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Title: Leo the Circus Boy; or, Life under the great white canvas

Author: Edward Stratemeyer

Release Date: April 10, 2011 [EBook #35821]

Language: English

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LEO THE CIRCUS BOY; OR, LIFE UNDER THE GREAT WHITE CANVAS ***



LEO'S FIRST APPEARANCE

LEO THE CIRCUS BOY;

or

LIFE UNDER THE GREAT WHITE CANVAS

BY CAPTAIN RALPH BONEHILL,

Author of "The Young Oarsmen of Lakeview," "The Rival Bicyclists," "Gun and Sled," etc., etc.

CHICAGO:
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Leo the Circus Boy

CHAPTER I.—A ROW AND ITS RESULT.

"Land sakes alive, Daniel, look at that boy!"

"Where is he, Marthy?"

"Up there on the old apple tree a-hangin' down by his toes! My gracious, does he wanter kill himself?"

"Thet's wot he does, Marthy," grumbled old Daniel Hawkins. "He'll do it, jest so ez we kin pay his funeral expenses. Never seen sech a boy before in my born days!"

"Go after him with the horsewhip, Daniel. Oh! goodness gracious, look at thet now!"

And the woman, or, rather, Tartar, Mrs. Martha Hawkins, held up her hands in terror as the boy on the apple tree suddenly gave a swing, released his feet, and, with a graceful turn forward, landed on his feet on the ground.

"Wot do yer mean by sech actions, yer young good-fer-nothin'?" cried Daniel Hawkins, rushing forward, his face full of sudden rage. "Do yer want ter break yer wuthless neck?"

"Not much, I don't," replied the boy, with a little smile creeping over his sunburned, handsome face. "I'm afraid if I did that I would never get over it, Mr. Hawkins."

"Don't try ter joke me, Leo Dunbar, or I'll break every bone in your worthless body!"

"I'm not joking; I mean what I say."

"Did yer put the cattle out in the cherry pasture?"

"Yes, sir."

"Feed the pigs?"

"Yes, sir."

"Mend thet barn door! as I told yer to yesterday?"

"Mended it last night."

"Wot about fixin' thet scythe yer broke tudder day?"

"I can't fix that. I'll have to take it down to Joe Marks' blacksmith shop."

"O' course! An' who's goin' ter pay fer it?" demanded Daniel Hawkins.

"You can take it out of my wages, Mr. Hawkins."

"Out o' yer wages?"

"That's what I said, sir."

The old farmer's face grew darker than ever. "Ain't no wages comin' to yer! You spile more than yer earn."

"According to my reckoning there are about twenty-eight dollars coming to me," returned Leo Dunbar quickly. "I have kept the tally ever since I came to live with you."

"Ain't a cent, boy; not a penny."

"I beg to differ with you. And now while we are at it, Mr. Hawkins, supposing we settle up?"

"Eh?"

"I say, supposing we settle up?"

"Settle up?" repeated the miserly farmer in amazement.

"Yes. You can pay me what you owe me. My month will be up to-morrow, and I don't intend to stay here any longer."

"But yer will stay, boy! I've got a right on yer. The poorhouse folks signed the papers."

"Squire Dobb signed the papers, but to me that doesn't count. He never had any claim on me."

"He settled yer father's estate."

"I know it—and kept me out of my money, too."

"You—you—"

"No more compliments, Mr. Hawkins. I say he kept me out of my money, and I mean it. And now he and you are doing about all you can to make me commit suicide." "Oh! jest to hear that boy!" burst in Mrs. Hawkins, who had just come up. "Daniel, why don't yeou birch him?"

"I will, ef he gives me any more sass," replied her husband. "He shan't talk about me an' the squire."

The old farmer was getting red in the face. He knew that Leo Dunbar was telling the truth.

A year before, Leo's parents had died, leaving the boy alone in the world.

Mr. Dunbar's property had been very much involved, and Squire Dobb, the most rascally lawyer in Hopsville, had taken the matter in charge.

At the end of six months he had announced to Leo that there was no money coming to him. Then, as manager of the poorhouse of the district, the lawyer had bound Leo over to Daniel Hawkins at four dollars a month and found.

"I will talk," cried Leo spiritedly. "I think it about time that I received my rights."

This remark made Daniel Hawkins' wrath boil over. He ran toward the barn and presently returned, carrying a heavy hide-bound whip.

"You ain't had a dressing down in a month, an' now I'm a-goin' ter give it to yer good!" he exclaimed, as he raised the whip and rushed at Leo.

Whiz! The heavy whip came down, the blow aimed for the boy's shoulder.

But Leo was not hit. Like a flash he moved to one side at the last instant, and the whip only circled through the empty air.

More enraged than before Daniel Hawkins rushed forward again and caught the boy by the arm.

“You whelp! I’ll show you!” he snarled.

Again the whip was raised. But it never struck the blow intended, for an interruption came as terrorizing as it was unexpected.

There was a fearful roar out in the dusty road beyond the house, a roar that echoed and re-echoed among the hills around, and then a huge beast bounded over the stone fence, landing directly at Leo Dunbar’s feet.

It was a lion that had escaped from “The Greatest Show on Earth,” the circus that was to perform at Hopsville that afternoon and evening.

CHAPTER II.—CAPTURING A RUNAWAY LION.

If Leo Dunbar was startled at the sudden appearance of this mighty monarch of the forest, what shall be said of Daniel Hawkins and his wife, Martha?

The farmer and his spouse gave one look and then stood, fairly paralyzed with fear.

They were unable to utter a word, and, to tell the truth, they both felt as if judgment was about to fall on them for ill-treating Leo, and that the ends of their miserable lives were at hand.

The lion crouched low, moving his heavy tail slowly from side to side.

He had escaped from his steel cage but an hour before, and as yet hardly knew what to do with his freedom.

From the road he had not been able to see the persons in the yard. But he had heard their voices, and his brute nature had caused him to leap the stone fence that he might rend some living creature limb from limb.

That the lion was in an ugly humor was easy to see. His mane was ruffled, his immense claws unsheathed, and his eyes were full of blood-curdling ferocity.

At first he gazed at Leo, but then swiftly turned toward Mrs. Hawkins, taking a single leap that brought him at the woman's very feet.

"Oh! Daniel, save me!" she managed to gasp.

"Can't nohow, Marthy!" spluttered the old farmer.

And then, recovering just sufficiently to move, he made a wild dash for the farmhouse, leaving his wife to her fate.

"You coward!" cried Leo, but Daniel Hawkins paid no heed to the remark. It is likely that in his terror he did not hear it.

"Save me, Leo!" went on the woman. "The beast is goin' ter eat me up!"

The sound of her voice appeared to anger the lion still more.

His tail moved quicker, and Leo saw that he was on the point of leaping on the woman.

The leap once made it would be impossible to do anything for Mrs. Hawkins. The lion would simply rend and devour her.

Leo gazed about him for some weapon. He realized that if anything was to be done it must be done instantly.

His eyes fell on the whip the old farmer had dropped. With a rapid movement he picked up the article, and, whirling around, struck the lion fairly and squarely across the eyes.

It was a telling blow, and, smarting with pain, the brute let out a roar ten times louder than

before.

Then he turned about and faced Leo.

“Run for your life!” sang out the youth to the woman. “Run, I tell you!”

She stared at him, but when he gave her a shove she realized what he was saying, and made such a spurt as had never before been seen in that dooryard.

The lion watched her go, but made no attempt to follow. His mind was on Leo and on the blow the boy had given him.

He was an ugly brute, and around the circus was known to be the most difficult to manage. Trainer after trainer had tried to break him in, but without effect. Instead of getting more docile, he grew worse.

In his former days he had killed a man, and evidently he was longing for a chance to repeat this bloody tragedy.

He took several steps and tried to get behind Leo.

But the boy was on the alert and ran backward toward the apple tree.

Then the lion crouched for a leap. His immense body was bent low, his tail gave a quiver, and forward he shot toward the very spot where Leo was standing.

But as the lion leaped so did the boy. He turned a graceful curve to the left, out of the brute’s reach, and caught the lowest branch of the tree behind him.

The lion’s nose struck the tree trunk, and he let out another roar of mingled pain and disappointment.

“Didn’t do it that time,” muttered Leo. “What’s the use of banging your nose like that?”

Another roar was the only answer, and then the lion left the vicinity of the tree and moved back several yards beyond the branch to which Leo clung.

The boy knew what was coming, and immediately stood up on the limb.

He was none too soon.

Again the lion made a leap upward.

He reached the limb, but only to find that Leo had taken a spring to the next above.

But now an accident happened which neither the boy nor the brute was expecting.

The apple tree was old and somewhat rotted at the roots. The weight of the boy and the sudden shock from the heavy body of the lion were too much for it to stand.

There was a crack and a loud snap, and then the tree went over on the ground, carrying Leo and the lion with it.

The lion was completely bewildered by the fall, and, moreover, he was entrapped for the moment by several limbs which came down on his back and neck.

As the tree went over, Leo turned around and landed on his feet directly beside the lion.

He saw how mixed up the brute was amid the branches and this gave him a sudden idea.

With a lightness of foot that was surprising in a mere farm lad, he ran to the woodshed.

Soon he reappeared carrying a wash-line, a well-rope, and half a dozen leather straps.

He fastened an end of the wash-line to one of the limbs of the tree and then to another, and so on all around the lion.

Then he crossed the well-rope over the line, and even fastened it around the lion's left hind leg.

Then making a noose of the longest strap, he watched his chance and dropped it over the brute's neck.

Of course, the lion roared and struggled to free himself, but Leo was too quick for him.

The noose around his neck, Leo tightened it considerably, and then fastened the end of the strap to the tree trunk.

"Now, if you move you'll take the whole tree with you," thought the boy.

CHAPTER III.—LEO LEAVES THE FARM.

The savage lion was a prisoner.

In vain he tried to release himself. Turning over merely tangled him up tighter, and in his struggle he almost broke a hind leg and choked himself to death.

He tried to run, and succeeded in carrying the whole apple tree several yards.

But the load was too much for him, and, with a roar of pain and rage, he at length became quiet.

In the meanwhile Daniel Hawkins and his wife had gone into the farmhouse and locked all the doors and lower windows.

They were now at an upper window watching proceedings.

"He's got him, Daniel!" cried Mrs. Hawkins.

"The apple tree is down!" groaned the old farmer in reply. "Plague take the pesky critter!"

"Leo hez tied him fast!"

"Maybe he might git away an' chew him up. Wish he would," continued Daniel Hawkins.

"It must be a lion from thet circus at Hopsville, Daniel, an' if so, they'll come after him."

"Well, they better take him away," growled the old farmer.

While they were talking a loud shouting was heard on the road, and presently half a dozen men on horseback came into view.

All were heavily armed, and several carried lassoes and ropes.

They were a party from the circus on the search for the lion.

Leo heard them coming and ran down the road to meet them.

"Hi, boy! Seen anything of a lion around here?" asked the leader.

"Indeed I have," laughed Leo.

"Where is he?" demanded another of the crowd quickly.

"Over in the dooryard of that farmhouse."

"Has he hurt any one?"

"He has scared the wits out of that man and his wife," and Leo pointed to Daniel Hawkins and his spouse.

"He's enough to scare the wits out of any one," put in another of the crowd. "Come, boys, now for

a tussle with old Nero.”

“We ought to shoot him at once. We can’t capture him alive,” growled a rear man.

“You won’t have to shoot him,” said Leo, with a twinkle in his eye.

“Why not? You don’t mean to say he’s dead already?”

“Oh, no! He’s alive enough.”

“Is it possible he has been captured?”

“Yes, I captured him and tied him to a tree.”

“Nonsense, boy, this is no time for fooling. The lion may eat somebody up.”

“I’m not fooling, sir. I have captured him. If you don’t believe me, come and see for yourself.”

Still incredulous, the party of men followed Leo into the dooryard.

When they saw the lion under the fallen apple tree they did not know whether to laugh, or praise Leo the most.

“By Jove! but this is the greatest feat yet!”

“Old Nero has a cage around him now and no mistake.”

“He can’t move a step unless he drags the whole tree with him!”

“Say, boy, who helped you do this?”

“No one.”

“You did it entirely alone?”

“Yes, sir,” was the modest reply.

“Thet ain’t so; it wuz me as captured yer lion fer yer,” came from Daniel Hawkins, who had joined the party in the yard.

“Mr. Hawkins, how can you say that!” exclaimed Leo in amazement. “You ran for your life and locked yourself in the house, even before your wife got away.”

“Tain’t so. I captured the lion, an’ if there’s any reward it comes to me.”

“We have offered no reward, but we are willing to pay for the capture,” replied the leader of the circus men. “But if you caught the lion how is it you were up in the house when we rode up?”

“Daniel! Daniel!” shrieked Mrs. Hawkins, still in the window. “Come up again! Leo didn’t fasten him tight enough an’ he’s gettin’ away!”

The alarm again terrorized Daniel Hawkins.

Forgetting all about his assumed bravery, he made a wild dash for the cottage, leaving Leo and the men alone in the yard.

“Does that look as if he had much to do with catching him?” laughed Leo.

“No, it does not. But the woman is right. Nero is getting ready to struggle for freedom. Come,

boys, put the harness over him while we have the chance.”

The three circus men set to work. It was a dangerous proceeding, but at last it was finished and the escaped lion was a prisoner.

Then one of the men rode back to the circus grounds to return with the cage in which the brute belonged.

While this was going on, Daniel Hawkins again came out, this time followed by his wife.

He tried to convince the circus men that he had captured the lion, but no one would believe him.

“I reckon the credit goes to this boy,” said Barton Reeve, the manager of the menagerie attached to the “Greatest Show on Earth.”

“No sech thing. He only got the ropes fer me.”

“If you were so brave, what made you run just now?”

“I—I—went ter help my wife. She—she sometimes hez fits, an’ I was afraid she would git one and fall from the winder.”

All the circus men laughed at this explanation, but not one believed it true.

“An’ another thing, thet apple tree hez got ter be paid for,” continued the farmer.

“We’ll pay for that if the lion pulled it down.”

“He certainly did,” put in Mrs. Hawkins.

“Well, what was the old tree worth?”

“Fifty dollars an’ more.”

“Hardly,” put in Leo. “You said only day before yesterday you were going to cut it down for firewood, because it was so rotted.”

“Shet up, boy!” howled Daniel Hawkins. “The tree is wuth fifty dollars an’ more.”

“I’ll pay you ten dollars,” said Barton Reeve.

“You’ll pay fifty.”

“Not a cent over ten. The tree is not worth five.”

“I’ll have the law on yer fer trespass!”

“All right; if you want to sue, I guess we can stand it,” was the circus man’s cool response.

Daniel Hawkins talked and threatened, but all to no purpose.

At last he agreed to take ten dollars and two tickets for the evening performance, and the bargain was settled on the spot.

It was not long after that that the steel-caged circus wagon came along, followed by a crowd of men and boys, all eager to see the strange sights connected with an escaped lion.

It was noised about that Leo Dunbar had captured the savage brute, and the boys gazed at the farm lad enviously.

"He's a brave one, eh?" said one.

"I wouldn't do it for a thousand dollars, would you?" added another.

"I always knew he was a cool one, and there isn't a fellow around as limber as he is," put in a third.

And so the talk ran.

When the lion was safe in the cage once more, Barton Reeve turned to Leo.

"Can you come with me to the circus grounds?" he asked. "I would like to talk with you."

"Certainly," replied Leo quickly. "I was going up there at the first chance I got to get away from the farm, anyway."

"Going up to see the show?"

"Not only that, but to see the manager."

"What do you want to see the manager for?"

"I want to strike him for a job."

"What sort of a job?"

"As a gymnastic clown."

"A clown and a gymnast," said Barton Reeve slowly. "Well, you might be a clown, if you got funny, but what do you know about gymnastics?"

"Quite a bit, sir, if I do say it myself. I have liked the exercise all my life, and it seems to me I was cut out for that sort of life."

Leo's earnestness kept Barton Reeve from smiling

He had often had boys and even men come to him full of silly notions about joining the circus.

He saw that Leo was a level-headed youth, and he noted, too, that the boy's body was finely formed and well developed.

"See here, what do you think of this?" suddenly cried Leo.

Running forward, he turned several handsprings and ended with a clear air somersault.

"That's all right." In fact, it was first-rate.

"If I had the apparatus I would like to show you what I can do on the bar and with the rings," went on Leo.

"You can do that at the grounds. Come on."

Barton Reeve rode off, with Leo behind him on the horse.

Daniel Hawkins tried to call the boy back, but all to no purpose.

"Has he any claim on you, Leo?" asked the man.

"Not a bit of a claim. He treated me like a dog, and now I'm going to leave him whether I get in

with the circus or not.”

CHAPTER IV.—LEO JOINS THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH.

On the way to the circus grounds Leo told Reeve much about himself.

He was seventeen years old, and for years had had a nice home with his parents, and it was during this time that he had taken a thorough course of gymnastics.

His father had been a retired officer of the United States army, and was supposed to be well to do at the time of his death.

But Leo had never gotten a cent out of the estate, and since becoming an orphan had known nothing but hard work.

The boy was satisfied that Squire Dobb was keeping him out of his money, but he had no proofs to use in bringing a case against the rascally lawyer.

Life on the farm he could not endure, and it was only the hope of getting some money out of Daniel Hawkins which had kept him so long at the drudgery there.

Now he was satisfied there was no money to be had, and he intended to leave at the first chance.

By the time Leo's story was told the party had arrived at the circus grounds.

It was afternoon, and already the great white tents were up, covering an entire block in the southern end of the town.

The cage was properly placed in the menagerie department, and then Barton Reeve led the way between numerous empty wagons to the rear of a large affair used as a ticket office.

This was not yet open, but a knock on the door brought a quick response.

Two men were in the wagon, the treasurer, Mr. Giles, and Adam Lambert, the traveling manager of the show.

"Here is a young man who would like to see you, Mr. Lambert," said Barton Reeve, and he introduced Leo.

"What is it?" asked the manager shortly. "My time is valuable."

"He would like a job in the ring."

And then Reeve told about what Leo had done and what the boy's aspirations were.

Ordinarily the manager would not have listened to such an application, having hundreds of such made to him every week.

But he liked Leo's looks, and besides, a boy who could capture a lion was certainly worth talking to.

"Don't you know it's a hard life, my boy?" he said.

"I'll warrant it is no harder than life on the Hawkins' farm, sir."

"It's not as rosy as it looks from a seat outside of the oval."

"I know that. But I am willing to put up with the roughness just for the chance to make something of myself," returned Leo.

Adam Lambert thought for a moment.

"Come with me into the ring," he said.

Leo followed him gladly.

The rings, two in number, were empty, and so were the hundreds of seats, making the tent look vast and gloomy.

"Now show me what you can do."

"Yes, sir."

Off came Leo's coat vest, and shoes. Then followed a number of handsprings, forward, backward, and sideways, and somersaults and curious attitudes.

"Can I use that bar up there?"

"Certainly, but there is no rope to get to it."

"Never mind, sir."

As he spoke Leo ran to the centerpole, and up this he went like a flash.

Then he gave a sudden leap and sat down on the bar several yards off.

"By Jove, there is something in that boy!" murmured Adam Lambert to Reeve. "He has just daring enough to succeed."

"So I would say, Mr. Lambert. Hullo! Look there!"

Leo was turning rapidly on the bar.

He went through a dozen gymnastic movements, and then slid down the center pole.

"That will do," shouted the manager. "I'll give you a trial. You can place yourself under Dick Pomeroy, the head tumbler and bar man. Mr. Reeve, take him to Dick."

Adam Lambert had scarcely spoken when a tall, finely-built fellow rushed into the ring from one of the dressing-rooms.

"Mr. Lambert!"

"Well, Dick."

"Broxton is intoxicated again!"

"Indeed! Didn't you warn him as I told you?"

"Yes, but it did no good. He is so intoxicated he can't stand."

"Then he can't do his brother clown act with Snipper?"

"No, sir, we'll have to cut it out."

"Too bad, with Nash on the sick list, too."

"See here," put in Barton Reeve. "This boy wanted to do clown as well as acrobatics."

"Is that so, Dunbar?"

"Yes, sir, if I can help you out I'll do my best."

"It's short notice," mused Adam Lambert.

"Snipper can instruct him and cut out anything difficult," suggested Barton Reeve.

He had taken a strong liking to Leo and wished to get the boy a place.

"Well, fix it up, Dick, the best you can," said the manager. "I must go back and see about those stolen tickets."

And off went the manager, followed a minute later by Barton Reeve, leaving Leo alone with Dick Pomeroy, who had charge of the clowns and tumblers connected with the "Greatest Show on Earth."

Pomeroy at once led Leo around to a dressing-room. In a corner sat Jack Snipper, a clown and gymnast, his face drawn down.

"Here's a man to take Broxton's place," explained Pomeroy.

"Why, he's a boy!" exclaimed Snipper.

"Never mind, you must drill him in the best you can."

"Can he do anything on the bar?"

"I reckon so."

"I don't like this drilling in new fellows every couple of weeks," growled Snipper, who was not a man of cheerful disposition.

As a matter of fact, he was what is commonly called a crank, and very jealous of his reputation.

He told Leo where he could obtain a pair of tights and a clown's outfit, and made up the boy's face for him.

Then he gave Leo a long lesson.

The two were to do a clown act, and then, while on the bars, throw off their clown dresses, and go in for a brothers' gymnastic act.

Leo worked hard, and by the time the circus commenced he was ready to go on, although it must be admitted he was extremely nervous.

The grand *entrée* was the first thing on the programme. It included the rulers of all nations, savage tribes, elephants, camels, chariots, and a hundred and one other things impossible to mention.

"Come on now!" suddenly said Snipper, and then he and Leo ran out into the ring and fell down

and bounced up as if they were a couple of rubber balls.

“Ho! ho! look at those two clowns!” shouted the crowd.

The tumble over, the clowns chased each other around the ring, knocked each other down, and did a dozen other funny things.

While the two clowns were cutting their capers a young lady bareback rider rode into the ring.

Her name was Natalie Sparks, but she was known on the bills as Natalie the Fire Queen.

Her great act was to dive through numerous hoops of fire while on horseback.

As she began to perform, Leo commenced to climb the centerpole of the tent, doing so in a way that nearly choked the crowd with laughter.

“See him twisting like a monkey!”

“He ain’t a clown at all! See, he is throwing off his clown dress!”

“Now he is dressed in tights!”

It was true. Leo was in full gymnastic costume and was swinging gracefully from the high bar.

As Leo began to do his best on the bar, Natalie the Fire Queen started to leap through rings of fire held up by several ringmen.

The performances of the young gymnast and the Fire Queen were in full swing when a cry of horror arose.

In some unaccountable manner the fire from the hoops had communicated to the tarred ropes running up by the centerpole to the roof.

The great canvas had taken fire in several places.

Before Leo could realize what had happened a cloud of smoke seemed to envelop him.

The fire had reached the ropes supporting the very bar upon which he was performing!

His escape in that direction was cut off, and the distance to the ring below was fully half a hundred feet!

CHAPTER V.—A LEAP OF GREAT PERIL.

Leo fully understood his great peril.

The entire canvas above him was in flames, and in a very short while the ropes which supported the bar upon which he had been performing would be burned through.

And then? Leo hardly dared to think of the consequences. The sawdust ring below seemed a terrible distance away.

A leap to it would mean broken limbs, perhaps death.

A panic arose among the audience.

"He can't escape!"

"He must fall or jump!"

A rope and a net were sent for, but long before they arrived Leo had made a move to save himself.

The smoke rolled around him a second time.

It was fearfully thick, and made him close his mouth and eyes for fear of being either blinded or suffocated.

As the smoke swept back in another direction there was a snap above.

One of the ropes which held the bar had parted!

The end of the bar hung down, and below it the end of the burned rope.

As quick as a flash Leo slid down to the very end of the rope.

Thus suspended he began to swing himself back and forth.

Soon he gave an extra swing, just as the smoke again came down.

Like a curving ball he passed through the cloud, past the centerpole, and on to the rings, on the other side of the tent.

