

The Circus Boys On the Mississippi Or Afloat with the Big Show on the Big River

Edgar B. P. Darlington

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The Circus Boys On the Mississippi
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by Edgar B. P. Darlington

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The Circus Boys On the Mississippi
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Afloat with the Big Show on the Big River

By EDGAR B. P. DARLINGTON

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The Circus Boys on the Mississippi

CHAPTER I

MAKING A LIVELY START

"Have you had any trouble with Diaz, Teddy?"

"Who's he?"

"The new Spanish clown."

"Oh!"

Teddy Tucker's face grew serious.

"What about him, Phil?"

"That is what I am asking you. Have you had any misunderstanding--angry words or anything of the sort with him?" persisted Phil Forrest, with a keen, inquiring glance into the face of his companion.

"Well, maybe," admitted the Circus Boy, with evident reluctance. "What made you think I had?"

"From the way he looked at you when you were standing in the paddock this afternoon, waiting for your cue to go on."

"Huh! How did he look at me?"

"As if he had a grudge against you. There was an expression in his eyes that said more plainly than words, 'I'll get even with you yet, young man, you see if I do not.'"

"Wonderful!" breathed Teddy.

"What do you mean?"

"You must be a mind reader, Phil Forrest," grumbled Teddy, digging his heel into the soft turf of the circus lot. "Can you read my mind? If you can, what am I thinking about now?"

"You are thinking," answered Phil slowly, "that you will make me forget the question I asked you just now. You are thinking you would rather not answer my question."

Teddy opened his eyes a little wider.

"You ought to go into the business."

"What business?"

"Reading people's minds, at so much per read."

"Thank you."

"I wish you'd read the mind of that donkey of mine, and find out what he's got up his sleeve, or rather his hoofs, for me this evening."

"Do you know of what else you are thinking?"

"Of course I do. Think I don't know what I am thinking about? Well! What am I thinking about?"

"At the present moment you are thinking that you will do to Diaz what he hopes to do to you some of these days--get even with him for some fancied wrong. Am I right?"

"I'll hand him a good stiff punch, one of these fine spring mornings, that's what I'll do," growled Tucker, his face flushing angrily.

"Teddy Tucker, listen to me!"

"I'm listening."

"You will do nothing of the sort."

"I won't?"

"No."

"You just wait and see."

"Since we started out on our fourth season with the Sparling Combined Shows this spring, you have behaved yourself remarkably well. I know it must have pained you to do so. I give you full credit, but don't spoil it all now, please."

"Spoil it?"

"Yes. You must remember that this is now a Big show--larger this season than ever before, and you must not expect Mr. Sparling to excuse your shortcomings as he did in the old days."

"I'm not afraid of Boss Sparling."

"You have no occasion to be, as long as you do your duty and attend to business. We owe him a heavy debt of gratitude, both of us. You know that, don't you, Teddy?"

"I--I guess so."

"What is the trouble between you and Diaz?" persisted Phil Forrest, returning to his original inquiry.

"Well," drawled Teddy, "you know their act?"

"Yes."

"Throwing those peaked hats clear across the arena and catching the hats on their heads, just like a couple of monkeys."

"I didn't know monkeys ever did that," smiled Phil.

"Well, maybe they don't. The trained seals do, anyhow."

Phil nodded.

"They--the Spaniards--were doing that the other day when I was going out after my clown act. I had picked up the ringmaster's whip, and as one of the hats went sailing over my head I just took a shot at it."

"Took a shot at it?"

"Yes. I fired at it on the wing, as it were. Don't you understand?" demanded the lad somewhat impatiently.

Phil shook his head.

"I hit it a crack with the ringmaster's whip and I hit the mark the first shot. Down came the hat and it caught me on the nose."

"Then what did you do?"

"Knocked it on the ground, then kicked it out of the ring," grinned Teddy.

"Of course you spoiled their act," commented Phil.

"I--I guess I did."

"That was an ungentlemanly thing to do, to say the least. It is lucky for you that Mr. Sparling did not happen to see you. Do you know what would have happened to you if he had?"

"He would have fined me, I suppose."

"No. You would have closed right there. He would have had you sent back home by the first train if he had seen you do a thing like that."

"I don't care. I can get a job with the Yankee Robinson show any time, now."

"Not if you were to be discharged from this outfit for bad conduct. I don't wonder Diaz is angry. Did he say anything to you at the time?"

Teddy nodded.

"What did he say?"

"I didn't understand all he said. Some of it was in Spanish, but what I did understand was enough," grinned the boy.

"Strong language, eh?"

"Phil, he can beat the boss canvasman in that line."

"I am surprised, Teddy Tucker."

"So was I."

"I don't mean that. I am surprised that you should so far forget yourself as to do such a thing. I don't blame Diaz for being angry, and I warn you that you had better look out for him."

Some of those foreigners have very violent tempers."

"Well, he didn't tell the boss, at any rate."

"No. Perhaps in the long run it might have been better for you if he had. Diaz is awaiting his opportunity to get even with you in his own way. Look out for him, Teddy."

"He had better look out for me."

"Don't irritate him. Were I in your place I should go to the clown and apologize. Tell him it was a thoughtless act on your part and that you are sorry you did it--"

"I won't."

"As you please, but that is what I would do."

"You--you would do that?"

"I certainly would."

"And let him give you the laugh?"

"That would make no difference to me. I should be doing what is right, and that would be satisfaction enough, no matter what he said or did after that."

Teddy reflected for a moment.

"Well, maybe that would be a good idea. And if he won't accept my apology, what then--shall I hand him a--"

"Smile and leave him. You will have done the best you could to make amends."

"All right, I'll apologize," nodded the Circus Boy. "I'll shed a tear or two to show him how sorry I am. Want to see me do it?"

"I should say not. You will do it better provided I am not looking on, but for goodness' sake don't make a mess of the whole business. It would be too bad to make an enemy of one of your associates so early in the season. Think how uncomfortable it would be for you all through the summer. He has not been with us long enough to become used to your practical jokes. Perhaps after he gets better acquainted with you, he may not mind your peculiar ways so much," added Phil, with a short laugh. "Now run along and be good."

Teddy turned away and slipped through the paddock opening, in front of which the lads had been standing just outside the tent, leaving Phil looking after him with a half smile on his face.

The Circus Boys were again on the road with the Great Sparling Combined Shows. This was their fourth season out, and the readers will remember them as the same lads who in "THE CIRCUS BOYS ON THE FLYING RINGS," had made their humble start in the circus world. During that first season both lads had distinguished themselves--Phil for his bravery and cool

headedness, Teddy for getting himself into trouble under all circumstances and conditions. They had quickly risen, however, to the grade of real circus performers, the owner of the show recognizing in each, the making of a fine performer.

In "THE CIRCUS BOYS ACROSS THE CONTINENT," it will be recalled how Phil and his companion won new laurels in the sawdust arena, and how the former ran down and captured a bad man who had been a thorn in the side of the circus itself for many weeks through his efforts to avenge a fancied wrong. By this time the boys had become full-fledged circus performers, each playing an important part in the performance.

It will be recalled, too, how Phil and Teddy in "THE CIRCUS BOYS IN DIXIE LAND," advanced rapidly in their calling; how Phil was captured by a rival show, held prisoner on the owner's private car, and later was obliged to become a performer in the ring of the rival show. His escape, his long tramp to rejoin his own show, followed by the battle of the elephants--will be well remembered by all the readers of the previous volumes in this series.

During the winter just passed, the lads had been attending the high school at Edmeston, where they made their home, working hard after school hours to keep themselves in good physical condition for the next season's work.

Spring came. The lads passed their final examinations, and, with their diplomas in their pockets, set out one bright May morning to join the show which, by this time, had come to be looked upon by them as a real home.

They had been on the road less than two weeks now, and were looking forward with keen anticipation to their summer under the billowing canvas of the Great Sparling Shows.

"I think I _will_ take a peep to see how Teddy is getting along with his apology," decided Phil, turning and entering the paddock. Then he stepped quietly into the dressing tent.

He saw Teddy approach the clown, Diaz, who sat on his trunk making up his face before a hand mirror.

Teddy halted a few feet from the clown, waiting until the latter should have observed him. The clown glanced up, glowered, and slowly placed the mirror on the trunk beside him. He seemed astonished that the boy should have the courage to face him.

Then Teddy, solemn-faced, made his apology. To Phil Forrest's listening ears it was the most amazing apology he ever had listened to.

"I'm sorry I made a monkey of you," said Teddy.

"What!" fairly exploded the clown.

"I'm sorry I made a monkey of you," repeated the Circus Boy in a slightly louder tone. "Maybe I wouldn't have done so if I had had time to think about it."

"You make apology to me--to me?" questioned Diaz, tapping his own chest significantly.

"Yes; to whom did you think I was making an apology--to the hyena out under the menagerie top, eh?"

"Bah!"

"I am sorry I made a fool of you, Mr. Diaz."

"Me--fool?"

"Yes, I guess you are about right. You certainly look the part, and--"

Diaz sprang up with a growl of rage, Tucker giving ground a little as he observed the anger in the painted face before him. Before the lad could raise his hands to protect himself Diaz had grasped Teddy and hurled him across the dressing tent, where he landed in a pail of water.

He was up in a twinkling. His face was flushed and his hands were clenched.

No sooner had he gotten to his feet than he observed that the clown had started for him again. Teddy squared off, prepared for fight. At that moment, however, there came an interruption that turned the attention of the enraged clown in another direction.

Phil Forrest quickly stepped between them facing Diaz.

"What are you going to do?" demanded the Circus Boy in a quiet voice.

"Do?"

"Yes."

"I punish the monkey-face--"

"You will, eh?" howled Teddy, starting forward.

Phil thrust his companion aside.

"Go away. I will see if I can explain to him," cautioned Phil, turning to the clown again, just as the latter was making a rush at Teddy.

"One moment, Mr. Diaz. My friend Teddy is not very diplomatic, but he means well. He apologized to you for what he had done, did he not?"

"Yes," growled the clown.

"Then why not call it square and--"

"I punish him. I fix him!" roared Diaz, making a leap for Teddy,

who had managed to edge up nearer to them.

"You will do nothing of the sort," answered Phil Forrest firmly, again stepping between them.

An angry light glowed in the eyes of the clown. For an instant he glared into Phil's steady gray eyes, then all of a sudden launched a vicious blow at the boy.

The blow failed to reach the mark. Phil dodged and stepped back a couple of feet.

Another, as swift as the first was sent straight for his head. This blow the Circus Boy skillfully parried, but made no effort to return.

"Mr. Diaz! Mr. Diaz!" warned Phil. "You forget yourself. Please don't do anything you will be sorry for afterwards."

"I fix you!" snarled the clown.

"I don't want to hit you, sir, but you may force me to do so."

Phil had no time to warn the fellow further, for the clown began to rain blows upon him, though with no great exhibition of boxing skill. Phil could have landed effectively anywhere on the clown's body had he chosen to do so.

Instead, the boy slowly gave ground, defending himself cleverly. Not one single blow from the powerful fist of Diaz reached him, Phil exhibiting the wonderful self-control that was characteristic of him. He even found opportunity to warn Teddy to get out of the tent until the tempest had blown over.

Teddy, however, stood with hands thrust in his trousers pockets, shoulders hunched forward, glaring at Diaz.

"Don't you get in this now," breathed Phil. "Keep away! Keep away! I'll--"

At that moment Phil stumbled over a trunk, landing on his head and shoulders. Quick as he was he found himself unable to turn over and roll away soon enough to get beyond reach of the angry clown.

Diaz hurled himself upon the slender, though athletic figure of the Circus Boy, almost knocking the breath out of Phil.

No sooner had he done so than something else happened. A body launched itself through the air. The body belonged to Tucker. Teddy landed with great force on the head and shoulders of the enraged clown, flattening the latter down upon Phil with crushing weight, and nearly knocking Forrest senseless.

CHAPTER II

JANUARY LENDS A FOOT

"Stop it!" roared a voice. "We don't allow 'roughhouse' in the dressing tent."

"Yes," added another; "go out on the lot if you want to settle your differences."

Mr. Miaco, the head clown, who had been a true friend to the boys from the beginning of their circus career, had discovered what was going on about the time Teddy decided to mix in in the disagreement. Mr. Miaco sprang up and ran to the struggling heap. Grasping Teddy firmly by the shoulder he tossed the lad aside.

"Now, you stay out of this, unless you want a thrashing from me," the head clown warned.

The next to feel the grip of his powerful hand was the clown, Diaz, and when Mr. Miaco discovered that the clown had Phil Forrest down, he could scarcely restrain himself from severely punishing the fellow. However, Miaco satisfied himself with hauling Diaz from his victim with little ceremony. Then he jerked the angry clown to his feet.

"Well, sir, what have you to say for yourself?" demanded Miaco, gazing at the other sternly.

"This no business of yours," growled Diaz.

"That remains to be seen. I'll decide whether it is any of my affair or not. Phil, what does this mean?"

"Just a little matter between ourselves. Thank you for helping me out."

"Did he attack you, Phil?"

"He did, but he no doubt thought he had sufficient provocation. Perhaps we should not be too hard on Mr. Diaz."

"Then the best thing to do is to tell Mr. Sparling. I--"

"Please don't do anything of the sort," begged Phil. "In the first place, Diaz's anger was directed against Teddy, and I had to mix myself in their quarrel. Teddy did something to him a few weeks ago that made the clown very angry, and I don't blame Diaz."

"Was there any excuse for his pitching into you in this manner?"

"Well," laughed Phil, "perhaps the situation did not demand exactly that sort of treatment."

"How did you come to let him get you so easily?"

"I fell over something."

"Oh, that's it?"

"Yes. I wasn't trying to hit him. I could have done so easily, but I felt that I was in the wrong."

"Humph!" grunted the head clown. Then he turned to Diaz.

"See here, you fellow!"

"What you want?" demanded Diaz in a surly tone.

"I want to advise you to let those boys alone in the future. They have been with this show a long time, and they are highly thought of by Mr. Sparling. Were he to hear what you have done tonight I rather think you would pack your trunk and quit right here. I shall not tell him. Next time I see you doing any such thing you will have to answer to me. I'm the head clown here, and I won't stand for one of my men pitching on a boy."

Teddy was chuckling to himself over the severe rebuke that Miaco was administering to his clown.

"Do you boys intend going on tonight?" Miaco demanded suddenly, turning on Teddy.

"Certainly," answered Phil.

"Then I should advise you to be getting into your makeups."

"Why, what time is it?"

"A quarter to eight."

"Whew! Come on, Teddy."

A few moments more and peace had been restored in the dressing tent, though Diaz was muttering to himself as he laid the powder over his face, preparatory to his first entry into the ring.

"I am afraid we have not heard the last of Diaz, Teddy," confided Phil to his companion. "You see what your moment of thoughtlessness has brought upon us, don't you?"

"You didn't have to mix in the row. I could have handled him."

"I am forced to admit that you are right. I sought to avoid trouble and I was the direct cause of a lot of it. There goes the first call. Hurry up!"

The Circus Boys had, indeed, made an enemy. It was noticed, however, that Manuel, the assistant of Diaz, had taken no part in the row. The young man had calmly proceeded with his making up without appearing to take the slightest interest in the affair. Whether or not his apparent indifference was merely assumed was not known.

The two boys were not performing on the flying rings this season. They had retained all their other acts, however, though the star act was the flying trapeze, in which Phil Forrest was now one of the leading performers.

Teddy rode his donkey, January, took part in the ground tumbling, acted as shadow again for the clown Shivers, besides making himself generally useful in some of the other acts.

As for Phil's bareback riding, he occupied the center ring in this act, as he had done the season before. He had come to be perhaps the most useful man with the Sparling show.

"I advise you to look out for that fellow. He is a dangerous customer," warned Miaco under his breath, as Phil sat down on his horse during a rest in the performance.

The Circus Boy nodded his understanding, but appeared little disturbed at Miaco's warning. Like the seasoned circus man that he was, he had learned to take things as they came, making the best of every situation when he came face to face with it.

Diaz and his assistant were entering the ring as Phil left it. They began throwing their hats, winning great applause, for their act was a clever one of its kind. At about the same time, Teddy Tucker and January came on, the Circus Boy howling, January braying and bucking, beating the air with his heels, for he had been taught some entirely new tricks during the winter.

The ringmaster held up his hand for silence.

"Ladies and gentlemen, let me introduce to you, January. As January is the first month of the year, so is this January first in the donkey world. You will observe how docile and kind he appears. Yet, ladies and gentlemen, the management of this show will give a hundred dollars to any person who can stick on his back for a full minute--only sixty seconds, ladies and gentlemen. Do you know of any easier or faster way to make money? Six thousand dollars an hour if you stay that long. Who will be the first to earn the money?"

It was the first time the announcement had been made from the ring. Mr. Sparling had given his consent, even though he had not seen the act. He had, however, observed Teddy engaged in a tussle with the beast that afternoon, and could readily understand that what Teddy told him about January's contrariness was not overdrawn.

A colored man came down from the audience, and, throwing off his coat, announced his intention of riding the mule.

January appeared to have no objection, permitting the colored man to get on his back without offering the least opposition. To Teddy, who stood in front of the animal, grinning, there was a glint in the eye of the mule that spelled trouble for the colored man.

Suddenly January reared, then as quickly tipped the other way until it appeared to the spectators as if he were standing on his head.

The rider suddenly landed on his back in the sawdust.

"The gentleman loses," announced the ringmaster. "Is there any other gentleman in the audience who thinks he can earn one hundred dollars a minute--six thousand dollars an hour?"

No one appeared to be anxious to make the attempt.

Manuel, in the meantime, had drawn closer, paying strict attention to the words of the ringmaster.

"You give money for riding the burro?" questioned the little Spaniard.

"Burro? This is no Mexican burro, this is a donkey!" sniffed Teddy contemptuously.

The ringmaster instantly scented an opportunity to have some fun, and at the same time make the audience laugh. He glanced about to see if Mr. Sparling were under the big top, and not seeing him, instantly decided to take a long chance.

"Do you think you can ride January, sir?"

"I ride burro."

"Very well, it is your privilege to do so if you can. Ladies and gentlemen, this clown has never before attempted this feat. He thinks he can ride the donkey. If he succeeds he will receive the reward offered by the management of the show, just the same as you would have done had you performed the feat."

Teddy stroked January's nose, then leaning over, the Circus Boy whispered in the animal's ear.

"January," he said, "you've got a solemn duty to perform. If you shirk it you are no longer a friend of mine, and you get no more candy--understand? No more candy."

January curled his upper lip ever so little and brayed dismally.

"That's right; I knew you would agree to the sentiment."

"Get away from his head, Master Teddy. The Spanish clown is about to distinguish himself," announced the ringmaster.

Manuel was an agile little fellow. While the announcement was being made he had been taking mental measurement of the beast and deciding upon his course of action.

Ere Teddy had stepped back the Spaniard took a running start, and, with a leap, landed fairly on the back of the donkey.

The latter, taken by surprise, cleared the ground with all four feet and bucked, but the rider had flung his arms about the donkey's neck, clinging with both feet to the beast's body, grimly determined to win that hundred dollars or die in the attempt.

"Go it, January," encouraged Teddy. "Give it to him! Soak him hard!"

January stood on his hind feet, then on his head, as it were, but still the Spaniard clung doggedly.

By this time the donkey had begun to get angry. He had been taken an unfair advantage of and he did not like it. Suddenly he launched into a perfect volley of kicks, each kick giving the rider such a violent jolt that he was rapidly losing his hold.

"Keep it up! Keep it up! You've got him!" exulted the Circus Boy.

The audience was howling with delight.

"There he goes!" shrieked Teddy.

Manuel, now as helpless as a ship without a rudder, was being buffeted over the back of the plunging animal.

Manuel was yelling in his native language, but if anyone understood what he was saying, that one gave no heed. Teddy, on the other hand, was urging January with taunt and prod of the ringmaster's whip.

Suddenly the Spanish clown was bounced over the donkey's rump, landing on the animal's hocks. It was January's moment--the moment he had been cunningly waiting and planning for. The donkey's hoofs shot up into the air with the clown on them. The hoofs were quickly drawn back, but the Spanish clown continued right on, sailing through the air like a great gaudy projectile.

The audience yelled its approval.

Manuel landed with a crash in the midst of the lower grandstand seats. A second later there was a mix-up that required the united services of a dozen ring attendants to straighten out.

In the meantime, Teddy Tucker was rolling on the ground near the center pole, howling with delight, while January, with lowered head, was trotting innocently toward the paddock.

The ringmaster's whistle trilled for the next act, and the show went on with its characteristic dash and sprightliness.

However, Teddy Tucker's plan to get one of the Spanish hat-throwing clowns into trouble had been an entire success. He had succeeded, also, in making another bitter enemy for the Circus Boys.

CHAPTER III

A DAY OF MEMORIES

Mr. Sparling, the owner of the show, had been a witness of the latter part of Teddy's act. The showman was standing

over near the entrance to the menagerie tent when Manuel took his unexpected flight, and the proprietor sat down on the grass, laughing until the tears started from his eyes.

The act had been a breach of discipline, so Mr. Sparling prudently kept himself out of sight until the show had progressed further.

Later in the evening he chanced to pass Teddy out in the paddock.

"Well, my lad, how is January working tonight?" he asked, with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Never better, sir, thank you."

"I presume he obeys your commands perfectly, eh?"

"Does everything I tell him to, Mr. Sparling. I can do anything with that donkey. Why, I could wink at him and make him kick your head off. I--"

"I'll take your word for it, young man--I'll take your word for it. Let me warn you to be careful that you do not tell him to do anything that will interfere with the programme. We must have our acts clean cut, and embodying nothing that has not been arranged for in advance. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," answered Teddy, giving the owner a keen, inquiring glance.

"I'll bet he saw that," mused the lad. "He's letting me off easy because he had to laugh, just the same as the rest of the people did."

"What did Mr. Sparling have to say?" questioned Phil, who had emerged from the dressing tent just as Teddy was walking away from the showman.

Teddy told him.

"You got off pretty easy, I must say. It is a wonder he did not discipline you for that."

"Do you think he saw Manuel fly?"

"He did, or else someone told him. Be careful, Teddy! You are laying up trouble for all of us," warned Phil.

"I got even with Mr. Hat Thrower, just the same," grinned Tucker.

Teddy was the happiest boy in the show that night, and he went to his sleeping quarters chuckling all the way.

The show, this season, had opened in Chicago, and was now working its way across the state of Illinois. The route had caused considerable comment among the show people. They did not understand what the plans of the owner might be.

Ordinarily, give a showman the first week or two of the show's

route and he will tell you just what parts of the country the show will visit during that particular season. The performers were unable to do so in this instance. Phil Forrest was as much perplexed as the others, but he made no mention of this to Mr. Sparling.

"He has some surprise up his sleeve, I am sure," decided Phil shrewdly.

The next morning Phil asked Mr. Miaco, the head clown, if he knew where they were going.

"I do not," answered the clown. "This route has kept me guessing. Boss Sparling may be headed for Australia for all I know. He's just as likely to go there as anywhere else. Has the Spaniard bothered you since that mix-up?"

"No."

"Well, keep away from him. That is my advice."

"I shall not bother him. You may depend upon that, Mr. Miaco. I can't say as much for Teddy."

"Teddy put up that job with January last night, didn't he?"

"He hasn't said so."

"Not necessary. I saw the whole thing. Lucky for Teddy that Mr. Sparling did not happen to be about."

"I am not so sure that he was not."

"What?"

Phil explained what Mr. Sparling had said to Teddy out in the paddock.

"Yes, he saw it all right, but I guess he doesn't know about the trouble in the dressing tent yesterday."

"No, I think not. I hope he does not hear of it, either. I do not wish Mr. Sparling to think that I am a troublemaker, or that I was mixed up in an unseemly row in the dressing tent. I should feel very much humiliated were I to be called to account for a thing like that. What are all those flags flying for in town today?"

"Don't you know?"

"No, I don't."

"You don't know what day this is?"

"No, sir."

"This is Decoration Day."

"Oh, that's so."

"We lose all track of days in the show business. I'll wager you do not even know what town we are performing in today," laughed the clown.

"I shall have to confess that I do not."

"I thought so. Of course you know we are in the state of Illinois?"

"Yes, I think I have heard something to that effect," grinned Phil.

By the time the boys had eaten their breakfast, and had strolled over toward the tents, they found the dressing tents in place and the performers busily engaged in unpacking their belongings, hanging their costumes on lines stretched across the dressing tent, and making such repairs in the costumes as were found to be necessary, for a showman must be handy with the needle as well as with bar and trapeze.

Phil's trunk was next to that of Diaz. The Circus Boy did not mind this at all, but the clown appeared to feel a continual resentment at the fact.

"Good morning, Mr. Diaz," greeted the lad, with a sunny smile. "Shall we shake hands and be friends?"

Diaz glared at him, but made no reply. He did not even appear to have observed the hand that was extended toward him.

"I am sorry you feel that way about it, sir. If I was hasty I beg you will forgive me," urged Phil.

Diaz turned his back on him.

"Very well, sir," said the Circus Boy, a little proudly and with slightly heightened color, "I shall not trouble you again."

Phil turned away and began unpacking his trunk, giving no further heed to the sullen clown.

"The Honorable Mr. Diaz says 'nix,'" laughed Teddy, who had been an amused witness to the one-sided conversation, the word "nix" being the circus man's comprehensive way of saying, "I refuse."

"Don't stir him up, Teddy," warned Phil.

"Say, what's going on over in the women's dressing tent?"

"I did not know that anything out of the ordinary was happening there," said Phil. "Why?"

"I see a lot of folks going in and out."

"Nothing unusual about that, I guess."

"Yes, there is."

"What makes you think so?"

" 'Cause they're carrying flowers in and making a great fuss. I'm going over to find out. Come along?"

"No, thank you. You had better keep out. You know you are not supposed to go in the other dressing tent."

Teddy was not disturbed by the warning. He turned and started for the women's dressing tent, where he saw several of the other performers passing through the entrance. Phil, who had stepped to the door of his own dressing tent, observed the same thing.

"I guess there must be something going on over there. I shall have to find out what it means," he thought.

"May I come in, Mrs. Waite?" called Phil from the entrance.

"Sure. Come in Phil," smiled the wardrobe woman.

Teddy had not wasted the breath to ask permission to enter, but the moment he stepped inside something caught his eyes, causing them to open a little wider.

Two trunks had been drawn up in the center; over them was thrown an American flag. At one end a flag on a standard had been planted, and on the trunks, flowers and wreaths had been placed.

"What's that thing?" asked Teddy.

"That is my grave, Master Teddy," answered Mrs. Waite in a low tone.

