CRAWFORD'S STRATAGEM.

BY

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"The affair of the Ghost of St. Dunstan's,"
"A Summer's Afternoon," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE four o'clock bell at St. Dunstan's was clanging noisily, and the banging of doors and shuffling of footsteps indicated clearly that the welcome relief from class had come.

The members of the Fifth had strolled off with an important air along the corridor, and past the groups of small boys, who eyed them with much curiosity.

"I say, they're going to have it," whispered young Raggles, eagerly, as he watched the elder boys mount the little narrow flight of stairs at the end of the corridor which led to the "Green Room."

"What?" asked a new youngster.

"Look at the notice board, ass," shouted Master Raggles, as he bounded downstairs to have a game of "punt-about" with his chief cronies.

Being of a curious disposition, the new boy wended his way to the notice board, where amid football and other announcements, he read the following:—

"NOTICE.—Meeting of the Rambriht Musical and Dramatic Society to be held in the Green Room, at 4 p.m. to-day. First rehearsal for annual concert to take place. Members kindly bring their instruments.

By Order,
(Signed)
A. CLAVEL, Stage Manager.
R. DIGBY, Secretary.
S. RICKET, Treasurer.

Membership of above Society is exclusively confined to the Fifth. Application for joining to be made to the Secretary."

Meanwhile, the members of the Rambriht Society were rapidly collecting in the Green Room, and the deafening strumming of the various instruments showed that "tuning up" was in full progress. It was some time before Clavel's voice could make itself heard above the din, and even when the uproar had subsided, the silence was still broken by the irritating "tum-tum" of some anxious individual who had not got the *E* of his violin to the right pitch.

"If you fellows can't shut up that strumming, we'll adjourn the meeting," cried Clavel, in righteous wrath, and this threat had the desired effect, so that his next words could be heard in comfort. "Look here, you chaps," he began, coming at once to the point. "We want our annual concert this year to be a success. It always has been, and I don't see why it shouldn't now. Of course I know some of our best singers are gone this term, but the new members may be as good, and they'll be a jolly sight better if they don't talk, as I have heard some old ones doing, namely, that it is an awful bore to have to practise so soon, and that they lose too much football. Well, if they think so, let them give it up, and the Rambriht can get along without them; but let them understand one thing, if they don't practise they'll have no choice, but just be kicked out. They are welcome to go and make fools of themselves on any platform, but not as members of the R.M.D.S. (laughter and cries of "hear, hear.") We've decided to have Christy Minstrels this year, as you know, and we can't do anything

decent in that way without work. And now for the programme."

Clavel's speech was received with much applause, for the leader of the Rambriht was a popular fellow, and then the business of the meeting began.

The members of the orchestra settled themselves without delay; the tambourines and bones took up their position, and Clavel standing in front of the group, with a ruler for a bâton, read off the first item on the programme.

"Chorus—'Boys of Wexford.'"

"That's O'Connor's choice," muttered Bridge, the 1st violin. "Oh, he's a patriotic bhoy."

"You shut up," growled the outraged O'Connor.

"Now then," cried Clavel, rapping the music stand to command attention.

Bang went Kirby on the piano, the violins screamed out, the 'cello buzzed away in the background, the banjo and mandoline tinkled faintly, then the boys caught up the song. It was a favourite, so away they went, and when the chorus came, the very walls seemed to tremble at the sound.

"We are the boys of Wexford,
We like to rant and roar."

But here an interruption occurred as the door suddenly opened, and Mr. Craven, the new science master appeared.

"What is the meaning of this—this unseemly row?" he demanded angrily.

"We like to ra-ant and roar," warbled Kirby from the piano, still unconscious of the master's presence.

"So it seems, so it seems," snapped Mr. Craven drily. Thereupon, the musician hastily retired amid the laughter of the boys.

"It is all right, sir," said Clavel quickly. "We are practising for our annual concert, you know, we always give one to the school. We have the Head's permission."

"Oh, of course, if the Head allows it, I have nothing to say," returned Mr. Craven curtly, walking off leaving the boys furious at his disparagement of their musical talents.

"Hurry up. What comes next?" asked Clavel, when the indignation had spent itself. He had mislaid his programme.

"Bridge's song," shouted several voices.

"Shut up," cried Bridge. "It's not."

"Yes it is," said Clavel. "Here we are, song—'Mother put me in my little bed.'—M. Bridge."