He caught hold of one of the rings and hung fast.

Then after a pause in which to catch his breath he let himself down to the ground.

A deafening cheer arose.

Leo had actually saved himself from death, for as he touched the sawdust the heavy ash bar high above fell with a crash, just missing those who came on with the net.

"He's safe!"

The ushers and others now ran around asking the vast audience to leave the tent as quietly as possible.

But every one was afraid of the falling of the huge centerpole, and all made a great rush for the openings.

In this stampede many women and children were knocked down, and it was a wonder that some of them were not killed.

The fire brigade of the circus went to work as speedily as possible. The nearest hydrant of water was some distance away, but soon a hose was attached and a stream poured on the burning canvas.

In less than half an hour the excitement was over. Without delay the canvasmen went to work to repair the damage done.

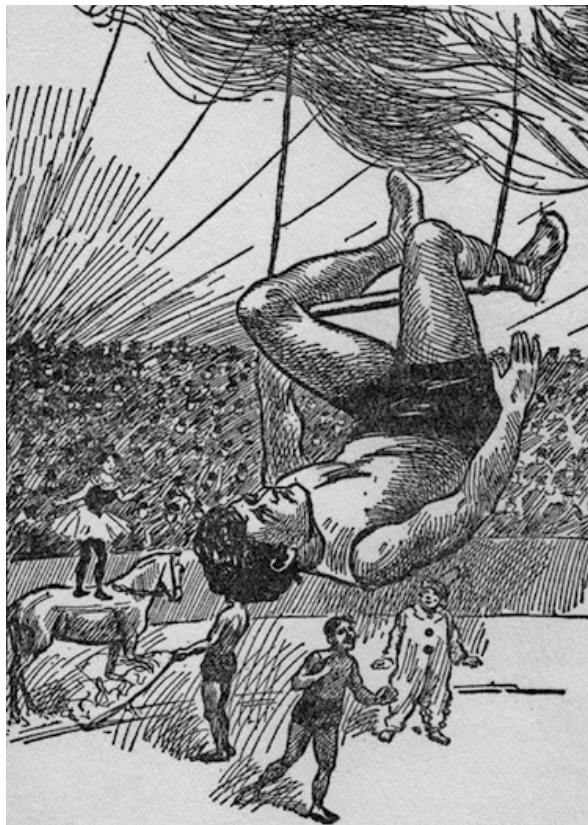
A good many people grumbled at not having seen a full performance. To these were given tickets of admission to the evening performance.

With the others from the ring, Leo hurried to the dressing tent. It was not long before he was joined by Barton Reeve.

“A great leap, my boy,” said the manager of the menagerie. “I never saw anything so neat.”

“It was a big undertaking,” smiled Leo. “I don’t think I would care to try it at every performance—at least not yet.”

“It would be the hit of your life to have that on the bills,” put in Natalie Sparks.



*THE FIRE SWEEPED DANGEROUSLY
CLOSE TO LEO.*

“Oh, that wasn’t so very wonderful,” remarked Jack Snipper, the brother clown and gymnast.

"It wasn't, eh?" cried Reeve. He could easily see how jealous Snipper was of the attention bestowed upon Leo. "I'll wager you a round hundred dollars you can't make the leap with the rings ten feet closer."

"Stuff and nonsense!" cried Snipper; but all noticed that he did not take up the offer and moved away a second later.

"You want to keep one eye on Snipper," was Natalie's caution to Leo.

"Why?"

"Can't you see he doesn't fancy the attention you are getting?"

"Oh, I'm sure I don't want to cut short his popularity," exclaimed the boy gymnast quickly.

"Popularity!" The Fire Queen burst into a laugh. "You can't, Leo."

"Why?"

"Because he never was popular. Why, they used to call him Sour Snipper."

It was now announced that the afternoon performance would not go on, and the different people separated to take off their ring dresses and put on their everyday clothes.

Leo was rather slow to make the change. He began to practice around the tent on several turns which as yet were difficult for him to do gracefully.

"You must love to work," growled Snipper on seeing him.

"I love the exercise," returned Leo shortly.

"You won't catch me doing any more of that than I have to."

"I want to become perfect."

"Do you mean to say by that that I am not perfect?" growled Snipper.

"We never get really perfect, Snipper."

"Oh, pshaw! Don't preach to me. Do you know what I think you are?"

"I do not."

"A country greeny with a swelled head."

Leo's face flushed at this. A laugh came from behind the canvas, where other performers were undressing.

"Thanks for the compliment, Snipper. I may be a little green, but at the same time I'll tell you what you can't do."

"What?"

"You can't stunt me. I'll do everything you do, and go you one better."

"Oh, you're talking through your hat," growled Snipper.

"Am I? Take me up and see."

"I won't bother with you, you greenhorn."

"Because you are a braggart and nothing else," retorted Leo, stung by the insolent acrobat's manner.

With a cry of rage, Jack Snipper leaped toward the boy, picking up a heavy Indian club as he did so.

CHAPTER VI.—LEO ASSERTS HIS RIGHTS.

At once a crowd of performers surrounded the pair. Very few of them liked Jack Snipper, and they wondered what Leo would do should the gymnast attack the boy.

“Call me a braggart, will you!” roared Snipper.

“Don’t you dare to touch me with that club!” replied Leo calmly.

“I’ll teach you a lesson!”

And, swinging the Indian club over his head, Jack Snipper made a savage blow at the young gymnast.

Had the stick struck Leo the boy’s head would have sustained a severe injury.

But as quick as a flash Leo dodged, and the Indian club merely circled through the empty air.

“For shame, Snipper!”

“Do you want to kill the boy?”

“What harm has he done?”

And so the cries ran on.

“Mind your own affairs!” shouted the maddened gymnast. “I’m going to teach the boy a lesson!”

Again he sprang at Leo.

But now suddenly the Indian club was caught. A dexterous twist, and it went flying out of reach across the dressing tent.

Then, before Snipper could recover, he received a stinging slap full in the face that sent him staggering backward on the grass.

A shout of approval went up.

“Good for Leo!”

“That’s right, boy, stand up for your rights!”

The shout brought Adam Lambert, the general manager, to the scene.

No sooner had he appeared than all the performers walked away. It was against the rules to fight, and every one present was liable to a heavy fine.

With the crowd went Snipper, who rolled over and over until a neighboring canvas-wall hid him from view.

“Who is fighting here?” demanded Lambert severely.

"Jack Snipper attacked me with an Indian club and I knocked him down," replied Leo.

"Why did he attack you?"

"Snipper's jealous of the lad," came from behind a side canvas.

"Yes, the boy only stood up for his rights," said another voice.

"We want no fighting here, Leo Dunbar," said Lambert. "Another such scene and you may be discharged."

And off went the general manager to inspect the mending of the tent.

He might have spoken even more severely, but he had seen Leo's wonderful leap and realized what fine mettle there was in the lad.

Snipper remained out of sight, nor did he appear again until the evening performance.

Having finished changing his clothing, Leo walked outside and mingled with the crowd of town people.

He knew but few of them, as since he had worked on Daniel Hawkins' farm he had been to Hopsville but seldom.

He wandered around to the museum, or side show, and while looking at the gigantic pictures displayed, was rather taken aback to see Daniel Hawkins and his wife standing not two yards away.

"My gracious!" murmured Leo to himself, and he lost no time in moving back.

As will be remembered, Daniel Hawkins had received two tickets for the show from the men who had come after the escaped lion.

Under pretense of looking for Leo, the old couple, who generally spoke of all shows as works of the evil one, attended the afternoon performance.

They saw the young gymnast, but the paint on his face as a clown so disguised him that neither recognized their bound boy.

They were much disappointed to have the fire cut short what proved to be so entertaining to them, but the extra tickets for the evening performance soothed their feelings greatly.

"We'll take in this 'ere side show and then git a bite an' wait fer the next openin'," said Daniel. "It's better'n goin' over to the county fair."

And Mrs. Hawkins agreed with him.

As soon as Leo saw the old couple an idea entered his head.

At the Hawkins' farmhouse he had several things which he wished to get. Not clothing—he was too poor to own more than what was on his back—but mementos of former days, when he had had as nice a home as any lad in the Hopsville district.

These mementos were secreted in the garret of the old farmhouse, in a corner behind the wide chimney, where Daniel Hawkins had never looked for them.

"I'll visit the house while they are here and get those things," Leo said to himself, and off he started.

As we know, it was quite a distance. Leo looked around for some sort of a vehicle which might give him a "lift," but unfortunately none appeared in sight.

At last he reached the place, to find it tightly locked up below.

In a twinkling Leo was up on the kitchen shed. From there he clambered along the gutter of the addition until he reached the window of a middle room.

As he had surmised this window was unlocked, and he crawled inside, although not without difficulty and danger of breaking his neck by a fall.

No sooner had he entered than a most appetizing smell greeted his nose.

"Huckleberry pie!" he cried. "By crimony! but I must have a piece!"

Down the stairs went Leo. The pies set on the kitchen table, two in number. A third, partly gone, rested close at hand.

At first Leo thought, just out of mischief, to cut a fresh pie. But then he reflected that this might cause suspicion and trouble, and he let the whole pies alone and satisfied himself on a juicy portion of that which was cut.

A glass of milk washed down the pie, and then, feeling much refreshed, the boy hurried upstairs to the garret.

The mementos were done up in a flat pasteboard box. There were pictures of his mother and father and other relatives, and half a dozen letters and other things, including a silver watch.

Daniel Hawkins had always wanted the watch but Leo had never let on that he possessed it.

With the articles in his pockets Leo started downstairs once more.

He had just reached the second story and was on the point of descending the lower flight of stairs, when an unexpected sound greeted his ears.

Daniel and Martha Hawkins had returned.

"So much cheaper ter git supper ter hum," he heard Mrs. Hawkins say, speaking from the kitchen.

"It's a pity, though, yer Aunt Mariah wasn't hum," returned Daniel Hawkins.

Leo was startled.

"Caught!" he muttered to himself, and then added: "Not much!"

With great caution he left the hallway and entered the side bedroom.

As noiselessly as possible he opened the window again.

The distance to the ground was at least twelve feet, but there was heavy grass below, and Leo did not mind such a drop.

"It's nothing to that leap I had to take in the circus," he said to himself, and crawled out on the window-sill.

"Hi! hi! You young rascal! What are you doing up there?"

Leo looked down. Beneath the window stood old Daniel Hawkins.

CHAPTER VII.—LEO GAINS HIS LIBERTY.

Daniel Hawkins had just come out to care for his horse. By sheer accident he had glanced up at the window and beheld Leo in the act of dropping out.

The young gymnast was as much surprised as was his tormentor. But he knew enough to cling fast to the sill, and not to drop into Daniel Hawkins' clutches.

"Goin' ter drop out, eh?" went on the old farmer.

"I rather think not," replied Leo, and popped into the room again.

At once Daniel Hawkins called his wife.

"Marthy! Marthy!"

"Wot, Daniel?"

"Leo's up in the house a-tryin' ter climb out o' the winder!"

"You don't say!"

"Run up an' catch him!"

"Why don't you go?"

"I want ter watch out here fer him! If I go up he'll drop anyway."

"Drat the boy!" muttered Mrs. Hawkins, and she went for her old-time weapon, the broom.

Armed with this, she ascended the stairs. She entered the side bedroom, to which her husband had pointed, only to find it empty.

"He ain't here!" she cried from the window.

"He's somewhere? Root him out!" shouted Daniel Hawkins.

So Mrs. Hawkins ran around from room to room.

But she did not find Leo, for the simple reason that the young gymnast had, by running through two rooms, reached the stairs and gone down to the front door.

He opened this and ran outside just as Daniel Hawkins appeared around the corner of the porch, whip in hand.

"Stop, Leo!"

"Not to-day!" retorted the boy.

And away he went, Daniel Hawkins lumbering after him.

The farmer was no match for the young gymnast. Soon Leo was out of his sight, and he returned to the farmhouse to talk the matter over with his spouse.

"I'll fix him yet, see ef I don't!" he said to Martha.

Soon his bony nag was hitched up to a buckboard, and away went the farmer in pursuit of the lad, who was doing his best to get away.

"I'll teach him a lesson he won't forget in a hurry when I collar him," thought the miserly man savagely.

On went the boy until nearly half the distance to Lendham, the next town, was covered. Wishing to throw the farmer off the scent, Leo did not head for the circus grounds.

As it was a hot day he was soon pretty well winded and he dropped into a walk.

On looking back he was chagrined to see the buckboard approaching.

"He means to catch me, after all!" he thought.

The young gymnast hardly knew what to do.

It was useless to think of going on, for his pursuer would sooner or later overtake him.

On both sides of the road were open fields, offering no place where he might conceal himself.

Suddenly an idea struck him.

He was approaching the inclosed grounds of the County Agricultural Society.

The county fair was in progress and thousands of people were in and about the inclosure.

Could he not lose himself in the crowd?

He resolved to make the attempt.

But he had not the price of admission, even though it was but twenty-five cents.

Yet this did not stop the youth.

"Necessity knows no law," and just as Daniel Hawkins drove up within a hundred feet of him he ran in among the carriages at the gateway and entered the grounds before the gatekeeper could stop him.

"Hi, boy, stop! Where is your ticket?"

The policeman near the gatekeeper made a dash after Leo.

But the boy was not to be collared.

He sprang into the midst of a crowd, and that ended the chase so far as the guardian of the law went.

Leo did not remain near the gates, but following the crowd, he walked to one of the main buildings and then to the large field beyond.

Here was a small racecourse, and local horsemen were running races for small purses and side bets.

At once something in the center of the racetrack attracted Leo's attention.

It was a very large balloon, swaying gracefully to and fro in the light breeze that was blowing.

The boy was interested on the instant, as he had not seen a balloon since he was a small boy.

"Father once went up in one of those things," he mused, as he moved forward. "I would like to try it once myself."

Around the balloon were half a dozen men, preparing for the ascension, to take place half an hour later.

Professor Williams, the aeronaut, had not yet put in appearance.

The balloon was about filled with hot air and the men were merely keeping the air warm until the professor should arrive.

As Leo stood by watching the arrangements an outsider came up.

"Too bad!" he said.

"What's too bad?"

"The professor can't get here to-day."

"Why not?"

"He has been taken sick and is at the hotel in New Haven."

"That will be a big disappointment to this crowd."

"I admit it, but it can't be helped."

The boy listened to the conversation with interest.

He pushed his way to where the man in charge of the balloon stood.

"I'll go up in the balloon for you, if you'll pay me," he said.

"You!" the man looked at him in astonishment.

"Yes."

"It won't do, my lad. The crowd want somebody who will make a parachute jump, and all that."

"I'll make the parachute jump if you'll give me a few instructions."

The man laughed.

"You're a daring youngster, to say the least," he remarked. "Why, you might break your neck."

"No, I wouldn't," returned Leo confidently.

"Well, I'm much obliged, but I can't use your services."

"Let me get in the basket and see how it feels, will you?" asked the boy, after a pause.

"Well, seeing as you are so anxious, I'll oblige you," laughed the man.

The basket rested on the ground, directly to one side of the fire, with which the air in the swaying monster was kept hot.

Hardly had the man given permission than Leo entered the wicker inclosure.

It was about six feet in diameter and filled with bags of sand for ballast.

To one side of the basket was attached a parachute. This the balloonist used in making his daring jumps from the clouds.

As Leo sat in the basket the crowd gathered around him.

"Hullo, Leo Dunbar! what are you doing in that basket?" asked Ben Barkley, one of the rich boys of Hopsville.

"Going to make an ascension," returned Leo jokingly.

"Bet you ten dollars you are not," laughed Ben.

"All right; I'll take you up. But you must loan me the money, Ben."

"How is it old Hawkins gave you a day off?" went on Ben. "Thought he was too mean to give anybody a holiday."

"So he is, Ben. I took a day off and I'm going to take more."

"Phew! What do you mean? Have you and the old man parted company?"

"We have."

"It is a wonder he would let you go—he got so much work out of you."

"He didn't let me go. I ran away."

Ben Barkley's eyes opened widely.

"You don't mean it!"

"I do! I'm tired of being his slave."

"I don't blame you a bit for leaving," was Ben's decided reply. "I know what a hard-hearted man he is."

"I'm going to carve my own way to fortune."

"What are you going to do?"

Leo was about to answer when Ben was pushed to one side and the portly form of Daniel Hawkins appeared.

"Ha! ha! So I have found you at last, you scamp!" he cried in a rage. "A pretty run you have given me! And made me pay out twenty-five cents, too, to come in the fair after you!"

Leo was taken completely aback. He had not dreamed that the farmer would follow him into the grounds.

"I'll skin you!" stormed the man, seeing the boy did not immediately answer him.

"Not much you won't," put in Ben Barkley.

"What have you to do with this?" howled Daniel, turning to the rich boy.

"You have no right to abuse Leo," responded Ben.

"This is none of your business!"

"Hold him a minute, Ben!" suddenly shouted Leo. "Hold him!"

As the boy spoke he drew from his pocket a clasp-knife.

Quickly he opened the largest blade.

Slash! slash! slash!

He was cutting the ropes which held the balloon.

"Here! What are you doing!" screamed the man in charge.

"I'm going to escape a tyrant!" responded Leo, as he cut the last rope.

For an instant the balloon continued to sway from side to side.

Daniel Hawkins fought off Ben Barkley and leaped forward.

Too late!

Up shot the balloon, dragging the basket after it.

In less time than it takes to tell it, Leo Dunbar was five hundred feet up in the air!

CHAPTER VIII.—AMONG THE CLOUDS IN A THUNDERSTORM.

A cry arose.

“The balloon has gone up!”

“Why, the balloonist is nothing but a boy!”

“My! but ain’t it going up fast!”

Daniel Hawkins could do nothing but stare after the balloon.

“Foolish boy, he will be killed!” he gasped.

Ben Barkley was also amazed.

“He said he would go up,” he murmured, “but I never supposed that he meant it.”

The crowd continued to shout. They wondered what it all meant, and some asked the men who had had the balloon in charge, but those individuals had no time to explain.

They sprang into a wagon and prepared to follow the direction of the balloon, supposing it would come down as soon as the hot air began to cool off.

Meanwhile, what of Leo?

So sudden was the upward rush of the balloon that the boy was thrown to the bottom of the basket ere he was aware.

He clutched the sides and then ventured to look down. The earth seemed to be fading away beneath him.

For a few minutes he was deadly sick at the stomach and there was a strange ringing in his ears.

The balloon was moving in the direction of Hopsville. Soon it passed over the town.

Leo could see the few streets and the brook laid out like a map beneath him.

He was growing accustomed to his novel situation.

On and on went the balloon.

The wind appeared to blow stronger the higher he went.

Then he looked ahead and saw he was rushing rapidly toward a dense mass of clouds to the southeast.

The boy had noticed the clouds while running toward Lendham.

They betokened a thunderstorm, and already the mutterings of thunder came to his ears.

"A storm would be more than I bargained for," he thought. "I wonder if I can't get away from it?"

Leo had heard tell of going up above a storm when the latter hung low.

He did not know if he could make a hot-air balloon go up, but he resolved to try.

With great rapidity he threw out one sandbag after another.

Lightened of a great part of its load, the balloon shot up a hundred feet or more.

Then the boy noticed a large sponge tied to the side of the basket and beside a can labeled alcohol.

At once he saturated the sponge and placed it on the stick for that purpose.

When the sponge was lit he held it up to the mouth of the balloon.

The cooling air began to grow hot again, and once more the balloon went up slowly, but steadily.

But now the wind made the basket rock violently from side to side.

Soon Leo had to extinguish the sponge and put it away.

A gust sent the basket almost over to one side, and he had to let everything go in order to cling fast.

Sizz! A jagged streak of lightning crossed directly in front of the balloon!

He was now in the very midst of the storm and all grew black around him.

The change from the bright sunshine was terrible to the boy and he almost gave himself up for lost.

Back and forth rocked the balloon and the basket, and many were the times that he was in danger of being hurled to death.

Then the balloon began to descend.

The clouds were left behind, and there followed a deluge of rain which drenched Leo to the skin.

He fell so rapidly that a new danger presented itself.

Where or how would he land?

Would he break his neck or a limb?

Down, down he went! There were trees or bushes under him, he could not tell which.

Crash! The basket settled in the top of a tree.

Down came the folds of the balloon on top of it, and the boy was nearly smothered.

Yet he was exceedingly thankful that his life had been spared.

He crawled from the basket and carefully made his way down the tree to the ground.

The storm still raged, but gradually it moved onward, and the sun broke from beneath the

scattering clouds.

Leo had traveled at least eight or ten miles, and he wondered what he should do next.

He had half a mind to run off and leave the balloon men to find their property as best they might.

But he soon changed his mind on that point.

"I'll aid them all I can," he said to himself.

The boy knew there was a road through the woods which ran almost directly to the fair grounds.

He made his way to this and walked on through the mud and wet.

It was not long before he came up to the men in the wagon.

At first they were inclined to be abusive, and they thought to have the boy locked up.

But Leo soon changed all this.

"Your balloon is all right," he said. "And by going up I reckon I saved you the amount you were to get from the fair people. You wouldn't get a cent if somebody hadn't gone up."

This was a new way of looking at it.

"Well, we won't get paid for a parachute jump," said the balloon manager. "But we can claim half money, true enough."

The boy showed the men where the balloon was, and helped them load it on their wagon.

The men took to Leo, and as he helped them at the hardest work, they readily answered his questions about the circus and gave him full directions by which he could take a short cut to the grounds.

"That was a narrow escape," murmured Leo to himself as he made his way back to the "Greatest Show on Earth."

Arriving there, he had another long talk with Barton Reeve, who, as before stated, had taken a sudden and strong fancy to the brave lad.

The upshot of the matter was that Reeve bought Leo a trunk and advanced him money for several changes of clothing.

The next day, at Lendham, the circus tents were jammed with people.

Everything was again in order, and all the acts went off with a dash that drew round after round of applause.

Snipper was as sour as ever, but he took good care not to interfere with Leo.

As for the boy, he appeared perfectly at home; so much so that many said he was a born circus performer.

As a clown he caused the people to laugh heartily, and when he threw off his trunks and performed on the bars and rings he got more than a share of the applause.

As soon as the performance was over the circus packed up, and at half-past eleven began to move from Lendham to Middletown, seven miles distant.

Leo spent the night at the Middletown Hotel with Barton Reeve. The boy was now a *protégé* of the menagerie manager.

Before going to bed, Leo told Reeve much about his former life, and showed the manager the pictures of his folks.

Reeve became interested.

"I'll tell you what I'll do, Leo," he said. "I'll go to this Squire Dobb and get him to release you in a lawful way. Then you will have nothing to fear from Daniel Hawkins."

"But supposing Hawkins won't let the squire release me?"

"I don't believe he has any claim on you that would hold good in a court of law. I'll make the squire show his authority over you first."

"I wish you could get Squire Dobb to make a settlement of my parents' estate," went on Leo earnestly.

"You think he is holding money from you?"

"I know he is."

"Well, I'll investigate."

Bright and early the next day the young lad and Barton Reeve drove over to the home of Nathan Dobb.

They found the squire busy in his office, looking over some legal papers.

Without preliminaries Barton Reeve introduced himself. The squire listened in silence, at the same time scowling at Leo.

"Want to quit the farm and become a circus performer, eh?" said Dobb at last. "Can't let you do it. You'll have to go back to Daniel Hawkins' farm."

"I never will!" returned Leo warmly. "I'll run away entirely first."

"We'll see," sniffed Squire Dobb.

Barton Reeve had sized up the lawyer at a glance. He saw that the man was a crafty villain, not to be trusted.

"Squire, would you mind showing me your authority over this boy?" he remarked firmly.

"Wh-what?" was the surprised exclamation.

"I would like to learn your legal authority over Leo."

"It's none of your business!"

"I shall make it my business."

"Going to pry into matters, eh?"

"Yes, unless you consent to release Leo. He has been misused on the Hawkins' place."