"Your grave?"

"Yes."

"Pshaw! That's a funny kind of grave. What's buried there--your pet poodle?"

"Teddy! Teddy!" whispered Phil reprovingly.

"Go 'way. This is some kind of a joke," growled Teddy.

"It is not a joke, though I do not understand the meaning of it just yet. You say this is your grave, Mrs. Waite?" asked Phil.

"Yes, Phil. You know my husband was a soldier?"

"No, I did not know that, Mrs. Waite. Will you tell me all about it?"

Phil was deeply interested now.

"My husband was killed at the battle of Gettysburg. He lies in Woodlawn Cemetery. I am never at home on Decoration Day. I am always on the road with the circus, so I cannot decorate the real grave."

"I understand," breathed the Circus Boy.

"Being unable to decorate my husband's real grave, I carry my grave with me. Each Memorial Day morning I prepare my grave here in the dressing tent, and decorate it as you see here, and all my friends of the circus are very good and thoughtful on that occasion."

"How long have you been with the show--how many years have you been decorating this little property grave, Mrs. Waite?" asked Phil.

"Thirty years, Phil."

"Is it possible?"

"Yes, and it seems no more than two."

"Do you intend remaining with the show much longer--aren't you ever going to retire?"

"Yes. I am going to retire. I am getting old. I have laid up enough money to keep me for the rest of my life, and I am going to take a rest after two years more with this outfit."

"I am afraid you will miss the show," smiled the lad.

"I know I shall. I shall miss the life, the color, and I shall miss my boys and my girls. I love them all very much."

One after another, the women of the circus had come in to the dressing tent, depositing their little floral remembrances on the property grave while Mrs. Waite was talking.

Teddy, as soon as he fully comprehended the meaning of the scene, had slipped out. In a little while he returned. He brought with him a bunch of daisies that he had gathered on the circus lot. These he had tied with a soiled pink ribbon that he had ripped from one of his ring costumes.

Phil saw the daisies, and, noting their significance, smiled approvingly.

"Teddy has a heart, after all," was his mental comment.

Teddy Tucker proceeded to the flag-draped grave, gently placed his offering upon it, then turned away.

As he did so, he was observed to brush a hand across his eyes as if something there were blurring his sight.

CHAPTER IV

THEIR CURIOSITY AROUSED

"Phil, I have an idea that you are wondering where we are bound

for?" said Mr. Sparling, with a merry twinkle in his eyes.

"I will confess that I have been somewhat curious," smiled the boy. "From the route I could not imagine where you were heading."

"You are not the only one who has been guessing. Our rivals are positively nervous over the movements of this show. They think we are going to jump into the Mississippi River, or something of the sort--"

"Or float on it," added Phil.

Mr. Sparling eyed him keenly.

They were in the owner's private tent, discussing the business of the show itself, as these two did every day of the season, for Mr. Sparling had come to place no little reliance on the judgment of his young Circus Boy.

"What made you say that, Phil?"

"I had no particular reason. Perhaps I thought I was saying something funny."

"Nothing very funny about that," answered the showman.

"I agree with you."

"I thought perhaps you might ask me where we were routed for this season."

"And I thought you would tell me when you wished me to know," answered the boy.

"It was not because I did not wish you to know our route, Phil. I rather thought I should like to give you a surprise."

"Yes, sir."

"We are going to surprise the show world at the same time, so you see you are not the only one who will be surprised."

"You arouse my curiosity, Mr. Sparling."

"Still you refuse to ask where we are going," replied the showman, laughing heartily. "I have made my arrangements with the utmost secrecy because I did not wish any of the opposition shows to get a line on my plans. Not one of them has done so thus far. Tomorrow they will know. Or at least by the day after tomorrow. I am not going to let you in on my little secret today either. Do you think you can possess your soul in patience until then?"

"I think there will be no trouble about that. If I have restrained my curiosity so far I surely can control it until tomorrow. We show at Milledgeville tomorrow, do we not?"

"That's what the route card says and I guess the route card is right."

"Small town, is it not?"

"Yes, one of the little river towns. Do you know much about the river?"

"Nothing except what I observed when we played the southern states last season. I should like to take a trip down the river, and hope I may have an opportunity to do so one of these days."

"You'll have the opportunity, all right."

"Sir?"

"I said you would have the opportunity."

"I hope so."

"Perhaps sooner than you think, too. How is your friend, Tucker, getting along?"

"Pretty well, thank you. I guess he is working better this season than he did last. His acts are much more finished, don't you think so?"

"Yes. I noticed that he nearly finished a clown with one of his acts the other night," answered Mr. Sparling dryly, whereat both laughed heartily. "Have you had any trouble, with any of the men?"

"Do you mean myself, personally?"

"Either or both of you?"

"Some slight disagreements. What trouble we have had has been due wholly to our own fault," answered Phil manfully.

"With whom?"

"I would rather not say anything about it, if you will permit me to remain silent."

"You are a queer boy, Phil."

"So I have been told before," answered the lad, laughing.

"And your friend Teddy is a confounded sight more so. I'm afraid he would have a hard time with most any other show in spite of the fact that he is an excellent performer."

"I have told him as much."

"Oh, you have?"

"Yes, sir."

"What does he say?"

"He doesn't take my advice very seriously, I am afraid. Teddy is all right at heart, however."

"I agree with you."

Phil then related to Mr. Sparling the incident of the dressing tent, when Teddy gathered the daisies to place on the "grave" in memory of Mrs. Waite's soldier dead, to all of which the showman listened with thoughtful face. Mr. Sparling rose, walked to the door of the tent, then returned and sat down.

"You never knew that I was a soldier, too, did you, Phil?"

"No, sir. Were you really?"

"Yes. I fought with the South. I was a drummer boy in a Georgia regiment," said the showman reminiscently. "Perhaps had I been older I might have done differently, but I loved my Sunny South and I love it now."

"So do I," added Phil Forrest fervently.

"But the war is over. It is the show business that concerns us most intimately at the present moment. I want to say that you are doing excellent work on the flying trapeze this season."

"Thank you. I am doing my best."

"You always do. Whatever you attempt you go at with all the force you possess, and that is no slight factor, either. I have been waiting to talk seriously with you for sometime. You have finished your studies, have you not?"

"Yes."

"What are your plans for the future?"

"I have no immediate plans beyond continuing in the show business. I am trying to lay up some money so I can go into business some of these days."

"What business?"

"Circus business, of course. It is the only business I know anything about, and I know very little about that, it seems to me."

"Let me tell you something, Phil. Nine-tenths of the men who have been in it nearly all their lives know no more about the circus business than you do. Many of them not so much. You are a born showman. Take my word for it, you have a very brilliant career before you. You spoke, sometime ago, about wishing to go to college."

"I should like to go."

"Under the circumstances I would advise against it, though I am a thorough believer in the value of an education. You have a good

start now. Were you to go to college you would spend four years there and when you finished, you would find that the show world had been moving right along just the same. You would be out of it, so to speak. You would have been standing still so far as the circus was concerned, for four full years. Think it over and some of these days we will have another talk."

"What would you advise, Mr. Sparling?"

"I don't advise. I am simply pointing out the facts for you to consider, that's all."

"I thank you, Mr. Sparling. I already owe you a debt of gratitude. I shall never forget all you have done for Teddy and myself, and I am sure Teddy also appreciates it."

"You owe me nothing."

"Oh, yes, I do! I shall never be able wholly to pay the debt, either."

"We will drop that side of the case, my boy. You will want to pack all your things for moving tonight."

"You mean my dressing-room trunk?"

"I mean all your belongings."

Phil looked his surprise.

"I have special reference to your stuff in the sleeper."

"May I ask why, Mr. Sparling."

"Because tonight will be the last night you will spend on the sleeping car for sometime, in all probability."

"I don't understand. Am I to leave the show?"

"Leave the show?"

"Yes, sir."

"I should say not. You leave the show? I would rather lose any ten men in it than to have you go away. I trust you never will leave it for any length of time--at least not while I am in the business. No, you are going on a little trip--the show is going on a little trip. That is the surprise I have in store for you. You will know tomorrow morning. Not another word now, Phil Forrest. Run along and get ready for the performance."

The Circus Boy hurried over to the dressing tent, full of curiosity and anticipation of what awaited him on the morrow. Strange to say, Phil had not the least idea what the plan of the owner of the show might be.

The surprise was to be a complete one.

CHAPTER V

THE CIRCUS BOYS' SURPRISE

"Come, Phil and Teddy. I want you to take a little walk with me," called Mr. Sparling early next morning after they had finished their breakfast.

That morning orders had been given in each of the sleeping cars, for the performers to pack their belongings, ready to be moved from the cars.

The show people could not understand it, and gossip was rife among them as to the meaning of the unusual order.

Orders also had been given to the various heads of departments to prepare to desert the train, bag and baggage.

"Where are we going?" demanded Teddy suspiciously.

"For a walk. You need not go along, unless you wish to," added the showman.

"Of course I wish to go. Do you think I want to stay on the lot when anything is going on somewhere else, eh?"

"There would be plenty going on, if you remained. I am sure of that," replied Mr. Sparling, with a short laugh.

"Come along, boys."

Still wondering what it was all about, Phil and Teddy walked along with their employer. They passed on through the business street of the town, then turned off sharply, heading for the north. A few moments of this and they turned to the left again.

"Hello, there's the river," announced Teddy.

"Yes, that is the river."

"I wish I could take a boat ride."

"You shall have one tonight."

"Good!"

Phil glanced at Mr. Sparling inquiringly.

"Oh, look at that funny boat!" cried Teddy. "It's yellow. I've heard of a yellow dog, but I can't say that I ever heard of a yellow boat. And it has a paddle wheel on behind. Well, if that isn't the limit! Why, there are three of them. What are they, Mr. Sparling?"

Phil's eyes already were widening. He had caught sight of something that shed a flood of light on the mystery--the surprise that Mr. Sparling had in store for them. But he was not positive enough to commit himself.

A moment more, and he knew he was not wrong.

"Teddy, if you will read the words on the side of that boat nearest to us, you will understand, I think."

"T-h-e," spelled Teddy.

"The," finished Phil.

"S-p-a-r-l-i-n-g, Sparling. C-o-m-b-i-n-e-d Shows. Well, what do you think of _that?_"

"I hardly know what to think, yet," answered Phil Forrest.
"The Sparling Combined Shows. Do you mean to say--?"

"I haven't said a word," answered Mr. Sparling, with a merry twinkle in his eyes. "I am waiting for you to say something."

"I--I am afraid I am too much astonished to say much. Do you mean we are going to take to the river?"

"Exactly."

"With the show?"

"Yes."

"Hooray!"

"What's that?" demanded Teddy.

"Didn't you hear?"

"I heard, but I don't understand. What's it all about? What is it about those yellow boats over there?"

"The Sparling Circus is going down the Mississippi," Mr. Sparling informed him.

"On those things?"

"On those boats."

"Then I think I'll walk. You don't catch me riding on any boat that has to have a wheel on behind to help push it along. No, siree, not for mine!"

"But, Teddy, they are fine boats," said Phil.

"They are among the few typical Mississippi River steamers," broke in Mr. Sparling. "I got them far up the river last winter. When I first conceived the plan of sending my show down the river, on the river itself, I took a trip out here to look over the ground--"

"You mean the water," corrected Teddy innocently.

"A little of both, my boy. I found that no show since the early

days of the barnstorming outfits had ever attempted the feat. I learned a number of things that made me all the more anxious to try it. The next question was a boat. I heard of some of the old broad-beamed river craft that were out of commission up stream. I found them exactly suited to our requirements, and I rented them for the season. It cost quite a sum to have them fixed up, but you will find them just the thing for our work. What do you think of the idea?"

"Great!" breathed Phil. "It fairly takes my breath away."

"When--when do we move in?" asked Teddy Tucker wonderingly.

"We begin moving in this morning. I have given the orders to have the property removed from the trains and brought here, now--that is, all that will not be needed for today's performances. Tonight all hands will sleep on the boats. How will you like that, boys?"

"Fine!" answered Phil, with glowing eyes.

"I'll tell you after I try it," added Teddy prudently.

Across the sides of each boat, in big black letters, were the words, "The Sparling Combined Shows." Below this lettering appeared the names of the boats. The "River Queen" was the name emblazoned on one, several shades more yellow than the other two.

"I guess we shall have to call her the 'Yellow Peril,'" laughed Phil. "Don't you think that would be an appropriate name?"

Mr. Sparling laughed good-naturedly.

The companion boat to the "Queen" was named the "Mary Jane." Teddy promptly renamed her the "Fat Marie," in honor of The Fattest Woman on Earth, much to the amusement of Phil and Mr. Sparling.

The "Nemah" was the third boat of the fleet, a much smaller craft than either of the others. The owner intended to use the "Nemah" as the Flying Squadron of the show, the boat that went ahead of the main body of the show, bearing the cook tent, kitchen equipment and as much other property as could be loaded on it.

"Well, Teddy," said Mr. Sparling, "in view of the fact that you and Phil have renamed the 'River Queen' and the 'Mary Jane,' I suppose you will not be satisfied until you have rechristened the 'Nemah.' What will you call her?"

"Little Nemo," answered the lad promptly.

"You boys beat anything I ever came across in all my circus experience," remarked Mr. Sparling.

"Where do we sleep?" asked Phil.

"The cabins are all on the upper decks. The lower decks will be

used wholly for the equipment. I have had all the partitions ripped out, down there, and the deck flooring lowered a little so that the elephants will have room to stand. I have also had smaller wheels put on all the wagons. Had I not done so the wagons would not have gone in through the openings on the sides."

"What about the tent poles?" asked Phil. "You never will be able to drive a pole wagon on board."

"You have an eye to business, I see. Have you noticed that the center poles are spliced this season?"

"Yes, I did observe that."

"It was for the purpose of easier handling. The poles will all be swung to the upper decks in bundles. In the morning they will be lowered to the wagons, which can be done without much difficulty. All the poles, except those belonging to the big top, will go out on the 'Little Nemo,' as you have named her. At first, handling the show will be a little awkward, but we shall soon get the hang of it and fit into the new arrangement just as if we had been always traveling on boats. Traveling on the water, you see, we shall be able to show on both sides of the river all the way down, which we could not do were we traveling by train. That will give us a long season, short runs overnight and a fine outing. Everybody will be delighted with the change, don't you think so?"

"If not, they will be pretty hard to please, I should say," rejoined Phil. "Why, it will be a regular vacation--all summer!"

"How far do we go?" asked Teddy.

"The length of the river."

"To the Gulf of Mexico?"

"Yes. New Orleans probably will be our last stand of the season. That is, if we do not get wrecked on the big river."

"We can swim out if we do," suggested Teddy.

"I hope nothing of the sort will occur. I think our new plans will make a great hit along the river."

"They cannot help but do so. We shall have a fine business, I know," smiled Phil, "and our rivals will be green with envy."

"May we go on board?"

"I hardly think you will have time this morning, Teddy. You boys had better get back to the lot now. I will let you run the show, Phil, as I shall be busy most of the day arranging for the transfer to our new quarters. I chose Saturday for the purpose, as it will give us plenty of time. We probably shall not get away from here much before daylight."

"What boat do we berth on?"

"The 'Fat Marie,'" answered the showman, with a laugh.
"I believe I'll have these new names of yours painted
on the boats. They certainly make a hit with me.
Skip along, now!"

Almost too full of the new plans to talk, the Circus Boys hurried
back to the circus lot. Mr. Sparling's surprise had been a
surprise, indeed.

By the time they reached the lot the news had been circulated
that the show was to take to the river, and the show people were
discussing excitedly the new plan.

All was bustle and excitement, and the occupants of the dressing
tent, who were preparing for the parade, crowded about the boys
to hear of the new boats.

The Sparling show had never gone along with the snap and
enthusiasm that it did that afternoon. The performers were on
their mettle and the little town was treated to a performance
such as it had never seen before.

Teddy distinguished himself by landing on his head on the
somersaulting mat, narrowly escaping breaking his neck, and
Phil took an unexpected header into the big net during his
trapeze act, getting a jolt that made his head ache for an
hour afterwards. Nothing else of an exciting nature occurred
during the afternoon performance, but at the evening show the
circus people were not so fortunate.

At that performance they met with excitement enough to last them
for a long time.

CHAPTER VI

A BOLT FROM THE CLOUDS

"The old hen has laid an egg! The old hen has laid an egg!"

The performance was moving merrily on, the gasoline lamps
shedding a bright glow over the golden haze of the circus tent,
when a diminutive clown rushed into the arena bearing something
in his arms.

To the spectators it was just another clownish act, and they
laughed uproariously. The circus people, however, realized at
once that something not down on the bills was taking place, and
they cast wondering glances at the little clown, who was dancing
about in high glee.

"Get out of here!" growled the ringmaster angrily. "What do you
mean by breaking into the performance in this way. Out of here,
I say!"

"The old hen has laid an egg!" repeated the clown, holding aloft
the object that all might see.

Teddy Tucker, for it was he, cared nothing for the crowds occupying the seats. In fact, it is doubtful that he gave any thought to them at all.

"What do you mean?" demanded the ringmaster.

"The ostrich. Don't you see?"

"The ostrich?"

"Yes, she's laid an egg."

Quick to appreciate the value of the clown's interruption, the ringmaster took the great egg that Teddy had brought in, and held it aloft.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he announced, as the band suddenly ceased playing, "wonders never cease in the Great Sparling Shows. You have been treated to startling feats of skill upon the lofty flying swings; you have witnessed desperately dangerous displays of unrivaled aerialism, and you are about to observe the thundering, furious Roman chariot races three times about the arena--"

"Say, what are you trying to get at?" growled Teddy Tucker. "Give me back that egg."

"But a sensation greater than all of these is in store for you, though you did not know it. The tallest hen in the world has laid an egg for your instruction and amusement--the ostrich has immortalized the town of Milledgeville by laying an egg within its sacred precincts, and my friend, Teddy Tucker, in discovering it, has accomplished an achievement beside which the discovery of the north or south pole is a cheap side show."

The audience yelled its approval and appreciation.

"Young man, what do you intend to do with this wonderful and rare specimen?"

"What do I intend to do with it?"

"Yes. Is it your purpose to present it to this beautiful little city, to be placed among its other treasures in the city hall?"

"Well, I guess not!"

"What, then?"

"I'm going to eat it. That's what I'm going to do with it," answered Teddy in a voice loud enough to be heard all over the big top.

The people shouted.

"Give me that egg!" demanded the Circus Boy, grabbing the big white ball and marching off toward the paddock with it, to the accompaniment of the laughter and applause of the audience.

"Now that we have seen this remarkable Easter achievement, the performance will proceed," announced the ringmaster, blowing his whistle and waving his hand.

The band struck up; the performers, grinning broadly, took up their work where they had left off upon the entrance of Teddy Tucker with the giant egg.

The incident had served to put both performers and audience in high good humor. Mr. Sparling was not present to witness it. He was busy down by the docks, attending to the loading of such of the show's equipment as was ready to be packed away for shipment on the Sparling fleet.

Perhaps it was just as well for Teddy, that the owner of the show was not present, as he might have objected to the Circus Boy's interruption of the performance.

Teddy was irrepressible. He stood in awe of no one except the Lady Snake Charmer, and did pretty much as he pleased all the time. Yet, beneath the surface, there was the making of a manly man, a resolute, sturdy character of whom great things might be expected in the not far distant future.

As the performance proceeded an ominous rumbling was suddenly heard.

"I think it is going to storm," Phil confided to his working mate on the flying trapeze.

"Sounds that way. Is that thunder I hear?"

"Yes."

"Guess it won't amount to much. Just a spring shower. You will find a lot of them along the river for the next month or so."

"I have always heard that rivers were wet," replied Phil humorously, swinging off into space, landing surely and gracefully in the arms of the catcher in the trapeze act.

"I think we had better cut the act short."

"Oh, no, let's go on with it," answered Phil. "I am not afraid if you are not."

"Afraid nothing. I remember still what a narrow escape we had last season just before that blow-down, when Wallace, the big lion, made his escape. That was a lively time, wasn't it?"

"Rather," agreed Phil.

The ringmaster motioned to them to bring their act to a close, and the band leader, catching the significance of the movement, urged his musicians to play louder. The crash of cymbals and the boom of the bass drum and the big horns almost drowned out the rumbling of the thunder.

Those up near the dome of the tent, still going through their acts, now heard the patter of heavy rain drops on the canvas top. The lights throughout the tent flickered a little under the draught that sucked in through the openings in the tent and the open space at the top of the side walls.

The audience showed signs of restlessness.

"It is only a spring shower, ladies and gentlemen," announced the ringmaster. "You have no cause for alarm. The hats of the ladies are perfectly safe. This tent is waterproof. You could soak it in the Mississippi without getting a drop of water through it. That's the way the Sparling show looks out for its patrons. Nothing cheap about the Sparling outfit!"

A laugh greeted his remarks.

A blinding flash faded the gasoline lamps to a ghostly flame. A few seconds later a crash that shook the earth followed, causing the audience to shiver with nervous apprehension.

Teddy had come out and was gazing aloft. He grinned at Phil, noting at the same time that all the lofty performers were preparing to come down.

"Hello, fraid-cats up there!" jeered the Circus Boy.

"You get out of here!" snapped the ringmaster. "What are you doing here, anyway?"

"I'm working."

"Yes, I see you working. Go on about your business and don't bother me. Don't you think I have anything else to do except to watch you, in order to prevent your breaking up the performance?"

"You ought to thank me for keeping you busy," chuckled Teddy, making a lively jump to get out of the way of the long lash that snapped at his heels.

Perhaps there was method in Teddy Tucker's movements. He strolled out into the concourse, gazing up at the crowded seats, winking and making wry faces at the people, as he moved slowly along, causing them to laugh and shout flippant remarks at him.

This was exactly what he wanted them to do. It gave Teddy an opportunity to talk back, and many a keen-pointed shaft did he hurl at the unwary who had been imprudent enough to try to make sport of him.

While this impromptu act was going on the minds of the people were so occupied that they forgot all about the storm.

The rain was now beating down on the big top in a deluge, and despite the ringmaster's assurance that the canvas would not leak, a fine spray was filling the tent like a thin fog, through which the lights glowed in pale circles.

"Even the lamps have halos," Teddy informed the people. "I had one once, but the ringmaster borrowed it and forgot to return it. But I don't care. He needs a halo more than I do."

A howl greeted this sally.

Teddy was about to say something else, after the first wave of laughter had swept over the audience, but no one heard him speak.

Another flash, more brilliant, more blinding than any that had gone before it, lighted up the tent. The big top seemed suddenly to have been filled with fire. Thin threads of it ran down quarter and center pole; circles of it raced about the iron rings used in various parts of the tent, then jumped into the rigging, running up and down the iron braces and wire ropes used to brace the apparatus.

The flash was accompanied by a report that was terrifying. At that instant a great ball of fire descended from the damp top of the tent, dropping straight toward the concourse. Teddy Tucker chanced to be standing just beneath it. He had glanced up when the report came, to see if any damage had been done aloft.

"Wow!" breathed Teddy.

Just then the ball burst only a few feet above his head, scattering fire in all directions.

Teddy fell flat to the ground.

He was up almost at once.

"I'm all right! How's the rest of the family?" he howled.

The rest of the family were too much concerned with what was taking place in the big top to notice the Circus Boy's humor.

Then Teddy observed that the center pole was split from end to end. The lightning bolt had followed it from its peak to the ground. Several of the side poles had already given way, and the lad saw the dome of the tent slowly settling.

"Hitch it! Anchor it!" he bellowed.

The attendants were too frightened to give heed to his words.

Phil Forrest was coming down a rope, hand under hand, as rapidly as he could travel.

"Snub the rope or you'll have the tent down on you!" he shouted.

Teddy darted forward, throwing himself upon the heavy rope that held the dome in place.

At that instant the rope on which Phil Forrest was descending gave way, and Phil came straight down.

He landed on Teddy Tucker's head and shoulders, knocking Teddy

flat on the ground, where the little Circus Boy lay still. Yet he had, with rare presence of mind, snubbed the heavy rope around a tent stake, keeping the free end of the rope in hand, and holding desperately to it.

Nor did Teddy release his grip on the rope, now that he had been knocked unconscious. He held it in place, the strands wound firmly about his arm, though inch by inch he was slipping toward the heavy tent stake. Phil had received a severe shaking-up, but he was on his feet quickly, looking about to see on whom he had fallen.

When he discovered that Teddy had been the victim, Phil groaned.

"I'm afraid I have finished him!"

Teddy had now been drawn along by the rope until his head was against the tent stake.

"Quick! Lend a hand here!" shouted Phil.

He wrenched the rope loose from Tucker's hands, taking a twist about his own arms and holding on with all his might.

Several ring attendants came to their senses about that time and rushed to his assistance.

"Take care of Teddy!" cried Phil.

The ringmaster turned Teddy over and looked into the lad's face. At that, Teddy opened his eyes and winked. The ringmaster jerked him to his feet and shook him vigorously.

This restored the boy to his normal condition.

"Hello, folks!" howled Teddy, turning a handspring, falling over a ring curbing as he did so.

The people forgot their fear and greeted Teddy with wild applause. The Circus Boy had saved a blow-down and perhaps many lives as well.

CHAPTER VII

IN NEW QUARTERS

Though the center pole had been struck by lightning, repairs were soon sufficiently advanced to enable the show to go on and complete the performance. The pole itself was practically ruined.

Fortunately, the show had another one, and the wrecked pole was left on the lot that night as worthless.

After the Roman races the people stood up in their seats and gave three cheers for the boy who had saved many of them from perhaps serious injury or death.

Teddy heard the cheer. He was in his dressing tent changing his clothes, having thus far gotten on only his trousers and undershirt.

He could not restrain his curiosity, so trotting to the entrance he inquired the cause of the commotion.

"They're cheering for you," a canvasman informed him.

"For me?"

"Yes."

Teddy needed no more. Without an instant's hesitation he ran out into the ring, where he stood smiling, bowing and throwing kisses to them.

"Come and see us again!" yelled the Circus Boy.

"We will that!" answered a chorus of voices.

"I'll have the big hen lay another egg for you. I--" His voice was drowned in the roar of laughter that followed this sally.

Already the attendants were ripping up the seats, loading them into the wagons, with a rattle and bang. Men were shouting, horses neighing; here and there an animal uttered a hoarse-voiced protest at something, it knew not what.

Circus animals often scent a change, perhaps more quickly than do the people about them.

Performers and others, whose duties did not keep them on the lot, were hurrying to get to the dock where the circus boats were waiting, and where Mr. Sparling was attending to the loading.

