reading by the light of a lamp placed close to his hand, heard a gentle tap at the door.

He called "Come in!" and the door opened, admitting Sporty Spots.

The latter had always a most melodramatic way about him that greatly amused his fellow-performers.

As he stepped inside the caravan he placed a finger upon his lips, as though enjoining the strictest silence, turned the key in the lock, and shot the top and bottom bolts. Then, on tiptoe, he approached the astonished and highly amused Ralph, and whispered:

"Mr. Milburn, I have made a terrible and awful discovery. Do you know the two chief stays that supported the net placed to catch you did not snap solely with your weight? They were partly severed with a knife or some other sharp instrument."

Ralph uttered a cry of surprise, and half rose to a sitting posture, giving his ankle a painful wrench that extorted a groan from him.

"What?" he cried. "Are you sure, Sporty? Remember, this means an ugly accusation against someone!"

"I know that, Ralph," returned the clown, with a solemn face. "It does mean that an ugly charge is to be laid at someone's door, and I don't think we would either of us have to go very far to find that someone. Mr. Milburn, it is the truth I am telling you. I know what a rope looks like when it has been cut by a knife, and I assert most positively those two stays were half cut through."

Ralph remained silent for a few minutes, then he asked: "Sporty, does Mr. Criddle know of this?"

"Not yet; but he is sure to find out, and then there will be a rumpus. If I were Nobby Niggs, I'd clear out of this at once. The 'boss' will give him in charge for this job."

"But what proof have you that he cut the ropes?"

"Who else would? Mr. Milburn, that fellow owed you a grudge, and would stick at nothing to injure you."

There was a dead silence in the van after this for a full

minute, when it was suddenly broken by a ringing scream outside, and then a deep, reverberating roar like distant thunder.

Sporty Spots and Ralph stared aghast at one another. There was no need of either to ask the meaning of that roar; both knew it only too well. It was the roar of an angry lion, and the pair in the caravan guessed, from the proximity of the alarming sound, that the wild beast was free.

"Good heavens!" gasped Sporty Spots, "the lions are out!"

Even as he spoke there came a terrific crash at the door of the van, the latter rocked upon its wheels and almost toppled over; and as the horrified men turned, they beheld a sight that was sufficient to freeze the blood in the veins of the bravest.

The frail door hung shattered from a single hinge, and framed in the opening was the huge head of a tawny-maned African lion, which has been described as the finest and most powerful specimen of its kind in existence.

Against the darkness beyond, its grandly massive head and shoulders loomed up distinctly, and its eyes gleamed like balls of living fire out of the shaggy hair. It opened its great jaws, and gave voice to another tremendous roar, which almost deafened the alarmed men in that confined space, and shook the caravan upon its wheels.

CHAPTER 4.

RALPH ENCOUNTERS A LION IN THE OPEN CARRYING OFF A CHILD—HIS DARING AND GALLANT RESCUE—THE LIONS ARE CAPTURED—THE FIRE IN THE "PROPERTY TENT."

With a choking cry, Sporty Spots fell back against the small table; but, almost helpless though he was with his sprained ankle, Ralph Milburn, even in that awful moment, did not lose his presence of mind. He saw that the lion was crouching to spring upon the clown, who was nearer it than himself, and, catching up the oil-lamp that stood upon the table beside his pillow, he hurled it full in the monster's face.

The lamp exploded with a loud report as it struck the lion full between the eyes. There was a mingled growl and roar of pain, and the ferocious beast disappeared from the doorway in the darkness beyond.

But now came a perfect succession of roars from various parts of the encampment, and Ralph Milburn felt his heart turn to ice within him.

There were four full-grown lions belonging to the circus, and, judging from the sounds, it seemed as if these were all out.

Thoughts of the terrible danger to the women and children, and especially to his own sweet girl-love, Sylvia Clayton, rushed upon his mind, and forgetting the pain of his sprained ankle in his anxiety for these, he leaped off the couch on to the floor of the van.

His ankle gave beneath him, causing him execratiating agony, and he nearly swooned; but, with the most indomitable pluck and fortitude he conquered the pain, and struggled desperately towards the door.

Down the steps he hastened and hobbled in the direction of Sylvia's caravan. Shouts and screams were ringing all over the camp, mingling now and again with a thunder-like roar from one of the wild beasts; lights were flashing in all directions.

Ralph had to pass several other caravans and tents to get to the Serpent Queen's, and from inside these came cries and moans of terrified women and children. Suddenly he saw a huge shaggy mass bound through the air, and fall with a crash upon one of the tents. It collapsed bodily, and piercing shrieks pealed forth from under the fallen canvas.

With an awful fear at his heart, Ralph rushed to the spot, oblivious of his sprain, to come face to face with a lion, holding in its mouth an infant of a few months.

The great brute was walking coolly off with its living burden, and did not see Ralph; and, without any thought of personal risk, the gallant young acrobat took a running leap, and landed fairly and squarely on the animal's back.

The lion, in its surprise at this strange attack, dropped the child, and uttered a deep growl; but Ralph's acrobatic skill stood him in good stead now.

Still maintaining his position on the back of the astonished brute, he bent down and clutched its shaggy mane firmly, so that it could not throw him off, and fumbled desperately in his vest-pocket for his knife.

The lion uttered a terrific roar, and, rearing on its hind legs, tried to throw him off; but he held on with a grip like death, and then the wild beast bit savagely round at its flanks in hopes of catching his legs.

Ralph was unable to draw his knife from his pocket as he required both hands to hold on, but he now set up shout after shout for help.

The lion reared and plunged in its attempts to unseat him, and finally flung itself completely over on its back.

But Ralph saw what was coming, and nimbly leaped clear, to find his injured ankle once more give way beneath him. He fell to earth, but his hand came in contact with a heavy iron

bar, doubtless dropped by one of the keepers. With a breathless prayer of thankfulness he clutched this eagerly, and scrambled to his feet again, despite the agony his ankle caused him.

The lion was crouching to spring upon him but a few feet away, and the next moment, with another roar, it had bounded into the air. Ralph, with a feeling of despair, struck wildly at the shaggy head with the iron bar, as it seemed to hover for an instant in midair; then he was hurled violently to earth with the monster atop of him.

Half-stunned by the shock, he yet was conscious of the hurried trampling of footsteps around him, of shouts, and the flashing of innumerable lights. Then his senses left him, and he knew no more.

The tamers and keepers, attracted by his cries for help, had come upon the scene in the very nick of time, and driven the lion off him. Now the fierce brute was quickly surrounded by the keepers, who closed in upon it with flares, red-hot irons, and heavy whips.

Dazed and cowed, the "King of the Forest" sank upon the ground, trembling in every limb, and four men hastily threw over it a stout network of ropes. The huge beast, of course, struggled and rolled about to free itself of the entanglement, but only succeeded in making itself a more secure prisoner than ever.

Then the keepers lashed and beat it unmercifully with their whips and poles; running nooses were slipped over its head and paws, and it was dragged away to its cage by fully twenty men.

The other three lions had been likewise captured in various parts of the camp, though two keepers had lost their lives, and three others been badly mauled by the fierce brutes, ere they overpowered them, and securely caged them once more.

Fortunately all the lions, with the exception of the one with which Ralph Milburn had had his thrilling encounter, had been more intent on escape than attacking the occupants of the caravans and tents, and this accounted for the immunity of the helpless women and children.

The baby, that had been rescued so gallantly by the young acrobat, was picked up laughing and crowing with delight, and quite unhurt. The lion had seized it by its night-clothes, and there was not as much as a scratch upon its body.

Ralph was carried by Mr. Criddle and Sporty Spots back to his caravan, and restoratives were applied. Beyond a few scratches, he was found to have escaped scot-free from his terrible fight with the monster; but, when he came to, he groaned aloud with the intense agony he suffered from his sprained foot, which after the almost superhuman exertions he had gone through was worse than ever.

Sylvia Clayton, however, came and sat beside him to nurse him, and, in the pleasure of her society and conversation, Ralph forgot his pain. There was a feverish flush, however, on his cheek as he fell asleep, which troubled the fair girl; and, next morning when he awoke, he was in a high fever, and quite delirious.

He did not even know Sylvia, as she bent tenderly over him; and yet her name was continually on his lips, and he kept muttering:

"Sylvia! She will be torn to pieces! The lions! The lions are out! Sylvia! Sylvia! Where are you?"

These broken ravings brought tears to the Serpent Queen's eyes, for she now well understood what had led him from his sick couch into the open, and brought on his combat with the king of beasts.

Weak and ill as he was, he had thought of her, and had been on his way to her tent. There was no one in the van, and, bending down, she pressed her lips again and again to his burning cheek and brow.

Meanwhile, Mr. Criddle was sharply interrogating the tamers and keepers. One of these had made the alarming discovery while the wild beasts had been loose, that the door of their cage had been unlocked, and the key could not even now be found.

The chief tamer, Signor Maldino, too, was not amongst the crowd, who comprised the entire male strength of the troupe with the exception of Ralph and the missing man. Two or three who had been despatched to see if he were in his caravan now returned, saying that he was helplessly drunk—or drugged.

A terrible suspicion fastened itself upon the mind of Sporty Spots, and he glanced round in search of Nobby Niggs. He started back, as he beheld the man standing close beside him, looking pale and ghastly in the light of the naphtha lamp, which illuminated the scene.

At the same moment a cry of "Look! Look yonder!" burst from the lips of several in the crowd, and, as all eyes turned in the one direction, a great flame was seen to shoot up into the air, and there came a succession of short, sharp explosions from the further side of the encampment, where stood the large tent used for the storage of the more cumbersome "properties."

The horrors of that night were not yet done with.

Mr. Criddle uttered a cry.

"Great heavens, the 'property-tent' is on fire! Quick, men, quick! bring buckets of water—get out the hose-pipes!"

The crowd around him melted away, and all ran to help in extinguishing the fire. But this was found to have secured a firm hold upon the contents of the tent, which was a sea of raging flames when the awed crowd gathered round it.

Barrels of naphtha and other inflammable oils stored in it were exploding every other minute, and the light canvas was rent asunder in all directions with cracks like pistol-shots, revealing the interior one red-hot molten mass. Dense volumes of choking smoke rolled upwards and outwards from it, and the air for a great radius was stifling.

Yet, in spite of the heat and smoke, the men of the circus laboured like giants to extinguish the flames, standing in lines, and passing buckets filled with water, rapidly from hand to hand, those in front dashing their contents upon the tent, now one mass of fire.

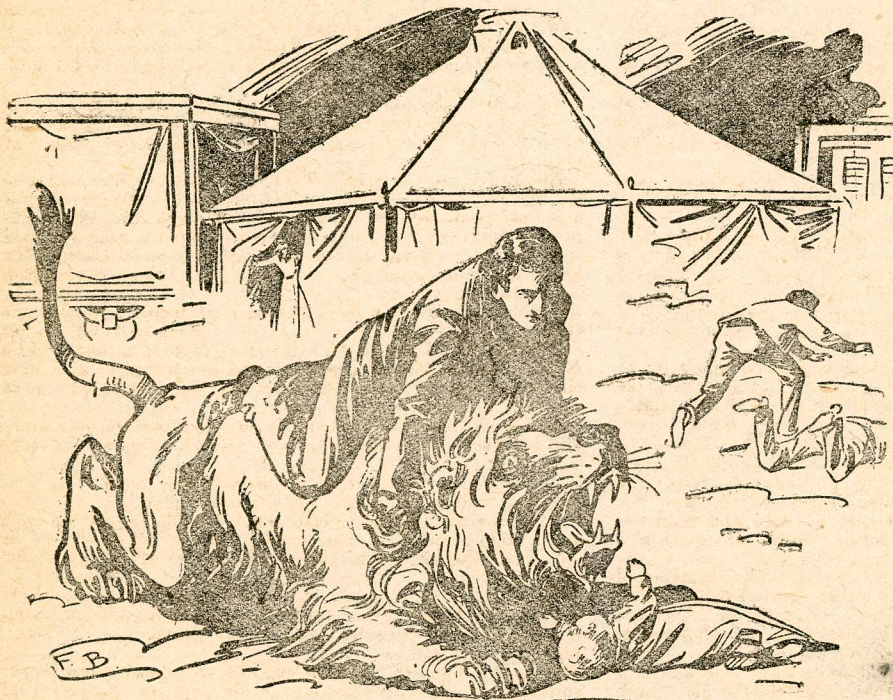
Presently the fire-hose was got into play, and gradually the terrible element was got under control, until at last nothing remained but the still smouldering, smoking debris.

The tent had been completely gutted, and its site was marked by a blackened, shapeless heap.