The face of Nathan Dobb was a study. If there was one thing he feared it was the exposure of the past. Why he feared this will be explained later.

"I'll have to see Hawkins first," he said at last.

"When will you see him?"

"To-day. But what is Leo to do?"

"He is going to travel with me and perform in the circus."

"He can't do anything."

"Never mind. I'll teach him a thing or two," replied Barton Reeve.

He was afraid if he told Squire Dobb what Leo could really do that the miserly lawyer would want money for the release.

After a little more talk Leo and Reeve left the squire's house.

On the next day Reeve got a short note from Dobb. It read:

"I have given up all claim to Leo Dunbar, and so has Daniel Hawkins."

Leo was much pleased. Barton Reeve smiled to himself.

"There is something in all this, Leo," he said. "Next week, when I get time, I'll look into your past and Squire Dobb's doings."

CHAPTER IX.—THE MAD ELEPHANT.

From Middletown the circus went to Dover, and then to Grasscannon.

At each of these places a big business was done, and at every performance Leo did better.

The young gymnast became a great favorite with all but two people in the "Greatest Show on Earth."

These two people were Jack Snipper, who remained as overbearing as ever, and Jack Broxton, the fellow discharged for intoxication.

Broxton had been following up the circus ever since his discharge, in the vain hope of being reinstated.

But the rules in the "Greatest Show on Earth" are very strict, and no intoxication is allowed.

After leaving Grasscannon, the circus struck up through New York State, and at the end of the week arrived at Buffalo.

It was while at this place that Broxton tried to play a dangerous trick upon Leo.

He met the young gymnast on the street one night after the performance.

He was under the influence of liquor at the time, and in his pocket he carried what is known by the boys as a giant torpedo.

As Leo turned a corner he threw the torpedo at Leo's feet.

Luckily the torpedo failed to explode.

Had it gone off the young gymnast would have been sadly crippled.

"You rascal!" cried Leo, and he made for Broxton and landed him in the gutter.

Some of the other performers then came up.

"What's the row, Leo?"

"Look what Broxton threw at me," he replied, and handed the torpedo around for inspection.

While the explosive was being examined, Broxton sneaked off, and it was well for him that he did so, for otherwise the crowd would have pounced upon him and given him the greatest warming up of his life.

But that ended Broxton's hope of rejoining the circus. The story of his attempt on Leo circulated, and he did not dare to show his face anywhere around the dressing tents.

After leaving Buffalo the circus turned southward toward Pennsylvania.

One night they arrived at Harmony Falls.

"To-morrow, if all goes right, I am going to take a train for Hopsville and see Squire Dobb," said Barton Reeve to Leo.

"I hope you have luck," replied the boy. "If he is keeping any of my property back from me I want to know it."

The day in Harmony Falls opened very warm. A haze hung over the mountains to the westward.

"We'll have a storm by night," said Natalie Sparks to Leo.

The two were now warm friends.

"That will make it bad for the ticket-wagon," laughed the young gymnast.

"Oh, I hate a storm during a performance," went on the girl, "especially if it thunders and lightens."

"Well, that's what it's going to do."

"How do you know?"

"Oh, didn't I live on a farm?"

"That's so!" Natalie laughed merrily. "You don't look much like a farm hand now."

"Thanks for the compliment," and Leo blushed.

During the afternoon it grew hotter and hotter. Under the big tents it was suffocating.

"Dandy weather for lemonade," said the owner of the main drinking stand, but he was about the only person who appreciated the sudden rise in the thermometer.

At seven o'clock the circus tents were again crowded, and amid the general excitement but few noticed the flashes of lightning over in the west. The low rumblings of thunder they attributed to the lions in the cages.

At last the grand *entrée* was over, and then the performance settled down to the various specialties.

Then, as Leo and Snipper came on, a louder peal of thunder attracted every one's attention.

To quiet fears the band struck up. Of course Leo and Snipper could not talk against the music, and so they tumbled around instead, Leo casting himself into the most awkward of shapes.

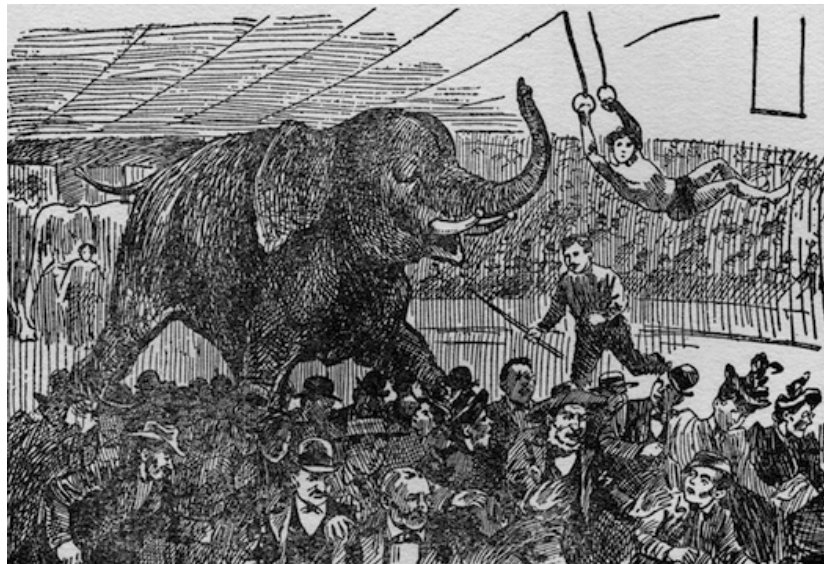
The rain began to fall, but as the canvases were waterproof this did no great harm.

Then the wind freshened up, and every one realized that a big storm was at hand.

Leo had just thrown off his clown's dress and mounted up to a pair of rings when a fearful crack of thunder caused every one to leap up in terror.

The lightning had struck a pole in the menagerie tent!

Down came the heavy stick, straight across the backs of three of the largest elephants.



THE ELEPHANT MADE FOR THE CROWD

The thunder and the fall of the pole frightened the huge beasts. They roared and plunged and finally broke from their fastenings.

Two of them were secured without much difficulty, but the third, the largest, could not be managed.

With a fearful roar he rushed into the main circus tent, under the spot where Leo was performing, and directly in the faces of the crowd, which tried in vain to flee from his path.

CHAPTER X.—CAPTURING THE ELEPHANT.

For the moment it looked as if the mad elephant would crush a dozen or more of the audience.

He was making straight for the crowd, which tried in vain to clear a path for him to pass.

The uproar was terrible, but it was nothing compared to the trumpeting of the gigantic beast.

Several attendants rushed toward the elephant with prods, but he was too angry to notice them.

“Turn him back!”

“He’ll walk right over the crowd!”

“Lasso him!”

“Shoot him!”

And so the cries went on.

The uproar had caused Leo to stop his performance; indeed, it had stopped everything but the stampede of the audience.

Suddenly the elephant ran directly under the young gymnast.

As he did so there came another crash of thunder.

The elephant raised up on his rear legs, and his trunk went up to where Leo swung.

And then a startling thing happened.

Leo dropped directly upon the beast’s head. With remarkable rapidity he slid back on to the neck.

“Throw me a rope!” he yelled to the nearest attendant, and the fellow did so.

Then the end of the elephant’s trunk came up angrily. He intended to catch hold of the young gymnast and hurl him to the earth, there to trample on him.

But Leo slipped further back, and at the same time threw the noose of the rope over the uplifted proboscis.

He hauled it taut, and with the end of the rope in his hand, sprang down and ran at lightning speed to the nearest centerpole.

Around this he went half a dozen times.

“Now keep him back with your prods!” he sang out.

More enraged than ever, the elephant tried to pull himself free.

But the rope held, and he was forced on his knees, roaring with pain, for an elephant’s trunk is

his most sensitive organ.

A shout of approval went up, and the crowd paused in its hasty flight.

But the elephant was not yet a prisoner. He pulled and tugged, and had the centerpole not been so strong and so deeply set in the ground, he would surely have either broken it off or pulled it up.

But now he hesitated, and in that moment more attendants came up. One began to soothe him, while the others slipped a leather and iron harness over him. Soon he was a complete prisoner, and realizing this, he shambled back to the menagerie tent as mildly as a lamb.

The rain was now coming down in a perfect deluge, and the audience would not remain. In less than a quarter of an hour the circus grounds were deserted, saving for those who had to remain on duty, and the performers in the dressing-tents.

Every one praised Leo for what he had done; every one, that is, but Snipper. He had not a word to say, but looked more morose than ever.

Leo did not wait, however, to hear all that the others had to say. He donned his regular clothing just as quickly as he could, and with Natalie Sparks rode from the grounds to the hotel at which they were stopping.

Barton Reeve was nowhere around. He had gone off to Hopsville to see Nathan Dobb.

He came in about half-past ten, and then Leo and he had a long discussion concerning the boy's past and future.

"The squire is a sly one," said the menagerie manager. "It was about as easy to get information out of him as it is to get milk out of a stone."

"Then you learned nothing?" returned Leo, much disappointed.

"I did and I didn't. He admitted that your folks were once wealthy; but he said the money was lost in speculations before you were left an orphan."

"I don't believe that."

"Nor I. I asked him for some proofs, but he would give me none. Then I asked him flatly how much there was coming to you when your folks died, and he said not more than a couple of hundred dollars. I wanted to see the papers, but he wouldn't show them."

"Didn't you tell him we would take the matter to court?"

"I did, and it worried him a good bit. That is what makes me think there is considerable at stake. If he had nothing to hide, what is he so scared about?"

"Just wait till I have money enough, I'll stir him up!" cried Leo.

He had not yet forgotten how Nathan Dobb and Daniel Hawkins had mistreated him.

"We'll both stir him up, Leo. But I guess before we go much further we had better get a lawyer's advice. In a few weeks the circus will make two three-day stops and that will give us a little time, certainly more than we get when we go to a new town every day."

They talked the matter over for some time longer, and when Leo went to bed it was with the fixed determination to make Squire Dobb "toe the mark."

And while the young gymnast was meditating thus, Nathan Dobb was walking up and down his

office, his face dark and full of cunning.

"The boy's getting too big and he's making too many friends," he muttered to himself. "Why couldn't he remain a simple farm hand, without trying to rake up the past and make a place for himself?" He took a turn or two and clenched his bony hands. "I wish I had stuck to my original idea and sent him to Africa on that freight steamer without a cent in his pocket."

Then Nathan Dobb dropped into the chair beside his safe, and from the strong box took a package of documents. These he looked over for nearly half an hour.

"Ten thousand dollars!" he muttered. "It would be a fortune to him! But he shan't have it. I've worked too hard for it to have it slip through my fingers at this late day. I had better burn all these papers and then concoct some scheme for getting him out of the way."

Nathan Dobb's soliloquy was interrupted by a crash in the rear of the house. Some one had broken into the kitchen, most likely a burglar.

CHAPTER XI.—A CRIMINAL COMPACT.

There had been several robberies in Hopsville lately, so the squire was certain the burglar had now come to his house.

Instantly he turned out the light in the office. Then opening the door to the hall he listened attentively.

He was right; some one was moving cautiously about the kitchen.

Moving back to his desk the squire secured his pistol and also a club.

When he came out into the hall on tiptoe he heard the would-be burglar moving around the dining-room.

Presently the fellow struck a light, which he set on the table.

Then he began an examination of the silverware on the sideboard.

By the light the squire got a good look at the would-be burglar. He was astonished beyond measure.

"Hank Griswold!" he muttered, half-aloud.

The man whose name he mentioned had formerly been a tavern-keeper in Hopsville.

But he had been sent to jail for robbing and beating a drunken man. His discharge had taken place but two weeks before.

As Squire Dobb spoke, the would-be burglar turned swiftly.

"Collared!" he muttered laconically.

Then he tried to escape by a rear door, but Nathan Dobb covered him with the pistol.

"Stop, Griswold!"

"Confound the luck! The game is up!"

"It is. Stop where you are."

"Don't be hard on me, squire."

"So you were going to rob me, eh?"

"Let me go this time, squire," went on the man pleadingly.

"What for? So you can rob somebody else?"

"I ain't got a cent to my name, squire."

"I can't help that."

Suddenly a thought flashed over Squire Dobb's mind.

"Griswold, step into my office."

"Don't lock me up, squire."

"I won't—if you will do as I wish you to."

"I'll do anything you say, only don't arrest me again."

"Step into the office, and see to it that you don't wake up the whole household."

Hank Griswold complied. The squire followed him, still, however, keeping his pistol ready for use.

But when the office was reached, and the door shut, Nathan Dobb's manner changed. He took Griswold's hand.

"Griswold, you are just the man I want to see."

"I—I—don't understand," was the confused reply.

"I'll explain. Sit down and take it easy. You love to smoke? Have a cigar," and a box was shoved toward him.

"See here, Nathan Dobb, what's your game now?"

"I want to throw some work in your hands, work that will pay well."

"What kind of work?" asked Griswold suspiciously. He was half-inclined to believe Nathan Dobb was out of his mind.

"You just said you would do anything for me if I didn't have you arrested."

"So I will." "Supposing I put a job in your way that will pay you an even hundred dollars——"

"You're foolin' me, squire."

"I mean it, Griswold, a hundred dollars. Would you do the work and say nothing?"

"Yes."

"It's a—a—job that isn't strictly—ah—all right, you know."

"I don't care what it is," returned Griswold recklessly. "I'll do anything you say. You can trust me."

"Will you?" cried Nathan Dobb eagerly. He hesitated. "I want to get a boy out of my way."

"Who?"

"Leo Dunbar, who used to live with Dan Hawkins."

"I know him. Didn't his father once have my tavern shut up as a disorderly house?"

"Well, as I said, I want to get that boy out of my way."

"Where is he now?"

"He is traveling as an acrobat with that circus which performed here a week or so ago."

"And you want me to—to—?" Griswold hesitated.

"I want him removed from my path. I never want to see him around here again." "And you'll give me a hundred for the job?"

"I will."

"It's not enough. Make it two hundred."

"Well, I will."

"In cash?"

"Yes."

"When can I get the money?"

"You can get it right here as soon as—well, I'm sure Dunbar won't bother me any more."

"You're a cool one, Dobb. But I said I'd go you, and I will. But, say?"

"Well?"

"You must let me have fifty dollars on account. I'll have to hang around the circus for awhile and lay my plans. It's no fool of a job to do as you wish."

"Here are thirty dollars. And one word more, Hank. Never mention my name in this, and if I were you, don't ever let Leo Dunbar see you."

"I'll remember," replied Griswold.

Ten minutes later he left Nathan Dobb's house as secretly as he had entered it.

CHAPTER XII.—THE STOLEN CIRCUS TICKETS.

ON the following week the circus moved down through Pennsylvania. Fine weather favored the show, and the crowd at each performance was very large.

“This is going to be a banner season,” said Giles, the treasurer, “unless we get tripped up as we were last season.”

He referred to a serious matter, namely, that of thousands of stolen tickets, which during the previous summer had been secured and sold by outside speculators.

This season a few tickets had thus far been missing, but the number was not sufficient to cause a serious loss.

Leo’s performances in the ring improved every day. Already was he as good as Jack Snipper, and soon he would outrival the other acrobat in every way.

Leo’s acts, while disguised as a clown, were highly amusing, even better than some of the regular clowns, of which there were eight.

“He could do clown and get big wages, even if he didn’t know a thing about gymnastics,” remarked Natalie Sparks.

Natalie was now a warm friend to Leo, much to Snipper’s disgust.

The second-rate gymnast had always been enamored of the Fire Queen, but he could make no progress in his suit.

One day he met Natalie in the dressing-tent when no one else was present.

He began to talk familiarly to her, and then attempted to kiss her.

“Don’t you dare!” she cried angrily.

“I guess you won’t mind very much,” said Snipper, and then, despite her struggles, he bent over and stuck his repulsive face close to her fair cheek.

But just then Leo came on the scene. For a moment he stood in amazement.

“Leo, make the horrid fellow go away!” panted Natalie.

“Do as Miss Sparks wishes, Snipper!” cried the young gymnast.

“Mind your own business!” grumbled Snipper.

“This is my business,” returned Leo warmly.

And rushing up, he collared the second-rate gymnast and hurled him halfway across the tent.

Snipper was clearly in the wrong, and, as Natalie had called on Leo for assistance, he did not dare raise a row.

He sneaked out, shaking his fist at Leo as he did so.

"Oh, Leo, I am very thankful you came in," panted Natalie as soon as she could recover.

"So am I," went on the boy honestly, and then, as he looked at the beautiful girl, both blushed.

Following the scene just recorded, Jack Snipper was more ugly than ever. Whenever he met or passed Leo he would mutter something under his breath.

"Look out for him, Leo," said Dick Pomeroy, the tumbler, one day. "He's cutting a club for you."

"I've got my optics peeled," laughed Leo.

That afternoon, after the performance, Leo was walking around outside, near the side-show.

Presently he saw something that at once interested him.

A "flim-flam worker," as such criminals around a circus are called, was trying to swindle a countryman out of twenty dollars.

He was working an old game, which consists in getting an outsider to hold the stakes in a bet with another flim-flammer.

The game is to mix the stakeholder up and make him put up his own money, and then secure all the cash in sight.

Leo was interested for two reasons.

In the first place, he did not wish to see the countryman swindled.

In the second place, he knew that swindlers of any kind were not allowed to work in the vicinity of the "Greatest Show on Earth."

The flim-flam man was about to receive the countryman's money when Leo stepped up.

"Drop this," he said quietly.

"Wot yer givin' us, sonny?" came in a hoarse growl from the swindler.

"I say drop the game." Leo turned to the countryman. "Put away your money, or you will be swindled out of it."

"By gum! Is thet so?" ejaculated the farmer, and he at once thrust the cash out of sight.

At this the would-be swindler turned on Leo.

"I'll thrash you for that!" he howled, and rushed at the young gymnast, while the two partners in the deal did the same.

Leo knew it would be foolish to attempt to stand up against all three, so he gave a peculiar whistle, known to all circus hands.

A cry of "Hi! Rube!" arose and soon several circus detectives reached the spot. But the swindlers vanished before they could be captured.

The countryman, whose name was Adam Slocum, was much pleased over what Leo had done, and insisted on shaking hands. He invited Leo to call on him when the circus came to the next town.

"Thank you, I'll call," said Leo.

Snipper had witnessed the scene between the swindlers and Leo. When the three men went off he followed them.

All four met at a low resort half a dozen blocks from the circus grounds.

Snipper knew the men. As a matter of fact, he would have left the circus and joined them in their work, but he had his reasons for remaining as an employee of the "Greatest Show on Earth," as will be seen later.

The four men had a conference, which lasted over an hour.

Then Snipper and one of them called on a local locksmith.

The swindler told a long story of having lost the keys to his trunk, and he ordered the locksmith to make him three keys from impressions furnished by Snipper.

With these keys in his possession, Snipper went back to the circus grounds.

On the following day, toward evening, there was a commotion at the entrance to the main tent of the circus. One of the managers of the great aggregation had discovered that hundreds of circus tickets had been sold throughout the district at a discount from the regular price, fifty cents.

A hurried examination was made, and then it was learned that two thousand tickets had been stolen from one of the box-office wagons.

These tickets were now either sold to individuals or in the hands of the outside speculators.

Who could have stolen the tickets was a mystery, until a slip of paper was handed to Giles, the treasurer, which read:

"Leo Dunbar was hanging around the ticket wagon last night. Better watch and search him.

"A Friend."

Giles lost no time in acting upon the suggestion given in the note. He ran to the dressing-tent and, finding a key to fit Leo's trunk, opened it.

A first examination of the contents revealed nothing, but then the treasurer brought to light three heavy strips of red paper, each marked 100—50s.

They were the strips used around bundles of tickets.

This was sufficient proof against Leo for Giles. He told several of the others, including Mr. Lambert, the general manager, and then waited for the boy to come in from his performance in the ring.

Amid a generous round of applause, the young gymnast finished his turn and bowed himself out.

On his appearance in the dressing-tent, Giles at once placed his hand on our hero's shoulder.

"Consider yourself under arrest, Leo Dunbar," he said sternly.

Leo was much startled.

"What for?"

"For stealing two thousand circus tickets."

CHAPTER XIII.—LEO MAKES A CHANGE.

Leo stared at the circus treasurer in amazement.

“For stealing two thousand circus tickets?” he repeated.

“Exactly, young man.”

“I am innocent.”

“I don’t believe Leo would steal a pin,” put in Natalie Sparks, who had just come up.

“That’s not for you to decide, Miss Sparks.” said Giles sharply. “We found evidence against you in your trunk, young man. You may as well confess.”

“What evidence?” asked Leo, bewildered.

The circus treasurer mentioned the red strips.

“I never placed them there,” declared Leo. “Somebody has been tampering with that trunk.”

“That’s too thin,” sneered Giles.

“Of course it’s too thin,” put in Snipper, who was watching the scene with an ill-concealed smile of triumph on his face.

Leo looked at the gymnast sharply. Then he suddenly bounded toward Snipper and ran him up against a pile of boxes.

“You scoundrel! This is some of your work! I can see it in your face.”

He choked Snipper until the man was red in the face.

“Let—let me go!” gasped the second-rate gymnast finally.

“Let him go, Dunbar,” ordered Giles, and caught Leo by the collar.

The noise of the trouble had spread, and now Barton Reeve appeared on the scene.

“What’s the meaning of all this?” he demanded.

He was quickly told by Natalie Sparks.

“I do not believe Leo is guilty, in spite of the red strips found in the trunk,” he said.

He talked the matter over with Giles, and finally Leo, Giles, and Barton Reeve went off to interview the manager.

They found Adam Lambert in the main ticket wagon, counting tickets and cash. He was much disturbed.

"I don't know much about you, Dunbar," he said coldly. "The thing looks very black, and——"

"Mr. Lambert, I am innocent!" cried Leo. "I believe this is only a plot against me."

"A plot? Whose plot?"

"This man Snipper——"

"You and Snipper seem to be fighting continually," broke in the manager.

"It is not my fault. He——"

"He always got along well enough before you came, Dunbar. I won't have this continual quarreling around the show. It sets a bad example for the others." The manager pulled at his mustache for a few seconds. "Can you prove you are innocent of the theft of the tickets?"

"Perhaps I can."

"Aren't you sure you can?"

"No, sir. I hope to be able to do so later on, though."

"Well, then, until that time arrives you can consider yourself suspended from duty. I am going to get to the bottom of this affair."

"I am discharged!" gasped Leo.

"Mr. Lambert, aren't you a bit hard on the lad?" put in Barton Reeve.

"I don't think so. Most men would have him arrested. But I'll let him go, and that will give him a chance to clear himself—if he can."

There was a sneer in the last words which cut Leo to the quick. He drew a long breath.

"Very well, sir, I'll go," he said in a strained voice. "But, sir, let me tell you that you are doing me a great injustice."

Unable to control his feelings any longer, Leo, left the ticket wagon and hurried to the dressing tent.

Here his friends surrounded him and tried to pour words of sympathy into his ears. But he would not listen. Sick at heart, yet burning with indignation, he packed his trunk and prepared to leave.

"Where are you going?" asked Natalie Sparks, with something like a tear in her eye.

"I don't know, Natalie—I'm too upset to think," responded Leo, and that was all he could say.

Just before he left Barton Reeve brought him the wages due him, which Leo thrust into his pocket without counting.

"Lambert has got 'em on to-day," he said. "In a day or two, when he cools down, he'll be sorry he let you go."

"It was a mean way to act," answered the boy bitterly; and then he walked away from the circus grounds. A few blocks off he met a man with an empty wagon and hired him to go and fetch his trunk. When the man came back he asked if there was any hotel or boarding-house on the other side of town, conscious, in a way, that he must put up somewhere.

"Yes, there's the Eagle Hotel," said the man. "A good place and very reasonable."

"All right; take me there."

This was done, and then Leo sent the man to the other hotel, at which the higher class of circus performers were stopping, for the valise which contained his ordinary clothing.

He was still so upset in mind that he knew not what to do. Having engaged his room, he entered it and locked the door, and gave himself up to his reflections.