Phil and Teddy were in no less haste. Quickly getting their trunks packed, they started off for the river. The moon had come out after the storm and the air was fresh and fragrant, though underfoot the evidences of the storm were still present.

"Did I hurt you much when I fell on you tonight, Teddy?"

"Hurt me?"

"Yes?"

"You knocked the breath out of me. But don't let a little thing like that worry you. I thought the tent had fallen on me, or at least a center pole. Lucky I was there, wasn't it?"

"It was."

"You might have received a bump that you wouldn't have gotten over right away."

"I might have done so."

"I saved your life, didn't I?"

"Perhaps you did. I had only a few feet to drop, you know. I was ready to drop on all fours lightly when you happened to get in the way--"

"When I happened to get in the way?"

"Yes. Didn't you?"

"Well, I like that," growled Teddy indignantly. "Here I run in and save your life, willing to sacrifice my own for you and you say when I 'happened to get in the way.'"

Phil laughed heartily.

"Of course, I appreciate your wonderful self-sacrifice. It was very kind of you to get in the way and let me fall on you. Nothing like having a soft place to fall, is there, old chap?"

Teddy uttered an unintelligible growl.

"That's right; insult me. I'm only a clown and--and a life-saver--"

"And one of the best fellows a chap could have for his friend, eh? I was only joking, Teddy."

"I accept your apology. My hand on it," answered Teddy condescendingly. "Next time you can fall on the ground or any old place. I don't care. I shan't try to catch you."

"If I remember correctly, you could not very well help yourself in this instance. You did not catch me. I caught you--caught you unawares. There is Mr. Sparling and there are the boats. Don't they look fine, all lighted up inside, their signal lights burning on the outside?"

"They look wet to me."

Thin wisps of smoke were curling lazily from the funnels of the three boats, for the stokers had not yet started to get up steam. Some hours would elapse before the fleet would be ready to begin its journey down the big river.

"There goes the 'Little Nemo,'" cried Teddy.

The smaller of the three steamboats moved slowly out into the stream, and there came to anchor to await the other boats. The "Fat Marie" was already alongside the long dock, but she now moved up a little further to make room for her companion boat, the "River Queen," which latter Phil had nicknamed the "Yellow Peril."

"Let's see, where do we stow our belongings, Phil?"

"On the 'Fat Marie.'"

"If that name don't sink her, nothing will," said Teddy, with a broad grin. "I hope the boat floats better than Fat Marie did when she fell in the creek last season. If not, we're lost. Let's go on board and find out where we are going to live."

"After we speak to Mr. Sparling. Is there anything we can do to help you, Mr. Sparling?" asked Phil, stepping up to the owner of the show, who, hatless, coatless, his hair looking as if it had not been combed in days, was giving orders in sharp, short sentences, answering questions and shouting directions almost in the same breath.

"Oh, is that you, Phil?"

"It is myself, sir," smiled the lad. "How are you getting along?"

"Much better than I had hoped. You see the 'Little Nemo' is already loaded. The 'Fat Marie' is well loaded and the 'Queen' is taking stuff on board at a two-forty gait."

"I see you haven't driven the bulls on yet," meaning the elephants.

The elephants were standing off beyond the docks, huge shadowy figures, swaying silently in the faint light, for there was a slight haze in the air that even the brilliant moonlight could not wholly pierce.

"No; I thought it best to load the bulls and the ring stock later on. The bulls might get frightened with all the unusual noises around them. After they become more used to this method of traveling they will be all right."

"What time do we pull out?"

"It will be three o'clock, I think. Perhaps a little later than that."

"You mean earlier," suggested Teddy.

The showman turned on him sharply.

"Why, hello, Teddy. Really, you are so small that I did not see you."

Teddy winced.

"I guess I'm some, even if I am little," protested the lad warmly.

"You are right. You are not only some, but much. What's this I hear about trouble on the lot? Some of the men said they heard there had been an accident, but they guessed it didn't amount to much."

"It was not very serious," said Phil.

"Oh, no; nothing of any consequence," jeered Teddy. "I was

struck by lightning, that's all."

"What!"

"Hit by balls of fire--and the big hen laid an egg."

"See here, what are you driving at--"

"And crushed, utterly crushed by my best friend, Phil Forrest. Now, what do you think of that?"

"Teddy, please hitch your tongue to the roof of your mouth for a moment. Now, Phil, tell me what happened. I get so dizzy when Teddy is talking that I almost imagine I am going to be seasick."

"Pshaw!" growled Teddy.

"We did have a little trouble."

"Tell me about it."

"The storm came up while the aerial acts were on. We all shortened our acts at the direction of the ringmaster, and it was well we did so. We had not all gotten down when a bolt of lightning struck the main center pole."

"You don't say! Here, men, stow those canvas wagons forward! You must learn to trim the boat, giving her an even load all over! Did the bolt do any damage?"

"Slivered the pole."

"Wreck it?"

"Yes. Not worth carrying off the lot."

"What else?"

"Some excitement--"

"Panic?"

"No, but I think there would have been had it not been for my friend, Teddy Tucker. He amused the audience while things were happening up above."

"Good for you, Teddy Tucker," said the showman, slapping the Circus Boy on the back.

"Ouch!" howled Teddy.

"I was congratulating you, that's all," laughed Mr. Sparling.

"If it is all the same to you, please use a club when you congratulate me. I won't feel it so much."

Phil next went on to relate how Teddy had, by his quickness, made fast the rope and probably saved the top from falling in on them, and how he, Phil, had fallen on the boy and knocked him out.

Mr. Sparling surveyed the flushed face of Teddy approvingly.

"Thank you, Teddy," he said. "I'll give you a day off to go fishing, sometime, for that."

"I don't want to go fishing."

"Then you are the first showman I ever knew who did not. They are simply crazy over fishing. You'll see every one of them hanging over the rails in the early morning trying to catch fish."

"I won't. You'll see me asleep about that time, if you look in the right place," answered Teddy very promptly.

"Teddy deserves your praise, Mr. Sparling."

"He does, and he has it. I will show my appreciation more fully when I get all this rush out of the way. The loss of the center pole doesn't amount to much, but the rest does."

"And the hen laid an egg," reiterated Teddy.

"Oh, yes, I forgot to tell you. The big ostrich hen laid an egg this evening."

"Is it possible?"

"Yes; Teddy found it in the hay behind the concert platform."

The showman's eyes twinkled.

"What were you doing back there?"

"Looking for a place to take a catnap between acts."

Mr. Sparling laughed heartily.

"There's only one Teddy in the whole wide world!"

"I hope not," added the boy quickly.

"Where is the egg--what did you do with it?"

"Got it in my bag here, want to see it?"

He handed the egg to Mr. Sparling who turned it over, glancing at it curiously.

"Look out! You'll drop it!"

"And what are you going to do with it, may I ask?"

"Eat it."

"What, eat up my property?"

"Eggs belongs to the finder, and--"

"You mean eggs _belong_ to the finder," corrected Phil.

"Yes, I guess so. Any way, so you say it. I'm going to eat this egg, even if it does give me indigestion all the rest of my life. How do you cook ostrich eggs?"

"I never cooked any, my boy. You will have to consult the cook on that point. Perhaps he may consent to cook it for you."

"I'll give you a slice off the white when it's cooked."

"Thank you. You are welcome to the whole egg. Better go up and locate yourselves, boys."

"What number is our room, Mr. Sparling?" asked Phil.

"Number twenty-four, on the upper deck. I have given you a nice, roomy, light and airy cabin that I think will please you. It is one of the best on the ship and you should be very comfortable there."

"I am sure we shall be, and thank you very much," said Phil.
"Come along, Teddy."

Together they made their way to the boat and through the crowded, bustling lower deck, where the big canvas-covered wagons were being warped into place, a sort of orderly confusion reigning over everything, the scene lighted by lanterns swinging from hooks all about the deck.

The lads found their cabin, and after lighting the lamp, uttered exclamations of surprise. Instead of the narrow berths they had expected to see, there were white enameled iron bedsteads, a washstand with the same neat finish, and several pictures on the walls.

The cabin was a large one. In the center of it stood a table on which lay a large portfolio and inscribed in gold letters on the outside they read the words, "For the Circus Boys."

The portfolio was filled with writing materials.

"Oh, isn't that fine?" exclaimed Phil.

"Yes, it's a fine egg. I'm going to have the feast of my life when I get it baked--"

"Teddy Tucker!"

"What?"

"What do you think I am talking about?"

"Eggs."

"I am not. I am talking about this beautiful cabin that Mr. Sparling has fixed for us. Look at it--look at this portfolio. I am afraid you don't appreciate how

good our employer is to us. There is an easy chair for each of us, too. Why, we ought to be very happy."

"I am happy. So would you be if a hen had laid a five pound egg for you," retorted Teddy.

"Hopeless, hopeless," groaned Phil.

Teddy, muttering to himself, carefully laid the egg away in his trunk, first wrapping it up in an old silk ring shirt, then locking the trunk and putting the key in his pocket.

The lad then made a personal and critical examination of the room, tried the springs of the bed, nodded approvingly, sat down in one of the easy chairs and put his feet on the table.

Phil promptly pushed the feet off.

"Here, what are you doing?"

"This is not the dressing room of a circus, Teddy. This is the living room of a couple of young gentlemen. Let's not forget that. Let us try to keep our cabin looking nice and shipshape, else Mr. Sparling will think we do not appreciate his kindness."

"Say, Phil!"

"Yes?"

"I'll tell you what we'll do!"

"I am listening."

"We'll have a spread up here all by ourselves, tomorrow night, after the show. We'll eat the egg. I'll get the cook to boil it all day tomorrow--does it take a day to boil an ostrich egg?"

"I should think it might take a month," laughed Phil. "Yes; I'll make a martyr of myself and help you eat the egg. I shall never have any peace until that egg is finally disposed of--"

"What's going on downstairs?" interrupted Teddy.

A commotion was heard out on the dock. There was the tramping of many feet, mingled with loud, angry shouts and sharp commands.

"It sounds to me as if something has been let loose," said Teddy Tucker wisely.

Something had been "let loose."

With one accord the Circus Boys sprang up. Rushing out into the corridor they leaped down the after companionway four steps at a jump.

CHAPTER VIII

JANUARY ON THE RAMPAGE

"What's the row? What's the row?" bellowed Teddy, who, bolting under a cage and, leaving his hat under the wagon, dashed out to the dock, where their vessel was moored.

The two boys saw an object leaping into the air, performing strange and grotesque antics.

"It's January!" yelled Teddy. "Whoa, January!"

But January refused to "whoa." The donkey had objected to going aboard the boat. When the workmen tried to force him, he protested vigorously, biting those in front and kicking those behind him.

"Teddy, get that fool donkey out of here or I'll throw him in the river," bawled the owner of the show.

Perhaps January understood the threat. At least he started for Mr. Sparling, snorting.

The showman ducked under a canvas wagon and climbed up the other side of it, giving his orders from the top of the wagon. He knew January. He had had business dealings with the donkey on other occasions.

"Get him out of here, I tell you!"

"Drive him in yourself," answered a groom. "I wouldn't try it for a present of the whole confounded show."

Up to this point those who had not left the dock willingly January had assisted with his ever ready hoofs, and, by the time Teddy reached the scene the donkey had kicked every man off and into the street, excepting the owner of the show himself. As already related, Mr. Sparling had seen fit to leave in haste when January directed his attention to him.

"Whoa, January!" commanded Teddy in a soothing tone.

The donkey, at sound of the Circus Boy's voice, reared and came down facing Teddy.

"Come here, you beast. Don't you know you're going to have a ride on the river? You don't know enough to know when you are well off. Come, Jany, Jany, Jany. Wow!"

January had responded with a rush. Teddy stepped aside just in time to save himself from being bowled over. But as the donkey ran by him the boy threw both arms about the animal's neck.

Then began the liveliest scrimmage that the spectators had ever witnessed. Kicking and bucking, the donkey raced from side to side, varying his performance now and then by making a dive toward the crowd, which quickly gave gangway as the people sought for safety.

"Whoa, January! I--I'll break your neck for this, hang you! Some other donkey has taught you these tricks. You never knew anything about them way back in Edmeston. You--"

Bang!

Teddy was slapped against the side of the "Fat Marie."

By this time Tucker's temper was beginning to rise. His first inclination was to hit the donkey on the nose with his free hand, but he caught himself in time. He was too fond of animals, even donkeys, to strike one on the head. It was a rule too, in the Sparling shows, that any man who so far forgot himself as to strike a horse over the head closed with the show then and there.

Now Teddy thought of a new plan. He watched his opportunity. Suddenly, Teddy put his plan into operation.

It must be remembered that the Circus Boy was strong and agile, and that his work in the ring had given him added quickness.

He therefore applied the trick he had thought of; then something happened to January. The donkey struck the planking of the pier flat on his back, his feet beating the air viciously.

"Whoa, January!"

Teddy flopped the animal on its side, then calmly sat down on the donkey's head. He had thrown the beast as prettily as ever had a wrestler an adversary.

The Circus Boy began mopping the perspiration from his brow.

"Warm, isn't it?" he said, tilting his eyes up to where Mr. Sparling had been watching the proceedings from the top of a wagon.

"You certainly look the part. Now, what are you going to do with that fool donkey?"

"I'm going to sit on his head until I get ready to get up. Then, if somebody will lend me a whip, I'll tan his jacket to my own taste."

January uttered a loud bray.

"Well, do something," shouted a canvasman. "We can't wait all night on the gait of that donkey."

"All right; if any of you fellows think you know the inside workings of a donkey's mind better than I do, just come and lead this angelic creature on board the 'Fat Marie.'"

"No, no; we don't know anything about donkeys," came a chorus of voices. "We don't want to know anything about donkeys, either."

"Somebody bring me a bridle, then. Don't be afraid of him, he is as gentle as a lamb. You wouldn't hurt a fly, would you,

dear January?"

January elevated both hind feet, narrowly missing the groom who had brought the bridle.

After some difficulty the bystanders succeeded in getting the bit between his teeth and the bridle over his head.

"Now, take tight hold of the bridle and lead him. I'll use persuasive measures at the other end," directed Teddy.

January fairly hurled himself forward, jerking the groom off his feet at once. But the man hung on stubbornly.

A moment more, and Teddy had fastened a firm grip on January's tail, not appearing to be in the least afraid of the flying hoofs that were beating a tattoo in the air.

How Teddy did twist that tail! Finally January, in sheer desperation, was forced to give ground. One leap carried him over the gangplank and into the boat. Once within, there was a repetition of the scenes enacted on the dock, except that this time it was the groom who was getting the worst of it, while Teddy sat on the gangway, howling with delight.

At last the donkey was subdued and led to the place where he was to spend the night. But they had to rope him in to prevent his kicking the other stock through the side of the boat.

Fat Marie herself came waddling along about this time, blowing like a miniature steam engine.

"Gangway! Gangway!" shrieked Marie, in a high-pitched, shrill voice.

Teddy was nearly crowded off the gangplank.

"See here, where are you going? Don't you know there's a crazy donkey in there?"

"Going to my cabin to seek sweet repose," squeaked Marie.

"What! Are you going to live on this boat?"

"That's what. If I can get up to the sky parlor where my 'boodwah' is. Come, help me up the stairs; that's a good boy, Teddy."

"I helped you once. That was enough for me. Say, Marie?"

"What is it, my lad?"

"If the boat should be wrecked in one of the terrible storms that sweep this raging river you had better grab the anchor the first thing."

"Why grab the anchor?"

"You'll sink quicker," laughed the Circus Boy, darting out to the

dock and leaning against a wagon wheel.

By this time Mr. Sparling had descended from his haven of safety, and began issuing orders again.

"Get the bulls in now. No more nonsense. Teddy, you did a good job, but it took you a long time to do it."

"Yes, sir. Do you think anybody else could have done it quicker?"

"I know they could not. Where is Phil?"

"Guess he went back to his cabin after I finished off January. Going to load the elephants, did you say?"

"Yes."

"Aren't you afraid they will sink the boat?"

"Don't bother us now. You know we did not bother you when you were trying to get your livestock in."

"I noticed that you didn't," answered Teddy, humorously, which remark brought a shout of laughter from everyone within hearing of his voice.

Mr. Kennedy, the elephant-trainer, now ranged his charges in line, with Jupiter, the ill-tempered member of the herd, in the lead. He wanted to get Jupiter in ahead, knowing that the others would follow willingly enough after him. Emperor, the great beast that had such a warm regard for Phil, was third in the line.

"Everybody keep away and don't make a racket or they will get nervous. I expect to have a little trouble with those bulls the first time. After that they will go one board as meek as a flock of spring mutton," declared Kennedy. Teddy was close at hand. If there was any prospect of trouble or excitement he wanted to be near enough not to miss a single feature of it.

Mr. Kennedy gave the command for attention.

Each of the elephants to the rear of Jupiter stretched forth a trunk and grasped the tail of the elephant directly in front of him.

"Forward, march!"

"Hip! Hip!" began Teddy.

"That will do, young man," warned Mr. Sparling.

The line moved slowly forward, Jupiter offering no objection to going where he was ordered.

Just as he reached the gangplank, however, Jupiter halted.

"Forward!"

The elephant's trunk curled upward and a mighty trumpeting sent the villagers scurrying for places of safety.

Mr. Kennedy prodded the elephant with the sharp point of his hook. The act forced Jupiter to place one foot on the gang plank, throwing his weight upon the planking to test its stability. He felt it give ever so little beneath his feet, and quickly withdrew the foot.

Once more the prod was brought into use. Jupiter waxed angry. With a great cough, he curled his trunk about the heavy gangplank, wrenching it free from its resting place.

Raising the planking high above his head he hurled it into the river.

"Ladies and gentlemen," announced Teddy Tucker, in a loud voice, "you have witnessed a most satisfying, edifying, gratifying, ennobling, superb and sublime spectacular prelude, as our press agent would say. But, if you know what's good for you, you will now hasten to the high places, for there's going to be something doing around here in about a minute."

Teddy was no false prophet in this instance.

Strutting up to the angry Jupiter the Circus Boy slapped him playfully on the trunk.

"You bad boy. I thought January was the limit, but I have changed my mind. You--"

Suddenly Jupiter's trunk curled about the lad. The angry elephant raised the boy far above his head and hurled him up into the air as he had done with the gangway, except that he threw Teddy in another direction.

CHAPTER IX

PHIL FORREST TO THE RESCUE

"Catch Teddy! Catch him!" shouted Mr. Sparling.

"The boy has gone into the river!" cried half a dozen voices at once.

"No; the bull threw him toward the boat. He may have shot right on over and into the water or he may still be on the upper deck," answered Mr. Kennedy, as he plied his prod industriously, shouting his orders to the other elephants that already were showing signs of restlessness.

By this time a boat had been launched from the dock, and half a dozen men had gone in search of the lost gangway that was now floating slowly down the river some distance away.

"Ahoy, boat!" bellowed Mr. Sparling. "Row around to the other side and see if Tucker is in the river."

At the same time the owner of the show was running toward the "Marie." He plunged into the mass of equipment on the lower deck, lost his footing and went rolling under a lion's cage. He was on his feet and bounding up the stairs almost in the next second.

Just as he reached the upper deck he met Phil Forrest emerging from the cabin, attracted by the uproar.

"What's the matter, sir?"

"Teddy," answered the showman shortly.

"Oh, that boy again! What is it?"

"Jupiter tossed him."

"Where is he?"

"Maybe in the river. Help me look for him up here. They are searching for him on the other side of the boat."

Phil started on a run along one side of the deck, Mr. Sparling taking the other side.

"Here he is. Ahoy, boat! Go and get the gangway. I have the boy here," called Mr. Sparling.

Phil hurried over to where Mr. Sparling was bending over Teddy, who lay doubled up against the pilot house.

"Is he hurt?"

"I don't know. I'll tell you when I get him untangled. He seems to be standing on his head. Lucky if his neck isn't broken."

"Teddy's neck is too tough to be easily broken. I think he is merely stunned," said Phil.

The showman straightened the Circus Boy out, and Teddy suddenly sat up, rubbing his head and neck gingerly.

"Did January kick me?" he demanded wonderingly.

"No; Jupiter threw you up here. Are you hurt?"

"Hurt?"

"Yes."

"I'm worse than that. I'm like the carpenter who swallowed a tape measure. I'm dying by inches."

Mr. Sparling uttered an impatient exclamation.

"Take care of him, Phil. I must get back. There is trouble

down there."

The showman hurried away, and Phil saw at once that his companion had sustained a severe shock, but nothing of a serious nature.

"You're all right, Teddy. What is the trouble down there?"

Teddy, still rubbing himself, explained what had happened.

Just then there came a call from below.

"Oh, Phil!"

"Yes."

"Can you come down here?"

"Of course. What is it?"

"Mr. Sparling wants you."

"I'll be right there."

The lad, instead of taking the time to go down the companionway, swung over the side of the boat and dropped lightly to the wharf. Such is the advantage of being a showman.

"Mr. Kennedy is having trouble with the bulls, Phil," explained Mr. Sparling.

"Yes; so Teddy told me."

"He thinks you may be able to suggest some way out of our difficulty. Mr. Kennedy has great confidence in your resourcefulness."

"What have you done thus far?"

Mr. Sparling explained briefly, Phil giving close attention.

"Have they found the gangplank yet?"

"Yes; they are towing it up to the dock now."

Phil waited until they had hauled the gangway up and put it in place.

"Will you try her, so that I can see how she works, Mr. Kennedy?" asked the lad after the gangway had been chained down so securely that the elephant would have difficulty in ripping it loose.

Jupiter was just as stubborn as he had been before. Phil observed three or four showmen standing near him on the other side.

"Please step back, all of you," he said. "Mr. Sparling, will you see that no one comes near the elephants? I'll see what I can do. Back him off, Mr. Kennedy."

This done, Phil stepped back along the line until he came to the big elephant Emperor.

"Good old Emperor," cried the Circus Boy soothingly. "Here's a lump of sugar."

Emperor tucked the sugar far back in his pink mouth. Then Phil, taking hold of the trunk, petted it affectionately, next tucking it under his arm.

"Come along, old fellow. You need not be afraid," he said, starting toward the ship, with Emperor following meekly and obediently. At the gangway he stopped and examined the passageway carefully.

"Are you sure it is strong enough to support them, Mr. Kennedy?"

"Yes, it will hold two at once."

"Very well."

Once more Phil took hold of the trunk and led Emperor across and into the boat, the elephant making no protest; though, knowing him as he did, Phil saw that the animal was timid. The beast's confidence in the little Circus Boy overcame his fears, however.

Emperor got another lump of sugar as the result of his obedience.

"See if Jupiter will follow," called Phil.

Jupiter would not.

Observing this, Phil swung Emperor around and led him to the dock.

"What are you going to do?" asked Mr. Sparling.

"Perhaps nothing at all. If Mr. Kennedy failed I do not see how I shall be able to accomplish anything. Get Jupiter up to the gangway, please."

This was done.

"When I say the word, you give Jupiter the hook good and hard and quick. I'll promise you that something will happen. See here; didn't I tell you fellows to keep away from those elephants?" demanded the boy, observing two figures edging up toward Emperor.

"Clear the dock!" roared Mr. Sparling.

A sudden thought seemed to strike Phil. He left Emperor and stepped around to the other side of the animal walking about and peering into the faces of the people who now were standing back at a respectful distance. Most of them proved to be villagers, with a few circus people sprinkled among them.

"Did you notice who those two men were who were standing on the other side, Mr. Sparling?" he asked in a low tone.

"No; why?"

"I wanted to know."

"Why do you ask that question?"

"Because I am suspicious of them, that's all."

Making sure that the dock was clear, Phil led Emperor up to Jupiter, placing the former's head against the hips of the stubborn elephant.

"Now!" he shouted, at the same time giving Emperor the signal to push.

The big elephant threw all his great strength into a forward movement. Jupiter, taken off his guard, plunged across the gangplank, with Emperor pushing him along, the former trumpeting wildly in his fear and rage. Another minute, and Jupiter was landed safely on the lower deck of the "Fat Marie."

CHAPTER X

ALL ABOARD FOR THE GULF!

Day was breaking.

Clouds of dense black smoke were rolling from the funnels of the Sparling fleet, while steam was hissing from the overburdened safety valves.

The show was ready for its start down the river. The "Little Nemo" had already hoisted anchor and was drifting with the current awaiting the signal to start her engines.

"All ashore that's going," sang a voice on each of the two boats lying at the dock.

The boats' whistles broke out in three deafening, prolonged blasts each.

"Cast off!" bellowed the pilots.

Hawsers were hauled in and the distance between the dock and the boats slowly widened.

"We're off," shouted Teddy, waving his hat joyously.

"We will be more so, unless we get some sleep," warned Phil. "I would suggest that you and I turn in for a few hours. We both need a beauty sleep."

"I don't," answered Teddy promptly.

"Think not?"

"No, sir. I'm handsome enough as it is. Even the fool donkey stands aghast when he comes face to face with my surpassing beauty."

"How about the elephants?" twinkled Phil.

"Elephants don't count, at least not after twelve o'clock at night."

"I move that we turn in just the same. We will sleep until sometime before noon, then we can get up and enjoy the ride. I understand we shall not reach the next stand until sometime this evening. This is going to be a great trip, Teddy."

"It has been," nodded the other boy. "Where do we show first?"

"Milroy, I believe is the name of the place. I never heard of it before."

"And probably you never will want to again, after you have been there. That is the case with most of these little tank towns. A fellow wonders where all the people come from who go to the show."

The lads went to their cabin and were soon sound asleep. They realized how tired they were when first they got into bed.

"This is great!" muttered Phil, as, lying in his bed, he felt the cool air drifting in over him.

When they awakened the sun was at its zenith.

Phil consulted his watch.

"Wake up, Teddy. It is twelve o'clock."

Teddy sleepily dragged himself from his bed, pulled himself wearily to the window and threw open the blinds.

"Where are we?" asked Phil.

"Ask the pilot," grumbled Teddy. "How do you suppose I know? This water looks like a big mud puddle. I'm hungry; aren't you?"

"Yes, I am. What are we going to do for breakfast? I never thought to bring along a lunch."

"I've got an egg," chuckled Teddy.

"You are welcome to it. I don't care for any, thank you."

Just then there came a rap on their door.

Phil opened it and looked out.

"Mr. Sparling wishes to know if you are ready for breakfast?" asked the man, whom they recognized as the showman's personal servant.

"Am I ready for breakfast?" shouted Teddy. "Tell Mr. Sparling he ought to know better than to ask a question like that. What's this, a joke? We can't get any breakfast on this old tub."