CHAPTER 5.

WHO TAMPERED WITH THE LIONS' CAGE?—RALPH UNABLE TO TAKE PART IN THE PERFORMANCES—NOBBY NIGGS STEALS OUT OF THE CAMP AT NIGHT, AND IS TRACKED BY HIS SON—TWO VILLAINS IN CONSULTATION—WILLY IS DISCOVERED EAVESDROPPING.

There was no sleep that night for any in the troupe, but the



The gallant young acrobat landed fairly and squarely on the animal's back.

smallest children and the delirious young acrobat, Ralph Milburn.

When morning dawned, the men of the circus gathered round their chief, who was almost beside himself with rage and despair at his loss. They talked over the events of the night in whispers, and many were the hints thrown out as to foul play being at the bottom of the terrible occurrences.

But who amongst them could have been guilty of such diabolical treachery and villainy? Who indeed?

Sporty Spots had vague suspicions, but after all these were only suspicions, and Nobby Niggs, the man he so darkly suspected, had been amongst the most eager in the chase after the escaped lions, as well as one of the most energetic in the work of extinguishing the fire.

The kindhearted clown, too, could scarcely bring himself to believe that his rival could be so utterly depraved as to be guilty of such atrocious villainy. Moreover, now he could not even point to the net he knew had been tampered with, as part proof of Niggs' scheme of vengeance, for this had been destroyed with all the other "properties" in the fire.

He therefore determined to hold his tongue for the present, as, after all, there was a possibility that he might be laying a horrible charge at the door of an innocent man.

When Signor Maldino recovered his senses, he was loud in his assertions that he had been drugged.

But as it was well-known that the lion-tamer was given to over-indulgence in spirituous liquors, not much credence was placed upon his word.

Mr. Criddle, after what had occurred, was of course unable to travel on as he had intended. An inquest had to be held on the bodies of the two keepers, killed by the lions; and Signor Maldino came very near being sent to trial for manslaughter by the coroner and his jury, who were inclined to look upon his leaving the door of the cage unlocked as most culpable negligence. The key, however, had not even yet been found, and its disappearance was a perfect mystery.

It was fully a week after that night of alarms and horrors before the encampment was broken up, and the company started once more on its travels.

By that time Ralph's fever had abated. He had recovered consciousness, but he was still too weak and ill to rise from his couch. Moreover, his ankle was not yet quite right.

The caravan stopped a few days later on the outskirts of the little town of Benning in one of the Midland Counties, and Mr. Criddle decided to stay a few days and seek the patronage of the inhabitants.

Ralph's name, of course, had to be left off the bill—a fact which the proprietor greatly lamented, for the young acrobat's fame had gone before him; but as it was, the Serpent Queen and Knotan Twisto, the contortionist, proved a great attraction, and the circus was filled to overflowing both at the afternoon and evening performances.

The show had closed for the night, the people had departed to their homes, and the wearied performers had sought their vans and tents to snatch a well-earned rest.

It was a pitch-dark night. Not a star glimmered in the heavens, and the encampment of the circus people was wrapped in silence as of the grave. Not a dog barked to disturb the stillness, and the vans and tents, looming up black, shapeless masses against the skyline, seemed empty and unoccupied.

What was that?

A dark form had glided out of the door of one of the vans and down the steps. It halted, and seemed to be listening intently.

Then it moved forward noiselessly and disappeared in the shadows. It had barely vanished, when out of the door of the same van came stealing yet another figure, this time that of a mere child, a boy of ten or twelve.

Descending the steps, the little fellow, whom the reader will readily recognise as Willy Niggs, followed stealthily in the direction taken by the other nocturnal prowler, none other than his ruffianly parent.

Quitting the encampment at the opposite side to where he knew the night-watchman was stationed, Nobby Niggs struck across the fields away from the town.

He gained a high road at length, and, following this for some distance, his son still closely dogging his footsteps, turned off into a narrow lane.

This brought him to a huge iron gateway, apparently the entrance to some noble estate, for an avenue of beeches could be seen beyond, and a pretty little white lodge, half buried in ivy.

Nobby Niggs shook the gates and found them locked; then, after a cautious look round to see if anyone were about, he climbed the gates and dropped down noiselessly inside the grounds. He advanced boldly up to the door of the lodge, and gave a sharp pull at the bell.

There was no answer, so he pulled again and again, and yet a fourth time in his impatience.

A window was cautiously opened above the door, and the head of a man, adorned with a white nightcap, appeared.

"Who are you, and what do you want at this hour of the night, rousing honest folks out of their beds?"

"Seth Hobbs, don't you know your old pal, Nobby Niggs?"

The man at the window started visibly, and an ejaculation of astonishment left his lips.

"What, you, Niggs? Well, what an unearthly hour you do choose, to be sure, for your visits! What do you want now?"

"To see you, Seth, my boy, of course!" grinned the ruffian below. "Hurry up! Jump into your clothes, I want to see you very partie'lar."

The head disappeared from the window, and, after what seemed an interminable time to Nobby Niggs, footsteps were heard shuffling along the passage. The bolts were drawn back, and then the door swung open, revealing a squat, thickset man, half-dressed, and carrying a lantern.

"It really is you, then, Nobby?" inquired the fellow, holding the lantern aloft, so that the light might fall upon the other's features.

"In course it's me!" growled Niggs, "and a bloomin' long time it takes you to come down and let an old pal in!"

"I was as quick as I could be!" answered Seth Hobbs, who somehow seemed to be afraid of his self-styled "pal." "Come in!"

Still grumbling and mumbling, Nobby followed the other into the house, unconscious of the fact that his son's bright eyes were watching him with curiosity and amazement through the bars of the gate.

No sooner had the door closed behind his father and Seth Hobbs, who was a total stranger to the boy, than the last-named muttered to himself:

"Now, what on earth can father be up to this time? He cannot be trying to hurt Mr. Milburn to-night, that's certain, or why should he have come here? And who is that strange man who knew him? Well, I like Mr. Milburn—I love him, that I do—and I won't let father try to kill him. I know it was father set the lions loose that night, and I'm not going to let him do anything like that again. I mean to find out what he has come here for."

With this determination, the plucky little fellow scaled the iron gates; but, in leaping down on the other side, his jacket caught on the iron spikes, and he hung for a minute, his feet swinging clear of the ground. Only for a moment, though; the next there was a tearing sound. The miserable shoddy, of which his clothes were made, gave, fortunately enough for the little fellow, and he fell upon his hands and knees.

Hastily scrambling up, he approached the lodge shortly, and saw that light was issuing from under the blind of one of the ground-floor windows.

The blind was short, fully six inches, and, stepping up to the window, Willy found that he was able to see into the room. It held three persons—his father, Seth Hobbs, and a sour-visaged, masculine-looking woman, evidently Seth's better-half.

Nobby Niggs and Seth were seated, talking eagerly together, while the woman was arranging some bottles and glasses upon the table. The little eavesdropper outside could hear the murmur of the men's voices, but that was all. He could not make out a word of the conversation, in which the woman also took part.

Nobby Niggs sat facing the window, and, probably attracted by that animal magnetism which we all possess to such an extent that we can often tell when another person's eyes are fixed upon us, he all at once looked straight into the eyes of his son.

He uttered a wild cry of mingled superstition and alarm as he beheld the small white face pressed against the glass, and, leaping to his feet, pointed wildly at the window.

CHAPTER 6.

NOBBY NIGGS'S BRUTALITY—LITTLE WILLY OVERHEARS THE RUFFIANS' PLOT TO COMMIT A BURGLARY—MR. CRIDDLE'S IDEA OF INTRODUCING A GLADIATORIAL CONTEST IN THE CIRCUS PROGRAMME—RALPH AND NOBBY NIGGS ARE TO BE THE GLADIATORS.

Willy Niggs realised with a thrill of terror that he had been discovered, and he knew his worthy parent's brutal temper only too well to dread the consequences. He turned and ran for the gate; but, ere he reached it, he heard the door of the lodge open, and the curses of the two men as they rushed forth.

Scrambling madly up the bars of the gate, he was almost over, when a strong hand clutched his coat-collar, and he was jerked back off the gate on to his feet.

"Why, it's only a boy!" gasped Seth Hobbs, in astonishment.

"Ay! But—"

Nobby Niggs stopped short, stared in stupid amazement at

the diminutive specimen of humanity he held in his powerful grasp, and then fairly panted.

"You young scoundrel, so you have followed me! Won't I make you smart for this! I'll—I'll flay you alive, I will! There's no Ralph Milburn goin' to interfere now! I'll cut the heart out of you, you young varmint, for daring to follow me! Come on!"

And the brutal ruffian dragged the unresisting, terrified lad into the house and flung him in a heap on the floor of the little parlour at the feet of the woman. She pounced upon him at once, and, after administering several resounding smacks upon his puny person with her heavy, bony hands, dragged him into the light.

As her eyes rested upon his pale, refined features, she uttered a low cry of fear, and, letting go of him, gasped:

"It—it is he! Seth—Seth! Look! Do you not recognise him?"

She pointed at the lad with a trembling hand, and her husband echoed her cry, as he, too, looked, and appeared to recognise the little fellow. Positively trembling all over, Hobbs wheeled upon Nobby Niggs, who was watching the effect of the recognition upon his companions with a smile of amusement, and demanded huskily:

"Niggs, what is the meaning of this? What have you brought him here for? It is the same, there's no doubt of that?"

"You're right, old pal," answered Nobby. "It is the boy; but, hang it all, what are you lookin' so skeart about? I didn't bring him. He came himself. He must have follered me from the caravan, and, by the hookey, I'll tan his hide for the trick!"

With that the burly ruffian unbuckled a leather belt from about his waist, and, seizing Willy by the collar, swung the heavy iron buckle into the air. He was about to bring it down with cruel force upon the lad's back, when Hobbs grasped his wrist and growled:

"No, no; stow that, Nobby! The lad's shouts may attract attention, and the colonel often takes a stroll in the grounds at night."

Nobby Niggs seemed half-inclined to persist in chastising his son, but the counsels of his associate carried weight, and, with a sullen scowl and a fierce imprecation, he hurled Willy—re-prieved for the time being—into a corner with such violence that his head, coming into contact with the wall, he lay in a heap, half stunned.

The two ruffians and the woman seated themselves again at the table, and, refilling their glasses, continued their conversation.

"Well, what I say is, let's get the job done at once," said Nobby Niggs. "There's no saying how long or how short a time the circus will stop here, and it would look suspicious if we cracked the place, say, the night before we left. Why, the police would be down on us circus people like a ton of bricks, and I know well old Criddle would suspect me at once!"

"Nobby's right, Seth," chimed in the woman. "Why not do it to-morrow night? The colonel's going to London in the morning, and won't return for a day or two, and there will only be the maids in the place and old Thomas the footman, and he don't count for much."

"Bravo, that's the ticket!" cried Nobby. "With the colonel and his valet out of the way, there will be no one to stop us. What do you say, Seth?"

"I'm agreeable!" growled that anything but agreeable-looking individual. "But look you here, Nobby, you've got to keep that 'ere kid out of the way, if the colonel and police visit your people afterwards. The old chap would be certain sure to recognise the youngster, and then all the fat would be in the fire."

"Never fear, I'll keep the kid dark. By the law, I could cut him into mince-meat for the trick he has played upon me to-night!"

And the ruffian rapped out another choice string of oaths.

"Well, to-morrow night be it," said Seth. "Be here about the same time as you came to-night, and we'll do the job a treat, with the colonel out of the way."

"By the by, old pal," observed Nobby, as the three rose, "you've heard tell nothing more of the colonel's nephew, I suppose?"

"No, not since the old man turned him out of doors. I s'pose he's sowin' his wild oats somewheres, and livin' in hopes the colonel will kick the bucket soon. I s'pose that is why you are keepin' the lad?"

"You bet," laughed Nobby, with a glance in the direction of the apparently unconscious Willy. "When Gaston Cotter comes in for the estate, won't I bleed him just! Did he think he got rid of me for a paltry fifty quid? Not much! He, he!"

He strode over to the corner where his son lay, and, kicking the latter viciously, growled:

"Come, get up, and come along! None of your shamming, now!"

Willy moaned with pain and struggled quickly to his feet. He had lain perfectly still during the foregoing conversation, simulating insensibility, but he had drunk in every word uttered with an astuteness beyond his years. He could not quite grasp the meaning of everything that had been said, but he was cute enough to understand that his father and the man Hobbs intended to commit a burglary at the house of the latter's master.

Seth accompanied Nobby and Will to the gate, and unlocked it for them to pass through; and then, having looked it again after them, returned to the house.