What should he do? Ah, that was the question. He had said that perhaps he could clear himself. How should he go to work to do it?

For fully an hour Leo pondered over the situation. Then he walked downstairs, left the hotel, and sauntered back to the circus grounds.

He kept his eyes and ears open in a vain endeavor to learn something to his advantage. The ticket thieves had taken warning, and not the slightest clew to them could be unearthed.

Leo passed a sleepless night at the hotel. Before he arose the "Greatest Show on Earth" had left the town.

"I'm out of it now," he sighed. "Out of it, too, with a stain upon my name." He bit his quivering lip until the blood came. "I can't keep on following the circus around trying to clear myself, for I haven't money enough."

Yet Leo was not willing to give up, and that afternoon he took the stage to the next town, where the "Greatest Show on Earth" was stopping. Once more he hung around, and again nothing came of it. Sick at heart, he returned to the Eagle Hotel, wondering what he should do next.

At the hotel he found a man awaiting him—a sharp, shrewd individual, who introduced himself as Nathan Wampole.

"This is Leo Dunbar?"

"That is my name," replied the young gymnast.

"I am the proprietor of 'Wampole's Trans-Continental Specialty Company,' which opens in this place to-night. I was over to Cokeville this afternoon, where I met a friend of mine, Jack Giles, who belongs to the circus. He told me that you were out of a position, and as I need an extra performer or two, I thought I would call around and see you."

"Did Mr. Giles send you to me?" queried Leo.

"Well, not exactly. But he said that probably you would be glad to obtain a position on the stage. He said you were a very fair gymnast and tumbler."

"They used to think so at the circus."

"I've no doubt you could do a very good turn or two." Nathan Wampole coughed slightly and lowered his voice. "I heard of your trouble on account of some circus tickets, but of course that makes no difference to me," and he looked at Leo suggestively.

"I had trouble, but I'm not guilty of any crime," replied the boy quickly.

"Of course not, of course not! I merely thought to mention it. What do you say, would you like to join my company? We have a splendid route laid out and, consequently, we are sure of a very successful season."

"What would you pay me, Mr. Wampole, if I joined you?" asked Leo cautiously. He did not like the man's looks, but still thought it would be foolish to throw a chance of work aside.

"I might pay you ten dollars per week."

"That would be a very small amount for a performer like myself."

"Well, if you can do two good turns at each performance I'll give you fifteen dollars. Come, what do you say?"

"I'll take a look at the show first," replied Leo.

In a few minutes more the pair were on the way to the theater in which "Wampole's Trans-Continental Specialty Company" was to perform that evening.

CHAPTER XIV.—LEO MAKES A NEW FRIEND.

Leo found that the specialty company numbered fifteen people. The performers were, for the most part, of very ordinary ability. There were several song and dance men, a number of musicians who drew tunes out of a variety of articles, several lady vocalists, a comical fat man and a magician.

The magician was a young fellow, hardly older than Leo. His name was Carl Ross, and he had such a smiling face and gentlemanly manner that Leo took to him instantly.

"We want a good all-around gymnast and tumbler," said Carl Ross. "As it is the show is lop-sided—too much singing and dancing."

Leo was asked to give an exhibition of what he could do, and readily complied, performing at first on the floor of the stage and then on a bar let down from the flies.

"Very good!" said Nathan Wampole, highly pleased, and Carl Ross also smiled his approval.

At the conclusion of the show that evening Leo decided to join the company, and from that moment on he and Carl Ross became warm friends.

From Cokeville the company proceeded to Lumbertown and then to Wimbleton. For the time being Leo lost track of the circus and devoted himself entirely to his new position. His acts on the stage were well received, yet Carl Ross remained, as heretofore, the star of the combination.

"I wish I could do tricks," said Leo, as he watched the young magician at practice. "But I don't believe I could learn."

"You could learn as easily as I could learn to act on the trapeze," laughed Carl. "If I tried that I would get dizzy and fall sure."

"Every one to his own line," concluded Leo. "I can go up any distance into the air and not be afraid."

"Up in a balloon?"

"Yes, even up in a balloon," and Leo told of his adventures along that line.

For several weeks matters ran smoothly, but then they took a turn. Leo found out that Nathan Wampole loved dearly to play cards, and every dollar the manager could raise was staked and lost at the gaming-table. For two weeks he could not get a cent of salary.

"I don't like this," he said to Carl Ross, when the pair talked the matter over.

"I don't like it myself, Leo. But what can we do about it?"

"That is what I would like to know. I am half-inclined to go on a strike."

"I doubt if he has any money. Business was poor last week on account of the rain. I imagine we are lucky to get our traveling expenses and board bills paid."

"You don't know if the board bills really are paid," was the suggestive response. "I haven't seen Wampole pay Mrs. Gerston a cent."

"Well, if he doesn't pay we'll have trouble; that's a foregone conclusion," said Carl. "He ought— Here he comes now, and two strange men with him."

Carl broke off short as Nathan Wampole entered the dressing-room of the little country theater at which the company had been performing for the past two nights.

"I've got to have my money, and that's all there is to it," one of the men was saying. "You agreed to pay for the theater after the first performance, and you haven't paid a cent."

"I will pay to-morrow," replied the owner of the organization uneasily. He was naturally a closefisted man, and bad business had made him more miserly than ever.

"That don't go. You pay this afternoon or this theater will be dark to-night."

A long war of words followed, and it soon transpired that the second stranger was a constable, brought to enter an attachment on the scenery and other things, should Nathan Wampole fail to come to terms.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," said the proprietor finally. "I'll pay you twenty dollars on account, and the other fifty as soon as the money is taken in at the box-office to-night."

He held out the twenty dollars temptingly as he spoke, and the landlord took it with but little hesitation.

"Come on, Yentley," he said to the constable. "Remember, I'll be on hand for the balance," he called to Nathan Wampole and departed.

Nathan Wampole growled something under his breath, and was about to pass on to the empty stage, when Carl and Leo stopped him.

"Well, what do you fellows want?" he demanded angrily. "Be quick, for Lanning is sick, and I've got to get up an act to fill in his time."

"We want to know about our pay, Mr. Wampole," said Carl.

"Your pay? As if I didn't have enough to worry me with all this bad weather!"

"But we must have some money," pleaded Leo. "I've been promising to buy myself a new suit, and—"

"I can't help it. I can't give you any now!" snapped Nathan Wampole.

"Then I can't go on any more."

"Neither can I," added Carl quietly.

"What! Do you mean to say you'll leave me in the lurch?" howled Nathan Wampole.

"We want our money, that's all."

"You shall have it." Nathan Wampole paused for a minute. "I'll pay you both twenty-five dollars on account to-morrow morning."

"If you'll do that I'll be satisfied," said Leo.

"So will I," added Carl Boss.

"Good!" said Nathan Wampole; but as he turned away a cunning smile crossed his wrinkled features.

It needed but an hour to the time for the performance for the evening to begin, and soon after Carl and Leo separated to fit themselves out for their separate "turns," as specialty performers call their performances.

Carl Ross was an orphan, having lost both of his parents six years before in a terrible railroad disaster in the West.

Carl's father had in his time been a juggler and magician, and it was but natural that the son should take up the same calling.

When left an orphan Carl had been placed under the care of a well-known conjuror, who had taught the youth many of the finest stage tricks ever performed. A number of these wonderful tricks will be mentioned and explained as our story progresses.

After the conjuror had had Carl under his care for four years the man had been called to Germany. He had left the youth with Nathan Wampole, who had agreed to give him a good position in his traveling company.

It did not take Carl and Leo long to shed their street costume and don their stage dress. This done they began to practice several new "turns" for the stage.

Outside of the small theater a "barker" was collecting quite a good-sized crowd.

"Walk up, ladies and gentlemen! The show is just about to begin. Nowhere on the face of the earth can you get so much for your money as right here! Remember, it costs you but half or quarter of a dollar to see our great company of sixty high-priced and talented artists! Walk up and get your tickets without delay!"

The barker succeeded in getting several scores of people to enter the building. Nathan Wampole was in the box-office, taking the money for the tickets. He smiled as the cash came in.

"The more the better," he muttered to himself. "Won't somebody be knocked out when they learn the truth!"

CHAPTER XV.—AN ACT NOT ON THE BILLS.

The performance had been going on for half an hour. Leo had done some very clever acts and been well received, and now it was time for Carl to make his bow.

The little orchestra struck up a grand flourish, and suddenly the young magician bounded upon the stage, bringing with him a small, square box.

He came down to the front, made a bow and threw the square box into the air. Down it came into his hands, and as he whirled around on his heel the box disappeared from view.

“My, look at that!”

“Where did that box go to?”

“Must have gone up in smoke.”

Such were some of the remarks passed.

The trick was a decidedly clever one, yet as simple as could be when explained.

True to our promise, we will let our readers into the secret.

The box consisted of nothing but six perfectly square and thin boards, all hinged together in such a manner that it would collapse into a perfectly flat mass when pressed on any two sides. With a little study any boy can make such a box.

As the box entered Carl’s hands he flattened it, and, as he whirled around, he slipped it into the bosom of his costume.

This trick performed, the young magician brought out several other tricks and then began to juggle ten teacups, throwing them over his head and under his arms. There was a perfect stream of teacups in the air, and not a one was so much as cracked.

“He’s certainly clever-handed!”

“He’s the best part of the show!”

Hearty hand-clapping followed, and then Carl threw the teacups to Leo, in the wings, and started to do a great balancing act on four chairs.

He had just arranged the chairs in position when he heard a commotion in the wings.

“I say the hall ain’t paid for, and the show can’t go on!” he heard, in the angry tones of the theater owner.

“Where is Wampole?” several asked.

“I can’t find him.”

“He was taking the money at the box-office.”

"Well, he's not there now."

"He must be somewhere around."

"I'll give you five minutes to produce him. If you can't, out go the lights."

Realizing that matters had reached a crisis, the young magician proceeded with his act as quickly as he could. The orchestra struck up a lively air, but scarcely had they played half a dozen bars when the proprietor of the theater came out on the stage and silenced them.

"This show can't go on, ladies and gentlemen," he said. "I haven't been paid for the hall, and the head man of this company has skipped out with all of the funds."

"What's that?"

"Skipped out?"

"No more of the show?"

"That's a shame! Give me my money back?"

A hundred other cries arose on the air. The owner of the place prudently retired, and in wonder the orchestra did the same. A second later the curtain came down, and the lights were lowered.

"Is it true that Wampole has skipped?" asked Carl of Leo hurriedly.

"Yes; and he took every cent of the receipts with him," was the bitter answer.

Carl said no more. He followed Leo to the dressing-room and hurried into his street clothing.

Overhead the pair could hear the tramp of many feet. Presently came the crash of a breaking bench.

"Some of the audience are getting mad," Leo muttered to himself. "I fancy——"

"We must run for it," gasped Carl, in a low voice. "Hark! Some of the toughs that were in the gallery have threatened to mob the entire company!"

"I am ready to go," said Leo, as he picked up his valise.

He turned to go out into the hallway. Then he leaped back and slammed the door shut and locked it.

"Too late. They are coming; they are here!"

The young gymnast spoke the truth. Heavy footsteps came up to the door. A hand tried the knob.

"Open that door, you confounded fakirs, or we'll smash it down!" was the cry. "You can't escape us! We are bound to get square with you!"

"Shall I open for them?" whispered Leo.

"No, no!" cried Carl. "They would half kill us, they are so enraged over the loss of their admission money."

"But what's to be done?"

"Here I have it—the window. Out you go."

“And you?”

“I’ll follow. Quick!”

Leo leaped for the window, a small affair, opening on a narrow and dirty alley.

The opening was barred, but he easily wrenched the irons from their rotted fastenings and crawled through the opening.

As Carl followed there was a crash, and the door fell in.

Half a dozen young men, the worst in the town, swarmed into the apartment, only to find it empty.

Up the alleyway sped Leo and his companion, nor did they stop until the theater had been left several blocks behind.

Deeming themselves now safe, they dropped into a walk and began to discuss the situation.

Soon they met several other members of the company. From these they learned that Nathan Wampole had indeed run away, carrying every cent of the box-office receipts with him.

“The scoundrel!” burst out Carl. “What are we going to do here, penniless and over two hundred miles from New York?”

No one could answer that question, and, as there was nothing else to do, Leo and Carl turned their steps toward the boarding-house at which they had been stopping.

CHAPTER XVI.—AN UNPLEASANT POSITION.

The bad news had preceded Leo and Carl Ross, and they found Mrs. Gerston, the landlady, waiting at the front door.

“So Mr. Wampole has run away, eh?” she said sharply.

“It seems so,” said Carl soberly.

“And who is to pay me?”

“He is responsible, madam,” replied Leo.

“Well, you’ll not come in this night, unless you pay,” cried the landlady, blocking up the doorway with her portly form. “I’m not running a boarding-house for fun.”

“I have no money to pay with.”

“Neither have I,” added Carl.

“Then you can just leave.”

“Very well; give us our baggage and we will.”

“I’ll not give up a thing until I’m paid,” was the determined reply.

Both Carl and Leo were nonplussed. They could not blame the woman, yet it was a hard situation to face.

“We have lost more than you,” said Carl. “Mr. Wampole owes us both three weeks’ salary.”

“That’s not my affair. When you pay the ten dollars due me you can both have your traveling bags, and not before.”

And with this the boarding-housekeeper shut the door in their faces.

“Knocked out all around,” said Leo, with a grin.

It was not in his nature to grieve over misfortune.

“Where shall we go for the night?”

“I don’t know. Let us look around for Wampole.”

The two set out on a search. It availed nothing, and by midnight they were worn out.

Fortunately the night was warm, and coming to a deserted mill on the outskirts of the town, they determined to remain there and rest. They found some old sacks, and on these made their bed.

Carl awoke with a start the next morning. Looking up he saw a young man of eighteen standing near him. The young man had a pleasant face, and he was smiling.

"Thought I'd wake you up," he said. "How is it you are bunking here for the night?"

"We are out of funds," replied the young magician.

"Tramping?"

"Hardly that; but we may be soon."

"We belonged to the specialty company that went to pieces last night," explained Leo, who had roused up.

"Oh! Were you on the stage?" the young man asked of Carl.

"Yes."

"Are you the magician?"

"Yes."

"And he is the gymnast, isn't he?"

"I am," replied Leo.

"I saw you both. You did finely. So you are out of money and out of a job?"

"We are."

"It's strange. Do you know I intended to call on you to-day."

"On us?" cried Carl in wonder.

"Yes. You see I am from Raymondsville, the next town. My name is Walter Raymond, and my father owns about half the place. My brothers and sisters are going to give a lawn party this afternoon, and I promised to see if I couldn't get some of the members of your company over to liven things up."

"I would like to appear for you, first rate," said Carl quickly, thinking he saw a chance to make a few dollars.

"So will I appear," added Leo.

"How much will you charge for an entertainment lasting say an hour?"

Carl looked at Leo. They did not wish to ask too much, and at the same time wanted to make all they could.

"Two city performers generally get twenty dollars," said Leo; "but we might go a bit cheaper."

"I wouldn't mind giving twelve dollars," replied Walter Raymond. "If you can come for that, I'll drive you over as soon as you can get ready."

A bargain was struck, and then the two performers returned to the vicinity of the theater. Nothing could be learned of Nathan Wampole, and an hour later they left for Raymondsville.

They found Walter Raymond very kind. He treated them to a liberal dinner, and aided them to get their stage things into proper shape.

"It's lucky we got our stuff from the theater," said Leo. "We may pick up quite a little money by giving private performances throughout this district."

"That twelve dollars will help us to get our baggage from Mrs. Gerston," said Carl.

The Raymond homestead was surrounded by beautifully laid out grounds, and directly after the noonday hour the guests began to arrive, to the number of a dozen or more. Carl and Leo had been given a dressing-room in the mansion, and here they prepared for their acts.

Leo was the first to perform, and at the conclusion of his initial act he was loudly applauded.

Then Carl appeared, followed by one of the house servants, who brought his paraphernalia.

"Isn't he handsome!" whispered several of the girls.

Carl began to juggle with several balls and a hoop. He threw the balls through the hoop and around it. Then he brought forth several daggers and juggled them in one hand, while he kept the balls going with the other. The hoop he balanced on a stick set on the end of his nose, and placed a ball on top of all.

This was a remarkable feat, requiring great delicacy of touch and a keen eye. The boys and girls watched him breathlessly, and then began to clap their hands.

"Wonderful! wonderful!"

"I never saw anything to equal that!"

"It's as good as a performance in a circus or a theater!"

The juggling continued, Carl getting down on one knee and also on his back, without making a miss of anything that was in motion.

At the very height of the act came a loud cry from the house.

"Help! help!"

"Look out for Jack Darrow's dog!"

"The brute is mad!"

The cry was taken up on all sides. The boys and girls looked around in terror.

And well they might, for a few seconds later an ugly-looking bulldog with glaring eyes and mouth dripping with white foam leaped into their very midst.

For an instant he stared at the spectators—the next he turned toward Carl, and with a loud snarl leaped straight for the young performer's throat.

CHAPTER XVII.—CARL SHOWS HIS BRAVERY.

“A mad dog!”

“He is going to bite the young juggler!”

Shriek after shriek arose on the air and several of the boys and girls fled from the scene.

It was truly a thrilling moment, and a youth with less nerve than Carl Ross would have been paralyzed with terror.

But in knocking around during the past few years of his life the boy juggler and magician had more than once been thrown into a position of peril, and he realized that to lose his nerve would perhaps cost him his life.

As the mad beast leaped for his throat Carl dodged to one side and caught the animal by the left hind leg.

He whirled the body in the air and flung it with great force against a neighboring tree.

The shock was such that for the moment the enraged beast was stunned. It lay panting upon the grass, its glassy eyes rolling frightfully.

“Get into the house, all of you!” cried Leo, and picked up a wee bit of a girl that was standing near. She was too young to realize her peril, and gazed at him in wonder.

The crowd started pellmell, with Leo and his burden in the rear.

Scarcely had Leo moved when the dog recovered and stood up. He had his eyes on Carl, and leaped once more for him.

Carl ran to where he had been performing. The four daggers he had used were still on the ground and he picked them up.

Swish! One of the daggers flew through the air with lightning-like rapidity. It struck the brute in the forehead, inflicting a telling injury.

“He has knifed the dog!”

“That was a clever throw!”

Seriously wounded, the bulldog, with the tenacity of his race, still showed fight. He crouched down, then made another leap for our hero.

As he did this his breast became exposed, and launching forth a second dagger the young magician struck him fairly between the ribs. The shining blade sank deep into the flesh, and with a snarl and a yelp the mad bulldog rolled over—dead.

A shout went up from the neighborhood of the mansion. Nearly all who had attended the party had seen the skillful way in which the dangerous animal had been dispatched. Leo was the first to reach Carl's side.

"By jove! Carl, that was great!" he ejaculated. "You did him up in jig time."

"You are a brave young man and no mistake," put in Walter Raymond. "Not one man in a hundred would have tackled that dog. I wouldn't have done it for a thousand dollars."

"I don't want any more of it," answered the young magician, as he wiped the perspiration from his forehead. "Shall I go on with the performance?" he continued to the young man of the house.

"I don't know as the folks are in the humor," replied Walter Raymond.

"We'll do a double act and make them forget the dog incident," said Leo quickly.

The gardener was called, and he removed the body of the canine. As soon as this was accomplished Leo and Carl set to work to do some sleight-of-hand performances of a humorous nature.

Taking Leo by the nose, Carl pretended to extract from his mouth a handkerchief, a baseball cap, and then a live frog.

To those wishing to know how this was accomplished he would say they were purely tricks of dexterity. Carl had the articles mentioned about his person and concealed them in his hand as he reached for Leo's mouth. A handkerchief and a baseball cap can be rolled into very small balls when it is necessary, and even a frog is small when tightly held.

Then, because Leo would not let him get anything else out of his mouth, Carl pretended to get angry.

"I'll bang myself against the tree!" he cried, and, rushing up to the nearest hardwood tree, he brought his forehead up against the bark. A thump was heard and each time his head went forward another thump followed.

"Oh, he'll hurt his head!" shrieked several of the girls.

But Carl did not hurt his head a bit. His head struck the tree very lightly. The thump was made by his fist, which, however, was kept concealed from the audience.

In the meantime Leo did some funny work on the ground, bending himself into an odd shape backward and hopping around after the released frog.

By this time a crowd had assembled in the grounds, for the grown folks were not supposed to come in until late. Seeing this, Carl stepped up on a little bench.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen, I will give you an exhibition of one of my most wonderful tricks," he said. "Is any one of you a good shot with a horse-pistol?"

There was a pause, and then an elderly gentleman with but one arm stepped forward.

"I fancy I can accommodate you," he said with a smile. "I am considered a crack shot, and was an officer in the cavalry."

"Very well, sir; I will give you the pleasure of shooting me."

As Carl spoke he brought out a long pistol.

"Please examine this," he went on, and as the pistol went the round of the crowd he opened his valise and brought forth a horn of powder and a good-sized ball.

"I wish you would mark this bullet so you will know it again," he continued. "And will somebody bring me a nice, ripe apple?"

The apple was brought, and Walter Raymond marked the bullet with his knife. Then with great gravity Carl proceeded to load the pistol.

“There goes the powder, here the paper, here the ball, and here more paper. Did you all see it loaded?”

“Yes, yes!”

“Good! Thanks for the apple—I’ll eat it after I am shot. Now then, Mr. Cavalry Officer, kindly take your station over there, aim straight for my heart, and fire.”

“But—but I might kill you!” suggested the one-armed man nervously.

“Never mind—I’m like a cat that has nine lives. Go ahead. Ready?”

“Yes.”

Carl took the apple given him and held it on his palm at arm’s length.

“Now aim for my heart. Ready? Fire!”

Bang! With a loud explosion the pistol went off, and for a moment the spectators were enveloped in smoke.

As it cleared away the young magician was seen to be standing as before. There was a smile on his face.

“I am much obliged to you for shooting me,” he said. “But what has become of the bullet?”

Thus speaking he bit into the apple.

“Hullo! what’s this? The bullet, I declare! Look!”

He was right; the bullet, with the mark still upon it, was embedded in the heart of the apple!

CHAPTER XVIII.—A WONDERFUL TRICK EXPLAINED.

“Wonderful!”

“That’s the best trick I’ve seen yet!”

“Really a remarkable performance,” said the old cavalry officer, who had done the firing. “How did you do it?”

To this question Carl, of course, made no reply. He was not in the habit of giving away his secrets.

But we will let our curious readers into the mystery. The way the trick was worked was as follows:

When Carl received the marked bullet back from Walter Raymond he substituted in its stead a similar-looking one made of amalgam of tinfoil and quicksilver. This bullet was rammed into the pistol so forcibly that it went to pieces beneath the paper. Even if it had not gone to pieces the firing of the weapon would have shattered it.

When Carl received the apple he split it partly open and dropped the marked bullet inside on the sly. The rest of the trick will now be readily understood.

The remarkable performance with the pistol and some additional acrobatic feats from Leo brought the entertainment to a close, and the two performers hurried to the house to get into their street dress.

“You must have dinner here before you leave,” said Walter Raymond as he paid them off. “It is but a slight return for killing that mad bulldog and saving the children.”

The performers were hungry, and readily accepted the invitation. While they were eating Walter Raymond sat close by.

“I wouldn’t mind knowing how to do some tricks,” he said. “It must be lots of fun.”

“Not so much when one performs for a living,” returned Carl. “To do tricks for your friends is amusing.”

“Can you show me some simple ones?” Walter pleaded.

Carl smiled.

“Let me have a cent,” he said, and after it was produced he took a knife and cut a little nick in one edge, turning the shaving of metal outward.

“Now this cent will stick on any door you place it,” he said, and illustrated by sticking it up with the metal shaving clinging to the woodwork. “Any boy can do this with ease.”

“That’s a nice trick.”

After this Carl explained a number of other simple tricks with coins and cards, and then he and

Leo departed with a cheer from the young people as they walked away.