"Mr. Sparling directs me to ask you to join him in his cabin for breakfast in ten minutes."

"Thank you. Tell him we shall be on hand," smiled Phil.

"I hope it isn't a joke," grumbled Teddy, pulling on his trousers.

"Now, isn't that fine of Mr. Sparling, old fellow?" asked Phil, with glowing eyes.

"Tell you better after I sample the breakfast. I'm suspicious."

"You need not be. Mr. Sparling would not be so unkind as to invite us to eat breakfast with him unless he had some breakfast to offer us."

"Well, I hope it's straight," muttered the doubting Teddy. A few minutes later the lads presented themselves at the door of the owner's cabin.

"Good morning, boys; how did you sleep last night?" he greeted them, with a cordial smile and a handshake for each.

"I was dead to the world," answered Teddy, with his customary bluntness of speech.

"I guess we all were," smiled the showman. "All day and all night was rather trying, but we shall not have the same trouble after this; at least not after the next stand. Everything should be in excellent working order after Monday. Sit down and have some breakfast with me."

An appetizing meal had been spread in the cabin. Teddy surveyed the table with wistful eyes.

"I did not know you were going to serve meals on board," said Phil.

"I am not, generally speaking. This is different. I would not ask our people to go all day without anything to eat. I have had a cold meal prepared in the main cabin, with hot coffee to wash it down. I thought you boys might like to join me here for a real meal. Having a real meal is one of the privileges of the owner of the show, you know," replied Mr. Sparling, with a hearty laugh, in which the boys joined.

"I was going to eat my egg," said Teddy humorously.

"It is very kind of you, Mr. Sparling," said Phil. "We were just wondering what we should do for breakfast, and Teddy, as he has just told you, was thinking of eating the ostrich egg."

"Raw?"

"I presume so," replied Phil, with a short laugh.

"It would make a fellow strong," declared Teddy in defense of his egg.

"I agree with you, my boy. I ate a piece of one once, and it was quite the strongest thing I ever tackled."

"That's a joke. Ha, ha!" replied Teddy, with serious face.

The lads were, by this time, on such terms of intimacy with their employer that they felt free to talk with him as they would to each other. At least Phil did, and in all probability Tucker would have done so at any rate.

"Do we unload tonight, Mr. Sparling?" questioned Phil.

"No, I think not. Tomorrow morning will be time enough. I never like to do any more work on Sunday than is absolutely necessary."

Phil nodded his approval.

"I believe in observing the day, and besides, our people need the rest and the relaxation. That reminds me of what I wanted to say. You did a very clever piece of work last night, both of you."

Teddy glanced up in surprise.

"Yes; I got a roughhouse from the donkey and the elephant. I'm a sort of a good thing all around. When the fool donkey gets through wiping up a whole county with me, the elephant takes a hand--a trunk, I mean--and lands me high and dry on the roof of the 'Fat Marie.'"

"You mean the deck," corrected Phil.

"I don't know what you call it, but it was hard enough when I struck it. Next time I'm going to have a net spread to catch me. I'll bet I would have made a hit in the ring with that donkey wrestling bout. I guess I will try it on some of these times, providing I can get the donkey to work the way he did last night."

"As I said before, there is something I want to ask you, Phil," repeated the showman.

"Yes, sir."

"Did it not strike you that Jupiter acted very peculiarly last night?"

"Yes. I did not see the first of it, but I saw enough."

"What did you think about it?"

"I did not know what to think."

The showman shot a keen glance at the Circus Boy's thoughtful, serious face.

"What do you think today?"

"That it was perfectly natural for Jupiter to balk going across the gangplank."

"How about him having hurled Teddy to the deck of the 'Fat Marie'?"

"That is different."

"Did it arouse any suspicions in your mind, my boy?"

Phil reflected for a moment, toying absently with his fork.

"Candidly, it did, Mr. Sparling. It struck me as peculiar at the time, and, as I thought it over, I became more and more convinced that there was some reason for Jupiter's action beyond what we saw."

The showman nodded, as if Phil's suggestion agreed with his own ideas.

"What do you think happened?" he asked.

"What do you think?"

"I will confess that I don't know, Phil. You had some reason for driving everyone away from the bulls there on the dock, did you not?"

"Yes, I did not want anyone to bother them while we were trying to get them on board."

"I understand," said Mr. Sparling, with a nod.

"Did you notice who was there on the dock at the time, Mr. Sparling?"

"No, not particularly."

"Was it some of the show people?"

"I am unable to say. I saw you drive two men off in particular, but I did not look at them closely. Did you know them?"

"Perhaps. They got away rather too quickly for me to make sure."

"Who do you think they were?"

Phil did not answer at once.

"Come, who were they, Phil?"

"I don't know, Mr. Sparling."

"I did not mean it exactly that way. You think you recognized them, and as I said before, I want to know who you think the men were?"

"I would rather not say, Mr. Sparling," answered the Circus Boy, looking his employer squarely in the eye.

"It is your duty to tell me."

"Not unless I am sure. It would be unjust to do so, and I know you would not wish to force me to be unjust."

"You are a queer boy, Phil Forrest," said the showman, gazing at the lad intently.

"I wish I knew who I thought they were, if they had anything to do with my aerial flight last night," growled Teddy. "They would have reason to think a Kansas cyclone had struck them."

No one paid any attention to Teddy's remark.

"I will tell you what I think, however, Mr. Sparling," continued Phil.

"That's what I am trying to get you to do."

"I think some person with evil intent did something to Jupiter to anger him, thus causing him to turn on Teddy. And it is my opinion that if you will examine the animal you will find the evidences on the animal himself," declared the Circus Boy boldly.

Mr. Sparling uttered an angry exclamation.

Teddy, who had tilted back in his chair as he listened to the conversation, went crashing to the floor, overturning table, dishes and all.

That broke up the conference of the morning.

CHAPTER XI

EGG, EGG, WHO'S GOT THE EGG?

"I've lost my egg! I've lost my egg!"

Teddy Tucker's shrill voice was heard from one end to the other of the "Fat Marie." An hour had elapsed since his mishap in Mr. Sparling's cabin, during which time the lads had been sitting on the after deck of the boat.

Phil had been very thoughtful. Perhaps he had not done right in keeping his real suspicions from Mr. Sparling. Yet he was firm in his purpose not to say who he thought the men were. He was not at all certain, in his own mind, that his eyes had not deceived him.

There could be no doubt, however, that some person or persons

had pricked Jupiter on a tender part of his anatomy just as Teddy Tucker was patting the trunk of the great beast.

Teddy had gone to his cabin for a moment, and no sooner had he opened the door than he discovered that all was not as it should be there.

"What's this? What's all this fuss about?" questioned Phil.

"My egg! My egg!"

"What about your egg?"

"It's gone, it's gone!"

"Gone?"

"Yes, yes."

"But I thought you locked it in your trunk?"

"That's what I did."

"Then how can it be gone?"

"It is, I tell you. Come and see, if you don't believe me."

"Of course I believe you, but I do not see how it would be possible for your egg to be taken when it was locked in your trunk," objected Phil.

Teddy grasped his companion by the arm and rushed him to the cabin.

"There, look!" exclaimed Teddy, pushing Phil into the room.

Teddy's trunk was open, most of its contents lying in a confused heap on the cabin floor.

Phil's face grew serious.

"Now, let's understand this. Was your trunk in that condition when you came in here a little while ago?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"Well, some of the stuff was sticking out, but the cover was down."

"The trunk was unlocked?"

"Sure it was."

"You are positive that you locked it?"

"I know it was locked."

"Is anything missing--have you looked to make sure?"

"I tell you my egg has been taken."

"I know. Has anything else been taken?"

"I was so excited that I didn't look."

"Then, do so now."

Teddy dropped down beside his trunk, and began going over his belongings, most of which were lying heaped on the floor. He examined everything closely.

"How about it?"

"I--I guess it is all here--but my egg is not, Phil."

"So I heard you say before."

"Where is it--where is it?"

"How do you suppose I know? You are lucky that nothing else was taken. Is the lock broken?"

"No. Somebody had a key."

"Almost any key made for an ordinary trunk will fit these steamer trunks." Phil proved this by selecting and trying three keys on his own key ring, each of which locked and unlocked Teddy's steamer trunk with ease.

"I'll bet you took my egg for a joke."

"Teddy Tucker, how can you say so," demanded Phil indignantly. "Did I ever do a thing like that?"

"No, I guess you didn't," admitted the boy. "But it's gone."

"It is evident that we have a thief on board. Mr. Sparling must be informed of this at once," decided Phil firmly. "You remain here and I will go and fetch him."

In a few moments the Circus Boy returned with Mr. Sparling. The showman made a careful examination of the room and the trunk on his own account. His face was flushed and angry.

He went over the same ground with his questions that Phil already had done.

"Do you suspect anyone, Phil?"

"I do not. Whom should I suspect? Nothing like this has ever happened in the Sparling show since I have been connected with it."

"You are right. It won't be healthful for the man who is responsible for this, if I catch him," growled the showman. "Somebody must be unusually fond of ostrich eggs to go to this

length for one. If anyone in this show chances to dine on ostrich egg in the next twenty-four hours we shall know whom to accuse of the theft."

"I do not think you will get the opportunity," said Phil, with a peculiar smile.

"What do you mean by that remark?"

"That it was not taken because the thief wanted to eat it. He would not be foolish enough to do that."

"Then why?"

"Probably to get even with Teddy."

Mr. Sparling eyed him sternly.

"You mean somebody had a grudge against Teddy?"

Phil nodded.

"Who?"

"I do not know."

"Teddy, who is it in this show who has a grudge against you?"

Teddy pondered.

"I don't know of anybody unless it's January," he made solemn reply.

"The fool donkey? Bah!"

"I guess the donkey did not unlock your trunk and steal your egg, Teddy," answered Phil, a half smile curling his lips.

"I am not going to ask you again whom you suspect. I take it for granted that you will keep your eyes open from now on."

"I certainly shall, Mr. Sparling."

"If you are unable to find out who is responsible for certain things I am sure there is no use in my trying to do so."

"I do not know about that, Sir. I shall try. If I find out anything worthwhile I shall come to you and tell you."

"I shall expect you to do so. And, Teddy!"

"Yes, sir."

"You are to say nothing of this occurrence to anyone on the boat. Do not mention that your precious egg has been lost or stolen, nor appear as if anything out of the ordinary had occurred."

Teddy nodded his understanding.

Mr. Sparling understood his boys better than they knew. He was confident that Phil Forrest had a shrewd idea as to who had aroused the anger of the elephant, Jupiter, as well as to the identity of the person who had stolen the egg from Teddy Tucker's trunk.

The Circus Boy, however, kept his own counsel.

He made a trip down to the lower deck and had a long conversation with Mr. Kennedy, the elephant trainer, while Teddy Tucker moped in his cabin, mourning over the loss of his egg.

The show reached Milroy shortly before dark that evening, after a most delightful trip down the river. The horse tents were unloaded and pitched on the circus lot and the stock stabled in them so the animals could get their rest and food.

Some of the show people strolled out through the little town, while others remained on board the boat and went to bed. All hands slept aboard that night. Bright and early, on the following morning, the boats were unloaded and the tents pitched, the men working much better for their day on the river.

Everyone appeared to be in high good humor and the wisdom of Mr. Sparling's methods was apparent. The tents went up more quickly that morning than at any time that season.

Breakfast under the cook tent was a jolly meal. Teddy had nearly forgotten the loss of the ostrich egg, but Phil Forrest had not. Phil, while not appearing to do so, was watching certain persons in the dressing tent, among them being Diaz, the Spanish clown.

During the dressing hour before the afternoon performance the clown had his trunk open to get out some costumes which were at the bottom, beneath the lower tray.

Phil's trunk, it will be remembered, was close by that of the clown's. The Circus Boy took advantage of the opportunity to peep into the open trunk while Diaz was rummaging over its contents. So absorbed did Phil become in his own investigation that he forgot for the moment that the owner of the trunk might resent such curiosity.

All at once Phil glanced down at the clown. He found the dark eyes of Diaz fixed upon him, and the lad flushed in spite of himself.

Diaz slowly rose to his feet. Thrusting his face close to that of the lad he peered into the boy's face.

"What you want?"

"Nothing, thank you."

"You look for something in the trunk of Diaz, eh?"

"Perhaps."

"What for you look?"

"Maybe I was looking for an egg. Maybe I thought the clown Diaz carried a supply of freshly laid eggs in his dressing-room trunk," said Phil in a tone too low for the others to catch, all the time holding the eyes of the clown in a steady gaze.

The eyes of the clown expressed surprise, but there was so much grease paint and powder on his face that the boy could not tell whether the fellow had flushed or not.

That Diaz was angry, however, was clear.

"What you mean?" demanded the clown, with a threatening gesture.

"If you do not know, I don't believe I care to explain just now."

"What you mean?" repeated the clown, his voice rising to a higher pitch. "You--you think I a thief?"

"If I thought so I might be too courteous to say so," was the calm retort. "What makes you imagine that I think you a thief? You must have some reason--you must believe there is some truth in your self-accusation, or you would not be so quick to resent it."

"I--I--"

"Remember, I have not accused you of anything. You have accused yourself."

Perhaps there was method in Phil's nagging--perhaps he was trying to goad the Spaniard into an admission that could be used against him. If that were his purpose he had only partly succeeded.

Diaz, who had closed the cover of his trunk with a bang, now sprang to the trunk again, jerking up the cover with such force as to nearly wrench it from its hinges.

Two trays came out and were hurled to the ground as the owner dived deeper and deeper into the chest.

"What's the matter? Have you gone crazy?" questioned Phil, laughing in spite of himself. "Come on, now; don't lose your temper. If you will stop to consider, you will recall that I have said nothing at which you might possibly take offence."

To this the clown made no reply.

All at once he straightened up with a snarl that reminded Phil of the cough of the tiger out in the menagerie as the beast struck viciously at its keeper when the latter chanced to step too close to the bars of the cage.

Diaz stood all a-quiver.

"This looks like trouble of some sort," muttered Phil Forrest.
"But I don't quite understand what he could have been hunting for

in the trunk."

Phil's question was answered a few seconds later.

>From the folds of the clown's costume his hand suddenly shot upward. The hand held a knife. The hand shook from rage as the knife was brandished aloft.

"Hello, so that's the game, is it?"

The Circus Boy stood his ground unflinchingly. He did not appear to be disturbed in the least, though his situation at that moment was a critical one.

"Diaz! Diaz! Drop that knife!" ordered Phil sternly.

Instead of obeying the command the clown leaped upon him, or upon the spot where Phil had been standing a second before. The lad had sprung back far enough so that the descending knife cut only the empty air.

Again the knife flashed up. Just as it was being raised, the boy leaped again. This time he sprang toward the enraged clown, rather than away from him.

Ere the knife could be brought down, Phil gripped the wrist holding the weapon, giving the wrist a quick, sharp twist that brought a roar of pain from Diaz.

The knife dropped to the ground. Phil calmly stooped and picked it up, while the clown was nursing his wrist and groaning.

Several performers, realizing that something out of the ordinary was going on in that corner of the tent, hurried over.

"What's the matter here?"

"Diaz was showing me his knife. It's a beauty, isn't it?" answered Phil, with a pleasant smile. "I think, however, it is a little too pretty for a circus. Were I in your place, Diaz, I should keep it in my trunk else someone may steal it."

The lad coolly raised the lid of the trunk, dropping the knife in. The others, not noting that the clown was hurt, and that his wrist had been twisted by the Circus Boy almost to the breaking point, turned back to their own corners and continued their labors preparatory to entering the ring.

"Mr. Diaz," said Phil in a low voice, bending over the clown, "your temper is going to get you into serious trouble one of these fine days. I am sorry I had to hurt you. But let me tell you one thing. If you attack me again I shall be compelled to give you the worst licking you ever had in your life. Put that in one of your fool caps that you throw around the arena, so you won't forget it. Behave yourself and you will find that I am a pretty good friend."

CHAPTER XII

TRYING OUT A NEW ACT

"Well, Dimples, I hope you and I do not make sad exhibitions of ourselves this evening."

"I hope not, Phil. I am sure you will not, but I am not so sure of myself."

The afternoon performance had passed off without incident, save that the performers had given a much better show than usual. Everyone felt fresh and strong after his Sunday rest.

It was now evening. The band was playing its loudest, the clowns were fast and furious in their fun, and the animals out in the menagerie tent were doing their part toward raising a din that might have been heard at least half a mile away.

Phil Forrest had already been in for his trapeze act, and after changing his costume had come out again for the bareback riding number, to which he always looked forward with pleasurable anticipation.

At the same time Little Dimples, the star female bareback rider, had come up and joined him and the two fell to talking, as they always did whenever the opportunity presented itself.

Long ago the circus woman had constituted herself the "mother of the Circus Boys," as she expressed it. She always insisted on doing their sewing for them, helped them to plan their costumes and gave them friendly advice on all occasions.

The act which they were entering the ring to perform on this particular evening was a new one. The two had been practicing it since the beginning of the season--practicing in secret that they might put it on as a surprise to Mr. Sparling.

This was what is known as a "brother and sister act." That is, the strong man and woman proposed to perform on the back of the same horse, and at the same time.

The brother and sister act was not a new act by any means, but they had added ideas of their own to it until it had become novel. They had essayed some daring and sensational features which were sure to create a sensation with any audience before which the act was performed.

"It is a small town," said Dimples. "We don't care if we do fall off, do we, Phil, my boy?"

"We most certainly do care. At least, I do. Where's your professional pride, Dimples?" demanded Phil, with an indulgent smile.

"In my feet, I guess," answered the woman, with a merry laugh. "I am making my living with my feet. Were they not so sure, enabling me to stand on the slippery back of a ring horse, I should not be drawing the fine salary that I now have."

Neither would you."

"Here we are at the ring," interrupted Phil. "The audience is applauding us before we begin. They must be expecting something out of the ordinary."

As a matter of fact, the two riders made a very pleasing appearance as they entered the ring. Phil, slender, athletic, manly; Dimples exquisitely dainty, looking almost as fragile as a piece of Dresden china, they were a pair to attract attention anywhere.

The spectators did not even dream that Little Dimples was a married woman, with a son almost as old as Phil Forrest himself.

They kicked off their slippers, chalked their feet, then Phil assisted his companion to the back of the horse.

The band struck up a lively tune, the ringmaster cracked his whip, and Phil leaped to the back of the ring horse beside Dimples.

"We are off," smiled the lad.

"I hope not," laughed the woman happily.

Further conversation for the moment was interrupted, for the time had arrived to begin their work in earnest. The two threw themselves into a series of graceful positions, neither very difficult nor very dangerous, but to Mr. Sparling, who was watching their performance from a seat directly opposite to them, their work was more attractive than anything of the kind he ever had seen.

The next time they started in, after the brief intermission, Phil and Dimples varied their performance by leaping from the ring horse, then, taking a running start, jumping to the back of the galloping animal. Only once did Phil miss, and Dimples not at all.

She greeted his failure with a merry laugh that goaded the lad to renewed efforts.

"Have you forgotten how to jump?" teased Dimples.

"I'll show you whether I have or not. Keep him up close to the ring curb and stand back as far as you can."

"What are you going to do?" she questioned suspiciously.

"Going to prove to you that I have not forgotten how to jump," answered Phil, with determination.

"Please don't do anything foolish," warned the dainty rider. "It is too early in the season to break your neck. Just think what you would miss were you to do so this early--think what I should miss. Come up here and be sensible--that's a good boy."

The ringmaster paid no attention to their chatter, which was in

tones too low for the audience to catch.

Phil placed the little jumping board in place, upon which the riders step just as they are leaping to the back of the ring horses. Then the lad backed up.

"Keep him up lively," he said to the ringmaster.

All at once the lad started on a brisk run across the sawdust arena.

"Yip!" encouraged Dimples.

"Yip! Yip!" answered Phil.

The lad leaped up into the air just as if he had been hurled there on springs. As he leaped his legs were curled up under him, and his working mate saw that he was not going to land on the back of the horse at all. Still she dared not speak to him, now. She knew that to attract Phil's attention at that moment might mean a bad fall for him, for a performer must have his mind on his work when attempting any dangerous feat.

To the surprise of everyone who witnessed the act, Phil Forrest cleared the back of the ring horse, fairly flying past the astonished eyes of Little Dimples.

He landed lightly well outside of the ring curbing, on the soft turf.

The audience broke out into a roar of applause and a ripple of hand clapping ran over the arena from the appreciative performers. They wholly forgot themselves in their surprise and approval of the feat.

"Wonderful!" breathed Mr. James Sparling. "That boy is worth a thousand dollars a week to any show."

"Have I forgotten how to jump?" demanded the Circus Boy exultingly, as the ring horse slowed down to a walk, Phil stepping along by the side of it looking up into the eyes of Little Dimples.

"Indeed you have not. It was wonderful. Don't you ever dare try it again, however. Why, suppose you had dropped on an iron tent stake? You would have at least been disabled for life."

"I presume I should have been. I happened to know there were no stakes where I landed. I made sure of that before I made the leap."

"You are a wise boy, even if an imprudent one. We try the shoulder stand next, do we not?"

"Yes."

"I haven't the routine in my mind yet. Don't you dare let me fall."

"Supposing we save the shoulder stand until the last. Let's do the somersault first," suggested Phil.

"Very well; I don't care."

The music started and the little couple began their work again.

Dimples sprang up to the hip of the Circus Boy, leaning far out to one side, holding to one of Phil's hands, a very pretty though not perilous feat for a sure-footed ride.

This they varied by throwing themselves into several different poses.

"Now the turn," breathed Phil.

He deftly lifted the little woman down to the horse just in front of himself. Having done so, Phil grasped Dimples firmly about the waist with his strong, muscular young hands.

"If you drop me I'll never speak to you again."

"I shall not drop you. You know the cue?"

"Yes."

The lad nodded to the ringmaster, indicating that the latter was to urge the horse on to a faster gallop.

"Now what are those two children going to do?" wondered the owner of the show. "One is as daring as the other. It's a wonder they have gone along without knocking themselves out. I believe they are going to do a turn."

That was exactly what they were preparing. "Now," said Phil sharply.

The pair rose from the back of the ring horse as one person. They leaped gracefully and deliberately into the air, doubled their legs under them and performed one of the most graceful somersaults that had ever been seen in the Sparling shows, landing lightly and surely on the resined back of the old ring horse.

Dimples sat down, and Phil, dropping lightly to the ground, threw a kiss to the audience.

The spectators, fully appreciating what had been done, went fairly wild in their enthusiasm.

Mr. Sparling was no less so. In his excitement he forgot time and place and ran into the ring, where he threw an arm about Phil Forrest, giving him a fatherly hug.

Dimples pouted prettily.

"That's what I call partiality," she complained.

Mr. Sparling promptly lifted her from the back of her horse,

and stood the blushing little performer on the sawdust by the side of Phil.

How the spectators did applaud, many standing up in their seats waving hats and handkerchiefs in their excitement and enthusiasm!

Mr. Sparling was always doing these little, intensely human things, not with any idea of winning applause, but out of sheer big-heartedness. They did much toward spreading the reputation of the Sparling show and popularizing it as well.

"Ladies and gentlemen," announced the showman when quiet had once more been restored, "you will pardon me for interrupting the performance, but as the owner of the show I want to say a few words on behalf of my star performers, Little Dimples and Master Phil Forrest."

The audience interrupted him with a cheer.

"The act which you have just witnessed is as great a surprise to me as it could possibly have been to you. It is the first time these two performers ever attempted it in public. I might say, also, that it is the first time to my own knowledge that any performers in the world ever succeeded in getting away with a feat of that sort. I thank you for your approval. The performance will now proceed."

After the applause which this little speech elicited had died away the band once more began to play.

Phil and Dimples commenced a series of acts, jumping from and to the back of the horse whose speed was increased for the purpose.

In the next rest Dimples called the attention of her associate to the clown Diaz, who was not far from them at the moment.

Dimples had been in the show business so long that her intuition had become very keen. Nothing of consequence happened under the big top, or beneath the low-roofed dressing tents, that she did not know of, or at least surmise. Especially keen was she in all matters relating to Phil Forrest and Teddy Tucker, and her interest had in many instances served to save the lads from unpleasant consequence.

"I don't like that fellow, Phil," Dimples remarked, referring to Diaz.

"Why not?"

"I think he is a bad man."

"I hope not. He is impulsive and--"

"Revengeful and ugly," finished Dimples.

"As I said, he is impulsive, like all of his race."

"What has been going on with you lately, Phil?"

"I don't understand what you mean?"

"Oh, yes, you do."

"You mean with regard to Diaz?"

"That's what I mean. Have you had any trouble?"

"We had a slight disagreement," admitted the lad.

"Tell me about it."

"Wait! There goes the music."

The ringmaster's whip cracked its warning and the gray horse started at a slow gallop. Phil was up beside his companion with agility and grace. The first round or two they stood poised on the horse, while Phil related briefly what had taken place between himself and Diaz.

"Come, aren't you two going to get to work?" demanded the ringmaster.

"You attend to your own work. We'll look out for ours," snapped Dimples.

"Yes, and if you think you can do better just come up and try," added Phil, with a good-natured laugh. "Up, Dimples!"

He threw her lightly to his shoulders, on which the woman stood poised, making as graceful and pretty a picture as had ever been seen in a circus ring. Fragile as she was, it seemed as if Phil were all too slender to support her weight.

The act brought a whirlwind of applause.

"You look out for him, Phil. I--"

"Jump, Dimples!"

The ring horse had suddenly stumbled, its nose plowing up the sawdust in a cloud.

Phil, with rare presence of mind, lifted the feet from his shoulders and hurled the girl far from him.

"Land on your feet!" he shouted, then Phil plunged off, head first.

CHAPTER XIII

A NARROW ESCAPE

Thanks to Phil's presence of mind, Dimples had landed lightly on her feet well outside the ring curbing. Had the lad held to her ankles even a second too long the result must have been serious, if not fatal, for Dimples would have been hurled to the ground

head first.

As it was, Phil gave her a lift, enabling her to double and "ball," a circus term meaning to curl one's feet up under the body, then straighten them as needed to give the body balance either in turning a somersault or in falling.

In doing so, however, Phil had had no thought for his own safety. He plunged forward over the head of the ring horse, striking the ground on his head and face.

The force of his fall had been broken somewhat by his quickly throwing out his hands in front of him and relaxing the muscles of his body. Circus performers soon learn how to fall--how to make the best of every situation with which they are confronted. Despite this, his fall had been a severe and dangerous one.

"There, he has done it! I knew he would," cried Mr. Sparling, rushing to the ring. Quick as he was, Dimples was ahead of him. She leaped the ring curbing and dropped down beside him, not caring for the dust and the dirt that soiled her pretty costume.