A roar of laughter greeted this announcement.

"It's rot," cried the infuriated Bridge. "I can't sing it."

"But you said you would," cried Kirby, swinging round on the music stool.

"Well I can't," growled Bridge, decidedly. He had made the promise in a rash moment, and now no amount of persuasion could induce him to keep it.

"Well we must put someone in your place," said Clavel dismally. "Bother you, Bridge, we are so short of singers, too."

"Put Crawford down for a song," suggested Kirby.

"You shut up," cried the owner of that name.

Crawford had only just entered the Fifth, and was consequently a very recent member of the R.M.D.S. He possessed a banjo and a voice, and wished to join, so Ricket enrolled him.

"Can you sing?" asked Clavel, impatiently.

"Yes," said Crawford.

Some laughter greeted this modest assertion.

"Well, what can you sing?" asked Clavel again.

"I haven't got any music," began Crawford, with some hesitation.

"Oh, that doesn't matter," cried Kirby. I'll vamp for you if you tell me what you want."

After a short consultation with the accompanist, Crawford took up his banjo, and leaning his back against the edge of the piano, began to sing. The song he chose was Kingsley's ballad, "When all the world was young, lad." Crawford sang it well, giving to the first verse its dash of boyish spirit and hope, while the last was rendered with a ring of despair that ill contrasted with the bright careless face of the singer.

There was a moment's silence when he finished, then a burst of applause.

"A ripping song," cried everybody. "Bravo Crawford." Clavel was especially pleased. He asked Crawford for another song, then another, and each met with hearty applause. The boys joined in the choruses of those they knew, and beat time with their feet to those they did not, and in every way showed their appreciation.

The meeting broke up in excellent spirits, and Crawford was looked to for three songs on the eventful night, with due provision for an expected encore.

"I say, youngster, you'd make your fortune on the stage," said Potter, as he and Crawford lingered behind to put away the instruments. "Why don't you go in for it, eh?"

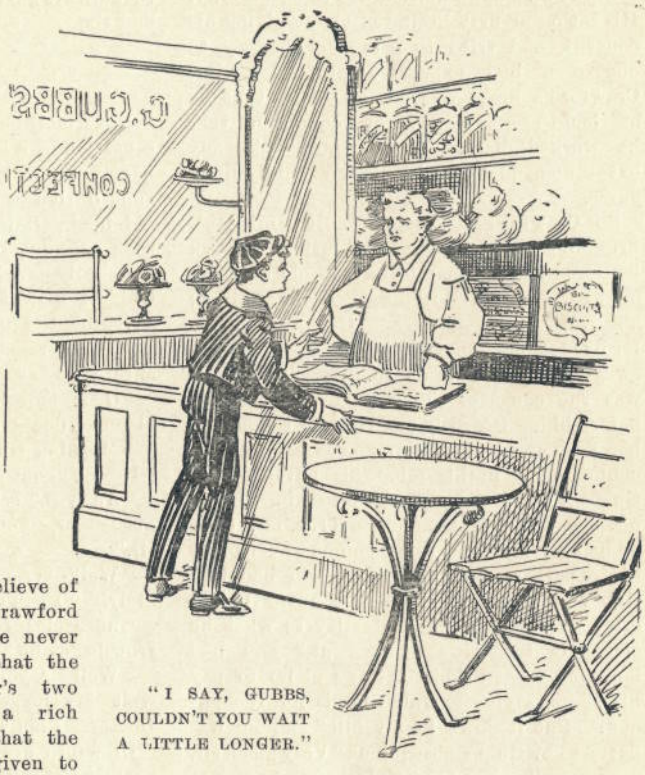
"No fear," laughed Crawford. "I should hate it, besides I don't sing well enough for that."

"Rot," cried Potter, shutting his violin case with a bang. "Why, I've got two cousins who made ever so much money in that way, and they don't sing half so well as you. They dressed up as Christy Minstrels, and sang at some fair, and got about five pounds—lucky beggars."

"Go away," cried Crawford, incredulously.

"Upon my word it's true," said Potter, earnestly. "It was during our last holidays. They told me all about it themselves, and Dick said to me: 'if ever you are hard up, take my tip and sing at a fair, and you'll earn more money than you want.' Hullo, there's the tea bell." And they both hurried away.