"Well, what's to do now?" questioned Leo as they hurried on.

"I move we get our baggage from Mrs. Gerston. I need some of my clothing, especially if we are to give garden exhibitions."

"That's true. All right; Mrs. Gerston's it is."

The walk back to town did not take long. At first the boarding-house mistress frowned on them, but when they explained that they intended to settle up her expression changed.

It was too late to go anywhere that night, so a bargain was struck whereby she agreed to let them remain and have breakfast for one dollar more, or eleven dollars in all.

"That leaves us with just a dollar capital," laughed Leo. "Not much, but a good deal better than nothing. The question is, what shall we do to-morrow?"

"We had better try to work our way from town to town," replied Carl. "Perhaps we'll be fortunate enough to give exhibitions on the way. Even if we can't strike garden parties, we can show at country hotels and take up a collection. It's not a nice way to do, but it's better than begging."

The next morning found the pair up bright and early. Their baggage—two satchels belonging to each, for their trunks had been lost—were soon strapped up, and after breakfast they set out to shake the dust of the town from their feet.

Hardly had the last house in the place been passed than Leo noticed that they were being followed by a burly fellow, who carried in his hand an ugly-looking rawhide whip.

The fellow soon caught up to them.

"Stop there, do yer hear?" he called out.

"What do you want?" asked Carl, coming to a halt.

"I want ter talk to yer. Ain't you the chap as killed the dog over ter Raymond's place?"

"I am."

"I thought so. Do yer know I was the owner of that dog, an' that he was a valuable beast?"

"If he was valuable, it's too bad. He was mad and had to be killed," put in Leo.

"He wasn't mad—he only had a fit. He gits 'em often. I want yer to pony up twenty-five dollars fer him. If yer don't I'll fix ye, see?"

"I'll not pay a cent," cried Carl. "He was mad and we can easily prove it."

"No sech thing, boy! Are yer goin' ter pay?"

"No."

"Then take that!"

The fellow raised the rawhide whip and brought it down with a whir over Carl's head.

Had the rawhide descended as intended the young magician would have been seriously injured.

But Carl was not to be caught unawares.

He leaped aside, and before the man could raise the whip again, Leo wrenched it from his grasp.

"Give me that whip or I'll fix yer, as sure as my name is Jack Darrow!" fumed the fellow.

"Stand back!" ordered the young gymnast. "You have no right to attack my friend."

"I'll show ye!" yelled Jack Darrow, and leaped upon Carl.

The young magician was on guard, and in a twinkle he put out his foot and sent the fellow on his back.

"Now leave me alone or I'll shoot you," he said sternly, and walked away. Leo threw the whip over a fence and followed.

Darrow got up and stood still. He shook his fist after them, then disappeared in search of his whip.

The next village was four miles distant, and when they reached the place, Carl, who had lamed his foot on a stone, was glad enough to sit down. He entered a tavern and took a seat by a corner table.

"I'll be with you in a few minutes," said Leo. "I want to see what the prospects are here."

"All right, I'll wait," replied the young magician, and taking up a paper that lay handy he glanced it over.

Presently a man came in and dropped in a chair opposite to him. Carl glanced over the paper and saw it was Nathan Wampole.

CHAPTER XIX.—WAMPOLE'S NEW SCHEME.

"Some ale," said Wampole to the waiter, and it was quickly brought and set before him.

"What's your order?" asked the waiter of Carl.

"I'll wait till my friend comes back," said Carl quietly.

Wampole had not yet seen him, but he heard the youth's voice and now looked around the edge of the paper.

"Carl Ross," he murmured, as he fell back in his seat.

"Yes, Mr. Wampole. You didn't expect to see me here."

"Well—er—not exactly. But it's very fortunate, very fortunate, indeed!" went on Nathan Wampole, gathering himself together with an effort.

"Why, do you want to pay me off?"

"Well—er—not exactly that, Carl," with a reproachful glance. "But the fact of it is, I'm thinking of reorganizing. I've seen four of our company already."

As he spoke Nathan Wampole drew a folded document from his pocket and thrust it across the table.

"There's my new scheme," he said earnestly. "A grand thing, too. We'll make money hand over fist. Of course you'll go in."

Carl looked at the paper.

"Hardly, sir. I don't care to work for nothing but fame."

"But this is dead sure, Carl, dead sure. A fortune——"

"The other company was to bring me a fortune, Mr. Wampole. No, henceforth I'm going to travel with a responsible manager or on my own hook."

"Do you mean to insinuate I'm not responsible?" cried Nathan Wampole, bristling up.

"You haven't proved yourself to be."

"I've had a misfortune, that's all. But I'll get on my feet again, and—hullo, here's my friend, Leo Dunbar!"

"Nathan Wampole!" ejaculated the young gymnast.

"I want you for my newly organized company," commenced the old manager, but Leo cut him short.

"I overheard your offer to Carl, Wampole. My answer is the same as his."

"You won't join me?"

"No."

Nathan Wampole's face grew dark and bitter.

"You'll regret it—mark my words, you'll regret it!" he hissed; and gulping down the liquor set before him, he arose and hurried from the place.

"The fraud!" murmured Leo. "I'll never perform for him again."

"Nor will I," added Carl.

A little later they were eating dinner, not an elaborate meal, for they had little to spend.

"I've struck luck," went on the young gymnast.

"I met a gentleman who was at Mr. Raymond's yesterday, and he has hired us to perform at his house this evening from eight o'clock to nine. He is going to pay us the same amount, twelve dollars."

This was good news, and on the strength of it Carl ordered some dessert, which cost him five cents additional.

They hired a room at the tavern, and leaving their baggage there took a walk out to see the sights. They walked further than they had intended and it was dark when they returned. The landlord of the place met them in surprise.

"Hullo, I thought you had changed your mind about coming back," he said.

"Changed our minds?" queried Carl, puzzled.

"Yes."

"Why so?"

"Didn't you send for your baggage?"

"No."

"What! why, a man came here not an hour ago and took all your things off."

Carl and Leo gave a simultaneous whistle of surprise. Here was a pretty state of affairs.

"Who was the man?"

"I don't know. He had a wagon and said you had sent him."

Carl gave a groan.

"We have been robbed, Leo."

"It looks like it, Carl. What are we to do? We must get our things back, and that quickly, or we won't be able to perform to-night."

"Do you mean to say that man was a thief?" demanded the landlord of the tavern, with intense astonishment.

"That's just what he was," answered Carl. "We never sent him here."

"What sort of a looking man was he?" asked Leo.

"Tall and dark, with a cast in one eye," was the reply. "I've seen him in these parts before."

"A cast in his eye?" repeated Carl. "It must have been that Jack Darrow!" he burst out.

"That's so," returned the young gymnast. "He said he would get square."

"Who is Jack Darrow?" questioned the landlord.

Matters were quickly explained.

"You had no right to let our baggage go," said Leo severely.

"Can't we go after the fellow? I'll drive you to his house, if you know where it is."

The landlord was very anxious to help them, realizing that he had "put his foot into it." The matter was talked over for several minutes, and it was decided to take a fast team of horses and drive back to Raymondsville and ascertain where Jack Darrow resided.

Five minutes later found Leo, Carl and Mr. Cook on the way. They made fast time, and soon drove up to the first of the line of stores in the next town.

"Jack Darrow is a worthless scamp," said the storekeeper. "He hasn't any regular home, but I fancy you can find him hanging around Budd's livery stable most any time."

"We can if he's not in hiding," said Carl in a low voice, as they drove off again.

The town being a small one it was easy to find the livery stable mentioned. Outside of the building sat two hostlers talking and smoking.

"Is Jack Darrow anywhere around?" questioned Mr. Cook.

"Yes; just went over to yonder stable," called back one of the hostlers. "Want to see him?"

"Yes."

"I'll call him," went on the hostler, thinking there might be a chance to earn a dime.

"Never mind," put in Carl. "Come on, Leo, we won't give him a chance to run away."

"That's so; we won't," returned Leo, and followed the young juggler to the ground.

The stable pointed out was but a short distance down a lane, back of which flowed a good-sized brook. Making their way rapidly to the building, which was old and much out of repair, they entered the open doorway.

A sound in the rear greeted them.

"There he goes!" yelled Carl. "Stop, Jack Darrow!"

A muttered exclamation was the only response. They saw the good-for-nothing leave the barn and run for the brook.

"He's going to leg it!" burst out the young gymnast. "Well, three can play at that game."

Through the barn rushed Leo and Carl. Down by the brook the bushes grew to a height of several feet. Reaching the water's edge, nothing was to be seen of the man they were after.

"He's hiding somewhere, that's certain," said Carl. "You go up and I'll go down the bank."

This advice was followed, and both covered a distance of fifty feet, when a faint splash was heard.

"He's crossing over!" cried out the young magician. "This way, quick!"

Regardless of the wetting, he plunged into the brook, which luckily was hardly a foot deep, and Leo came, too. The young man they were after had gone over in full view. He was running down a country road on the opposite side at top speed.

He was a good runner, and once having gained the road, Leo and Carl felt they had a lively chase before them.

But the thought of losing their baggage nerved them to do their best, and over the ground they flew in good shape, gradually closing the gap between them and the man they were after.

Evidently Jack Darrow was getting winded, for when a quarter of a mile had been passed he slowed up and turned around.

"Keep back or I'll fire on yer!" he howled, making a suggestive movement, toward his hip pocket.

The two pursuers slowed up, but did not come to a halt.

"Do you think he's got a pistol?" asked Leo.

"No; if he has he won't dare to use it. Arm yourself with a stick or stone," were Carl's words.

As he spoke he picked up a stick lying near, and Leo followed his example. In another moment they were within ten feet of Jack Darrow, who had started to run once more.

"Stop!" cried Carl. "Stop, or I'll fire!"

"You ain't got no pistol!" roared Darrow.

"No; but I've got this!" was the retort. The stick whirled through the air, launched with the young juggler's aim, and struck the thief in the back between the shoulders. It was a heavy blow, and Darrow fell flat on his face.

Before he could get up Carl and Leo were on top of him. In vain he tried to fight them off. Carl held him fast while the young gymnast produced a stout cord and tied his hands behind him.

The two heroes of the occasion had scarcely finished their work when carriage wheels were heard approaching, and Mr. Cook and his turnout hove into sight.

"Hullo! you've got him!" cried out the tavern-keeper. "That's a good job done. What are you going to do with him?"

"Lemme go!" whined Darrow, all his bravery oozing away. "Lemme go! I ain't done nuthin'!"

"Where are our things?" demanded Carl.

"Wot things? I ain't got nuthin' belongin' to you."

"That's a falsehood!" put in Mr. Cook. "You are the man that took their baggage from my hotel. I have witnesses to prove it. The best thing we can do is to take him to the village lock-up."

"Don't yer do it—I'll fix yer if yer do!" bellowed Darrow. "Let me go an' I'll tell yer where the satchels are, every one of em."

"I've an idea he hid them in that stable," said Leo. "It seems to me he was coming down from the loft when we entered."

"We'll soon find out," said Carl. "Dump him into the carriage and drive back."

CHAPTER XX.—ANOTHER STOP ON THE ROAD.

In vain Jack Darrow protested against the proceedings. He was lifted into the carriage without ceremony, and the horses' heads were turned back along the road to where a bridge crossed the brook.

The stable reached, Leo and Carl went upstairs. The loft was filled with loose hay.

"I'll pitch it over with this fork," said Carl, and took up the implement he had mentioned.

He had proceeded but a short distance into the hay when one of Leo's valises came to light. His own followed, and soon all their baggage was recovered.

"Well?" called the tavern-keeper from below.

"We have it," replied the young gymnast.

"Good enough. This fellow is good for a term in the State prison."

At this Darrow began to whine and beg. But Mr. Cook was obdurate and told him to shut up.

As soon as the two performers came below again the party drove off for the squire's office, situated over the general store and post office. Here a formal complaint was lodged by Mr. Cook, and Jack Darrow was locked up to await the sitting of the grand jury at the county seat.

"He'll be indicted—I'll see to it myself," said the tavern-keeper, as he and our heroes drove back to Charlotting.

Leo and Carl were anxious to get to the place where they were to perform that night, and as it was some distance out Mr. Cook drove them directly to the spot—a fine country seat, at which a party of over forty were stopping.

A round of applause greeted their appearance in the drawing-room some time later. The drawing-room opened into a conservatory, and the latter was used by the pair for a stage.

As usual, Leo was the first to appear, doing a number of feats which were watched with close attention. As the space was limited he did not confine himself to acrobatics but, in addition, performed several tricks with fire which Carl had taught him.

Among other things he did was to stuff his mouth with burning cotton.

"He'll burn himself up!" cried several, but Leo only smiled. His mouth had been washed with a strong solution of alum, and was to a certain degree fireproof. Of course, he had to be very careful in doing the fire tricks, for at the best such tricks are highly dangerous.

"I will next swallow a red-hot knife," he announced, and brought in an iron blade, heated to a red heat. He faced the audience sideways, and it looked as if the knife slid down into his open mouth, which was thrown back, but in reality it slipped close to the outside of his mouth, on the side from the spectators, and into a sheath inside his collar, placed there to receive it. As the knife disappeared, the sheath followed, and he faced the audience to show that all was fair and square.

This concluded Leo's single act, and then Carl came on. After giving a number of the tricks previously mentioned, he came forward smilingly.

"I have in my hand a box given me by the Prince of Wales," he said, holding up an oblong object four inches wide by four high and eight inches long. "This box, the prince insisted, was the most wonderful box he had ever possessed. See; I open the box, and find it contains nothing but an empty sliding drawer. Will somebody be kind enough to put a quarter into the box?"

He held the open drawer out, and a young lady threw a piece of silver into it. Then Carl shut the box up and blew upon it. When he opened the box again the silver was gone!

The company applauded, while the young lady looked glum. Carl smiled upon her.

"Never mind; we'll try to get the silver back," he said, and struck the box on the bottom. Then he opened the drawer, and out tumbled the coin into the lady's lap.

"Good! good! Very neat!"

Carl turned around to put the box on the table. Leaving it there, he came forward again.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen," he began, when of a sudden the box on the table began to dance, finally dancing to the floor.

"Well, I declare!" cried the young magician. "Something has surely gotten into that box. And yet we left it empty, did we not?"

There was a nod from the young lady, who had looked into the box when the coin came out.

Holding the box before him, Carl gave the knob to the drawer a jerk, out it came, and a shower of small candies flew all over the audience. Some fell into the young lady's lap, and all present sent up a shout of laughter, in the midst of which Carl temporarily withdrew.

Now, no doubt our young readers are, as usual, anxious to know how it was all done. The explanation is simple.

The box was not exactly what it appeared to be. Instead of having one drawer it had two, one that worked inside of the other. The outside drawer was a mere shell, without a back, to allow the inner box to slide back and forth within it. There was a little spring outside at the end which held the inner drawer when desired.

When the box was opened first the coin was placed in the second or inner drawer. When it was opened again the second drawer was held back by the catch, and out came the shell, or empty drawer. The third time the second drawer came with the coin, as described.

After the young ladies and the others had seen the box was empty Carl turned toward the table, and while so doing slyly poured the candy from his bosom into the open box, and after closing the article stuck a bent pin into one corner to which was attached a long, black horsehair, the other end of the horsehair being pinned to his leg.

As he began to talk, he pulled in jerks on the horsehair, which caused the box to dance and fall. Then bringing it forward he opened it and released a spring that held the bottom, thus causing the candy to fly in all directions. When he retired the horsehair was removed, and he prepared for his next trick.

Carl now came out in a new rôle—that of a mesmerist, and after drawing the curtains over the door for an instant, requested the company to draw around, that they might get a good view of the top of the table which was covered with a smooth cloth which reached to the floor.

"You have all played tiddle-de-winks and such games," he said. "I have my own way of playing

them. See, I place three circles on the table, and also this shining bit of metal—my mascot, I call it. I name the circles 1, 2, and 3. Now, will somebody kindly designate a circle to which the bit of metal shall pass!”

“To circle No. 2,” said an interested boy.

“Advance, and do as bidden!” cried Carl, making some passes at the metal, and slowly but surely the piece moved across the table until it reached the center of the circle, where it stopped.

“Again?” said Carl impressively.

“To circle 3,” said a lady.

Slowly but surely the mesmerized metal turned in the direction. Then circle 1 was called out, and the others again. Wherever commanded the metal went.

“And now who will keep the mascot for a keepsake?” cried Carl.

The little girl of the house spoke first, and as she was sitting close to the table the metal moved to the edge and fell into her lap.

CHAPTER XXI.—AN UNEXPECTED BATH.

Soon after this the young performers brought their performance to a close.

But the last trick—how was it performed? we hear some of our readers say.

It was very simple. When the curtains were closed Leo came forward and concealed himself under the table. He had a powerful magnet, and wherever he pushed the magnet under the table the bit of metal on top of the table was sure to follow.

Leo knew where the circles were to be placed, and made his movements accordingly. A swift motion at the finish dropped the metal into the little girl's lap.

"I would like to see you," said a gentleman at the close of the engagement. "I belong across the river about ten miles north of here. The folks are going to give a sociable, as we call it. I will give you twenty dollars if you can give us a first-class entertainment to last two hours."

"We'll try to suit you," said the young gymnast, and the engagement was duly entered on a passbook he had purchased.

"We are getting famous!" cried Carl, when the mansion was left behind. "We are making money faster than we ever did with Nathan Wampole's combination."

"The trouble is, these snaps may not last, Carl. By the way, I wonder if Wampole will really succeed in getting our people together again."

"He won't get me. I am done with him."

"So am I."

The two partners, as they now called themselves, slept soundly that night and did not get up until late. Their hotel bill paid, they found themselves eight dollars and a half ahead.

"We'll have to open a bank account soon," laughed Carl. "We'll be waylaid for our wealth."

"Wait awhile, my boy, wait awhile," sang out Leo. "But tell me, how do we get over to Point Snoker?"

Mr. Cook was appealed to, and told them to take the road to the river.

"You'll come to Jack Hazlett's landing, and he'll ferry you across in his sloop. We haven't got any regular ferry on the river closer than the town of Perryskill."

A colored man suggested that they let him wheel their baggage in his barrow for a quarter, and they accepted the offer, and the start was made immediately after breakfast.

On the way Carl had considerable fun with the colored man. He played a number of clever tricks on that individual, and when the river was reached conjured a quarter from his coat-sleeve, and pretended to wring the money from the old fellow's nose.

"Here's your quarter, uncle."

"Fo' de law's sake, chile!" cried the darkey, and his eyes rolled around in intense surprise.

"Easy way to get the money, uncle."

"Yo' must be in wid de ole boy hisself," was the darkey's comment. "Much obliged."

And off he went with a side glance at Carl, as if half-expecting the young juggler might conjure the quarter from the pocket in which he had placed it.

Leo and Carl found that Jack Hazlett was out on the river, but would soon return. They sat down and waited. While doing so they noticed a large steamboat coming up the river, crowded with people.

"An excursion of some sort," said Carl. "See the flags flying."

"They are going to land up at yonder island," said Leo. "See, they are turning into the landing."

While the steamboat was discharging its passengers, Jack Hazlett returned and took them on board. The passage across the river took them close to the steamboat.

"She seems to be an old ferryboat fixed up," observed the young gymnast as they came up. "See, several people have remained on board."

"What is the matter with that young girl!" cried Carl, pointing to a young lady hanging over the rail. "Can she be seasick?"

"There she goes!" yelled Leo. "My gracious!"

With a loud splash the young lady had dropped over the rail into the river!

"She'll be drowned!"

"My daughter! Save her! She has a fit!" suddenly cried an old man, rushing from his seat in the shade.

"A fit—that accounts for it," said Leo. "I'll save her!"

In another moment he was on the boat's rail—the next he was over the side. He struck out boldly.

"Take care—she may fight you if she has a fit!" called his partner.

Soon Leo reached the girl's side. She was about to sink when he came to her support. She lay like one dead.

"I guess the fit's gone," he thought, when suddenly she gave a frightful scream and began to tear at his face like an enraged tigress!

It was a position he had not bargained for, and what to do the young gymnast did not know.

"Look out for her!" yelled Carl, as the girl in the water began her attack.

"Keep quiet, please!" gasped Leo to his charge. "I will take you to the boat."

But the girl paid no attention. Her eyes rolled horribly, and she continued to clutch at his throat.

Realizing that something must be done, the young gymnast resolved to duck the girl. He did so, and when she came up again she lay as limp as before. Ere she could recover he struck out for the boat.

Carl and Jack Hazlett were waiting for him, and quickly assisted him on board. Here the girl dropped upon the deck unconscious.

"My gracious, that's the worst experience I ever had in my life!" panted Leo, as soon as he could speak. "I thought she was going to chew me up!"

"She's got fits the worst way," put in the boatman. "I'll take her back to that steamboat."

This was done. The girl's father was anxiously awaiting their arrival, and, taking his daughter in his arms, he carried her into the cabin, where a stewardess waited upon her.

"I had her in a hospital," he explained, "but they discharged her last week as being cured. You are a brave lad to save her."

Leo smiled faintly.

"Thanks; but I don't want the job again. Come on, Carl."

He was about to go aboard the small boat again, when the fond father stopped him. Taking a ten-dollar bill from his pocketbook, he pressed it into the young gymnast's hand.

"Don't say you won't take it," he said. "You deserve more, but it's all I have with me."

And he made the youth keep the amount.

CHAPTER XXII.—WAMPOLE SHOWS HIS HAND.

After this adventure the river was soon crossed, and an hour later Leo and Carl found themselves installed at another hotel but a short distance from the mansion at which they were to perform.

While they were taking a stroll through the village, Carl's eyes were suddenly arrested by a huge poster stuck on the side of a barn.

"Look, Leo, what do you think of that?" he cried.

The poster referred to ran as follows:

Wampole's Trans-Continental
Specialty Company.
Reorganized!
Better and Brighter than Ever!
See Leo, the Wonderful Clown and Gymnast!
Don't Miss Carl Ross,
The Greatest Juggler and Magician
The World Has Ever Produced!
30—Other Artists—30!
At Pelham's Hall To-night!
Admission 15 and 25 Cents.

"If that ain't cheeky!" burst out Leo. "What right has he to advertise us when we are no longer with him?"

"That is what I would like to know," returned Carl.

"We ought to stop him."

"We certainly can," said the young juggler. "He hasn't any more right to use our names than the president's."

"What shall we do?"

"I wonder where we can find him?"

"Most likely at Pelham's Hall, wherever that is."

The two made inquiries and soon located the hall, which was situated over the general store.

Going upstairs, they met a tough-looking individual coming down.

It was Bill Gormley, one of the Wampole Company.

He was put down on the bills as Ricardo, the Great German Impersonator. He could do one or two things fairly well, but the majority of his acts were decidedly poor. More than that, he was a heavy drinker, and had on several occasions appeared on the stage when he could hardly stand.

"Hullo, Ross!" he called out. "Hullo, Dunbar! so you've decided to rejoin, eh?"

“Hardly,” replied Carl. “Where is Wampole?”

“Back of the stage. But you ain’t going to join us, you say?”

“We are not,” answered Leo.

“You had better. We are going to make a big thing of the show now.”

“Wampole was always going to do that,” laughed Carl.

They passed up the dingy stairs and into the hall. Nathan Wampole stood on the empty stairs rehearsing a boy of twelve in a funny dialect part.

“That ain’t right!” he roared. “Do it this way! You ain’t worth your salt! Come now, or I’ll crack you with this club!”

“Wampole!” called out the young gymnast.

“Leo! And you, too, Carl! Delighted to see you!” Nathan Wampole’s face took on a smile, and the boy was forgotten. “So you thought you would join us again. I was on the point of sending for you.”

“We are not going to join, and we want to know by what right you are advertising us,” said Carl firmly.

Nathan Wampole’s face instantly took on an ugly look.

“Not going to join eh?” he muttered.

“No.”

“And we demand that you take our names from your bills,” added Leo.

“What! Not much!”

“Then we’ll compel you.”

Nathan Wampole’s face grew white.