Nobby Niggs, as they approached the encampment, suddenly turned upon his son, and, seizing the latter by the throat, growled:

"Look here, you cursed young fool, if you'll follow me without making any noise, so as not to attract the attention of the watchman, I'll overlook your follerin' me to-night. Do you hear? Come on, now, and mind you make no noise!"

The man knew that the watchman generally kept near the property-vans and the cages containing the wild beasts, so he stole round to the further side of the camp, and, as stealthily as an Indian warrior on the war-path, glided in amongst the vans and tents, followed by his son, and safely regained his own quarters. As the door of the van closed behind their retreating forms, the encampment once more appeared desolate and lonely.

Next day, Ralph Milburn's ankle was so much improved that he decided to get up and walk about a bit. Sylvia and he took a short walk together in the morning, and feeling the better for this, he asked Mr. Criddle to allow him to take part in the afternoon performance.

"No, no, Ralph, your ankle is not strong enough yet," answered the kind-hearted proprietor; "you would only strain it again. Have patience, and take a little longer rest."

But in the evening, Ralph declared himself quite fit to resume his acrobatic feats, and besought Mr. Criddle to let him take part in the performance. The proprietor was firm, however, and would not hear of him attempting his rope-walking, but at last gave way so far to his entreaties as to permit him to take a minor part.

"I am thinking of introducing a novelty into the performance," said Mr. Criddle—"nothing less than a gladiatorial combat. What do you think of that, eh, Ralph?"

"A splendid idea, sir. A gladiatorial combat, after the fashion of those witnessed in the arena of ancient Rome, I suppose?"

"Exactly!" chuckled the proprietor, rubbing his hands gleefully together, as his mind pictured the "draw" such a combat must prove to his rustic patrons. "Exactly; sword versus net and trident. As you so particularly wish to take part in the performance, you might take that of the swordsman. You won't have much to do as I think it would be better to have the man with the net win. It will look more effective, you know—the swordsman entangled in the net, and his antagonist standing over him with uplifted trident. Ho, ho! It will be a grand 'draw.'"

"I will be delighted to take the part of the swordsman, Mr. Criddle," returned Ralph; "and who will my antagonist be?"

"Oh, one of the clowns. Nobby Niggs, I think, in preference to Sporty Spots. He is a better build for the part."

Ralph felt a slight misgiving. He could not altogether rid his mind of a suspicion of Niggs. He had not forgotten Sporty Spots's statement that the stays of the net placed to catch him in case of accident during his performance on the trapeze had been cut by a knife, and he also in his secret heart believed the fellow was responsible for the escape of the lions and the fire in the property-tent.

However, he reflected, Nobby Niggs would scarcely be likely to attempt anything in the presence of hundreds of spectators, so he put the dark thoughts of Nobby from his mind, and went off to enjoy a few minutes' chat with Sylvia the Serpent Queen before they would both have to hurry off to dress for the entertainment.

CHAPTER 7.

THE GLADIATORIAL COMBAT IN THE RING—RALPH'S DEADLY PERIL—SAVED BY THE DEVOTION OF WILLY—FLIGHT OF NOBBY NIGGS—KNOTAN TWISTO, CONTORTIONIST.

The doors of the circus had been shut, enclosing a crowded audience, and many had been turned away for want of room. The performance was in full swing, and the Serpent Queen and Twisto the contortionist, came in for their usual meed of praise.

But the major part of the spectators were waiting with ill-concealed impatience for the newly added item to the night's programme—the gladiatorial contest; and when at length its turn came, a buzz of anticipation ran through the crowded tiers of seats.

There was a blaze of trumpets from a group of attendants, all

dressed in ancient Roman costumes, standing near the entrance to the ring, and then in marched Ralph Milburn and Nobby Niggs, attired as gladiators.

The former wore a heavy helmet and greaves or shin-guards, and carried a short sword; while the latter wore tights, over which was thrown a leopard's skin; his head was bare, and he carried a net and trident.

The two marched round the arena in opposite directions, amidst music from the band. When they met face to face, there was a mighty crash from the big drum in the orchestra, a roll from the side-drums, and the combat began.

Ralph, keeping his eye warily upon his opponent, proceeded to move slowly round and round the latter, gripping his short sword firmly, so as to give to the spectacle every appearance of terrible reality.

Niggs, too, in his character of the retiarius, or man with the net, stood with his body half bent, the net gathered up in his right hand, and watching his adversary's movements like a cat.

Suddenly Niggs bounded lightly forward, and flung out his net, trying to entangle the swordsman in its meshes. But Ralph leaped aside, and the net missed him.

Then Niggs took to his heels, and ran at his topmost speed around the ring, the swordsman in hot pursuit with his sword, which of course was blunted at the point, gleaming brightly in numerous lights.

So realistic seemed the scene that the audience were hushed into silence, and watched the chase with breathless interest and keen suspense.

Round and round the ring the pair flew, Nobby Niggs gathering up his net as he ran, and, doubling and turning like a hare, for in the days of ancient Rome it meant death if the swordsman caught him.

Suddenly he wheeled, the swordsman lunged fiercely forward with his blade, but the other parried it with his trident. Then, ere the swordsman could recover himself, the net was thrown over his head and shoulders.

This was as it should be, and now Ralph, while pretending to free himself from the entangling meshes, purposely slipped, staggered, and fell upon his knees. Nobby Niggs dragged on the net, and he rolled over in the ring, the sword flying far from his hand.

Entangled in the net, Ralph lay prostrate at the feet of Nobby Niggs, who now, with a cry of triumph, raised his terrible-looking trident as though about to plunge it deep into his foe-man's breast.

Thus they stood for a single moment, forming a most striking tableau in more senses than one, while cheer upon cheer rang from the enthusiastic spectators.

But hark, what was that? A cry of horror, of terror pealed high above the plaudits of the crowd. It came from the blanched lips of Ralph Milburn, as he lay helplessly entangled in the coils of the net at the feet of his late antagonist, in whose eyes and convulsed face he had read—murder.

Yes, for these two—the chief actors in it—the mimic fight had developed into a terrible, a deadly reality.

The heart of Nobby Niggs had murder in it, and knowing how the contest must end, he had determined to bide his time and strike his antagonist dead as he lay at his feet. He had snapped the buttons off the three cruel prongs just before issuing forth from the dressing-room.

Who was to prove after the deed was done that the thing was not an accident?

As he drew back the weapon, though, Ralph had seen and rightly read that fearful light in his eyes, and, feeling sure he meant murder, had uttered that one ringing cry for help.

With a savage imprecation and a grin of fiendish exultation showing through the paint upon his face, Nobby Niggs was about to bury the three points of his weapon in our hero's heart, when there was a sudden rush, and a light, boyish form flung itself across the prostrate acrobat.

Then a shriek of agony rang out, as the trident was driven deep into the arm of this new-comer, none other than the would-be murderer's son, Willy.

All was confusion and horror in a moment. The ring-master and attendants ran hastily forward, the spectators rose like one person from their seats, and women screamed and fainted at sight of the blood gushing forth from the lad's wounded arm, and staining the sawdust around.

Nobby Niggs stood as one dazed, unable to comprehend what had happened. But when the proprietor caught him fiercely by the arm, and demanded "What have you done, you idiot?" he had recovered his composure, and feigning as much horror and amazement as those around, he stammered:

"I—I don't know! I didn't mean to strike, really, but—but there could have been no buttons on the prongs!"

The spectators were still greatly excited by what had occurred, and it took all the eloquence of Mr. Criddle to prevail on them to resume their seats and let the entertainment continue.

"The boy is but scratched," he assured them, "and the accident would never have occurred had he not rushed forward

and flung himself upon the body of his friend, in the belief that the latter was really to be killed."

This little fiction satisfied the audience, and restored its good humour and confidence, and the performance continued without another hitch.

But meanwhile, in the dressing-room, Sylvia Clayton and Mrs. Criddle were busily engaged in rendering the poor little sufferer first aid, until a doctor could be brought. Willy had fainted with pain and loss of blood, and Ralph, Sporty Spots, and several of the other performers stood round, eager and anxious to lend a hand in mitigating the pain for the unfortunate boy.

Little Willy's wound, however, was not by any means a dangerous one, and, when the local doctor arrived, he declared that there was no fear of the boy losing his arm. He also complimented Sylvia on the excellent "first aid" she had rendered.

Where was Nobby Niggs, while his wounded son was thus receiving the kind attentions of all the other performers? Feeling sure that no excuse on his part would be taken by Mr. Criddle or his fellow-employees this time—that, in other words, he would be denounced and given in charge for attempted murder, he had quickly changed his dress and slipped out of the circus by one of the public exits, mingling with the departing crowd to evade detection by any of the attendants.

Then he fairly flew towards the encampment, told the watchman there a lying story, and, making straight for his own van, hastily collected a few of his more valuable belongings.

Thrusting these into a handbag, he descended the steps of the van, and was about to pass the watchman again, when he caught sight of several men hastening in the direction of the circus, and recognised police helmets and tunics among them.

The scoundrel uttered a gasping cry, as he realised the officers of the law were already coming for him, and, darting like a flash past the astonished night-watchman, he fled at his topmost speed across the waste ground.

Fear-craven fear of the consequences of arrest—possessed the brutal ruffian and lent wings to his feet. He fairly raced over the field, making for the open country, and soon placed a considerable distance between him and the heavy-booted policeman.

But there was another pursuer, a far more light-footed gentleman he had to fear. This was Knotan Twisto, the contortionist, whose real name, by the way, was the more commonplace though perhaps more convenient name in private life of Tom Tupper.

This performer was amongst the chief attractions of the circus, being able to throw himself into the most extraordinary postures. He was also a general favourite with everybody on account of his consistent good humour, and the harmless tricks he was so fond of playing on all and sundry.

We have already made casual mention of him more than once, but we now come to a part of our story from which he begins to play a pretty prominent part.

Fly fast as the terrified and hunted miscreant, Nobby Niggs did, Knotan Twisto flew even faster, and was rapidly overhauling him. The contortionist seemed scarcely to touch the ground in his flight.

Nobby Niggs turned and looked over his shoulder, and saw, to his immense relief, that he had only one pursuer really to reckon with. He fully believed that he could make short work of the contortionist, who was after all rather diminutive in stature.

Facing quickly round, therefore, the burly ruffian drew a six-chambered revolver from his hip-pocket, and, levelling it at Twisto, ordered him, with a string of oaths, to keep off.

CHAPTER 8.

KNOTAN TWISTO CAPTURES NOBBY IN A NOVEL MANNER—THE VILLAIN, HOWEVER, SUCCEEDS IN GETTING AWAY AGAIN—LITTLE WILLY TELLS OF THE BURGLARS' DESIGN—RALPH SURPRISES THE BURGLARS AT THEIR WORK—COLONEL HOLCROFT APPEARS ON THE SCENE.

The contortionist halted at sight of the gleaming barrel and



"No, no; let me deal with them," spoke a musical voice. And Sylvia pushed her way through the men.

on hearing the fierce threat, and about six feet separated the pair, as they stood glaring at one another.

"Go back! Do you hear? Go back, if you follow me a step further, I will kill you!" panted Nobby Niggs, turning to resume his flight.

But ere he could take a single step, Twisto suddenly bent back so far that the nape of the neck actually touched the inside of the knees, and that so quickly that it looked to Nobby Niggs as if the upper half of the contortionist's body and his head had suddenly vanished into thin air.

Ere the astonished ruffian could realise his pursuer's intention, the latter had left the earth, describing a complete somersault in midair, and landed with both feet stretched out full, fairly and squarely upon Nigg's chest.

The desperado was sent flying off his feet, as if a cannonball had caught him, and he lay flat upon his back fully three yards from where he had stood, gasping, panting for breath, and wondering what on earth had happened.

The revolver, of course, was thrown far from his hand, and he lay there without moving for several minutes, while Knotan Twisto began to perform all manner of feats around his prostrate form as though these formed part of a savage, triumphant dance around a fallen enemy.

The police came puffing and panting on the scene, just as Nobby Niggs began to recover from his rude treatment, and those worthy men were considerably amazed to behold Knotan Twisto doing "the splits" and "the backward kick over the head," around the field.

Such was the astonishment of the officers, that as they stood gazing at the contortionist, the fugitive regained his feet, and once more set off running at top speed.

Again the police and Knotan Twisto were after him, but this time, as the contortionist drew near, Nobby stooped and picked up a heavy stone. Then, wheeling, while yet the other was about half a dozen yards off, he hurled it with unerring aim.

Knotan Twisto received the stone full upon the temple, and dropped like a shot, stunned.