If Crawford had not been such a very new member of the fifth, he would have learned to put little faith in Potter's tales of his two cousins, for the old members were sick of them, and would have known how much to believe of the present one, but Crawford accepted it as a whole. He never suspected for one minute that the "Fair" at which Potter's two cousins had reaped such a rich harvest was a bazaar, and that the money they obtained was given to some Charity; nor could he know that Dick's remark was purely a joke, and perhaps also a slight sneer at Potter who possessed a voice like a tin-kettle. However, at that moment the story had little interest for Crawford, and he soon forgot it.



"I SAY, GUBBS, COULDN'T YOU WAIT A LITTLE LONGER."

After tea, Crawford went off to his study, and on the way thither fell into the arms of his fag, young Raggles, who was tearing at a break-neck pace along the corridor.

"Bother you, youngster, I wish you would look where you are going," growled Crawford, good-humouredly, as they became mutually entangled.

"Here's a letter for you Crawford," gasped Raggles, breathlessly. "I couldn't give it to you before, because—" But with a muttered "thanks" Crawford strolled on without waiting to hear the small boy's excuse, and Raggles departed, congratulating himself on having a master like Crawford, who did not "jaw" one for being a bit behind time.

Meanwhile, Crawford, with a troubled look on his face, entered his study and tore open the note. It was from Gubbs, the confectioner, whose shop was much patronised by the boys of St. Dunstan's, and ran as follows:—

"Young sir,

"Enclosed is my little account. I should be glad if you would settle it at once, otherwise I must put it into the hands of the Doctor.

"Your obedient servant

"G. Gubbs."

Crawford grew very pale as he read the note, and quickly opened the "little account." It was just eighteen and six. He stood with the two papers in his hand for a moment completely stunned. Eighteen and six! The figures whirled before his brain. However could he have spent all that? He took it up again to see if he had made a mistake. No! There it was as plain as daylight. Eighteen and six. To Crawford the sum seemed a small fortune, and the possibility of paying it out of his reach altogether. To other fellows of the Fifth, Rawson for instance, who always had a half-sovereign amongst his small change, or Garleigh, who could contribute fifteen shillings to the football club, the debt would have seemed trifling, and perhaps cost them hardly a thought, but with Crawford it was different. He was the youngest son of a large family, nearly all boys. Two of his brothers were at Sandhurst, a third at Cooper's Hill, so owing to the heavy expenses thus incurred, his father had warned him very seriously about getting into debt, and begged him to cause him as little expense as possible while at school.

Crawford's one ambition was to be a soldier. His father at first hesitated about giving his consent, and tried to persuade the boy to choose a less expensive profession, but Crawford's heart was so set on it, that he at length gave way on condition that he worked hard and did not make any extra demands on his already thinly-lined purse.

So Crawford had come to St. Dunstan's brimming over with good resolutions to work hard and be as economical as an old miser, as he expressed it. But he had one failing; he was too generous. Generous in a lordly fashion, that often ended in giving away what was not his to give. This fault was the cause of the unpaid bill that lay before him. Scarcely one sixth of the money had been spent on himself, and as he miserably conned over in his mind his purchases at Gubbs & Co., it did not seem to him that he had spent half that amount. True, last term he had given a feast to his chums to celebrate his departure into the Fifth, and had told Gubbs to put it down to his account. He had often treated his chum Hartley to what he elegantly termed a "blow out," and had laughingly set aside Hartley's claim to pay his share, saying to Gubbs in his lordly manner: "Put it down in my bill," and he was flattered by Gubbs' obsequious "Very good, sir, very good." Now for the first time he was to realise the consequence of his carelessness and extravagance. If once the Doctor came to hear of his debt he was certain he would be expelled, and worse still, the prospects of his entering the army would be all over as his father would never trust him again. Come what may, he must pay the money—but how? Could he borrow it? Crawford saw this was impossible. The boys who were his chums were like himself, not burdened with very much pocket-money. Others like Rawson and Garleigh he was too proud to ask. There seemed only one thing possible at present, namely, to induce Gubbs to wait a little longer for his account.

It was too late that evening to get leave to go into town, so with a weary sigh Crawford turned to his books. Yet he could not study. Those wretched figures danced before his eyes. He saw them in every line of his books, and his sums always worked out at eighteen and sixpence.

