Andy the Acrobat eBook

Andy the Acrobat

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Page 1

EXPELLED

?Andrew Wildwood!?

The village schoolmaster of Fairview spoke this name in a tone of severity. He accompanied the utterance with a bang of the ruler that made the desk before him rattle.

There was fire in his eye and his lip trembled. Half of the twenty odd scholars before him looked frightened, the others interested. None had ever before seen the dull, sleepy pedagogue so wrought up.

All eyes were fixed on a lad of about sixteen, seated in the front row of desks.

The name called out applied to him. It had been abbreviated so commonly, however, that its full dignity seemed to daze him for the moment.

Andrew Wildwood slowly arose, his big, fearless eyes fixed dubiously on the schoolmaster.

?Yes, sir,? he said.

?Step forward, sir.?

Andy Wildwood did so. He was now in full view of the other scholars. Mr. Darrow also arose. He thrust one hand behind his long coat tails, twirling them fiercely. From the little platform that was his throne he glared down at the unabashed Andy. In his other hand he flourished the long black ruler threateningly.

He pointed a terrible finger towards two desks, about four feet apart, at one side of the room. The desk nearest to the wall had its top split clear across, and one corner was splintered off.

?Did you break that desk?? demanded the pedagogue.

Andy?s lips puckered slightly in a comical twist. He had a vivid imagination, and the shattered desk suggested an exciting and pleasurable moment in the near past. Some one chuckled at the rear of the room. Andy?s face broke into an irrepressible smile.

?Order!? roared the schoolmaster, bringing down the ruler with a loud bang. ?Young man, I asked you: did you break that desk??

?Yes, sir, I?m afraid I smashed it,? said Andy in a rather subdued tone. ?It was an accident.?

?He was only fooling, teacher!? in an excited lisp spoke up little Tod Smith, the youngest pupil in the school. ?He broke the desk, but?say, teacher! he did it?yes, sir, Andy did the double somersault, just like a real circus actor, and landed square on both feet!?

The eyes of Andy?s diminutive champion and admirer sparkled like diamonds. A murmur of delight and sympathy went the rounds of the schoolroom.

Mr. Darrow glared savagely at the boy. He brandished the ruler wildly, sending an ink bottle rolling to the floor. As a titter greeted this catastrophe, he lost his temper and dignity completely.

Springing down from the platform, he made a swoop upon Andy. The latter stood his ground, and there was a shock. Then Andy was swayed to and fro as the schoolmaster grasped his arm.

?Young man,? spoke Mr. Darrow in a shaking tone, ?this is the limit. An example must be made! Last week you tore down the schoolhouse chimney with your ridiculous tight rope performances.?

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?And wasn?t it just jolly!? gloated a juvenile gleesome voice in a loud whisper.

The schoolmaster swept the room with a shocked glance. It had no effect upon the bubbling-over effervescence of his pupils. Every imagination was vividly recalling the rope tied from the schoolhouse chimney to a near tree. Every heart renewed the thrills that had greeted Andy Wildwood?s daring walk across the quivering cable.

Then the culminating climax: the giving way of the chimney, a shower of bricks?but the young gymnast, safe and serene, dangling from the eaves.

?Last week also,? continued the schoolmaster, ?you stole Farmer Dale?s calf and carried it five miles away. You are complained of continually. As I said, young man, you have reached the limit. Human patience and endurance can go no farther. You are demoralizing this school. And now,? concluded Mr. Darrow, his lips setting grimly, ?you must toe the mark.?

A hush of expectancy, of rare excitement, pervaded the room. The schoolmaster swung aloft the ruler with one hand. He swung Andy around directly in front of him with the other hand.

Andy?s face suddenly grew serious. He tugged to get loose.

?Hold on, Mr. Darrow,? he spoke quickly. ?You mustn?t strike me.?

?How? what! defiance on top of rebellion!? shouted the irate pedagogue. ?Keep your seats!? he roared, as half the school came upright under the tense strain of the moment.

The next he was struggling with Andy. Forward and backward then went over the clear recitation space. The ruler was dropped in the scrimmage. As Mr. Darrow stooped to repossess it, Andy managed to break loose.

Dodging behind the zinc shield that fronted the stove, he caught its top with both hands. He moved about presenting a difficult barrier against easy capture. Andy looked pretty determined now. The schoolmaster was so angry that his face was as red as a piece of flannel. He advanced again upon the culprit, so choked up that his lips made only inarticulate sounds.

?One minute, please, Mr. Darrow,? said Andy. ?You mustn?t try to whip me. I can?t stand it, and I won?t. It hasn?t been the rule here, ever. I did wrong, though I couldn?t help it, and I?m sorry for it. I?ll stand double study and staying in from recess and after school for a month, if you say so. You can put me in the dark hole and keep me without my dinner as long as you like. I have lots of good friends here. I?d be ashamed to face them after a whipping?and I won?t!?

?Yes, yes?he?s right!? rang out an earnest chorus.

?Silence!? roared the schoolmaster. ?An example must be made. I shall do my duty. Andrew Wildwood?Graham! what do you mean, sir??

The scholars thrilled, as a new and unexpected element came into the situation.

Graham, quite a young man, and double the weight of the schoolmaster, had arisen from his seat. He walked quietly between Mr. Darrow and Andy, quite pushing back the former gently.

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?The lad is right, Mr. Darrow,? he said, in his quiet, drawling way. ?I wouldn?t punish him before the scholars if I were you, sir.?

?What?s this? You interfere!? flared out the pedagogue.

?Don?t take it that way, Mr. Darrow,? said Graham. ?You are displeased, and justly so, sir, but boys will be boys. Andy is the right kind of a lad, I assure you, only in the wrong kind of a place. They did the same thing with me when I was young. If they hadn?t, I wouldn?t be here spelling out words of two syllables at twenty-eight years of age.?

Andy?s eyes glistened at the big scholar?s friendliness. A murmur of approbation ran round the room.

Silently the pedagogue fumed. The disaffection of the occasion, mild and respectful as it was, disarmed him. He regarded Andy with a despairing look. Then he straightened up with great dignity.

?Take your seat, sir!? he ordered Andy severely, marching back to his own desk.

?Yes, sir,? said Andy humbly.

?Pack up your books.?

Andy looked up in dismay. The fixed glint in the schoolmaster?s eye told him that this new move meant no fooling.

?Now you may go home,? resumed Mr. Darrow, as Andy had obeyed his first mandate.

Andy kept a stiff upper lip, though he felt that the world was slipping away from him.

A picture of an unloving home, a stern, hard mistress who would make use of this, his final disgrace, as a continual club and menace to all his future peace of mind, fairly appalled him.

He arose to his feet, swinging his strapped up books to and fro airily, but there was a dismal catch in his voice as he turned to the teacher?s desk, and said:

?Mr. Darrow, I guess I would rather take the whipping.?

?Too late,? pronounced the relentless schoolmaster in icy tones.

And then, as Andy reached the door amid the gruesome silence and awe of his sympathetic comrades, Mr. Darrow added the final dreadful words:

?You are expelled.?

CHAPTER II

Hoop-la!

Andy Wildwood passed out of the village schoolhouse an anxious and desolate boy.

The brightest of sunshine gilded the spires and steeples of the village. It flooded highway and meadows with rich yellow light, but Andy, swinging his school books over his shoulder, walked on with drooping head and a cheerless heart.

?It?s pretty bad, it?s just the very worst!? he said with a deep sigh, as he reached a stile and sat down a-straddle of it.

Andy tossed his books up into the hollow of a familiar oak near at hand. Then he fell to serious thinking.

His gaze roving over the landscape, lit on the farmhouse of Jabez Dale. It revived the recent allusion of the old schoolmaster.

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?I didn?t steal that calf,? declared Andy, straightening up indignantly. ?Graham, who boards over at Millville, told us boys how Dale had sold a cow to a farmer there. He said they took her away from her calf, and the poor thing refused to eat. She just paced up and down a pasture fence from morning till night, crying for her calf. We got the calf, and carried it to its mother. I?ll never forget the sight, and I?ll never regret it, either?and what?s best, the man who had got the cow was so worked up over its almost human grief, that he paid Dale for the calf, too, and kept it.?

The memory of the incident brightened up Andy momentarily. Then, his glance flitting to the distant roof of a small neat cottage in a pretty grove of cedars, his face fell again. He choked on a great lump in his throat.

?Ginger!? he whistled dolefully, ?how can I ever face the music over there!?

The cottage was Andy?s home, but the thought had no charm or sweetness for the lone orphan boy whom its roof had grudgingly sheltered for the past five years.

Once it had belonged to his father. He had died when Andy was ten years old. Then it had passed into the legal possession of Mr. Wildwood?s half-sister, Miss Lavinia Talcott.

This aunt was Andy?s nearest relative. He had lived with her since his father?s death, if it could be called living.

Miss Lavinia?s favorite topic was the sure visitation of the sins of the father upon his children.

She was of a sour, snappy disposition. Her prim boast and pride was that she was a strict disciplinarian.

To a lad of Andy?s free and easy nature, her rules and regulations were torture and an abomination.

She made him take off his muddy shoes in the woodshed. Woe to him if he ever brought a splinter of whittling, or a fragment of nutshell, into the distressingly neat kitchen!

Only one day in the week?Sunday?was Andy allowed the honor of sitting in the best room.

Then, for six mortal hours his aching limbs were glued to a straight-backed chair. There, in parlor state, he sat listening to the prim old maid?s reading religious works, or some scientific lecture, or a dreary dissertation on good behavior.

She never allowed a schoolmate to visit him, even in the well-kept yard. She restricted his hours of play. And all the time never gave him a loving word or caress.

On the contrary, many times a week Miss Lavinia administered a tongue-lashing that suggested perpetual motion.

Mr. Wildwood had been something of an inventor. He had gotten up a hoisting derrick that was very clever. It brought him some money. This he sunk in an impossible balloon, crippled himself in the initial voyage of his airship, and died shortly afterwards of a broken heart.

Andy?s mother had died when he was an infant. Thus it was that he fell into the charge of his unloving aunt.

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It seemed that the latter had loaned Mr. Wildwood some money for his scientific experiments. As repayment, when he died, she took the cottage and what else was left of the wreck of his former fortune.

Even this she claimed did not pay her up in full, and she made poor Andy feel all the time that he was eating the bread of charity.

Andy?s grandfather had been a famous sailor. Andy had read an old private account among his father?s papers of a momentous voyage his grandfather had made to the Antarctic circle.

He loved to picture his ancestor among the ship?s rigging. He had an additional enthusiasm in another description of his father?s balloon venture.

Andy wished he had been born to fly. He seemed to have inherited a sort of natural acrobatic tendency. At ten years of age he was the best boy runner and jumper in the village.

The first circus he had seen?not with Miss Lavinia?s permission?set Andy fairly wild, and later astonished his playmates with prodigious feats of walking on a barrel, somersaulting, vaulting with a pole, and numerous other amateur gymnastic attainments.

For the past month a circus, now exhibiting in a neighboring town, had been advertised in glowing prose and lurid pictures on big billboards all over the county.

Juvenile Fairview was set on fire anew with the circus fever. Andy?s rope-walking feat and double somersault act from desk to desk that morning had resulted, getting him into the trouble of his life. It furthermore had interrupted other performances on the programme listed for later on that very day.

Andy?s head had been full of the circus since he had seen its first poster at a cross-roads. He could never pass a heap of sawdust without cutting a caper.

In the spelling contest, he had stupefied his fellow students by nimbly rattling over such words as ?megatherian,? ?stupendous,? ?zoological aggregation,? and the like.

One of his sums covered the number of yards a clown could cover in a given time on a handspring basis. He had shocked the schoolmaster by handing in an essay on ?The Art of Bareback Riding.?

Andy had tried every acrobatic trick he had seen depicted in the glowing advance sheets announcing the circus. To repeated efforts in this direction his admiring schoolmates had continually incited him.

He had tried the double somersault in the schoolroom that morning. Andy had made a famous success of the experiment, but with the direful result of smashing a desk, and subsequent expulsion.

Thinking over all this, Andy realized that the beginning and end of all his troubles was his irrepressible tendency towards acrobatic performances.

?And I simply can?t help it!? he cried in a kind of reckless despair. ?It?s born in me, I guess. Oh, don?t I hope Aunt Lavinia turns me out, as she has often threatened to do. Say, if she only would, and I could join some show, and travel and see things and?live!?

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Andy threw himself flat on the green sward. He closed his eyes and gave himself up to a rapture of thought.

Gay banners, brightly comparisoned horses, white wildernesses of circus tents, tinselled clowns, royal ringmasters, joyful strains of music floated through his active brain. It was a day dream of rare beauty, and he could not tear himself away from it.

An idle hour went by before Andy realized it. As echoing voices rang out on the quiet air, he got to his feet rubbing his eyes as if they were dazzled.

?Recess already,? Andy said. ?Well, I?ll lay low until it?s over. I don?t want to meet the boys just now. Then I?ll do some more thinking. I suppose I?ve got to decide to go home. Ugh! but I hate to?and I just won?t until the very last moment.?

Andy went in among the shrubbery farther away from the road, but he could not hide himself. An active urchin discovered him from a distance. He yelled out riotously to his comrades, and they all came trooping along pell-mell in Andy?s direction.

Their expelled schoolmate and favorite greeted them with a genial smile, never showing the white feather in the least.

His chums found him carelessly tossing half-a-dozen crab apples from hand to hand. Andy was an adept in ?the glass ball act.? He described rapid semicircles, festoons and double crosses. He shot the green objects up into the air in all directions, and went through the performance without a break.

?Isn?t Andy a crackerjack?? gloated enthusiastic little Tod Smith. ?Oh, say, Andy, you won?t disappoint us now, will you??

?What about?? inquired Andy.

?The rest of it.?

?The rest of what??

?Your show. You know you promised??

?Oh, that?s all off!? declared Andy gloomily. ?I?ve made trouble enough already with my circus antics, I?m thinking.?

?Don?t you be mean now, Andy Wildwood!? broke in Ned Wilfer, a particular friend of the expelled boy. ?Old Darrow has given us a double recess. We have a good forty minutes to have fun in. Come on.?

The speaker seized Andy?s reluctant arm and began pulling him towards the road.

?Got the horse?? he asked of a companion.

?Sure,? eagerly nodded the lad addressed. ?I got him fixed up, platform, blanket and all, before school. He?s tied up, waiting, at the end of father?s ten-acre lot.?

?Yes, and I?ve got the hoop all ready there, too,? chimed in Alf Warren, another schoolboy.

?See here, fellows,? demurred Andy dubiously, ?I haven?t much heart for frolic. I?m expelled, you know, and there?s Aunt Lavinia??

?Forget it!? interrupted Ned. ?That will all right itself.?

Andy consented to accompany the gleeful, expectant throng. They had arranged the night before to hold an amateur circus exhibition ?on their own hook.?

One boy had agreed to provide the ?fiery steed? for the occasion. Alf Warren was to be property man, and donate the blazing hoop.

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They soon reached the corner of the ten-acre lot. There, tethered to a stake and grazing placidly, was a big-boned, patient-looking horse.

Across his back was strapped a small platform made of a cistern cover. This had been cushioned with a folded buggy robe.

Alf Warren dove excitedly into a clump of bushes. He reappeared triumphantly holding aloft a big hoop. It was wound round and round with strips of woolen cloth which exuded an unmistakable and unpleasant odor of kerosene.

?Say! it?s going to be just like the circus picture on the side of the post office, isn?t it?? chuckled little Tod Smith.

Ned Wilier took down the fence bars and led the horse out into the road.

Andy pulled off his coat and shoes. He stowed them alongside a rock near the fence. Then he produced some elastic bands and secured his trousers around the ankles.

His eyes brightened and he forgot all his troubles for the time being, as he ran back a bit.

?Out of the way there!? shouted Andy with glowing cheeks, posing for a forward dash.

He made a quick, superb bound and landed lightly on the horse?s back.

Old Dobbin shied restively. Ned, at his nose, quieted him with a word.

Andy, the centre of an admiring group, tested the impromptu platform. He accepted a short riding whip handed up to him by Alf Warren with a truly professional flourish. Andy stood easy and erect, one hand on his hip. All that seemed lacking was the sawdust ring and a tinselled garb.

?Ready,? announced Andy.

All of the group except Ned Wilfer started down the road in the wake of Alf Warren. The latter carried the hoop in one hand, some matches in the other.

The mob rounded the highway, purposely selected because it curved, and disappeared from view.

?Everything all right, Andy?? inquired Ned, strutting about with quite a ringmaster-like air.

?Yes, if the horse will go any.?

?Oh, he?ll get up full speed, once started,? assured Ned.

It was fully five minutes before an expected signal reached them. From far around the bend in the road there suddenly echoed vivid shouts and whistlings.

?Start him up,? ordered Andy.

Ned led the horse a few rods and got him to running. Then, dropping to the rear, he kept pace with the animal, slapping one flank and urging him up to greater speed.

He fell behind, but kept on running, as Andy, guiding the horse by the long bridle reins, occasionally gave him a stimulating touch of the light whip he carried.

Five hundred feet covered, old Dobbin seemed to enjoy the novelty of the occasion, and kept up a very fair gait.

Rounding the curve in the road and looking a quarter-of-a-mile ahead, Andy could see his schoolmates gathered around a tree stump surmounted by Alf Warren, holding the hoop aloft.

Just here, too, for the space of a mere minute Andy could view the schoolhouse through a break in the timber.

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A swift side glance showed the big scholar, Graham, lounging in the doorway.

Just approaching him from the direction of the village was the old schoolmaster, Mr. Darrow.

?He has been up to see Aunt Lavinia, that?s the reason of the double recess,? thought Andy, his heart sinking a trifle. Then, flinging care to the winds for the occasion, he uttered a ringing:

?Hoop-la!?

Andy felt that he must do justice to the expectations of his young friends.

He swung outward on one foot in true circus ring fashion. He swayed back at the end of the bridles. He tipped thrillingly at the very edge of the cushioned platform. All the time by shouts and whip, he urged up old Dobbin to his best spurt of speed.

At the schoolhouse door Mr. Darrow gazed at the astonishing spectacle with uplifted hands.

?Shocking!? he groaned. ?Graham, there goes the most incorrigible boy in Fairview.?

?Yes,? nodded Graham with a quaint smile, as Andy Wildwood flashed out of sight past the break in the timber??he certainly is going some.?

?He?ll break his neck!?

?I trust not.?

CHAPTER III

DISASTER

Old Dobbin pricked up his ears and kept royally to his task as he seemed to enter into the excitement of the moment.

Andy had practiced on the animal on several previous occasions. Lumps of sugar and apples had rewarded Dobbin at the end of the performances for his faithful services. He seemed now to remember this, as he galloped along towards the waiting group down the road.

Sometimes Andy had made the horseback somersault successfully. Sometimes he had failed ignominiously and tumbled to the ground. Just now he felt no doubt of the result. The padded cushion cover was broad and steady.

He kept the horse close to the inner edge of the road. The tree stump upon which Alf Warren stood just lined it.

By holding the hoop extended straight out, the horse?s body would pass directly under this.

Nearer and nearer steed and rider approached the point of interest.

The spectators gaped and squirmed, vastly excited, but silent now.

About one hundred feet away from the tree stump, Andy shouted out the quick word:

?Ready.?

At once Alf Warren drew the match in his free hand across his coat sleeve. It lighted. He applied the ignited splinter to the edge of the hoop.

The oil-soaked covering took fire instantly. The blaze ran round the circle. The hoop burst into a wreath of light, darting flames.

Andy fixed a calculating eye on hoop and holder.

?Two inches lower,? he ordered??keep it firm.?

The horse seemed inclined to swerve at a sight of the fiery hoop. Andy soothed Dobbin by word and kept him steady with the bridle reins.

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Everything seemed working smoothly. Andy moved to the extreme rear edge of the platform and poised there.

Five feet away from the hoop he dropped the riding whip. Then he flung the reins across the horse?s neck.

With nerve and precision Andy started a forward somersault at just the right moment.

He felt a warm wave cross his face. As he made the complete circle he knew that something was wrong.

?Ouch!? suddenly yelled out Alf.

A spurt of flame had shot against his hand that held the short stick attached to the hoop.

Alf let go the hoop and dropped it. As Andy came down, righted again on the platform, one foot struck the narrow edge of the hoop.

He was in his stocking feet, and the contact cut the instep sharply. It threw Andy off his balance. He tried to right himself, but failed. He tipped sideways, and was forced to jump to the ground.

The hoop fell forward against the horse?s mane. With a wild neigh of terror and pain the animal leaped to one side, carrying away a section of rotten fence. The blazing hoop now dropped around its neck.

A shout of dismay went up from the spectators. Alf, nursing his burned fingers, looked scared. Andy glanced sharply after the flying horse and spurted after it. At that moment the school bell rang out, and the crowd made a rush in the direction of the building. Alf Warren lagged behind.

?Go ahead,? directed Andy, ?I?ll catch Dobbin.?

Ned Wilfer at that moment dashed up to Andy?s side.

?I?ll stay and help you,? he panted.

?Don?t be tardy, don?t get into trouble,? said Andy.

Dobbin was making straight across a meadow. The kerosene soaked rags had pretty well burned out. They smoked still, however, and in the breeze once in a while a tongue of flame would dart forth.

Dobbin passed a haystack, then another. He was momentarily shut out from Andy?s view on both occasions.

At his second reappearance Andy noticed that the animal had got rid of the hoop. Dobbin now slackened his pace, snorted, and, laying down, rolled over and over in the stubble.

The horse righted himself as Andy came up with him, breathless.

?So, so, old fellow,? soothed Andy. ?Just singed the mane a little, that?s all.?

He patted the animal?s nose and seized the bridle to lead Dobbin back to the pasture from which he had started.

?Oh, gracious!? exclaimed Andy, abruptly dropping the bridle quicker than he had seized it.

Forty feet back on the course Dobbin had come, the second haystack was all ablaze.

There the horse had thrown off the fire hoop, or it had burned through at some part and had dropped there.

It had set the dry hay aflame. As Andy looked, it spread out into a fan-like blaze, enveloping one whole side of the stack.

Andy was dumb with consternation. However, he was not the boy to face a calamity inactively.

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His quick eye saw that the stack was doomed. What troubled him more than that was the imminent danger to half-a-dozen other stacks nearly adjoining it.

?All Farmer Dale?s hay!? gasped the perturbed lad. ?Fifty tons, if there?s one. If all that goes, what shall I do??

Andy took in the whole situation with a vivid glance. Then he made a bee-line dash for a broken stack against which rested a large field rake.

It was broad and had a very long handle. Andy ran with it towards the blazing heap of hay and set to work instantly.

?This won?t do,? he breathed excitedly, as an effort to beat out the spreading flames only caused burning shreds to fill the air. These threatened to ignite the contiguous stacks.

Once the first of these was started they would all go one after the other. They were out of the direct draught of the light breeze prevailing. What cinders arose went straight up high in the air. The main danger threatened from the stubble.

Creeping into this from the base of the haystack in flames, little pathways of fire darted out like vicious serpents.

Andy made for these with the rake. He beat at them and scraped the ground. He stamped with his stockinged feet and pulled up clumps of stubble with his hands.

The trouble was that so many little fires started up at so many different spots. Finally, however, the ground was a mass of burned-out grass for twenty feet clear around the centre of the blaze.

The haystack was sinking down a glowing mass, but now confined itself and past spreading out.

Andy flung himself on the ground fairly exhausted. His hands and face were somewhat blistered, and he was wringing wet with perspiration.

He looked pretty serious as he did ?a sum out of school.?

?That stack held about two tons and a-half,? he calculated. ?I heard a farmer at the post-office say yesterday that he was getting eight dollars in the stack for hay. There?s twenty dollars gone up in smoke. Where will I ever get twenty dollars??

Andy became more and more despondent the longer he thought of the dismal situation.

He stirred himself to action. With the rake he heaped together the brittle filaments of burned hay.

?It can?t spread any now,? he decided finally. ?It?s dying down to nothing. Now then, what?s next??

Andy took a far look in all directions. The fire had burned so rapidly and clear in the crisp light air that it did not seem to have been observed in the village.

Andy wondered, however, that some of the Dales had not discovered it. He stood gazing thoughtfully at the Dale homestead about a quarter-of-a-mile away.

A great many impulsive, disheartening and also reckless projects ran through his mind.

?It?s an awful fix to be in,? ruminated Andy with a sigh of real distress. ?If ever it was up to a fellow to cut stick and run, it?s up to Andy Wildwood at this minute. Expelled from school, burning up a man?s haystack and then?Aunt Lavinia! The rest is bad enough, but when I think of her it sends the cold chills all over me. Ugh!?

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Andy looked for Dobbin. It was some time before he discovered the innocent partner of his recent disastrous escapade.

The old horse was half-a-mile distant, placidly making along the roadway for home.

Andy rubbed his head in distress and uncertainty. He had a hard problem to figure out. Suddenly his eyes snapped and he straightened up briskly.

?I won?t crawl,? he declared. ??Toe the mark? is Aunt Lavinia?s great motto. ?Face the music? is mine. I won?t turn tail and play the sneak. I?ve destroyed some property. Well, the first honest thing to do is to try and make good. Here goes.?

Andy started for the road. He reached the spot where he had left his coat and shoes. Donning these he went to a little pool in the brush, washed his face and hands, and made a short cut for Farmer Dale?s house.

Andy?s heart was beating pretty fast as he entered the farm yard, but he marched straight up to the front door.

Andy knocked, first timidly, then louder.

There was no response.

CHAPTER IV

A BUSINESS PROPOSITION

?Nobody at home,? said Andy to himself.

He walked around the house to find all the windows closed and locked.

?That?s the reason no one came to the fire,? he resumed. ?There?s somebody, though.?

Andy started in the direction of the barn. He had caught the sound of some one chopping or hammering there.

He came upon a hired hand splitting some sawed hickory slabs to whittle down into skewers.

?Mr. Dale?s folks all away?? inquired Andy.

?Reckon they are, youngster,? answered the man.

?Will they be gone long, do you think??

?Mr. Dale won?t. He drove the family over to Centreville. The circus is there, you know.?

?Yes,? said Andy?longingly.

?Took them early, so they could look around town. They?re going to stay all night with some relations, Mr. Dale isn?t, though. He ought to be back by this time. He?s due now. Was talking of carting a couple of loads of hay over to Gregson?s this morning.?

Andy?s heart sank at this. He did not tell the man about the fire.
Backing away gloomily, he went out into the road again.

Every point in the landscape suggested some section of his morning?s misfortunes.
Andy craned his neck as he took in a distant view of the old school-house.

He made out a female figure approaching it. Andy recognized the green bombazine dress of Miss Lavinia Talcott. She carried a baggy umbrella in her hand. Andy from experience knew that its possession by the old maid was generally a sign that she was on the war-path.

?She?s hunting for me,? thought Andy. ?I suppose I?ve got to face the music some time, but I?ll not do it just now, I?ve got some business to attend to, first.?

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Andy hurried down the Centreville turnpike. He walked along briskly, more to get out of possible range of Miss Lavinia than with any other distinct motive in mind. Still, Andy had ?business? in view. That burned down haystack haunted him. Somehow he must square himself with Mr. Dale, he said. He fancied he had found a way.

Andy did not pause until he was fully a mile down the highway. He felt safe from interruption now, and sat down on an old log and mused in a dreamy, drifting sort of a way.

The sound of approaching wagon wheels disturbed him in the midst of a depressing reverie.

?It?s Mr. Dale,? said Andy, getting up from the log and viewing the approaching team. ? I wanted to see you, Mr. Dale,? he spoke aloud as the carry-all came abreast of him.

?Oh, hello, you, Wildwood,? spoke the farmer with a grin. ?Playing hookey, eh??

?No, sir,? answered Andy frankly. ?I was expelled from school this morning.?

?Do tell me now!? said Dale. ?Want a lift??

?No, sir,? answered Andy, ?I just wanted to take up a minute of your time. I?m sorry, Mr. Dale, I don?t suppose you think any too much of me already, and when I tell you??

?Hey? Ha! ha!? chuckled Dale. ?Think I?m sore on you because of that calf business? Not at all, not at all. Why, I got double price for the critter, see??

?There?s something else,? announced Andy seriously. ?The truth is, Mr. Dale, I burned down one of your haystacks about an hour ago.?

?What! You burned one of my haystacks? Which one?which one?? demanded Dale, growing pale with excitement.

?The little one to the north-east of the field,? explained Andy. ?I should think it held between two and three tons.?