Then, leaping over a fence, the desperate ruffian scudded across another field, and was eventually lost in the darkness by the slow-footed country-policemen.

Poor Knotan Twisto was carried back senseless to the encampment, and the entire staff of the circus started out to hunt down

the man, whom now there was not one did not believe guilty of attempted murder. But in vain they searched the countryside far into the night. The fugitive had made good his escape for the present at any rate.

Ralph Milburn and the Serpent Queen were sitting by Willy's couch, conversing in whispers lest they should awaken the sufferer, who had fallen into a tranquil and refreshing sleep.

The hearts of both the watchers were full of gratitude and pity, for had not the noble little fellow risked his own life to save that of Ralph.

At length the sleeper stirred uneasily, and then woke, fixing his eyes upon our hero's face.

"Mr. Milburn, I want to tell you something," he whispered faintly. "I—I heard my father say he would kill you to-night, and that it would only be thought an accident. He broke off the buttons from the trident—I saw him do it in the dressing-room, when he thought no one was looking. Oh, Mr. Milburn, though he is my father, I—I fear and—and, yes, detest him. He means to commit a burglary to-night at the house of some colonel who lives close by. I heard him planning the robbery with a man named Seth."

"What?" cried Ralph, springing to his feet. "Do you mean at Colonel Holoroff's place, the Beeches?"

"I—I did not hear the name, but it was the house of a colonel, I know. The colonel will be away to-night, they said, and there will be no one in the place to resist them but women and an old footman."

"Ah! It will be Colonel Holoroff's, without a doubt!" cried the young acrobat. And, turning to Willy, he inquired: "When was the burglary to take place, did you hear?"

"To-night, Mr. Milburn, and oh"—with a glance at the little clock ticking away on a side-table—"they will be there already. They arranged to meet about this time."

"Sylvia, I must prevent those scoundrels carrying out their design. Tell Mr. Criddle to send for the police, and follow me with some of the men. I'm off to the house."

"No, oh, no, Ralph; stay and wait for the others!" cried the girl in deep alarm. "They may murder you, for one at least we know is a desperate and bloodthirsty ruffian."

"Oh, I can take care of myself, Sylvia, never fear." And the young fellow approached a locker, opened it, and taking therefrom a loaded revolver, rushed, without another word, from the van.

Hastily he told the night-watchman to call Mr. Criddle and inform the latter of the intended burglary; and then, leaving the camp, he ran at full speed across the fields in the direction of the Beeches, Colonel Holoroff's house.

He gained the garden wall, but found it too high to scale, so he skirted it until he came to the iron gates. These he quickly climbed, and, dropping down on to the gravelled drive, he set off running once more across the lawn towards the house.

It was plunged in total darkness, and as he ran up the broad steps of the terrace, Ralph paused for a moment to think what would be his best course.

Suddenly he saw a bright light flash for a single moment from one of the French windows on a level with the terrace. Undoubtedly it was the light of a dark-lantern, and Ralph immediately stole on tip-toe to the window.

Looking in, he beheld a strange spectacle. An old, white-haired footman lay helplessly bound and trussed in a corner of the room, while two ruffians, with crape masks covering their faces, were busily ransacking the room, thrusting various articles of value from from time to time into a large bag, which chinked audibly and suggestively at each new addition to its contents. Upon the floor near the bag stood a large bull's-eye, faintly illuminating the scene.

Ralph drew his revolver and cocked it; then softly tried the window. It was unfastened, as he suspected, and he opened it wide enough to permit of his slipping his body through. The next instant he stood within the room, without either of the burglars being aware of his presence.

Pointing his weapon at the head of the man he guessed to be

Nobby Niggs, he said, in a calm and distinctly audible voice:

"Surrender, you rascals! I have you covered!"

There came hoarse ejaculations of terror and surprise from the two miscreants, who turned instantly, dropping the articles they had in their hands with a clatter in the start they got.

Ralph was partly hidden by the shadows from the two ruffians, who, however, stood fully revealed to him in the light of the bull's-eye.

For a full couple of minutes the burglars and the young acrobat stood silently, and motionlessly staring at one another; then Ralph again exclaimed:

"Now, then, up with your hands, the pair of you, or I shall shoot! Nobby Niggs, I know you, and you know me—I am not to be trifled with."

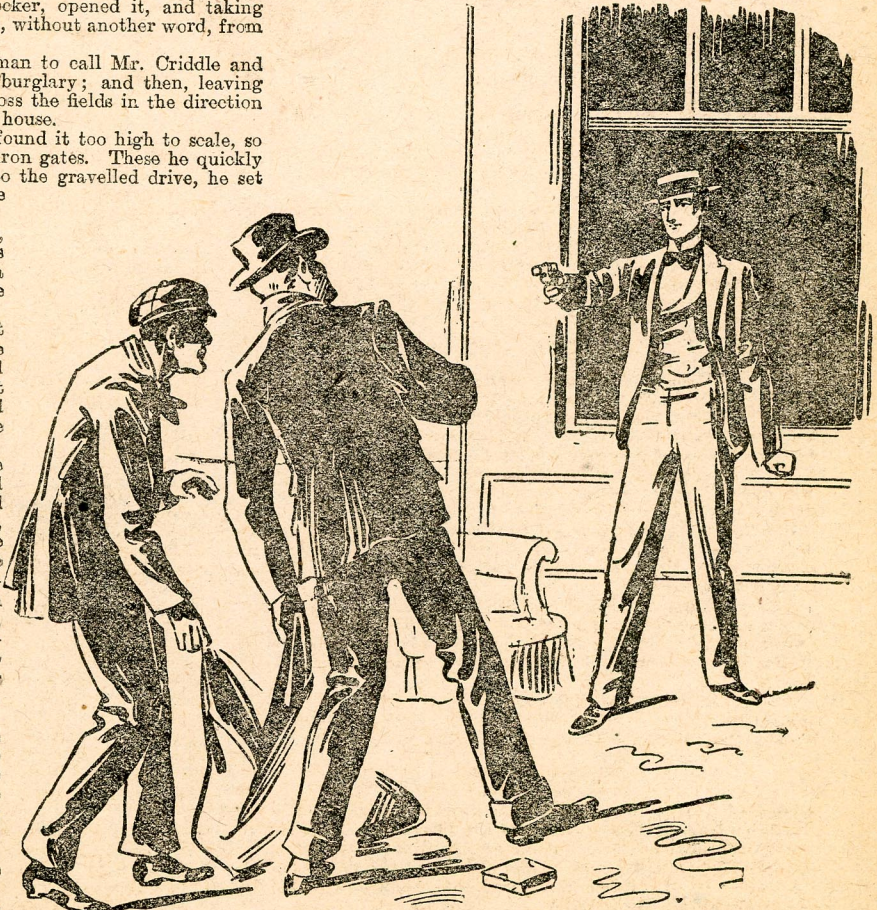
The ex-clown uttered a startled cry at being thus recognised; then, as he made a movement as though to obey Ralph's command and raise his hands above his head, he suddenly ducked, and catching up a heavy vase, which stood on the mantelpiece beside him, hurled it, without waiting to take aim, at Ralph's head.

The vase missed our hero, but went crashing through the window behind him; and, with a cry to his associate, the desperado sprang at Ralph. The latter pressed the trigger of his revolver, and the bullet just grazed the ruffian's wrist, for Ralph fired to disable not kill his antagonist.

With a hoarse scream of pain, Nobby was upon Ralph, and the two men closed, falling heavily together over a chair, with the impetus of the burglar's onset.

Seth Hobbs whipped a life-preserver from his pocket, and ran to the assistance of his accomplice; but Ralph and Nobby were rolling about on the floor so mixed up that he more than once raised his weapon to deal a blow at the former's head to suddenly find its place taken by the latter's.

Over and over the pair rolled, now Ralph uppermost, now Nobby Niggs, each struggling desperately for the mastery, each trying to clutch the other by the throat. Seth saw no way of interfering to aid his associate in crime, and as he bent over them, gripping the life-preserver, ready to use it at the first opportunity, his quick ear caught the "crunch" of hurrying footsteps on the terrace outside.



"Surrender, you rascals! I have you covered!" he said in a calm voice.

The instinct of self-preservation was strong within him, and he sprang towards the open window, to suddenly find himself face to face with a grey-haired, military-looking man, still in the prime of life, and another younger, but scarcely more robust.

"Ah, Jenks, help! Burglars!" ejaculated Colonel Holcroft, for it was he suddenly and unexpectedly returned home.

Seth swung the life-preserver in the air, and aimed a terrific blow at the Colonel's head. The latter threw up his arm to save himself, but the blow fell with crushing force upon his wrist, beating it down and laying open his skull.

The brave old man dropped like a stone, and, swinging the weapon again above his head, the desperate ruffian made a dash at the valet. The latter ducked the blow, and, closing with the villain, clasped him round the waist, and tripped him up.

CHAPTER 9.

THE CIRCUS MEN TO THE RESCUE—KNOTAN TWISTO AGAIN TO THE FORE—CAPTURE OF HOBBS—NOBBY NIGGS, HOWEVER, AGAIN GETS AWAY—COLONEL HOLCROFT DISCOVERS HIS LOST SON IN LITTLE WILLY.

Over the valet and Hobbs now rolled, clawing wildly at one another, but the former was no match in physical strength for the latter, and the burglar, still retaining possession of his life-preserver, was at length able to use it.

He brought it down with sickening force on the head of his adversary, and repeated the blow again and again until the latter's grip relaxed, and he fell back senseless.

The ruffian leaped to his feet, and, without wasting another thought upon his accomplice, turned to fly. A horrible cath broke from his lips as he saw fully a score of men rushing towards him across the lawn.

Turning, he ran round the house, and made off across the grounds in the opposite direction. But he could not hope to outstrip so many, and especially the light-footed acrobats.

Our old friend, Knotan Twisto, was amongst them, none the worse for his encounter with Nobby, save for a deep cut covered with sticking-plaster upon his forehead. Rapidly he overhauled the fugitive, though several of the others were not far behind.

As Seth ran blindly on, the contortionist suddenly took a flying leap, landed in the small of his back, and whipped both legs and arms like lightning around his body, completely pinning the astonished burglar.

The latter reeled beneath the shock and weight, and sank upon his hands and knees.

In a few minutes, Mr. Criddle and the other pursuers had surrounded them, and loud was the laughter and shouts of amusement at sight of the contortionist bestriding his prisoner.

Seth saw the odds were against him, and when Knotan Twisto condescended to get off his back, he sullenly accepted the inevitable, and allowed them to lead him back to the house.

As the party approached the terrace, they suddenly saw another man rush out of the open window, followed by one who appeared to be in pursuit. Once more, therefore, they started after the flying figures, and soon overtook the second, who was Ralph.

The young fellow's ankle was again causing him pain, and he was unable to cope with his late antagonist. He abandoned the chase to the others; but Knotan Twisto was amongst those who had stayed behind to guard the prisoner, and Nobby Niggs was as quick on his feet as any who were after him.

He fled down the avenue, reached the gate, and, scrambling over it like a cat, was half-way across a field and fast disappearing in the darkness before the others were down the drive.

When they reached the gate he was not to be seen, so they were forced to abandon the chase and return to the house.

Meanwhile, those who had remained in charge of the prisoner, had carried Colonel Holcroft and the valet into the house, and set about resuscitating them.

Ralph Milburn was none the worse for his struggle with Niggs, save for a few slight contusions. He had been partially stunned by knocking his head against the leg of a chair in their rough-and-tumble, and thus the villain had been able to break from his hold and escape from the room.

The household was aroused by this, and the colonel, whose wound, after all, was but a slight one, returned to consciousness. He was considerably astonished as well as enraged to find that the captured burglar was his own lodgekeeper—a man who had been in his service for years, and to whom he had ever been the kindest of masters and greatest of benefactors.

He expressed himself under deep obligation to our hero for the latter's gallant attempt to capture the burglars. Ralph modestly answered that the colonel must thank not him but the little fellow, who had informed him of the ruffians' design; and the master of the Beeches declared that he would call round in the morning to see Willy.

He was good as his word, and a few hours before the after-

noon performance he came to the camp. When he entered the caravan where little Willy lay, he started forward with a low cry of incredulous joy at sight of the thin, pale face on the pillow.

"It is he—my son!" he cried. "Willy, Willy! Do you not know me?"

The boy looked up at the eager face with wondering eyes.

"Who—who are you, sir?" he asked. "I—I seem to know your face! It is a face I remember seeing a long—long time ago, and I have often seen it since in my dreams. But—but I—"

"Willy, Willy, my son, my long-lost son! At last—at last I have found you!"