“You will not. On the other hand, I’ll compel you to perform in my company. I have your signatures, remember.”

“That old contract doesn’t count—you broke it yourself,” returned Carl.

“It was never broken.” Nathan Wampole smiled maliciously. “I’ve been to a lawyer and he says you must perform with me.”

“The lawyer that said that is a fool,” cried Leo.

“No, he’s not—he’s a smart man. You will perform with me and nowhere else. If you don’t—”

“If we don’t?” queried Carl.

“If you don’t I’ll have you arrested.”

“You can’t do that.”

“Yes, I can.”

"On what charge, pray?" asked Leo.

"On a charge of breaking up my former company and running off with some of my things," replied Nathan Wampole, triumphantly. "I've got witnesses to prove that you two fellows are thieves."

Scarcely had he uttered the words when both Leo and Carl leaped forward. Two quick blows landed Nathan Wampole flat on his back.

"You contemptible cur!" cried Carl.

"Take that for calling us thieves!" added the young gymnast.

"Whow!" spluttered Nathan Wampole as he struggled to rise. "Wha—what do you mean by attacking me in this fashion?" he howled.

"What do you mean by insulting us?" said Carl sternly.

"I—I told the tru—"

"Stop or we'll give you another dose," ejaculated Leo. "Now let us come to an understanding, Nathan Wampole. You broke your agreement with us, and that ended our engagement. As to the things we took, we can prove our property. Your talk doesn't go."

This plain talk had its effect on Nathan Wampole. He was naturally a coward, and he at once began to cringe.

"Well, I—perhaps I was mistaken, gentlemen, but—ah—really, you ought to join our company. It will be the chance of a lifetime, and—"

"We won't waste words with you," said Carl. "But understand, our names come off your bills. If they don't, we'll tear the bills down and have you up in court for false pretense. We are done with you."

Thus speaking, Carl left, followed by Leo. Walking down the street they tore their names from every bill to be found.

Nathan Wampole followed and expostulated, but in vain. He had to rebill the town, and this time took good care that their names did not appear. Wampole never bothered either of them again.

At the proper time Leo and Carl made their appearance at the mansion where they were to perform. The partners had a new trick which they called "Samson's Strength."

"Any one can have the strength of a Samson if he so desires," said Carl on coming forward. "Please to look at these dumbbells."

He produced a pair of iron dumbbells each weighing about ten pounds.

"Now, if you will observe, I handle these dumbbells with ease." He gave them a flourish. "Over they go—high in the air—around and around—easy enough, is it not? Bang!"

Down went the dumbbells on a large, flat stool he had provided.

"Will the strongest man present pick them up?"

A tall, well-formed man came forward and caught hold of one of the dumbbells.

He thought he could lift it with ease.

He was sadly mistaken.

In vain he tugged at the dumbbell. It refused to budge.

"You have fastened it down in some way," he said.

"Fastened it? Nonsense!" cried Carl, and leaning forward he picked up the dumbbell with only his forefinger and his thumb.

"Try the other dumbbell," he said.

The man did so, and found it equally hard to raise.

"Why, a little girl can pick them up," said Carl, and he motioned for a young miss of twelve to come forward. "I will strengthen your arms," he added, and made several mysterious signs over her wrists.

The little girl took hold of the dumbbells. Sure enough, she raised them without trouble.

This trick was a grand success, and the audience wondered how it was accomplished.

The explanation was simple. Under the stool Carl had a powerful magnet connected with the electric current which served the mansion with lights. By applying this magnet to the dumbbells the attraction was so strong they could not be moved. Leo controlled the current from below the floor, and certain movements which Carl made with his foot told the young gymnast when to turn the attractive force off or on.

CHAPTER XXIII.—THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH ONCE MORE.

The performance at the mansion lasted longer than had been anticipated. Many visitors were present and the whole affair was voted a big success.

But, though Leo and Carl both tried, they failed to secure another engagement anywhere in the vicinity.

"Never mind, we can't expect to earn twelve or twenty dollars every night," said the young gymnast. "If we did that we would be millionaires in no time."

When they arrived at the hotel at which they were to stop they found several gentlemen talking about eggs and how Columbus had stood one on end.

"Yes, but he cracked the shell," said Carl. "I will agree to stand an egg on end without cracking the shell. Wait till I put my traps away."

He disappeared upstairs, but soon returned.

"I'll bet a dollar you can't stand an egg up on end," said one of the gentlemen, and produced an egg brought from the kitchen.

Carl took it and waved it over his head several times.

"You have to daze the chick inside," he explained. "Now it will stand up all right."

He put the egg down on the smooth table. Sure enough, it stood up as nicely as one would please. Then he took the egg up, and, making several passes, handed it to the man.

But the egg wouldn't stand for the man, try as hard as he could.

"You've won the bet."

"Keep your money; it was only a trick," smiled Carl.

"And how was it done?"

"Ah, that's one of our professional secrets," laughed Carl. "Good-night," and he and Leo retired.

"How was the trick done?" the reader asks. We will tell them. When Carl went out he procured another egg and put in one end a bit of quicksilver. This egg he substituted for the original egg when he waved the latter in the air. The egg with the quicksilver could, of course, be set on end with ease, for the quicksilver's weight would balance the other end.

Leaving the town the next day, Leo and Carl struck out for a city five miles away, having heard that it was a good place in which to perform. There was no stage running to the city, so the pair walked the distance. When they reached the outskirts Leo suddenly stopped short and pointed to several billboards fastened to the side of a barn.

"What's the matter?" asked Carl. "I don't see anything but circus bills. And the circus won't be here until the day after to-morrow."

"It's the 'Greatest Show on Earth'—the circus I used to travel with," said the young acrobat.

"Oh, that's so. Well, we needn't come in contact with the crowd, if you don't care to do so," said Carl.

For Leo had told his friend the whole story of the stolen circus tickets and Carl sympathized with him over the fact that he was under suspicion.

"If only I could get at the bottom of that affair," murmured Leo as they walked along one of the city streets.

"Those ticket thieves are sure to be run down some day," put in Carl, "and then your name will be cleared."

"They can't be run down any too quick for me," answered Leo.

Since leaving the circus he had often thought of Barton Reeve, Natalie Sparks and his other friends. No communications had passed between them for the reason that none of those traveling with the circus knew where Leo was.

In Chalburgh, for such was the city's name, Leo and Carl were lucky enough to strike an engagement with a fat men's association. The association gave a picnic in a large grove, and the pair performed on one end of the dancing platform. This engagement brought in eight dollars more, and when they were paid off the head man of the committee asked if they intended to remain in the city long.

"That depends," said Carl. "We'll stay if we can find another opening."

"I might be able to find you an engagement with another society," said the fat man, who tipped the scales at three hundred and ten pounds. "I can let you know by to-morrow night, if you can wait that long."

Leo and Carl consulted together, and agreed to remain in Chalburgh, and the fat man took down their hotel address.

So the time went by until the day came when the circus was to perform in the city. Long before daybreak the wagons arrived and also the canvas and ring men. Leo could not resist the temptation to take a walk down to the circus-grounds for a look at the familiar scene.

While he stood there somebody touched him on the shoulder. It was Barton Reeve.

"How are you, Leo," said the menagerie manager heartily, as he held out his hand.

"I am pretty well, thank you," replied the young gymnast.

"Where have you been all this time?"

"Knocking around on my own hook," and Leo smiled faintly. He was glad to see Reeve still considered him a friend.

"I heard you had joined Wampole's specialty company."

"I did, but I had to get out," answered the boy, and told of the theatrical manager's doings and of how he was now giving private exhibitions with Carl.

"I wish you were back in our show," said Barton Reeve. "All of us miss you."

"Has Mr. Lambert discovered the ticket thieves yet?"

"No, but he's got his eyes on several fellows who are following us around."

"Is Snipper still with you?"

"Yes. But nobody likes him. Natalie Sparks thinks Snipper may be in with the ticket thieves—that's between you and me, of course," added Barton Reeve quickly.

"I have the same kind of an idea, Mr. Reeve. But the thing is to prove it."

"Of course. Until you can do that you had better remain silent."

While conversing, the two had been skirting the circus grounds, and now they came to a halt near a lemonade stand. Leo looked up, to see Jack Snipper not over fifty feet away.

"There is Snipper now," he exclaimed. "Who are those two men with him?"

Barton Reeve gave a look.

"I declare, they are two of the crowd that Lambert has under suspicion," he ejaculated.

"The three are going somewhere," said Leo quickly. "If you have the time to spare, let us follow them."

Barton Reeve looked at Leo, and saw what was passing in the young gymnast's mind.

"I have the whole morning on my hands and will go willingly," he replied.

They set off side by side, taking care that Snipper should not notice them.

A half dozen blocks were covered, and the old gymnast and his two companions turned into a low-looking drinking resort.

Passing the place, Leo and Barton Reeve saw the men take a drink and then walk into a back room.

At once Leo led the way through a side yard belonging to the drinking resort.

Here was a window opening into the back room, and standing close to this the two could hear and see all that was going on.

The men were counting over several bags of money.

This finished, one of them brought out several bundles of unsold tickets.

"When can you get more for us, Snipper?" asked one of the circus swindlers.

"I don't know. They have discovered this loss already," replied the second-rate gymnast.

"Didn't you put it off on the boy, as you said you would?"

"Certainly. But they think the boy is too good to steal," growled Snipper.

Then one of the other men began to figure up profits and mentioned how the money was to be divided.

"Hurry up," said Snipper. "I don't want to stay away too long. It might excite suspicion."

At this Barton Reeve motioned to Leo to walk a distance away.

“Run for a couple of policemen,” he whispered. “I’ll keep an eye on the crowd.”

The young gymnast needed no second bidding, but went off swiftly.

At the first corner he ran across a bluecoat and hurriedly related his story.

At once the policeman rapped for an assistant.

Then the three joined Barton Reeve.

Snipper and the swindlers were just preparing to leave the saloon.

The back window was wide open, and with a bound Barton Reeve leaped into the apartment.

Leo came close behind, and the policemen followed.

Jack Snipper turned as pale as death when he saw how he was trapped.

He started to sneak out through the drinking resort, but Leo caught him and threw him down on the sawdust floor.

Then a struggle took place between the swindlers and Barton Reeve and the policemen.

But at last the swindlers were overcome and handcuffed.

Snipper was also made a prisoner, and the whole crowd marched down to the police station.

The excitement was great at the circus when it was learned that Leo was innocent and Jack Snipper was guilty.

In her joy Natalie Sparks actually hugged Leo, while the boy blushed most furiously.

In due course of time Snipper and the swindlers were tried, and each was sentenced to two years’ imprisonment.

CHAPTER XXIV.—IN THE CIRCUS RING AGAIN.

"Leo, Mr. Lambert wants to see you," said Barton Reeve, after the excitement of the arrest was over.

"What about?" questioned the young gymnast.

"Oh, he wants to see you, that's all," added Reeve, with a peculiar wink of his eye.

The circus manager was at the main ticket wagon, as usual. As Leo entered, he held out his hand.

"Dunbar, I did you a great wrong, and I am sorry for it," he said frankly.

"I am glad that my name is cleared, Mr. Lambert," said Leo, as he took the extended hand.

"We owe you something for what you have done for the show," went on the manager. "You did what the detectives failed to do, and I feel I ought to pay you a reward."

"You can reward me well enough by taking me back, Mr. Lambert—that is, if you will take my present side partner, too," Leo added, for he did not intend to desert Carl, who had done so much for him.

"I don't understand. Who is your partner?"

"Carl Ross, a magician and juggler. He is very clever, and I think would make a hit with the show. We have been traveling around giving private exhibitions."

"In that case, I will be pleased to see what your partner can do. Can he come around to the dressing-tent just before the evening performance begins?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well then. Have him bring what apparatus he possesses with him. And remember, your old place is open whenever you care to step into it again."

"I'll be on hand as soon as you settle with Carl Ross," smiled Leo.

He lost no time in hunting up Carl, who was close at hand, having heard of the arrest of the ticket thieves at the hotel.

"The manager of the circus says my old position is open for me," said Leo.

"Are you going to leave me, Leo?" asked Carl, with an anxious look on his face.

"No. I said I would rejoin if he would give you an opening too."

"Oh!"

"He wants you to show what you can do at the dressing tent a little before seven o'clock." And Leo went into a few particulars. "Do your best, Carl, and you are sure of a steady place at a good salary."

"That would certainly be far better than knocking around, as we have been doing, on an uncertainty."

That evening Carl presented himself, in company with Leo, and gave an exhibition of his finest tricks and of his most dexterous juggling. Mr. Lambert was greatly pleased.

"You'll do first rate," he said, when Carl had concluded. "If you wish, you can join us, and I'll pay you the same wages that I was paying Dunbar."

Carl accepted on the spot, and the next day found him and Leo traveling with the other performers of the "Greatest Show on Earth."

Leo's friends were glad to see him back, and doubly glad that they had gotten rid of Snipper.

"I never want to see that man again," declared Natalie Sparks, and nobody blamed her.

The next two weeks were busy ones for Leo. Not only had he to practice up himself in his old acts, but he had also to instruct a new gymnast who came to take Snipper's place.

The newcomer was named Harry Ray. He was a first-class fellow, and soon he and Leo and Carl became warm friends.

The "Greatest Show on Earth" moved nearly every day. Its course was westward, something which did not suit the young gymnast, but which was also something he could not help.

For during all his adventures he had not forgotten about the old life at Hopsville, and how Barton Reeve had promised, when he got the chance, to look up his monetary affairs for him. One day he spoke to Reeve about it.

"I haven't forgotten, Leo, don't think that. But at present I can do nothing."

"When will we move eastward again?"

"That I can't say either. It will depend to a great extent on how matters pan out in the West. If we don't take in much money we'll turn back again as soon as the necessary arrangements can be made."

"Well, I want the show to make all the money possible. But I want my rights, too."

"And you shall get them; never fear of that," concluded Barton Reeve.

"I reckon Nathan Dobb is glad to get rid of the care of me," thought Leo, as he walked away. "And yet, it seems to me he has been acting very queerly."

Never for an instant did the young gymnast dream that Nathan Dobb had placed Hank Griswold on his track to do him harm.

Why Griswold had not put in an appearance ere this will be related later.

CHAPTER XXV.—ANOTHER BALLOON TRIP.

In the middle of the ring the circus men usually built a large tank, in which several celebrated swimmers and divers used to give a special performance.

This was something new in the circus line, and it made a hit with the audience.

One morning one of the swimmers, a lad named Delbier, was trying a new act.

This was to turn in the air in a peculiar way and land in the water on his side, with his body tied up in a knot.

It was a very difficult feat, and Leo watched Delbier with interest.

"That's dangerous," he said.

"I know it, but orders are for something new, and it's the only thing I can think of," was the reply.

Leo was practicing on the rings close at hand, and for some minutes all went along well.

Then Delbier did the new trick. Down he went into the tank, but failed to come up.

Leo waited for nearly half a minute, and then growing alarmed, dropped from the rings and hurried to the edge of the tank.

In the clear water he beheld Delbier at the bottom.

The fellow had disjointed himself in some way and could not straighten out.

He was in great danger of drowning.

Without hesitation Leo leaped into the tank, intending to raise the doubled-up body.

He made an alarming discovery.

Delbier had a cramp, and his right hand and left foot were tightly twisted about a corner brace in the bottom of the water-box.

In vain Leo tugged to free the diver. He could not break that deathlike hold.

In less than half a minute Leo was out of breath.

It looked as if he must arise to the surface and leave poor Delbier to his fate.

But then he clinched his teeth.

"I'll save him," he thought grimly.

Catching the brace in both hands, he planted his feet against the side of the tank.

Then he strained and tugged for dear life.

At first the brace, which was screwed on, would not budge.

But finally it parted with a snap which sounded unusually loud in the water.

Delbier still clung to it, and so Leo brought both brace and drowning man to the surface together.

By this time a crowd of helpers and performers had gathered.

“What’s the matter?”

“Hello! Delbier has a cramp!”

“See how he holds to the brace!”

“Leo Dunbar saved him. He tore the brace loose!”

Meanwhile a doctor was sent for. He quickly came, and after an hour’s hard work succeeded in bringing Delbier around all right.

Leo’s wonderful nerve was much commented upon.

“He’s a plucky chap,” said Pomeroy, the head of the tumblers, and all agreed with him.

Delbier was very thankful to our hero for what he had done for him, and from that day he was added to Leo’s growing list of friends.

About this time the “Greatest Show on Earth” was joined by a balloonist named Professor Ricardo, and his assistant, Larry Greson. The professor gave ascensions in the afternoon, previous to the circus performance, and thereby attracted large crowds.

Professor Ricardo was a jovial sort of fellow and he and Leo were soon on good terms.

“How would you like to go up some day with me, Dunbar?” he asked one afternoon.

“First-rate.”

“It’s a peculiar sensation when you go up for the first time.”

The young gymnast smiled.

“It wouldn’t be my first trip,” he said. “I went up once before—in a big hurry.”

And he told of his adventure while trying to escape from Daniel Hawkins.

About a week after this Leo went up with the professor, taking the place of the assistant. He rather enjoyed the trip and was not at all afraid.

“I’m used to swinging around in the air, you know,” he explained.

The circus was going still further west, and one day it struck a town around which the forest fires were raging rather extensively. On this same day Larry Greson came to the manager of the show and said that Professor Ricardo was sick and could not give his customary exhibition.

“That’s too bad,” replied Adam Lambert. “It has been advertised, and I hate to disappoint the crowds.”

Leo heard about the trouble and presently he volunteered to go up with Greson.

“I’ll do a turn or two on the bar and the country folks won’t know the difference,” he said.

And so it was arranged that the young gymnast should go up.

"But be mighty careful, Leo," cautioned Barton Reeve. "We can't afford to lose you."

At the appointed time Leo was on hand, the big balloon was inflated, and up the monster went, with Greson in the tiny basket and Leo clinging to a bar beneath.

The wind was blowing rather strongly, and as they shot up it increased in velocity. Before Leo had time to make a dozen turns on the bar the balloon had left the circus grounds far behind and was sailing rapidly over the outskirts of the town.

Far ahead could be seen the burning forests.

It being useless to remain on the bar, Leo hastily clambered into the basket.

"We had better come down," he cried.

"We can't come down fast enough," gasped Greson.

"What do you mean, Greson?"

"We are sailing along too fast. We'll land right in the center of the fire."

"Then what is best to do?"

"Sail over it and land on the other side of the woods."

"Can we do that?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then go ahead," returned Leo, much relieved. "Put some more alcohol on your sponge," he added, referring to the sponge which was blazing beneath the balloon opening to keep the air hot.

Leo kept a sharp lookout ahead while Greson tended to the lighted sponge.

They kept well up in the air.

It was not long before the burning forest could be seen plainly.

"Gosh! but we don't want to get down in that!" cried Greson, with a shudder. "We would never come out alive!"

"Look to your sponge!" called out the young gymnast sharply.

A puff of wind had blown the flame in an opposite direction.

Greson turned to comply, but at that moment the wind took a piece of the lighted sponge from the holder and carried it upward.

It caught on the balloon. There was a puff of smoke and a tiny flame.

The balloon was on fire!

White with terror, Greson sank down on the floor of the basket, too overcome to think or act.

Leo's heart leaped into his throat.

They were speeding with terrible swiftness directly toward the forest of fire.

CHAPTER XXVI.—ADVENTURES AMID THE FLAMES.

There was no escape, for the burning balloon was going down in the very midst of the crackling forest.

Already the atmosphere was thick with smoke and flaming pieces of wood and brush.

It was with difficulty that Leo breathed, and he could scarcely see a dozen feet before him.

Larry Greson, the assistant, lay on the floor of the basket, too frightened to move.

“Out with the sandbags!” cried the young gymnast. “It is our one hope!”

“What’s the use? The balloon is on fire!” gasped Greson hopelessly.

“We must do something—I won’t give up!” was Leo’s response.

He began to cast out the heavy bags one after the other. Greson at last consented to help him.

The burning balloon shot up into the air fifty or sixty feet. But only for a few seconds.

Yet this space of time was enough to carry them over the worst of the burning forest.

Then they began to settle again, the smoke rolling blackly on all sides of them.

“We’re goners!” groaned Greson. “Good-by.”

Splash! What was this? Both could scarcely believe the evidence of their senses.

They had dropped into the very center of a little lake in the midst of the forest. Down they went, with the burning balloon settling over them. Both knew enough to leap from the basket and dive under. It was well they did so; otherwise they would have been caught in the folds of the ignited monster and drowned like rats in a trap.

Leo took a long dive, and when he came up he was fully fifty feet away from what was left of the once valuable balloon, now partly above and partly below water, and still burning and hissing.

“Larry, where are you?” he called out.

He received no reply, but a moment later perceived his assistant puffing and blowing not a dozen feet away.

“This is awful!” spluttered Greson. “We’ve escaped from fire to be drowned.”

“Nonsense! Come, let us swim ashore.”

“How can we do that when the fire is on all sides of the lake?” was Greson’s dismayed answer.

“I’ll find some spot to land, never fear,” was Leo’s confident reply.

He led the way, and Greson, being a good swimmer, easily followed.

The firebrands were thick about them, and often they had to duck to get out of the way of being burned. It was with difficulty that they could get any fresh air.

To one side of the lake, which was not over three hundred feet in diameter, Leo beheld a number of high rocks comparatively free from burning brush. Hither he directed his course.

"We can get on the rocks, if nothing else," he said.

"Yes, and have our feet blistered," growled Greson. "I'll bet the stones are as hot as pepper."

"We'll try them, anyway."

The young gymnast swam around with great care before he essayed to land.

Presently he discovered a little cove, and further on a split in the rocks several feet in width.

"Just the spot! Come," he shouted to Greson.

He led the way into the narrow opening. Fifteen feet further on was a bit of a cave, and into this the pair crawled on hands and knees.

It was much cooler in the cave than it had been outside. By lying flat on the flooring they managed to get a current of fresh air. There was also a little pool there, and both washed the sweat and smoke from their faces and procured a drink. They were exhausted, and only too glad to about lie down and rest in their safe retreat.

"A narrow escape, truly," said Leo with a shiver.

"We ain't out of it yet," returned Greson.

"I know that."

"We may have to stay here a week, and without food; that won't be very pleasant."

Slowly the day wore on.

Overhead the flames crackled and roared as if delighted to hold sway over such an immense area of woods.

Once the wind changed a bit and blew the smoke directly down upon them. But just as they had about made up their minds that they would have to seek new quarters it went back, and they were molested no more on that score.

Toward evening both began to feel hungry.

"There ought to be lots of dead birds and small animals around," said the young gymnast. "But the thing is to get hold of them."

"I'm not going to venture out—at least not yet," said Greson.

"All right—let's wait till empty stomachs drive us out."

"I have an idea. The lake—it must have fish in it."

"That's right!" cried Leo.

He had some line in his pocket. Soon he had made a hook with a big bent pin.

In the meantime Greson dug around among some dirt near the pool for worms. He brought out

several.

The line was baited, a stone put on for a sinker and thrown into the water. Then they went back to the cave.

Twice they found the line as they had left it. But the third time something was on it. They hauled in the catch.

It was a fat, spotted fish, weighing nearly two pounds.

“Good!” shouted Greson. “Now to cook him. Heaven knows there is fire enough!”

Half an hour later the fish was done to a turn. They ate him with a big relish, and at once threw out the line again, in hope of catching something for the morning meal.

CHAPTER XXVII.—ESCAPE FROM THE BURNING FOREST.

The night passed and half of the next day.

The two remained in the cave, living on fish alone.

It looked as if they would have to remain in the cave a week, perhaps longer.

"I'm sick of it from my hair to my toes," growled Greson.

"So am I; but I am thankful we are alive," returned Leo grimly.

The noon hour passed slowly.

It was furiously hot.

"Wouldn't you think the fire would burn itself out, Leo?" remarked the assistant.

"There are a good many thousands of cords of wood to consume, and that takes time, Larry."

About the middle of the afternoon it began to grow dark.