Finally he shut up his books with a bang, and betook himself to bed, there to lie tossing and turning with ever the same old puzzle tormenting his brain. How to pay eighteen and six out of an empty purse. At last he fell asleep, to dream he was a bank clerk (for that was what his father had wished him to be) adding up innumerable columns of figures that always gave the same sum total—eighteen and six.

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Chapter II.

Next morning, Crawford awoke with the sensation of a load of care on his mind. He hardly knew how he dragged through the time until the twelve o'clock bell rang. He obtained permission to go into town, and was soon speeding down the road at a quick pace. He hardly dared think of the consequences if Gubbs refused to wait, and even if he proved agreeable the prospect of paying the debt was still very remote. With beating heart he entered the shop and approached the counter.

"Good morning, sir," said Gubbs, with a bland smile. "What can I do for you?"

"Morning Gubbs," said Crawford quickly. "I came about my bill, you know."

"Ah, yes," said Gubbs cheerfully, opening his ledger, "you wish to settle it, of course, sir."

"Well—er—no," faltered Crawford desperately. "I can't yet, I—"

Gubbs closed his book with a bang, and frowned as he shook his head.

"Well sir, you got my note. I can't really wait any longer, I must report it to the Doctor. I am very sorry!"

Crawford grew pale, and he leaned heavily against the counter.

"I say, Gubbs, couldn't you wait a little longer. I'll give you my pocket-money every week."

"And how much is that, young sir?" asked Gubbs, sarcastically.

"Well it's — it's — sixpence," stammered Crawford.

Gubbs laughed, and Crawford flushed hotly.

"Won't do, won't do," said Gubbs slowly. "You pay me the money to-day, and you'll hear no more about it, otherwise—" and he shrugged his shoulders as much as to say that the consequences did not depend on him.

"But I can't," said Crawford, in despair. "I haven't a copper."

"Very well, sir," said Gubbs, carelessly, and he turned to serve another customer.

Crawford watched him for a moment, then hopelessly left the shop. He walked slowly down the street, feeling the most wretched boy in all the world, and blaming himself again and again for his careless extravagance. As he wandered miserably back to the College, his eyes suddenly fell on a large bill posted against some boarding around a half-built house. It proclaimed in large red letters that a Fair was to be held at Brompton on Friday, 16th of October, and set forth the various attractions in the shape of Wild Beast Show, Merry-go-rounds, and marvellous

Skeleton-men. Crawford read the bill through very slowly. Then there suddenly flashed through his mind Potter's tale of his two cousins. They had sung at a fair; they had made five pounds. He was half-frightened for a moment at his own idea. He stood motionless; then a fresh thought acted like a spur to his wavering resolution. How strange! Friday was a whole holiday, being Founders' Day. Could he—dare he do it? Crawford set his teeth together with a determined snap. Why ever not? Why could not he do what other fellows had done? In a moment he was racing back to Gubbs' shop and burst in in such a breathless hurry that he completely startled that individual.

"Gubbs," gasped the boy eagerly, "Will you wait till Saturday. To-day's Wednesday, so it won't be long, and I promise faithfully you shall have the money then. Will you?"

"Well sir," he said slowly, "If I could rely on your paying the money—"

"You can," cried Crawford, "really you can, and if I don't pay you, you can tell the Doctor, or do anything you like."

Gubbs smiled rather grimly at this last speech. "Well, I'll wait," he said at length. "I don't mind obliging you this once, and—"

But Crawford waited to hear no more. With a hasty "thanks," he departed, mentally vowing that it would be the last time that Gubbs would have to oblige him in that way.

As he walked back, he had time to consider in detail the enterprise which he had undertaken, and to realise the difficulties and dangers that lay in his path. Yet somehow, they only made him more determined to go through with it.

"I'll do it," he muttered, stopping still in his walk and bringing his two hands together with a clap in the energy of his resolve. "And what's more, I'll succeed, too,"

If only Crawford had used the same energy and determination to keep himself straight as he displayed when he found himself in a scrape, what a fine fellow he would have been.

By the time Crawford had reached the College, his whole plan of action was mapped out. He decided to catch the eleven train to Brompton, a large village about half-an-hour's distance by rail from St. Dunstan's, and return by the five; thus he would have ample time to return to the School before half-past six. He had his Christy Minstrel costume all ready, having had it sent him for the coming entertainment, and he decided to wrap it up and take it with him, trusting to luck to secure an empty carriage, and so effect his change of dress on the way.