"Phil! Phil!" she cried.

Phil did not answer at the moment.

"Is he hurt--is he killed?" demanded Mr. Sparling excitedly.

"Of course he is hurt. Can't you see he is?" answered Dimples testily.

She turned the boy over and looked into his face. The dirt was so ground into the handsome, boyish face as to make it scarcely recognizable.

"Lift him up. Get some of the attendants to carry him back!" commanded the woman impatiently.

"No, no!" protested Phil in a muffled voice, for his mouth was full of sawdust and dirt. "I'm all right. Don't worry about me."

"He's all right," repeated the showman. "I'll help you up, Phil."

Phil, like the plucky performer that he was, declined their offers of assistance and struggled to his feet. He was dizzy and staggered a little, but after a moment succeeded in overmastering his inclination to faint.

A fleck of blood on his lips showed through makeup and sawdust.

"I'm all right. Don't worry about me," he said, with a forced smile.

Dimples sought to brush the dirt from his face with her handkerchief, but he put her aside gently, and, with a low bow, threw a kiss to the audience.

Their relief was expressed in a roar of applause.

Phil staggered over to where the ring horse still lay near the center of the ring and knelt down beside it, examining the leg that was doubled up under the animal.

The ringmaster cracked his whip lash as a signal for the animal to get up, but the faithful old horse, despite its efforts to rise, was unable to do so.

"What is the matter with him?" demanded Mr. Sparling.

"Jim has broken a leg, I think," answered Phil sadly. "Too bad, too bad!"

The lad patted the head of the horse and ran his fingers through the grey mane. Tears stood in Phil Forrest's eyes, for he had ridden this horse and won most of his triumphs on its resined back during the past three years.

"Dimples, I guess we have ridden Jim for the last time," said Phil in a low voice. "Hadn't you better start the other acts, Mr. Sparling. The audience will become uneasy."

"Yes, yes," answered the showman, waving his hand to the band, a signal that they were to play and the show to go on as usual. "Are you sure, Phil--sure Jim has not merely strained the leg?"

"I am sure. He never will perform again."

Dimples brushed a hand across her eyes.

"I shall cry when I get back to my dressing tent. I know I shall," she said, with a tremor in her voice that she strove to control.

Then Dimples smiled bravely, waving a hand at the audience, though her heart was sad.

"What had we better do with him, Phil?"

"We can do nothing at present--not until the show is ended. Then, there is only one thing to do."

"You mean he will have to be--"

"Yes, Dimples, he will have to be shot," answered Phil.

"But the audience?"

"Have a couple of attendants come in here and pretend to be working over Jim. That will make the audience think the animal's foot is injured rather than fatally hurt," suggested Phil Forrest.

"A good idea," said Mr. Sparling, giving the necessary orders.

Tell them not to disturb the spot, not trample it down.

"Why?" questioned the showman in surprise.

"I'll tell you later. I have my own reasons."

Phil motioned to Teddy to approach.

"Sit down here in the ring and watch the horse and the men around him," directed the Circus Boy. "I'll tell you why later."

The show went on with a snap and dash. Meanwhile, Phil, his clothes torn, his face grimy with dirt, started down the concourse toward the pad room, hand in hand with Little Dimples.

Their progress was a triumphal one so far as the audience was concerned, for the people cheered them all the way and until the slender riders had disappeared behind the crimson curtain just beyond the bandstand.

Phil quietly washed the dirt from his face, and pulling on his street clothes over his ring costume, started to reenter the arena.

At that moment Mr. Sparling came hurrying in. The two met in the pad room.

"Phil, how did that accident happen?" demanded the showman.

"You saw it, did you not, Mr. Sparling?"

"Yes. But I was unable to understand how it occurred."

"That is exactly what is bothering me," answered the lad, with a peculiar smile that the owner of the show was not slow to catch.

"You suspect something?"

"I suspect I got a bump that I shan't forget soon," laughed the Circus Boy. "It is a wonder I did not break my neck."

"You undoubtedly saved Dimples' life at the risk of your own. You are the pluckiest lad--no, I'll say the pluckiest _man_ I have ever known."

"Don't make me blush, Mr. Sparling."

"Nevertheless, I wish you wouldn't take chances on that act again. Give the audience the same old act and they will be satisfied with that."

"Didn't you like the act?"

"Like it?"

"Yes."

"It was the finest exhibition of its kind that I ever saw. I hope neither the Ringlings, nor Barnum and Bailey, nor any of the big shows get a peep at that act."

"Why?"

"Because were they to do so I would be sure to lose my little star performers right in the middle of the season," laughed the owner.

"Oh, I hardly think so. I do not wish to leave this show. Had it not been for you I should still be doing chores for my board and clothes back in Edmeston. Now wouldn't that be fine?"

"Very," grinned the showman.

"Whatever I have accomplished I have you to thank for."

"You mean you owe to your own brightness and cleverness. No, Phil, you are a boy who would have succeeded anywhere. They can't keep you down--no, not even were they to sit on you."

"If Fat Marie, with her five hundred and odd pounds, were to sit on me, I rather think I would be kept down," answered the Circus Boy, with a hearty laugh in which Mr. Sparling joined uproariously.

"What is Teddy doing out in the ring?"

"I left him there to keep an eye on the injured horse."

"Why, Phil?"

"Until I could get back and make an examination."

"Very well; I want to see you after you have done so."

"I will look you up."

With that Phil hurried out into the arena. None of the spectators appeared to recognize the lad in his street clothes. Besides, he tried to avoid observation. He might have been one of the spectators, except that he picked his way, among the ropes and properties down through the center, where the public were not allowed to go.

"The rest of you may go," said Phil, reaching the ring where Jim lay breathing heavily. "Thank you for easing off old Jim. I know he appreciates it."

Jim looked up pleadingly as Phil bent over him, patting the animal on his splendid old gray head.

The attendants went about their duties.

"How'd this happen, Phil?" questioned Teddy.

"I fell off; that's what happened."

"Yes, I know you did, but there's more to it. I wonder if it's got anything to do with the loss of my egg?"

"I guess not."

"You guess not? Well, I know something, Phil."

"I should hope you do."

"I mean about this accident."

Phil gazed at his companion keenly.

"What do you know?"

"Look here," said Teddy, pointing to a depression in the sawdust arena.

Phil bent over, examining the spot closely. When he rose, his lips were tightly compressed and his face was pale.

"Don't mention this to anyone, Teddy. Promise me?"

" 'Course I won't tell. Why should I? But I found out about it, didn't I?"

"Yes; at least you have made a pretty good start in that direction. I shall have to tell Mr. Sparling. It would not be right to keep this information from him."

"N-n-o-o. Then maybe he'll organize a posse to hunt for my egg."

"Oh, hang your old egg!"

The Roman chariot races were on, the rattle of the wheels, the shouts of the drivers drowning the voices of the two boys.

"Teddy, you'll have to get back and change your clothes. The performance is about over. That makes me think. I have on my ring clothes under this suit and I must hurry back to my bath and my change."

The performance closed and the rattle and bang of tearing down the big white city had begun. The boys were engaged in packing their trunks now, as were most of their fellow performers.

"What's that?" demanded Teddy, straightening up suddenly.

"Somebody fired a shot," answered another performer.

Phil knew what it meant.

A bullet had ended the sufferings of the faithful old ring horse off under the big top. The Circus Boy turned away, with a blinding mist in his eyes.

"Poor old Jim!" he groaned.

Off under the women's dressing tent another pair of ears had heard and understood, and Little Dimples, burying her head in her hands wept softly.

"Poor old Jim!" she, too, murmured.

CHAPTER XIV

THE PILOT GETS A SURPRISE

The happiness of the day had been marred by the accident, but, like true circus men, all hands took the disaster in the matter-of-fact manner characteristic of their kind.

The show people, in couples and singly, took their way to the river, where they boarded the boats. Already wagons were rumbling down on the docks and cages were being quickly shunted into position for their journey down the river that night.

Everything moved with as much method as if the show had been traveling in this way from the beginning of the season.

The performers were enjoying the novel experience of river traveling too thoroughly to turn into their berths early. A cold lunch had been spread in the main cabins of the "Marie" and the "River Queen" for the performers, while from the cook tent, baskets had been prepared and sent in for the use of the laborers after they had completed their night's work and finished loading the show.

All this was appreciated, and it was a jolly company that lined the tables in the two larger boats. Leather upholstered seats were built into the sides of the cabin, and with mouths and hands full, the circus people soon took possession of the seats, where they ate and chatted noisily.

"Funny thing about Jim," said one of the performers. "What do you suppose made him fall, Mr. Miaco?"

"I don't know. Probably for the same reason that anyone falls."

"What is that?"

"Stumbled over something, I guess."

"Hey, Teddy, what ailed the ring horse?" called a voice as the Circus Boy sauntered in and espying the tables made a dive for them.

"I guess he was hungry," mumbled Teddy, his mouth full of ham sandwich.

"Hungry?"

"Yes."

"What makes you think that?"

" 'Cause he bit the dust."

A general groan was heard in the cabin.

"Throw him overboard!"

"I know a better way to punish him for that ghastly joke."

"How?"

"Take the food away from him, tie him up and make him watch us eat," was the answer.

A shout of laughter greeted the proposition.

The pilot of the "Marie," a heavily bearded man named Cummings, broke out in a loud guffaw.

All eyes were turned upon him.

"I reckon I kin tie him up if you says the word," he volunteered.

"All right; tie him up," shouted the performers, scenting fun.

Teddy eyed the pilot out of the corners of his eyes and placidly munched his sandwich. The pilot, in the meantime, had stepped to the rear end of the cabin, where, from a box of life-preservers he took a piece of Manila rope.

"I believe he is going to do it," said a clown, nudging his companion.

"You mean he is going to try it," answered the other. "Watch for some fun. He thinks Teddy is an easy mark."

"He will be in this case. That fellow, Cummings, is hard as a rail fence. He could handle two of Teddy."

In the meantime Tucker had strolled to the table, from which he took a large sandwich, buttered it well, then returned to his seat, not appearing to observe the pilot's movements at all.

As he sat down the lad was observed to open the sandwich, removing the thin slice of ham and stowing the latter in his coat pocket. Then he sat thoughtfully contemplating the two pieces of buttered bread as if trying to decide whether or not he should eat them.

"Get up, kiddie," said Cummings, grasping the boy by the shoulder. "Get up and take your punishment like a little dear."

Teddy got up, carelessly, indifferently, while the pilot stretched the rope to its full length.

The boy saw that he was in earnest.

Smack!

Quick as a flash Teddy had plastered one half of the sandwich, buttered side in, right over the eyes of Cummings.

Smack!

The second half of the sandwich landed neatly over his mouth, pressed home by a firm fist.

Cummings could not speak, neither could he see. At that moment he was perhaps the most surprised man on the Mississippi River. At least he appeared to be, for he stood still. He stood still just a few seconds too long.

Teddy had seized the rope. With it he made a quick twist about the body of the pilot, taking two turns, then drawing the rope tight and tying it, thus pinioning the hands and arms of the pilot to his sides.

"Yip-yeow!" howled Teddy.

The show people shrieked with delight.

"You'll tie up a Circus Boy, will you?" jeered Teddy.

"You'll have to grow some first. No Rube with a bunch of whiskers on his face like that ever lived who could tie up a real circus man."

Teddy had drawn nearer to impress his words upon the pilot, when all of a sudden the man's hands gripped the lad. The boy never had felt quite so strong a grip on his body. Cummings had not handled a pilot wheel on the Mississippi for thirty years without acquiring some strength in hands and arms.

Teddy, failing to pull away, grappled with his antagonist, all in the best of humor, though his face bore its usual solemn expression.

"Gangway," cried Teddy humorously. "I'm going to give him a bath in the river."

Then began a lively scrimmage. Back and forth the combatants struggled across the cabin floor, the growls of the pilot drowned in the shouts and jeers of the performers.

All at once, Teddy tripped his antagonist and the two went down into a heap, rolling under the main table on which the lunch had been spread.

"Look out for the table!" warned a voice.

"Sit on it, some of you fellows, and hold it down!"

The suggestion came too late. The table suddenly rose into the air, landing upside down with a crash, at one side of the cabin. A moment more and the two combatants were wrestling on roast beef and ham sandwiches, potato salad and various other foods.

"I guess this has gone about far enough," decided Mr. Miaco, the head clown. "We'll have a fight on our hands, first thing we know. If Teddy really gets angry you'll think the 'Sweet Marie' is in the midst of a cyclone."

"The 'Fat Marie,' you mean," corrected a voice.

With the assistance of two others Miaco succeeded in separating the combatants, after which he untied the rope, releasing the pilot.

Teddy was grinning broadly, but Cummings was not. The latter was glowering angrily at his little antagonist.

"Shake?" asked Teddy, extending a hand.

"No, I'm blest if I will! I'll not shake hands with anybody who has insulted me by buttering my face," growled the pilot.

"You'll be better bred if you are well buttered," suggested Teddy.

"Oh, help!" moaned The Fattest Woman on Earth.

"Put him out! Put him out!" howled several voices in chorus.

"Yes, that's the thing! We can stand for some things some of the time, but we won't stand for everything all of the time," added a clown wisely.

Half a dozen performers picked Teddy up bodily, bore him to one of the open windows and dumped him out on the deck.

"Here, what's all this commotion about?" commanded Phil, who, at that moment, came from his cabin to the deck.

"They threw me out," wailed Teddy.

"What for?"

"I made a pun."

"Tell it to me."

Teddy in short, jerky sentences, related what had been done and said. Phil leaned against the rail and shouted.

"I--I don't blame them," he gasped between laughs. "It is a wonder they did not throw you overboard."

"They had better not try it."

"But what about the pilot--what happened to him?"

"May--maybe they have put him out, too."

"You have a way of getting into trouble, Teddy. Mr. Cummings will love you for what you have done to him, I can well imagine."

"About as much as I love him, I guess. He got too bold, Phil. He had to have a lesson and Teddy Tucker was the boy who had to teach it to him. Say, go in and gather me a sandwich out of the wreck, will you?"

"Not I. Go and get your own sandwich. I'm going to see Mr. Sparling in his cabin. He has sent for me."

Teddy sat out on deck while the others were picking up the table, the dishes and the ruined food. It would not do for Mr. Sparling to come in and see how they had wasted the food he had had prepared for them. The probabilities were that they would get no more, were he to do so. Teddy watched the proceedings narrowly from the safe vantage point of the deck.

In the meantime Phil had gone to Mr. Sparling's cabin, where the showman was checking up the day's receipts.

"A pretty good day, Phil," smiled Mr. Sparling.

"I am glad to hear that, sir."

"Two thousand dollars in the clear, as the result of our two performances today. Do you know of any other business that would pay as much for the amount invested, eh, Phil?"

"I do not, sir."

"You see, it is a pretty good business to be in after all, provided it is run on business principles, at the same time treating one's employees like human beings."

"Yes, sir."

"How would you like to have an interest in a show?"

"I am going to, someday. It may be a long time yet before I have earned money enough, but I shall if I live," said the Circus Boy quietly but with determination.

"So you shall. I intend to have a talk with you on this subject, one of these days. What I wanted to talk with you about is Jim's loss. I am glad it wasn't your ring horse, Phil. Have you anything to say about the animal breaking his leg?"

"I have."

"Out with it."

"Somebody is to blame for that accident."

"How?"

"Someone planned that accident."

"Explain!"

"Teddy and myself examined the ring, that is, Teddy already had done so before I returned, and he discovered something--we both decided what must have happened."

"Yes," urged the showman as Phil paused.

"A round hole about a foot deep had been dug in the ring. This had been covered with a shingle and the sawdust sprinkled over to hide the shingle. It was a deliberate attempt to do someone an injury."

Mr. Sparling eyed him questioningly.

"Are you sure?"

"As sure as I can be. Jim didn't happen to step on the shingle until we were doing the pyramid, then of course something happened. It is a wonder that neither Little Dimples nor myself was injured."

"Phil, we simply must find out who is responsible for this dastardly work."

"Yes, sir."

"And when we do--when we do--"

"What then, Mr. Sparling!"

The showman was opening and closing his fingers nervously.

"Don't ask me," he replied in a low, tense voice. "I don't want to see the man. I should do something I would be sorry for all the rest of my life. Good night, Phil."

Phil Forrest left the cabin and strode thoughtfully away to his own room, where he was soon in bed. Phil, however, did not sleep very well that night.

CHAPTER XV

AN UNWELCOME VISITOR

The boats of the Sparling fleet had been moving steadily downstream for several hours, their passengers, in the majority of instances, sound asleep, lulled by the gentle motion and the far away "spat, spat, spat," of the industrious paddle wheel at the stern of each craft.

Teddy had prudently kept away from the main cabin for the rest of the evening; when Phil turned in, Teddy was sleeping sweetly. His active part in the affair in the cabin had not caused him any loss of sleep.

With the pilot, Cummings, however, matters had been different. Mr. Cummings had been steadily at the wheel of the "Marie" since the boats had sailed shortly after one o'clock in the morning.

The pilot's temper had suffered as the result of his experience in the cabin, and the jeers and laughter of the circus people had not added to his peace of mind. At intervals he would break out into a tirade of invective and threats against Teddy Tucker, who had so humiliated him.

"I'll get even with that little monkey-face! They ought to put him in the monkey cage where he belongs," growled the pilot, giving the wheel a three-quarter turn to keep the boat from driving her prow into the bank, for which he had been steering to avoid a hidden sand bar.

"I'll tell the manager tomorrow, that if he doesn't keep that boy away from me, I'll take the matter into my own hands and give that kid a trouncing that will last him till we get to New Orleans."

The darkness of the night, just before the dawn, hung over the broad river. Doors and windows of the pilot house were thrown open so that the wheelman might get a clear view on all sides.

All at once Cummings seemed to feel some presence near him. He thought he caught the sound of a footfall on the deck. To make sure he left the wheel for a few seconds, peering out along the deck, on both sides of the pilot house.

He saw no one. The air was filled with a black pall of smoke from the "Marie's" funnel, the smoke settling over the boat, wholly enveloping her from her stack to the stern paddle wheel.

"Huh!" grunted the pilot, returning to his duties.

Yet his ears had not deceived him. Something was near him, a strange shape, the like of which never had been seen on the deck of the "Fat Marie", in all her long service on the Mississippi.

"If that fool boy comes nosing around here I'll throw him overboard--that's what I'll do," threatened Cummings. "I'll show him he can't fool with the pilot of the finest steamboat of the old line. I--"

The pilot suddenly checked himself and peered out to starboard.

"Wha--what?" he gasped.

Something darkened the doorway. What he now saw was a strange, grotesque shape that looked like a shadow itself in the uncertain light of the early morning.

"Get out of here!" bellowed the pilot, the cold chills running up and down his spine.

The most frightful sound that his ears had ever heard, broke suddenly on the quiet of the Mississippi night.

"It's the lion escaped!"

Cummings grabbed a stout oak stick that lay at hand--the stick that now and then, when battling with a stiff current, he used to insert between the spokes of the steering wheel to give him greater leverage.

With a yell he brought the stick down on the head of the strange beast. The roar or bray of the animal stopped suddenly.

Whack! came the echo from the club.

Cummings sprang back. He slammed the pilot-house door in the face of the beast, and closed the windows with a bang that shook the pilot house. In his excitement the pilot rang in a signal to the engineer for full speed astern.

About that time something else occurred.

With a terrific crash one of the windows of the pilot house was shattered, pieces of glass showering in upon the pilot like a sudden storm of hail.

Crash!

Another window fell in a shower about him. He tried to get the door on the opposite side of the pilot house open, but locked it instead and dropped the key on the floor.

All this time the "Fat Marie's" paddle wheel was backing water and the craft, now swung almost broadside to the stream, was working her way over toward the Iowa shore.

Bang!

A section of the pilot-house door fell shattering on the inside, and what sounded like a volley of musketry, rattled against the harder woodwork of the pilot house itself.

Frightened almost out of all sense, Cummings began groping excitedly for his revolver. At last he found it, more by accident than through any methodical search for it.

The pilot began to shoot. Some of his bullets went through the roof, others through the broken out windows, while a couple landed in the door.

At last the half-crazed Cummings was snapping the hammer on empty chambers. He had emptied his revolver without hitting anything more than wood and water.

The fusillade from the outside still continued.

By this time the din had begun to arouse the passengers on the boat. Phil Forrest was the first to spring up. He shook Teddy by the shoulder, but, being unable to awaken his companion, jerked the boy out of bed and let him drop on the floor.

"Get a net! What's the matter down there!" yelled Teddy.
"Hey, hey, did the mule kick me? Oh, that you Phil?
What's the row--what has happened?"

"I don't know. Come on out. Something has gone wrong.
Hear those shots?"

"Wow! Trouble! That's me! I knew I couldn't dream about angels without something breaking loose."

Phil had thrown the door open and bounded out to the deck. Just as he did so the pilot leaped from the front window of the pilot house, climbed over the rail and dropped to the deck below. The volleying, the thunderous blows still continued.

A loud bray attracted their attention to the other side of the boat.

"What's that?" demanded Phil, starting off in that direction.

"It's January! It's January!" howled Teddy Tucker. "I would know that sweet voice if I heard it in the jungles of Africa. Where is he?"

"Over here somewhere. Come on. I can't imagine what has happened."

"The animals have escaped. There's a lion on the hurricane deck!" they heard a voice below shout in terrified tones.

"Do you think that's it?" called Phil.

"Lion, nothing! Didn't I tell you I knew that voice? There he is now. See him hand out the hoofs at the pilot house. He must have a grudge against Cummings. I know. He's paying the fellow back for trying to tie me up."

"But--but, how did he ever get up here?"

"Go it, January! Kick the daylights out of him! I'll give you a whole peck of sugar if you kick the house into the river, pilot and all."

"Whoa! Whoa, January!" shouted Phil.

The donkey, for it was January himself, and not a savage beast that was acting the part of a battering ram and rapidly demolishing the pilot house, paused for a second; then, moving to a new position, he began once more hammering at the structure.

"How did he ever get up here, Teddy?"

"I don't know. I know I am glad he did, that's all. Let him kick."

"I'm going to try to catch him."

"Keep away, Phil. He'll have you in the river. He has a fit. Wait till he comes out of it."

"Why, the boat is moving backwards," cried Phil.

"No!"

"Yes, it is."

"Maybe January has kicked the machinery out of gear."

The circus people were by this time on deck, and, like Teddy and Phil, many of them were in their pajamas. They had heard the cry, "the animals have escaped," and many of the people were gazing apprehensively about.

"It's all right," shouted Teddy. "It is only January, taking his morning exercise."

About that time Phil, who had run around to the other side of the pilot house, discovered that it was empty. There was no pilot there.

Understanding came to him instantly. January had either kicked or frightened Cummings out.

"The boat is running wild!" he called. "Find the pilot or we shall be on the shore before we know it."

Phil did not wait for them to find the pilot. Instead, he climbed in through one of the broken windows and grasped the wheel.

"I've got to stop this going astern first of all," he decided.

He could see the banks now, and they seemed perilously near in the faint morning light. The other boats of the fleet were steaming up in answer to the signals of distress that Cummings had blown in his excitement.

"What is it? Are you sinking?" called a voice through a megaphone from the deck of the "River Queen."

"No, we are all right," answered Phil, leaning out of the window.

"You'll be high and dry on the Iowa shore if you don't watch sharp. Where are you going?"

"Don't know. Keep out of the way or we're liable to run you down."

Phil grabbed a bell pull and gave it a violent jerk. The engines stopped suddenly, to the Circus Boy's great delight. January had ceased his bombardment and now stood with head thrust through one of the broken windows, gazing in inquiringly at Phil Forrest.

"If one bell stopped the engine, another bell should be the signal to go ahead," reasoned the lad, giving the bell pull two quick jerks. He was right. The machinery started and he could hear the big paddle wheel beating the river into a froth.

The lower deck was in an uproar. Men were shouting and running about, trying to discover what animals had escaped, as the pilot insisted that the hurricane deck was alive with them.

"Get that pilot up here, if you have to drag him. I don't know where the channel is, and I am liable to put the whole outfit aground any minute," shouted Phil Forrest. "Teddy, never mind that idiotic donkey. We're in a fix. Get downstairs, at one jump, and see that the pilot is brought up here lively."

"I'll fetch him. You watch me," answered the irrepressible Teddy, starting off on a run.

January had all at once grown very meek. He stood gazing thoughtfully off over the river.

"What is the trouble here?" roared Mr. Sparling dashing up to the pilot house at that moment.

"That is exactly what I have been trying to find out," answered the Circus Boy.

"What, _Phil?_"

"Yes, it's Phil."

"What are you doing in there?"

"Steering the boat."

"Piloting the--where is the pilot?"

"Somewhere below. I have sent Teddy after him. You see, January was trying to kick the pilot house off the boat and into the river. The pilot, thinking the animals had escaped, fled. When I came up this craft was traveling astern and January was making a sieve of this little house. I have got the 'Marie' going forward, but I may run her aground if he doesn't come along pretty soon."

Mr. Sparling reached the companionway in two bounds, and, leaping to the lower deck, caught the pilot by the coat collar, shaking off the two circus men who had hold of Cummings.

"You get up to that pilot house or you'll be in the worst fix in your whole river career." Mr. Sparling accompanied the words with a violent push that sent the pilot headlong toward the stairway. But the showman was by the fellow's side by the time he had gotten to his feet, and began assisting him up the companionway, while Teddy Tucker followed, prodding the pilot in the back with a clenched fist.

Into the pilot house they hurled the man, Cummings.

"Now, you steer! If it had not been for that boy we might have lost our whole equipment. I don't care anything about your old boat, but I'm blest if I am going to let a fool pilot wreck us--a pilot who is afraid of a donkey."

"I'll quit this outfit tomorrow," growled Cummings. "I kin pilot steamers, but I can't fight a menagerie and a pack of boys with the very Old Nick in them. Get away from that wheel!" he commanded, thrusting Phil aside.

Mr. Sparling had him by the collar once more.

"You do that again, and I'll take it out of you right here!" declared the showman savagely.

"I'll bet he's the fellow who stole my egg," declared Teddy, eyeing the pilot sternly.

CHAPTER XVI

BETRAYED BY A SNEEZE

"How did that beast get up here?" demanded Mr. Sparling.

"Who, Cummings?" asked Teddy innocently.

"No, no! The donkey."

"Oh! Maybe he came up through the smoke stack. If you will look at it you may find donkey tracks on the inside of the stack."

"That will do, that will do, young man."