Farmer Dale dropped the lines and jumped down into the road from the wagon, whip in hand. All his jubilant slyness deserted him. He began to get frightfully worked up over Andy?s news.

?Wait a minute,? pleaded Andy. ?Don?t get excited till I explain. I managed to save the other stacks. It was all an accident, but I want to pay the damage. Yes, I?ll pay you, Mr. Dale.?

?You?ll have to, you bet on that!? snorted the farmer wrathfully. ?I?ll go to your aunt right off with the bill.?

?Don?t do it, Mr. Dale,? advised Andy. ?She preaches lots about honesty and responsibility and all that, but she?s mighty close when it comes to the dollars. She wouldn?t pay you a cent, no, sir, but I will. That hay is worth about twenty dollars, I reckon, Mr. Dale??

?Well, yes, it is,? nodded the farmer. ?Good timothy is scarce, and that was a prime lot.?

?I?ve got no money, of course,? went on Andy, ?but I thought this: couldn?t you give me some work to do and let me pay it out in that way? I?ll do my level best to??

?Oh! that?s your precious proposition, is it?? snarled Mr. Dale, switching the whip about furiously. ?No, I couldn?t. The hand I?ve got now is idle half the time. See here, Wildwood, arson is a pretty serious crime. You?d better square this thing some way. In fact you?ve got to do it, or there?s going to be trouble.?

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?I know what you mean,? said Andy??you?ll have me arrested. You mustn?t do that, Mr. Dale?I feel bad enough, I?m in a hard enough corner already. I want to do what?s right, and I intend to. I owe you twenty dollars. Will you give me time to pay it in? Will you take my note?with interest, of course?for the amount??

?Will I?take your note?interest? ha! ha! oh, dear me! dear me!? fairly exploded Dale in a burst of uproarious laughter.

?Secured,? added Andy in a business-like tone.

?Secured by what?? demanded Dale eagerly.

?I can?t tell you now. I will to-night, or to-morrow morning.?

?You don?t mean old ball bats, or your mud scow in the creek, or that kind of trash?? inquired Dale suspiciously.

?No, sir, I mean tangible security,? declared Andy.

?You don?t seem to carry much of it around with you,? suggested Dale bluntly, casting a sarcastic eye over Andy?s well-worn clothes.

?Perhaps not,? admitted Andy, coloring up. ?I can give you security, though. What I want to know is this: If I can place good security in the hands of a trusty person, will you give me?say?three months to pay you off in? If I don?t, the person will sell the security and pay you in full.?

?Why don?t you put the security in my hands?? asked the farmer shrewdly.

?Because I have done some damage up at the schoolhouse. I want to pay for that, too. You will be satisfied with the security and the person holding it, Mr. Dale. I will let you know all about it before ten o?clock to-morrow morning.?

Farmer Dale surveyed Andy with a long, curious stare, whistling softly to himself. His hot temper was subdued, now that he saw a prospect of payment for the burned hay.

?You talk straight off the reel, Wildwood,? he said. ?I believe you?re honest. Go on with your little arrangement, and let?s see how it pans out. I shan?t make any move until after ten o?clock to-morrow morning.?

?Thank you, Mr. Dale,? said Andy. ?I won?t disappoint you.?

Andy started to move away from the spot.

?Hold on,? interrupted Dale. ?Tell me how it happened.?

Andy gave an unbiased account of the morning?s occurrences.

?Ha! hum!? commented the farmer. ?No end of scrapes because you?re a lively lad and can?t help it. See here, Wildwood, do you know what I would do if I were in your place??

?No, what?s that, Mr. Dale?? asked Andy.

?I?d join the show?yes, I would!? declared the farmer energetically. ?I tell you I believe circus is born in you, and you can?t help it. You don?t have much of a life at home. You?re not built for humdrum village life. Get out; grow into something you fancy. No need being a scamp because you?re a rover. My brother was built your sort. They pinned him down trying to make a doctor of him, and he ran away. He turned up with a little fortune ten years later, a big-hearted, happy fellow. No one particularly knew it, but he?d been with a traveling minstrel show for those ten years. Now he?s settled down, and I?d like to see a finer man than Zeb Dale.?

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?Thank you,? said Andy, ?I?ll think of what you say.?

Farmer Dale jogged on his way. Andy faced towards Centreville. It seemed as if something was pulling him along in that direction.

CHAPTER V

THE CIRCUS

At the first cross-roads a field wagon containing a farmer, his wife and half-a-dozen children whirled into Andy Wildwood?s view. A merry juvenile chorus told Andy that they were bound for the circus.

?Trace loose, mister,? he called out as he noticed the trailing strap.

?Whoa,? ordered the driver, halting with a jolt, and Andy adjusted the faulty harness and smiled back cheerily at an eager little fellow in the wagon who inquired if he was going to the show, too.

?Jump in, youngster, if ours is your way,? invited the farmer.

Andy promptly availed himself of the offer. He sat with his feet dangling over the tailboard. The farther he got from Fairview the less he thought of the manifold troubles and complications he was leaving behind him there.

Andy did not intend to run away from home. He had business in view which demanded his presence in Fairview the next day. He was, however, resolved to go to Centreville. He would at least see the outside of the circus, and could put on the time until evening.

It was only six miles from Fairview to Centreville, and they soon came in sight of the county seat.

Andy caught more and more of the circus fever as they progressed. At every branch road a new string of vehicles joined the procession. They passed gay parties of ruralites on foot. Andy leaped down from the wagon with a ?Thank you? to his host, at the first sight of the mammoth white tents over on the village common.

This was the second day of the circus at Centreville. It was scheduled to remain one more day. Its coming was a great event for the town, and the place was crowded with pleasure-seekers.

Andy reached the principal street just as the grand pageant went by. It was a spectacle that dazzled him. The music, the glitter, the pomp, the fair array of wild animals made him forget everything except that he was a boy enjoying a rare moment of existence.

It was the inner life of the circus people, however, that attracted Andy. It was his great ambition to be one of them. He was not content to remain a spectator of the outside veneer of show life. He wanted to know something of its practical side.

Andy did not dally around the ticket seller?s booth, the side shows or the crowded main entrance of the show.

Once, when a small circus had visited Fairview, he had gotten a free pass by carrying buckets of water to the cook?s tent.

He had now a vague hope that some such fortunate chance might turn up on this new occasion.

Andy soon discovered, however, that the present layout was on a far different scale to the second-class show he had seen at Fairview.

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It was a city in itself. There were well-defined bounds as to the circus proper. Ropes strung along iron stakes driven into the ground kept curious visitors at a distance.

The performers? tent, the horse tents, the cook?s quarters and the sleeping space of the working hands were all guarded, and intruders warned to keep their distance.

Everything was neat and clean, and a well-ordered system prevailed everywhere.

The savory flavor of roasting meat made Andy desperately hungry. He saw a fat, aproned cook hastily gathering up some chips near a chopping block. Andy offered to split him some fresh wood, but received only an ungracious:

?Get out! No trespassers allowed here.?

Andy wandered about for a long time. He greatly envied a lad about his own age who, adorned with a gilt-braided jacket, was walking a beautiful Arabian steed up and down.

While he was staring at the circus boy, two popcorn boys connected with the show ran into him purposely and tripped him up. They went off with a laugh at his mishap. Andy concluded he was getting in the way as a gruff, grizzled old fellow with a bludgeon ran forward and yelled to him to make himself scarce.

?I wish I could get into the show,? murmured Andy ?There seems no way to work it, though,? he added disconsolately. ?I wonder if they?d let me stay here? When that canvas flaps I can see right into the main tent.?

Andy was right near the canvassed passageway leading from the performers? tent to the main one.

If no one disturbed him he could have occasional glimpses of what was going on inside, and that was better than nothing.

Fate, however, was against him. He heard quick breathing, and turning saw the big watchman rapidly making for him, club uplifted.

?Trying to get in under the canvas, eh?? roared the man.

?Not I?I wouldn?t steal anything, not even a sneak into the show,? declared Andy.

He retreated promptly, but in doing so tripped over a guy rope and went flat.

Andy got up, his mouth full of fine shavings, but grasping something his hand had come in contact with and had clutched in his fall.

He ran out of range of the watchman, who brandished his stick at the lad threateningly. At a safe distance Andy inspected his find.

?Only a handkerchief,? he said, ?and a rather mussy one at that. But there?s something knotted in it. I wonder what it is??

It was a large dark-colored silk handkerchief. It had an odor of resin, and two of its corners were knotted.

Untying one knot, Andy disclosed a mysterious device resembling two hard rubber shoe horns, joined in the centre by a concave piece of metal.

He could not possibly imagine its use or value. Then Andy laughed outright. The other knot undone revealed a small rabbit?s foot.

?Not much of a find,? he ruminated. ?Queer kind of plunder, though. Wonder who owns it, and what that fandangle thing is??

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Andy pocketed the find and was about to move away from the spot, when the flap of the performers? tent moved apart.

A man came out, all arrayed in tights and spangles for the circus ring. He wore a loose robe over his show costume and big slippers on his feet. His hair was nicely combed and his face powdered up for the performance.

He looked very anxious and excited. Andy at once saw that he was looking for something in great haste and suspense.

The man walked all around outside of the performers? tent, eagerly scanning the ground. Then he enlarged the scope of his survey and search.

?Hey, Marco!? sang out another man, sticking his head past the flap of the tent. ?Time to get in line.?

?Wait a minute,? retorted the other. ?I?ve lost something, and I won?t go on till I find it.?

The speaker looked positively distressed as he continued a disappointing search. A sudden idea struck Andy, and he drew the handkerchief and its belongings from his pocket.

Just then the circus performer nearly ran against him. He looked up and made a forward jump. He seized the handkerchief and the two odd objects it contained with a fervent cry that astonished the bewildered Andy.

?Give them to me,? he exclaimed eagerly. ?They?re mine. Where did you find them? Boy, you?ve saved my life!?

CHAPTER VI

CIRCUS TALK

Andy knew that the circus actor?s vehement statement was an exaggeration, still there was no doubting the fact that he was intensely pleased and grateful.

?I found those things in the handkerchief over near the dressing tent,? explained Andy.

?I must have dropped them there, or they got kicked out under the flap in hustling the baggage around,? cried the man. ?Here, kid.?

The speaker made a motion towards his side, as if reaching for a vest pocket.

?I forgot,? he laughed. ?I have my ring togs on. Come along, I?ll borrow some coin for you.?

?Oh, no,? demurred Andy, ?I don?t want any pay.?

?Don?t?? propounded the man in astonishment. ?I want to do something for you. I?m the Man with the Iron Jaw, and that hard rubber device is what I hold in my mouth when I go up the rope, see??

?And that rabbit?s foot?? insinuated Andy, guessing.

?Hoodoo. Don?t grin, kid. If you were in the profession you?d understand that a fellow values a charm that has carried him safe over Fridays, thirteenths, rotten trapezes and cyclones. We?re a superstitious bunch, you know, and I?m no wiser than the rest. Why see here, of course you want to see the show, don?t you??

?I just do,? admitted Andy with alacrity??if it can be arranged.?

?Come with me.?

?Yes, sir.?

Andy readily followed after his gymnastic acquaintance. A word at the door flap of the performers? tent admitted them without challenge.

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Andy took a keen, interested look around. Near two stands holding silver starred boxes was a performer in costume, evidently the conjurer of the show. Beyond him, seated daintily on a large white horse, was a pretty woman of about thirty, waiting her call to the ring.

A great-muscled fellow sat on a stool surrounded by enormous balls and dumb bells?-the ?Strong Man? of the circus.

A trick elephant was being fed by its keeper at once side of the tent. Nearby was a young man dressed as a jockey, holding the chains leading to the collars of a dozen performing dogs.

Andy had a good memory. He knew from her resemblance to the posters he had seen, that the lady on the white horse was Miss Stella Starr, ?the dashing equestrienne.?

She seemed to be on good terms with everybody, particularly with Andy?s new acquaintance.

?Who is your friend, Marco?? she asked, as the man passed by her.

He explained, with a great many excited gestures. Then he beckoned to Andy as the equestrienne smiled pleasantly at him.

?You bunk right there, kid,? said Marco, stowing Andy behind a pile of seat planks that lined the side of the canvassed passageway joining the performers? tent with the main one.

Andy promptly climbed up on top of the heap of boards. The curtain that separated the two circus compartments was festooned at one side. Just beyond was the orchestra. Andy could look over their heads and past them, with a perfect view of the performing ring.

He gave himself up so completely to the enjoyment of the grand privilege accorded him, that for one engrossing, bewildering hour he seemed in a dreamland of rare delight.

Everything went smoothly and neatly. The various acts were new, and cleverly performed.

When it came to Stella Starr?s turn, Andy witnessed a second exhibition of the superstitious folly of these strange circus folk.

The equestrienne sharply halted the man who led her horse forward for a dash into the ring.

?Back him?instantly,? she called out. ?Right foot first over the dead line. I wouldn?t start on a left foot *entree* for the whole day?s proceeds.?

The imperious mandate was obeyed, and Andy raptly witnessed some bareback riding that made his heart quicken and his eyes flash with pleasure and admiration.

Miss Stella Starr had two acts. When she retired from the ring, kissing her little hands prettily to the applauding audience, the manager turned her horse again facing the curtain in the canvassed passageway.

The equestrienne sank gracefully to a rest on the flank of the big white horse, patting him affectionately, while some hands began rolling great tubs into the ring.

These were to form a pyramid, up one side of which and down the other the white horse was to pass.

Suddenly, as Andy?s interest was divided between the ring and the equestrienne, a sharp crack rang out. It was accompanied by a swishing, ominous, tearing sound.

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An uneasy murmur swayed the audience. The manager ran out into the ring, swiftly glanced at the centre pole, and drawing a whistle from his pocket gave three piercing blasts.

?It?s a wind storm,? Andy heard some one remark.

A second gust swayed the centre pole. The great spreads of canvas bulged and flapped. The audience arose in their seats.

Andy saw the manager seize a great megaphone near the band stand. He shouted:

?Preserve order. There is no danger. Keep your seats. It is only a passing gust of wind. Play! play!? he shouted frantically to the band.

?Take care!? shouted the man, Marco, with a look through the outside flap, ?she?s coming again!?

A sudden tumult fell on the air. Shrieks, yells, a great babel arose from the audience. The centre pole creaked and swayed dangerously. Then, with a sharp rip the canvas roof over Andy?s head was wrenched from place and went sailing up into the air.

A heavy wooden cross-piece running between two supports had been torn loose at one end. The rope securing it whipped about and struck Andy in the face.

He dodged, and was about to leap to the ground, when a sharp cry from Stella Starr announced a new peril.

The free end of the heavy cross piece was descending with the force of a driven sledge hammer. She was directly within range. Andy saw her danger, jumped erect, grabbed at the rope whipping about, and pulled it towards himself.

As the equestrienne shrank to the neck of the trembling horse upon which she sat, the timber just grazed her spangled hair. It struck the ground and tore loose above. Its other end hit the pile of seat planks with a crash.

Andy felt them topple. He tried to steady himself, to jump aside. He was caught in the tumble and went headlong to the sawdust, the planks falling on top of him.

CHAPTER VII

A WARM RECEPTION

Andy Wildwood was knocked senseless. When he came back to consciousness he found himself lying on a mattress in a little space surrounded by canvas. It was one of the circus dressing rooms.

He sniffed camphor, and one side of his head felt stiff and sore. Putting up his hand Andy discovered strips of sticking plaster there.

?Was I hurt?? he asked, sitting up.

?Circus doctor says not badly,? promptly answered Marco, who stood by the mattress. ?How is it, kid? No bones broken??

?Oh, no,? answered Andy readily, getting to his feet. ?Say, what happened? The wind storm??

?Gone over. It?s sunshine outside now. A few hanks of thread will fix the rips. The show went on all right after the squall. But say, you?re a daisy. That timber?oh, here she is to talk for herself.?

Miss Stella Starr put in an appearance just here. She was neatly dressed in street costume. Her eyes were very bright, and there was a grateful smile on her womanly face as she grasped both of Andy?s hands.

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?You are a good boy,? she said with enthusiasm. ?Bring me a stool, Marco, I want to talk with him.?

Andy flushed with embarrassment, as the little lady went on to insist that but for his quick foresight and energy she might have missed her salary, lying in a hospital for many a long day. She was very anxious as to Andy?s injuries, and looked greatly relieved to find them trifling.

?Just a lump under the ear and a cut on one cheek,? reported Andy indifferently. ?They?re worth having to see you ride, Miss.?

?There, Marco!? cried the equestrienne brightly, ?that is the handsomest compliment I ever received.?

?The kid?s a mascot,? pronounced Marco in his heavy, earnest way. ?He found my lost traps, and he maybe saved your life. What can we do for you, now??

Andy shook his head vaguely. His bright face clouded. The human sympathy of his new friends had warmed his heart. It chilled, as he thought of Fairview and what awaited him there, especially Aunt Lavinia.

The quick witted equestrienne read his face like a book.

?See here, boy,? she said, laying her gloved hand winningly on Andy?s sleeve, ?what is your name?? and as Andy told her she added; ?And what is your trouble??

?Do I look as if I had trouble?? inquired Andy with a forced smile.

?Don?t try to fool Mrs. Jones, Wildwood,? advised Marco. ?She?s our keenest. Has a boy at school nearly as old as you, haven?t you, Mary??

?Jones? Mary?? spoke Andy in some wonder. ?I thought the lady?s name was Stella Starr.?

?On the posters and in the ring, yes,? laughed the equestrienne. ?Come, Andy, make a clean breast of it. Have you gone circus-crazy, and run away from home??

?No ma?am, but I?d like to.?

?Oh, dear! I guess you boys are all alike,? commented the equestrienne. ?Why do you wish to leave home??

?It?s a long story,? said Andy, with a sigh.

?Tell it, Wildwood,? spoke Marco. ?We will be glad to listen.?

?Yes, indeed,? assented Stella Starr. ?I am interested in you, Andy. You have been of great service to us. Let us help you, if we can.?

Andy told his story. Stella Starr laughed merrily at his mild escapades. Marco?s big eyes opened widely as Andy made plain the fact that he was a very fair amateur acrobat.

?Why, the kid is up to the trained average, if he can do all those things,? he declared.

Stella Starr studied Andy silently for a few minutes. Then she said:

?Andy, I believe you are a good, truthful boy. I am sorry for you. You deserve a better home. I don?t believe you will ever have it with your aunt.?

?Half-aunt,? muttered Marco.

?I do not consider you owe her any particular duty. You are not happy with her??

?No, ma?am, never,? said Andy.

?And I believe you would be happy with us.?

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?Yes, I would,? said Andy, with emotion. ?I love the life here.?

?Very well, go back to Fairview just as you have planned. Arrange your affairs just as a clear conscience dictates to you. If fate leads you back here, come to me directly. I will speak to the manager and ask him to take you on with the show.?

Tears of longing and gratefulness came to Andy?s eyes. He could not stop them.

?You are good, kind people,? he said in a muffled tone. ?If I never see you again I shall never forget you.?

Stella Starr kissed Andy on the cheek in a motherly way. Marco followed the boy outside. He thumped him on the back with the farewell words, uttered with emphasis:

?Cut for it, kid. Take my advice?it?s good. You?ve got the making of a first-class ringer in you. Don?t waste your ability in that humdrum town of yours.?

Andy started for Fairview in a daze. So much had happened since morning that he could recall it all only in a series of long mental pictures. The kindness and suggestions of his new-found friends kept him thinking deeply.

It was nearly dusk when Andy entered Fairview. He steered clear of old comrades and familiar haunts. When he reached home it was by way of the rear fence.

A light shone in the little kitchen. His aunt was bustling about in a brisk, jumpy way that told Andy she was full of excitement and bottled-up wrath.

?Here goes, anyway,? he said finally, vaulting the fence and reaching the woodshed.

Andy took up a good armful of wood, marched right up to the back steps and through the open doorway. He placed his load behind the kitchen stove.

?You graceless wretch!? were Miss Lavinia?s first words.

She had a cooking fork in her hand and with it she jabbed the air viciously.

?Go up stairs instantly,? she commanded next.

?I?m not sleepy, and I?m hungry,? said Andy respectfully enough, but firmly.

He walked over to the set table and picked up two biscuits from a plate.

?Put those down, you put those down!? screamed Miss Lavinia. ?Will you mind me??

Andy pocketed the biscuits. He was taking wise precautions in view of past experiences with his termagant relative.

The boy stood his ground, and his aunt stamped her foot. Then she reached behind the stove and took up a stick used as a carpet beater. Armed with this she advanced threateningly upon Andy.

?Don?t strike me, Aunt Lavinia,? said Andy quickly. ?I am getting too big for that. I won?t stand it!?

?You scamp! you disgrace!? shouted his irate relative, still advancing upon him.

She beat at Andy, who snatched the stick from her hand, broke it in two and threw it out through the open doorway.

?I will go to my room if you insist upon it,? said Andy now. ?I don?t see the need of treating me like a dog, though.?

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?Don?t you?? screamed Miss Lavinia. ?Oh, you precious rascal! Here I?ve worked my fingers off to keep you respectable, and you go and disgrace me shamefully. Go to your room, Andy Wildwood. We?ll attend to this matter of yours in the morning.?

?What matter?? demanded Andy.

?Never mind, now. Do as I say. There?s a rod in pickle for you, young man, that may bring you to your senses this time.?

Andy preferred loneliness up stairs to nagging down stairs. He left the kitchen and reached his own room. He lit a candle and sat down on the bed.

There was a sharp click at the door almost immediately. His aunt had stolen silently up the stairs and had bolted him in.

?As if that would keep me if I wanted to get out very bad!? thought Andy, with a glance at the frail door. ?Oh, but I?m tired of all this! I?ve made up my mind. I shall leave Fairview.?

Andy went to a shelf, felt in an old vase, and took out a key.

He fitted it to the lower drawer of the bureau in the room. It was full of old clothes and papers that had belonged to his father.

Finally Andy unearthed a little wooden box, and lifted it to the light. It held a lot of trinkets, and from among them Andy selected a large silver watch and chain. He also took out a small box. It was made of some very dark smooth wood, and its corners and center were decorated with carved pieces of gold and mother of pearl.

?The watch and chain are solid silver,? murmured Andy. ?The box was given to father by his father. It is made of some rare wood that grows in the South Sea islands. The gold on it is quite thick. I am sure the bare metal on those things is worth more than thirty dollars.?

Andy carefully stowed the watch and little box in an inner pocket. Then he lay down on the bed to think, but without removing any of his clothing.

He silently munched the biscuits. His face cleared as reflection led to determination. Andy planned to leave the house as soon as it was closed up for the night and Aunt Lavinia was asleep.

?I can?t stand it,? he decided. ?She says I?m a burden to her. I?ve got a show to enjoy myself and maybe make some money. Yes, it?s Centreville and the circus by morning.?

Andy was more tired out than he had fancied. He fell asleep. As he woke up, he discovered that heavy footsteps tramping up the stairs had aroused him.

He had caught the echo of lighter feet. There was rustling in the narrow entry outside.

Andy sprang up and listened intently.

?Aunt Lavinia and some one with her,? he reflected. ?I wonder who it can be??

Just then a gruff voice spoke out:

?Is the boy in that room, Miss Lavinia??

?Yes,? said Andy?s aunt.

?Then have him out, and let?s have this unpleasant duty over and done with.?

CHAPTER VIII

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?*Coasting*?

The key turned in the lock. Andy?s candle had remained lighted. As the door was pushed open Andy saw a big portly man standing behind his aunt.

?Put on your clothes, Andy Wildwood,? began Miss Lavinia.

?I?ve got them on,? answered Andy. ?What do you want??

?Ask me that,? broke in the man, stepping into view. ?Sorry, Andy, but it?s me that wants you. You know who I am.?

?Yes,? nodded Andy, staring hard.

He recognized the speaker as Dan Wagner, the village constable. Instantly the truth flashed over Andy. He turned to his aunt with a pale, stern face.

?Are you going to let this man take me to jail?? he demanded.

?Yes, I am,? snapped Miss Lavinia. ?You?ve gone just a little too far this time, Andy Wildwood.?

?What have I done that?s so bad?? inquired Andy indignantly. ?What is the charge against me??

?That?s so, Miss Lavinia,? observed the constable with a laugh. ?There?s got to be a specific charge, as I told you.?

?Charge!? sniffed Miss Lavinia scornfully. ?I?ll make a dozen of them. He?s a bad, disobedient boy??

?When did I ever disobey you?? interrupted Andy, calmly keeping his temper.

?Oh, you! He?s got himself expelled from school.?

?That?s no crime, ?cordin? to the statoots,? declared the constable.

?I don?t care!? cried the angry spinster. ?My duty is to keep this boy from going to ruin. You do yours. I explained it all to the judge. He said that if I, as his guardian, swore Andy was an incorrigible, unmanageable boy, he would send him to the parental school at Byron till he was reformed.?

Andy grew white to the lips. He fixed such a glance on his aunt that she quailed.

?Shame on you!? he burst forth. ?You my guardian! What did you ever guard for me, except too little clothes and victuals? I?m never out of the house after dark. I never

refuse to do your hardest work. I even scrub for you. Well, I won?t any longer. I have made up my mind to go away.?

?You hear that? you hear that?? cried Miss Lavinia. ?He?s going to run away from home!?

?Home!? retorted Andy scornfully. ?A fine home this has been for me?snapped at, found fault with, treated like a charity pauper. Do your duty, Mr. Wagner. But I warn you that no law can send me to the reform school. This woman is not my legal guardian. She is not rightfully even a relative. I have friends in Fairview, I tell you, and they won?t see me wronged. I wonder what my poor dead father would say to you for all this??

Miss Lavinia gave a shriek. She fell into a chair and kicked her heels on the floor and went into hysterics.

The constable looked in a friendly way at Andy. He liked the lad?s pluck and independence. He recalled, too, how Andy had once led him to a quiet haystack, where he had slept himself sober instead of risking his position and making a public show of himself on the streets of Fairview.

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?See here, Miss Lavinia,? he spoke, ?I don?t fancy treating Andy like a criminal. If I take him with me now I?ll have to lock him up with two chicken thieves and a tramp. They?re no good company for a homebred boy.?

?He deserves a lesson,? declared Miss Lavinia. ?He shall have it, too!?

?Let him stay here till morning, then I?ll come after him.?

?He won?t be here. Didn?t you hear him say he was going to run away from home??

?Haven?t you got some safe place I can lock him up in?? suggested Wagner. ?I?ve got to make you safe and sound, you know,? observed the officer quite apologetically to Andy.

?Yes, there is,? reported Miss Lavinia after brief thought. ?You wait a minute.?

She went away and returned with a bunch of keys. The constable beckoned to Andy to follow her, and he closed in behind.

A steep, narrow staircase led to an attic room at the extreme rear of the house. This, as Andy knew, was his aunt?s strong room.

It had a heavy door secured by a padlock, and only one window. As Miss Lavinia unlocked the door and the candle illuminated the interior of the apartment, the constable observed grimly:

?I reckon this will keep him safe and sound.?

Andy said nothing. He had made up his mind what he would do, and considered further talk useless.

The apartment was littered up with chests, barrels and old furniture. In one corner was a pile of carpets. Andy walked silently over to these, threw himself down, and found himself in darkness as the door was again stoutly padlocked on the outside.

?If anybody cared for me here it might be different,? he observed. ?As they don?t, I must make friends for myself.?

In about half an hour Andy went to the window, It was a small one-pane sash. Looking out, he could trace the reflection from a light in his aunt?s room on the shrubbery.

Finally this light was extinguished. Andy waited a full hour. He heard the town bell strike twelve.

The lad took out his pocket knife, opened its big blade, and in a few minutes had pried off the strip lining the sash. He removed the pane and set it noiselessly on the floor.

As he stuck his head out through the aperture Andy looked calculating and serious.

It was fully thirty feet to the ground, and no friendly projection offered help in a descent.

It was furthermore a question if he could even squeeze through the window space.

Andy had nothing to make a rope of. The old pieces of carpet could not be utilized in any way. If he could force his body through the window head first, it was a dive to go feet first on a dangerous drop.

Andy investigated the aperture, experimented, took in the situation in all its various phases. Finally he decided what he would do.

He had unearthed a long ironing board from a corner of the room. He pulled a heavy dresser up to the window, and opened one of its drawers a few inches.

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By slanting the ironing board, he managed to get its broad end out through the window. Then he dropped it flat, with its narrow end held firmly under the projecting drawer.

Andy got flat on the board, squirmed along it, and just managed to squeeze through the window space.