He borrowed half-a-crown from his chum Hartley, for his railway fare, but was very careful to say nothing about his plans, as if once his escapade reached the Doctor's ears, he would be in a far worse position than before. Thursday seemed to crawl by, and when Friday morning broke clear and sunny, Crawford jumped out of bed with the feeling that his whole future career was to be decided by the events of the day. He was too much excited to take any interest in the plans of the other boys, and as soon as breakfast was over, he rushed off to the dormitory and packed up his costume into as small a parcel as possible; then he hung about the School House until half-past ten. By that time the School was nearly deserted, so Crawford with his parcel and banjo was able to slip out unnoticed, and reached the station in safety. Fortunately, very few seemed to be going at that time, so Crawford had no difficulty in securing an empty third-class carriage. As soon as the station was left well behind, he undid his parcel and quickly got into his costume. The striped trousers and long-tailed coat, the huge turned-up collar and wide-awake hat, felt very strange, and as he carefully blacked his face and hands, he began for the first time to have some misgivings as to the result of his adventure, but he resolutely put them aside and thought only of success.

He wrapped up his own clothes and made them into a small parcel to sling over his shoulder. He dare not leave them anywhere, as, if opened, his cap would tell tales, and he was determined that his escapade should never be known.

It needed all his pluck when the train drew up at Brompton to step unconcernedly from his carriage, and cross the platform. He felt somehow, that everyone must recognise him, and he could have heartily kicked the cheeky grinning official who took his ticket. He was rather dismayed to find that the Fair was two miles distant from the station. However, there was no help for it, so he set off. After walking for some time, he began to meet several people, who joined him from various turnings and cross roads, so he judged he was approaching the scene of the Fair; and he was right, for now in the distance could be seen flags and tents, and the faint sound of music reached his ears. Crawford hurried on and looked rather anxiously at the miscellaneous crowd that was now gathering together, soldiers, sailors, cheap-jacks, farm labourers and tramps, and he shuddered slightly as he heard their coarse jests and loud laughter. He reached the Fair itself, and as he paid his money and entered the grounds, he found the crowd even greater. He was jostled and pushed about on all sides. The fearful screeching music of the merry-go-rounds deafened his ears, and the loud shout-

"I'D LIKE TO KNOW WHY A YOUNG GENT LIKE YOU TOOK UP NIGGER SINGING."

ing as each man proclaimed the advantages of his own show, was terribly confusing. Some were advocating cocoanut-shies, others offering to take one's photo for sixpence, others announcing wild beast shows—poor Crawford. His imagination had never pictured any scene like this. For a moment he was quite bewildered, and it required all his efforts to prevent himself from being knocked down, or his banjo smashed. How could he ever summon up courage to raise his voice in this crowd, or what chance was there of his being heard amid the din.

The smell of beer, and the smoke of coarse tobacco nearly made him sick. His one desire was to get out of the place as soon as possible. He wished he had asked Potter more details regarding the Fair at which his two cousins sang, and his admiration at their pluck increased tenfold. It was partly this thought that kept him from rushing then and there from the place. "If they did, why can't I?" muttered Crawford doggedly.

As he moved along with the crowd he found he was leaving the most noisy part of the Fair behind. The sound of a banjo in the distance attracted his attention, and, approaching a group of men and women, he saw an oldish man dressed in a manner somewhat similar to himself, standing on a wooden table, entertaining his audience with a comic song to a very feeble banjo accompaniment. Crawford pushed nearer and nearer, in his curiosity, until he found himself standing close to the table. The old nigger finished his song and as the last notes died away, his eyes fell on Crawford who was looking at him earnestly.

"Hullo, young 'un," he said good-humouredly. "What can you do?"

Crawford's first impulse on finding public attention thus directed to himself, was to flee, but finding now that the crowd around him was too dense to escape easily, he remained where he was, and said nothing.

"Come, 'op up 'ere, young 'un, and let's see what you can do," continued the old nigger, laughing.

"No thanks," muttered Crawford, colouring furiously under his paint.

A roar of laughter greeted this remark, and some men began to handle him roughly, at the same time demanding a song. Crawford, now thoroughly frightened, tried to free himself from their grasp, but in vain. Then the old nigger came to his rescue.

"Now then, 'ands off there," let the youngster alone, or pass 'im up 'ere to me. That's right."

And Crawford found himself lifted up on to the table by the side of the nigger, where his appearance was greeted by shouts of laughter, and a shower of nuts and orange peel.