The colonel drew forth a pocket-book, and, with trembling fingers, took therefrom a photograph.

"See, see, Mr. Criddle!" he exclaimed, holding the photo before the astonished proprietor's eyes. "See, that is the likeness of my son, taken eight years ago! Is it not also that of this boy? My son was stolen—kidnapped eight years ago, and I hunted everywhere for him in vain. But I have found him. At last I have found him! This is he—this is he!"

And the old officer broke down utterly, and clasped little Willy in his arms.

Mr. Criddle stared at the photo placed in his hands. It was the perfect image of Willy Niggs, though, of course, much younger looking. He handed it to Ralph and Sylvia, who were likewise both amazed at the resemblance.

"It is very extraordinary, Colonel Holcroft," said the proprietor, when he could recover from his astonishment. "But we know the boy to be the son of a man hitherto connected with our company—a man who goes by the name of Nobby Niggs."

"Nobby Niggs!" screamed the colonel, starting quickly round. "Ha! then there is no longer any doubt in my mind but that this is my dear lost son Willy. Niggs was a fellow I sent to gaol for poaching twelve years ago, and he swore in the dock he would be revenged upon me. The year my son disappeared was the year his term of imprisonment expired, and I at once concluded he was concerned in the kidnapping. But, though I searched high and low for him, I could not find a clue to his whereabouts. This is my son, I am now convinced."

Little Willy raised himself slightly on his pillow, and said:

"Sir, I—I don't know whether I am your son or not, but—but I can tell you that when I overheard my—my father Nobby Niggs plotting with Seth Hobbs to rob your house; they also spoke of some boy they were keeping out of the way until you—yes, that is what they said—until you 'kicked the bucket,' and Gaston Cotter came in for the estate."

The colonel started, and rapped out a fierce exclamation.

"Yes, yes, my boy, go on! What else did they say?"

"My—my father said that if he could find Gaston Cotter, he would bleed him, that he was not going to be put off with a paltry fifty quid!"

"I see it all! I see it all now!" gasped the colonel. "You are my son without the shadow of a doubt. Gentlemen," addressing Mr. Criddle and Ralph, "this Gaston Cotter is my nephew, whom I turned out of doors for his dissipated habits some years ago. He clearly conspired with my lodgekeeper Hobbs and this scoundrel Niggs to kidnap my child, in hopes that in the event of my death the estate would go to him. The abominable scoundrel! It will go ill with him if ever I come across him! But Heaven be praised my son is restored to me! Willy, Willy, my own boy!"

We will draw a veil over the touching scene that followed. There was now not the remotest shadow of a doubt left in the minds of any of the spectators that the little fellow, who had so long been believed to be the son of the ex-clown Nobby Niggs, was in reality Willy Holcroft.

The colonel had him removed in his own carriage to the Beeches, and every possible care was taken that his wounded limb should not be subjected to any jolting during the drive.

Colonel Holcroft visited Seth Hobbs as he lay in prison awaiting his trial, and found that ungrateful scoundrel completely cowed in spirit and willing to admit his share in the kidnapping of his master's son seven years before.

He stated that Willy was the boy, and that he and Nobby Niggs had stolen him at the instigation of Gaston Cotter, the colonel's nephew, who had wished to remove so insurmountable a barrier to the attainment of his ends.

Where Cotter had disappeared to of late years no one knew, and, we might even add, cared; and the colonel was too overjoyed at the recovery of his lost boy to trouble to put the police on the track of the miscreant.

Search was, of course, made for Nobby Niggs for his share in the attempted burglary, but the fellow contrived to evade all pursuit, and was not to be found.

The part the circus people had played in the discomfiture of the burglars at the Beeches somehow leaked out and got into

the papers, with the result that the marquee was crowded to excess daily and nightly; and whenever Ralph Milburn and Knotan Twisto made their appearance in the ring, they were greeted with the most enthusiastic cheers.

Mr. Criddle remained nearly a fortnight in Benning, and still found no falling off in the attendance. He, however, in vain besought Colonel Holcroft to permit him to advertise the final appearance in the ring of the famous boy equestrian Little Willy.

The proud old officer would not hear of his son even for a single night resuming the tights and spangles, though, in consideration of the kindness the proprietor and performers had lavished upon his son while with them, he insisted on their accepting the handsome gift of £1,000, to be divided in equal proportions amongst the entire company.

Little Willy himself, however, never forgot his old friends of the circus, and Mr. Criddle and his wife, Ralph Milburn and Sylvia Clayton, spent many a pleasant evening at the Beeches during their stay in the town of Benning.

CHAPTER 10.

NOBBY NIGGS'S TREACHEROUS SHOT—RALPH, ONLY SLIGHTLY WOUNDED, ENTERS HIS VAN, TO FIND IT OCCUPIED BY THE PYTHONS—IN THE COILS OF THE SERPENTS—SYLVIA CHARMS THE CREATURES—FATE OF NOBBY NIGGS—FINIS.

Ralph Milburn was now once more able to take his full share in the performances, and as usual his daring feats on the tight and slack ropes and the trapeze were the events of the entertainment.

It was over a week since the burglary at the Beeches, and Ralph and Sylvia had been enjoying a stroll—the night was so beautiful—after the evening performance.

Oblivious of time, everything, in the rapture of each other's society, they had wandered rather far through the moonlit lanes, and it was after midnight when they awakened to the fact and retraced their steps.

They were approaching the camp, and were still some distance from it, when in the clear moonlight they perceived a dark object crawl from under one of the waggons. It was a man, for he presently rose to his feet and began to creep away from the encampment in a crouching posture, taking advantage of every shadow, as though anxious not to be seen by any of the circus people.

Sylvia uttered a faint cry of terror, and clung frantically to Ralph's arm, and the young fellow whispered to her reassuringly:

"Don't be frightened, dearest. The fellow is clearly some miserable thief, and I'm going to stop him."

"No, oh, no, Ralph! Don't leave me! Let him go! He may be armed and may kill you!"

"Nonsense, sweetheart! Trust me, I can look after myself. You run to the camp and call the watchman. You will be quite safe. I'll head him off."

They had been standing in the deep shadow cast by a hedge, bordering the common, on which the camp was pitched, and the mysterious stranger was now within barely thirty yards of them.

Sylvia released Ralph and ran towards the caravan, while he sprang away in the direction of the stranger.

The latter glanced quickly round on hearing the footsteps, and Ralph saw clearly revealed in the moonlight the hangdog visage of the ex-clown and burglar Nobby Niggs.

The ruffian at the same moment recognised Ralph, and, rapping out a ferocious oath, he dived his hand into a side-pocket, and drew it forth armed with a heavy bludgeon. Instead of taking to his heels, he stood stockstill, as though daring our hero to approach and take him.

Ralph Milburn did not fear a personal encounter with the scoundrel. He had his walking-stick, and, even had he been without it, he would not have hesitated for a moment to tackle the fellow, armed though the latter might be.

Bounding on, therefore, Ralph was within a few paces of Niggs, who was still standing motionless, when suddenly the latter threw his left hand, which he had kept partly behind his back, forward with a quick jerk.

Ralph saw a pistol-barrel gleam in the moonlight, and heard the savage ejaculation: "Curse you, I will settle you this time!"

Then there was a bright flash, and, with the report ringing in his ears, the young acrobat felt a stinging sensation on the side of the head.

Half-stunned, he reeled blindly forward, and, with a cry of delight, Nobby Niggs aimed a terrific blow at his head with the bludgeon as though to make sure of his victim.

Had the blow fallen upon Ralph's skull, it would undoubtedly have crushed it in like an eggshell, but the young fellow was falling forward at the time, and the blow only fell upon his shoulder.

Senseless and bleeding, Ralph lay at the feet of his implacable foe, who looked down upon his pale, bloodstained features with a grin of fiendish exultation.

"Dead to a certainty!" he growled. "Ha! ha! One wiped out. The colonel will be the next."

He cast a quick glance towards the caravan, then fled like the wind across the fields. When the circus-men, alarmed by the shot, turned out in all stages of deshabille, and followed the Serpent Queen out upon the common, they found the unconscious body of their fellow, but no trace whatever of his dastardly assailant.

Sylvia was nigh distracted at her lover's casualty, and when he was brought into camp, she bound up his wound and sat by him till he recovered consciousness.

When he informed his brother-performers who his wound-be murderer had been, their surprise and horror knew no bounds, and Mr. Criddle affirmed he would spare no money after that to hunt down the ruffian.

Ralph had been carried in the first place to the night-watchman's van, but his injury after all was only slight. The bullet had grazed the side of his head near the temple, stunning him for the time, but he was able to walk to his own van unaided.

Some of the men accompanied him to the steps of the van, and then, as he slowly mounted these, called out "Good-night," and sought their own quarters.

Ralph closed and bolted the door behind him, and turned, to start back with a cry of horror and dismay. The great, ugly head of a monster snake was within an ace of his own, and ere he could as much as utter a single shout for help, much less turn to escape, it had glided forward, and was coiling its powerful folds around his body.

Our hero realised that he was in the relentless coils of the largest python belonging to Sylvia, and, with a thrill of unspeakable horror, remembered that, contrary to the general belief, the hideous creature's fangs were not drawn.

Any moment the poison might be darted into his blood, and meanwhile the muscular coils were slowly compressing his ribs.

Ralph suffered intense agony. It seemed as if his backbone was being crushed against his breast. He struggled desperately, manfully, to free himself from that terrible embrace; but his arms were lashed firmly to his sides by the slimy rings, and he shrieked aloud again and again for help as he realised his own impotence.

The monster hissed incessantly, and kept moving its head in a semi-circle before its victim's face, its bright eyes scintillating in the light of the lamp that illuminated the interior of the van. Ralph could now only breathe with the greatest difficulty, and in painful gasps, while closer and closer those terrible folds drew, until he expected to hear his ribs crack beneath the frightful pressure.

His cries for help were now beginning to grow faint, a blood-red mist gathered before his eyes, his head swam, and he felt consciousness leaving him. As in a dream, he saw another huge snake rear its hammer-like head from the bed in the corner, saw it trail its coils on to the floor and dart forward with distended jaws. It caught the young acrobat's antagonist by the neck, and bit it with the utmost fury.

Ralph felt the terrible embrace relax, and fell to the floor insensible, just as there came a loud hammering at the door. The next moment it was forced inwards with a crash, and Sporty Spots, Mr. Criddle, and half a dozen others stood aghast in the doorway at sight of the two pythons engaged in a fierce battle for the mastery, with Ralph lying in a heap upon the floor.

The monsters were firmly intertwined together, and, writhing about on the floor, they bit savagely at one another, their eyes flashing fire, their tails lashing the ground. They seemed unaware in their rage of the presence of their common enemy, man; and, shuddering with horror at the terrible spectacle they presented, Mr. Criddle, Sporty Spots, and Knotan Twisto reached in, clutched Ralph by the collar, and dragged him out.

"Quick, fetch a revolver!" cried the proprietor. "We must kill the monsters."

"No, no, let me deal with them," spoke a musical voice. And Sylvia pushed her way through the men.

Then she uttered a series of peculiar cries, on hearing which the pythons simultaneously ceased their efforts, and reared their heads aloft in a listening attitude, though their bodies still remained firmly twisted together.

"Quick, fetch the box. I saw it beneath the van!" whispered the Serpent Queen to the man around. Then immediately she struck up the same weird chant she used when charming the reptiles in the ring.

The monsters slowly disengaged themselves, and crawled towards her, as she stood boldly framed in the open doorway. They began to coil themselves about her just as they did during her performance, and, turning round on the steps, the girl noted where the box had been placed by the awe-stricken men.

Still chanting, she removed their coils from about her waist, and once more uttered that quick, sharp cry; whereupon the monsters immediately dragged themselves towards the open box

and climbed into it, leaving only their ugly heads showing above the sides.

Continuing her chant, the snake-charmer stepped up to the box, shut down the lid, and locked it. Then, turning to the attendant, she calmly bade them carry the box back to her tent, and turned anxiously to where a small group was gathered about Ralph, who was showing signs of returning consciousness.

It was apparent to all how the pythons came to be in Ralph Milburn's van. Without a doubt, Nobby Niggs had taken advantage of Sylvia's absence from her tent, to enter it, and drag the box containing the monsters across the small intervening space to the van.

Then, through the air-holes, he had injected some powerful anæsthetic, traces of which were afterwards found in the box, and when he was satisfied the pythons were asleep, undid the padlock, for the key was in it, and dragged them one after the other into the van.

It was a fiendish design, and one worthy of the evil brain that concocted it.