At the end of five minutes he found himself extended outside on the board. A touch might throw it out of position and drop him like a shot. Very carefully he arose to his feet and backed against the clapboards of the house.

Andy felt sideways and up over his head. He soon located what he knew to be there?-two lightning rod staples. The rod itself had rusted away. The staples had been used to hold up a vine. This drew bugs, Miss Lavinia declared, and had been torn down.

Andy hooked his finger around one of the staples. He got one foot on the window sill clear of the board. The other foot he lifted in the air.

Stooping and getting a hold on the side of the ironing board, Andy gently slid it out from its holding place and upright.

He brought it and himself erect. Moving up his hand, he transferred its grasp to the second iron staple higher up the side of the house.

Now Andy rested the board on his toes. He clasped it like a shield against his body, its broad end nearest his face.

Beyond its edge he took a keen glance. The moon shone brightly. The nearest object it showed was a high, broad-branched thorn apple tree.

It stood about twelve feet from the house, and its top was perhaps as far below his foothold.

?It?s my only show,? said Andy. ?I?ve got to coast it, or get all torn up.?

He let go his hold of the staple. Instantly he had a hand firmly grasping either side of the ironing board Andy dropped to a past-centre slant.

Giving his feet a prodigious push against the window sill, he shot forward and downward.

For an instant Andy sailed through the air. He feared he might dive short of the tree. He hoped he would land flat.

The latter by luck or his own precision he did. The board struck the tree top.

There was a sliding swish, a vast cracking of branches.

His weight dropped one end of the ironing board. It landed against a big branch, and Andy found himself safely anchored in the tree top.

CHAPTER IX

GOOD-BYE TO FAIRVIEW

Looking back at the attic window, Andy Wildwood wondered how he had ever made the successful descent.

Any boy lacking his sense of athletic precision would have scored a dangerous fall. Andy now slowly worked his way down thrown the branches of the tree. He got a few sharp scratches, but was vastly pleased with himself when he landed safely on the ground.

?Good-bye to Fairview!? he spoke with a stimulating sense of freedom, waving his hand across the scene in general. ?I may not come back rich or famous, but I shall have seen the world.?

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Andy did not turn in the direction of Centreville. He felt of the pocket containing his father?s watch and the little box, and then headed straight for Millville.

That was where the big scholar, Graham, lived. It was five miles away. Graham boarded with the farmer who had bought Mr. Dale?s cow and calf.

Andy had kept Graham in mind ever since he had agreed to pay for burning up the hay stack. It was about two o?clock when he reached his destination.

The night he and his school companions had restored the little calf to its frantic mother, Andy had seen Graham in the window of his room in the old farmhouse.

Andy now looked up at the window of this room. It was open. A trellis ran up its side. The house was dark and silent. He scaled the trellis and rested a hand on the window sill.

?Mr. Graham,? he called out softly. Then he repeated the call several times, gradually raising his voice.

There was a rustle of bed clothes, a droning mumble. Andy called again.

?What is it? who is there?? questioned Graham?s tones.

?It?s me,? said Andy. ?Don?t be disturbed. Just listen for a minute, will you??

?Eh! Is that Andy Wildwood?? exclaimed Graham.

?Yes,? answered Andy.

A white-robbed figure came to the window and sat down in a chair there. Graham rubbed his eyes and stared wonderingly at the strange midnight visitor clinging to the window sill.

?Why, what?s the trouble, Andy?? he questioned in a tone of surprise.

?It?s trouble, yes, you can make sure of that,? responded Andy with a little nervous catch in his voice. ?I?m having nothing but trouble, lately. There?s so much of it around here that I?ve concluded to get out of it.?

?How get out of it?? demanded Graham.

?I?ve left home?for good. I want to leave a clear record behind me, so I?ve come to you. You don?t mind my disturbing you this way, I hope??

?No?no, indeed,? answered Graham promptly. ?Run away, eh??

?Yes, I?ve got to. Aunt Lavinia has had me arrested; she wants to send me to reform school.?

?Why,? exclaimed Graham indignantly, ?that?s a burning shame!?

?I thought so. The constable was around last evening. He locked me in the attic for safe keeping, but I got free, and here I am, on my way to?to?on my way to find work.?

?Do you mean circus work?? guessed Graham quickly.

?Why, yes, I do. I don?t mind telling you, for you have always been a friend to us smaller boys.?

?Always will be, Andy.?

?I believe that. We all like you. It?s this way: I think I have a chance to join a show, and I want to, bad. I shall be paid something. When I am, I want to send it to you.?

?To me? What for, Andy??

?Well, I smashed the desk and pulled down the chimney at the schoolhouse, you know.?

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?Yes.?

?I calculate that damage amounts to about ten dollars. I burned down a haystack belonging to farmer Dale yesterday. Twenty dollars, he says. I?ve agreed to pay him, and I want you to see the school trustees to-day and explain to them that I?ll pay for the desk and the chimney. I told Mr. Dale I would give him my note. I can?t just now, but I will mail one, signed, to you.?

?Will Dale accept it?? asked Graham.

?Yes, if I secure it.?

?Secure it, how??

?That?s why I came to see you,? explained Andy. ?I?ve got in my pocket a silver watch and chain and a box ornamented with gold. They were left to me by my father. I want you to take the articles. Explain to Mr. Dale and the school trustees about them?that you are to hold them for the benefit of my creditors, see??

?That?s quite business-like, Andy.?

?I will certainly send you some money. As soon as I do, divide it up with the school and Mr. Dale. I will keep you posted as to my whereabouts, but keep it a secret. Will you do all this for me??

?Gladly, Andy.?

?Here are the things,? continued Andy, handing over the contents of his pocket. ?And thank you.?

?Don?t mention it. You?re all right, Andy,? declared Graham in a warm, friendly way. ?I shan?t encourage you to run away from home, but I won?t try to stop you. Have you got any money??

?Why, no,? answered Andy.

?You wait a minute, then.?

Graham took the watch and the box and retired from the window. As he returned he pressed a folded piece of paper between Andy?s fingers.

?Take that,? he said.

?What is it?? asked Andy.

?It?s a five-dollar bill.?

?Oh, Mr. Graham??

?No nonsense, Andy. I know from practical experience what it is to start out in the world penniless. I have the money saved up for two years? board and schooling. I won?t miss that little amount until way along next fall. You will have paid it back long before that, I?ll warrant.?

?You bet I will?and you?re awful good to me!? declared Andy heartily.

?Just one more word, Andy,? resumed Graham earnestly. ?If you are determined to be a circus tumbler, be the best or nothing. If you like enjoyment, made it good, clean fun. I?m not afraid of you. I?m only giving the advice of a fellow older than you, who has learned that it pays to be right and do right in the long run.?

When Andy once more stood in the road with his royal friend?s ?Good luck, old fellow!? still echoing in his ears, his heart was very full.

?It?s mighty good of him,? murmured Andy, safely stowing away the five-dollar bill. ?I?ll deserve his good opinion, see if I don?t!?

Andy walked on a mile or two further. Climbing a fence he made a snug bed alongside a convenient haystack.

The sun was shining brightly when the lad awoke, refreshed and full of spirit and hope. He somehow felt as though he was beginning the most eventful day of his life.

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Andy turned his face in the direction of Centreville. He had no idea of going direct there, however, that day.

He did not know how many people from Fairview might have seen him there the day previous. He did know that if Aunt Lavinia was determined to pursue him, the first thing she would think of was his circus predilections.

Andy planned cautiously and with wisdom. From watching the circus posters he knew it?s route. Centreville was in another county from Fairview. But Clifton, the next point of exhibition, was in another state.

?That suits me,? he murmured.

Andy had an idea that once safely over the state line the law could not reach him so readily as on home territory.

He knew the neighboring towns pretty fairly, and he fixed on Clifton as his destination. Clifton was about eight miles from Centreville.

Andy decided he would go there and put in the time until next morning.

At midnight the show would pull up stakes at Centreville. He would be on hand to welcome its arrival at Clifton.

?Then I will see Miss Starr and Mr. Marco,? he thought. ?If the circus manager will only take me on, I?ll fall into great luck.?

Andy got to Clifton about noon. He changed the five-dollar bill, buying a cheap but big dinner, for he was nearly famished.

He learned where the circus was to exhibit, and went to the spot. Some workers were already there, digging trenches, distributing sawdust and the like.

Andy volunteered to help them. It would be good practice in the way of experience, he told himself. Until four o?clock in the afternoon he was quite busy about the place.

He had heard so much circus talk during his free labors that his mind was more full of the show than ever.

Andy had heard one of the workers describe to a new hand all the excitement, bustle and novelty attending a jump from one town to another.

He strolled about the place but grew restive. Just before dusk he bought some crackers and cheese, filled his pockets with the eatables, and started down the road leading towards Centreville.

Andy met an advance guard of the circus about two miles out of Clifton. Some wagons carried the cooking camp outfit. A little farther on he was met by some menagerie wagons.

?They?ll come in sections,? ruminated Andy.

?The big tent people won?t make a start till after the evening performance. I won?t risk going any farther. There?s an open barn near the road. I?ll take a little snooze, and wake up in time to join the procession of big loads.?

Andy secured his little cash reserve in a marble bag. He ate some lunch and made for the open structure he had observed.

It was an old doorless barn near a hay press. A great many bales were stack up at one side. Climbing among these Andy found a cozy boxed in space, carried some loose hay to it, and composed himself for sleep.

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?Twenty cents a day is pretty economical living,? he reflected, as he studied the stars visible through a chink in the roof. ?I wonder what the circus people pay a beginner??

Wondering about this, and a variety of similar themes, Andy dozed, but was suddenly awakened by the sharp snap of a match and a brief flare.

He got up and peered over the edge of the bales of hay that enclosed his resting place.

The moon was shining brightly. Outlined at the open doorway of the barn was a man. He leaned against a post, had just lit a cigar, and was looking intently down the road in the direction of Centreville.

Some wagons rattled by and the man drew inside the barn out of view. Andy made out that he was well-dressed and very active and nervous in his manner.

?That man is waiting for some one,? decided Andy, getting interested??yes, and he belongs to the show, I?ll bet.?

Andy reasoned this out from the facility with which the man hummed out a tune he had heard the circus orchestra play.

The man paced restively to and fro. He went out into the road and looked far down it. He returned to the barn and resumed his impatient pacing to and fro.

Nearly an hour went by in this fashion. Andy began to consider that he had become curious without much reason. He was about to drop back again to his cozy bed when he heard the man utter an exclamation of satisfaction.

He rubbed his hands and braced up, and as a new figure turned from the road spoke in a cautious but distinct tone.

?That you, Murdock??

?It?s me, sure enough, Daley,? came the reply.

?S?sh?don?t use my name here. You know??

?All right. No one likely to hear us in this lonely spot, though,? spoke the newcomer addressed as Murdock.

?Well, what have you to report?? questioned Daley eagerly.

?It?s all right.?

?You?ve fixed it??

?Snug and sure. The show will have a big sensation to-night not down on the bills.?

The listening Andy heard the man called Daley utter a gratified chuckle.

?Good,? he said.

?And there?ll be a vacancy on the Benares Brothers? team to-morrow,? added Daley, ? so give me the twenty dollars.?

CHAPTER X

A FIRST APPEARANCE

Andy pricked up his ears with a good deal of animation. The jubilant statement of the fellow called Murdock did not sound honest.

?I?m taking your word for it,? spoke Daley.

He had drawn something from his pocket, evidently a roll of bills, for as he extended it Murdock said eagerly.

?Twenty dollars??

?Yes. Tell me how you fixed it.?

?Why,? answered Murdock with a cruel laugh, ?you was laid off as one of the Benares Brothers up at the show on account of drinking, wasn?t you??

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Daley moodily nodded his head.

?They put on Thacher in your place. You and him are probably the only two men in the profession who can do the somersault trapeze act with old Benares. That puts you out of a job, for you?re no good single.?

?I guess that is right. Thacher takes the bread out of my mouth, sink him!?

?You say, ?twenty dollars? if I fix Thacher so he can?t act well,? declared Murdock in a cold-blooded way that made Andy shiver, ?he won?t act for a spell after to-night, I?m thinking.?

?Come to the point?what did you do??

?Why, after doing their regular stunt on a separate trapeze, Thatcher somersaults and catches a bar swing from centre. He hangs by his knees and Benares swings from aloft and catches his hands in his dive for life. Well, the minute Thacher lands on the centre trapeze to-night down he goes forty feet head-first. It?s broken limbs or nothing, for I cut the bar free first thing after the afternoon performance. It?s held in place now by only two little pieces of thread that a child?s finger could break.?

?Um!? remarked Daley. ?I guess I?ll cut for it. They think I?m a hundred miles away. It mustn?t be known that I was this near the circus or they?d suspect me. I presume they?ll be wiring for me to come back now.?

?Oh, sure. They won?t suspect me, either. I sneaked in the big tent and fixed the trapeze when no one was about. See here, Daley, if you do get your job back you?d ought to give me an extra ten.?

?I?ll see about it,? said Daley.

The two worthies walked from the place. Andy watched them cross fields away from the main road and away from both Clifton and Centreville.

Little thrills of horror ran all over the boy. This was his first view of the dark, plotful side of circus life, and it appalled him.

?Why,? he exclaimed, ?it may be murder. Oh, those wretches! The Benares Brothers. I saw them yesterday. I remember the dive for life. I had to hold my breath when one man made that somersault, away up at the top of the tent. It was more than thrilling when he caught the other trapeze with his knees. It was curdling when his partner made his dive for life. One second over time, one miss of an inch, and it looked sure death. And now that trapeze has been tampered with, and??

The excited Andy did not finish the sentence. He forgot all his own plans and the possible danger of arrest at Centreville.

He jumped down from the hay bales and dashed out of the barn. Andy sped along the highway circus-ward at the top of his speed.

The situation had appealed to him in a flash. The two plotters had talked in plain English. There was no misunderstanding their motives and acts.

Andy had a vivid picture in his mind?the big circus tent four miles away. He could recall just where the Benares Brothers act came on the programme.

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?It was about ninth down the list yesterday afternoon,? he mused, softly. ?They begin the show about eight o?clock. It?s now about nine. I calculate the Benares Brothers come on this evening at about a quarter to ten. Four miles. I can run that in half an hour. Yes, I shall be in time.?

Andy pressed his arms to his sides, took breath to conserve his staying powers, and maintained a steady, telling pace.

The lights of Centreville began to show nearer. He heard a town bell strike the half-hour as he came in sight of the grounds and the illuminated big tent of the show.

The band inside was blaring away. The side shows were not doing much business. Some were getting ready for the removal. There were not many people around the main entrance. Andy, quite breathless, rushed up to the ticket taker there.

?I want to go in for just a minute,? he said??I must see the manager.?

?Cut for it?no gags go here,? retorted the man rudely.

?It?s pretty important. Here,? began Andy. Then he paused in dismay. ?Oh dear!? he spoke to himself, ?I never put on my coat, that I used as a pillow back in that barn.?

In the hurry and excitement of the occasion Andy had left the coat among the hay bales. Just before arranging his bed he had stowed the marble bag containing the balance of Graham?s five dollars in a pocket of the garment.

He could not therefore pay his fare into the show. Only for an instant, however, was Andy daunted.

He suddenly realized that he could get more promptly to the manager or the ringmaster from the rear.

He ran around the big white mountain of canvas till he reached the performers? tent. Patrolling outside of it was a club-armed watchman.

?Please let me in,? said Andy hurriedly. ?I want to see the manager, quick.?

?Yes, they all do. G?wan! Games don?t go here.?

?No, no, I?m not trying to dead-head it,? cried Andy. ?Please call Mr. Marco or Miss Starr. They know me??

?G?wan, I tell you. I?m too old a bird to get caught by chaff. Get?now.?

The watchman struck Andy a sharp rap over the shoulders. Andy was in desperation. He was started to run around to some other of the minor tents, when a shifting slit in the canvas gave him a momentary view of the interior of the big circus tent.

?Oh,? cried Andy, wringing his hands, ?the very act is on?the Benares Brothers! I must act at once!?

Andy made a rush, intent on getting under the canvas at all hazards. He checked himself. If he succeeded in eluding the watchman outside, he would have difficulty in getting to the manager. He might be captured inside at once. He stood staring at the tent top in extreme anxiety and suspense.

Shadows aloft enlightened him as to-what was going on. The Benares Brothers were mounting aloft. He made them out bowing gracefully, pulled up on the toe coils. He saw their outlines, trapeze-seated. The orchestra struck up a new tune. The act was about to commence.

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?I must stop them?I will warn them!? panted Andy with resolution. ?If I got to the manager he might not understand me or believe me. It might be too late?there is not a minute to spare.?

Andy was quivering with excitement, his eyes flashing, his face flushed.

He ran towards a guy rope, sprang up, caught at it, and hand over hand rapidly ascended it.

Where it tapped the lower dip of the upper canvas, he transferred his grasp.

A seam was here, held together by hook and ring clear to the gap at the centre pole. This seam, Andy discerned, ran right over to the trapezes.

Andy scaled the course of the seam with the agility of a monkey, hooking the rings with his fingers and pulling himself up. The canvas quivered, shook and gave, but he did not heed that.

He came to the open gap around the centre pole, seized the bound edge of the canvas, and gazed down.

Ten feet across was old Benares, just getting ready for some evolutions. Directly under Andy was the trapeze holding the man he supposed to be Thacher. Over his head swung a smaller trapeze.

Andy lay flat along the sloping canvas and stuck his head further down.

?Mr. Thacher! Mr. Thacher!? he shouted.

?Eh, why, hello! Who are you??

In wonderment the trapezist gazed up at the earnest, agitated face gazing down at him.

At that juncture there was an ominous rip. Andy?s weight it seemed had pressed too forcibly down upon a rotted section of the canvas.

A strip about a foot wide tore free, binding and all, from the edge nearest the centre pole. It split six feet sheer. Andy?s feet went over his head, but he kept a tight grip on the end of the strip.

Dangling in mid air sixty feet above the saw-dust ring, Andy swung in space dizzy-headed, his first appearance before the circus public.

CHAPTER XI

SAWDUST AND SPANGLES

Andy stared down at a sea of faces. They seemed far away. The circus manager had stepped briskly out into the ring.

In great wonderment he stood gazing aloft. The audience swayed, and a general murmur filled the air. Many pointed upwards. Some arose from their seats, craning their necks in excitement.

The orchestra dropped the music to low, undecided notes. Puzzled spectators wondered if the strange appearance above was part of some new novelty change in the programme.

Andy clung to the dangling strip of canvas for dear life. The trapezist, Thacher, stared at him in profound astonishment. He was about to speak, to demand an explanation, when there was a second ripping sound.

?Look out!? cried Thacher sharply.

Andy saw what was happening. The canvas strip that had torn free lengthwise was now splitting its breadth.

In another moment a mere filament of cloth would hold Andy suspended. He must act, and act quickly, or take a plunge sixty feet down.

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Andy did not lose his presence of mind. Just the same as if he was on the rafters of the old barn at home, or practicing on a rope strung from two high tree tops, as had been many a time the case, he calculated his chances and set his skill at work.

He ventured a brief swing on the frail strip of canvas. As it finally tore free in his hand, Andy dropped it. He had got his momentum, however. It was to swing sideways and down. The next instant Andy was at the side of Thacher. One hand caught and held to a rope of the trapeze. There Andy anchored, resting one knee on the edge of the performing bar.

?You?re a good one!? muttered the trapezist in wonder. ?Don?t get rattled, now.?

?Not while I?ve got my grip. Say,? projected Andy, ?I?m sorry to interrupt the performance, but it?s a matter of life or death.?

?Eh?? uttered Thacher in a puzzled way. ?What?s up??

?Do you know a man named Murdock??

?Ring man, fired last week. Yes. What of it??

?Do you know a man named Daley??

?Fired, too?for drinking. I took his place on this team.?

?They hate you. They have plotted to disable you. The trapeze yonder?Murdock has cut the ropes, secured the bar with thread, and the slightest touch will send a performer to the ring with broken limbs.?

?What! Are you crazy or fooling? Doped the rigging? Why, that?s murder, kid!?

?They have done it just the same. Listen.?

Faster than he had ever talked before Andy told of the conversation he had overheard in the old hay barn. He hurriedly recited his failure in reaching the manager. He told of his rapid ascent of the top canvas. The present denouement had resulted.

Under his face rouge Thacher showed the shock of vivid emotions. The murmur below was increasing. The manager was looking up impatiently.

Old Benares, across on his trapeze, regarded his partner in bewilderment.

Suddenly Thacher shot out some words towards him. It was a kind of circus gibberish, mixed with enough straight English to enlighten Andy that his story was being imparted to Old Benares.

?You must get me out of this,? said Andy. ?The audience is becoming restive.?

Thacher extended his hand, the back showing, in the direction of the orchestra. The band, at this signal, struck up a quick, lively tune.

?Get clear on the bar,? directed Thacher rapidly, giving Andy more room. ?Say,? he added, in some surprise at Andy?s cleverness, ?you seem at home all right. Performer??

?Oh, no?only a little amateur practice.?

?It?s given you the right nerve. Now then, you can?t get up again, you?ve got to go down. Want to do it gracefully??

?Sure,? smiled Andy, perfectly calm and collected.

The situation rather delighted him than otherwise. He had supreme confidence in his companion, and felt that he was in safe hands.

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?Are you grit for a swing?? pursued Thacher.

?Try me,? said Andy.

Thacher called over some further words to old Benares. The latter at once swung down from his trapeze, holding on by his knees, both hands extended towards his partner.

?Do just as I say,? directed Thacher to Andy. ?Let me get you under the arms. Double your knees up to your chin. Can you hold yourself that way??

?Yes,? assented Andy.

?Now!? spoke Thacher sharply.

The next instant the performer had dropped Andy in his clasp. He had slipped an ankle halter to one of his own limbs.

This alone held him. Head downward, he lightly swung Andy to and fro.
Andy rolled up like a ball ready for the next move.

All this had consumed less than two minutes. Now the audience believed Andy?s sensational appearance a regularly arranged feature of the performance.

The oddity of a boy in ordinary dress coming into the act, as Andy had done, excited the profoundest interest and attention.

The manager in the ring below stood like one petrified, puzzled beyond all comprehension.

The orchestra checked its music. An intense strain pervaded. The audience swayed, but that only. There was a profound silence.

?One, two, three,? said Thacher, at intervals.

?Come,? answered old Benares.

At the end of a long, swift swing of his body, Thacher let go of Andy, who spun across a ten feet space that looked twenty to the audience below. Andy felt a light contact, old Benares? double grip caught under his arms.

The act was the merest novice trick analyzed by an expert, but it set the audience wild.

A prodigious cheer arose, clapping of hands, juvenile yells of admiration. The band came in with a ringing march. Old Benares righted himself, Andy with him.

?Su-paarb!? he said. ?Can you hold on alone?one little minute??

?Sure,? said Andy.

The trapezist reached up and untied the descending rope, secured it to the bar, and shouted to those standing below.

Two ring hands ran out into the sawdust, caught the other end, and held it perfectly taut.

?Can you slide down it?? asked Benares.

Andy?s eyes sparkled.

?Say, Mr. Benares,? he replied, ?if I wasn?t rattled by all that crowd, I could do it head first. I?ve done the regular, one leg drop, fifty times.?

?You are admirable?an ex-paart!? declaimed old Benares. ?Who are you, anyway??

?Only Andy Wildwood. Do you think I could ever do a real circus act??

?Do I think?hear them yell! You have made a hit. Good boy. Be careful. Go.?

Andy essayed an old rope performance he had seen done once, and had many times practiced.

This was to secure one leg around the rope, throw himself outwards, fold his arms, and wind round and round the rope, slowly descending.

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The orchestra caught the cue, and kept time with appropriate music. A second hush held the audience. Without a break, Andy descended the forty odd feet of cable.

Nearing its end, he caught at the rope to steady himself. Then he gracefully leaped free of it to the sawdust, and made a profound bow to the audience amid wild thunders of applause.

CHAPTER XII

AN ARM OF THE LAW

The circus manager followed Andy, as the latter darted past the band stand and into the passageway leading to the performers? tent.

His face was a blank of wonderment. The ringmaster joined him, and so did one or two others as he hurried after Andy.

They found the latter holding to a guy rope, Andy?s head was spinning. The reaction from intense excitement made him weak and breathless for some moments.

The audience was still in a pleasant flutter of commotion over the unique act that had caught their fancy.

The Benares Brothers went on with their performance, They cut out ?the dive for life,? but they made up for it by some dazzling aerial evolutions that thrilled the spectators, and everybody seemed satisfied.

Five minutes later they joined the group crowding around Andy. The manager had just finished questioning the lad as to details of the remarkable story he had told.

His face was stern and angry as he uttered some quick words to the ringmaster. Then the latter, taking a weighted coiled-up toe rope in his hand, went out into the ring.

From where he was Andy could see this flung aloft. It caught across the bar of the ? doped? trapeze.

At a touch this latter came hurtling to the ground. Old Benares, watching also, trembled with intense anger.

?It is infamoos!? he declared. ?Where should my partner be, but for this boy??

The ringmaster examined the loosened trapeze bar. Just as Andy had stated, two slight threads alone had held it to the supporting ropes.

Thacher laid a friendly, grateful hand on Andy?s shoulder. He was too full of emotion to speak. Andy looked up and smiled brightly.

?Good thing I was around, wasn?t it?? he said carelessly. ?Oh, there?s Mr. Marco.?

The Man with the Iron Jaw came up to the group at this juncture.

?You, Andy Wildwood!? he said. ?I heard of the trapeze. So it is you again? Come with me. No, don?t keep him,? continued Marco to Thacher in a hurried way that made Andy curious. ?You can see him again. Come, lad.?

?What?s the trouble, Mr. Marco?? asked Andy.

Marco did not answer. He kept hold of Andy?s arm and led him to the rear. About to enter the performers? tent he dodged back.

?Keep close to me,? he directed in a tone of suppressed excitement. ?Quick, Wildwood?out this way. Hurry, now.?

He had darted towards the bottom of the canvas strip siding the passageway. Lifting this up, he thrust Andy under it. Crawling after him and arising to his feet, he again grasped Andy?s arm.

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Headed for the open space the main entrance faced, Marco suddenly jerked Andy to one side. He now made swiftly for some small tents abutting the performers? tent.

?Hey! hi! hello!? some one had yelled out at them, and Andy saw two skulking forms making towards them.

A third figure joined them. Andy discerned evident pursuit in their manner and actions.

?Keep with me. Run in,? directed Marco.

He had thrust Andy into one of the little tents the boy recognized as a dressing room. Marco dropped the flap and stood outside.

?Where?s the boy gone to?? puffed out a labored voice.

?Gracious!? exclaimed Andy, under cover, but with a gasp of sheer dismay. ?I understand now.?

Andy recognized the tones of this last speaker. They belonged to Wagner, the village constable of Fairview.

?He?s in that little tent,? spoke another voice.

?Surround it,? ordered Wagner. ?Here, you stand aside. The boy I?ve been looking for all day is in that tent. I want him.?

?Hold on,? retorted Marco. ?This is private circus property.?

?Yes, and I?m a public officer, I?d have you know!? said Wagner. ?No use. Don?t interfere with the course of justice, or you?ll get into trouble.?

There was no light in the tent. The many flaring gasoline torches outside, however, cast a radiance that enabled Andy to pretty accurately make out the situation.

He traced two shadowy figures making a circuit of the tent. He could see Marco push back Wagner.

The latter was unsteady of gait and voice. Andy theorized that he had been commissioned by his aunt to pursue him.

Wagner had come down to Centreville with two assistants. Their expenses were probably paid in advance, and they had made a kind of individual celebration of the trip.

?I?ve been looking for that boy all day,? now spoke Wagner.

?I know you have,? answered Marco, standing like a statue at the door of the tent.

?He?s a fugitive from justice. I?m bound to have him. I?m an arm of the law.?

?What?s he done?? inquired Marco.

?He?s nearly broken his poor old aunt?s heart.?

?I didn?t ask about his aunt?s heart. What?s he done??

?Oh, why?hum, that?s so. Well, he?s been expelled from school because of his crazy circus capers.?

?Indeed. I?m a circus man. Do you observe anything particularly crazy about me?? demanded Marco. ?Say, my friend, you get out of this. I?m Marco, the Man with the Iron Jaw. It won?t be healthy for me to tackle you, and I will if you make yourself obstreperous. You won?t get that boy until you show me convincingly that you have a legal right to do so.?

?Legal right? Why!? cried Wagner, drawing out a paper, ?there?s my warrant.?