"More smoke coming this way," announced Greson.

"No, it's clouds!"

"Clouds! yes, and—hark!"

They listened intently. A low rumble was heard.

"A thunderstorm! If it only rains hard enough!"

The sky kept growing blacker and blacker. Then came a flash of lightning through the smoke, and the patter of rain.

As the rain came down the smoke grew thicker, and soon it drifted into the cave, and they were all but driven out.

"We can't stand this! Let us get out!" said Greson.

"No, no; wait awhile, Larry! See, the wind is changing!"

The young gymnast was right. The wind swerved around and at once the smoke left them.

Another hour passed, and still the rain came down steadily. It had full effect on the burning forest, for the fire died out in spot after spot.

"We'll be able to get out by morning," said Leo.

That night they thought it safe to sleep, and lay down utterly exhausted.

In the morning it was still raining. All around the lake the burned trunks of tall trees were left standing. Every bush was reduced to ashes.

They had not even a compass by which to make their course out of the forest. But this did not stop them from departing.

"Here is a stream that flows from the lake," said Leo. "It must lead to some river or larger lake. We will follow it for a few miles and see where it brings us."

"That's right; keep near the water. We may need it if the rain stops and the fire starts up again," replied Greson.

They picked their way slowly along the bank of the brook, sometimes walking directly in the water where the dirt and stones became too hot for their feet.

"Hurrah!" cried the young gymnast at the end of a long turn in the stream.

He pointed ahead. There, beyond a stretch of prairie grass, lay a small village.

Evidently it had entirely escaped the ravages of the fierce forest fire.

The prairie grass was burned in spots, but that was all.

The village could be distinctly seen, but they knew it was, nevertheless, several miles off.

One can see a long distance over a prairie, the same as over the water.

The middle of the afternoon saw them safe in the village of Rallings, footsore and weary.

The people were astonished to hear their tale.

"It's lucky ye escaped with your lives," said one old inhabitant, and Leo and Larry Greson agreed with him.

To keep the circus folks from worrying, Leo sent Barton Reeve a telegram stating they were both safe. That very day they started back to join the "Greatest Show on Earth."

When they returned it was found that Professor Ricardo was still sick. He had another balloon, but this would be of no use unless somebody was found to take his place.

"I'll become balloonist for awhile," said Leo, "that is, if you don't ask me to go up near any burning forests again."

"That's right," put in Greson. "No more such adventures for me. Besides, burning up balloons is rather expensive."

The matter was talked over, and it was decided that for the next few weeks Leo should take the old balloonist's place.

CHAPTER XXVIII.—THE RIVAL BALLOONISTS.

"We're going to have fun to-day, Leo," said his assistant two days later.

"How so, Larry?"

"There is a rival here."

"Who?"

"Porler from New Orleans."

"You don't mean to say he is going to give an exhibition here?" said the young gymnast with much interest.

"So he says, and he adds that he will show up in a way that will throw the circus exhibition away in the shade."

Leo smiled. He had heard that Porler was a very conceited man who had been in the business for a dozen years or more.

Once he had wanted to become Professor Ricardo's partner, but the professor refused to go into the deal.

This made Porler angry with the professor and also with the circus folks.

When Leo arrived at the circus lot he found that the two balloons had been located side by side.

Porler was to exhibit at one o'clock, while Leo usually went up an hour later.

The young gymnast cautioned Larry to be on guard, so that no harm should come to his outfit, and he likewise cautioned his men to keep away from Porler's inclosure and thus avoid trouble.

The backs of the two tents used by Leo and Porler were almost together, and while Leo was in his own, looking over his things, he heard quarreling in the tent beyond.

"Oh, don't ask me to do that, Mr. Porler!" pleaded a boyish voice. "Anything but that!"

"You must do it, Mart Keene!" responded the gruff voice of the balloonist.

"I can't—really I can't!" pleaded the boyish voice again.

"You can do it and you will. My reputation is at stake and you must go up with me and do the fairy act."

"I will fall and break my neck!"

"No, you won't—not unless you get too confoundedly nervous, which you haven't any right to do."

"Let me do my own act," pleaded Mart Keene, for such was the boy's name.

"No, you'll do as I want you to. We must show up at our best."

The boy began to cry.

He was a street waif from New Orleans. Porler had picked him up in the French quarter one day and adopted him. He had promised him a good living and some money, but he got neither. He had often abused him, and at times made him do acts in connection with his exhibitions which imperiled Mart's limbs and life. He did not care what became of the boy, as long as he made money.

Porler flew into a rage when Mart started to cry.

"Shut up!" he cried in a low tone that was full of passion. "Do you want the crowd outside to hear your sniveling?"

"I will stop when you promise not to make me do the fairy act," sobbed Mart.

"You'll do that act, I say, and that ends it!" howled Porler.

He looked around the tent, and, espying a whip lying near a trunk, picked it up.

"Do you see this?" he demanded.

"Oh, don't whip me, please!"

"Promise to do as I wish you to or I'll break this whip over your bare back, you rascal!"

"No, no!"

Mart tried to shrink back from the man, but he sprang forward and clutched him by the arm.

Yet the upraised whip never descended.

The back canvas of the tent was pushed up and Leo appeared.

He caught the whip and twisted it from Porler's hand.

"You coward, let that poor boy alone!" he cried.

Porler was thunderstruck. He had not dreamed of being interrupted. His face grew dark as he whirled around and faced the young gymnast.

"What right have you to come in here?" he hissed.

"The right any one has to save a defenseless boy from a brute!" retorted Leo. "I want you to leave him alone."

"He is my ward."

"I don't care if he is. You evidently treat him worse than you would a dog."

"He won't do as I order him to."

"You want him to risk his neck in the fairy act, an act that can't be accomplished except by long and careful training. It isn't right."

"You are jealous and afraid we are going to outdo you," sneered Porler.

Leo's face flushed.

"I am not," he said calmly. "I wish to stick up for the lad, that is all. Leave him alone and I won't bother you."

"Supposing I don't choose to leave him alone?"

"Then I'll make you, and not only that, I'll go outside and let the crowd know just how matters stand—that you want to force him to do an act that he can't do, and which may cause him to lose his life."

Hardly had Leo uttered the words than, with a muttered imprecation, Porler sprang upon him and bore him to the ground.

CHAPTER XXIX.—PORLER'S MOVE.

Porler was angry enough to give Leo a good beating.

He struck at the boy as he sent him down to the ground, but the young gymnast avoided the blow.

Then Leo let out, and Porler received a blow on the nose.

This brought blood, and he grew more enraged than ever.

Like an eel Leo squirmed from his grasp, and panting the two faced each other.

"I'll fix you!" howled Porler.

He ran to his trunk to get a weapon, for he was in his balloon costume, but suddenly stopped short.

"Where is he?"

He referred to Mart Keene, who had disappeared.

Fearful that the boy was running away, Porler forgot all about Leo for the time being and ran outside.

The young gymnast ran to his own tent and came out.

He saw Porler looking around anxiously.

The lad had certainly escaped.

"I hope he doesn't find him," thought Leo.

Porler whispered to his assistant, a man named Murphy, and the latter hurried off to ascertain, if possible, what had become of Mart.

Then Porler re-entered his tent. The band was playing and it was time for him to make his ascension.

He delayed as long as possible, but at last the crowd got impatient.

"A little hole in the balloon, that is all, gentlemen," said Porler. "I am ready now."

He did not dare to speak of Mart for fear an investigation would be started.

He came out, smiling falsely at the crowd, and walked over to where his balloon swayed in the air.

At a given signal the balloon shot up with Porler in the basket.

When the balloon was scarcely two hundred feet in the air Porler got out his parachute and

leaped overboard.

As he came floating down he made several turns about the double handle of the parachute.

The crowd applauded this, for it was something new to them.

Leo saw the exhibition from a hole in the top of his tent, and smiled to himself.

"There are twenty balloonists in the United States who can do as good as that, and better," he thought.

Porler had expected to make Mart go up with him.

The boy was to leave the balloon with him on the parachute, and then, when within fifty feet of the ground, fly away by himself on an immense pair of white wings filled with gas.

The band continued to play after Porler landed.

"Now for the circus balloonist!" was the cry.

A flourish from the band and Leo came running out.

He was dressed in a suit of white and gold. The gold sparkled in the sunshine and made a beautiful appearance, quite in contrast to Porler's dirty costume of plain white and red.

"Let go!"

Up shot the circus balloon with a rush.

There was Leo, not in a basket, but clinging to a slender trapeze. A shout of approval arose.

Up and up went the balloon until it became to the human eye about as large as a dinner plate.

The young gymnast was making a great ascension.

As he went up he began to perform on the trapeze. He turned over and over and hung by his toes.

The crowd could scarcely believe its eyes. Porler was completely outdone.

At last both balloon and balloonist passed out of sight of those on the fair grounds.

Leo landed in a field several miles from the city.

He hired the farmers who came out to see what was the matter to help him pack up the balloon.

About an hour later Greson came along and the outfit was packed on a wagon and carted back to the circus grounds. When Leo came in for supper he found a note awaiting him.

It was from Mart Keene and ran like this:

"DEAR MR. DUNBAR: I must thank you for your bravery and great kindness to me. I am alone in the world and need a friend. If you will help me, kindly call at the address given on the inclosed card."

The young gymnast looked at the card. It bore the address of a boarding-house on a side avenue half a dozen blocks from the grounds.

He at once departed for the place.

CHAPTER XXX.—MART KEENE'S STORY.

It did not take Leo long to reach the boarding-house advertised on the card.

"I wish to see Mart Keene," he said to the lady who answered his summons.

"Oh, yes; please walk into the parlor."

In a few minutes the lad came in.

He wore an old suit, one he had caught up when escaping from Porler. He blushed as he took Leo's hand.

"You will have to excuse my appearance," he said. "But you are aware it cannot be helped."

"Yes, Mart, I understand it all. I am glad you escaped from Porler."

"I must thank you for what you did for me," went on Mart. "You are as brave as you are daring."

"Don't mention that, Mart. It was a pleasure to be of service to you. Let me know how I can serve you further."

There was a silence, and the lad cast down his eyes.

"I must be frank with you," he said at last. "I am without a friend in the world and likewise without a dollar."

The young gymnast smiled faintly.

"My boy, allow me to contradict you," he said. "Neither statement is true. I am your friend."

The boy's face lit up.

"I thought you would be my friend, you seemed so generous. And I wanted a small loan, so that I might get away from Mr. Porler. I never want to see that man again."

"As I said before, what I have is at your service."

"Will you loan me ten dollars?"

"Yes, and more. Here are twenty dollars. Accept them as a loan, to be paid back at any time that suits you."

And Leo handed out the amount.

Mart blushed as he accepted the bills.

"I shall never forget you, never!" he murmured, and put the money away. "I will repay you as soon as I am able."

"Be in no hurry. What are you going to do, if I may ask?"

"I am going to try to hunt up an uncle of mine," said Mart. "If I can only find him, I think he will give me a home. If I am not mistaken, he is holding some property which belongs to me."

"Where does your uncle live?" questioned Leo with interest.

"That I do not know. I will have to advertise for information, I presume."

"Up-hill work, that. What is your uncle's name?"

"Daniel Hawkins."

"Daniel Hawkins," repeated Leo, leaping to his feet in astonishment.

"Yes. Why, you act as if you knew him," returned Mart.

"Know him? Well, I rather guess I do," returned the young gymnast bitterly.

"Oh, I am so glad!"

"And I'm sorry."

"Sorry? Why?"

"You need expect nothing from your uncle, Mart."

"Oh, don't say that!" and the boy grew pale.

"I might as well be plain with you, even if it does hurt. There is no use in building up false hopes."

"You must know my uncle well."

"I worked for him for a long while—he acted as if he owned me. He is a miserable skinflint, nothing less. If you go to him he will work you to death and treat you worse than a slave. He never lets up on anybody, not even his own relations."

And then and there Leo sat down again and told his story—how he had slaved for the farmer and run away and become a professional circus performer.

Mart listened with interest, his face growing paler as he proceeded.

"You are right; I have nothing to expect from him, even though he was my mother's own half-brother."

"Won't you tell me your story?" asked Leo.

"Willingly, if you care to listen to it."

And then Mart told how he had been an orphan for ten years. His father had been an actor and his mother a comic-opera singer.

"The Hawkinses never had much to do with us after mother went on the stage," he said. "That is how I lost track of my uncle."

Then he told of his mother's death in New Orleans and how he had been cast out on the streets by an old woman with whom they boarded. He had danced down in the French quarter, and there Porler had picked him up.

"He promised me so many things that I went with him willingly," he said. "But it was a great

mistake.”

The two talked matters over for a long while—until nearly midnight—and then Leo made a proposition.

“I am sure you will not find living with Daniel Hawkins agreeable,” he said. “So I am going to make you an offer. If you wish to travel with the circus I will try to arrange it for you. I think I can get you a place at eight or ten dollars a week to go up in the balloon with me.”

“Thank you; I’d like that,” replied Mart Keene.

CHAPTER XXXI.—A FALL FROM THE CLOUDS.

The next day Leo lost no time in interviewing Adam Lambert concerning Mart.

“He is clever and will in time make a good acrobat and balloonist,” he said.

The matter was talked over, and that afternoon Mart joined the “Greatest Show on Earth” on trial. He was to assist Leo in the balloon, Larry Greson having now to spend much of his time with Professor Ricardo, who was worse in health.

A week later found the circus in Denver. In the meantime nothing had been heard of Porler, but one night Leo came face to face with him.

The balloonist scowled and was about to speak, but suddenly changed his mind and walked away.

“You must be on guard against that man,” said Leo to Mart.

“I will be,” was the reply.

The ascension from the circus grounds in Denver attracted great attention.

When the time came for the balloon to go up Leo and Mart entered the basket.

Up and up went the great monster, gayly decorated on every side.

Below hung several swinging bars and a rope ladder.

Mart began to perform on the ladder, while the young gymnast leaped from one trapeze to another.

It was a marvelous sight, and the crowd went wild with enthusiasm.

But suddenly, when the balloon was well up over the buildings near by, a cry of horror arose.

A man was seen to lean out of a window not far away.

He held a rifle in his hand, and the weapon was pointed at the balloon.

Crack!

The weapon spoke and the ball pierced the silken sides of the floating monster.

Leo heard the sound of the rifle and he at once felt that something was wrong.

Suddenly Mart Keene gave a cry of terror.

“Oh, Mr. Dunbar, look out. There is a man in one of the buildings who is aiming a gun at the balloon!”

Crack!

The rifle spoke again, and the people, looking upward, saw Leo make a leap.

The trapeze had been struck.

Leo had leaped to where hung his parachute.

He caught it with his left hand.

Down he came, the parachute in his grasp.

The catch gave way and out shot the ribs of the parachute, and the young gymnast's headlong flight to earth was stayed.

A cheer went up.

"He is safe!"

The crowd gathered around to where Leo had reached the earth, in the center of a field of grass.

"He was struck!"

"Is he badly hurt?"

The youth lay unconscious on the grass, his face as pale as a sheet.

A few thought him dead, and the report that he had been killed quickly circulated.

The police ran into the building in search of the rascal who had done the firing, but could not find their man.

Taking advantage of the excitement, Porler, for it was he, had left the grounds as fast as possible.

He knew that if caught the crowd might be incensed enough to lynch him on the spot.

Luckily two physicians were present, and both hurried to Leo's side.

It was found that he was suffering quite a little from his fall.

An ambulance was summoned, and the young gymnast was conveyed to a hospital.

Here he was given every attention, and by the following morning he felt nearly as well as ever, although his breast was still sore and had to be kept tightly bandaged.

In the meanwhile the balloon had sailed away from the fair grounds with Mart clinging to the ropes.

The boy was terribly frightened over what had occurred.

He became faint and felt for a minute that he must fall from his lofty perch.

But he recovered and held fast, and thus the balloon drifted far away.

He imagined the man who had fired the shots was Porler, but was not certain.

On and on went the balloon over the city, and then across a wide stretch of farming land.

Finally it began to settle in a neighborhood full of brush and trees.

Mart looked out anxiously, and it was with much satisfaction that he saw the balloon was about to

fall in a cleared spot, where no damage would come to it, and from which he could easily escape.

Down and down came the monster, until it touched the ground as lightly as would a drifting feather.

The lad leaped away to escape the great mass of falling silk and ropes. Soon the balloon lay a flat mass where it had struck.

Mart wondered if it would be safe to leave the thing until some one came for it.

Usually Greson attended to such matters, but now he might have his hands full with Leo Dunbar.

As Mart thought of Leo his eyes filled with tears.

He thought a good deal of his champion.

He was the first person in the world who had really befriended him.

"Oh, I hope he isn't seriously hurt!" he murmured to himself.

While he stood by the fallen balloon wondering what was best to do he heard the sound of wagon wheels.

They came from a country road a few hundred feet to his right.

"It must be Greson or one of the others coming for the balloon," he said to himself.

The wagon came to a stop, and he ran forward to meet the newcomer that he might inquire about Leo.

Then of a sudden his heart seemed to stop beating.

The man approaching from the wagon was Porler!

CHAPTER XXXII.—MART A PRISONER.

Mart was nearly dumfounded.

It was so unexpected, this meeting, that he was almost too paralyzed to move.

He gave a faint cry of alarm. Porler heard it and looked in his direction.

“Ah, so there you are!” he sang out. “I thought I would find you somewhere in the vicinity!”

He ran toward the lad.

Instinctively Mart turned to flee.

“Stop!” he cried. And he made after the boy at a greater speed.

Mart did not answer him, but ran the faster.

But the boy was no match for the old balloonist, who in his day had been a swift runner.

He kept gaining on Mart, and seeing this, the lad ran toward a clump of bushes.

Mart dived into the midst of these, and thus managed to get out of his sight.

“You can’t escape me,” cried Porler in a rage. “You might as well stop right where you are.”

Mart made no reply, but kept on.

Presently he came to a tall tree.

This gave him an idea. Mart could climb like a monkey, and up the tree he went with great speed.

When Porler reached the spot he was out of sight, and the old balloonist went on.

“Oh, how I hope he will go far enough away,” said Mart to himself.

Soon he could hear no more of Porler.

Thinking him gone, he cautiously descended the tree.

Barely had his feet touched the ground than he felt a rough hand on his shoulder.

“I thought you were here,” cried the old balloonist in his harsh tone. “You can’t get away from me now, Mart Keene.”

“Let me go!” he panted. “Don’t you dare touch me!”

“Touch you? Well, I guess that’s cool. As if you didn’t belong to me!”

“I don’t belong to you. You haven’t the first claim on me.”

"We'll see about that. Didn't I take you out of the street and feed and clothe you, and——"

"Made me work like a horse to pay for it," finished the boy. "You have got more out of me than I ever cost you, ten times over, so there!"

"You'll come along with me—willingly or unwillingly," growled Porler. "Give me your hand."

He tried to catch hold of Mart. He snatched his arm away.

Filled with rage, he struck the lad a cruel blow full in the face.

It staggered Mart, and he nearly went to the ground.

Then he picked Mart up and put him over his shoulder.

At once the boy began to scream for help.

"Shut up!" growled Porler.

For reply Mart screamed louder.

Then Porler threw him down, poured some chloroform he had in a bottle on his handkerchief and applied it to Mart's nose.

The boy struggled vainly for a few minutes and then became limp in his arms.

"Ah, that did the business," Porler murmured to himself. "Glad I brought the chloroform along."

He took Mart to his carriage and placed him inside, covering him with several robes.

When Mart came to his senses he found himself in a little room. The door was locked and the one window was nailed up tightly. He was a close prisoner.

The boy had been placed on a cot in the corner, and now sat up and gazed around in bewilderment.

"Where am I?" he thought.

Then the full realization of what had happened burst upon the boy, and he gave way to tears.

"That bad man! What does he intend to do with me?"

Hour after hour went by and no one came to Mart.

There was a pitcher of water in the room and a loaf of bread, both on a stand close at hand.

He drank some of the water, but could not eat.

He knew it was night. Slowly the hours dragged by until morning.

Not long after this the door was unlocked and Porler came into the room.

"Awake, are you?" he said. "Hope you slept well."

"You monster!" Mart cried. "What are you going to do with me?"

"I'll tell you. I am going to make you promise on your bended knees that you will travel with me as you used to do, and obey all my commands."

"I'll never promise anything like that," exclaimed Mart, recoiling with horror.

"You will, or else—" The old balloonist paused.

"Or else what?"

"I will keep you here, and starve you into submission."

CHAPTER XXXIII.—LEO TO THE RESCUE.

Leo's first care, after leaving the hospital, was to ask about Mart.

He was astonished to learn at the hotel at which the party was stopping that nothing had been seen of the lad since the balloon had left the exhibition grounds.

Greson had gone for the balloon late the day before.

"Found the balloon all right, but didn't see a single trace of the boy," said the assistant.

"That is queer," mused Leo. "Can it be that he tumbled down in some out-of-the-way place and was killed?"

He at once learned the course the balloon had taken, and then got a buggy and horse and went over every inch of the ground.

A little later he found himself at the spot where the balloon had come down.

He walked around in much perplexity.

If Mart had escaped injury, where was he?

"All this must be Porler's work," said the young gymnast to himself. "I would just like to come across that man."

Satisfied that nothing was to be gained by remaining near the woods, Leo started back to the road.

In doing this he came across the bottle which had contained the chloroform Porler had used.

He picked up the bottle and smelled of what remained in it.

"My gracious!"

Like a flash the truth burst upon him.

"It's that rascal's work! He fired on me, and then came out here after Mart. He has abducted the boy!"

As we know, Leo was partly right and partly wrong.

The young gymnast realized that if he was to act he must do so without delay.

It made him very angry to think of the young lad being in the old balloonist's power.

That he would ill-use Mart he felt certain.

From where he had found the bottle Leo traced Porler's footsteps to the carriage.

The marks of the carriage wheels were still fresh and they ran straight into the city.

On the pavements they were, of course, lost.

Leo was in a quandary.

He told Greson of what he had discovered, and then both of them began a systematic search for Mart.

Greson started from where the carriage had entered the city.

The young gymnast went to the exhibition grounds and attempted to trace up the man who had fired the shots at the balloon.

From one end and another the young gymnast was able to trace up Porler to a third-rate boarding-house on one of the side streets.

He was about to enter the place when he saw a fellow named Danny Murphy, who was Porler's assistant, leaving in a great hurry.

"Perhaps he is going to join Porler at some place where Mart is being kept," said Leo to himself. "I'll follow him."

And follow Murphy he did.

All unconscious of being watched, Porler's tool walked half a dozen blocks until he came to the residence in which Mart was kept a close prisoner. He walked around to the rear through an alleyway.

Close behind him, Leo heard him give a peculiar knock on the door.

A moment passed and Murphy was admitted. The back door was locked and bolted after him.

When the door had been opened Leo had caught a momentary glimpse of Porler's face.

"That settles it," he thought. "Mart is kept a prisoner right here."

Leo had armed himself, and now he walked to one of the kitchen windows.

He opened the blinds. The window itself was locked, but bringing out his pocketknife he shoved back the catch.

Another moment and the lower sash was raised and the young gymnast leaped into the house.

He did not care if his enemies were present. He was prepared to fight, if need be.

But, as he surmised, the lower floor of the residence was deserted.

With cautious steps Leo left the kitchen and walked toward the stairs leading to the next floor.

As he did so he heard the murmur of voices from above.

He went up and listened with strained ears.

"Mr. Porler, starve me or not, I will never do as you wish."

It was Mart who was speaking.

"And I say you will do so," growled Porler.

"That's right," put in Murphy. "Make the boy toe the mark."

"I will not only starve you," went on Porler, "but I will give you a taste of your old friend, the strap."

"You will not dare to touch me!" exclaimed the lad.

"Wait and see."

"My friend, Mr. Dunbar, will have the law on you for it."

"Dunbar will never help you again."

"I think he will."

The voice came from the doorway, and the three in the room found themselves confronted by Leo.

CHAPTER XXXIV.—THE END OF PORLER.