Ralph fortunately was none the worse for his terrible experience; and in the morning Mr. Criddle telegraphed to Scotland Yard for a detective to track down the murderous Niggs. Ere the man arrived, however, the news reached the ears of the circus people that Nobby was dead.

After his rencontre with Ralph, he had proceeded to the Beeches, intent on wreaking vengeance also upon its owner ere he left that part of the country.

Knowing it was the colonel's habit to take a stroll in the shrubbery before retiring, he had posted himself there, and as his foe neared his hiding-place, he sprang out upon him with uplifted bludgeon.

Colonel Holcroft, though taken completely by surprise, tried to dodge the blow, slipped, and fell upon one knee. The slip was providential, for his assailant thereby missed striking him; and in a flash the gallant old officer had caught the ruffian round the waist, and they fell to the ground, struggling fiercely.

Nobby Niggs had lost his bludgeon in the fall, and he strove to draw his revolver, resolved to risk the shot being heard. He

was more powerful and agile than his older adversary, and at length he succeeded in getting the upper hand of the latter. Kneeling upon the colonel's chest, he drew forth the revolver, and pressed its cold muzzle against the old officer's temple.

The next moment the latter's brains would have bespattered the leaves around, when, in an agony of despair, he exerted the last remnant of his failing strength, and hurled the ruffian off him.

There was a bright flash, a sharp report, and as Colonel Holcroft staggered to his feet, weak and dazed, he saw his implacable foe lying at his feet, with the upper part of his skull blown completely off.

The nerveless right hand of the corpse was still clutching the smoking weapon, and the colonel was staring horror-stricken into the bloodstained, distorted features, when the servants came rushing to the spot.

We have but little more to add.

Ralph Milburn married Sylvia some three months later, and was taken into partnership by Mr. Criddle. Thenceforth prosperity followed them everywhere.

"Criddle and Milburn's Travelling Circus" was always sure to attract crowds. Our old friends, Sporty Spots and Knotan Twisto, remained with it, and as their employers prospered so, too, did they.

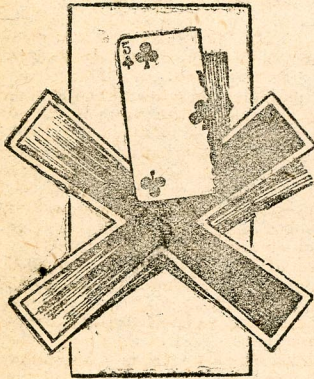
Frequently did the caravan return to Benning and pitch upon its old site, and Ralph and his wife were ever welcome guests at the Beeches, as indeed were also our other acquaintances of the circus.

The ex-lodgekeeper and kidnapper, Seth Hobbs, received several years' penal servitude for his share in the burglary and his murderous assault on Colonel Holcroft. After he had served his time, he and his wife disappeared, and were not heard of again.

As to Gaston Cotter, the scapegrace nephew of the colonel's, "as he had lived so he died." He was killed in a free fight in a gambling hell in San Francisco, and none mourned his end.

THE END.

YOU CAN BEGIN THIS TO-DAY,



THE SIGN OF THE SCARLET CROSS

By CLAUD HEATHCOTE,

Author of "Four British Boys," "Val the Boy Acrobat," "Roy Royal of St. Miriam's," "The Red Light," "Dick Danvers," &c.

READ THIS FIRST.

The story opens on Harry's fifteenth birthday.

Harry and Pierre Evison, whose son Harry thinks he is, are about to have tea, when Harry's great chum, Shaggy, a newsboy, enters, and tells them that a body has been dragged from the Thames at Limehouse, and that on the breast of the dead man is a strange tattoo—a scarlet cross, and half of the five of clubs.

On hearing this, Pierre Evison turns deadly pale.

Harry asks Shaggy to tea. The newsboy tells his chum that he has a few papers to sell first, and goes out.

He does not return, and Harry sets out in search of him.

In the street he meets Paul Lamaret, who asks if he knows where Pierre Evison lives. Harry directs him to their home, and goes on his way.

Meantime, Pierre takes down a picture from the wall of his room and, undoing the back, pulls a couple of banknotes from it. Then he replaces them.

Mr. Mawker, who has been watching him, unknown to Pierre, then slips away.

A few moments later, Paul Lamaret enters. "Pierre Evison, otherwise Pierre Gourbet, I salute you!" he says. And tells him that he has come to take his life because he has not killed one Horace Temple as he promised to do. The pair fight with rapiers, and Pierre is mortally wounded. The murderer escapes. Harry, meanwhile, goes to where Shaggy lives. He is out.

Harry is about to leave, when he sees a rat gnawing a paper. He takes it from the animal, and discovers it to be a letter half eaten away. He puts it into his pocket and goes home. He discovers Pierre dying, and is told by him that he is not his son; that his family name is Temple; and that he must beware of the Lamarets, all of whom are marked on the breast with the scarlet cross and the half of the five of clubs. Then he falls back dead.

Mawker makes up his mind to steal the money hidden behind the picture, but not wishing to be suspected, and knowing that Harry has a letter from the dead man, which no doubt refers to the notes, he decides to be careful. He sends Angela to Harry with a cup of coffee, which he has previously drugged. Harry drinks it, and goes to bed. Later Mawker quietly enters his bedroom, and proceeds to look for Pierre Evison's letter, eventually placing the drugged lad on the floor while he searches under his pillow. He finds it, and slips it into his pocket.

As he is about to leave, he hears someone coming. He hides. A man enters, and plunges a dagger into the bed.

A dagger was buried to the hilt in the bolster Mawker had dragged from its place in order to find Pierre's letter to Harry.

"The Sign of the Scarlet Cross!" he murmured hoarsely. "The Sign of the Scarlet Cross!"

Then he turned his lantern on Harry, who was still sleeping soundly where he had left him.

WRITE AND TELL THE EDITOR WHAT YOU
THINK OF THIS.

"Ah, my fine young gentleman, it was a good job you was resting there instead of in your bed!" he muttered. "You don't know what Mawker has saved you from? If it hadn't been for Mawker you'd have been as dead as a coffin-nail by this time. And you're the ungrateful young cub that refused to sell me the picture! Well, well, this is an ungrateful world. Mawker's the only man that's got any gratitude in him. But, dear me!—dear me! Mawker always was an old fool. He always was too good-hearted, and always would stand in his own light."

Terror had now passed away from him. A complacent smile rested on his cunning, wrinkled face, and with a last look at Harry and the dagger in the bolster, he slipped out of the room.

The morning sun was shining into the room before Harry awoke from his deep slumber. His head was aching, his senses blurred and confused.

"Where am I?" he cried. "On the floor! Fallen out of bed, eh? I must have slept soundly for the fall not to have wakened me up."

He rose to his feet, and saw the dagger in the bolster.

"A dagger?" he cried, aghast. "How did that come there?"

He looked at it in bewilderment. Had it been meant for him? Somebody must have entered that room as he slept, and placed it there?

And yet it could not have been meant for him, for whoever had entered that room had been careful to place him out of harm's way on the floor.

But it must have been intended as a menace and a warning.

Very well; he would accept the warning and—the weapon. He drew it from the bolster, and examined it. The blade was of finely-tempered, brightly-polished steel.

On one of its sides had been burnt in, with microscopical neatness, the sign he was beginning to know so well—the sign of the scarlet cross and the five of clubs.

In searching through the drawers on the previous night he had come across an empty scabbard. He had wondered at the time what could have become of the blade.

Harry opened the drawer, and, lifting up some of the clothes, found the scabbard. He tried if the blade would fit it. It fitted it exactly—just as though it had been made for it.

"Strange!" thought Harry. "Can this be the identical dagger which once belonged to that sheath?"

Alas! alas! Only that one could tell him whose lips were closed for ever. All that he had lost came upon him as a torrent. "Pierre! Pierre!" he cried. The room seemed to echo back in mockery his cry.

With an effort he restrained his feelings. Remembering that Shaggy was coming for him that morning to take him to the hospital, he hastily washed and dressed himself; then hid the dagger away inside his waistcoat.

Suddenly he remembered Pierre's letter—the letter which he had concealed beneath the mattress. To his great grief, it was gone.

Who had taken it? He could come to only one conclusion. The hand that had left the dagger as a menace and a warning, and the hand that had robbed him of Pierre's letter, were one and the same.

CHAPTER 9.

IN THE HOSPITAL—THE DUMB LIPS SPEAK—THE MISSING NOTES.

At present all was darkness and mystery; and both the darkness and mystery seemed to have grown with amazing rapidity during the few short hours that had elapsed since Pierre's death.

Harry fervently hoped, however, that Mrs. Hobbs, Shaggy's grandmother, might be able to throw some light on the mystery, for he was firmly convinced that the Percival Temple who had written the letter mutilated by the rats was in some way connected with his own father.

If he could only discover this Percival Temple, he might, through him, obtain some clue to the whereabouts of his father and to that strange scene—the scene which he had thought to be a vision, but which Pierre, with his dying breath, had told him was quite true—at his mother's bedside so many years ago.

Though out to so late an hour at night selling his papers, Shaggy was usually up with the lark in the morning. For one thing the inducements to stay in bed in his miserable home were not very great; and, for another, he had to get to Fleet Street at an early hour to buy his papers and catch his morning customers.

On the morning following Pierre's death, he rose as usual, snatched a hasty breakfast, consisting of half a pint of coffee and "three doorsteps" (slices of bread-and-butter) at a coffee-stall, where he was on friendly terms with the proprietor; and then went briskly about his business.

He finished his morning's work at eleven, and at once betook himself to Harry's in order to fulfil his promise of the night before.

He found his chum anxiously awaiting his arrival, and they started together for the hospital. On the way, Harry told Shaggy what had happened during the night, and showed him the dagger he had found in the bolster.

Shaggy looked very grave as he examined the deadly weapon. "What did I tell yer, Harry? I told yer you needn't worry much about finding that Lamaret or his tribe of cut-throats. The great thing will be to keep out of their way."

"But my father?"

"Your father? Oh, that's a hoss of another colour. You'll have just about as hard a job to get on his track as to keep out of theirs. He's in hiding somewhere, you may be sure—just to keep out of their murderous clutches. I don't blame him either."

"Don't blame him!" cried Harry. "But is it manly to go sneaking about the world, Shaggy, when you've done nothing wrong, even though bloodthirsty assassins are trying to track you down?"

"It's all according," said Shaggy shrewdly. "If you're anything to go by, Harry, your father's no coward, nor any of your race. You see, you can't meet a cut-throat in the open; he's always crawling about in the dark, and trying to stab in the back. The only way to meet blackguards like that is to be just as cunning as them. If we're ever to get at the bottom of this mystery, it won't do to be always ramping about in the skin of the lion. We must sometimes put on the skin of the fox. That's my notion, Harry."

Harry saw that there was a good deal of sound, commonsense, as there usually was, in what the newsboy had said.

By this time they had reached the hospital. The were at once admitted. It was evident that the case of old Mrs. Hobbs was regarded as a very critical one.

They entered the accident ward, and the nurse conducted them to the bedside of the injured woman. Her head was swathed in bandages, and she looked a very pitiable object.

It transpired that she was in a half-drunken condition at the time of the accident, and had staggered right underneath a horse's feet as she was endeavouring to cross the road.

She recognised Shaggy, but she could not speak. Shaggy determined, however, to see if it were not possible to obtain from her some information which might be of service to his chum in the mysterious quest on which he was starting.

"Can you hear me, granny?" he asked.

She nodded her head.

"We've found this paper," he said, producing the mutilated paper which Harry had preserved from the teeth of the rats. "Is it any good?"

She again nodded her head, this time more energetically than before, while a wild, startled look came into her eyes as she stared at the document.

Then she turned her face away, and closed her eyes as though to shut out the picture which the view of that torn paper presented to her.

Shaggy hardly knew how to proceed. It was useless asking questions if the old woman could not answer them.

"It's no go, I'm afraid, Harry!" whispered Shaggy.

"I'm afraid not," said Harry dejectedly.

As the words fell from his lips, the old woman turned her head again, and fixed her eyes for a long time upon Harry. She seemed to be scrutinising every feature of his face, as though she were trying to recognise it.

"She has never seen you before, has she, Harry?" whispered Shaggy.

"Not once that I know of."

"This is my chum Harry, granny!" said Shaggy aloud. "You've often heard me speak of him, so I thought you wouldn't mind my bringing him. Though I've known him a good time, he's never been introduced to you before, has he?"

She shook her head; then nodded it energetically.

Shaggy was perplexed. Her answer meant yes and no. She could not mean both.