?Let me look at it, please. Oh,? said Marco, examining the document. ?Issued in another county. We?re pretty good lawyers, us show folks, and I can tell you that you will have to get a search warrant issued in this county before you dare set a foot in that tent.?

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The Fairview constable was nonplussed. Marco was right, and Wagner knew it. He threshed about, fumed and threatened, and finally said:

?All right. I guess you know the law. We may have no right to enter that tent without a local search warrant, but the minute we get the boy outside we can take him on sight.?

?You won?t have the chance,? observed Marco.

?We?ll see. Hey,? to his two assistants, ?keep a close watch. I?m going for a local search warrant. Don?t let Andy Wildwood leave that tent. The minute he does, nab him. Mister, I hereby notify you that these two men are my regularly appointed deputies.?

?All right,? nodded Marco calmly.

?Watch out, boys. I won?t be gone half-an-hour.?

At that moment a waddling man came up smoking an immense pipe.

?Ha,? he said to Mr. Marco, ?I vant mine drums.?

?Wait a minute, Snitzellbaum,? directed Marco.

Marco held the newcomer at bay until Wagner had disappeared in the direction of the town.

Then, leaning over, he whispered in the ear of the rotund musician.

?Ha! ho! hum! vhat? ho?ho! ha?ha!?

?Hush!? warned Marco, with a quick glance at the constable?s deputies patrolling up and down. ?Will you do it??

?Vill I?oh, schure! Ha-ha! ho-ho! Mister Marco, you are von chenyus.?

?Want your drum, eh?? spoke Marco in a loud tone. ?Well, go in and get it.?

Andy knew something was afoot from what he observed. He hoped it was in the line of preventing his return to Fairview.

In about five minutes the fat German came out of the tent, lugging his big bass drum with him.

?I put him on dot vagon,? he puffed. ?Good night, Mr. Marco. Vat dey do mit dot poy in dere, hey??

?Oh, I?ll attend to him,? declared Marco.

Another half-hour went by. At its end Wagner came hurrying up to the spot. He had a companion with him, a keen-eyed, shrewd-faced fellow, evidently a local officer.

?I have a search warrant here,? said the latter.

?All right,? nodded Marco accommodatingly, ?go on with your search.?

?Told you I?d get that boy,? announced Wagner, with a chuckle lifting the flap of the tent. ?Say! How?s this? Andy Wildwood is gone!?

CHAPTER XIII

ON THE ROAD

?Come oud!? said Hans Snitzellbaum.

?I?m glad to,? answered Andy Wildwood.

He took a long, refreshing draught of pure air, and stood up and stretched his cramped limbs with satisfaction.

When the Man with the Iron Jaw had whispered to the fat musician outside the dressing tent guarded by Wagner?s assistants, he had asked him to get Andy out of the clutches of the constable.

The fat sides of Hans Snitzellbaum shook with jollity, and his merry eye twinkled at the hint conveyed by Andy?s staunch friend.

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When Hans came inside the tent, a whispered word to Andy was sufficient to make the young fugitive understand what was coming.

Hans removed the top head of his big bass drum. Andy snuggled along the rounded woodwork of the instrument, and the drum head was replaced.

The double load was a pretty heavy one for the portly musician to handle, but all went well.

He got away from the dressing tent without arousing the suspicions of the constable?s assistants. The drum was hoisted to the top of a moving wagon at some distance. Andy was rather crowded and short of breath, but he lay quiet and serene as the wagon started up.

They must have traveled four miles before the musician?s welcome invitation to ?come oud? followed a second removal of the drum head.

Andy looked about him. They were slowly traversing the main road leading from Centreville to Clifton.

There was bright moonlight, and the general view was interesting and picturesque. Ahead and behind a seemingly interminable caravan was in motion.

Chariots, cages, vehicles holding tent paraphernalia, a calliope, ticket wagons, horses, mules, ponies, seemed in endless parade. Performers and general circus employees thronged the various vehicles.

That in which Andy now found himself was a wagon with high, slatted sides, piled full of trunks, mattresses, seat cushions and curtains.

The fat musician reclined in a dip in the soft bedding; his bulky body had formed. Over beyond him lay a sad-faced man in an exhausted slumber, looking so utterly done out and ill that Andy pitied him.

A boy about Andy?s own age, and two men whose attire and general appearance suggested side show ?spielers,? or those flashily dressed fellows who announce the wonders on view inside the minor canvases, lay half-buried among some gaudy draperies.

The two men lay with their high silk hats held softly by both hands across their breasts. The circus tinge was everywhere. One of them in his sleep was saying: ?Ziripa, the Serpent Queen. Step up, gentlemen. Eats snakes like you eat strawberry shortcake. Eats ?em alive! Bites their heads off!?

As the wagon jolted on Hans comfortably smoked a pipe fully four feet long. His twinkling little eyes fairly laughed at Andy as the latter stepped out of the drum.

?Hey, you find him varm, hey?? he asked.

?I?d have smothered if I hadn?t kept my mouth close to that vent hole,? explained Andy. ?Is it all right for me to show myself now??

?Yaw,? declared the fat musician. ?You see dot sign??

He pointed back a few yards. Andy recognized the four-armed semaphore set where a narrow road intersected the highway they were traversing.

?Oh, yes,? said Andy quickly, ?that shows the State line.?

?Yaw, dot vas so. No one can arrest you now, Marco says, and Marco vas like a lawyer, hey??

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?Will I see Mr. Marco soon again?? asked Andy.

?For sure dot vas. He toldt me vot to do. Vhen we reach dot Cliftons, you vill go mit Billy Blow. He vill takes care of you till morning. Den you goes to dot Empire Hotel und sees Miss Stella Starr.?

?Oh, I understand,? exclaimed Andy brightly and hopefully. ?And who is Billy Blow, please??

?Him,? explained Hans, pointing to the sleeping man with the sad, tired face??dot is Billy Blow, the clown.?

?Eh, what?clown? Not the one who rides the donkey and tells such funny stories??

?Oh, yaw,? declared the musician in a matter-of-fact way.

Andy was naturally surprised. He could hardly realize that the person he was looking at could ever make up as the mirth-provoking genius who was the life and fun of the big circus ring.

?Poor Billy!? said Hans, shaking his head solemnly. ?First his vife falls from a horse. She vas in dot hospitals. Den his little poy, Midget, is sick. Poor Billy!?

Andy suddenly remembered something. He craned his neck and looked steadfastly along the road.

?I want to leave the wagon when we get a little further along,? he said.

?I likes not dot,? answered Snitzellbaum. ?Maybe you gets in droubles, so??

?No, it?s when we reach an old barn,? explained Andy. ?I left something there earlier in the evening. I won?t be a minute getting it.?

In about half-an-hour, as they approached the hay barn where Andy had overheard the conversation between Daley and Murdock, he slipped down from the wagon. He ran ahead, went up among the hay bales, found the coat containing the marble bag holding his little stock of money, and speedily rejoined the musician.

Hans finished his pipe and sank into a doze. Andy could not sleep. He had gone through too much excitement that day to readily compose himself.

He lay listening dreamily to the jolty clatter of the wagons, the shouts of the drivers, and the commotion of the animals in the menagerie cages. Meanwhile he was thinking ardently of the next day. It would decide his fate. He felt hopeful that the show would

take him on from the fact that Miss Stella Starr had required his presence the next morning.

?Hey,? spoke a sudden voice, ?give us a chaw, will you??

Andy with a start turned to face the boy he had noticed asleep. The latter had rudely knocked his shoulder. He had looked mean to Andy while slumbering. He looked tough as he fixed his eyes on Andy, wide open.

?I don?t ?chaw,?? said the latter.

?Teeth gone?? sneered the other.

?No, that?s why I don?t care to lose them,? retorted Andy.

?Huh! Say, Snitzellbaum, loan me a little tobacco, will you??

The speaker had nudged the musician. The latter eyed him with little favor.

?You vas a kid,? he observed, stirring up. ?Vhen you grow up, maybe. Not now.?

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The boy let out a string of rough expletives under his breath. Then fixing his eye on Andy curiously, he demanded:

?Who?s the kindergarten kid? Trying to break into the show??

?I may,? answered Andy calmly.

?Oho!? chuckled the other, with a wicked grin??we?ll have some fun with you, then.?

?Maybe not,? broke in the musician. ?Dot poy has a pull.?

?Oh, has he?? snorted the other.

?Yaw. Maybe you don?t know, hey, Jim Tapp? You hear about dot cut trapeze? Aha! It vas dis poy who discovered dot in time.?

?Eh!? ejaculated young Tapp, with a prodigious start. ?Yes,? he continued very slowly, viewing Andy with a searching, hateful look. ?I heard of it. Says Murdock put up the job to break Thacher?s neck.?

?Dot vas so.?

?How does he know it??

?He overheardt dose schoundrels tell dot.?

?Maybe he?s lying.?

?Did dot cut trapeze show if he vas, hey??

?Then he?s a spy. Sneaking in on gentlemen?s private affairs. Bah!? cried Tapp, with a venomous stare at Andy, ?I wouldn?t train with you two at a hundred per week!?

He crawled over to the edge of the wagon preparatory to leaving the vehicle and seeking more congenial company.

?Hey, you, Jim Tapp,? observed Snitzellbaum, ?you vas a pal of Daley, hey? You see him? Vell, you tell him ve hang him up by dose heels, und Murdock mit him, vonce ve catch dem. See you??

Tapp disappeared over the edge of the wagon into the road.

?Mein friend,? remarked the musician to Andy, ?you vatch oud for dot poy.?

Andy Wildwood recalled the solemn warning before the next day was over.

CHAPTER XIV

BILLY BLOW, CLOWN

Billy Blow, the clown, woke up just as the wagon reached the tent site at Clifton. It was nearly midnight.

His sleep did not seem to have refreshed him much. He got down from the vehicle like a man half-awake, and as if the effort hurt him. He had to shake himself to get the stiffness out of his limbs.

?Dis vos dot poy I told you aboud, Billy,? said the musician.

?Oh, yes, yes,? answered the clown in a preoccupied way, with a quick look at Andy. ? I?ll take him under my wing until Marco comes along. This way, kid. I?ve some baggage to look after. Then we?ll bunk.?

Andy bade Hans Snitzellbaum adieu with reluctance. He liked the bluff-hearted old German with his fatherly ways.

?Goot py for dot bresent times,? said the fat musician. ?Vhen I sees you mit dose tumblers, I gives some big bang-bang, boom-boom, hey??

?I hope you will,? responded Andy with a cheery laugh.

He followed Billy Blow. The latter finally found the wagon he was after. He bundled its contents about and got a small wooden box and a big wicker trunk to one side.

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?Wish you?d mind these till I see if I can?t make quick sleeping quarters,? Blow said to Andy.

?Yes, sir, I?ll be glad to,? answered Andy willingly, and the clown hurried off in his usual nervous fashion.

Andy was kept keenly awake for the ensuing hour. It did not seem to be night at all. The scene about him was one of constant activity.

Andy caught a glimpse of real circus life. Its details filled him with wonderment, admiration and keen interest.

The scene was one of constantly increasing hustle and bustle. There was infinite variety and excitement in the occasion. For all that, there was a system, precision and progress in all that was done that fascinated Andy.

The boy was witnessing the building of a great city in itself within the space of half-a-dozen hours.

The caravan wound in, section by section. The wagons moved to set places as if doing so automatically, discharged their cumbersome loads, and retired.

First came the baggage train, then the stake and chain wagons, the side shows, paraphernalia, and the menagerie cages.

The circus area proper had been all marked out, the ring graded, sawdust-strewn, and straw scattered to absorb dampness.

The blacksmiths? wagons, cooks? caravan and the minor tents all removed to the far rear. The naphtha torches were set every twenty feet apart to illuminate proceedings. Workers were hauling on the ground great hogsheads of water. Near the dining tents half-a-hundred table cloths were already hanging out on wire clothes lines to dry.

Some men were washing small tents with paraffin to season them against the weather. Finally the great forty-horse team lumbered up with its mighty load. The boss canvasman with half-a-hundred assistants began the construction of ?the main top,? or performing tent, holding fifteen thousand people.

Andy, absorbed in every maneuver displayed, was completely lost in the deepest interest when a voice at his side aroused him.

?Tired waiting?? asked Billy Blow.

?Oh, no,? answered Andy, ?I could watch this forever, I think.?

?It would soon get stale,? declared the clown, with a faint smile. ?Give us a hand, partner?one at a time, and we?ll get my togs and ourselves under cover.?

Andy took one handle of the box, the clown the other. They carried it to the door of one of twenty small tents near the cook?s quarters. They brought the wicker trunk also, and then carried box and trunk inside the tent.

Andy looked about it curiously. A candle burned on a bench. Beyond it was a mattress. Near one side, and boxed in by platform sections as if to keep off draughts, was a second smaller mattress.

On a stool near it sat a thin-faced, lady-like woman. She was smiling down at a little boy lying huddled up in shawls and a comforter.

?This is my boy, Wildwood,? spoke Billy Blow. ?New hand, Midge?if he makes good.?

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The little fellow nodded in a grave, mature way at Andy. According to his size, he resembled a child of four. That was why they called him Midget. Andy learned later that he was ten years old. He had an act with the circus, going around the ring perched on the shoulders of a bare-back rider. He also sometimes had a part with ?the Tom Thumb acrobats,? doing some clever hoop-jumping with a trick Shetland pony.

He seemed to be just recovering from a fit of sickness. His face, prematurely old, was pinched and colorless.

?Our Columbine in the Humpty Dumpty afterpiece,? was the way the clown introduced the lady. ?I don?t know how to thank you for all your trouble, Miss Nellis.?

?Don?t mention it, Billy,? responded the woman. ?Any of us would fight for it to help you or the kid, wouldn?t we, Midge??

?I don?t know why,? answered the lad in a weary way. ?I ain?t much good any more.?

?Now hear that ungrateful boy!? rallied Miss Nellis. ?Billy, the doctor says his whole trouble was poisoned canned stuff, bad water and a cold. He?s broken the fever. Here?s some medicine. Every hour a spoonful until gone, and doctor says he?ll be fit as ever in a day or two.?

?That?s good,? said the clown, a lone tear trickling down his cheek. ?I wish I could afford the hotel for the lad, instead of this rough-and-tumble shack life, but my wife?s hospital bills drain me pretty well.?

?Never mind. Better times coming, Billy. Don?t you get disheartened,? cheered the little woman. ?Remember now, don?t miss that medicine.?

Miss Nellis went away. Andy heard poor Billy sigh as he adjusted the larger mattress.

?There?s your bunk,? he said to Andy. ?Marco will see you early in the morning.?

Andy took off his coat and shoes and lay down on the rude bed. He watched Midget tracing the outlines of a picture with his white finger in a book Miss Nellis had brought him.

Andy saw the clown go over to a stool and place a homely, old-fashioned watch and a spoon and medicine bottle Miss Nellis had given him upon it.

Then Blow came back to the big mattress and sat down on it. He bent his face in his hands in a tired way. Every minute he would sway with sleepiness, start up, and try to keep awake.

?The man is half-dead for the want of sleep, worn out with all his worries,? thought Andy. ?Mr. Blow,? he said aloud, sitting up, ?I can?t sleep a wink. This is all so new to me. I?ll just disturb you rustling about here. Please let me attend to the little fellow, won?t you, and you take a good sound snooze? Come, it will do you lots of good.?

?No, no,? began the clown weakly.

?Please,? persisted Andy. ?Honest, I can?t close my eyes. Now don?t you have a care. I?ll give Midget his medicine to the second.?

Andy felt a glow of real pleasure and satisfaction as the clown lay down. He was asleep in two minutes. Andy went over to the stool.

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?I?m going to be your nurse,? he told Midget. ?Suppose you sleep, too.?

?I can?t,? answered the little fellow. ?I?ve been asleep all day. Wish I had another book, I?ve looked this one through a hundred times.?

?I could tell you some stories,? Andy suggested. ?Good ones.?

?Will you, say, will you?? pleaded the clown?s boy eagerly.

?You bet?and famous ones.?

Andy kept his promise. He ransacked his mind for the brightest stories he had ever read. Never was there a more interested listener. Andy talked in a low voice so as not to disturb the clown.

Midget seemed most to like the real stories of his own village life that Andy finally drifted into.

?That?s what I?d like,? he said, after Andy had told of some boyish adventures back at Fairview.

?Oh, I?m so tired of moving on?all the time moving on!?

?Strange,? thought Andy, ?and that?s just the kind of a life I?m trying to get into.?

Midget became so animated that Andy finally got him to tell some stories about circus life. All that, however, was ?shop talk? to the little performer, but Andy learned considerable from the keen-witted little fellow, who appeared to know as much about the ins and outs of show life as some veteran of the ring.

He enlightened his auditor greatly in the line of real circus slang. Andy learned that in show vernacular clowns were ?joys,? and other performers ?kinkers.? A pocket book was a ?leather,? a hat a ?lid,? a ticket a ?fake,? an elephant a ?bull.? Lemonade was ?juice,? eyes were ?lamps,? candy peddlers were ?butchers,? and the various tents ?tops,? as, for instance: ?main top,? ?cook top,? and the side shows were ?kid tops.?

Finally little Midge went to sleep. Andy woke him up each hour till daybreak to take his medicine. After the last dose Andy went outside to stretch his limbs and get a mouthful of fresh air.

He saw men still tirelessly working here and there. Some were housing the live stock, some unpacking seat stands, some fixing the banners on the main tent.

Andy did not go far from the clown?s tent. It was fairly dawn. Happening to glance towards the chandelier wagon he came to a dead stand-still, and stared.

?Hello!? said Andy with animation. ?There?s that Jim Tapp, and the man with him?yes, it?s the fellow, Murdock, I saw with Daley in the old hay barn.?

As he stood gazing Tapp caught sight of him. He started violently and spoke some quick words to his companion, pointing towards Andy.

?That?s the man who cut the trapeze,? murmured Andy. ?I?ll rouse the clown and tell him. He?s a dangerous man to have lurking around.?

?Hey! hey!? called out Tapp at just that moment.

Both he and his companion started running towards Andy. There was that in their bearing that warned Andy they meant him no good. Andy did not pause.

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?Stop, I tell you!? shouted the man, Murdock.

Andy made a bee-line for the clown?s tent. As he neared it he glanced back over his shoulder.

Tapp was still putting after him. His companion had stooped to pick up an iron tent stake from the ground.

This he let drive with full force. It took Andy squarely between the shoulders, and he dropped like a shot.

CHAPTER XV

ANDY JOINS THE SHOW

The breath seemed clear knocked out of Andy?s body. The shock of the blow from the stake deprived him of consciousness.

Andy opened his eyes in about two minutes. He found himself lying on the ground, half-a-dozen circus employees gathered around him.

?Help me up,? said Andy in a confused way. ?I mustn?t miss giving Midge his medicine.?

?Eh?the clown?s boy?? spoke one of the men sharply.

?Oh,? said Andy, regaining his senses more completely, ?have I been here long??

?About two minutes.?

?Then Midge is all right?oh, dear!?

Andy, trying to arise, gasped and tottered weakly. The man who had addressed him seemed to be a sort of boss of the others. He held Andy firmly as he said:

?Belong with Billy Blow? All right, we?ll take you to his tent. But, say?what did those fellows knock you out for??

?Did you see the fellows?? inquired Andy.

?I was way over near the big bunk top. I heard some one holler, saw you running. Two fellows were after you. One let drive that stake. It took you between the shoulders like a cannon ball. An ugly throw, and a wicked one. Wonder it didn?t fetch you for good.?

?One of the fellows was a boy named Jim Tapp,? said Andy.

?That rascal, eh?? spoke the man. ?Thought he?d quit us. Was going to. Borrowed all he could, and salary tied up on an attachment.?

?The other was a man named Murdock. He?s the fellow who cut the trapeze on Benares Brothers last night.?

?What!? cried the man, with a jump. ?Hey, men?you hear that? Go for both! Get them! They?re wanted for these crooked jobs.?

Those addressed started on a chase, pursuant to directions of their leader who had seen Murdock and Tapp run away as he came up to the prostrate Andy.

The man himself helped Andy to the clown?s tent. Their entrance aroused Billy Blow, who sprang up quickly as he noticed that Andy walked in a pained, disabled fashion. He was quite another man for his long, refreshing sleep.

?Why, what?s the matter?? he asked.

Andy?s companion explained. The clown expressed his sympathy and indignation in the same breath. He urged that the show detectives be aroused at once.

?I heard Harding say last night he?d spend a thousand dollars, but he?d get Daley and Murdock behind the bars for attempted murder,? declared the clown.

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The man who had assisted Andy went away saying he would consult with Mr. Giles Harding, the owner of the circus, at once.

?You see, Murdock ventured here to find out how his wicked plot succeeded, never suspecting that he was found out,? theorized the clown. ?That fellow, Tapp, was always his crony. They?re a bad lot, you can guess that from the stake they threw at you. No bones broken? Good! Hurts? I?ll soon fix that. Strip, now.?

?All right.?

The clown had felt all over Andy?s back as the latter sat down on the bench. Now he made Andy take off his coat and shirt. Then he produced a big bottle from his wicker trunk.

?Ever hear of the Nine Oils?? he asked, as he poured a lot of black, greasy stuff out of the bottle into the palm of his hand.

?No,? said Andy.

?This is it,? explained the clown, beginning to rub Andy?s back vigorously. ?You?ve got quite a bruise, and I suppose it pains. Just lay down. When I get through, if the Nine Oils don?t fix you up, I?ll give you nine dollars.?

The clown rubbed Andy good and hard. Then he made him lie down on the big mattress. The Nine Oils had a magical effect. Andy?s pain and soreness were soon soothed. He fell into a doze, and woke up to observe that Marco was in the tent conversing with the clown.

?Hi, Wildwood,? hailed Andy?s friend. ?Having quite a time of it, aren?t you??

Andy got up as good as ever. His back smarted slightly?that was the only reminder he had of Murdock?s savage assault.

Billy Blow had been telling Marco about Andy?s latest mishap. Marco was greatly worked up over it. He said the attempted trick on old Benares?s partner had become noised about, and if the two plotters were arrested and brought anywhere near the circus, they stood a good show of lynching.

?I?ll step down with you to the hotel about ten o?clock, Wildwood,? said Marco. ?Miss Starr has some word for you.?

Andy simply said ?Thank you,? but his hopes rose tremendously. He accompanied Marco to the big eating tent and at the man?s invitation had breakfast. The food was good and everything was scrupulously clean.

Marco got a big tin tray, and he and Andy carried a double breakfast to Billy Blow?s tent.

The clown had got rested up and was bright and chipper, for little Midge seemed on the mend, and was as lively as a cricket. The little fellow ate a hearty meal, and then expressed a wish for an airing. Marco borrowed one of the wagons used by some performing goats, and Andy rode Midge around the grounds for half-an-hour.

At about eight o?clock Andy went to the principal street of the town. He bought himself a new shirt and a cap. Going back to the clown?s tent he washed up, and made himself generally tidy and presentable for the coming interview at the Empire Hotel.

Andy had a full hour to spare before the time set for that event arrived. He took a stroll about the circus grounds, meeting jolly old Hans Snitzellbaum, and Benares and his partner, Thacher.

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His part taken in the impromptu arenic performance of the evening previous had become generally known. Andy was pointed out to the watchmen and others, and no one hindered him going about as he chose.

Andy viewed another phase of show detail now. It was the picturesque part, the family side of circus daily life.

He saw women busy at fancy work or sewing, their children playing with the ring ponies or petting the cake-walking horse.

Some of the men were mending their clothes, others were washing out collars and handkerchiefs. What element of home life there was in the circus experience Andy witnessed in his brief stroll.

He was on time to the minute at the Empire Hotel. A bell-boy showed him up to the ladies? parlor on the second floor.

Miss Stella Starr was listening to some members of the circus minstrel show trying over some new airs on the piano.

The moment she saw him she came forward with hand extended and a welcome smile on her kindly face.

She made Andy feel at home at once. She insisted on hearing all the details of his experience since the evening he had saved her from disaster during the wind storm.

?I think now just as I thought night before last, Andy,? she said finally. ?You do not owe much of duty to that aunt of yours. I think I would fight pretty hard to get away, in your place, with the reform school staring me in the face. Well, Andy, I have spoken to Mr. Harding.?

?Can?can I join?? asked Andy, with a good deal of anxiety.

?Yes, Andy. I had a long talk with him about you, and?here he is now.?

A brisk-moving, keen-faced man of about fifty entered the parlor just then.

?Mr. Harding, this is the boy, Andy Wildwood, I told you about,? said Miss Starr.

?Oh, indeed?? observed the showman, looking Andy all over with one swift, comprehensive glance. ?They tell me you can do stunts, young man??

?Oh, a little?on the bar and tumbling,? said Andy.

?Well, I suppose you don?t expect to star it for awhile,? said Harding. ?You must begin at the bottom, you know.?

?I want to, sir.?

?Very good. I will give you a card to the manager. He will make you useful in a general way until we have our two days? rest at Tipton, I?ll look you up then, and see if you?ve got any ring stuff in you.?

Andy took the card tendered by the showman after the latter had written a few words on it in pencil.

Andy made his best bow to Miss Starr. He was delighted and fluttered. He showed it so much that the showman was pleased out of the common.

?Come back a minute,? he called out. ?My boy,? he continued, placing a friendly hand on Andy?s shoulder, ?you have made a good start with us in that Benares matter. Keep on the right side always, and you will succeed. Never swear, quarrel or gamble. Assist our patrons, and be civil and obliging on all occasions. The circus is a grand centre of fraternal good will, properly managed, and the right circus stands for health, happiness, virtue and vigor. Its motto should be courage, ambition and energy, governed by honest purpose and tempered by humanity. I don?t want to lecture, but I am giving you the benefit of what has cost me twenty years experience and a good many thousands of dollars.?

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?Thank you, sir, I shall not forget what you have told me,? said Andy.

For all that, Andy?s mind was for the present full only of the pomp and glitter of his new calling. One supreme thought made his heart bubble over with joy:

At last he had reached the goal of his fondest wishes. Andy Wildwood had ?joined the circus.?

CHAPTER XVI

THE REGISTERED MAIL

Andy hurried back to the circus grounds the happiest boy on earth. He went straight to the clown?s tent.

Billy Blow was making up for the morning parade. Dressed up as a way-back farmer, he was to drive a hay wagon, breaking into the procession here and there along the line of march. Finally, when he had created a sensation, he was to drop his disguise and emerge in his usual popular ring character.

While Billy was putting the finishing touches to his toilet he conversed with Andy, congratulating him on his success in getting a job with the show.

?Wait about half-an-hour till the parade gets off the grounds,? he advised Andy. ? Scripps, the manager, will be busy till then. You?ll find him in the paper tent.?

Andy knew what that was?the structure containing the programmes and general advertising and posting outfits of the show. He had noticed it earlier in the day. A wagon inside the tent, with steps and windows, comprised the manager?s private office.

Little Midge was sitting up playing with some show children who had brought in a lot of toys. Andy went outside with Billy.

?See here,? said the clown, as he hurried off to join the parade. ?Tell Scripps that you bunk with me. Any objection??

?I should say not.?

?You?re welcome. The general crowd they?d put you with is a bit too rough for a raw recruit. Just stand what they give you till we reach Tipton. You?ve got friends enough to pull you up into the performers? rank. We?ll fix you out there.?

?Thank you,? said Andy.

He strolled about with a happy smile on his face. Prospects looked fine, and Andy?s heart warmed as he thought of all the good friends he had made.

?They?re a nice crowd,? he thought??Miss Starr, Marco, the Benares Brothers, the clown. How different, though, to what I used to think! It?s business with them, real work, for all the tinsel and glare. It?s a pleasant business, though, and they must make a lot of money.?

There was a shrill, whistling shriek from the calliope wagon. The various performers scampered from their dressing rooms at the signal.

Each person, vehicle and animal fell into line in the morning caravan with a promptness and ease born of long practice.

Soon there was a fluttering line of gay color, rich plush hangings, bullion-trimmed uniforms, silken flags and streamers.

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Zeno, the balloon clown, eating ?redhots,? *i.e*. peanuts, led the procession, bouncing up and down on a rubber globe in the advance chariot. The bands began to play. The prancing horses, rumbling wagons, screaming calliope, frolicking tumblers, tramp bicyclists weaving in and out in grotesque costumes, often on one wheel, the Tallyho stage filled with smiling ladies, old Sultan, the majestic lion, gazing in calm dignity down from his high extension cage?all this passed, a fantastic panorama, before Andy?s engrossed gaze.