It was found upon investigation that January had gnawed his halter until only a thin strand held it together, which was easy for the donkey to break. Then he began an investigation of the boat, ending by his climbing the broad staircase and frightening the pilot.

Next morning the pilot house looked as though it had been through a shipwreck. The whole craft, in fact the entire fleet, was laughing at the expense of Cummings, who now kept to himself, studiously avoiding the other people. January was tied up with a dog chain after that, and was not heard from again during any trip of that season; that is, beyond his regular acts in the sawdust arena.

The next day Phil Forrest began his investigation in earnest. He knew that Mr. Sparling looked to him to discover who had caused so much trouble in the show, besides which, Phil took a personal interest because of the attempt that had been made on the lives of Little Dimples and himself.

Teddy suggested that he go through the pilot's belongings, expressing the firm belief that they would find the ostrich egg were they to do so.

Phil consulted Little Dimples, that afternoon, as to her opinion of the occurrences of the past week, but the star bareback rider could shed no light on them, beyond the fact that certain people with whom Phil had had difficulties might bear watching.

"That's what I think," answered the Circus Boy. "I do not like to accuse anyone unjustly, but I have these suspicions of the Spanish clown."

"Have you mentioned your suspicion to Mr. Sparling, Phil?"

"No."

"Do you intend to do so?"

"Not unless I find some facts to support my suspicion."

"You will get to the bottom of the mystery, I am sure," smiled the woman.

"I am not so sure. Why do you think so?"

"Because you are one of the cleverest boys I ever knew, that's why. I should hate to have you on my track if I were guilty of any particular crime that you were trying to run down. I should expect to land in jail, and I think I should come straight to you and give myself up," added the woman with a merry laugh.

"I wish I were all that you think I am, Dimples."

"You are. You saved my life again yesterday. I'm going to pay you back, however. Someday, when you fall overboard, Little Dimples is going to jump right in and rescue you--haul you out by the hair of your head--"

"You can't, it is cut too short."

"Then I will pull you out by an ear."

"I shall make it my business to fall in, then, at the first opportunity," laughed Phil. "It would be worthwhile."

Dimples gave him a playful tap.

"You can turn a compliment as well as you can do a turn in the ring, can't you Phil Forrest?"

Despite their narrow escape from serious accident, Phil and Dimples went through their double act in the ring that day and evening with perfect confidence. Previous to going on, Phil had had a ring attendant go over the sawdust circle on his hands and knees, making a careful examination of it, to be sure that the ring had not been tampered with.

>From that time on until the act went on, the ring was watched, though Phil did not believe the miscreant would attempt to lay another trap for him so soon. Still, he took nothing for granted.

That night after the performance, the air being warm and balmy, the Circus Boy strolled out on the lot, sitting down on a little knoll to think matters over. There was plenty of time, for the boat would not leave for two or three hours, and Phil wanted to be alone.

Lights were twinkling on the lot like fireflies. There was shouting and singing, but little of this conveyed itself to Phil, for his mind was on other things.

All at once he pricked up his ears. He caught the sound of running footsteps.

"Someone is coming this way," he muttered. "I wonder what that means? Surely none of the circus people would come here. They would go around by the road."

The lad concealed himself behind the knoll, peering over the top of it. He resolved not to show himself until he had discovered the identity of the newcomers.

They proved to be two men who halted a short distance beyond him, and began to converse in guarded tones. It was so dark that Phil could scarcely distinguish their figures and their voices were pitched so low that it was impossible for him to hear what they were saying.

"This looks queer," Phil muttered. "I wish I could hear what they are talking about. Perhaps they are town fellows who have been chased off the lot because they were in the way. At any rate, I'm going to try to find out what they are up to. Hello, they are coming right over here."

Phil crouched down behind the knoll and listened. The men turned slowly and came toward him. All at once one of them stumbled on the very knoll behind which he was secreted.

The man uttered a growl.

"Come, sit down," he said to his companion.

"We better go on," answered the other.

"No hurry. We've got all the time in the world. If we miss the boat we can swim. That was a narrow escape. In a minute more we'd had that wagon fixed so they would never have got off the lot with it."

"Hello," muttered Phil under his breath. "Something surely is going on here. One of the voices I have heard before, and the other I seem to recognize. I believe that first fellow belongs to the show. I am almost sure of it."

"You think the fellow suspects?"

"The tall one does. But he doesn't know whom he suspects."

"We have to take care."

"Yes."

"But we will get both before the end of the season."

"You bet we will. I have a plan that--"

"What is it?"

"It is this."

Phil had buried his head in the grass and compressed his body into the smallest possible space that he might avoid discovery. He could hear the two men breathe, and he reasoned that they

might hear him as well.

"You know the big net?"

"You mean the one over which the flying four perform?"

"Yes."

"What about it?"

"It can be fixed."

"How?"

"By weakening some of the strands on each side."

"That is good, but suppose someone noticed."

"Not if it is done right. I don't mean to do it all at once. I'll doctor one or two strands every day until the net is so weakened that it won't hold."

"Yes, but how will you do this so no one will see?"

"I'll tell you. After the act is over they roll the net up and carry it out. It is dumped just outside the pad room, where it is picked up by one of the property wagons later in the evening. It's in the same place every night."

"I think somebody may see us do it."

"No danger. Keep cool; that's all. We'll get even with those fellows. We have got to before we can carry out the other plans we have talked over. They are too sharp. Sooner or later they will get wise to us, and we've got to get them out of the way before we go any further. The work must be done in a natural sort of way, so that no suspicion is aroused."

"Yes, that's so. But what about the others? You want to hurt them, too?"

"I don't care, so long as we get the right one, how many get their bumps."

"That's right. But only one of them is on trapeze. What you do about other?"

"It is the tall one that I want most. He's got to be put out of the running. It won't kill him, but it will lay him up in a hospital for the rest of the season, and that's enough for us."

"Yes."

"The other one will be taken care of after we get through with the first. The small fellow is sharp, but he can't see beyond his nose. It's easy to fool him."

"The fiends!" muttered Phil. "I believe they are plotting

against Teddy and me. I have a good notion to sail into them right here and settle it. I believe I could whip the two of them. I--"

At that instant a blade of grass tickled Phil's nose. He raised his head quickly.

"What's that?" exclaimed one of the plotters.

"I heard nothing."

"You didn't? Well, I did. There's someone around here and close by us."

"Perhaps it was a squirrel in the grass. There is no one here."

The blade of grass had done its work, however. Phil tried hard to control himself, but he knew he was going to sneeze.

All at once the sneeze came, louder than he had ever sneezed before.

The men leaped to their feet in sudden alarm.

CHAPTER XVII

EAVESDROPPERS!

"Look out!"

"There he is!"

"Grab him!"

Phil had bounded to his feet, realizing that he could no longer conceal himself from them. As he did so, both men sprang toward him, the Circus Boy eluding them by a leap to one side.

The men made a rush for him. At first Phil was inclined to stand his ground and give battle, but he reasoned that, being two to one, the chances were against him and that even if he were not captured, he might sustain injuries that would keep him out of the ring.

That was the deciding factor with Phil Forrest. Although he would have preferred facing his enemies, he whirled instead and started on a run, with both men pursuing him at top speed.

"He's out-running us. He'll get away!" cried one of the men. "Run, run! Run for all you're worth!"

But they might as well have spared their effort. Phil was fleet of foot, and after getting a slight lead over them he turned sharply to his right, leaped a fence and lay down.

The men quickly discovered that they had lost their prey. Then they became alarmed.

"Get out of here, quick! He will be following us!"

The men turned and ran swiftly in an opposite direction.

"Do you think he recognized us?"

"I don't know. We can tell by the way he acts when we get back; that is if he doesn't follow us now. We had better separate and go back to the lot. From there we can go along with the wagons and not be noticed. Don't let him bluff you."

"Have no fear for me."

The plotters separated and cautiously made their way back to the lot where they were soon lost among the crowd of men at work taking down the tent.

"I believe one of those two men was Diaz," declared Phil, as he once more tried to place the voice that he had seemed to recognize. "They have given me the slip, too. I know what I'll do. I will hurry back to the boat and when Diaz returns I will face him and make him betray himself if I can. I shall have him then."

Having decided on his course of action, Phil struck off at a trot across the field. He soon reached a back street of the village, and from there ran at full speed to the docks.

All was activity here. The lad cast a quick glance about, though he did not expect to find the man for whom he was looking. Without pausing in his rapid gait he ran up the companionway to the upper deck, where he intended to watch at the rail for the arrival of Diaz from the lot.

As he leaned over the rail he felt someone stir near him. Glancing up quickly, the Circus Boy started almost guiltily. There, beside him, sat Diaz on a camp stool with his feet on the steamer's rail, calmly watching the loading operations on the deck below.

"Good evening, Mr. Diaz," said Phil quickly recovering his self-possession.

Diaz uttered an unintelligible grunt, but did not deign to turn his head.

"Hey, Phil, is that you?" called the voice of Teddy from further down the deck.

"Yes," answered Phil, rising and moving aft. "How long have you been here?"

"About an hour."

"Do you know who is sitting over there?"

"Over where?"

"There by the rail?"

"Sure, I know. That's our old friend Diaz," grinned Teddy.

"How long has he been there?"

"He came in when I did."

"An hour ago?"

"Yes."

Phil was perplexed.

"I do not understand it at all."

"Don't understand what?"

"Something that occurred this evening."

Teddy's curiosity was aroused.

"What is it all about, Phil?"

"I should prefer not to talk about it here, Teddy. I will tell you after we get to bed and there is no one about to overhear us. There is a rascally plot on foot."

"A plot?"

"Yes. I know very little about it, but I know enough to warn me that you and I will have to keep our eyes open or else we shall find ourselves in serious difficulties before we realize it."

"Is that so? Tell me who the plotters are, and I'll turn January loose on them," explained Teddy. "Do you think they are the fellows who stole my egg?"

"I don't know. Where is Mr. Sparling?"

"I haven't seen him since I ran into him and bowled him over off on the lot."

Phil laughed.

"As I have said many times before, you are hopeless, Teddy. I must go now. If you see Mr. Sparling, please let me know, but say nothing to anyone about what I have just told you."

"I won't."

Phil walked back to the point on the deck where he had first stopped to look over the rail, and, drawing up a stool sat down. He began studying the faces of the belated performers who came straggling down to the dock, singly and in pairs. None seemed to be in a hurry; not a face appeared to reflect any excitement. After an hour of this Phil felt sure that all the company had been accounted for.

Mr. Sparling had arrived about twenty minutes earlier, and was

standing on the dock giving orders. As the lad saw the owner enter the boat he turned away and hurried downstairs.

"When you are at liberty, I should like a few moments conversation with you, sir," announced Phil.

"I am at liberty, now, my lad," answered the showman with a smile and a friendly slap on the boy's shoulder.

"I would rather not talk here, Mr. Sparling," answered Phil in a low tone.

"Something doing, eh?"

"There is."

"Is it important that you should talk with me at once, or will a little later on answer the purpose?"

"Later on will do. It is not so urgent as that."

"When the men get these menagerie cages all shifted on deck I will meet you in my cabin. That will be in about twenty minutes, Phil."

"Very well, sir; I will be on hand."

Phil walked away, watched the loading operations for a few minutes, then strolled to the main cabin on the upper deck, where lunch was being served as usual.

The Circus Boy appeared more light-hearted than usual that evening, as he chatted and joked with his friends among the performers. He did not wish the man or men whom he had overheard off on the lot to know that he was the eavesdropper. He felt that he could make better progress in his investigation were they not on their guard.

The pilot, Cummings, was not in the cabin. He had not been seen there since his trouble with Teddy. Despite the pilot's determination to resign, he was still on duty, he and Mr. Sparling having come to a satisfactory understanding.

Teddy was helping himself liberally for the second time since his return from the lot.

"Do you think you will ever be able to satisfy that appetite of yours?" laughed Phil.

"I hope not," answered Teddy solemnly. "That's the only fun in life--that and the donkey."

Just then Mr. Sparling passed through the cabin on the way to his stateroom and office. He gave Phil a significant glance, to which the Circus Boy did not respond. A few minutes later, however, Phil strolled out to the deck. Reaching it he turned quickly and hurried aft, entering the passageway there and going directly to Mr. Sparling's quarters.

"Come in," invited the owner in response to Phil's gentle rap.

The blinds had been drawn up, though the windows were let down into their casings out of sight. Phil noted this in a quick glance.

"Sit down and tell me what has happened, Phil. I am sure you have made some sort of discovery."

"I have and I haven't."

"What do you mean?"

"That I am deeper in the mire than ever."

"Tell me about it."

"While I have made no discoveries that will help us much, I have learned just enough to understand that there is a diabolical plot on foot."

"Against whom?"

"I am not sure, but I think it is against Teddy and myself."

"Is it possible? Who are the plotters?"

"That is the worst of it; I do not know. I wish I did. I thought I had one of the men identified, but I find I am all wrong. I am more at sea than ever."

"Who did you think it was?"

"As long as I am mistaken, why should I accuse anyone?"

"You are right. Have you reason to believe it is someone connected with this show?"

"I am sure that at least one of the men is."

"Then there is more than one in this thing?"

"There are two men. At least I have seen two. There may be more for all I know."

"Now, tell me what it is all about. You haven't said a word regarding this plot yet," urged the showman drawing his chair around the corner of his desk and leaning forward with his hands on his knees.

Phil told how he strolled off into the field adjoining the circus lot, and went on in detail to relate all that had occurred after that. As he proceeded with his story the face of James Sparling grew serious and then stern.

"I presume I should have stood my ground and given battle to them, if for no other reason than to find out who they were," concluded the lad, somewhat ruefully.

"Phil Forrest, you should have done nothing of the sort," answered Mr. Sparling sharply. "You take quite enough risk as it is. You think the plot now is to tamper with the big net?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is it possible that such scoundrels are traveling with the Sparling shows?"

"I wish I did not think so."

"Phil, it is not the man who was responsible for several accidents the first year you were with us, is it?" demanded the showman shrewdly, darting a sharp glance at Phil.

"No, sir," answered the boy flushing a little. "That man is no longer with the show."

"I thought so. Now I have him located."

"The--the man I saw tonight--you know him?" gasped Phil.

"No. I did not mean that. I refer to the fellow who nearly caused your death three years ago."

"Oh!"

"You had some trouble with Diaz a short time ago, did you not?"

Phil was surprised that the showman was aware of this.

"Yes."

"Where is Diaz tonight?" demanded the showman almost sternly.

"In his stateroom, or else out on deck."

"Are you sure?"

Phil nodded.

"What time did he return from the lot?"

"He was here when I went on deck. He came to the boat directly after the performance."

"You are sure of this?"

"I am."

"You are a very shrewd young man, sir," said Mr. Sparling, with a mirthless smile. "However, these guilty men must be found and punished. You think their first efforts will be directed toward the net?"

"Yes, according to what I overheard. I have an idea, however, that they will not do so at once, fearing they may have been recognized, or at any rate that their plans are known to someone else."

"Do you think they recognized you?"

"I do not. I did not speak. I was on the point of doing so, then checked myself."

"Right! You are one in a hundred. I will have a watch kept on the net, and an examination made of it before every performance."

Phil smiled faintly.

"I am not afraid for myself."

"No, that's your greatest failing. You are not afraid of anything and you take very long chances. I hope you will be more cautious in the future. You must be careful, Phil, and you had better caution your partner, Teddy Tucker. Does he know of this?"

"No, but I intend to tell him. He is more interested in the possibility of recovering his egg than in any personal danger to himself or to me," said the Circus Boy with a short laugh.

"Keep your eyes open, and take care of yourself. If we fail to get a clue by the time we get to Des Moines I shall send to St. Louis for the best detective they have and put him on the case. Perhaps it would be best to do so now."

"I think--" began Phil, when his words were arrested by a loud noise just outside the cabin, on the deck.

Mr. Sparling and Phil started up, for the instant not understanding the meaning of the disturbance.

"Wha--what--" gasped the showman.

Phil ran to the window and looked out.

The deck at that point was deserted. He thought he saw a figure dodge into an entrance near the stern of the boat, and looking forward he discovered another disappearing in that direction.

The Circus Boy sprang for the door.

"What is it, what is it?" cried the showman.

"Eavesdroppers!" answered the lad, darting out into the passageway, followed closely by Mr. Sparling.

"You go that way and I'll go this," directed Phil.

CHAPTER XVIII

MAKING A CAPTURE

The two ran down the corridor, Mr. Sparling heading for the forward end, Phil toward the stern.

"There he goes! I see him!" shouted the showman as a figure leaped out to the deck, slamming the door. "We have him now!"

Phil rushed out at the stern and started to run along the starboard side of the boat. As he emerged he caught sight of a figure running toward him, and behind the figure, Mr. Sparling, coming along the deck in great strides.

"Stop! We've got you!" shouted the showman.

Phil spread out his arms as the fleeing one drew near him, then threw them about the fellow, holding him in a firm grip.

"I've got him, Mr. Sparling!"

"Leggo of me! What's the matter with you? Anybody would think this was a high school initiation."

"Teddy," groaned Phil.

"What's that?" demanded the showman jerking Phil and his prisoner over to an open window through which a faint light was showing.

"It is Teddy Tucker, sir," said Phil releasing his hold.

"What does this mean, sir?" demanded the showman in a stern voice.

"That's what I want to know. You fellows chase me around the boat as if I were some kind of a football. It's a wonder one of you didn't kick me. Lucky for you that you didn't, too, I can tell you."

"Teddy, come to my cabin at once. Phil, bring him along, will you?"

"Yes," answered Phil Forrest. Phil was troubled. He could not believe it possible that Teddy was guilty of eavesdropping, and yet the evidence seemed to point strongly in that direction. Taking firm hold of his companion's arm he led him along toward Mr. Sparling's cabin.

"What's all this row about?" growled Teddy.

"That is what I hope you will be able to explain to Mr. Sparling's satisfaction," replied Phil. "However, wait till we get to his cabin."

Phil led Teddy to the door, thrust him in, then followed, closing and locking the door.

"Perhaps we had better close that window this time, sir."

"Yes."

Mr. Sparling drew up and locked the window.

"Sit down!" he commanded, eyeing Teddy keenly.

Teddy sat down dutifully and was about to place his feet on the showman's desk when Phil nudged him.

"Now, sir, what does this mean?"

"What does what mean? I never was any good at guessing riddles."

"What do you mean by eavesdropping at my cabin window?"

"Oh, was that your window?"

"It was and it is. And unless you can offer a satisfactory explanation, something will have to be done. That is one of the things that I shall not tolerate. I can scarcely believe you guilty of such a disgraceful act. Unfortunately, you have admitted it."

"Admitted what?"

"That you were listening at my window."

"I never said anything of the sort."

"No, not in so many words; but when I asked you what you meant by doing so, you answered, 'Oh, was that your window?'"

"Certainly I said it."

"Then will you kindly explain why?"

"I wasn't listening at your window. I wasn't within half a block--half a boat, I mean--of it. What do you think I am?"

"Well, Teddy, for a minute I thought you had been guilty of an inexcusable act but upon second thought I begin to understand that it is impossible. There is some misunderstanding here."

Phil looked relieved, but Teddy was gazing at the showman with half-closed eyes.

"While Phil and myself were holding a confidential conversation here, someone was listening to us under that window. All at once the blind fell with a crash--"

"And so did the other fellow," interrupted Teddy, his eyes lighting up mischievously.

"Phil looked out quickly. He thought he saw someone dodging into the entrance aft, and at the same time he was sure someone was doing the same thing forward."

"I was the fellow who dodged in the forward entrance. Then you fellows started a sprinting match with me."

"Why did you run?"

"Oh, I suppose I might as well tell you all about it."

"Yes, if we are to make any headway it will be best to let you tell your story in your own way," answered Mr. Sparling with a grim smile.

"I was halfway between here and the pilot house, sitting down on the deck, leaning against the side of the deck-house. I had just gone to sleep, at least I think I had, when I woke up suddenly. I saw somebody down this way peeping in at a window. I became curious. I wondered if he was the fellow who stole my egg, so I got up to investigate. Just then he saw me."

"Well, what happened?"

"He was standing on a box. The box tipped over or he jumped off, I don't know which. I thought he was chasing me, and I ran."

"Afraid, eh?" jeered Phil.

"No, I wasn't afraid. I just ran because I needed the exercise; that's all. Do you think he really had my egg?"

"Who was the man, Teddy?"

"How do I know?"

"You saw him. Could you not--did you not recognize him?"

"No, it was too dark. I didn't wait long after I first discovered him, you know. I thought maybe it was that fellow Cummings, laying for me. I wish January had finished him while he had the chance."

"You noticed nothing familiar about him?"

"Yes, I did."

"What?"

"He looked like some kind of a man," answered Teddy solemnly.

"Oh, fudge!"

"You say he was standing on a box?"

"Something of the sort."

Mr. Sparling went out, leaving the boys alone for a few minutes. When he returned he brought with him a small square box which he examined very carefully.

"Do you recognize it?" asked Phil.

"Yes, it is one in which the candy butcher received some goods. It might have been picked up by anyone. I will find out where he left it. This may give us some slight clue. It is quite evident, boys, that we have among us one or more dangerous men. Teddy, I offer you my humble apology for having suspected you for a moment. The thought was unworthy."

"Don't mention it," answered the Circus Boy airily.

CHAPTER XIX

TEDDY JOINS THE BAND

"I would suggest that you divide the band into two parts and have them play on deck as we approach the next stand," said Phil later that evening.

"I think that a most excellent plan," decided Mr. Sparling. "We will work it whenever we get in after daylight. It might not be a bad idea to try it tomorrow morning. I'll allow the musicians overtime for it, so there should be no objection on their part. We will make a triumphal entry into Des Moines, providing nothing happens to us in the meantime."

Mr. Sparling's face darkened as he thought of the dastardly attempts that had been made against his young charges.

"I will see the leader before I turn in. You had better go to bed now, Phil. You have been keeping pretty late hours and working unusually hard. Good night."

"Good night," answered Phil pleasantly.

Man and boy had come to be very fond of each other, and Phil Forrest could not have felt a more genuine affection for Mr. Sparling had the latter been his own father.

"A noble fellow," was Mr. Sparling's comment as the youth walked away from the cabin.

At half-past three o'clock the next morning the boat's passengers were awakened by the blare of brass, the crash of cymbals and the boom of the big bass drum.

They tumbled out of bed in a hurry, for few of them knew of the plan of the owner to give an early morning concert on the deck of the "Fat Marie."

Teddy Tucker struck the floor of his cabin broadside on.

"Wake up, Phil! We're late for the show. It's already begun and here we are in bed."

"Guess again, Teddy," answered Phil sleepily. "Don't you know where you are?"

"I thought I did, but I don't. Where am I?"

"In our cabin on the ship."

"But the band, the band?"

"It is playing for the benefit of the natives along the shore."

"Oh, pooh! And here I am wide awake. Do you know what time it is?"

"No."

"It is only twenty minutes of four."

"In the afternoon? Goodness we are late."

"No, in the morning, you ninny. This is a shame. I'll bet that band concert was your suggestion, Phil Forrest."

Phil admitted the charge.

"Then you must take your medicine with the rest of us. Come out of that!"

One of Phil's feet was peeping out from under the covers. Teddy saw it and grabbed it. Being a strong boy, the mighty tug he gave was productive of results.

Phil landed on his back on the floor, with a resounding thump and a jolt that made him see stars.

"Teddy Tucker, look out; I'm coming!"

"You had better look out; I'm waiting."

The two supple-limbed youngsters met in the middle of the cabin floor and went down together. They were evenly matched, and the muscles of their necks stood out like whip cords as they struggled over the floor, each seeking to get a fall from his antagonist.

Teddy managed to roll under the bed, and there they continued their early morning battle, but under no slight difficulties. Every time one of the gladiators forgot himself and raised his head, he bumped it. Phil tried to force Teddy out from under the bed, but Teddy refused to be forced.

"When--when I get you out of here I am going to do something to you that you won't like, Teddy Tucker," panted Phil.

"What--what you going to do to me?"

"I'm going to pour a pitcher of cold water on your bare feet."

"Oh!"

The thought of it sent Teddy into a nervous chill. He would rather take a sound thrashing, at any time, than have that done to him. Now he struggled more desperately than ever to hold Phil under the bed. At last, however, the boys rolled out and Teddy's shoulders struck the cabin floor with a bang that sent the pitcher jingling in the wash bowl.

Phil sprang up, seized the water pitcher, making a threatening move with it toward his companion.

"Wow! Don't, don't!" howled Teddy.

Phil pursued him around the cabin, the water splashing from the pitcher to the floor. Teddy yelling like a wild Indian every time he stepped in the puddles.

The window was open and the band was playing just outside.

Suddenly a new plan occurred to Teddy--a plan whereby he might escape from his tormentor.

Taking a running start he sprang up, making a clean dive through the window head-first.

The lad had intended to land on his hands, do a cartwheel and come up easily on his feet. But the best-laid plans sometimes go wrong.

The bass drummer was pounding his drum right in line with the window. Teddy did not see the drum until too late to change his course. His head hit the drum with a bang. He went clear through it, his head protruding from the other side. And there he stuck!

"Oh, wow!" howled the Circus Boy.

The other members of the band, discovering that the drum was no longer marking time for them, got out of tune and came to a discordant stop.

The leader, whose side had been toward the drummer at the time, did not know what had happened. He was furious. He was about to upbraid them when he discovered the head of Teddy Tucker protruding from the head of the drum.

"Wha--wha--what--"

The bass drummer paid no attention to him. Instead he grabbed the offending boy by the feet, bracing his own feet against the rim of the instrument, and began to pull. The drummer was red in the face, perspiring and angry.

Teddy popped out like a pea from a pod. The Circus Boy was not yet out of his trouble. With unlooked-for strength the irate drummer threw the lad over his knees, face down, and raised the drumstick aloft.

This drumstick, as our readers well know, is made of heavy leather--that is the beating end is--and is hard. To add to the distress of the victim, Teddy was in his pink pajamas and they were thin.

Whack!

The stick came down with more force than seemed necessary.

"Ouch! Stop it! I'll pay you back for keeps for that!"

Whack!

"Oh, Phil!" Teddy was making desperate efforts to squirm away now, but his position was such that he was unable to bring his full strength to bear on the task.

The stick was raised for another blow, but there came an interruption that took all thought of continuing the punishment out of the mind of the angry drummer.

"Stop it! I don't want to be a drum!" howled the boy.

Splash!

A pitcher of water was emptied over the drummer's head, a large part of the water running down and soaking Teddy to the skin, causing that young gentleman to howl lustily.