Still the eyes of the old woman were fixed upon Harry, as though seeking to find in his lineaments something she had lost.

Presently she became greatly agitated, and turned to Shaggy. "What is it, granny?" asked Shaggy softly.

She looked first in his face, then down at his pocket. Instinctively he comprehended her. A moment since he had folded up the mutilated paper, and put it in his pocket.

He again drew it out, unfolded it, and held it before her.

"Is that what you want?"

She nodded. Her eyes went from the paper to Harry; then from Harry to the paper. She was struggling to say something, but seemed unable to frame the words.

The boys watched eagerly the lips of the old woman. What were the words she was trying to frame? It was painful to see her. The lips were bloodless, but the eyes were shining with a feverish light.

Shaggy's head was bent low, so that he should not lose one syllable. At length she gasped:

"An-co-nia!"

Then her head fell back on the pillow. The eyes closed. She had fainted.

Harry went in haste for the nurse. When she came to the bedside she was very angry.

"You'd better be off, you boys!" she cried. "It's all your fault. You have over-excited her."

The boys withdrew from the ward, but waited outside the door until they heard that the old woman had recovered from her fainting-fit; then they retraced their footsteps homeward.

"Did you hear what she said, Harry?" asked Shaggy.

"Yes, distinctly."

"What did you make of it?"

"Anconia."

"Right! That's what I made of it. Then there can be no mistake?"

"No mistake whatever. I'm just as certain that was the name as that I'm standing here. You remember it?"

"Yes; here it is."

And Shaggy drew from his pocket the card he had found in his grandmother's room, with the name on it—"PAULINE ANCONIA."

"Well, this don't tell us very much, Harry. The name don't help us."

"But it may. From what I could understand, your grandmother meant that the lady who came to her before her accident—this Pauline Anconia—is the only one who can throw any light on that paper in your pocket."

"Yes; I think you're right, Harry. That was what she meant. But where the dickens are we to look for Pauline Anconia? I've never heard of the lady. Sounds to me like a furiner."

"Yes, it has got a foreign twist about it. We must have patience. I dare say she'll be turning up at your diggings in a day or two's time."

By this time the boys had reached Harry's home.

On mounting the staircase, they heard the sound of voices coming from the top landing.

To their astonishment they saw Mr. Mawker and a constable standing outside.

"Here he comes!" cried Mr. Mawker, on catching sight of Harry—"here he comes!"

"Young man," said the constable severely, when Harry had reached the landing, "I want to know what you've been a-doin' with yourself this morning?"

"Been with my friend Shaggy——"

"Newsboy—gets his living in the streets!" whispered Mawker to the constable.

"Been with my friend Shaggy to the hospital to see his grandmother," continued Harry, not noticing Mawker's interruption.

"Oh!" said the constable. "Been to see his grandmother, have you? Be good enough to open that door."

It may be explained that Harry had found the missing key of the door on the mat outside that morning, and had come to the conclusion that it had been somehow knocked from the lock during the previous day. He had, therefore, locked the door when he went to the hospital, and put the key in his pocket.

Harry, thinking that the policeman's visit had something to do with Pierre's death, at once unlocked the door, and entered the room, followed by Shaggy, Mawker, and the constable.

"What do you want with me?" he asked.

"To answer me one question. Was you in this gentleman's room yesterday?"

"Yes; for a few minutes—speaking to Miss Angela."

"And that's all?"

"That's all" said Harry in wonderment.

"Ah, then, you'll have no objection to turning out your pockets, for this gentleman accuses you of stealing from his room fifty pounds!"

"Fifty pounds?" gasped Harry.

"Yes; fifty pounds in Bank of England notes! He's given me the numbers. So turn out your pockets, my lad, and quick about it!"

CHAPTER 10.

THE SEARCH—SHAGGY'S STRANGE METHOD OF EXPRESSING HIS FEELINGS—THE BANKNOTES—THE ESCAPE.

Harry turned out his pockets. They contained several miscellaneous articles, amongst others, the braided lock of hair and the wedding-ring, which Pierre had asked might be buried with him. Harry had slipped them into his pocket that morning, determined not to trust them out of his possession until he had discharged the injunctions of the dead.

Mawker showed some astonishment when he saw these relics. The policeman was a trifle mystified. What could a boy want with a lock of hair and a wedding-ring?

"Where did you get those from?" he asked curtly.

"They were my father's!" answered Harry, with a choking voice.

Shaggy squared up with his fists behind the policeman, and, with a most ferocious expression on his face, made all kinds of fantastic endeavours to make a punching-machine of the small of his back. The policeman, quite unconscious of this pantomime, wore his severest and most dignified expression of countenance.

"Your father's, eh? The man as is dead, eh? Strange sort of things to carry about in yer pocket, eh? Nothink else about yer, eh?"

"No. Nothing."

"No banknotes, eh?"

Shaggy made a vicious feint at the policeman's head, which stopped within an inch of the mark at which it was directed.

"No!" said Harry indignantly.

"Sorry to have to do it," said the policeman, feeling over Harry's body with his hands; "but duty is duty. Hallo! What's this?"

He drew from the inside of Harry's waistcoat the dagger which he had found in the bolster that morning. Hardened old sinner though he was, Mawker shuddered. The sight of the dagger brought before his eyes again the terrible quarter of an hour he had spent the night before in Harry's room. The policeman was more astounded than ever at this discovery.

"It's a dagger!" he cried, glancing at Harry as though he were a monster of iniquity. Then he drew it from its case, and saw upon it the sign of the scarlet cross. "Where did this come from?" he demanded severely.

"Well, that's what I would like you to tell me. Where did it come from?"

Shaggy left off sparring at the policeman's back, and pretended to vigorously clap his hands, and indulge in other expressions of delight. He evidently thought that Harry had scored one by putting this question to the constable.

"Now, then, none of yer cheek, or else I'll run yer in, slap off!" Shaggy put his thumb to his nose, and extended his fingers mockingly at the constable's spine. "Where did yer get this murderous weapon from, eh?"

"In my bolster!"

The constable glared at Harry as though he were on the point of annihilating him. With an effort he restrained himself.

"Now, look 'ere, youngster, don't you think you're coming the old soldier over me. I dare say you think that's very funny, but people don't usually stuff bolsters with daggers. Howsomever, you'll be going before a gentleman presently who'll make yer grin the other side of yer face, if you don't answer properly. You can put back that rubbish into yer pocket again"—he tossed the braided hair and the ring back to Harry—"but I'll take care of this little toothpick."

He put the dagger into his pocket.

"You see the sort of young gentleman you have to deal with—vicious, extremely vicious!" said Mawker, in his oiliest tones. "Oh! oh!" Mawker ended, with a prolonged howl.

Shaggy accidentally stumbled at that moment, and the result of his stumbling somehow was to bring his hard head into contact with Mawker's stomach.

"Beg pardon, I'm sure!" said Shaggy, in his most sympathetic tones. "Did I hurt yer? Slipped a bit, yer see? Where was it? Below the bek? I'm very, very sorry."

Mawker had fallen into a chair, gasping for breath, and repeating between each gasp his favourite phrases: "Dear me! dear me! The rising-generation—are—a—bad lot. You're an old-fool—Mawker! Caution—caution—that's—Dear me! dear me!"

"Why can't yer be careful, you clumsy young scoundrel! You've nearly settled the old gentleman," said the policeman.

"I'm very sorry!" said Shaggy penitently. "I didn't mean knocking him out o' time like that. It must ha' been below the bek, I think. The floor's so slippery, yer see. I was just stepping forward to say, when Mawker put his breadbasket in front o' my head, as how I'd like to be searched while you're about it. You might think as I've got property as don't belong to me."

In an interval between the sparring match that Shaggy had been indulging in behind the policeman's back, his eye had noticed a thick daub of paste in brown paper on a small shelf to the right of the table where Pierre used to work.

Shaggy had slipped the paste into his trouser-pocket.

"Don't you worry yerself. I wasn't going to pass you over, never fear. You look no better than you oughter, I can tell yer!"

"Thanks!" said Shaggy drily; "you're too kind. Where was you made—in Germany?"

The constable seized Shaggy by the collar, and, disdaining to answer him, at once proceeded to search him.

It was not long before he thrust his hand into the pocket filled with paste. The expression on the constable's face when he first found his hand sinking into the soft, sticky substance, and eventually drew it out covered with the paste, can be better imagined than described.

In his indignation he threw the handful at Shaggy. That young gentleman dexterously ducked his head, with the result

that the paste caught Mawker, who was just recovering his breath and rising from his chair, right in the eye.

Mawker speedily resumed his former position on the chair, imagining for the moment that he was blinded.

Snaggy danced the double shuffles, whilst the constable, with profuse apologies, proceeded to take the paste out of Mawker's eye.

"Dear me! dear me!" moaned Mawker. "They're up to all sorts of tricks, those boys! You can never tell when you have them. Where have they hidden those notes?—where have they hidden them, I wonder? We must search the room, constable—the drawers, the pictures. These young villains are very fond of hiding things behind pictures. You just cast your eye behind those pictures, while I look in that table-drawer over there."

Mawker, having at length cleared all the paste out of his eye, went over to the work-table at which Pierre usually worked, opened the drawer, and pretended to be busily engaged in searching amongst its contents, mainly consisting of engraving tools.

"Hallo! What's this?" cried the policeman.

"What's what?" asked Mawker, looking around with an admirably assumed air of astonishment.

"This picture's been tampered with."

The policeman lifted from the wall the engraving of "Napoleon after the Battle of Austerlitz," the picture behind which were secreted the banknotes. When replacing the notes, Mawker had not replaced them in their hiding-place in the same neat, careful fashion that Pierre had. He wished it to be clearly seen that the back of the picture had been tampered with.

"Tampered with, has it? In what way?"

"Ha! Here they are!" cried the constable. "Well, I'm blest if that ain't the artfullest bit o' bis'ness I've seen for a long time!"

He had placed the picture on the table, and, removing the back, had discovered, as Mawker had so artfully conjectured he would, the hidden banknotes.

To the amazement of the boys he held up the notes.

"That looks like 'em!" cried Mawker. "Four o' 'em, ain't there? Three tenners and a twenty?"

"Yes."

"Just see if the numbers tally to make sure."

The policeman pulled out his pocket-book, and looked at the numbers of the notes supposed to have been stolen from Mawker. They were, of course, identical with those found behind the picture.

Snaggy was perfectly serious now. He had regarded it all as a huge joke, or rather as a nasty bit of spite on Mawker's part. He had not treated it seriously. But it was now impossible to escape the fact that there was a grave side of the case—a side which seriously involved his chum.

As for Harry, he was speechless. He had had one or two astonishing things happen to him the last day or so. This was of a piece with the events that had preceded them.

"Well, my young gentleman, what have you got to say to these notes?" asked the policeman.

"I know nothing about them," said Harry.

"Of course not!" sarcastically commented the constable.

"They got behind that picture in the same mysterious way that that little toothpick I took from yer got in the bolster! You're getting on."

"The rising generation are a bad lot!" whined Mawker, turning up his eyes to the ceiling, and throwing up his hands with a gesture of despair.

Snaggy looked very much as though he were about to repeat his former experiment on Mawker's anatomy. His hair was bristling up for the charge, but his glance happened to rest for a moment on Harry's face, and he saw so much misery and bewilderment written there, that all other feeling was absorbed in one of pity for his friend.

He would have liked to comfort him, but he knew not what to say.

"Well, young gent, as you can't explain to me how these banknotes got behind that picture, I shall have to ask you to come along with me to the police-station. Sorry to trouble yer."

The constable crossed over to Harry, and caught hold of his collar.

The hot blood rushed to the boy's face at the indignity cast upon him. The jibes of the policeman were already ranking in his breast, and when he felt his hand upon his collar his whole soul rose in revolt against him.

He shook off his grasp, and struck him a heavy blow in the face with his clenched fist. Then he darted through the door and down the stairs before the policeman had time to recover, while Mawker (seeing that Harry had not taken the banknotes with him, rubbed his hands with a gratified smile as he exclaimed:

"Dear me! dear me! The rising generation are a bad lot! And Mawker—Mawker, you're nothing but an old fool!"

(To be continued in next Friday's UNION JACK.)

WITTY WILL WYNN.

THE STRANGE ADVENTURES OF A CLOWN.

(Continued.)

Will, the next second, ducked his head, and striking Swilley in the pit of the stomach, bowled him over as neatly as a nine-pin. Ada and Pat had scampered on. Swilley, every particle of breath knocked out of him, rolled on the ground, speechless and powerless. Will did not wait, but rushed after the others.