?It?s grand!? decided Andy??just grand! A fellow can never get lonesome here, night or day. I?m going to like it. Now for the manager. Hope I don?t have any trouble.?

When Andy came to the paper tent he found a good many people inside. There were several performers and canvas men on crutches or bandaged up. There were village merchants with bills, newspaper men after free passes and persons seeking employment.

They were called in turn up the steps of the wagon that constituted the manager?s office.

Mr. Scripps was a rapid talker, a brisk man of business, and he disposed of the cases presented in quick order.

Andy saw four or five dissipated looking men discharged at a word. The applicants for work were ordered to appear at Tipton, two days later.

Several were after an advance on their salary. Some farmers appeared with claims for foraging done by circus hands. Finally Andy got to the front and tendered the card Mr. Harding had given him.

?All right,? shot out Scripps sharply, giving the lad a keen look. ?You?re the one who blocked the game on Benares? Good for you! We?ll remember that, later.?

Scripps glanced over a pasteboard sheet on his desk, first asking Andy his name and age, and writing his answers down in a big-paged book.

?Half-a-dollar a day and keep, for the present,? he said.

?All right,? nodded Andy??it?s a start.?

?Just so. Let me see. Ah, here we are. Report to the Wild Man of Borneo side top at twelve.?

?Yes, sir.?

?Hammer the big triangle there till two. Then?let me see again. Know how to ride a horse??

?Oh, yes,? replied Andy eagerly.

?All right, at two o?clock report for the jockey ring section at the horse tent. They?ll hand you a costume.?

Scripps wrote a number on a red ticket and handed this to Andy?his pass as an employee. Just then a newcomer bundled up the steps unceremoniously, a red-faced, fussy old fellow.

?Mail?s in,? he announced. ?Give me the O.K.?

Scripps fumbled in a drawer of his desk and brought out a rubber stamp and pad.

?Mind your eye, Rip,? he observed, casting a scrutinizing look over the intruder.

?Which eye?? demanded the old fellow.

?The one that sees a bottle and glass the quickest.?

?H?m!? grumbled Ripley, or ?Rip Van Winkle,? as he was familiarly known by the show people. ?My eyes are all right. Don?t fret. I?ve been twenty years with this here show, man and boy??

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?Yes, yes, we know all about that,? interrupted Scripps. ?You?re seasoned, right enough. Don?t leave the rig to come home without a driver, though, and money letters aboard, as you did last week. Here is a new hand. Break him in to keep his time employed.?

Ripley viewed Andy with some disfavor. Evidently he regarded him as a sort of guardian.

Andy, however, silently followed him outside. Ripley soon reached a close vehicle, boarded up back of the seat and with two doors at the rear.

A big-boned mottled horse, once evidently a beauty, was between the shafts. As Andy lifted himself to the seat beside Ripley, the latter made a peculiar, purring: ?Z-rr-rp, Lute!?

He did not even take up the reins. The horse, with a neigh and a frisky dance movement of the forefeet, started up.

?Right, left, slow, Lute. Turn?now go??Ripley gave a dozen directions within the next five minutes. He was showing off for Andy?s benefit. The latter was, in fact, pleased. The animal obeyed every direction with a precision and intelligence that fairly amazed the boy.

Finally getting to a clear course outside the circus tangle, Ripley took up the reins.

He set his lips and uttered two sharp whistles, ending in a kind of hiss.

Andy was very nearly jerked out of his seat He had to hold on to its side bar. For about five hundred yards the horse took a sprint that knocked off his cap and fairly took his breath away.

?Say, he?s great!? Andy exclaimed irrepressibly, as Ripley slowed down again.

?I guess so,? nodded the latter, aroused out of his crustiness by Andy?s enthusiasm. ?That Lucille was famous, once. Past her prime a little now, but when her old driver has the reins, she don?t forget, does she??

Ripley took a turn into a side street and finally halted, giving Andy the reins.

?Got to order something,? he said.

Andy saw him enter a store, but only to leave it by a side door and cross an alley into a saloon.

Ripley tried to appear very business-like when he came back to the wagon, but Andy caught the taint of liquor in his breath.

Twice again the circus veteran made stops in the same manner. He became quite chatty and confidential.

Ripley explained to Andy that he went regularly for the circus mail at each town where the show stopped.

?Postmasters kick, with five hundred strangers calling for their mail,? he explained, ?so we always forward a list of the employees. This mail, just before pay day, when the crowd is usually hard up, brings a good many money letters from friends. That rubber stamp you saw the manager give me O.K.?s all the registered cards at the post office. Once the wagon was robbed. The looters made quite a haul. Not when I was on duty, though.?

At a drug store Ripley got several packages and some more at a general merchandise store. Finally they reached the post office, and Ripley drove around to a sort of hitching alley at its side.

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?Come with me to see how we do things,? he invited Andy. ?Bring along those two mail bags.?

Andy had already noticed the bags. One was quite large. It was made of canvas, with a snap lock. The other was of leather, and smaller in size.

Swinging these over his shoulder, Ripley entered the post-office. He showed his credentials from the circus, and was admitted behind the letter cases of the places.

Andy watched him receive over a hundred letters and packages, receipting for the same on registry delivery cards. This lot he placed in the small leather bag.

The ordinary mail lay sorted out for the circus on a stamping table. This went into the big canvas pouch.

The circus newspaper mail was ready tagged in a hempen sack. Ripley carried this out to Andy.

?Toss it in the wagon,? he ordered, following with the letter pouches.

Andy opened the back doors of the wagon and tossed in the newspaper bag.

?Say, back in a minute,? observed Ripley, depositing his own burdens on the front wagon seat.

Andy stood watching him. Ripley rounded a corner in the alley where a wooden finger indicated a side entrance to a hotel bar. Ripley?s failing was manifest, and Andy decided that he did, indeed, need a guardian.

The wagon stood on a space quite secluded from the street. Near the entrance to the alley several men were lounging about.

Andy carried the leather pouch with him as he went around to the open doors at the rear of the wagon.

He climbed in, and stowed the newspaper bag and what packages they had already collected in a tidy pile. Ripley had indicated that there was quite a miscellaneous load to pick up about town before they returned to the circus.

Andy was thus employed when the rear doors came together with a sharp snap.

They shut him in a close prisoner, for they were self-locking, on the outside only.

Andy, in complete darkness, now groped back to the doors. He heard quick, suppressed tones outside.

The vehicle jolted. Some one had jumped to the front seat. A whip snapped. Old Lute started up with a bound, throwing Andy off his footing. ?Send her spinning!? reached him in a muffled voice from the front seat.

?Jump with the bag when we turn that old shed,? answered other tones. ?Why, say! There?s only one mail bag.?

?I saw them bring out two. I am dead sure of it.?

?And this is only common letters.?

?How do you know??

?Jim Tapp described them??get the leather one,? he says. ?It?s got the money mail in it.??

?Then where is it??

?The kid must have it.?

?Inside the wagon??

?Yes.?

?Whoa.?

With a sharp jerk the horse was pulled to a halt.

Andy heard the two men on the seat jump to the ground. He knew that their motive was robbery. He knew further that this was another plot of bad Jim Tapp, the friend and associate of criminals.

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In another minute the men would open the wagon doors, pull him out, perhaps assault him, take the registered mail and fly.

Andy had only a second to act in. He theorized that the wagon, following the alley, was now probably halted in some secluded side lane.

To escape the clutches of the would-be robbers was everything. Andy, having no weapon of defence, was no match for them.

?If the rig once reaches the crowded streets, I?m safe,? thought Andy.

Then he carried out a speedy programme. Forming his lips in a pucker, as he had seen Ripley do, Andy uttered two sharp whistles, then a clear, resounding hiss.

?Thunder!? yelled a voice outside.

?Ouch!? echoed a second.

The horse had given one wild, prodigious bound at hearing the familiar signal.

The vehicle must have grazed one of the thieves. Its front wheels knocked the other down.

?My! I?m in for it,? instantly decided Andy.

For, swayed from side to side, he realized that the circus wagon was dashing forward at runaway speed.

CHAPTER XVII

A WILD JOURNEY

Andy Wildwood found himself in a box, in more ways than one.

Judging from the sounds he had heard, the men bent on securing the registered mail pouch had been baffled. The old circus horse had started on a sudden and surprisingly swift sprint. From the feeling of turns, jerks and swings, Andy decided that within four minutes the rig had left the post-office fully half-a-mile to the rear.

?I?ve started the horse all right,? said Andy. ?Old Ripley?s signal has acted like a charm. How to stop the animal, though. That is the present question??

Andy ran at the two rear doors of the wagon. He steadied himself, arms extended so as to touch either side of the box. Then he gave the doors a tremendous kick with the sole of his shoe.

The doors did not budge. He felt over their inner surfaces where they came together. The lock was set in the wood. They could be opened only from the outside.

The wagon box had one aperture, Andy discovered. This was a small ventilating grating up in one corner above the seat.

He sprang up on the newspaper bag. This brought his eyes on a level with the grating. It was about four by six inches, with slanting slats. Andy could see down at the horse and ahead along the road.

He grew excited and somewhat uneasy as he looked out. Lute was a sight for a race track. Her head down, mane flowing, tail extended, she was covering the ground with tremendous strides.

Farther back on the route Andy had felt the wagon collide with curbs and with other vehicles. Once there was a crash and a yell, and he felt sure they had taken a wheel off a rig they passed. Now, however, they appeared to be quite clear of the town proper.

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The road ahead was a slanting one. A steep grade fully half-a-mile long led to a stone bridge crossing a river. It was so steep that Andy wondered that Lute did not stumble. The wagon wheels ground and slid so that the vehicle lifted at the rear, as if its own momentum would cause a sudden tip-over.

?We?ll never reach the bottom of the hill,? decided Andy. ?My! we?re going!?

He shouted out words of direction to the horse he had heard Ripley employ. Lute did not hear, at least did not heed. Andy remembered now that in stopping the horse Ripley had used the reins.

He held his breath as, striking a rut, the wagon bounded up in the air. He clung for dear life, with one hand clutching the ventilator bars as the vehicle was flung sideways over ten feet, threatening to snap off the wheels, which bent and cracked on their axles at the terrific strain.

Contrary to Andy?s anticipations they neared the bottom of the hill without a mishap. Suddenly, however, he gave a shout. A new danger threatened.

The bridge had large stone posts where it began. Then a frail wooden railing was its only side protection. The roadway was not very broad. Two full loads of hay could never have passed one another on that bridge.

?There?s a team coming,? breathed Andy. ?We?ll collide, sure. Whoa! whoa!? he yelled through the grating. ?No use. It?s a smash, and a bad one.?

Andy fixed a distressed glance on the team half-way across the bridge. A collision was inevitable. Lute, striking the level, only increased her already terrific rate of speed.

Andy took heart, however, as she swerved to one side.

The intelligent animal appeared to enjoy her wild runaway, and wanted to keep it up. Apparently she aimed to keep precisely to her own side of the road and avoid a collision.

The driver of the team coming had jumped from his seat and pulled his rig to the very edge of the planking. All might have gone well but for a slight miscalculation.

As Lute?s feet struck the bridge plankway, she pressed close to the right. The wagon swerved. The front end of the box landed squarely against the stone post.

The shock was a stunning one. It tore the wagon shafts, harness and all, clear off the horse. With a circling twist the vehicle reversed like lightning. The box struck the wooden rail. This snapped like a pipe stem.

Lute, dashed on like a whirlwind, the driver of the other team staring in appalled wonder, the box slid clear of the plankway and went whirling to the river bed fifteen feet below.

Andy was thrown from side to side. Then, as the wagon landed, a new crash and a new shock dazed his wits completely. He was hurled the length of the box, his head fortunately striking where the newspaper bag intervened.

Judging from the concussion, Andy decided that the wagon box had landed on a big rock in the river bed. There it remained stationary. He struggled to an upright position. One arm was badly wrenched. His face was grazed and bleeding.

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?If I don?t get out some way,? he panted, ?I?ll drown.?

It looked that way. He felt a great spurt of water, pouring in rapidly when the ventilator dipped under the surface. Then, too, the crash had wrenched the box structure at various seams. Water was forcing its way in, bottom, sides and top.

From ankle-deep to knee-deep, Andy stood helpless. Then, locating the door end of the vehicle, he drew back and massed all his muscle for a supreme effort. Shoulders first Andy posed, and then threw himself forward, battering-ram fashion. He felt he must act and that quickly, or else the worst might be his own.

CHAPTER XVIII

A FREAK OF NATURE

The doors at the rear of the wagon box gave way as Andy?s body met their inner surface with full force. He stood now on a slant, his body submerged to the waist.

The box had crashed on top of one big flat rock in the river bed, and had tilted on this foundation against another upright rock. But for this it might have gone clear under water or floated down stream, and Andy might have been drowned.

All through his stirring runaway experience Andy had kept possession of the registered mail pouch. It was still slung from his shoulder as he gazed around him. He was careful lest he disturb the equilibrium of the wreck. He found out now that the door hinges had been knocked clear off and the frame badly wrenched in its fall.

?Hello! hello!? shouted an excited voice overhead.

?Hello yourself,? sang back Andy, looking up.

The driver of the team into which the runaway had so nearly dashed stood looking down from the bridge planking. His eyes stared wide as Andy suddenly appeared like a jack-in-the-box.

?Was you in there?? gulped the man.

?I was nowhere else,? answered Andy. ?Say, mister, where?s that horse??

?Oh, he?s all right. See him??

The man pointed along the other shore of the river bank. Lute had crossed the bridge. She had now taken herself to some marshy grass stretches, and was grazing placidly.

Andy was about twenty feet from the shore. He could nearly make it by jumping from rock to rock, he thought. At one or two places, however, the current ran strong and deep, and he saw that he might have to do some swimming.

?See here,? he called up to the man on the bridge, ?have you got a rope??

?Yes,? nodded the man.

?Long enough to reach down here??

?I guess so. Let?s try. Wait a minute.?

He went to his wagon. Shortly he dropped a new stout rope used in securing hay loads. It had length and to spare.

Andy tied the mail pouch to its end. Then he groped under water in the wagon box. He managed to fish out the various parcels it held, including the newspaper bag.

These he sent up first. Then the man at the other end braced the cable against a railing post. Andy came up the rope with agility.

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He stamped and shook the water from his soaked shoes and clothing. The mail bag he again suspended across his shoulders.

?Hi, another runaway!? suddenly exclaimed his companion.

Andy traced an increasing clatter of a horse?s hoofs and wagon wheels to a rig descending the hill at breakneck speed.

?No,? he said. ?It?s Ripley.?

?Who?s he??

?The man who drove that wagon. Stop! stop!? cried Andy, springing into the middle of the bridge roadway and waving his arms.

The rig came up. It was driven by a man wearing a badge. Andy decided he was some local police officer. Ripley was fearfully excited and his face showed it.

?What did you do with that wagon?? sputtered Ripley, jumping to the plankway.

Andy pointed down at the river bed and then at the distant horse. Briefly as he could he narrated what had occurred.

Ripley nearly had a fit. He instantly realized that whoever was to blame for the runaway, it was not Andy.

?Where?s the mail?? he asked.

?There?s the newspaper bag,? said Andy; ?here?s the registered mail pouch. Those thieves took the other bag of mail.?

?They did? Do you hear, officer? Get after them quick, won?t you? Never mind us. Describe them, kid.?

?How can I, when I never saw them?? said Andy.

Ripley groaned and wrung his hands. He was in a frenzy of distress and indecision.

?See here,? spoke the officer to him. ?You had better go after that horse. Your wagon isn?t worth fishing up. Got all there was in it, lad??

?Yes, sir,? answered Andy.

?Very well, bundle that bag and those packages in here, and come with me. It?s good you held on to that registered stuff.?

Ripley started after the runaway horse. The officer hurried townwards, questioning Andy closely. He stopped at the post-office and made some inquiries among the crowd loitering about its vicinity. Then he drove to the town hall, went into his office, jumped in the buggy again, and they proceeded toward the circus.

?I?ve got a vague description of your two men,? he told Andy, ?but that isn?t much, with so many strangers in town. You think they are partners of that Rapp, whom the circus people know??

?Tapp?Jim Tapp,? corrected Andy. ?Yes, they mentioned his name.?

?The circus detectives ought to handle this case, then,? said the village officer. ?I?d better see them right away.?

The manager of the show regarded Andy in some wonderment as he and the officer unceremoniously entered his presence. His excitement increased as Andy recited his story.

?I warned Ripley,? he exclaimed. ?Well, he shan?t play the spoiled pet any longer. As to you, Wildwood, you deserve credit for your pluck. I?ll have a talk with you when we get to Tipton. Too shaken up to do a little general utility work, till I can arrange for something better??

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?Not at all, sir,? answered Andy promptly.

Andy saw that he had made a good impression on the manager. The latter was pleased with him and interested in him. Andy waited outside the tent. Soon the village officer and two of the circus detectives sought him out. These latter questioned him on their own behalf.

?Daley, Murdock and Tapp are in this,? one of them remarked definitely. ?They haven?t got much, this time. The next break, though, may be for the ticket wagon. They?ve got to be squelched.?

Andy put in a busy, pleasant day. He was getting acquainted, he was becoming versed in general circus detail.

For an hour he hammered the huge triangle in front of a side show, as directed. At the afternoon rehearsal he was one of twenty dressed like jockeys in the ring parade.

Afterwards Andy was making for the clown?s tent, when a fat, red-faced, perspiring fellow, aproned as a cook, hailed him.

?Belong to show?? he asked, waving a frying pan.

?Sure, I do,? answered Andy, proudly.

?Help me a little, will you??

?Glad to. What can I do??

?Open these lard and butter casks and carry them in. I haven?t time. There?s a hatchet. My stuff is all burning up inside.?

A hissing splutter of his ovens made the cook dive into his tent. Andy picked up a chisel dropped by the cook. He opened six casks standing on the ground and carried them inside.

The cooking odor pervading the place was very pleasing. The cook?s assistants were few, some of the regulars were absent, Andy guessed from what he heard the cook say. The latter was rushed to death, and jumping from stove to stove and utensil to utensil in a great flutter of excitement and haste for he was behind in his work.

Andy caught on to the situation. In a swift, quiet way he anticipated the cook?s needs. He dipped and dried some skillets near a trough of water. He sharpened some knives. He carried some charcoal hods nearer to a stove needing replenishing.

After awhile the cook began to whistle cheerily. His perplexities were lessening, and he felt good humored over it.

?Things in running order,? he chirped. ?You?re a game lad. Hold on a minute.?

The cook emptied out a smoking pan into which he had placed a mass of batter a few minutes previous.

?Don?t burn yourself?it?s piping hot,? he observed, tendering Andy a tempting raisin cake, enough for two meals.

?Oh, thank you,? said Andy.

?Thank you, lad. Whenever you need a bite between meals, just drop in.?

Andy came out of the tent passing the cake from hand to hand. He caught a newspaper sheet fluttering by, wadded it up, and surmounted it with the hot cake.

?That?s better,? he said. ?My, it looks appetizing. Beg pardon,? added Andy, as rounding a tent he ran against a boy about his own age.

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At a glance he saw that the stranger did not belong to the show. He was poorly dressed, but clean-faced and bright-eyed, although he limped like a person who had walked too far and too long for comfort.

?My fault,? said the stranger. ?I?ve done nothing but gape since I came here. Say, this circus is a regular city in itself, isn?t it??

?Yes,? answered Andy. ?Stranger here??

The boy nodded. He studied Andy?s face quite anxiously.

?Look here,? he said, ?you look honest. Some lemonade boys I asked sent me astray with all kinds of wrong information. You won?t, will you??

?Certainly not,? said Andy. ?What?s the trouble??

?Is it hard to get a talk with the circus manager??

?Why, no.?

?Is it hard to join the show??

?I have just joined,? said Andy.

?Is that so?? exclaimed the stranger, brightening up. ?Was it hard to get in??

?Not particularly. What did you expect to do??

?Anything for a start,? responded the other eagerly. ?Only, my ambition is to be an animal trainer.?

Andy became quite interested.

?Why that?? he inquired.

?Because it seems to be my bent. My name is Luke Belding. I?m an orphan. Been brought up on a stock farm, and know all about horses. And say,? added the speaker with intense eagerness, ?if they?ll take me on I?ll throw in a great curiosity.?

He held out what looked like a wooden cage covered with a piece of water-proof cloth.

?Got it in there, have you?? asked Andy.

?Yes. I?ve trained it, and it?s cute. Honest, it?s better as a curiosity, and to make people laugh, than a lot of the novelties they have in the side, tents.?

?Why,? said Andy, with increasing interest, ?what may it be, now??

?Well,? answered Luke, ?it?s a chicken.?

?Oh. Two-headed, three-legged, I suppose, or something of that sort??

?Not at all. No,? said Luke Belding, ?this is something you never saw before. It?s a chicken that walks backward.?

CHAPTER XIX

CALLED TO ACCOUNT

Andy burst out laughing,?he could not help it.

?That?s strange,? he said. ?A chicken that walks backward??

?Yes,? answered Luke Belding, soberly.

?Really does it??

?Oh, sure. All the time. I?ve got it here. I?ll show you.?

Luke made a move as if to remove the cloth cover from the box under his arm, but Andy stopped him.

?Hold on,? he said. ?Come with me till I get rid of this cake, and then you shall show me.?

?H?m!? observed Luke, smacking his lips with a longing look at the cake, ?it wouldn?t take me long to get rid of it!?

?Hungry?? insinuated Andy.

?Desperately. I?d be almost tempted to sell a half-interest in the chicken for a good square meal.?

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?You shall have one without any such sacrifice,? declared Andy. ?Come along.?

They found the clown?s tent empty.

?Billy Blow is probably giving Midget an airing,? said Andy, half to himself.

?Who?s Billy Blow?? inquired Luke.

?The clown.?

?Do you know a real live clown? Say, that?s great!? said Luke. ?Must keep a fellow laughing all the time.?

?I thought so until yesterday,? answered Andy. ?But no?they have their troubles, like other people. This poor, sorrowful fellow has his fill of it. He don?t do much laughing outside of the ring, I can tell you. There, we?ll enjoy the cook?s gift together.?

Andy drew up the bench and handed Luke fully three-quarters of the toothsome dainty. It pleased him to see the half-famished boy enjoy the feast. Luke poked a good-sized piece of the sake under the cage cover. There was a gladsome cluck.

?Two of us happy,? announced Luke, with a smile that won Andy?s heart.

Andy decided that his new acquaintance was the right sort. Luke had a clear, honest face, and there was something in his eye that inspired confidence.

?Now, then,? said Andy, as his companion munched the last crumb of the cake, ?let?s see your wonderful curiosity.?

?I?ll do it,? replied Luke with alacrity. ?Find me a little stick or switch, will you??

Andy went outside to hunt for the required article. As he returned with a stake splinter he observed that Luke had uncovered and set down the cage, which was a rude wooden affair.

Near it, with a pertly cocked head and magnificently red feathers, stood a small rooster. Luke took the stick from Andy?s hand.

?Walk, Bolivar!? he ordered.

Andy began to laugh. It was a comical sight. The rooster went strutting around the tent backwards as rapidly and steadily as a normal chicken. It was ludicrous to watch it proceed, pecking at the ground and turning corners.

?Now, then, Bolivar!? said Luke.

He used the stick to direct the rooster, which kept time first with one foot and then the other to a tune whistled by its owner, ending with a triple pirouette that was superb.

?Well, that?s fine!? commented Andy with enthusiasm. ?How did you ever train it??

?Didn?t,? responded Luke frankly??except for the dancing. I?ve done that with crows and goats, many a time. See here,? and he picked up the chicken and extended its feet.

?Why,? cried Andy, ?it was born with its claws turned backwards!?

?That?s it,? nodded Luke. ?See? A regular freak of nature. Odd enough to put among the curiosities??

?It certainly is,? voted Andy. ?The circus wouldn?t use it, though?just a side show.?

?I don?t care,? said Luke, ?as long as I get started in with the show. Can you help me??

?I?ll try to,? declared Andy. ?Wait here. I want to find Billy Blow and tell him about this.?

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Andy went about the circus grounds until he discovered the clown. Billy was quite taken with the chicken, and finally decided to try and place the boy with his freak.

He and Luke went away together. When he came back the clown was alone. He told Andy that one of the side shows had agreed to try Luke and his wonderful chicken for at least a week for the food and keep of both.

Andy went on with the jockey riders in the evening performance. The last performance at Clifton was the next forenoon. He had only a glimpse of Marco and others of his acquaintance meantime, with everything on a rush.

?You see, Tipton is a regular vacation for us folks,? Billy Blow explained to him. ?Country around isn?t populous enough for more than one day?s performances, and then only when the county fair is on. We rest two days, and play Saturday. Then is your chance. There?s a good deal of shifting and taking on new hands. We?ll watch out for you. You?ll see some fun, too. All the new aspirants have been told to show up at Tipton.?

?Are there many??

?About five to every town we?ve played in,? declared Billy. ?They all want to break in, and it?s policy to give them a show.?

Andy was sent off by the manager to the superintendent of the moving crew about noon. There was considerable lifting to do. Andy was tired when, about six o?clock in the evening, he climbed up on a loaded wagon for the well-earned ride to Tipton.

He had met one of the circus detectives that morning, who told him they had so far discovered no trace of Jim Tapp, or his colleagues, or the stolen mail bag.

They got to Tipton about eight o?clock in the evening. Andy was ?told off? to help in the construction work the next morning, and had now twelve hours of his own time.

He was hungry, and knowing that it would be difficult to get much to eat until late, when the cook?s quarters had been re-established, he left the wagon as it reached the principal street in Tipton.

Andy went to a restaurant and got a good meal. He decided to stroll about a bit, and then join the clown in his new quarters.

Andy had been to Tipton before. His aunt had some acquaintances there. He walked up and down the principal street, looking in the store windows, and studying the country people who had come to visit the county fair.

Suddenly Andy drew back into the shadow of a doorway. Leaning against a curb hitching post was a person who enchained his attention.

?It?s Tapp?Jim Tapp,? said Andy. ?I?d know that slouch of his shoulders anywhere.?

The person under his inspection was swinging a light bamboo cane and smoking a cigarette. He wore a jet black moustache and a jet black speck of a goatee. Moustache and goatee were unmistakably of the variety Andy had seen a circus fakir selling for twenty-five cents, back at Clifton.

Their wearer kept his back to the lighted windows, so that his face was in partial shadow. He also kept taking sidelong glances up and down the curb, as if expecting some one.

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Andy watched him for fully five minutes, made up his mind, and at last stealthily glided up behind him.

Seizing both the fellow?s arms, he whirled him around face to face, let go of him, and with two quick movements of one hand tore the false moustache and the false goatee from his face. His surmises were correct. It was Jim Tapp.

The latter gave Andy a quick, startled glance.

?Wildwood!? he said, and switched his cane towards Andy?s face.

?No, you don?t!? cried Andy, grasping his arms again. ?Jim Tapp, the circus people want you.?

?Let go. Nobody wants me. I?ve done nothing.?

?Call Benares Brothers, the stake your partner hit me with, the stolen mail bag, nothing?? demanded Andy. ?You?ll come along with me or I?ll call the police.?

Tapp glanced sharply about. So far nobody seemed to particularly notice them. He threw out his own arms and grasped Andy in turn. Thus interlocked, he threw out a foot. Andy was taken off his guard. He went toppling, but he never let go of his antagonist. Both landed with a crash on the board sidewalk.

There was a vacant lot just next to a brilliantly lighted store. As they took a roll, they landed nearly at the inner edge of the walk.

?There!? panted Andy, ?you won?t trip me again.?

He was the stronger of the two, and got Tapp on his back. Sitting astride of him, Andy caught both hands at the wrists.

?Let go!? panted Tapp. ?Say, don?t draw a crowd. I?ll go with you.?

?You?ll go with a policeman,? declared Andy, glancing along the walk. ?There?ll be one here soon, for the crowd?s coming.?

?Fight! fight!? yelled three or four urchins, dashing up to the spot.

Others came hurrying along from inspecting the store windows.

?What?s the row?? demanded a man.

?Fair fight. Let him up. Give him a chance,? growled a low-browed fellow, also approaching.

?What is it? what is it?? inquired a fussy old lady, craning her neck towards the combatants.

?Say,? ground out Tapp, vainly endeavoring to free himself, ?let me up. It will pay you. Say, I can tell you something great.?

?Can you?? smiled Andy calmly. ?Tell it to the police.?

?Hold on,? proceeded Tapp. ?I?m not fooling. I know something. I can put you on to something big.?

?How big?? insinuated Andy, disbelievingly.