Porler and Murphy were taken completely by surprise when confronted by Leo.

On seeing the young gymnast, Mart gave a cry of joy.

“Oh, thank Heaven you have come!”

“Get into the corner, boy!” howled Porler.

“Don’t you speak to him again,” said Leo sharply. “He is no longer your prisoner.”

“Ain’t he? We’ll soon see about that.”

As Porler spoke he advanced upon Leo.

But when the young gymnast brought his weapon up within range of the rascal’s head the latter quickly recoiled.

“You see, Porler, I am armed.”

Murphy, who was completely dumfounded to see Leo, now came forward.

“We are two to one, young feller,” he said warningly. “Yer better go slow.”

“I know my own business,” was Leo’s quiet reply. “Mart!”

“Well?”

“Will you go down and summon help?”

“But you are alone——”

“Never mind. Get a policeman, or somebody else. I am going to have these rascals arrested.”

“Not much!” howled Porler.

“Let’s down him?” yelled Murphy.

“Back! both of you!”

The two men, however, ran forward, dodging behind Mart as they came on, and closed in on him.

It was an unequal fight.

But Leo fought well, and the boy was not idle.

Mart caught up a chair, and raising it over his head brought it down on Porler’s back.

“Oh! oh! you have broken my back!” yelled the old balloonist.

Scarcely had he spoken when Leo tripped him up.

But now Murphy leaped on the young gymnast, and the pair rolled over on the floor.

He was in a high rage, and he meant to do Leo a serious injury if such a thing was possible.

In the meanwhile Porler arose and pushed Mart from him.

"Help! help!" cried Mart.

He ran out of the room and into the next, the window of which was not fastened, and opening the window continued to cry out.

Then of a sudden he saw a sight that gladdened his heart.

Larry Greson was in sight.

He had followed up the trail from the other end.

"Hurry! hurry!" screamed Mart.

"Mart!" burst out Greson.

"Come up and help Mr. Dunbar!"

"Who is in there?"

"Porler and Murphy!"

Greson ran up on the piazza of the house, and at the same time Mart flew below to let him in.

"Confound the luck!" howled Porler, who had heard Mart speaking to Greson.

"The neighborhood will be in alarm," added Murphy.

Both men leaped to their feet.

Greson was mounting the stairs three steps at a time, and close behind him came Mart.

The two rascals thought a crowd was advancing to capture them.

Dodging Leo, who gave each a heavy blow as he passed, the two villains rushed out into the hallway.

Porler was too quick for Greson, but Murphy was tripped up.

Before he could arise Leo and his assistant had the fellow a prisoner.

They bound him so that he could not escape.

Then they went after Hank Porler, but he could not be found.

He had dropped out of a rear window on to a shed and disappeared.

In the meantime a policeman arrived.

When he heard the particulars of the affair he willingly took Murphy into custody, and later on the man was sent to jail.

Steps were taken to attach Porler's balloons and other property, but it was found he had sold all his things.

"He knew he was taking big chances when he went into that underhanded work," laughed Greson.

"Oh, I trust I shall never see that man again," said Mart, with a shudder.

Strange to say, the boy's wish was gratified. Fearful of prosecution, Porler fled to South America, and that was the last heard of him.

Leo and Mart rejoined the circus at a place called Wheatlands, and their friends were heartily glad to see them back, safe and sound.

There was news for both. Professor Ricardo was much better, and on the week following was to return to work. This would put Leo back among the acrobats again, and for this the young gymnast was not sorry.

He did not forget to put in a good word for Mart to Professor Ricardo, and consequently the boy remained in his old place, and Larry Greson was given a situation among the menagerie men, something which suited him better than did ballooning.

CHAPTER XXXV.—A COWARDLY ATTACK.

In the meantime it must not be supposed that Hank Griswold had forgotten his compact with Nathan Dobb.

The man had been anxious to put his plot against Leo into operation at once, but Providence willed otherwise. Griswold was taken down with rheumatism and for several months could scarcely walk.

But now he was better, and one day started west to earn the money the squire of Hopsville had promised him.

As has been related, Delbier, the expert swimmer, and Leo had become warm friends. One morning the performer called Leo aside.

“Say, Leo, have you any enemies besides that Porler?” he asked.

“I don’t know but what I have,” laughed the young gymnast.

“Don’t laugh; I am serious.”

“Why, what’s up?”

“For the past two days I have noticed an ugly-looking man hanging around, watching you,” went on Delbier earnestly.

“Watching me?”

“Yes, and if I’m not mistaken, he follows you wherever you go.”

“What kind of a looking man?”

As well as he could, Delbier described the individual. But Leo was not thinking of Hank Griswold—indeed, he hardly knew the man—and he shook his head.

“You must imagine it, Delbier.”

“I guess not. Better be on your guard.”

“All right,” and Leo laughed.

When in the country Leo had grown tired of the quietness, but now when every day brought fresh bustle and confusion he was glad enough to escape the crowd and go for a quiet walk.

His course took him along a country road which presently followed the bank of a mountain stream.

It was a clear stream and full of fish, and Leo much regretted not having brought along a line and hook.

He wandered on and on until the town was left a good two miles behind.

Then he sat down on a rock overlooking the stream to rest.

As he did so he fancied he saw somebody following him.

The individual drew behind some bushes.

Leo at once thought of what Delbier had said.

He resolved to be on his guard, and so kept his eyes open.

But nearly half an hour went by, and as no one appeared Leo began to think he was mistaken.

A little later the boy started across an open field not far from the brook.

Then from out of the bushes crawled a man. It was Hank Griswold.

Cautiously he came behind Leo.

Presently our hero soon stumbled across the opening to an old well.

"Hullo, this is dangerous!" he murmured. "It ought to be closed."

A footstep sounded near at hand. He turned, and on the instant received a shove that hurled him backward into the opening!

For the minute Leo felt that his end must be at hand.

Down he went into the dark and deep well, with the dirt and brush on top of him.

Had he fallen to the rocky bottom he would most certainly have been killed.

But, fortunately, when less than ten feet had been passed, his clothing caught on some projecting rocks.

Instantly he grasped the rocks with his hands.

The dirt, falling on him, nearly choked him.

He steadied himself with difficulty and managed to kick himself clear from what was above.

The dirt and brush sliding past him, he felt safer, although his position was still an extremely perilous one.

He looked up and saw the evil face of Hank Griswold peering down into the well.

It was too dark for the villain to see the boy, and the young gymnast remained perfectly quiet.

Griswold heard the dirt strike the bottom of the well with a loud sound.

He laughed softly to himself.

"Done for that trip!" he muttered to himself. "Good enough!"

Hank Griswold waited for a few minutes, and then, apparently satisfied, hurried off.

As soon as he disappeared Leo looked about for some means by which to get out of his present position.

To an ordinary individual this would have been an impossible undertaking, for the sides of the

well were very slippery.

Leo's gymnastic training now stood him in good stead.

Cautiously he made his way from rock to rock, taking chances more than once that would have made many a boy shudder, grow dizzy and fall.

At last the top of the well was reached once more.

Griswold had disappeared, but he resolved to follow the man's trail, if the thing could be done.

"Ought to have one of our Indians along," he thought. There were sixteen of the redmen traveling with the "Greatest Show on Earth."

But the path through the brush was plain enough. It led to the road which Leo had originally pursued when coming out for a walk.

When our hero reached the road he saw an old farmer driving along. Evidently the old man was just coming from town.

"Hold on, sir, I want to talk to you!" cried Leo.

"What's the matter?" asked the farmer, surveying our hero's torn and muddy clothing in curiosity.

"Did you meet a man on his way to town—a man with a queer walk?"

"I did."

"Take me to that man and I'll give you a five dollar bill."

The old farmer was greatly astonished.

"Who be you?" he questioned cautiously.

Leo told him.

The farmer at once agreed to run down Hank Griswold, if it could be done.

Leo jumped into the wagon and off they went.

The chase, however, was a useless one. Griswold had taken to a side road and could not be found.

"But I'll catch him some day," said Leo to Carl, "and then I'll make him tell why he attacked me."

"Perhaps he was hired to do it," ventured the young magician.

"That is what I think," returned Leo, with a grave shake of his head.

Carl was doing very well. He had several new tricks, some of which he thought would please the children. One was called "Milk or Water," and was brought out the day after Leo had the adventure just described.

"I will now show you how easy it is to change water into milk," said the young magician as he mounted the platform in the circus ring. "Will some one kindly hand me a glass of water? I have the milk here," and he took up a small pitcher and passed it around for inspection.

The glass of water was brought and he placed it on the table and covered it with a handkerchief. Then he tapped the glass and also the pitcher.

Removing the handkerchief, he held up the glass. Sure enough, there was the white milk, as plain as day. Taking up the pitcher, Carl turned it upside down to show it was empty.

“Now we’ll change them back,” he said. Another tap, and lo! the glass was full of water and the milk was in the pitcher again.

A burst of applause followed.

This trick was simplicity itself. The pitcher really had milk in it, and the glass was full of water all the time.

When Carl covered the glass with a handkerchief he slipped into the water a bit of white cardboard, which standing upright made the water look like milk.

While the audience were inspecting the glass as he held it up he pressed over the top of the pitcher, inside, a circular card which exactly fitted the opening. This enabled him to turn the pitcher over for a second without spilling any milk.

To turn the milk in the glass to water again, he had but to remove the card. The card in the pitcher was also removed as the receptacle was handed around for inspection after the trick was done.

CHAPTER XXXVI.—ON THE ELEVATED TRACKS.

Ten days later the circus reached the great lakes and settled in Chicago for a week.

On the following day Leo was strolling down State Street when, happening to glance up, he saw Hank Griswold coming from a building with a large letter in his hand.

As quick as a flash he made after the man.

Leo was almost up to Griswold when the latter saw him coming and started up the street on a run.

Coming to a side street, he turned up that thoroughfare and continued on his way for a dozen blocks or more.

Leo tried to keep him in sight, but was unsuccessful, and after a search lasting half an hour he mounted to the elevated road, to take a train to Jackson Park.

As he went up he did not imagine that Hank Griswold was watching him.

There was a crowd at the station, and this kept increasing, as the train was late.

Leo stood close to the edge of the platform. Just in front and below him were the glistening tracks.

With a rumble the train came in sight.

When it was but a few yards away the young gymnast felt a sudden shove from behind.

He lost his balance and fell from the platform directly in front of the oncoming locomotive.

To the onlookers it seemed that the boy must surely be killed.

He rolled fairly and squarely upon the railroad tracks, and the oncoming locomotive was barely a dozen feet from him.

The engineer, who was preparing to stop, jerked the lever to come to an instantaneous halt, but it was of no avail.

On and on rolled the heavy engine, with its long train of cars.

"The boy will be killed!"

"Oh! oh! Isn't that awful!"

Many turned away, unable to endure the awful sight.

But the crowd made one mistake.

They did not know that Leo, as an acrobat, was used to making lightning-like movements whenever necessary.

His profession now stood him in good stead.

As he came down he had no chance to use his feet.

But his hands and arms were ready, and like a flash he turned a handspring and swept out of the way just as the ponderous locomotive rolled past.

The monster brushed his left leg, but he was unharmed, and in a second more had reached the platform on the opposite side of the street.

Although attacked so unexpectedly, Leo did not lose his presence of mind.

"That was that rascal's work!" he muttered to himself.

Reasoning that the man would try to escape from the scene, the young gymnast rushed down the stairs into the street.

He was right; for scarcely was the pavement touched than he beheld Griswold on the opposite side walking along at a rapid gait.

"Stop!"

Griswold looked around in horror. His intended victim was not dead! In abject fear he took to his heels as though Leo's ghost was on his track.

Up one side street and down another dashed man and boy, until, coming to an avenue, the man boarded a street car and was lost to view.

"The villain!" muttered Leo, as he slowed up to catch his breath. "I must be on my guard in the future."

He hunted around and brushed up his clothes. Then, as there seemed nothing else to do, he walked to where he had left his friends.

Here he told his story to Carl, who listened in amazement.

"He is certainly after your life," said Carl. "In the future you ought to go armed."

"I wonder if he can be hired by any one in Hopsville?" mused Leo.

"That remains to be seen."

"I'm going to capture him the next time we meet," concluded Leo, with a determined look in his outspoken face.

Mart also heard about the attack and came to Leo full of fear.

"Oh, Leo, do be careful in the future," he pleaded. "What if that bad man should take your life!"

Two days passed, and as the young gymnast neither saw nor heard of Griswold, he began again to feel a bit easier in mind.

But one afternoon, while walking in the vicinity of the lake, Leo's attention was attracted to a small steam tug which was tying up at a wharf.

"Look! look!" he shouted to Carl, who was with him. "It is Griswold, and Broxton, who was discharged from the circus for drunkenness, is with him."

"Shall I call a policeman?"

"Yes. I'll watch them."

Carl hurried off. Ere he had taken a dozen steps Griswold caught sight of Leo and whispered something the young gymnast could not catch.

Both rascals were on the point of leaving the steam tug, but now they changed their minds and ordered the captain to cut loose and move on.

"Stop!" called out Leo, and ran to the edge of the wharf.

"Go to thunder!" muttered Broxton.

"We're not to be caught to-day," added Hank Griswold.

In another second the steam tug was clear of the stringpiece of the wharf.

Leo hesitated not a moment, but, taking a flying leap, landed on her forward deck. With angry yells Griswold and Broxton rushed on him.

"We've got him now!" said the former. "Down the lake with you, captain, and be quick!"

"Stop the tug, those men are criminals," said Leo.

The tug captain paid no attention. He was in the pay of the other men.

Griswold had a stick in his hand, and now he aimed a savage blow at Leo's head.

The young gymnast warded it off as well as he was able, but he was no match for both men, and soon they had him down.

"A rope!" roared Griswold, and when it was brought he and Broxton and one of the tug hands proceeded to bind Leo's hands and feet.

This accomplished, the young gymnast was thrown into a dark locker. The door was shut and locked upon him, and the tug proceeded on her way at full steam.

CHAPTER XXXVII.—THE CAPTURE OF GRISWOLD.

“What will you do with him?”

It was Broxton who asked the question.

He and Griswold, with whom he had struck up an acquaintanceship by accident, sat in the little cabin of the steam tug which was flying down Lake Michigan at her utmost speed.

The rascally fellow referred of course to Leo, who still lay bound in the dark locker.

“I’ve got a good mind to tie a weight to his neck and heave him overboard,” growled Griswold.

“It won’t do to let him go free, that’s certain. He would have us both locked up at the first chance.”

“Certainly.”

“Who was with him on the wharf?”

“I don’t know.”

The two rascals talked the matter over for some time, but could come to no conclusion regarding the young gymnast.

They wished to get him out of the way, but hardly dared to undertake such a high-handed proceeding before the captain and crew of the tug.

“I have it,” said Griswold, half an hour later. “See that town over there?”

“Yes.”

“Let us tie up there. I’ll go ashore and hire a close coach and drive it myself. We can take him inside and——”

He did not finish, but his half-drunken companion understood.

Their victim should never get away from them alive.

The tug captain was given orders, and soon a landing was approached.

After tying up Hank Griswold hurried ashore. He procured a coach with difficulty, and it was some time before he appeared on the box, whip in hand.

Then the two men went to the locker, intending to drag Leo forth, gag him, and roll him up as though he were a bundle of clothes.

“Gone!” burst from Griswold’s lips.

He spoke the truth. The locker was empty.

"How did he manage it?" queried Broxton, in deep perplexity.

Griswold looked dumfounded for a moment. Then he grated his teeth in rage.

"Fools that we are!" he shouted. "To forget that he is a gymnast. Why, he must have freed himself within a minute after we locked him in."

"By thunder! that's so. But how did he get out of the locker?"

"I don't know."

"The door was locked, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

An examination followed, but the two men could not solve the mystery connected with Leo's escape.

We will let our reader into the secret.

As Griswold said, the boy slipped from his bonds with ease.

This done, he lit a match he had in his pocket and began an examination of his cramped prison.

The sides of the locker were solid, but in the flooring a board was loose, and he pulled it up.

Underneath was a small opening and into this he crawled. The board was put in place again, and finding a nail, Leo succeeded in fastening it.

Crawling around in the dark and wet the young gymnast soon came to an opening leading up near the engine-room of the tug.

He came up, and finding a sheltering nook proceeded to secrete himself.

He could easily have dropped overboard and swum ashore, but by so doing he would have lost track of the rascals he had determined to bring to justice.

After leaving the locker Griswold and Broxton made an examination of the tug from end to end.

Several times they came close to where Leo was lying, and he fairly held his breath until they passed on.

At last the two rascals gave up the hunt in disgust.

"He has slipped us," said Broxton. "Better return that coach and move on."

This was done and soon the steam tug was ten miles away.

A landing was made that night at another place, and the two evil-minded men put up at the leading hotel.

Leo had followed them ashore and now he felt he had them just where he wanted them.

He hurried to the nearest telegraph office and sent a message to Carl to come on at once.

This done, he called on the chief of police, and a long talk followed.

Without delay the party, accompanied by two policemen, hurried to the hotel at which the rascals were stopping. They ascended the stairs and Leo knocked on the proper door.

"What's wanted?" came from Hank Griswold.

"There's a fire next door," said Leo in an assumed voice. "Please dress and leave the hotel as soon as possible."

"A fire!" came from Broxton, as he leaped out of bed.

In three minutes the two men had their clothes on and then they threw open the door.

"Who—what—Leo Dunbar!"

The men were dumfounded at the sight of the young gymnast, Carl and the police.

"The game is up," cried Leo. "Officers, arrest them."

"You rat!" cried Griswold.

He struck Leo in the face and then tried to dash past the youth.

He was successful, and reached the stairs before the policemen could stop him.

Like a flash Leo recovered and made after the man.

As he reached the top of the stairs Griswold struck the bottom steps.

Whizz! Leo took a flying leap and landed on the rascal's shoulders.

Down went the fellow in a heap. He gave a groan and then a yell of pain.

"You have broken my leg!" he screamed. "Oh, my ribs are all caved in!"

He spoke the truth in one particular—his left leg was broken and he was unable to make further resistance.

In the meantime Carl and the policeman had captured Broxton and handcuffed him.

A little later, before the guests in the hotel could ascertain the cause of the disturbance, the two prisoners were taken to jail.

Then Barton Reeve appeared on the scene.

"I am satisfied Griswold was hired to attack me," said Leo.

"Can't you get him to confess?"

"He pretends it is all a mistake."

"Let us both talk to him."

"Oh, wait; I wonder if the police searched him," went on the young gymnast suddenly.

"We can soon find out," rejoined Barton Reeve.

They questioned the captain in charge. Yes, Griswold had been searched, and his stuff, quite a heap, lay in a lump on a near-by desk.

There was some money, a knife, several keys and a notebook. Leo began to search through the notebook. He uttered a wild cry.

"Look here!" he ejaculated.

He had found an entry concerning the money Griswold was to get from Nathan Dobb for his dastardly work.

"Come with me," he went on, and led the way to Hank Griswold's cell.

At first they could not make the rascal talk at all.

But after awhile Griswold began to think he was in a terrible dilemma.

"Look here, supposing I confess," he said, "will you be easy on me?"

"Perhaps I will," replied Leo. "One thing is certain, I won't be easy if you don't confess."

"I was coaxed into this job," growled the villain.

"And who coaxed you to do it?" asked Leo quickly.

"Nathan Dobb, the squire at Hopsville."

"Why does he want to get Leo out of the way?" questioned Barton Reeve.

"So as he can keep the thousands coming to the boy," was Hank Griswold's reply, which filled Leo with astonishment and pleasure.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.—GOOD-BY TO THE CIRCUS BOY.

Having said so much, Hank Griswold made a complete confession, only holding back the fact that he and Nathan Dobb had come together through his trying to rob the squire's house.

The confession was taken down in writing, and then Griswold signed it in the presence of several outside witnesses.

By this time it was late in the evening, but Leo was too excited to sleep.

"Can't we take the first train east?" he asked of Barton Reeve. "I am anxious to let Squire Dobb know what I think of him."

"I will see Lambert and see if we can get off," replied the menagerie manager.

They sought out the general manager, and, after putting the whole case to him, got permission to leave the "Greatest Show on Earth" for three days.

There was a midnight train eastward, and this they boarded.

Barton Reeve had secured sleeping accommodations, but Leo was too excited to rest.

The following noon found them in Hopsville.

From the railroad station they walked to Nathan Dobb's house.

"Hullo! there is Daniel Hawkins' wagon standing in front," cried Leo. "He must be calling on the squire."

The servant girl ushered them in. As they sat in the hall waiting for Nathan Dobb they heard a loud dispute in the office of the justice.

Hawkins and Nathan Dobb were having a quarrel about some money the latter was to pay the former for releasing Leo.

In the midst of the discussion Leo walked in, followed by Barton Reeve.

Both Squire Dobb and old Hawkins were much astonished at the unexpected appearance.

"By gum, Leo!" cried Daniel Hawkins. "You good-fer-nothin', where did you come from?"

Nathan Dobb turned slightly pale.

"Why—er—I didn't look to see you so soon, Leo," he stammered.

"I know it; in fact, you didn't look to see me over again," retorted the young gymnast bitterly.

"What—er—that is, I don't understand you, Leo."

"You soon will understand me, Squire Dobb. I have come back to show you up as a villain."

"By gum!" It was all Daniel Hawkins could say. It took away his breath to hear a boy talk like that to the principal man in Hopsville.

"You young rascal!" began Nathan Dobb, growing red in the face.

"Hold on there!" put in Barton Reeve.

"Who are you?"

"You know well enough. I am here to help Leo obtain his rights."

"What rights?"

"To all the money you are trying to rob him of."

"Me?"

"Exactly."

"I haven't a cent belonging to him."

"We know better."

"Hank Griswold has been caught and has made a confession," put in Leo. "So your game is up, Nathan Dobb. I always thought there was something wrong about your doings concerning my parents' estate, and now I know it."

Nathan Dobb had risen to his feet. The shot from Leo told, and he sank back in his chair.

"Griswold under arrest!" he gasped.

"Yes, and you will be soon, too," added Barton Reeve.

"By gum!" came faintly from Daniel Hawkins.

"I—I—it is all a mistake," stammered Nathan Dobb. "I—er—never intended to defraud Leo out of a cent."

"I will never believe that," replied our hero warmly.

"Get an officer," said Barton Reeve quietly.

"No! no! don't arrest me! For the sake of my family, have mercy!" groaned Nathan Dobb, breaking down utterly.

"Will you promise to restore every cent due Leo?"

"Yes! yes! He shall have it all!"

"I only want what is due me," said Leo.

"You shall have every cent—I swear it."

After this Nathan Dobb was easy to handle. He told the whole story of the estate and how the money was invested.

All the necessary papers were turned over to Barton Reeve to be put into the hands of the court.

"A good day's work," said Reeve when he and Leo left the squire's house. "You are now free and

rich.”

“I hardly know myself,” replied Leo, and he told the plain truth.

It was not long after this that Leo came into possession of property which, later on, when times became better, proved to be worth nearly fifteen thousand dollars.

Barton Reeve was appointed his guardian until he should become of age. The great friendship between the man and the boy, so strangely begun, was never broken.

A few weeks after the exposure, and after Daniel Hawkins had carried the news far and wide, Nathan Dobb sold out his household effects and went West. Whatever became of him is not known.

Several years have passed.

On his stony farm Daniel Hawkins worries out a miserable existence. His wife is more of a tartar than ever, and together they make one of the most wretched couples living in the Hopsville district.

Mart Keene is still with the “Greatest Show on Earth” and is earning a good salary. He has called once or twice upon the Hawkinses, but he has nothing in common with the mean farmer and his wife.

Carl Ross is likewise still on the road and is getting a large salary. He has married pretty Natalie Sparks and both are well and happy.

Leo has given up the circus profession and is now at college. He is a diligent scholar and expects to become a doctor. He has a score of friends who wish him well and who predict for him a brilliant future. But no matter how successful he may be in years to come it is not likely that he will forget the stirring times when he was simply Leo the Circus Boy.

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