It gave the boy the opportunity he was looking for, however. With a quick twist he wrenched himself free from the grasp of the drummer, dropped on all fours and was up and away, a pink streak along the port side of the "Fat Marie."

Phil had come to the rescue of his companion. He now jerked the window shut and slammed the blind in place, after which he quickly got into his clothes, fully expecting that he should have a call from the bass drummer.

There was a great uproar on deck about that time, with much shouting and unintelligible language--at least unintelligible to Phil.

Before he had finished dressing, Teddy came skulking in, rubbing himself and muttering threats as to what he proposed to do to the drummer.

"You did it! You did!" he shouted, pointing a finger at Phil Forrest.

"It strikes me that you did something, too--"

"No I didn't. Something was done to me. I had on my pajamas, too," wailed the boy. "I'm glad you soaked him, though. Why didn't you throw the pitcher at him, too?"

"Oh, no, it might have hurt him, Teddy."

"Hurt him? Pshaw! Maybe the drumstick didn't hurt me. Oh, no!"

"Well, get dressed. I will go out and see if I can pour oil on the troubled waters. You stay here. I don't want you mixing it up with the drummer. I'll attend to him."

Phil first hunted up Mr. Sparling, whom he found shaving in his cabin.

"Why good morning, Phil. Why this early call?"

"I called to ask you what a new set of heads will cost for the bass drum?"

"I think they are worth about fifteen dollars. Why do you ask?"

"Because Teddy and myself have just smashed the heads out of the one belonging to the band."

Mr. Sparling paused in his shaving long enough to glance keenly at Phil. There was a twinkle in his eyes. He knew that his Circus Boys had been up to some mischief. Phil was as solemn as an owl.

"It was this way," explained the lad, as he related how the accident had occurred.

Mr. Sparling sat down and laughed.

"Never mind the drum heads. We have others for just such an emergency, I do not mind a little fun once in a while. We all have to blow off steam sometimes."

"No, sir; we shall pay for the drum heads. To whom does the drum belong?"

"The drummer, I think."

"Very well; thank you."

Phil hastily withdrew from the cabin and hurried back to his own stateroom.

"Teddy," he said, "I want seven-fifty from you."

"What's that?"

"Seven dollars and a half, please."

Teddy began pawing over his trousers. All at once he paused, looking up at Phil suspiciously.

"You want to borrow seven-fifty, do you?"

"No, I want you to contribute it."

"To what?"

"To the fund."

"What fund? What are you talking about?"

"Those drum heads are worth fifteen dollars and we are going to pay the owner of the drum for the damage we did. I will give half and you half."

"What!" shrieked Teddy.

"Come, pay up!"

"What! Give that fellow money when he's taken more than twenty-five dollars worth out of my hide? I guess not! What kind of an

easy mark do you think I am? Pay him yourself. You did it."

"Teddy, do you want me to give you a good thrashing, right here and now?"

"You can't do it. You never could," returned Teddy, belligerently.

"Come, hand out the money!"

Teddy eyed his companion for a full minute; then, thrusting a hand slowly into his own trousers' pocket, brought forth a goodly roll of bills from which he counted off eight dollars.

"Tell him to keep the change."

"I will, thank you," said Phil with a merry twinkle in his eyes.

"It's like taking candy out of the mouth of a babe. I'll get more than eight dollars' worth out of that bass--he's baser than he is bass. Bass sounds like a fish, doesn't it--out of that bass drummer when I get a good fair chance at him. Sometime when he isn't looking, you know. I wonder if he could be the fellow who stole my egg?" questioned Teddy reflectively.

Phil went out laughing, to make his peace with the drummer.

CHAPTER XX

A CAPTURE IN THE AIR

Fortunately, the band carried a new set of heads for the drum, and the contribution of the boys served to restore the offended musicians to good nature. Teddy, however, was not appeased. That youngster vowed that he would take revenge on the bass drummer at the very first opportunity.

That afternoon, during the performance, Teddy began his getting-even process by standing in front of the bandstand between his acts, and making faces at the musicians.

This seemed to amuse them, and brought only smiles to their faces. Teddy was not there for the purpose of amusing the band, so he turned his back on them and tried to think of something more effective.

The show did a great business at Des Moines, having a "turn-away" at both afternoon and evening performances. The Sparling shows had played there before, but never to such business, which the showman decided was due to their novel way of traveling. He knew that these little novelties frequently made fortunes for Circus owners.

At the evening performance, Teddy had an inspiration. He was too busy, during the first part of the show, to give his idea a practical test, but later in the evening, while he was awaiting his cue to go on in his clown act, he tried the new plan.

The lad had purchased half a dozen lemons from the refreshment stand. One of these he cut in halves, secreting the pieces in a pocket of his clown costume; then when the time came he stationed himself in front of the bandstand where he stood until he had gained the attention of several of the musicians.

Teddy took out the two pieces of lemon with a great flourish, went through the motions of sprinkling sugar over them, then began sucking first one piece, then the other, varying his performance by holding out the lemon invitingly to the players.

The bass drum player scowled. Teddy's lemon did not affect the beating of the drum, but as the lad began to make believe that the acid juice was puckering his lips, some of the musicians showed signs of uneasiness.

The Circus Boy observing this, smacked his lips again and again, and industriously swallowed the juice, though it nearly choked him to do so.

Very soon some of the players got off the key, their playing grew uneven and in some instances stopped altogether. The leader could not understand what the trouble was. He called out angrily to the offending musicians, but this seemed only to add to their troubles.

All at once the big German, who played the bass horn, rose from his seat and hurled his music rack at the offending Teddy Tucker. Everything on the bandstand came to a standstill, and the performers in the ring glanced sharply down that way, wondering what could have happened.

The leader turned and discovered Teddy and his lemons. He was beside himself with rage. He understood, now, why his musicians had failed. Teddy sucking the lemon had given many of them "the puckers."

It was an old trick, but it worked as well as if it had been brand new.

The Circus Boy was delighted. The leader experienced no such sensations. With an angry exclamation, he leaped from the box on which he was standing, aiming a blow at Teddy with his baton.

The boy dodged it and ran laughing out into the ring, for it was now time for him to go on in his next act.

After a minute or two the band once more collected itself and the show went on, but there were dire threats uttered against Teddy Tucker by the leader and players. The bass drummer grinned appreciatively.

"I wish I could think of something that would tie up that fellow with the drum," muttered Teddy, gazing off at the drummer with resentful eyes.

The band leader had no scruples against carrying tales, and immediately after the performance he hunted up Mr. Sparling and entered a complaint against the irrepressible Teddy. The result was that Teddy was given a severe lecture by the showman after they got on board the boat that night. Then Phil added a warning.

"Well, what about yourself?" retorted the lad.

"Why?"

"I never stirred up as much roughhouse as you did this morning. You had better take some of that advice to yourself."

Phil laughed good-naturedly.

"I shall have to admit the impeachment," he said.

It seemed, however, as if the Sparling shows could not get along without exciting incidents happening at least once in twenty-four hours. They appeared to follow the Circus Boys, too, like a plague. It is likely that, had they not followed the boys, Teddy Tucker would have gone out hunting for them.

The next morning something else occurred that was not a part of the daily routine. The boats were late and the next stand was not yet in sight, so the band had not been called to work as early as on the previous morning. The bandsmen were just rousing themselves, in response to raps on their cabin doors, when they heard rapid footsteps on the deck, and excited shouts from several voices.

Teddy and Phil awakened at about the same time, having been disturbed by the unusual sounds.

"Now, what is the trouble?" exclaimed Phil.

"Something is going on, and here I am in bed," answered Teddy, tumbling out and throwing open the blinds.

He saw nothing unusual. The boat was slipping along, enveloped in a cloud of black smoke. The disturbance seemed to be on the other side of the vessel.

"Come on, Phil. Let's find out what it is all about. Maybe the boat has struck a rock and we are sinking. Wouldn't that be fun?"

"I don't see anything funny about that. It would be serious, and you and I would be out of a job for the rest of the season."

"Don't you care! I have money. Didn't I give you seven-fifty yesterday and still have some left?"

"Eight," grinned Phil.

By this time the boys had hurried out into the corridor, and thence to the deck.

"Well, what do you think of that?" howled Teddy.

"Bruiser is out," exclaimed Phil.

Bruiser was a baboon, whose temper was none too angelic. He was a big heavy fellow, who never lost an opportunity to vent his temper on whoever chanced to be within reach.

It seems that on this particular occasion a sleepy keeper was cleaning Bruiser's cage so that it might be neat and presentable when the show opened. Bruiser had sat on a trapeze far up in the cage, watching the proceedings with resentful eyes, perhaps wondering how he might administer a rebuke to the keeper.

All at once the baboon saw his opportunity. The keeper had stooped over to pick up something from the floor of the boat, as he stood at the open door of the cage in the rear.

Bruiser projected himself toward the opening like a catapult. At that instant the keeper had straightened up and the baboon hit him squarely in the face. There could be but one result. The keeper tumbled over on his back.

Chattering joyously, Bruiser began hopping off on all fours. First he investigated the tops of the cages, running over them and bringing roars from the animals within. Then he hopped down and paid a visit to the horses.

January sent a volley of kicks at the beast, but Bruiser was too quick, and the hoofs passed harmlessly over his head.

About this time the keeper had scrambled to his feet in alarm. At first he did not know where the baboon had gone, but hearing the disturbance among the horses he ran that way, soon coming upon Bruiser. With a scream of defiance, the animal bolted up the companionway, hurriedly investigated the corridors and the main cabin, then leaped out through an open window to the hurricane deck.

Two other men had joined in the chase now, and it was their shouts that had awakened the Circus Boys.

"Come on, here's sport!" shouted Teddy Tucker starting on a run after the fleeing Bruiser. The latter tried to climb up the smoke stack and narrowly missed being captured in the attempt. At the same time he burned his feet, filling him with rage and resentment, so that, when the keeper grabbed him, the former's face was badly scratched.

Round and round the deck ran pursued and pursuers, the baboon having not the slightest difficulty in eluding his followers, Teddy chasing gleefully and howling at the top of his shrill voice.

Others joined the chase, until well nigh half the boat's company raced yelling up and down the decks. Mr. Sparling was one of the number, though he devoted most of his attention to directing the others.

One mast had been erected on the boat from which to fly flags, and from this rope braces ran off forward and aft.

Finally Bruiser was so hard pressed that he took to this rigging and ran up one of the ropes to the mast, where he perched on the end of a spar and appeared to mock his pursuers.

Poles were brought, at the direction of the owner, with which the men sought to poke Bruiser down. But the poles were too short. Then the men threw ropes and missiles at the baboon, most of which went overboard and were lost.

"It is no use. We shall have to wait until he gets ready to come down," decided Mr. Sparling. "How did he get away?"

The keeper explained.

"He won't come down today," added the man. "That is, so long as we are here. He is a bad one."

"You do not have to tell me that. Can any of you offer suggestions? I am not very strong on capturing escaped animals. Phil, how about it?"

Phil shook his head.

"I have an idea, Mr. Sparling," spoke up Teddy.

"I knew you had, from the expression on your face. What is it?"

"I'll climb up and shake him down."

A loud laugh greeted this remark.

"You couldn't climb up there. The mast is too slippery."

"I'll show you."

"Very well; go ahead."

"Teddy, I think I would keep out of this, were I in your place," remarked Phil.

"You keep out of it yourself. I'll show you that I know how to catch wild beasts. I haven't ridden January all this time for nothing."

Teddy started in bravely to climb the mast. After a great struggle he managed to get up about eight feet. Suddenly he lost his grip and came sliding down, landing at the foot of the mast in a heap.

A shout greeted his ludicrous drop.

"I think you had better give it up," laughed Mr. Sparling.

"I won't give it up."

"You cannot climb the mast."

"I don't intend to. I have an idea."

"What is your idea?"

"I will show you. Bring me a rope."

The rope was quickly handed to him. The Circus Boy coiled it neatly, closely observed by the show people, who did not understand what he was about to do.

"I'm a sailor, you know," he grinned. Measuring the distance accurately, Teddy swung the coil about his head a few times, then let it fly up into the air, keeping the free end in one hand as he did so.

The coil tumbled over the yard or cross piece and came down, hitting the deck with a thump.

"There. Can you beat that?" he demanded triumphantly.

"Very well done," agreed Mr. Sparling. "Now that it is over, what do you propose to do next?"

"Watch me!"

The lad made fast one end of the rope to the ship's rail, the baboon peering down suspiciously.

"Oh, I'm after you, you rascal," jeered Teddy, shaking a fist at the ugly face above him.

After testing the rope, Teddy began climbing it hand over hand. Then the spectators divined his purpose.

"The boy is all right," nodded Mr. Sparling approvingly.

"That is the time that he got the best of you, Phil."

"He is welcome to the job," answered Phil. "You haven't captured the baboon yet."

Teddy, by this time, was halfway up the mast. It seemed a dizzy climb, but the lad was so used to being up high that he did not mind it in the least.

"Hey, down there!" he called.

"What is it?"

"Better get out a small net so you can catch him. I'm going to shake him down as I would a ripe apple. If you catch him in the net he will tangle himself up so that he cannot get away."

"That is a good idea," approved Mr. Sparling. "Get the net, and hold it in readiness."

Teddy, in the meantime, was working his way up. After a time his hands grasped the crossbar and he pulled himself up astride it, waving one hand to those below him.

Bruiser, however, was not there. The baboon had scrambled to the top of the mast on which there was a golden ball, and on this he perched some eight or nine feet above Teddy Tucker's head.

"Now where is your baboon?" called a voice.

"Where he cannot get away from me unless he jumps into the Mississippi," answered Teddy quickly.

"How are you going to get him?" called Mr. Sparling.

"I'll see when I get to him."

With great caution, the lad climbed up the slender top of the mast.

Bruiser's tail hung over, while he clung with his feet, glaring down at Teddy. The baboon realized that he could not get away.

"Come down here!" commanded Teddy, grabbing the beast's tail and giving it a mighty tug.

Bruiser's grip gave way. Down shot Teddy and the baboon. But the cross-tree saved him, as the lad figured that it would. One hand was clinging to Bruiser's tail, the other arm thrown about the mast.

Now, Bruiser took a hand. With a snarl of rage he fastened in the hair of Teddy Tucker's head, causing that young man to howl lustily.

For a moment boy and baboon "mixed it up" at such a lively rate that it was difficult for the spectators below to tell which was boy and which baboon. Teddy seemed to be getting the worst of it.

"Look out! Let go of him! You will be in the river the first thing you know!" shouted Mr. Sparling warningly.

Teddy did not hear him. He was too busy, at the moment, trying to keep those savage teeth from fastening themselves in his neck, for which the beast seemed to be aiming. At the same time the boy was getting more and more angry. It was characteristic of Teddy that, the angrier he became, the cooler he grew.

He was guarding himself as best he could and watching his chance to get the upper hand of his antagonist.

All at once Teddy let drive a short-arm blow at the head of the baboon.

Few things could withstand that blow, and least of all a baboon. It landed fairly on the grinning jaws and Bruiser's head jolted backwards as if it were going right on into the river.

Teddy lost his balance, aided in this by the fact that Bruiser had fastened to the lad's pajamas.

"They're going to fall!" roared Mr. Sparling. "Catch them! Catch them!"

The men hastened to move the net, and none too soon, for Teddy and Bruiser came whirling down, the lad making desperate efforts to right himself so as to drop on his feet. But the baboon prevented his doing this.

They struck the net, which was jerked from the hands of the men, and Teddy hit the deck with a terrific bump.

CHAPTER XXI

A CIRCUS BOY MISSING

"Grab the beast!"

Teddy was still clinging to the baboon so firmly that they had to use force to get Bruiser away from him.

As for the baboon, he was too dazed from the shock of the fall to offer any resistance, and was quickly captured and returned to his cage.

Teddy had not fared quite so well. He was unconscious, and for a time it was feared that he had been seriously injured.

As it turned out, however, he had escaped with nothing worse than a severe shock and a sprained wrist. A sprain of any sort is sufficient to lay up a circus performer for sometime. As a result of his injury, Teddy Tucker did not work again for the next week; that is, he did not enter the ring, though he was anxious to do so. Mr. Sparling, however, would not permit it.

Those were glorious days for Teddy. He could not keep away from the circus lot. He had plenty of time to think up new ways of tormenting his enemies, some of which he applied from time to time. The boy was safe, however, for no one felt inclined to punish a boy who was going around the outfit with one arm helpless in a sling.

Perhaps Teddy Tucker took advantage of this fact. At least, he enjoyed himself and, besides, found plenty of time to hunt for his lost egg. The boy was suspicious of everyone. One time he became firmly convinced that Mr. Sparling had taken it from him. The moment the idea occurred to him he hunted up the showman and demanded to know if the latter had his egg.

"No," answered Mr. Sparling with a twinkle in his eyes, "but I will try to arrange so you get another."

"You will?"

"Yes."

"Thank you; thank you."

"I am having the show's carpenter make one out of wood."

"I can't eat a wooden egg," protested Teddy.

"Why not? You were going to eat the ostrich egg. The wooden one will give you indigestion no quicker than the other would have done."

"I'll tell you what I will do," said the Circus Boy, an idea suddenly occurring to him.

"I am listening."

"You have the carpenter make an egg and I will circulate the news that I have another egg. I will leave it in my cabin and keep watch on the thing. In that way I shall catch the fellow, if he tries to steal it again. I shan't put it in the trunk. Oh, I'll talk a lot about that wooden egg."

"I am in hopes we shall hear no more about eggs all the rest of the trip, after I give you another," said the showman.

"Your idea is not a half-bad one at that. If you catch the man we are looking for I will make you a nice present."

"What kind of a present?" asked Teddy with an eye to business.

"What would you like?"

"I'll have to think it over. There are so many things I want, that I do not know which I want most."

"I thought you had money enough to buy whatever you needed. By the way, how much money have you saved, Teddy?"

"Let me see," reflected the lad, counting up on his fingers.

"Why, I must have a little more than three thousand dollars in the bank. Mrs. Cahill is taking care of it for me, you know."

"Fine, fine! That is splendid. What are you going to do with all of that money?"

"I think I will buy out the Sparling shows, someday, when you get tired of the business and want to sell at any old price," answered the boy boldly.

The showman laughed heartily.

"So you think you would like to own a show, do you?"

"Yes, sir, I am going to--Phil and I."

"May I ask when this interesting affair is coming off--this purchasing of a real circus?"

"I told you. When you get tired of the business we are going to buy you out."

"You have it planned, eh?"

"Yes, sir; that is, I have. Phil doesn't know anything about that yet. I haven't told him."

"I thought not. So, while I am paying you to work for me, you are planning to take my show away from me, are you?" questioned Mr. Sparling with a smile.

"No, Sir; we are not trying to do anything of the sort. You have been too kind, and I thank you for all you have done for me, and--and all you have put up with. You ought to have 'fired' me a long time ago--I guess you ought to have done it before I started in the Show business. I'm glad you didn't," added Teddy, glancing up with a bright smile.

It was the first time Mr. Sparling had ever heard the little Circus Boy express his appreciation. He patted the lad affectionately.

"I hope you are feeling quite well, today, my boy. You never talked this way before. What caused your sudden change of heart?"

"I--I guess it was the baboon," answered Teddy whimsically. "Or else, maybe, it was the bump I got when I hit the deck of the 'Fat Marie.'"

Phil came up and joined them at that moment, waiting for his turn to go on in his trapeze act for the evening performance. Mr. Sparling surveyed him keenly. He noted the trim, athletic figure, the poise of the head and the steady clear eyes that held one irresistibly.

"You are looking very handsome tonight, Phil," said the owner.

"Thank you, sir. 'Handsome is as handsome does,' as the saying goes," laughed the Circus Boy. "Are you having the net watched, Mr. Sparling?"

"Yes, my lad. Two men are keeping close tab on the big spider web all the time, except in the afternoon, when no one would dare to tamper with it for fear of being detected."

"I am not so sure of that. You see, I have a personal interest in that net, seeing that I have to risk my bones over it twice each day."

"Don't worry. It will be well watched, Phil."

"I take the first drop in it, you know, so if it should give way you would be minus Phil Forrest."

"Teddy tells me you and he are thinking of buying out the Sparling shows, eh?"

"Why, Teddy, how could you say such a thing?" demanded Phil, reddening.

Teddy expostulated, explaining that it was merely a dream in his own mind, repeating that Phil knew nothing of it.

"I do intend to own a show, as I have told you before, Mr. Sparling, as soon as I have enough money. I am afraid, however, that that day is a long way off."

"Perhaps not so far off as you think, Phil. Perhaps both of you may own a show much sooner than you even dream," said the showman, significantly. "Well, good night, boys if I do not see you again."

"What do you think he meant by that?" questioned Teddy.

"I am sure I do not know. Perhaps he thinks we have a future before us and that we shall make rapid advances. I hope so, don't you, Teddy?"

"I think I would rather find my egg than have most anything else just now."

"Oh, hang your egg! There goes my cue. I must get out, now. Bye, bye. You are a lucky boy not to have to work on this hot night."

Phil waved his hand and tripped out into the arena. A few minutes later he was soaring through the air with the gracefulness and ease of a bird on the wing.

The boys did not meet again until bedtime, for Phil had turned in immediately upon reaching the boat. Teddy, of course, was the last one to go to bed, but he was soon asleep after reaching there.

Phil, on the contrary, had lain awake for some hours, thinking. He was still seeking a solution to the mystery that had been disturbing them almost from the beginning of the season. Twice had an effort been made to do him serious injury at least. Who could have taken so violent a dislike to him as to wish to cause his death? There seemed to be no answer to the question.

"I can think of no one, unless it is Diaz," muttered the boy. "Yet he surely was not one of those who were plotting out on the lot that night. He would not have had time to get back to the boat ahead of me. Then again, Teddy was sure that the clown had been back for more than an hour. He may have had something to do with laying the trap in the ring for Dimples and myself."

"I am afraid I am not on the right track at all," decided Phil at last, with a deep sigh.

He was still awake when the "Fat Marie" shook off her moorings and with a long blast of her siren, drifted out into the stream and began pounding down the river.

Phil got up, stretched himself, looked out of the window, then decided to go on deck to get the breeze, for the heat was stifling in his stateroom. Teddy was sound asleep.

The deck seemed to be deserted. Phil walked over to the rail and leaning both elbows upon it closed his eyes dreamily.

It must have been fully an hour later when Teddy awakened suddenly, with a foreboding that something was not as it should be.

"Phil!" he called.

There was no reply.

"_Phil!_" repeated Teddy in a louder tone.

Failing to get a response, Teddy arose and found his companion's bed empty. Teddy, knowing that Phil seldom ever left the stateroom after retiring, decided to go out to look for him. He investigated the cabin, then going out on deck peered into every shadow, calling softly for Phil.

Failing to get any trace of his chum, Teddy returned to his cabin, put on his slippers and went down to the lower deck, where he made inquiries of the watchman, but with no better success.

Teddy Tucker began to feel alarmed. He hurried to the upper deck again, once more going over it carefully, as well as the inside of the boat.

A terrible suspicion began to force itself upon him.

"Man overboard!" bellowed the Circus Boy. "Man overboard!" He ran through the corridors shouting the startling cry, then out to the deck repeating it as he ran.

The cry was taken up by others as they rushed from their cabins, Mr. Sparling among the number.

"Where, where?" shouted the showman. "Who--who--"

"It's Phil! He's gone. He's over there, somewhere, I don't know where!"

CHAPTER XXII

OVERBOARD INTO THE RIVER

"I can't understand it," Phil mused, as the soft evening breezes lulled him into slumber.

"What! What!" he cried suddenly. "What is it? I'm falling!"

The deck of the "Marie" all at once seemed to have dropped from beneath him. He felt himself falling through space. What could it mean?

With the showman's instinct the Circus Boy quickly turned his body, spread out his hands and righted himself.

The night was black, and as yet he had not succeeded in collecting his senses sufficiently to decide what had happened.

He knew that he was falling, but that was all.

There was a sudden splash as his body struck the water. Phil shot right down beneath it and the waters of the Mississippi closed over him.

He understood then what had happened, but not for an instant did he lose his presence of mind. Phil had caught his breath as his feet touched the water, and now that he had sunk beneath the surface he began to kick vigorously and work his hands to check his downward course.

A moment of this and he felt himself rising toward the surface. Phil was as good a swimmer as he was a performer in the circus ring, and he felt no nervousness, even though his position at that moment was a perilous one.

Almost at once he felt his head above the surface of the river, but his eyes were so full of muddy water that he could see nothing at all. Instead of trying to swim, Phil lay over on his back, floated and began blinking industriously to get the water out of his eyes. He soon found that he could see once more, though at that moment there was nothing to be seen in the blackness of the night.

"There's the 'Marie,'" he cried. Phil raised his voice in a good lusty howl for help, but none heard him. He could see the lights of the steamboat and they appeared to be far away.

"There is only one thing left for me to do, and that is to strike out for the shore. I wonder which way the shore is?"

Once more he raised himself in the water, for an instant, and gazed toward the rapidly disappearing lights of the 'Marie.'

"She is going downstream, so if I swim to the left I should reach shore after a while," decided the lad.

He did not know that the boat had in the meantime made a sharp turn to her right and that in turning to the left he would be swimming downstream, making his attempt to reach shore a difficult one indeed.

The lad struck out manfully, swimming with long, easy strokes, aided considerably by the current which was sweeping him downstream much faster than he thought.

"I'm glad I have only my pajamas on," decided the lad. "If I had all my clothes on I fear I should have a pretty tough fight. It's bad enough as it is."

Talking to himself, in order to keep up his courage, he swam steadily on, now and then pausing to swim on his back to rest himself. He had gone on for nearly an hour when the lad began to wonder why he had not reached shore.

"Surely the river cannot be so wide at this point. I must have drifted downstream considerably. Perhaps I haven't been going in the right direction at all."

He tried to find out which way the drift was, in order to make up his mind as to the direction in which the shore lay. In the darkness, however, he was unable to determine this, so he began swimming again, trusting to luck to land him on something solid, sooner or later. He knew that this must occur, but whether his strength would hold out that long he could not say.

All at once he caught a peculiar drumming sound. It reminded him of a partridge that he had once heard in the woods, but it seemed a long way off and he could not identify it.

"I guess it must be my heart, up somewhere near my mouth, that I hear," said the boy with a short mindless laugh. "Maybe I am going to pieces. If I am I deserve to drown."

About that time Phil decided to turn over on his back and rest for a moment.

The instant he did so he uttered a sharp exclamation. His eyes caught sight of something that he had not seen before. It looked to him like some giant shadow, from which twinkled hundreds of lights.