?I can, I vow I can! I?m in dead earnest. Say, Wildwood, nobody knows it but me?you? re an heir??

?Eh? Bosh! I guess your heir is all hot air. Ah, here comes the policeman?oh, gracious! My aunt!?

Andy Wildwood let go his hold of Jim Tapp. With startled eyes, in sheer dismay he stared at a woman approaching them, her curiosity aroused by the crowd.

It was his aunt, Miss Lavinia Talcott.

CHAPTER XX

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ANDY?S ESCAPE

Jim Tapp gave a great wriggle as Andy involuntarily let go his hold of the young rascal. His ferret-like eyes twinkled and followed the glance of Andy?s own.

Tapp was too keen a fellow not to observe that Andy was startled and unnerved by the unexpected appearance of some one on the scene.

He probably caught the words spoken by Andy: ?My aunt,? and presumably identified Miss Lavinia Talcott as the cause of the boy?s disquietude. Further, Jim Tapp knew that Andy had run away from home and had been sought for by the police. As it turned out later in Andy Wildwood?s career, Jim Tapp knew a great deal more than all this put together. In fact, he knew some things of which Andy never dreamed.

Andy had been completely driven off his balance at the sight of his aunt. It was natural that she should be at Tipton. She went there quite often. Loneliness at home and the variety of the county fair at Tipton had probably induced her to make the present visit.

Instantly Andy thought of but one thing?to escape recognition. Still, the minute he let go of Tapp his presence of mind returned, and he was sorry he had lost his nerve on an impulse. It would have been quite an easy thing to roll and force his antagonist over the sidewalk edge. Now, however, Tapp had wriggled past his reach.

Andy made one grab for him, prostrate on the planks now, missed, rolled along, and dropped squarely over the inner edge of the walk five feet down into the vacant lot below.

?She didn?t see me,? he panted??I?m sure she didn?t. Too bad, though! I had that fellow, Tapp, tight. Why should I lose him, even now??

Andy ran under the sidewalk for about ten feet. He rounded a heap of sand and glided up a slant where an alley cut in. There he paused, hidden by a big billboard. Peering past this barrier he could view the crowd he had just left.

?Thief?stop thief!? fell in a frantic yell on his hearers.

To his surprise it was Jim Tapp who uttered the call. He was flinging about in great excitement. As a police officer ran up, Andy saw him pointing into the vacant lot. He also evidently told some specious story to the officer.

The latter jumped into the lot, and two or three followed him. Andy saw that he was in danger of discovery, and directed a last glance at the crowd on the sidewalk. He saw his aunt?s bobbing bonnet retreating from the scene. He also saw Jim Tapp, apparently following her. He did not dare to go in the same direction.

Andy dodged down the alley and came out on the next street. He looked vainly for the two persons in whom he was interested. He failed to locate them, and then proceeded in the direction of the circus grounds. He was very thoughtful, and in a measure worried and uneasy.

?Tapp is pretty smart,? soliloquized Andy. ?He?s mean, too. If he noticed that I was flustered and afraid of Aunt Lavinia seeing me, and guesses who she is and connects my running away from home with her, he would tell her where I am just out of spite. Wonder if she could have me arrested here, in another State??

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Andy was too tired to stay awake over this problem when he located the clown?s new quarters. Before he retired, however, he got word to the circus manager that Jim Tapp was evidently following the circus, and had been seen in Tipton that very evening.

The next morning Andy was too busy to give the matter of his aunt?s near proximity much thought. He worked with a gang hoisting the main tent until nearly noon.

?Hi, Wildwood!? hailed a friendly voice, as Andy was leaving the cook?s tent an hour later.

The speaker was Marco. He made a few inquiries as to how Andy was getting along. Then he said: ?I saw Miss Stella Starr this morning. You know the manager, of course??

?Mr. Scripps?yes,? nodded Andy.

?Well, about two o?clock they?re going to line up the amateurs in the performance tent. You be there.?

?All right,? said Andy.

?Benares and Thacher will be on hand. You?ll see some fun. Afterwards they?ll put you through some stunts in dead earnest. It?s your chance to get in on the tumbling act. Would you like that??

?I should say so?if I can do it good enough.?

?Well, try, anyhow. If you?re not up to average, Benares will train you. He?s taken a fancy to you, and he?ll help you along. Some of the tumblers leave us here, and they? re shy on a full number. If they take you, stick hard for ten dollars.?

?A month?? said Andy.

?No, a week.?

?Gracious!? exclaimed Andy, ?that?s too good to come out true.?

?Stick and strive, Wildwood?the motto will win,? declared Marco.

When Andy went to the performers? tent at two o?clock, he found over fifty persons there. In its centre a balancing bar had been put up. An old circus horse stood at one side. Some low trapezes were swung from a post. A number of the circus people were lounging on benches in one corner of the tent. In another corner on other benches some twenty persons, mostly boys, were gathered.

?Here, you?re not on show yet,? spoke Benares, the trapezist, pulling Andy beside him as he passed along. ?Your turn will come after they get rid of those aspirants yonder.?

CHAPTER XXI

A FULL-FLEDGED ACROBAT

The circus manager sat in a chair at the edge of a little sawdust ring that had been marked out for the occasion. The ringmaster stood near him, in charge of the ceremonies.

?Now, then, my friends,? observed this individual in a sharp, snappy way, ?you people want a chance to get on as performers. That?s good. We are always looking for fresh talent. Show your paces. Who?s first??

A big, loutish fellow with an ungainly walk stepped forward. He was wrapped up in a tarpaulin. As he let it drop it was like a transformation scene.

It seemed that some of the mischievous candy peddlers had got hold of him. They had induced him to appear for trial in costume.

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He wore a pair of tights three sizes too small for him. They had powdered his hair with fine sawdust and daubed his face with chalk and dyes. They had stuffed out his stockings until his calves resembled sticks of knotted wood.

The manager nearly fell over in his chair with repressed laughter. The audience was one vast chuckle.

?Well, sir,? spoke up the ringmaster, with difficulty keeping a straight face, ?what can you do??

?I?d like to be a clown,? grinned the victim.

?A clown, sir. Good. Let?s see you act.?

The fellow capered into the ring. One stocking came down, letting out a quart of sawdust. One tight split up to the knee as he made a jig step that brought the tears to the eyes of Billy Blow, who, with his boy, had come to witness the show.

Then the fellow sang a funny song. It was funny. His voice was cracked, his delivery dolorous. He began to shuffle at the end of it.

?Faster, faster, sir!? cried the ringmaster, snapping his whip across the bare limb exposed. ?Faster, I tell you!?

?Ouch!? yelled the aspirant.

?Come, sir, faster. I say faster, faster, faster! Purely ring practice, my friend. We do this to all the clowns, you know.?

With the pitiless accuracy of a bullwhacker the ringmaster pursued his victim. The whip-lash landed squarely every time, biting like a hornet. The aspirant was now on the run.

?Stop! Don?t! Help!? he roared. ?I don?t want to be a clown!? and with a bellow he ran out of the tent, followed by the hooting candy peddlers.

?Well, who are you?? demanded the ringmaster of two colored boys who stepped forward.

?Double trapeze act, sir,? said one of them.

?Oh, here you are. Let?s see what you can do.?

The ringmaster set free the temporary trapeze rigging.

These aspirants did quite well, singly. When they doubled, however, there was trouble.

The one swinging from the hands of the other lost his grip. He caught out wildly, grabbed at the shirt sleeve of his partner to save himself. This tightened the garment at the neck. Then it gave way, buttons and all. Both tumbled to the ground. They began upbraiding one another, came to blows, and the ringmaster sent them about their business, saying the show could not encourage prize fighters.

The programme continued. There was an ambitious lad who was quite a wonder at turning rapid cartwheels. Another did some creditable pole balancing. One old man wanted to serve as a magician. All had a chance, but their merit was not distinguished enough to warrant their engagement.

Most of the crowd filed out when the last of the amateurs had done his ?stunt.? Benares then stepped up to the ringmaster and beckoned to Andy.

At his direction Andy threw off his coat and hat, and old Benares led the horse Andy had noticed into the main tent. It was a steady-paced, slow-going steed. The ringmaster got it started around the ring.

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?Do your best now, Wildwood,? whispered Marco, who with the clown and the manager had followed into the main tent.

Andy was on his mettle. He made a run, took a leap and landed on the platform on the horse?s back just as he had done a hundred times back at Fairview.

?Very good,? nodded the ringmaster, as Andy rode around the ring, posing, several times.

?Try the spring plank next,? suggested the manager.

The single and double somersault were Andy?s specialty. The apparatus was superb. He was not quite perfect, but old Benares patted him on the shoulder after several efforts, with the words:

?Fine?vary fine.?

Andy did some creditable twisting on the trapeze, the manager and the ringmaster conversing together, meantime.

?Report to me in the morning,? said the latter to Andy at last.

Marco followed the manager as he left the tent. He came back with a pleased expression of face.

?It?s all right, lad,? he reported. ?You?re in the ring group as a sub. He tried to chisel me down, but I insisted on fair pay, and it?s ten dollars a week for you.?

Andy was delighted. That amount seemed a small fortune to him. No danger now of not being able to pay back to Graham the borrowed five dollars and his other Fairview debts.

Benares took him in hand after the others had left. He gave him a great many training suggestions. He led him into the regular practicing tent and showed him ?the mecanique.? This was a device with a wooden arm from which hung an elastic rope. Harnessed in this, a performer could attempt all kinds of contortions without scoring a fall.

Benares also showed Andy how to make effective standing somersaults by ?the tuck trick,? This was to grasp both legs tightly half-way between the knees and ankles, pressing them close together. At the same time the acrobat was to put the muscles of the shoulders and back in full play. The combined muscular force acted like a balance-weight of a wheel, and enabled that neat, finished somersault which always brought down the house.

?You ought to try the slack wire, too, when you get a chance,? advised Benares. ?We?ll try you on the high trapeze in the triple act, some time. Glad you?re in the profession, Wildwood, and we?ll all give you a lift when we can.?

Andy felt that he had found some of the best friends in the world, and was a full-fledged acrobat at last as he left the circus tent.

CHAPTER XXII

AMONG THE CAGES

?Hi! Hello?stop, stop.?

?Oh, it?s you, Luke Belding??

Andy, passing through the circus grounds, turned at an eager hail. The owner of the chicken that walked backwards came running after him. He caught Andy?s arm and smiled genially into his face.

?Well,? spoke Andy, surveying Luke in a pleased way. ?You look prosperous.?

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In fact Luke did present signs of a betterment over his first forlorn appearance on the circus scene.

He wore a new jacket and a neat collar and necktie. His face had no trouble in it now. He presented the appearance of a person eminently satisfied with the present and full of hope and animation for the future.

?Prosperous?? he declaimed volubly??I guess I am. Square meals, a sure berth for a week, jolly friends?and, oh, say! you?re one of the true ones.?

?Am I?? smiled Andy??I?m glad to hear you say so.?

?Billy Blow is another. He got me on at a side show. They give me my keep, ten per cent, on what photographs I sell, and togged me out respectable looking, gratis.?

?Good for you,? commended Andy heartily. ?And what of the famous chicken??

?In capital trim. Say, that wise little rooster seems to know he?s on exhibition. There?s some monkeys in our tent. He steals their food, fights them, cuts up all kinds of antics. Boss says he thinks he will be a drawing card. I?ve got him to turn a somersault now. Come on.?

?Come where??

?I want to show you. See there. Isn?t that grand, now??

Luke led Andy into the tent where the side show was. A big frame covered with cheese cloth took up the entire width of the place. Upon this a man with a brush was liberally spreading several quarts of glaring red and yellow paint.

?Greatest Curiosity In The World?Remarkable Freak of Nature?The Famous Bolivar Trick Rooster, Who Walks Backwards??so much of the grand announcement to the circus public had been already painted on the sign.

?They?re bound to give you a chance, anyhow,? observed Andy. ?And I must say I am mighty glad of it.?

?And see here,? continued Luke animatedly. ?Come on, old fellow. Easy, now. Ah, he wants a lump of sugar.?

Luke had approached a very strongly-built cage.

Its occupant was one of the largest and ugliest-looking monkeys Andy had ever seen.

It bristled and snarled at Andy, but as Luke opened the cage door leaped into his arms, snuggled there, and began petting his face with one paw.

Luke gave the animal a lump of sugar, coaxed it, stroked it. Then he took it over to where an impromptu slack wire was strung between two posts, and set the monkey on this.

The animal went through some evolutions that were so perfect an imitation of first-class human trapeze performance, that Andy was fairly astonished.

?The people here give me great credit on that,? announced Luke with happy eyes, as he put the monkey back in his cage. ?They were just going to kill him when I came here?

?Kill him?what for?? asked Andy.

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?Oh, he was so savage. He bit off an attendant?s finger, and maimed two smaller monkeys. He wouldn?t do anything but sulk and show his teeth all day long. I got at him. When he first grabbed my hand in his teeth I just let it stay there. Never tried to get it away or fight him. Just looked him in the eyes sort of reproachfully, and began to boo-hoo. Oh, I cried artistic, I did. Say, that monkey just stared at me, dropped my hand and began to bellow at the top of his voice, too. Then he got sorry and licked my hand. A lump of sugar sealed the compact. Why, he?s the smartest animal in the show. You see what he did for me. The people here are delighted. It?s made me solid with them.?

Luke introduced Andy to the ?Wild Man,? a most peaceable-looking individual out of his acting disguise. His wife was the Fat Woman, who did not act as if she was very much afraid of her supposed savage and untamable husband.

?I want you to do something for me,? said Luke, presently. ?Will you??

?I?ll try,? answered Andy.

?I?d like to go through the menagerie. You see I?m not regular, so, while I have the run of the small tops, they won?t pass me in at the big flaps.?

Andy walked over with his new acquaintance to the menagerie. The watchman at the door admitted them at a word from Andy.

The trainers, keepers and manager were busy about the place, feeding the animals, cleaning the cages and the like.

Luke?s eyes sparkled as if at last he found himself in his element. He petted the camels affectionately, and talked to the elephants in a purring, winning tone that made more than one of them look at him as if pleased at his attention.

The lion cages were Luke?s grand centre of interest. He stood watching old Sultan, the king of the menagerie, like one entranced.

Luke began talking to the beast in a musical, coaxing tone. The animal sat grim as a statue. Luke thrust his hand into his pocket. As he withdrew it he rested his fingers on the edge of the cage.

The lion never stirred, but its eyes described a quick, rolling movement.

?Look out!? warned Andy??he?s watching you.?

?I want him to,? answered Luke coolly.

?But??

Luke continued his animal lullaby, he kept extending his hand. Straight up towards the lion?s face he raised his arm fearlessly, now inside the danger line fully to the elbow.

?Hi! Back! Thunder! He?ll eat you alive!? yelled a trainer, discovering the lad?s venturesome position.

?S-sh. Good old fellow. Purr-rr. So?so.?

Old Sultan bristled. Then his corded sinews relaxed. He lowered his muzzle. Andy stroked it gently. The animal sniffed and snuffed at his hand. He began to lick it.

Just then the trainer ran up. He gave Luke a violent jerk backwards, throwing him prostrate in the sawdust. With a frightful roar Sultan sprang at the bars of the cage, glaring apparently not at Luke, but at the trainer.

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?Do you want to lose an arm?? shouted the latter, angrily. ?You chump! that animal is a man-eater.?

?I?m only a boy, though, you see?? said Luke, arising and brushing the sawdust from his clothes. ?He wouldn?t hurt me.?

?Wouldn?t, eh? Why??

?He didn?t, all the same. Did he, now? Say, mister, I?m a side show actor just now, but some day I?ll work up to the cages here. Bet you I can make friends with your fiercest member.?

?Bah! you keep away from those cages.?

?How did you dare to do that?? asked Andy, as the boys came out of the menagerie.

?Why, I?ll tell you,? explained Luke. ?I love animals, and most times they seem to know it. Once a lion tamer summered at our farm on account of poor health. He told me a lot of things about his business. One thing I tried just now. I?ve got a lot of fine sugar flavored with anise in my pocket. When I tackled Sultan I had my hand covered with it. Any wild animal loves the smell of anise. You saw me try it on their champion, and it worked, didn?t it??

?You are a strange kind of a fellow, Luke,? said Andy studying his companion interestedly.

?That so?? smiled Luke. ?I don?t see why. You fancy tumbling. I?m dead gone on the cages. We both have our especial ambitions?say, I haven?t caught your name yet.?

?Andy.?

?All right, Andy. Going to use your full name on the circus posters, or just Andy??

?The circus posters are a long way ahead,? smiled Andy. ?But if I ever get that far I think I?ll use my right name?Andy Wildwood.?

?Eh? What?s that? Andy Wildwood!? exclaimed Luke.

Andy was amazed at a sharp start and shout on the part of his companion.

?Why, what now?? he began.

?Andy Wildwood? Andy?Wildwood?? repeated Luke.

He spoke in a retrospective, subdued tone. He tapped his head as if trying to awaken some sleeping memory.

?Got it now!? he cried suddenly. ?Why, sure, of course. Knew the name in a minute.?

Luke seized and pulled at a lock of his hair as if it was a sprouting idea.

?You came from Fairville,? he resumed.

?Fairview.?

?Then you?re the same. Yes, you must be the fellow?Andy Wildwood, the heir.?

CHAPTER XXIII

FACING THE ENEMY

The young acrobat stared hard at Luke Belding. He wondered if the embryo lion tamer was crazy?or had he not heard him aright?

Instantly Andy?s mind ran back to the encounter with Jim Tapp on the streets of Tipton the evening previous.

This made the second time, then, within twenty-four hours that an allusion had been made to the fact that he was ?an heir.?

Andy knew of no reason why a sudden mystery should come into his life. The coincidence of the double reference to the same thing, however, namely, an alleged heirship, struck him as peculiar.

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?Heir,? he spoke in a bewildered tone??me an heir??

?Yes,? said Luke.

?Heir to what??

?Why?oh, something, I don?t know what. But the thing you?re heir to is there.?

?Where?? persisted Andy.

?I don?t know that, either?Fairview, I reckon.?

?Nonsense. I?ve got nothing at Fairview excepting a lot of debts. I wish you?d explain yourself, Luke. There can?t be anything to your absurd statement.?

?Can?t there?? cried Luke excitedly. ?Well, you just listen and see??

?Oh, Wildwood?been looking for you,? interrupted some one, just there.

Andy looked up to recognize Marco. The latter nodded to Luke, and proceeded to lead Andy away with him.

?Hold on,? demurred Luke.

?You?ll have to excuse your friend just now,? said Marco. ?Very important, Wildwood,? he added.

?What is it, Mr. Marco?? inquired Andy.

Marco showed two folded sheets of writing paper in his hand.

?Your contract with the circus,? he explained. ?There?s a bad hitch in this business. Hope to straighten it out, but we?ll have to get right at it. Come to Billy Blow?s tent. I want to have a private talk with you.?

Andy traced a seriousness in Marco?s manner that oppressed him. Instantly all his mind was fixed on the matter of the contracts.

?I?ll see you a little later, Luke,? he said to his young friend.

?All right,? nodded Luke. ?I?ve got a good deal to tell you. But it will keep.?

When they reached the clown?s tent Marco sat down on the bench beside Andy.

?Business, Wildwood,? he spoke, briskly tapping the papers in his hand. ?I wanted to get you fixed right, and started right in to get a contract from Mr. Scripps.?

?Is that it?? asked Andy.

?Yes, and favorable in every way?your end of it, and the circus end is all right. But there?s another end. That is it. I reckon you?d better get the gist of the trouble by reading it over.?

Marco separated one of the written sheets and passed it to Andy.

?Oh, dear!? cried the latter in dismay the moment his eyes had taken in the general subject matter of the screed before him. ?That settles it.?

Andy?s face ran quickly from consternation to utter gloom.

The document before him was a legally-worded affair awaiting a signature. It stated that ?Miss Lavinia Talcott, guardian relative of Andrew Wildwood, minor, hereby agreed to hold the circus management free from any blame, damage or indemnity in case of accident to the said Andrew Wildwood, this day and date a contracted employee of said circus management.?

?She?ll never sign it!? cried Andy positively. ?How did they come to bring her name into this business, anyhow??

?Hold hard. Don?t get excited, Wildwood,? advised Marco. ?Business is business, even if it is unpleasant sometimes. You?ve got the facts. Don?t grumble at them. Let?s see how we can remedy things.?

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?They can?t be remedied,? declared Andy forcibly. ?Why, Mr. Marco, I wouldn?t meet my aunt for a hundred dollars, and I couldn?t get her to sign any such a paper if it meant a thousand dollars to me.?

Marco stroked his chin thoughtfully and in perplexity.

?Then the jig?s up,? he announced definitely. ?You see, Wildwood, we?ve had all kinds of trouble?suits, judgments, injunctions?along of fellows getting hurt in the show. One man lost an ear in the knife-throwing act. He recovered two thousand dollars damages. Another sprained an ankle. Had to pay him eight dollars a week for six months. Now they put the clause in the contract holding the circus harmless in such matters. Where it?s a minor, they insist further that parent or guardian also sign off all claims.?

?But I have neither,? said Andy. ?Miss Lavinia is only a half-aunt.?

?Well, Miss Starr explained just how matters stood to Mr. Scripps. He hasn?t got time to quibble over your aunt. Her signature fixes it?otherwise you?re left out in the cold.?

Andy was never so dispirited in all his life. He sat dumb and wretched, like a person suddenly finding his house collapsed all about him, and himself in the midst of its ruins.

?Look here, Wildwood,? said Marco kindly, arising after a reflective pause, ?you think this thing over. You?re a pretty smart young fellow, and you?ll disappoint me a good deal if you don?t find some way out of this dilemma.?

Andy shook his head doubtfully. He sat dejected and crestfallen for a full hour. Then he left the circus grounds, evading friends and acquaintances purposely. He went away from the town, reached meadows and woods, and finally threw himself down under a great sheltering tree.

Andy thought hard. There was certainly a check to his show career unless he secured the sanction and cooperation of his aunt.

Judging from existing circumstances, Andy utterly despaired of moving his unlovable, stubborn-minded relative towards any action that would favor him. Especially was this true after he had defied her authority and run away from home.

?If Mr. Harding?s circus won?t take me without this restriction, why should any other show?? mused Andy. ?Oh, dear! Just as things looked so bright and hopeful, to have this happen??

The boy gulped, trying hard to keep back the tears of vexation and disappointment. Then he became indignant. He got actually mad as he decided that he was a victim of rank injustice.

He arose under the spur of violent varied emotions, pacing the spot excitedly, wrestling with the problem that threatened to destroy all his fond youthful ambitions.

Gradually his mind cleared. Gradually, too, a better balance came to his thoughts. He went logically and seriously over the situation.

Daylight was just going as Andy arrived at a heroic decision.

?There?s only one way,? he said slowly and firmly. ?It looks hopeless, but I?m going to try. Yes, make or break, I?m going to face Aunt Lavinia boldly.?

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Andy Wildwood started in the direction of Tipton.

CHAPTER XXIV

ANDY?S AUNT

Andy went straight to an old dwelling house in a retired part of the town.

He had been there twice before when younger, and remembered that an old couple named Norman lived there.

The Normans were distant relatives of his Aunt Lavinia. She had other acquaintances in Tipton, but, Andy recalled, usually made the Norman home her headquarters, paying them some small sum for board and lodging whenever she visited them.

The old ramshackly house stood far back from the street. Its front fence was broken down, and Andy crossed the lot from the side.

There was no light downstairs except in the kitchen at the rear. An upstairs middle room, however, seemed occupied, for chinks of light came through the half-closed outside shutters.

The slats of these were turned upwards, to catch light in the daytime and shut out a view from street and garden.

Just beneath this window was a door and steps. The latter had nearly rotted away, and the door was nailed up and out of use. A framework formed of hoop poles rose up from the steps. Once green vines had enclosed these. At present, however, only a few dead strands clung to the original framework.

The half-open top of this framework was not three feet under the window sill of the lighted room. Across it lay some fishing poles and nets, also some old garden tools, it apparently being used as a catch-all for useless truck about the place for a long time past.

?I?ll assume that aunt is in that room,? thought Andy, halting near the hoop-pole framework and looking up at the window. ?She always has the middle room here. Yes, she is there, and a man with her. Maybe I?d better skirmish around a little, instead of running the risk of being nabbed before I can have an explanation. I want a little private talk with aunt, alone, if I can get it.?

Andy bent his ear. He caught no words, only the sound of human voices. His aunt?s high, strained tones were unmistakable.

He seized one of the supporting poles of the framework. It rattled and quivered, yet he believed it would hold him if he proceeded carefully. It was no trick at all for Andy to make a quiet and rapid ascent. He perched across the top of the framework and raised his head.

Andy saw his aunt closing up a packed satchel on a chair. She had her bonnet on, as if just going out.

At the hallway door was a man taking his leave.

He was excessively polite, hat in hand, and making a most respectful bow.

?Well!? commented Andy, fairly aghast.

Andy recognized the man instantly. He was the individual he had seen in the hay barn. He was Daley?s companion, the man who had ?doctored? the Benares Brothers? trapeze in the circus at Centreville.

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In a flash Andy fancied he understood the situation, the motive of this fellow?s presence here and now.

?Jim Tapp found out my aunt,? theorized Andy rapidly. ?He, this fellow, and the mail thieves are all in a crowd. Murdock here has probably come to tell my aunt that he knows where I am. She may have made a bargain to pay him well if he will kidnap me, or in any way get me back to Fairview. It?s a fine fix to be in!? concluded Andy bitterly.

He was for getting back to the ground, going to the circus, turning in the contract, giving up all hopes of show life, and getting to a safe distance before his enemies could capture him.

?No, I won?t!? resolved Andy a second later, acting on a new impulse. ?At least, not right away. I?ll turn one trick on my enemies, first. The circus detectives want this scoundrel, Murdock, bad. I?ll get down, follow him, and have him arrested the first policeman we meet.?

Andy, bent on a descent, paused. Murdock was speaking.

?Are you going back home to Fairview to-night, Miss Talcott?? he asked.

?Yes,? snapped Andy?s aunt in her usual quick; sharp way.

?Then I will call on you at Fairview.?

?If you want to,? was the ungracious answer.

?No, no,? softly declared the oily rogue??if you want me to, madam. This is your business, Miss Talcott.?

?Oh,? observed Andy?s aunt snappily, ?you?re working for nothing, I suppose??

?I?m not,? frankly answered Murdock. ?I?m working for a fee. What I get, though, is so small compared with what you may get??

?Very well,? interrupted Miss Lavinia, ?when you have this matter in a clear, definite shape, I shall be ready to listen to you.?

?Good evening, then, madam.?

?Evening,? retorted Andy?s aunt with a curt nod, going on with her packing.

Andy rested his hand against the house to get a purchase and leap to the ground.

?Pshaw!? he exclaimed abruptly.

One of the hoop poles bent nearly in two, throwing him off his balance.

Andy caught at the window sill, and his body slipped to one side. He tried to drop, found himself impeded, and held himself steady, looking down.

His rustling about had made something of a racket. As he was seeking to determine what had caught and held the side of his coat, one of the wooden shutters was thrust violently open.

Its edge struck his head. He dodged aside. Then he sat staring, the full light from within the room showing him to its occupant as plain as day.

?Um!? commented Miss Lavinia, simply. ?Some one was there. And you, Andy Wildwood!?

Andy was taken aback. His aunt was not particularly startled. She rather looked stern and suspicious. She did not grab him, or call for help, or seem to care whether he came in or stayed out.

?Yes, it?s me, Aunt,? said Andy, a good deal crestfallen and embarrassed. ?You see, I wanted to see you??

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?Then why didn?t you come like a civilized being! The house has doors. Tell me, do you intend to come in??

?If you please, aunt.?

?You may do so.?

?Thank you,? fluttered Andy.

He now discovered that his coat had caught in half-a-dozen fish hooks attached to an eel line all tangled up in the framework. It took him fully two minutes to get free. Andy climbed over the window sill and stood fumbling his cap. His old awe of his dictatorial relative was as strong as ever within him.

?Can?t you sit down?? she demanded, sinking to a chair herself and facing him steadily. ?How long have you been outside there??

?Only a few minutes,? answered Andy.

?Did you see anybody in this room beside myself??

?Yes, ma?am?a man.?

?And eavesdropping, I suppose?? insinuated Miss Lavinia.

?I heard him say ?good night,??

?Um!? commented Miss Lavinia. That closed the subject for the present. She had always known Andy to be a truthful boy, and his reply seemed to satisfy her and relieve her mind.