Mrs. Swilley bent down over her prostrate husband, but three or four minutes elapsed before she could get him on his legs again. He was spluttering and panting with rage and pain. He was still cursing and fuming when Copples, close followed by Slymer and Grix, rushed down upon him.

"Have you seen——" almost shrieked Copples. "Oh, it's you, Swilley! My ward has been stolen from me!"

"Yes, I know. It was her and two others who passed just now. One of them has brutally assaulted me and nearly killed me. Quick! I'm too hurt to run, master; but you should overtake them!"

And Swilley, folding his arms round his stomach, continued to wriggle with pain.

It was a mile and a half to the town. Had Will and Pat been by themselves they would have left their pursuers far behind. But Ada, struggle on as she would, was well-nigh exhausted. It was piteous to hear her short, panting gasps. Now and again her legs seemed to give way beneath her, and it was only the strong support on either side that kept her up.

"We must slacken down a bit," said Will, "it's no use."

"Whist! But we can't!" whispered Pat excitedly. "Listen! They're coming down the road after us. If it were one, we'd just give him what for; but it's two or more by the sound."

The distant pit-pat of rapidly moving feet was now distinctly audible.

Will took a wild glance round. Ada could go no further.

If only he could find some place of concealment! Nearer and nearer came the sound of their pursuers. Then, suddenly, and without a word, he snatched up Ada in his arms, darted across to the trees on the roadside, and, having lowered her into the ditch, scrambled down himself. To have spoken to Pat might have been to have betrayed their presence to their pursuers, who, though invisible in the darkness, were now close upon the spot.

But Will took it for granted that Pat would follow him into the ditch.

But Pat did not.

The Irish lad had grown to worship Will, short time as he had really known him. He might be rough, and uncouth, but a generous, stout heart beat beneath his waistcoat. He was still suffering considerable pain from the pellets in his back. But he was not going to let that interfere with his plans.

Instead of jumping into the ditch, he started to race down the road, clattering loudly with his feet, his purpose being to lead the pursuers astray, and so give Will a better chance to get Ada away.

Grix was pumping and puffing away like a traction-engine. Copples was wheezing and spluttering and creaking as if he badly needed oiling; Sleuth Slymer, who was slightly in advance of the other two, was in the best condition, but even he was emitting sounds like those of a roaring horse.

"Ah!" gasped Slymer, putting on a spurt as the sound of Pat's feet reached him—"ah, we're on 'em! We're gaining!"

His words acted like a spur on the miser, who also quickened, and the trio, Grix now last of all, darted past the spot where Ada and Will were lying concealed. They waited for some time without speaking or stirring. And then Will said in a whisper:

"Good old Pat! What a brick he is! If you get away safely you'll owe it to him. He's leading them off on a false trail."

And at that moment, Pat, his elbows pressed close to his side, his head thrown back, was scampering farther and farther away.

"By the piper," he said to himself, "though I'm carrying some dead weight about me in the shape of shot, I'll lead the beasts behind me a dance, or my name's not Patrick Flannigan!"

Grix, the fattest, the heaviest, and in the worst condition owing to his temperate habits, was the first to give up. Utterly exhausted, and not having enough breath even to swear with, he sat down by the roadside. A quarter of a mile further along Copples was obliged to throw up the sponge. Sleuth Slymer alone continued the pursuit.

Then Pat began to slow down. He had reached the outskirts of Oldham, and he guessed by the sounds that only one man was following him now. And though it was somewhat risky owing to the darkness, and the fact that there was no one about, he determined to let himself be overtaken. He could not resist the temptation of having a laugh at the pursuer, whoever he might be, when he found out what a wild-goose chase it had been.

HAVE A LOOK AT THE SECOND PART IN THE EDITOR'S CHAT.

Sleuth Slymer's heart began to thump with joy; visions of a reward for his zealous conduct rose up before him as the sounds ahead became louder and louder.

Then Pat stopped, and deliberately waited till Sleuth Slymer came up. He gave a great gasp of disappointment when, instead of Ada, he saw the lanky figure of the Irish lad loom out of the darkness.

"Can I do anything to oblige ye?" said Pat, in the politest tones possible. "Ye seem to be in a terrible hurry. Can I assist ye!"

The detective spluttered and gasped, inarticulate with fury. In the darkness he had not recognised Pat as the whilom potboy of the Beetle and Whistle.

"How dare you play a trick like this! You have led us astray. I'll have you arrested for conspiracy!"

"Shure, and I suppose I may please myself whether I walk or run; and if ye've been fool enough to follow after, it's your own look-out, Mr. Thimble-rigging Joe!"

The detective started back at the sound of the name.

"So it's you, is it?" he choked, "you carroty-nobbed son of a Fenian! I've a good mind to break every bone in your body!"

"Ye'd best not try it on, or, perhaps, it would be other bones than my own that'd get broken!"

Slymer was an arrant cur. Had Pat shown any symptoms of fear, he would have probably struck him, so furiously enraged was he; but there was a certain ring in the lad's voice that warned the detective not to presume too much.

"Well, since I can be of no further assistance to ye, I'll be after getting along. If ye should happen to be in Nottingham again, p'raps ye'll give my love to Dicky Neave—that is, when he comes out of gaol. When I left I heard there was a warrant out for the arrest of his accomplice, Thimble-rigging Joe. Well, good-night to ye!"

And with that Pat turned on his heel, and rapidly made his way towards Oldham.

Slymer, paralysed with passion, stood in the middle of the road, for a few seconds unable to move or speak. Then, when at last he found tongue, he poured out a stream of abuse and oaths that would have put even Joe Grix to shame.

He cursed Ada, Will, and Pat, and swore that he would yet be revenged on the pack of them. Then, turning back, he disconsolately made his way back, picking up the old miser, and Joe Grix at different stages of his journey.

"What's to be done?" hissed Copples.

"Done!" muttered Sleuth Slymer, between his teeth. "They must be somewhere in the neighbourhood—probably they'll be in Oldham, and will take a train somewhere in the morning. One of us must watch the railway-station to begin with. Then you must advertise a big reward for the recovery of Ada Graham"—he was thinking of himself when he made this suggestion. "As for that young blackguard of a clown, he'll be joining the Temple of Mirth shortly. He's only got a week's leave of absence. And then"—he patted Joe Grix on the back, and lowered his voice to a whisper—"and then our trusty friend here will be able to carry out that little plan we hatched this evening!"

CHAPTER 23.

ADA AND WILL REACH LONDON—SLEUTH SLYMER IN A NEW DISGUISE.

Sleuth Slymer made a big mistake when he calculated to find Ada in Oldham. Will had realised that that would be the first place they would look for her. Consequently, when he and Ada had crawled out of their hiding-place, they had made off in precisely the opposite direction.

"We must get to London, Ada. If I can find out my mother—at least, I've always called her so, though I don't believe she is—I'll get her to take care of you. But since I've been with Professor Romah I've never had a letter from her, though I have written often to her. If not, I'll take rooms for you. Thank goodness, I've got plenty of money to be going on with!"

Will had been thinking so much about Ada, that he had almost forgotten the strange confession that he carried in his pocket, and the mysterious discovery he had made in the underground vault beneath Copples's house. But now, as he hurried along through the darkness, he told Ada of all that had happened. She was horrified and surprised.

"Then it means," she said, "that my guardian knows that the money supposed to belong to me, belongs to someone else, and has concealed the fact for his own evil ends. It means, that I have a half-brother. Oh, Will, we must find him!"

"Yes, Ada," said Will, with a little smile, for he had an idea that it would be easy enough to find him, though it might be more difficult to obtain proofs of his identity, "we'll look for him; but we must get you in safety first. But think," he said, with another strange smile, "if he is found, you will no longer be an heiress!"

"Why, Will, you don't think I am so fond of money that I should like to keep another out of his rights? I should be glad.

My supposed fortune has been nothing but a curse to me!"

"No, Ada, I know you too well. I was only joking."

He did not wish to tell her that, in consequence of the confession in his pocket, and the strange enmity that had so consistently pursued him, he was beginning to believe that he himself was the real heir. He would wait till he had proofs. And thus how delightful it would be to tell her that he was her brother, and that there would be no need for her to lose her fortune, for what was his, should be hers. But Will was a practical little fellow, and he did not believe in counting his chickens before they were hatched. The thing he had to think about now was Ada's safety, and how to get her to London.

"Wait a moment, Ada"—they had been tramping steadily on through the darkness—"I hear the sound of wheels coming along behind. It would be a splendid thing if we could get a lift."

The next moment two lights shone out, and a covered van came rattling along.

"Hi, there!" shouted Will; "woa, will you give us a lift?"

The van drew up, and the driver stared suspiciously at the two figures. It was a strange hour for people to ask for a lift.

"What do you want a lift for at this time of the night, or rather morning? You ought to be in bed, the pair of you."

"The same remark," said Will, with a laugh, "might apply to you."

"So I would," answered the man, "but I'm a carrier, and I've got to be in Manchester and out again before sunrise. But it strikes me, youngster, I know your voice, and perhaps, if I saw your face, I'd know that too!"

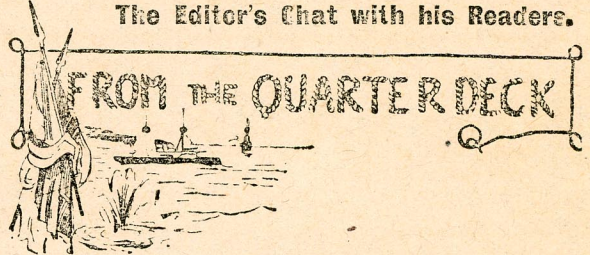
"My name's Wynn, if that's any use to you—William Wynn."

"What! The boy-clown! Of course, I knew your voice! Didn't I see you clowning outside the Temple at the fair? didn't I see you in court when you were tried? didn't I help to carry you round the town, when you were acquitted? Jump in, my lad. Proud to have you in my van. Take you to Manchester, if you like, and back. But who's the young lady? You're not eloping with someone, are you?"

Will gave Ada's arm a gentle nip, as much as to say "Back me up."

(To be continued in next Friday's UNION JACK.)

The Editor's Chat with his Readers.



Friday next is the day all you readers who entered for my "Nations" competition are longing for. In the UNION JACK, published on that day, you will find the names of the fortunate winners. You may be one of them. Make sure of getting a copy of the number by asking your newsagent at once to keep one for you.

It is the UNION JACK's boast that it is always up-to-date. May the 25th is Derby Day, and on the Friday before, that is to say, on this day fortnight, the UNION JACK will contain a thrilling racing story.

It is written by a gentleman thoroughly up in the ways of racing men, and is of absorbing interest. More about this next week.

I am still waiting for that postcard from you telling me what you think of "The Sign of the Scarlet Cross." Surely you are not too lazy to write a few lines. As I have said so often before, I cannot be expected to know your likes and dislikes if I do not hear from you.

P. Walker, writing from Bristol, informs me that he is anxious to make several of the things given in the "How to Make Money in Spare Time" articles, but does not possess a fretsaw, and has no idea where to get one.

I am afraid my friend does not keep his eyes wide enough open. All tool shops sell them, and almost all ironmongers.

*Yours sincere friend,
The Editor*

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This offer is good for 30 days from the date of this paper. The cheques for the Prizes will be forwarded immediately, with the Forks ordered, in due time as received.

The Result of our last Money Prize Distribution was as follows:

A Cheque for £10 was posted to J. A. Turner, Esq. (son of the Premier of British Columbia), 46, Queen Victoria Street, London, E.C.
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To convince you of our offer being genuine, we send herewith copies of a few Testimonials which we are daily receiving.

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Gentlemen,—I received the Watch and Albert safely, and am exceedingly pleased with same. I have shown it to my friends, all of whom are astonished to find it such a genuine bargain; one of my friends wishes to know if he could obtain one in the same manner, or has the time expired. My sincere thanks, I remain, yours truly,
Mr. C. Knows.

10, Dean Street, Lislecard,
November 1st, 1897.
Dear Sir,—I received the Watch and Chain on Tuesday last, and I am very pleased with them; the Watch is keeping good time.—Yours truly, Miss E. GUYER.

The Folly, 48, Thornton Street, Hertford,
November 1st, 1897.
Dear Sir,—I received your Watch and Chain quite safe, and was very well pleased with them; and many thanks for your kindness for sending me one of your catalogues; and perhaps I will have the pleasure of giving you another order before long. I remain yours truly,
Miss E. GATEY.

New Brancepeth, Durham,
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Dear Sir,—Just a line to say that I received the Watch and Chain which you sent me, and was highly pleased with them. I have shown the Catalogue to many of my friends.—Yours respectfully,
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