"It is the 'Marie!'" cried the boy. "They are coming back for me. No, no, it cannot be the 'Marie,' for this boat is coming from the opposite direction. Yes, it surely is a steamboat!"

Though Phil did not know it, this was one of the big river packets bound down the river from St. Louis.

"I must get out of the way, or they will run me down, but I want to keep close enough so I can hail them. I hope this is where I get on something solid again."

A few minutes of steady swimming appeared to have taken him out of the path of the river boat. Then Phil rested, lying on his back, watching the boat narrowly.

"In almost any other position or place, I might think that was a pretty sight. As matters stand, now, it looks dangerous to me."

His position was more perilous at that moment than he even dreamed.

"H-e-l-p! H-e-l-p!" called Phil, in what he thought was a loud tone.

There were no indications that his cry had been heard by those on board the steamboat. He tried it again, but with no better success than before.

"I have simply got to keep on yelling my lungs out until I attract their attention. I am afraid I shall never reach shore unless I am picked up. I might be able to keep afloat until daylight, but I doubt it. I shall get so chilled, before then, that I shall have to give up. I've got some fight left in me yet, just the same."

"A-h-o-y, boat! _Help!_"

On came the steamer, steadily.

Suddenly Phil discovered something else. She had changed her course. The boat seemed to be drawing away from him! His heart sank, but almost at once, the boat turned again, following the tortuous channel of the stream.

She now was sweeping almost directly down upon him. He heard some call on the upper deck.

"They are going to run me down!" he gasped.

Phil threw all his strength into an effort to swim out of the path of the swiftly moving boat, but he feared he would not be able to clear her.

The lad uttered a loud shout, then dived deep, coming up at once only to find himself almost against the side of the moving craft.

He grabbed frantically, hoping that his hands might come in contact with some projection to which he could cling, but the slippery sides of the hull slid past him at what seemed almost express train speed.

He was almost on the point of diving again to get away from the dangerous spot, when suddenly, his fingers closed over something. It was a rope, one of the hawsers that had not been fully hauled in when the boat left the last landing place some miles up the river.

With a glad cry, both the lad's hands closed over the precious rope. His joy was short lived. He found himself dropping back, the river craft still gliding past him.

The rope was paying out over the boat's side in his hands.

Phil Forrest was never more cool in his life, but he now began to realize the well-nigh hopeless position in which he found himself placed.

Suddenly the rope ceased paying out with an abruptness that jerked him clear out of the water. He fell back with a splash, all but losing hold of the rope as he did so.

"I've got it! I've got it!" exulted the lad. A rush of water filled his mouth, almost suffocating him.

"I guess I had better keep my mouth closed," thought the boy.

He was directly astern of the steamboat by this time, and this placed him in a much more favorable position than he had been while dragging along at the side.

Phil began resolutely to work himself along the rope hand over hand. It was a desperate undertaking, one calling for strength and courage of an unusual kind, but he never hesitated.

His breath came in long, steady, sighs, for he was going through the water at such a rate of speed that breathing was made doubly difficult.

"It is a good thing I am a circus performer. I should probably have been at the bottom of the river long ago, had I not been a ring man."

At last, after what seemed hours of struggling, he had succeeded in working his way past the stern paddle wheel, and up under the stern of the ship. He twisted the rope about one arm, and with his head well out of water lay half exhausted while he was shot through the water at high speed.

A few minutes of this, and Phil, considerably rested, began to pull himself up.

Ordinarily this hand over hand climb would have been an easy feat for the Circus Boy. As it was, however, the lad was forced to pause every foot or so, and, twisting the rope about an arm and a leg, hang there between sky and water, gasping for breath, every nerve and muscle in his body a-quiver.

Few men, no matter how strong nor how great their endurance, could have gone through what Phil Forest had endured that night.

He was glad to be out of the water, where he was in imminent danger of being drowned as the boat jerked him along. Of course he was not obliged to cling to the rope, but the chances of his reaching shore, were he to let go, he felt were very remote.

"I am glad Teddy is not here," muttered Phil with a half smile as he thought of his companion back on the "Marie" fast asleep. "I wonder what he will think when he finds that I am missing? I hope they do not turn about and come back to look for me, for I hardly think they will be able to do that and make their next stand in time."

Once more the lad began pulling himself up the rope. At last, to his great relief, his fingers closed over the stern rail of the river boat. Phil pulled himself up as if he were chinning the bar, though in this case he chinned it only once.

Elbows were braced on the rail, then the right leg was thrown over and Phil Forrest was high and dry on the deck of a great river steamer, after an experience that perhaps never had befallen a human being on the Mississippi before.

He found himself standing face to face with an officer of the boat, who proved to be the mate. The man was so astonished at the dripping figure that had come over the stern, that, for the moment, he did not speak.

"Good evening," greeted Phil politely.

"Who are you?" demanded the mate sternly.

"I guess I am Old Neptune himself. Maybe I am a mermaid. At least I have just risen from the sea, and mighty glad

I am that I have risen."

The officer seized Phil. Leading the boy to where the light shone from the main cabin window, he peered into the lad's face. Evidently fairly well satisfied by his brief glance into the honest eyes of the Circus Boy, the officer quickly turned and led Phil to the forward end of the boat, where he summoned the captain, who was lying down in the pilot house.

"What's this? Whom have you here?"

"I don't know, sir," answered the officer. "He came over the side half a mile above here."

"What--what's this--came over the side?"

"Yes, sir."

"Impossible!"

"I saw him. I was standing astern when he climbed over the rail."

"See here, young man, what does this mean?"

"I fell from a boat, sir, further up the river. I was trying to swim ashore when you nearly ran me down. You see, I did not know you were going to make that sharp turn and I did not have time to get out of the way."

"That is not a likely story, young man. How did you get aboard this boat? That is what I want to know."

Phil explained that he had caught hold of a rope.

"Is there a rope trailing, mate?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Find out."

The mate returned a few moments later with the information that a hawser was dragging astern.

"Wonderful!" breathed the captain. "How did you ever do it, and you only a boy?"

"I am pretty strong, even if I am a boy," smiled Phil.

"What is your name?"

Phil gave it.

"How did you happen to get in the river?"

"I told you I fell in, or something of the sort, from the 'Fat Marie.'"

"Never heard of her."

"I think she was called the 'Mary Jane.'"

"Oh, that's that circus boat--the Sparling Circus?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you belong to the circus?"

"Yes. I am a bareback rider and a trapeze performer."

Both men gazed at him with new interest.

"Well, you beat anything that I ever heard of. You certainly must be a performer if you did a thing like that. I remember the pilot's telling me he thought he heard someone cry out from the river, but as the call was not repeated, he thought he must have been mistaken. Come in, and we will put you to bed."

"I have no money with me, sir," said the lad. "If you will extend the courtesies of your craft to me, I will see that you are well paid after I reach my show once more."

"We will take care of you. Never mind about the pay."

"By the way, where is your next landing place?"

"Memphis."

Phil gave a low whistle.

"Where do you want to go?"

"Corinth, I believe is the stand we show at tomorrow."

"That's not far from Memphis. We will land you at Memphis in the morning and you can take a train back, getting you to Corinth in plenty of time for your show. I will see that you have a ticket."

"Thank you ever so much. You are very kind."

The Circus Boy was put to bed and in a few minutes he was sound asleep, thus far not much the worse for his thrilling experience, though he was completely exhausted, as he realized after he had tucked himself in his berth.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE ROMAN CHARIOT RACES

It was late when the Circus Boy awoke next morning. A steward rapped at the door and a suit of officer's clothes, brass buttons and all was handed in to him.

"With the captain's compliments, sir," said the steward.

"He hopes it will fit you. When you are ready, you will

please come to the saloon for breakfast."

"Thank the captain for me, and say that I can't get there any too soon," laughed Phil, springing out of bed.

The passengers had all heard the remarkable tale from the captain that morning, and they were anxious to see the young Circus Boy who had performed such a plucky act.

Phil entered the dining room, not thinking for a minute that he would be recognized. When the passengers saw the handsome young fellow in an officer's uniform, they knew him. Everyone in the room sprang to his feet and three cheers rang out for Phil Forrest.

"Speech, speech!" cried someone.

Blushing faintly, Phil glanced about him.

"You cannot expect a boy to make much of a speech before breakfast, especially after he has been swimming most of the night. I don't know that I am entitled to any special credit. I saved only my own life, and I do not expect to get a medal for it, either. I hope all of you will visit the Great Sparling Shows at the first opportunity. Then I shall try to entertain you in a way that I understand far better than this. I'm very much obliged to you all."

Then Phil sat down. The passengers gave him another cheer, louder and more enthusiastic than the first. Mr. Sparling would have been proud of the lad could he have heard that speech. Phil lost no opportunity to advertise the Sparling shows, and every passenger on the boat, that morning, made up his mind to visit the show ere another week had passed.

All the rest of the morning Phil was a hero in the eyes of the passengers, who followed him wherever he went, asking questions about his experience in the river, and how he had happened to fall in, as well as numerous questions about the life of a circus man.

With regard to his accident, Phil had little to say. He seemed to wish to avoid discussing the falling-in matter, but his face took on a serious expression when it was referred to.

At last Memphis was sighted. Phil arranged with the captain to return the uniform, which he promised to send to St. Louis, so that his benefactor could get it on the return trip.

As the craft began drawing in toward the dock, the Circus Boy bade all the passengers good-bye, everyone of whom insisted on shaking hands with him.

Phil walked off, the passengers giving him three cheers as he stepped over the gangplank to the dock. Before he had reached the end of it, he was overtaken by a reporter who had just heard of Phil's feat and wished an interview.

At first Phil was reluctant to speak.

"I think it will be a good advertisement for the show," he said to himself. So the Circus Boy related, modestly, the story of his experience in the river and of his rescue of himself; not forgetting to say some pleasant things about the Sparling shows, which would visit Memphis two days hence. That afternoon he saw his story set forth in the Memphis newspaper. He bought two papers, one of which he tucked in his pocket, sending the other to Mrs. Cahill, his guardian. His next move was to start for the station, to take a train for Corinth. He was already too late to reach that town in time for the afternoon performance, but he had wired Mr. Sparling that he was safe.

As it happened the lad reached the show grounds before his message had been delivered. Mr. Sparling, well nigh beside himself with worry, had telegraphed to all points passed by their boats, begging that neither effort nor expense be spared to find his Circus Boy.

The showman was standing in front of his office tent, that afternoon, at about three o'clock, his broad-brimmed slouch hat pulled well down over his eyes, his hands thrust deep in his trousers pockets.

Off under the big top the band was playing a lively tune, and the side-show people were out in front sunning themselves, all discussing Phil Forrest's mysterious disappearance.

After a short time, Mr. Sparling espied a young man in uniform coming on the lot. He did not pay much attention to the stranger, thinking the fellow was a police officer or something of the sort.

As the young man drew nearer, however, the showman thought he noted something familiar in the springy step and the poise of the body.

"Now, who is that?" he muttered. "Somehow I seem to know that youngster."

Others about the main entrance were also looking in his direction about that time. Still no one seemed to recognize the young man.

All at once the showman tilted up the rim of his hat and gazed more keenly.

"Phil!" he shouted, casting the hat aside and running forward with outstretched arms. "It's Phil, it's Phil Forrest!"

A moment more and Mr. James Sparling had clasped his little Circus Boy about the waist, hugging him delightedly. There was a suspicious moisture in the eyes of the showman, which he sought to hide from Phil.

"Phil! Phil! Where have you been?" he cried leading the boy toward the office tent. "And that uniform--what does it mean?"

"I will tell you all about it as soon as I get my breath," laughed the lad.

By this time the others out in front had hurried forward, showering questions upon the boy, all of which he answered without giving very much information. He wished to talk with Mr. Sparling first of all.

"Where is Teddy?" was almost his first question.

"He is in the big top at work."

"I presume he was considerably excited when he missed me, was he not?"

"Yes, at first, but since then he has not said much. Teddy is a queer boy."

The word was quickly passed that Phil had returned safe and sound, and ten minutes after his arrival every man and woman in the show had heard the news. There was great rejoicing.

Teddy was going through his clown act when he first heard the rumor that Phil was back. Teddy waited until he had worked around to the entrance to the menagerie tent when he suddenly darted through, leaving his work and the ring, a most serious breach of discipline. Teddy, however, did not care. He was willing to be fined. He bolted through the main entrance like a miniature tornado, to the amazement of the door tenders.

"Where's Phil?" he shouted.

One of the doormen pointed to Mr. Sparling's office tent.

The little clown was off on a run.

"Hey, Phil, you old rascal! Where have you been?" he demanded, dashing into the small tent.

"I have been out for a swim, old fellow. Did you miss me?"

"I nearly broke my neck thinking about you this afternoon. Landed on my head in the leaping act, and I've got a pain in my neck yet."

"Young man, what are you doing here?" demanded the showman, sternly.

"Same thing you are. Seeing Phil."

"Get back to your act!"

"I'm off. I'll see you later, Phil, then we will talk it over."

"We will, Teddy," and Teddy was off at top speed to take up his performance where he had so abruptly left it a few minutes before. The ringmaster had not missed him, though he saw at once that the boy was not on his station, when Teddy began to work again.

"Now, Phil, we will hear all about it. How in the name of the

Sparling shows did you get into that uniform?"

"The captain of the river boat that picked me up fitted me out."

"So you really fell in?"

"I got _in,_ right."

"Tell me all about it."

The Circus Boy related his experiences from the time he found himself in the river, until his arrival in Memphis that morning.

"Marvelous--almost unbelievable," breathed Mr. Sparling as the tale was unfolded. "I never heard anything to compare with it."

When Phil told of his speech in the dining saloon of the river steamboat, Mr. Sparling leaned back with hands on his hips, laughing immoderately.

"Oh, Phil, you are the sort from which great showmen are made!"

Phil handed over the Memphis paper with the account of his experience, which the showman glanced over briefly.

"That will give us another turn-away in Memphis. You can't stop them, after that. They will come to the show even if they have to fight their way in. That was a great stroke of enterprise, but I would rather it had not happened, of course."

"What--the interview?"

"No, of course not. I mean your accident."

"It is all right, Mr. Sparling. I am here now, and none the worse for my bath, but for a time I surely thought I was a goner. I would not care to go through that experience again."

"I should say not. Yours was the most wonderful escape I ever heard of. I'll wager there was never anything like it before on this river."

Mr. Sparling paused suddenly and bent a keen, searching glance on Phil Forrest's face. The lad felt that he knew what was in the mind of his employer.

"Phil?"

"Yes, sir."

"You have not told me everything, yet."

"What makes you think that, Mr. Sparling?"

"Because I know you so well. There is something on your mind that you have not told me. I want to know what it is."

Phil's eyes were lowered to the green grass at his feet. For a moment he was silent and thoughtful.

"What is it you wish me to tell you, Mr. Sparling?" he asked in a low voice.

"You have not given me a satisfactory explanation of how you came to get into the river."

"Perhaps I fell in," answered the lad with a faint smile.

"Perhaps. But you have not said so. I want you to tell me how you did get in."

"I think I was thrown in, Mr. Sparling," answered the Circus Boy quickly.

"Thrown in!" exclaimed the showman, leaping to his feet, his face working convulsively in his effort to control his emotions.

"Phil Forrest, do you mean that?"

"I do."

Mr. Sparling sat down helplessly.

"Is it possible?"

"I am sure of it, sir."

"Had anyone but you told me that I should have laughed. I know I can depend upon what you say. Tell me more about it?"

"As I have already said, I was leaning on the rail and dropped off into a doze. How long I had been in that position I do not know. I could not have been there many minutes, or I should have gone so soundly asleep that I would have fallen over to the deck, you know."

"Yes, yes."

"All at once I felt myself being lifted. At first, as I remember it, the sensation was as if the deck were dropping from under me. As I recalled the incident afterwards, I realized that I had been lifted. You know all that occurred after that."

"Was there more than one who threw you overboard?"

"I am unable to say. I did not even see one," said Phil with a half-smile. "I felt myself being lifted--that's all. The next minute I was in the river, with the 'Marie' pounding away downstream at a lively clip."

"Dastardly! Dastardly!" growled the showman. "I shall send for a detective to meet us in Memphis tomorrow. This thing has gone far enough."

"I think I agree with you, sir," was Phil's half-humorous answer. "But I had been in hopes of solving this mystery myself."

"Yes, and you came near losing your life as the result. No, sir! This thing must be cleared up at once. I shall wire to

St. Louis now, and we will have a man with us sometime tomorrow. Say nothing to anyone of my plan. The detective will join the show in some capacity or other, and have regular duties to perform. You will know him, but no one else will except myself. I think the Roman races are about due under the big top now. Suppose you go in and change your clothes, joining me at my table after you come out. We will talk these matters over at length this evening. When the officer reaches here I shall expect you to tell him freely all that you know as well as what you suspect. Keep nothing from him. Run along, Phil. I want to think this matter over by myself for a few minutes."

As Phil entered the big top the Roman races were just coming on. The chariot drivers, with their prancing steeds, had entered the arena.

Phil paused to wait until the fast and furious races were over. The leading woman chariot driver was trying out a new three-horse team; that is, two of the horses were new to the work, the third, being an old hand. The new animals were spirited, and after the first round of the arena, Phil saw that they were nervous.

"I am afraid she is going to have trouble with that pair," muttered Phil with a shake of his head. "If she can keep them up to the mark, they will outrun anything in the show today."

The new team fairly tore around the arena. They won the first races easily, then lined up in the center to await the finals which were to follow a few minutes later.

The ringmaster's whistle trilled for the successful drivers to swing out into the concourse. They were driving furiously, almost before the echoes of the whistle had died away.

Making the turn at the lower end of the track in safety, the two teams in the race squared away down the home stretch. All at once Phil saw that something was wrong. The leading chariot was swaying dizzily, and the driver was trying with all her strength to pull the plunging animals down.

Suddenly the wheel on the inner side slipped from its axle and went rolling off into the center of the arena. The axle dropped to the turf, caught, then turned the chariot bottom side up.

The woman driver was hurled off into the center in the wake of the careening wheel, landing on her head and shoulders beside the center platform.

The team did not stop, however. It started directly across the arena, in a diagonal course.

"She is hurt!" cried Phil. "Somebody will be killed unless that wild team is stopped!"

Giving no thought to the danger to himself, Phil Forrest darted across the arena and leaped for the bridles of the plunging, frightened animals.

CHAPTER XXIV

CONCLUSION

It seemed a foolhardy thing to do, but Phil understood exactly how to go about it. If he were able to turn the team, he would undoubtedly save them from plunging into the seats where hundreds of people were sitting. A trained circus horse always will avoid the spectators, but there is no accounting for what a green animal will do.

Grasping the bit of the animal nearest to him, Phil threw his whole weight into the effort. To his intense satisfaction the team swerved, half turned and dashed across the arena again. This time, however, they did not go far. The outfit smashed into the main center pole, and Phil went on, sitting down violently in the middle of the concourse, unhurt, but more or less shaken up.

By that time ring attendants had caught the frightened horses. All danger was over.

Phil Forrest was loudly cheered by the spectators, but his borrowed officer's uniform was a hopeless wreck. It was torn beyond any possibility of repair.

Upon investigation, which Phil made at once, he found that the cap that held the chariot wheel in place, had been removed. No trace of it ever was found, and Phil well knew that the mysterious enemy was once more at work. The news was conveyed to Mr. Sparling, with the information that Phil had gleaned.

He also bore the unwelcome tidings to his employer that their leading woman chariot driver had broken both arms and that she would not perform again that season, if ever again.

Mr. Sparling was so angered over this latest outrage that he was scarcely able to control himself. Yet he knew that it would be best to maintain silence until the detective had had an opportunity to make an investigation. Some of the circus people, however, had voiced a suspicion that the accident was a deliberate attempt to do the show an injury, and this was quickly passed from lip to lip, until almost everyone had heard it. The show people accepted the situation quietly, as was their wont, nevertheless they were very much excited. There was no telling when they themselves might fall victims to the mysterious enemy, and each one vowed to run down the scoundrel who they knew must be a member of the circus family.

Phil made some guarded inquiries, but was unable to learn whether or not anyone had been observed about the chariots that day. The hub cap, of course, might have been removed while the chariots were still on the boat, but in that event its loss would no doubt have been noticed, for the caps were of brass, large and prominent.

Phil decided that the act must have been committed just before the chariots were driven into the arena for the Roman races.

In this, Phil Forrest was right.

The solution of the mystery was at hand, however, and was to come in a most unexpected manner.

Supper had been eaten, and most of the performers were out on the lot, enjoying the balmy air of the early evening for the few moments left to them before they would be obliged to repair to the dressing tent to make ready for the evening performance.

Phil decided to go in, after finishing a talk with Mr. Sparling in the latter's private tent. As the lad passed through the menagerie tent the attendants were lighting the gasoline lamps there and hauling them up the center poles.

Under the big top, however, one could not see half its length. The lights there would not be turned on for fifteen or twenty minutes yet. Not a person was in sight as Phil entered the tent, making his way slowly down the concourse. He paused half-way down, seating himself on a grandstand chair in one of the arena boxes, where he thought over the latest exploit of the show's enemy.

"This time they were not after me, but after the outfit itself," he muttered. "That is the time the fellow showed his hand, and it gives me an idea. I--hello, there is someone who acts as if he did not wish to be seen."

Phil sat still and watched. Someone had slipped in under the tent down at the other end, directly across the arena from where the bandstand was located. It had now become so dark in the tent that Phil could not make out the fellow's features. In fact, the man was a mere shadow.

"I wonder what he is doing there?"

Then a thought struck Phil Forrest like a blow.

"That's where they put the big net between performances."

Phil crept down into the arena and made his way back to the entrance to the menagerie tent, where he quickly slipped out into the open and ran down along the outside of the big top at his best speed. As he drew near the spot where he had seen the man, he moved cautiously.

Finally Phil dropped down and peered under the tent. He was less than ten feet from where the fellow was at work. The Circus Boy could catch a "rip, rip" now and then.

"The fiend is cutting the net," he muttered. "I wonder who he is. Ah, I know him now! He is one of the tent men. I never thought he was in this thing. I must catch him--I must make the attempt, for he may get away. I don't even know the fellow's name, nor do I understand his enmity toward the show or myself."

Phil wriggled in under the tent, now, not fearing discovery, for inside the tent, it was quite dark. Slowly raising himself to his feet, he edged nearer, step by step, to where the man was

at work. The man had partly spread the net out by this time, to make sure that he was cutting it in the right place so that it would give way beneath the weight of the performer unfortunate enough to drop into it first.

"The fiend!" repeated Phil, clenching his fists. "I'm glad I am the one to discover him. Mr. Man, I have a score to settle with you and I'm going to begin the settling up now."

Phil crouched low. He was now only a few feet from the stooping figure.

All at once the boy threw himself forward. He landed on the man, forcing him to the ground. As he struck, Phil raised his voice in the showmen's rallying cry.

"_Hey, Rube!_" he shouted in a sing-song voice that was heard in the dressing tents and even out in the menagerie tent.

His first care, then, was to pinion the man so he could not use his hands, for the Circus Boy knew that his captive had a knife in one hand.

Men came running from all directions, Mr. Sparling among the number, for he had been in the menagerie tent when the cry reached him, and feared some fresh trouble was at hand.

"What is it? Where is it?" roared the showman.

"Here, here! Bring lights. Bring--"

The man beneath him began to struggle. In fact the fellow staggered to his feet, the boy being too light to hold him down.

Phil grabbed him about the waist, pinioning the man's arms to his sides. Then began a desperate struggle, during which the combatants fell to the ground, rolling over and over in their fierce battle.

"It's Phil Forrest!" shouted the owner.

He sprang forward and with a mighty tug, jerked the tentman free of the Circus Boy's body. At that instant the fellow leaped to his feet and started to run.

"Stop him!" howled Phil.

Teddy, who had come running up, suddenly stooped over and constituting himself a battering ram, ran full tilt into the tentman, the boy's head landing in the pit of the circus hand's stomach. The fellow went down, whereupon Teddy promptly sat on him until the others reached the scene.

"Now, what does this mean?" demanded the showman sternly.

"It means that I caught this fellow cutting the net. If you will look at it you will find it to be badly mutilated, I think." An examination proved that Phil was right. Mr. Sparling had all he could do to prevent the angry circus men from wreaking their

vengeance on the wretch then and there.

Teddy, in the meantime, had been peering into the man's face.

"I know him! I know him!" howled the Circus Boy, dancing about.

"You know him?"

"Yes, do you remember Bad Eye who was mixed up with Red Larry, the fellow we sent to jail two or three seasons ago?"

"Yes."

"That's Bad Eye," pointing to the prisoner, "and he is bad medicine, besides."

"Is it possible?" muttered Phil, a new light breaking over him.

Suddenly Teddy uttered a yell.

"I've got him! He's the fellow who stole my egg." Teddy made a dive for the prisoner, but strong hands pulled him away.

Bad Eye, it developed, smarting under the punishment that had been meted out to his companion, had once more joined the show, determined upon revenge. He had in the meantime grown a full beard, so that no one recognized him. Now, Phil Forrest knew why the voice was dimly familiar to him when he had heard it that night out on the lot.

Caught red-handed, Bad Eye made a full confession. And to the surprise of everyone, he implicated Manuel, the assistant to the Spanish clown. Bad Eye admitted having thrown Phil Forrest overboard, as well. He denied having stolen Tucker's egg, placing the full responsibility for this on the shoulders of Manuel.

What was done with the egg was never known, though Manuel was believed to have thrown it overboard. Diaz, after his one violent outbreak, had made no further evil attempts.

Bad Eye and Manuel were tried and convicted in due time, and placed where they would do the show no further harm.

The show went on, and after several successful weeks, reached New Orleans, where the final performance of the season was given. All hands then turned their faces northward. Teddy and Phil decided to take a steamship for New York, thence proceeding to their home by train. Each lad was a few thousand dollars richer than when he had joined out in the spring.

They waved their adieus to Mr. Sparling from the deck of an ocean steamer next morning as the big ship slowly poked its nose out into the gulf.

"You can't down the Circus Boys," said Phil, with a pleased smile as they leaned over the rail.

"At least, not this season," added Teddy.

But the exciting experiences of the Circus Boys were not yet at an end. The lads will be heard from further in another volume, under the title: "THE CIRCUS BOYS ON THE PLAINS; Or, The Young Advance Agents Ahead of the Show."

In this forthcoming volume the lads pass through a phase of circus life never experienced by them before. They will find, too, that all the thrills of the circus life are not confined to the sawdust arena, but that there is every whit as much excitement and real peril in the daily life of the advance man on the advertising car ahead of the show.

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