Andy wondered what he had better say first. The fixed, set stare of his stern, uncompromising relative made him nervous.

?See here, aunt,? he blurted out at last, ?I?ve never seemed to do anything right I did for you, and you don?t care a snap for me. I don?t see why you keep hounding me down and wanting me back home.?

?I don?t.?

?Eh?? ejaculated Andy.

?No, I don?t,? declared Miss Lavinia.

?You don?t want me back at Fairview??

?I said so, didn?t I?? snapped Miss Lavinia.

?Then?then??

?See here, Andy Wildwood,? interrupted his aunt in a tone of severity, ?you have been a disobedient, ungrateful boy. You deserve to be locked up. I?ve tried to have you. I am so satisfied, however, on reflection, that you will have a bad ending anyhow, that I have decided to wash my hands of you.?

?Glory!? uttered Andy to himself, in a vast thrill of delight.

?Have you joined the circus?? continued Miss Lavinia.

?They won?t have me??

?Why not??

?Without your sanction. They want you to sign away any claims as to damages, if I get hurt. I knew you wouldn?t do that.?

?You are mistaken, Andy Wildwood?I will do it.?

?It?s too easy to be true!? breathed Andy, in wild amazement. ?You?you will sign such a paper?? he stammered.

?Didn?t I say so? Let me understand. You wish to cut loose from home and friends for good, do you? You don?t want to ever return to Fairview??

?Not till I?m rich and famous,? answered Andy.

?H?m! Very well. What have I got to sign??

?That?s it,? said Andy, with eager hand drawing a written sheet from his pocket.

Miss Lavinia opened the document, read it through, went to the table, took a fountain pen from her reticule, signed the paper, returned it to Andy.

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?I?m dreaming! it?s a plot of some kind!? murmured Andy, lost in wonderment.

Miss Lavinia took out her pocket-book.

?Andy Wildwood,? she said, her harsh features as mask-like as ever, ?here are ten dollars. It is the last cent I will ever give you. When you leave here you sever all ties between us. I have only one stipulation to make. You will not disgrace me by having anything to do with anybody in Fairview.?

?That?s all right,? said Andy. ?I?ll agree, except that I?ve got to write to Mr. Graham on business.?

?What business??

Andy explained in full. If he had been more versed in the wiles of the world, less astonished at his aunt?s strange compliance with his dearest wishes, he would have noticed a keen suspiciousness in the glance with which she continually regarded him.

?I must insist that you do not write even to Graham,? she remarked. ?About what you owe?I will pay that. Yes, I?ll start you out clear. You won?t write to Graham??

?No,? said Andy slowly??if you insist on it.?

?I will settle the five dollars you owe Graham,? promised Miss Lavinia, ?I will pay the bill of damages at the school and to Farmer Dale, and send you the receipts. Does that suit you??

?Why?yes,? answered Andy in a bewildered tone.

?You take that pen and a sheet of paper. Write an order on Graham to deliver to me those old family mementos you pawned to him. Also, give me your address for a few weeks ahead.?

Andy did this.

?And now, good night and good-bye,? spoke his aunt. ?I hope you?ll some day see the error of your ways, Andy Wildwood.?

Miss Lavinia did not offer to shake hands with Andy. She nodded towards the door to dismiss him, as she would have done to a perfect stranger.

?Good-bye, Aunt Lavinia,? said Andy. ?You?re thinking a little hard of me. But you?ve done a big thing in signing that paper, and I?ll never do anything to make you ashamed of me. Ginger! am I afoot or horseback? Permission to join the show! Ten dollars! Oh my head is just whirling!?

These last sentences Andy tittered in a vivid gasp as he went down the stairs and once more reached the outer air.

He hurried from the vicinity, fearful that his aunt might change her mind and call him back.

?I don?t understand it,? he mused. ?I can?t figure it out. That paper fixes it so she can?t stop me joining the show, nor force me back to Fairview. Then what is she having dealings with Murdock for??

Andy could not solve this puzzle, and did not try to do so any further.

Within an hour the two precious documents were ?signed, sealed and delivered,? and Andy Wildwood entered on his career as a salaried circus acrobat.

CHAPTER XXV

A BEAR ON THE RAMPAGE

?Hoop-la!?

All a-spangle, to the blare of quick music, the great tent ablaze with light, the rows of benches crush-crowded with excited humanity, Andy Wildwood left the spring-board. For a second he whirled in midair. Then, gracefully landing on the padded carpet, he made his bow amid pleased plaudits and rejoined the row of fellow tumblers.

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?You?ve caught the knack,? spoke the ringmaster encouragingly. ?Be careful on the double somersault, though.?

?It?s just as easy to me,? asserted Andy.

He proved his words when his turn came again. He was breathless but all aglow, as he and his seven fellow acrobats bowed in a row and retired to the performers? tent.

Andy was delighted with himself, his comrades, his environment?everything. In fact, a constant glamour of excitement and enjoyment had come into his life.

This was the second day after his strange interview with his aunt. It was the last evening performance of the show at Tipton.

Andy had been away from the circus for two days. The morning after handing in the contracts, the manager had selected him to accompany the chief hostler and four of his assistants on a trip into the country.

The show was to make a long jump after closing the engagement at Tipton. While Mr. Harding joined a second enterprise he owned in the West, the present outfit was to take up a route in the South.

Many of those connected with the show were to leave. This cut the working force down. They had too many horses, and with a string of fifty of these the chief hostler started out to sell off the same.

The expedition continued a day and a half. When Andy came back, he found himself in time for two rehearsals. That evening he made his first appearance in public as a real professional.

Outside of the charm of being seen, appreciated and applauded by others, Andy loved the vigorous exercise of the spring-board. The mechanical athletic and acrobatic equipments of the show were superb. He made up his mind he could about live among the balancing bars and trapezes, if they would let him.

One disappointment Andy met with that somewhat troubled him. When he came back from the horse-selling expedition, he found that Luke Belding had left the show.

Billy Blow told Andy that Luke had been to his tent a dozen times to see him. That morning early, before Andy?s return, the side show Luke was with had packed up and shipped by train to join a show going east.

?So I?ll never find out what I?m heir to,? smiled Andy. ?Oh, well, of course it was some absurd guess of Luke?s. It?s funny, though. That fellow, Jim Tapp, had the same delusion. By the way, Aunt Lavinia seems to have been in earnest. Nobody appears to

be looking for me to go back to Fairview. I am free to do as I choose. Now, then, to make a record.?

Sunday was passed at Tipton. Of the better class in the show, nearly all the lady performers and some of the men went to church, and Andy went also. In the afternoon Billy Blow went the rounds of some friends, and took Andy with him.

It revealed a new phase of circus life, the domestic side, to Andy. There was no ?shop talk.? The boy passed a pleasant hour among several very charming family circles.

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Next day everybody pitched into genuine hard work. The circus train had been sent for, and occupied a long railroad siding.

Andy was amazed at the system and order of the proposed transit. The train was on a big scale. The manager had a car to himself. The star performers were cared for in luxurious parlor coaches. Even the minor employees were well-housed, and feeding arrangements for man and beast were perfect.

In order to reach their destination, which was Montgomery, a central southern city, the train made many shifts from one railway line to another. This took time, and necessitated many unpleasant stoppages and waits.

It was the second day of the trip when they were side-tracked at a little way station. Here it was given out they would remain from noon until midnight, awaiting a fruit express which would pick them up and deliver them at terminus.

Billy Blow, his Boy Midget, and Andy had a compartment in a tourists? car. When the long stop was announced, Andy was glad to get a chance to stretch his limbs.

He interested himself for more than an hour watching the menagerie men attend to the animals. They were fed and watered, their quarters neatly renovated, while a veterinarian went from cage to cage examining them professionally and treating those that were sick or ailing.

Big Bob, the star bear of the show, had in some way run a great sliver into one paw. This had festered the flesh, and bruin, bound with stout ropes, had been brought out of his cage on a wheeled litter, and laid on the grass for careful treatment.

Andy watched the skilful doctoring of the big, bellowing fellow with curiosity. Then he strolled off into a stretch of timber to enjoy a brief walk.

He reached a deliciously cool and shady nook, and threw himself down at the mossy trunk of a tree to rest in the midst of fresh air, peaceful solitude and merrily singing birds.

Andy was lost in a soothing day dream when a great rustle made him sit up, startled.

A dark object passed close by him in and out among the bushes. It was of great size, and was making its way fast and furiously.

?I declare!? cried Andy, springing to his feet, ?if it isn?t the bear. Now how in the world did he get loose??

Andy stood for a moment staring in wonder after the disappearing animal. It was certainly Big Bob. The animal was fully familiar to Andy. The beast wobbled to one side

as it ran, and this the boy discerned was due to the sore paw. He was a fugitive, and his escape had been discovered. Andy could surmise this from shouts and calls in the distance, back in the direction of the circus train.

Big Bob had a bad reputation with the menagerie men. At times placid and even good-natured, on other occasions he was capricious, savage and dangerous. Even his trainer had narrowly escaped a death blow from one of the animal?s enormous paws when the brute was in one of its tantrums.

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The bear was lumbering along as if bent on getting a good start against pursuit. He chose a sheltered route as if instinctively cunning. Andy, acting on a quick impulse, started after the bear.

The route led up a hill. Big Bob scaled a moderately steep incline and disappeared over its crest.

Andy, reaching this, glanced backwards. From that height he could look well over the country.

The belated train was in sight. From it, armed with pikes and ropes, a dozen or more menagerie men were running.

The alarm had spread to the settlement of houses near by. Andy saw several men armed with shotguns and rifles scouring adjacent wood stretches.

?I won?t dare to tackle the bear, but I?ll try and run him down till he gets tired,? thought Andy.

He remembered many a discussion of the menagerie men over the real danger and loss involved in the escape of an animal. The fugitive rarely did much damage except to hen roosts, beyond scaring human beings. The trouble was that armed farmers, pursuing, thought it great sport to bring down the fugitive with a shot. Big Bob was worth a good deal of money to the show. The principal aim of the menagerie men, therefore, was to prevent the slaughter of an escaped animal.

Down the hill bruin ran and Andy after him. Then there was a country road and Big Bob put down this. Andy could easily outrun the fugitive, but this was not his policy for the present. The disabled foot of the animal diminished his normal speed. Andy believed that bruin would soon find and harbor himself in some cozy nook.

At a turn in the road Andy noticed that there was a house a few hundred feet ahead. Beyond this several other dwellings were scattered about the landscape.

?I don?t like that,? mused Andy. ?It may mean trouble. I?d rather see the old scamp take to the open country. Wonder if I can head him off??

Andy leaped a field fence. He doubled his pace, got even with Big Bob, then ahead of him. He snatched up a pitchfork lying across a heap of hay, and bolted over the fence to the road again.

Extending the implement, he stood ready to challenge the approaching fugitive, and, if possible, turn bruin?s course.

Big Bob did not appear to notice Andy until about fifty feet distant from him. Then the animal lifted his shaggy head. His eyes glared, his collar bristled.

With a deep, menacing roar the bear increased his speed. He headed defiantly for the pronged barrier which Andy extended. Big Bob ran squarely upon the pitchfork. Its prongs grazed the animal?s breast.

Andy experienced a shock. He was forced back, thrown flat, and the next minute picked himself up from the shallow ditch at the side of the road into which he had fallen.

?Well,? commented Andy, staring down the road, ?he?s a good one!?

Big Bob had never stopped. He was putting ahead for dear life. Andy watched him near the farm house.

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The animal turned in at a road gateway. He ran rapidly up to an open window at the side of the house.

Its sill held something, Andy could not precisely make out what at the distance he was from the spot. He fancied, however, that it was dishes holding pies or some other food, put out to cool.

Big Bob arose erect on his hind legs, his fore feet rested on the window sill. His great muzzle dipped into whatever it held.

At that moment from inside the farmhouse there rang out the most curdling yell Andy Wildwood had ever heard.

CHAPTER XXVI

A CLEVER RUSE

The boy acrobat scrambled up from the roadside ditch, seized the pitchfork, and dashed along in the direction Big Bob had taken.

A glance showed the audacious animal still at the window of the farmhouse, though now under it.

Bruin had swept the contents of the window sill to the ground with one movement of his great paw. He was now discussing the merits of the dishes he had dislodged with a crash.

Andy ran around to the other side of the house. From within occasional hysterical shrieks issued. They were mingled with distracted sobs. At another open window Andy halted.

He could look into a middle apartment crossing the entire house. Crouching in a corner was a young woman. Her eyes were fixed in terror on the window at which the bear had appeared.

In her arms was a child, crying in affright. An older woman stood at a telephone, twisting its call bell handle frantically.

?Don?t be afraid,? said Andy. ?It?s a harmless old bear escaped from the circus down at the tracks.?

The two women regarded him mutely, too scared to believe him. Andy heard the telephone bell ring.

?Quick! quick!? cried the woman at the instrument. ?Send help. A big bear! We?ll be devoured alive!?

?No you won?t,? declared Andy in a shout, making around the house.

He hardly knew what to do next, but he kept his eyes open. He hoped for some discovery among the truck littering the yard that would suggest a way of getting Big Bob again on the run.

?Capital?the very thing,? cried Andy suddenly.

He dropped the pitchfork and whipped out his pocket knife. In two seconds he had severed a forty-foot stretch of clothes line running from a hook on the house to a post.

Then Andy ran to the kitchen door. Hanging at its side was a big piece of raw beef.

It was evidently from an animal recently slaughtered, for it was still moist and dripping. Andy tightly secured one end of the clothes line about it. He ran to the side of the house.

Big Bob was just finishing a repast on some apple pie. Andy gave the meat a fling. It struck the bear in the face. Big Bob raised his head. He sniffed and licked his lips. He made an eager, hungry spring for the meat, which had rebounded several feet.

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?Come on,? said Andy, sure now that his bait was a good one, and that his experiment would succeed. ?I?ve got you, I guess.?

Andy started on a run, paying out the rope. Just as Big Bob was about to pounce upon the toothsome spoil, Andy gave it a jerk.

He gauged his rate of progress on a close estimate. Along the trail sped bruin. Andy put across the fields.

He heard a bell ring out. Glancing back at the farmhouse, he saw a human arm reaching through an open window. It pulled at a rope leading to a big alarm bell hanging from the eaves. Looking beyond the farmhouse he also saw three or four men in a distant field, summoned by the bell, now rushing in its direction.

?I?ll get Big Bob beyond the danger line, anyhow,? decided Andy. ?No, you don?t!?

The fugitive had pounced fairly on the dragging beef. Andy gave it a whirling jerk. Bruin uttered a baffled growl.

?Come on,? laughed Andy. ?This is jolly fun?if it doesn?t end in a tragedy.?

Andy ran under the bottom rail of a fence. He made time and distance, for the bear did not squeeze through so readily. Andy put through a brushy reach beyond. Big Bob began to lag. He limped and panted.

?If I can only tucker him out,? thought Andy.

He kept up the race for fully half-an-hour. As he reached the edge of a boggy stretch, Andy saw, directly beyond, the top of a house poking up among a grove of fir trees.

Andy?s eyes were everywhere as he neared the building. Its lower part was so tightly shuttered and closed up that he decided at once it was an empty house.

Getting nearer, however, he discovered that the door at the bottom of the stone cellar steps was open. Andy glanced back of him. Big Bob, with lolling tongue, was lumbering steadily on his track, perhaps twenty feet to the rear.

?I?ll try it,? determined Andy.

He ran down the steps, halted in the dark cellar, pulled in the meat and flung it ahead of him. Then stepping to one side he prepared to act promptly when the right moment arrived.

Big Bob came to the steps, cleared them in a spring and ran past Andy. The latter dodged outside in a flash. He banged the door shut, shot its bolt, sank to the steps and swept his hand over his dripping brow.

?Whew!? panted Andy. ?But I?ve made it.?

Andy felt that he had done a pretty clever thing. He had gotten the fugitive safely caged behind a stout locked door. The cellar had several windows, but they were high up, and too small for Big Bob to ever squeeze through.

?I don?t believe there is anybody at home,? said Andy, getting up to investigate. ?I?m going to find out. Gracious! I have?there is.?

Andy was terribly startled, almost appalled. At just that moment a frightful yell rang out. It proceeded from the cellar into which he had locked the bear.

A sharp crash followed. Andy, staring spellbound, saw one of the side windows of the cellar dashed out.

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Through the aperture, immediately following, there clambered a man.

He was hatless, a big red streak crossed his cheek, his coat was in ribbons down the back.

White as a sheet, chattering and trembling, he scrambled to his feet, gave one affrighted glance back of him, and shot for the road like a meteor.

Bang! bang! bang!

?Oh, dear!? cried the distressed Andy. ?What?s up now??

CHAPTER XXVII

A ROYAL REWARD

Bang! bang!

Five sharp reports rang out from the cellar. Then came a roar from Big Bob. Then a second frantic man appeared at the smashed window.

One sleeve was in ribbons. He carried a smoking pistol. Without ado, like his predecessor he ran for the road. Glancing thither, Andy saw the two running down it, one after the other, like mad.

Andy hardly knew what to make of it all. The two men did not look like farmers. He went around the house, and hammered at the front door. No response. Every window on the lower floor was tightly shuttered.

Finally he came back to the smashed window. At first he could see nothing much beyond it. Then, his eyes becoming accustomed to the darkness, he was able to make out the cellar interior quite clearly.

His anxiety as to Big Bob was immediately relieved. If five bullets had been fired at the bear, they had made no more impression than peas from a putty blower. The serene old animal was leisurely devouring the juicy bait that had lured him to his present prison.

?He?s safe for a time, anyhow,? decided Andy. ?I can?t quite make out the situation here. It looks to me as if those two men don?t exactly fit to the premises. They are certainly not farmers, nor tramps. Maybe they had sneaked in the cellar for a nap, or to steal, leaving the door open, and Big Bob tackled them.?

Andy made further unsuccessful efforts to arouse the house. He was sure now that there was nobody at home. He sat down on its front steps to think.

Finally he noticed that a wire ran from the barb wire fence in front into the house.

?They?ve got a telephone here, as they have at most of these farmhouses,? he decided. ?That ought to help me out. If I could only get to the inside.?

Andy took another rambling tour about the house. Finally he discovered a window an inch or two down from the top in the second story.

His natural aptitude for climbing helped him out. With the aid of a lightning rod he soon reached the window, lowered it further, stepped into a bedroom, and descended a pair of stairs. Looking around the little front hall, he made out a telephone instrument on the outside wall.

Andy promptly turned the handle of the call bell. He placed the receiver to his ear.

?Hello,? came the instantaneous response ?this is Central.?

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?Central?where?? asked Andy.

?Brownville.?

?Are you anywhere near the way station where the circus train is sidetracked?? inquired Andy.

?Certainly. We?re the station town.?

?Can you reach any of the circus folks??

?Reach them?? responded the distant telephone operator animatedly. ?The woods are full of them. They say the whole menagerie has escaped, and they?re hunting for the animals everywhere. What do you want??

?I want to talk with some one connected with the show?and?quick.?

?All right I?ve just got to call to the street. Wait a minute.?

Soon a new voice came over the telephone: ?Hello.?

?Who is that?? asked Andy promptly.

?Brophy.?

?Oh, the chief hostler? Say, Mr. Brophy, this is Andy Wildwood.?

?The acrobat??where are you??

?Tumbler, yes. Listen: I?ve found and caged Big Bob.?

?What?s that??Say, where??

Even over the wire Andy could discern that the man at the other end of the line was manifestly stirred up.

?Let me tell you,? spoke Andy. ?I?ve got the animal shut up in a cellar. For how long or how safe, I can?t tell. You had better tell the trainer, and get some people here with the things to secure the bear.?

?I?ll do it,? called back Brophy. ?Try and keep those crazy farmers from finding him. There?s a hundred of them out gunning.?

?All right. Listen.?

Andy described his present location. He wound up by saying he would stay within call?? telephone 26?until the capturing crew put in an appearance.

Andy sat down in an easy chair in the hall a good deal satisfied with himself. However, he felt a trifle squeamish at the thought of the tenant of the premises returning and finding him there.

A growling grunt came to his ears. Andy, tracing it, came to an open doorway leading down under the front stairs to the cellar.

This he closed and locked, although he saw that the stairs were too crooked and narrow to admit of Big Bob ascending to the upper portion of the house.

Andy simply rested. There was no further call on the telephone. Finally he arose abruptly to his feet.

The sound of wagon wheels came from the front of the house. A minute later footsteps echoed on the steps. A key grated in the front door lock. The door swung open.

?Hi?Hello! Who are you?? sang out a brusque, challenging voice.

The minute the newcomer entered the hall his eyes fell on Andy. They became filled with dark suspicion. He was a powerfully-built, intellectual-looking man. Andy believed he was the proprietor of the premises, although he did not resemble a farmer.

This man kicked the door shut behind him. He made a pounce on Andy and grabbed his arm.

?Let me explain ??began Andy.

?How did you get in here?? retorted the man, his brow darkening.

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?By an open window?I was waiting??

?Let?s have a closer look at you,? interrupted the newcomer.

Dragging Andy with him, the speaker threw open the parlor door. That room was lighter, but as he crossed its threshold he uttered a wild shout.

He stood spellbound, staring about the apartment. Andy stared, too.

The room was in dire disorder. A cabinet had all its drawers out. The floor was littered with their former contents.

A stout tin box was overturned, its fastenings were all wrenched apart.

?Robbed!? gasped the man. ?Ha, I see?you are a burglar,? he continued, turning fiercely on the astonished youth.

?Not me,? dissented Andy vigorously.

?Yes, you are. All my coins and curios gone! Why, you young thief??

?Hold on,? interrupted Andy, resisting the savage jerk of his captor. ?Don?t you abuse me till you know who I am. Yes, your place has been burglarized?I see that, now.?

?Oh, do you?? sneered the man. ?Thanks.?

?Yes, sir. I saw two men come out of the cellar here an hour ago. I didn?t understand then, but I do now.?

?From the cellar? Well, we?ll investigate the cellar.?

?Better not,? advised Andy. ?At least, not just yet.?

?Well, you?re a cool one! Why not??

?Because there?s a bear down there.?

?A what?? cried the man, incredulously.

?A bear escaped from the circus. Say, I just thought of it. Have the burglars taken much??

?Oh, you?re innocent aren?t you?? flared out the man.

?I certainly am,? answered Andy calmly.

?Did they take much? My hobby is rare coins. With the missing curios, I guess they?ve got about two thousand dollars? worth.?

?Would the stuff make quite a bundle?? asked Andy.

?With the curios?I guess! Five pound candlesticks. Two large silver servers. The coins were set on metal squares, and would make bulk and weight.?

?I have an idea?? began Andy. ?No, let me explain first. Please listen, sir. You will think differently about me when I tell you my story.?

?Go ahead,? growled his captor.

Andy recited his chase of the bear and its denouement. Then he added:

?If those two men were the burglars, they got in by way of the cellar. They came out through the cellar window. I theorize they came down into the cellar with their plunder. They disturbed the bear, and Big Bob went for them. When I saw them they were empty-handed. I?ll bet they dropped their booty in their wild rush for escape.?

?Eh? I hope so. Let?s find out.?

The man appeared to believe Andy. He released his hold on him. Just as they came out on the front porch Andy spoke up:

?There are the circus people. They?ll soon fix Mr. Bear.?

A boxed wagon had driven from the road into the yard. It held six men. The chief animal trainer jumped down from the vehicle, followed by the head hostler. Four subordinates followed, carrying ropes, muzzles, pikes, and one of them a stick having on its end a big round cork filled with fine needles.

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?I?m glad you?ve come,? said Andy, running forward to meet them. ?Big Bob is in there,? he explained to the trainer, pointing to the cellar.

?You?re a good one, Wildwood,? commended the trainer in an approving tone. ?How did you ever work it??

Andy explained, while the trainer selected a muzzle for the bear and armed himself with the needle-pointed device. Then he went to the cellar door.

?Shut it quick after me,? he said. ?Come when I call.?

Andy ran around to the broken window as soon as the trainer was inside the cellar.

He watched the man approach Big Bob. The bear snarled, made a stand, and showed his teeth.

One punch of the needle-pointed device across his nostrils sent him bellowing. A second on one ear brought him to the floor. The trainer pounced on him and adjusted the muzzle over his head. Then he deftly whipped some hobbles on his front paws.

He yelled to his assistants. They hurried into the cellar and soon emerged, dragging Big Bob after them.

The owner of the place had stood by watching these proceedings silently. While the others dragged the bear to the boxed wagon the trainer approached him.

?If there?s any bill for damages, just name it,? he spoke.

?I?ll tell you that mighty soon,? answered the man.

He dashed into the cellar and Andy heard him utter a glad shout. He came out carrying two old satchels. Throwing them on the ground he opened them.

They were filled with coins and curios. The man ran these over eagerly. He looked up with a face supremely satisfied.

?Not a cent,? he cried heartily. ?No, no?no damages. Glad to have served you.?

?All right. Come on, Wildwood,? said the trainer, starting for the wagon.

?One minute,? interrupted the owner of the place, beckoning to Andy.

He drew out his wallet, fingered over some bank bills, selected one, and grasped Andy?s hand warmly.

?You have done me a vast service,? he declared. ?But for you??

?And the bear,? suggested Andy, with a smile.

?All right,? nodded the man, ?only, the bear can?t spend money. You can. I misjudged you. Let me make it right. Take that.?

He released his grasp of Andy?s hand momentarily, to slap into his palm a banknote.

?Now, look here?? began Andy, modestly.

?No, you look there!? cried the man, pushing Andy towards the wagon. ?Good bye and good luck.?

Andy ran and jumped to the top of the wagon, which had just started up.

Settling himself comfortably, he took a look at the banknote. His eyes started, and a flush of surprise crossed his face.

It was a fifty dollar bill.

CHAPTER XXVIII

?*Hey*, *Rube*!?

?From bad to worse,? said the Man With the Iron Jaw.

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?Correct, Marco,? assented Billy Blow dejectedly.

It was three weeks after the start of the southern tour of the circus.

Marco, the clown, Midget, Miss Stella Starr, Andy and about a dozen others were seated or strolling around the performers? tent about the middle of the afternoon.

Every face in the crowd looked anxious?some disheartened and desperate.

Bad luck attended the southern trip of the show. They had reached Montgomery in the midst of a terrific rain storm. Two animal cars had been derailed and wrecked on the route.

Three days later a wind storm nearly tore the main top to tatters. Some of the performers fell sick, due to the change of climate. Others foresaw trouble, and joined other shows in the north.

The season started out badly and kept it up. The attendance as they left the big cities was disastrously light.

They had to cut out one or two towns here and there, on account of bad roads and accidents. Now the show had reached Lacon, and after more trouble found itself stalled.

To be ?stalled,? Andy had learned was to be very nearly stranded. No salaries had been paid for a full fortnight. Some of the performers had gotten out executions against the show.

Aside from this, on account of the absence of many attractions advertised in the show bills, disappointed audiences were showing an ugly spirit.

The show was tied up by local creditors, who would not allow it to leave town until their bills were paid.

To make matters worse, Sim Dewey, the treasurer of the show, had run away with eleven thousand dollars two days before.

This comprised the active capital of the show. Not a trace of the whereabouts of the mean thief had been discovered.

All these facts were known to the performers, and over the same they were brooding that dismal rainy afternoon, awaiting the coming of the manager.

?Here he is,? spoke an eager voice, and Mr. Scripps bustled into the tent.

He rubbed his hands briskly and smiled at everybody, but Andy saw that this was all put on. Lines of care and anxiety showed about the plucky manager?s eyes and lips.

?Well, my friends,? he spoke at once. ?We?ve arrived at a decision.?

?Good,? commented Marco. ?Let?s have it.?

?I have had a talk with the lawyers who hold the executions against the show, I have suggested four nights and two matinees at half-price, papering four counties liberally. We?ll announce only the attractions we really have, so there can be no kicking. What is taken in the treasurer is to hand over to the sheriff. He is to pay fifty per cent on claims against us. The balance, minus expenses, is to go for salaries. I should say that we can pay each performer a full half salary. There?s the situation, friends. What do you say??

?Satisfactory,? nodded Marco.

?Billy Blow??

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?I?ve got pretty heavy expenses, with a wife in the hospital,? said the clown in a subdued tone, ?but I?ll try and make half salary do.?

?Miss Starr??

The kind-hearted equestrienne smiled brightly.

?Take care of the others first, Mr. Scripps,? she said. ?While I have these, we won?t exactly starve.?

Miss Stella Starr shook the glittering diamond pendants in her pretty pink ears.

?Thank you,? bowed the manager, choking up a trifle. ?Andy Wildwood??

?I?m a mere speck in the show,? said Andy, ?but I?ll stick if there isn?t a cent of salary. It?s the last ditch for my good, true friends, Mr. Scripps.?

The manager turned aside to hide his emotion.

?Friends,? he resumed an instant later, ?you break me all up with this kind of talk. You?re a royal, good lot. I?ve wired Mr. Harding that he must help us out. Stick to your posts, and no one shall lose a dollar.?

There was not a dissent to his proposition as he completed calling the list of performers. Andy?s action shamed some into coming into the arrangements. The manager?s words encouraged others. While some few answered grudgingly, the compact was made unanimous.

?There?s a crowd of hard roughs trying to make trouble,? concluded Mr. Scripps. ?Leave that to the tent men. Give the best show you know how, try and please the crowds, and I guess we?ll win out.?

Every act went excellently at the evening performance up to about the middle of the programme.

Andy did his level best. He won an encore by a trick somersault old Benares had taught him.

Billy Blow was at his funniest. He had the audience in fine, good humor. Little Midget over-exerted himself to follow in his father?s lead.

Marco was a pronounced success. Miss Stella Starr made one of her horses dance a graceful round to the tune of ?Dixie,? and the audience went wild.

Andy, in street dress, came into the canvas passageway near the orchestra as the trick elephants were led into the ring. The manager nodded to him. Andy saw that he was pleased the way things were going.

For all that, he observed that Mr. Scripps kept his eye pretty closely on a rough crowd occupying seats near the entrance.

They seemed to be of a general group. They talked loudly and passed all kinds of comments on the various acts.

Finally one of their number shied a carrot into the ring, striking the elephant trainer.

The latter caught his cue instantly at a word from the ringmaster. He picked up the vegetable, made a profound bow to the sender, juggled it cleverly with his training wand, one-two-three, and turned the tables completely as the smart baby elephant caught it on the fly.

Cat calls rang out derisively from a lot of boys, directed at the group of rowdies from the midst of whom the carrot had been thrown.

Then a man arose unsteadily from that mob and stumbled over the ring ropes.

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The ringmaster, his face very stern and very white, stepped forward to intercept him.

?What do you want?? he demanded.

?Man insulted me. Going to lick him,? hiccoughed the rowdy, his eyes fixed on the elephant trainer.

?Leave the ring,? ordered the ringmaster.

?Me? Guess not! Will I, boys?? he demanded of his special crowd of cronies.

?No, no! Go on! Have it out!?

A good many timid ones arose from their seats. The ringmaster scented trouble.

Stepping squarely up to the drunken loafer, his hand shot out in a flash and caught the fellow squarely under the jaw. He knocked him five feet across the ropes, where he landed like a clod of earth in a heap.

Instantly there was an uproar. The orchestra stopped playing. The manager ran forward and put up his hand.

?We will have order here at any cost,? he shouted. ?Officer,? to the guard at the entrance, ?call the police.?

With wild yells some fifty of the group from which the drunken rowdy had come sprang from the benches. They jumped over the ropes, crowding into the ring and making for the manager.

Half-a-dozen ring men ran forward to repel them. Fists brandished, and cudgels, too. The circus men went down among flying heels.

Then arose a cry, heard for the first time by the excited Andy?never later recalled without a thrill as he realized from that experience its terrific portent.

?*Hey, Rube*!?

It was the world-wide rallying cry of the circus folk?the call in distress for speedy, reliant help.

As if by magic the echoes took up the call. Andy heard them respond from the farthest haunts of the circus grounds.

From under the benches, through the main entrance, under the loose side flaps, a rallying army sprang into being.

Stake men, wagon men, cooks, hostlers, candy butchers, came flying from every direction.

Every one of them had found a weapon?a stake. Like skilled soldiers they grouped, and bore down on the intruders like an avalanche.

Women were shrieking, fainting on the benches, children were crying. The audience was in a wild turmoil. Some benches broke down. The scene was one of riotous confusion.

Suddenly a shot rang out. Then Andy had a final sight of crashing clubs and mad, bleeding faces, as some one pulled the centre-light rope. The big chandelier came down with a crash, precipitating the tent in semi-darkness.

So excited was Andy, that, grasping a stake, he was about to dash into the midst of the conflict. The manager pushed him back.

?Get out of this,? he ordered quickly. ?Look to the women and children. Our men will see to it that those low loafers get all they came for.?

?Wildwood,? spoke Marco rushing up to Andy just here, ?they have cut the guy ropes of the performers? tent. I must get to my family. Look out for Miss Starr. Here she is.?

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CHAPTER XXIX

A FREE TROLLEY RIDE

The young acrobat turned in time to see the performers? tent wobble inwards. Miss Starr, quite flustered, ran rapidly to escape being caught in its drooping folds.

Following her, looking worn out and anxious, carrying Midget in his arms, was Billy Blow.

?Get them out of this!? cried Marco, holding up the flap of the canvas passage way.

?Here, let me take him,? directed Andy. ?You?re not equal to the heavy load.?

He removed Midget from the clown?s arms, and led the way to the outer air.

Yells and shots sounded from the main tent. Outside there was a swaying, excited mob. Andy evaded them, leading the way to the street lining the circus grounds at one side.

?Look there,? suddenly exclaimed the clown in a gasping tone.

The main tent was on fire. A mob was trying to pull down the menagerie tent.

?Hi!? yelled the leader of a gang of boys rushing past them and halting, ?here?s some show folks.?

?Pelt them!? cried another voice. ?They won?t pay my father his feed bill.?

An egg flittered towards the fugitives. It struck Miss Starr on the back, soiling her pretty dress.

Andy ran back, Midget held on one arm. He let drive with his free hand and knocked the egg thrower head over heels.

This was the signal for a wild riot. The crowd of young hoodlums pressed close on Andy, and he retreated to the others.

?Take him, Miss Starr,? he said quickly, placing Midget in her arms. ?Hurry to the lighted street yonder.?

A rain of stones came towards them. Andy ran back at the crowd. In turn he sent four of them reeling with vigorous fisticuffs. Then he rejoined his friends.

A trolley car stood at one side of the street. The boys had yelled for help from others of their kind and their numbers increased dangerously. The motorman of the trolley car had neglected his duty and joined a gaping crowd at a corner. Riot and enmity to the circus people was in the air. Andy formed a speedy decision.

?Quick!? he ordered, ?get into that car.?

A brickbat knocked off his hat. A second smashed a window in the car as Miss Starr and the others got aboard.

Two big fellows pounced upon Andy. He met one with a blow that laid him flat. With a trick leap he landed his feet against the stomach of the other, sending him reeling back, breathless.

Andy made a jump over the front railing of the car. Another deluge of missiles struck the car. He noticed that his friends were safely aboard. Andy noticed, too, that the crank handle of the motor box was in place.

?Anywhere for safety from that mob,? he thought.

Grr-rr-whiz-z! The car started up. Shouts, missiles, running forms pursued it. Andy stopped for nothing. He put on full speed.

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As he turned a sharp corner, Andy caught sight of a mass of light flames shooting upward. A crowd was in pursuit of the car. Shouts, shots and the roars of the animals in the menagerie caused a wild din. His inclinations lured him back to the scene of the excitement. His duty, however, seemed plain; to follow out Marco?s instructions and convey his charges to a place of safety.

At a cross street some one hailed the car. Andy simply shot ahead the faster. Soon they reached the limits of the town. Andy bent his ear, and caught the distant clang of the trolley wagon.

He had stolen a car, and they were in pursuit. The general temper was adverse to the circus folks. Andy kept the car going.

Miss Starr came to the front door of the car and stepped out on the platform beside Andy.

?Brave boy,? she said simply.

?Miss Starr, what are your plans?? he asked.

?Anything to get away from this horrid town,? she said. ?I am not afraid but what our tent men will teach that mob a lesson. They always do, in these riots. I have seen a dozen of them in my time. The police, too, will finally restore order. As to the show, though?the southern trip is over.?

?Then you don?t want to go back to Lacon??

?Why should we? Our traps are probably burned, or stolen. If not, they will be sent on to us on direction. The show can?t possibly survive. Billy and his boy couldn?t stand the strain of any more trouble. No,? sighed the equestrienne, ?it is plain that we must seek another position.?

Andy again heard the gong of the repair wagon. He thought fast. Putting on renewed speed, he never halted until they had covered about four miles. Here was a little cluster of houses. He stopped the car.

?Come with me, quick,? he directed his friends, entering the car and taking up Midget in his arms.

Andy had been over this territory the day previous doing some exigency bill-posting service.

He led the way down a quiet street. After walking about four squares they reached railroad tracks and a little station. This was locked up and dark within. On the platform, however, was a box ready for shipment, with a red lantern beside it.

?I hope a train comes soon,? thought Andy quite anxiously, as he caught the echo of the repair wagon gong nearer than before.

?There?s a whistle,? said little Midget.

?That?s so,? responded Andy, bending his ear. ?Going north, too. I hope it?s a train and I hope it comes along in time.?

?In time for what?? inquired Midget.

Andy did not reply. He could estimate the progress of the pursuing wagon from gong sounds and shouts in the distance. He traced its halt, apparently at the stranded car. Then the gong sounded again.

Andy glanced down the street they had come. Two flashing, wobbling lights gleamed in the distance, headed in the direction of the railway station.

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?They?ve guessed us out,? said Andy. ?Of course they can only delay us, but that counts just now. If the train??

?She?s coming!? sang out Midget in a nervous, high-pitched voice.

Andy?s nerves were on a severe strain. A locomotive rounded a curve. The trolley wagon was still a quarter-of-a-mile distant.

The engine slowed down to a stop, the repair rig with flying horses attached less than a square away.

The baggage coach door opened. A man jumped out and started to put the box aboard.

?Hold on?through train,? he yelled at Andy.

?That?s all right. Quick, get aboard,? he urged his companions.

Andy glanced from the windows of the coach they entered as the train started up with a jerk.

He saw the trolley wagon dash up to the platform. A police officer and some company men jumped off.

?Just in time,? murmured Andy with satisfaction, as the station flashed from view.

The coach was nearly empty. He found a double seat. Miss Starr uttered a great sigh of relief. Poor Billy Blow sank down, thoroughly tired out. Midget laughed.

?I hope it?s a long ride,? he said.

?I?m afraid,? spoke Miss Starr, ?it won?t be, Midge. See,? and she opened a little purse, showing only a few silver coins. ?I have some money in a bank in New York, but that does not help us at the present moment.?

?I sent all I had to my poor wife,? announced the clown dejectedly.

?That?s all right,? broke in Andy cheerily. ?Here?s a route list,? and he picked up a timetable from the next seat. ?Can you tell me where this train is bound for?? he inquired politely of a gentleman occupying the opposite seat.

?Baltimore.?

?That sounds good,? said Miss Starr. ?There was a show there last week. The season?s broken, we can?t hope for a star engagement, but we might get in for a few weeks.?

?I haven?t the money to chase up situations all over the country,? lamented the clown.

?Don?t worry on that score,? put in Andy briskly. ?You people find out where you want to go. I?ll take care of the bills.?

?You, Andy?? spoke Miss Starr, with a stare.

?Yes, ma?am. You see, I?ve got my savings??

?Ho! ho!? laughed Billy Blow bitterly. ?Savings! Out of what? You haven?t drawn one week?s full salary since you joined us.?

?Remember the needle and thread you loaned me on the train when we were going south, Miss Starr?? asked Andy.

?Why, yes, I think I do,? nodded the equestrienne.

?Well, I wanted it to sew up a fifty dollar bill for safe-keeping. Here it is.?

Andy with his knife ripped open a fob pocket and produced the bank note in question.

?Our common fund,? he cried, waving it gaily. ?Mr. Blow, designate your terminus. We?ll not be put off the train, while this lasts.?

Billy Blow choked up. He directed one grateful glance at Andy. Then he snuggled Midget close, and hid his face against him.

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Miss Starr put a trembling hand on Andy?s arm. A bright tear sparkled in her eye.

?Good as gold!? she said softly, ?and true blue to the core!?

?Thank you. I think I?ll get a drink of water,? said Andy, covering his own emotion at this display of others by a subterfuge.

He went to the end of the car. At the moment he put out his hand for the glass under the water tank, a person from a near seat put out his also.

?Excuse me,? said Andy, as they joggled.

?Certainly?you first,? responded a pleasant voice.

?Hello!? almost shouted Andy Wildwood, starting as if from an electric shock. ?Why, Luke Belding!?

?Eh? Aha! Andy Wildwood. Well! well! well!?

It was the ambitious lion tamer of Tipton?Luke the show boy, the owner of the famous chicken that walked backwards.

They shook hands with shining faces, forgetting the water, genuinely glad at the unexpected reunion.

?What are you ever doing here?? asked Andy.

?Me?? responded Luke, drawing himself up in mock dignity, yet withal a pleased pride in his eye. ?Well, Wildwood, to tell you the truth I?ve got up in the world.?

?Glad of it.?

?And I am on my way to join the Greatest Show on Earth.?

CHAPTER XXX

WITH THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH

?The Greatest Show On Earth?? repeated Andy wonderingly. ?You don?t mean??

?I do mean,? nodded Luke vigorously. ?The one?the only. Is there more than one? I?m on my way to join it.?

?You?re lucky,? commented Andy.

?And ambitious, and tickled to death!? cried Luke effusively. ?My! When I think of it, I imagine I?m dreaming. And say?I?m a capitalist.?

?Well!? smiled Andy.

?Yes, sir?see?? and Luke spun round, exhibiting his neat apparel. ?I?m an independent gentleman.?

?You do look prosperous,? admitted Andy.

?Living on my royalties.?

?Royalties? How?s that??

?You remember the chicken??

?That walked backwards. I?ll never forget it.?

?Well, sir,? asserted Luke, ?it took. When we left you, we struck a brisk show. Big business and the chicken a winner from the start. Another side showman offered me a big salary, and my boss got worried. He agreed to pay me ten per cent gross receipts for Bolivar. I knew he had a brother who was chief animal trainer with the Big Show. I took him up on condition that he got me a place there. He wrote to his brother, and I?m his assistant. On my way to Baltimore now. The show is on its way through Delaware.?

?Wait here a minute,? spoke Andy, and he went back to his friends.

Andy told them of meeting Luke, and the whereabouts of the Big Show. Just then the conductor came into the car, and they had to make a rapid decision.

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?Let us get to Baltimore, anyway,? suggested the clown. ?It?s nearer home?and my wife.?

Andy paid their fares. Miss Starr briefly told the conductor of their mishaps at Lacon. Her eloquent, sympathetic eyes won Midget a free ride.

Andy got pillows for his three friends, and some coffee and pie from the adjoining buffet car.

He saw them comfortably disposed of for the night; and then went back to Luke.

They sat down close together, two pleased, jolly friends. Andy interested Luke immensely by reciting his vivid experiences since they had parted.

?By the way, Luke,? he observed at last, ?there?s something I missed hearing from you at Tipton. Remember??

?Let?s see,? said Luke musingly. ?Oh, yes?you mean about your being an heir??

?That?s it.?

Luke became animated at once.

?I?ve often thought about that,? he said. ?You know I was all struck of a heap when you first told me your name!?

?Yes.?

?And asked if you was Andy Wildwood, the heir? Do you remember??

?Exactly.?

?Well, it was funny, but early on the day I came to the circus I was tramping it along a creek. About three miles out of town I should think, I lay down to rest among some bushes. Ten minutes after I?d got there a boat rowed by some persons came along. They beached it right alongside the brush. Then one of them, a boy, lifted a mail bag from the bottom of the skiff.?

?A mail bag?? a boy?? repeated Andy, with a start of intelligence. ?Did you hear his name??

?Yes, in a talk that followed. The man with him called him Jim.?

?Jim Tapp,? murmured Andy.

?He called the man Murdock.?

?I thought so,? Andy said to himself. ?They put up that mail robbery.?

?They cut open the bag and took out a lot of letters,? continued Luke. ?A few of them had money in them. This they pocketed, tearing up the letters and throwing them into the creek. There was one letter the boy kept. He read it over and over. When they had got through with the letters, he said to the man that it was funny.?

?What was funny?? asked Andy.

?Why, he said there was a letter putting him on to ?a big spec.,? as he called it. He said the letter told about a secret, about a fortune the writer had discovered. He said the letter was to a boy who would never know his good luck if they didn?t tell him. He said to the man there was something to think over. He chuckled as he bragged how they would make a big stake juggling the fortune of the heir, Andy Wildwood.?

?I don?t understand it at all,? said Andy, ?but it is a singular story, for a fact.?

?Well, that?s all I know about it. The minute I heard your name, of course I recalled where I had heard it before.?

?Of course,? nodded Andy thoughtfully.

After that the conversation lagged. Luke soon fell asleep. For over two hours, however, Andy kept trying to figure out how he could possibly be an heir, who had written the letter, and to whom it had been addressed.

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The next day they arrived at Baltimore. A morning paper contained a dispatch from Lacon.

The circus men had nearly killed half-a-dozen of the mob of roughs. The police had restored order, but fire and riot had put the show out of business.

Miss Starr wired to the town in Delaware where the Big Show was playing. Luke had gone on to join it. By noon she received a satisfactory reply. Then she telegraphed to Lacon about their traps, directing the manager where to send them.

That evening, after a long talk over their prospects, the four refugees took the train for Dover.

The next morning Miss Starr, Billy, Midget and Andy went to the headquarters of The Biggest Show on Earth.

Andy had a chance to inspect it while waiting for Bob Sanderson, the assistant manager, who was a distant relative of Miss Stella Starr.

Its mammoth proportions fairly staggered him. Its details were bewildering in their system and perfection. Alongside of it, the circus he had recently belonged to was merely a side show.

Sanderson was a brisk, business-like fellow. He soon settled on an engagement for Miss Starr and Billy and Midget for the rest of the season.

?I don?t think I can use the boy, though,? he said, glancing at Andy.

?Then you can?t have us,? said the equestrienne promptly. ?Bob, you and I are old friends, but not better ones than myself and Andy Wildwood. He stood by us through thick and thin, he makes a good showing in the ring. Why, before the Benares Brothers left us, they were training him for one of the best acts ever done on the trapeze.?

?Is that so?? spoke Sanderson, looking interested. ?The Benares Brothers joined us only last week. Here, give me five minutes.?

?Miss Starr, you mustn?t let me stand in your way of a good engagement,? said Andy, as the assistant manager left the tent.

?It?s the four of us, or none,? asserted the determined little lady.

Sanderson came bustling in at the end of five minutes.

?All right,? he announced brusquely, ?I?ll take the boy on.?

?You?ll never regret it,? declared Stella Starr positively.

CHAPTER XXXI

CONCLUSION

?Bravo!?

?Clever!?

Amid deafening applause, old Benares and Thacher retired from the sawdust ring, bowing profusely with a deep sense of pride and satisfaction.

Between them, hands joined in the group of three, Andy Wildwood imitated their graceful acknowledgment of the plaudits of the vast concourse in the great metropolitan amphitheatre.

?Wildwood,? declared Thacher, as they backed towards the performers? room, ?you? ve made a hit.?

?It is so!? cried old Benares, with sparkling eyes. ?We are a three now?The Three Benares Brothers.?

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Andy was dizzy with exultation and delight. It was the first night of the Biggest Show on Earth in New York City.

For a week he had been in training for the fantastic trapeze act which had won thunders of approbation.

The Benares Brothers had appeared in the amphitheatre dome on a double trapeze.

After several clever specialties, the ringmaster suddenly stepped forward. He lifted his hand. The orchestra stopped playing.

Raising a pistol, the ringmaster directed it aloft. Bang! Crash! went the orchestra, and from a box suspended over the trapezes the bottom suddenly dropped out.

Following, an agile youthful form shot down through space. Quick as lightning the Benares Brothers swung by their feet, joined hands in mid-air, and the descending form?Andy Wildwood?catching at the wrists of Thacher, was swung back in a twenty foot circle. Crash! again the orchestra. Andy was flung through space across to old Benares, a plaything in mid-air, Benares catching at the feet of Thacher, Andy tailing on in a graceful descent, thrilling the delighted audience.

The act was not so difficult, but it was neat, rapid, unique. Andy Wildwood felt that at last he was a full-fledged acrobat.

The manager came back to compliment him. Billy Blow looked delighted. Miss Stella Starr said:

?Andy, we are all proud of you.?

The next morning?s papers gave him special notice. Luke Belding whispered to him to demand double salary.

Andy walked from his boarding house the next morning feeling certain that he had made very substantial progress during his sixty days of circus life.

He was passing a row of houses on a side street when a cab drove up to the curb. Andy casually glanced at the passenger as he crossed the sidewalk. Then he gave a great start.

?It can?t be!? he ejaculated. Then he added instantly: ?Yes, I?d know him among a thousand?Sim Dewey.?

The man entered an open doorway, and Andy ran after him. He heard the fellow ascend a pair of stairs and knock at a door.

?Oh, good morning, Mr. Vernon.?

?Gracious!? exclaimed Andy??Aunt Lavinia!?

Here was a stirring situation. There could be no mistake. Despite a false moustache and a pair of dark eyeglasses, Andy had recognized the defaulting cashier of the disbanded circus. Beyond dispute he had recognized the welcoming tones above as belonging to his aunt, Miss Lavinia Talcott.

?It?s like dreaming,? mused Andy. ?All this happening together, and here in New York City! Why, what ever brought Aunt Lavinia here? Where did she ever get acquainted with that scamp??

Andy felt that he had an urgent duty to perform. Here was a mystery to explore, a villain to capture.

He went softly up the stairs. The place was a respectable boarding house, he concluded. Stealing softly past a door, he went half-way up a second pair of stairs.

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Not five feet away from an open transom, Andy could now look into a room containing three persons.

A motherly, dignified old woman sat in a big arm chair. Near her was Andy?s aunt, smiling and simpering up at Dewey. The latter, dressed ?to kill,? was bowing like a French dancing master.

Dewey sat down. The chaperone, who seemed to be the landlady, did not engage in a brief conversation that ensued within the room.

At its conclusion Andy saw his aunt hand Dewey a folded piece of paper. The defaulting circus cashier gallantly bowed over her extended hand and came out of the room.

?Hold on, Mr. Sim Dewey,? spoke Andy, down the stairs in a flash, and seizing Dewey?s arm on the landing.

?Eh? Hello?Wildwood!?

?Yes, it?s me,? said Andy. ?A word with you, sir, as to what business you have with my aunt. Then?the stolen eleven thousand dollars, if you please.?

Dewey had turned deadly white. He glared desperately at Andy, and tried to wrench his arm free.

?Shall I arouse the street?? demanded Andy sternly. ?It?s jail for you??

Crack! The treacherous Dewey had slipped one hand behind him. He had drawn a slung shot from his pocket. It struck Andy?s head, and he went down with a sense of sickening giddiness.

?Stop him!? shouted Andy, half-blinded, crawling across the landing.

Dewey made a leap of four steps at a time.

?Out of my way!? he yelled at some obstacle.

?Hold on, mister!?

Andy arose to his feet with difficulty. He clung to the banister, descending the stairs as a frightful clatter rang out.

A boy about his own age, coming up the stairs, had collided with Dewey.
Both tripped up and rolled to the front entry.

The boy got up, unhurt. Dewey, groaning, half-arose, fell back, and lay prostrate, one limb bent up under him.

Andy was still weak and dizzy-headed, but he acted promptly for the occasion.

He saw that Dewey had broken a limb, and was practically helpless. He glanced out at the driver of the cab. He was an honest-faced old fellow. Andy ran out to him and spoke a few quick words.

With Dewey writhing, moaning and resisting, this man, Andy and the strange boy carried him to the cab. Andy directed the boy to get up with the driver, He got inside the cab with Dewey.

A hysterical shriek rang out at the street doorway. Andy saw his aunt wildly wringing her hands. The maiden lady was held back from pursuing the cab by the landlady.

Within ten minutes the cab delivered Dewey at a police station, and Andy told his story to the precinct captain.

They found in a secret pocket on the defaulting cashier certificates of deposit to the amount of ten thousand dollars, issued in a false name. The amount was a part of the stolen circus funds.

In another pocket was discovered a draft for three thousand dollars, made over to the same false name by Miss Lavinia Talcott on the bank at Fairview.

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The police at once locked the prisoner up in a cell, sent for a surgeon, and asked Andy to telegraph to Mr. Giles Harding, the circus owner, at once.

When Andy came out of the police station, he found the boy who had assisted him waiting for him.

He was a bright-faced, pleasant-mannered lad, but his appearance suggested hard luck.

Andy gave him a dollar, and got his name. It was Mark Hadley. Andy was at once interested when the boy told him that his dead father had been a professional sleight-of-hand man in the west.

Mark Hadley had come to New York on the track of an old circus friend of his father. This man, it turned out, was a relative of Dewey, masquerading now under the name of Vernon.

The man had told him that Dewey could help him out. He did not know where Dewey was living, but understood he was about to marry a lady living at the boarding house where Mark had gone, to meet the fellow in a most sensational manner, indeed.

Andy invited Mark to call upon him later in the day, gave the youth his present address, and proceeded back to the boarding house to find his aunt.

The hour that followed was one of the strangest in Andy?s life.

There were reproaches, threats, cajolings, until Andy found out the true state of affairs.

It was only after he had proven to his humiliated and chagrined aunt that Dewey was a villain, that Miss Lavinia broke down and confessed that she had been a silly, sentimental woman.

It seemed that the letter Jim Tapp and Murdock had secured was from Mr. Graham, back at Fairview.

Graham had discovered in a secret bottom of the box Andy had left with him, a paper referring to a patent of Andy?s father.

As time had brought about, this paper entitled the heirs of the old inventor to quite large royalties on a new electrical device which had come into practical use after Mr. Wildwood?s death.

The plotters had gone at once to Miss Lavinia. Her cupidity was aroused. She quieted her conscience by giving Andy ten dollars at Tipton, and deciding to take charge of the royalty money ?till he was of age.?

This was her story, told amid contrite tears and shame as Andy proved to her that Dewey was after her three thousand dollars, and would have escaped with it only for his decisive action.

Murdock had introduced her to Dewey. The latter had pretended to be in love with her, had promised to marry her, and that day had induced the weak, silly old spinster to trust him with her little fortune.

?I have been a wicked woman!? Miss Lavinia declared. ?I will make amends, Andy. You shall have your rights. Come home with me.?

?Not till my engagement is over, aunt,? replied Andy, ?and then only for a visit, if you wish it. I love the circus life, and I seem to find just as many chances there to be good and to do good as in any other vocation.?

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Miss Lavinia was given back her three thousand dollars the next day, and Sim Dewey was sent to prison on a long term.

Mr. Harding came on to the city the following day. He recovered all except a trifle of the stolen circus money. That evening he sent a sealed envelope by special messenger to Andy. It contained five one hundred dollar bills?Andy?s reward for capturing the embezzling circus cashier.

The next afternoon Andy invited five of his special friends and several of his acquaintances to a little dinner party.

Miss Starr, Billy Blow the clown, Midget, old Benares, Thacher, Luke Belding and Mark Hadley were his guests of honor.

Andy had found a starting place in the circus for Mark, whose ambition was to become a great magician.

They were a merry, friendly party. They jollied one another. They saw nothing but sunshine in the sawdust pathway before them.

?You are a grand genius!? declared old Benares to Andy. ?My friends, one thought: in six weeks up from Andy the school boy, to Andy the acrobat.?

?Hold on now, Mr. Benares,? cried Andy, smilingly. ?That was because of my royal, good friends like you.?

?And your own grit,? said Marco. ?You assuredly deserve your success.?

And the other circus people agreed with Marco.

For the time being Andy heard nothing more of Tapp, Murdock and Daley. The days passed pleasantly enough. He did his work faithfully, constantly adding to his fame as an acrobat.

Between Andy and Luke Belding a warm friendship sprang up. Luke had much to tell about himself. As time passed the lad who loved animals had many adventures, but what these were I must reserve for another volume, to be named, ?Luke the Lion Tamer; or, On the Road with a Great Menagerie,? In that we shall not only follow brave-hearted Luke but also Andy, and see what the future held in store for the boy acrobat.

?Andy, are you glad you joined the circus?? questioned Luke, one day, after a particularly brilliant performance in the ring.

?Glad doesn?t express it,? was the quick answer. ?Why, it seems to be just what I was cut out for.?

?I really believe you. You never make work of an act?like some of the acrobats.?

?It must be in my blood,? said Andy, with a bright smile. ?Anyway, I expect to be Andy the Acrobat for a long while to come.?

And he was.

The end.