"No, no," cried his champion. "Let 'im be, I tell yer. Give the young 'un a chance. Now then youngster, fire away."

Crawford looked at the sea of rough faces around him, his heart beating quickly, and his hand clenched with anger at the treatment he was receiving. His first impulse was to indignantly refuse to sing, then he remembered who he was supposed to be, and his pride cooled down a little. If he was to succeed, it was now or never; so he drew himself up defiantly, and struck a few notes on his banjo, but it was some minutes before he could find courage to begin to sing. Then the memory of his scrape and unpaid debt acted as an incentive, and some of his old pluck and determination came back to him.

He boldly commenced a favourite boating song of his, with a very rollicking chorus. It was quite new to his audience, and far superior to the kind of songs they were

accustomed to hear, but it caught their fancy and held them spellbound until the boy had finished. A loud roar of applause greeted its conclusion, and vociferous demands were made for an encore. Crawford sang again and again, until his store of songs was almost exhausted. Then he became aware that the old nigger was passing round the hat, and the chink chink of the money thrown in spurred him on to fresh efforts. He struck up the ballad "When all the world was young, lad," and sang it his very best, and the most sincere applause of all rewarded him, namely silence. The rough hearts of his hearers seemed to have been touched by the old song and the clear boyish voice of the young singer, and some even wiped their eyes with their great red handkerchiefs, explaining elaborately that the sharp October wind made them water "drat it."

"Let's 'ave that agin, me dear," asked one old woman, looking up at Crawford with her wrinkled face and bleared eyes, and her request was caught up by the crowd.

Crawford started the song again, and had just reached the last verse, while the whole mob hung breathlessly on his words, when he saw on the outskirts of the crowd, a gentleman gazing steadily at him. He was a tall young man with a very bronzed face, and an eyeglass that gave him a rather cynical expression. In the lane outside the field was a dogcart, which evidently belonged to him, as he cast a quick glance around every now and then, as if to see whether the horse was safe.

Crawford felt uneasy under the stranger's glance. His mind wandered away from his song, he faltered over the words, and finally broke down.

"I can't sing any more," he said to the old nigger, who had now joined him on the table.

"All right, sonny," said the nigger, who noticed the boy's tired look. "Come along with me."

He took his hand, and jumping down, led him out of the crowd, which now began to disperse to seek fresh amusement elsewhere

"Wait a jiff for me 'ere," he said quickly to the boy, and he disappeared among the crowd. For a moment Crawford thought the nigger had deserted him, but he soon returned with his arms full of packages, and two bottles of lemonade. "We'll find a quiet corner, and 'ave a bit of grub, sonny," he said to Crawford. and the boy who was now feeling weak and faint with hunger, for he had had nothing since his breakfast, readily followed him into a small lane, where, on a low bank, the old man proceeded to display his purchases. There was something so kindly about the man, that Crawford, who was elated and proud of his success, chatted to him freely. As he talked, the old nigger became more deferential in his manner, and regarded the boy with curious glances. At last he could control his curiosity no longer.

"If I might make so bold, I'd like to know why a young gent like you took up nigger singing?" he asked, with some hesitation. "'taint fit for yer, no more's this place. If yer were one o' my class, I'd say join me, darn if I wouldn't, and together we'd make a pile o' tin. But now I ses to yer, sir, drop it, yer ain't suited to it."

"Oh I don't mean to do it again," cried Crawford, with a slight shudder, and straightway he took the old man into his confidence, and told him all his story. The nigger listened attentively until the boy had finished.

"Well, well, sir," he said, slowly shaking his head. "It was darned plucky of yer, my word it was, but I don't like it. I wish yer were back safe at yer school. If that there gent, as is yer master, came to 'ere of it—"

"Oh, I shall be all right." said Crawford, cheerfully, although he heartily echoed the old man's wish.

"Well sir, yer 'ave my good wishes. Now let's count yer tin. I 'opes it'll pay off that there little debt of yours."

The old man took the money out of his pocket, and rapidly counted it over.

"There's a yaller man," he said, laying down half a sovereign. "A gent with an eye-glass gave me that, and there"—piling up the heaps of silver and coppers—"there's just twenty-one shillings and sevenpence. "There yer are sir, yer done it nicely and a little bit to spare."

Crawford gazed at the money in delight. It seemed too good to be true.

"Oh I say," he cried gratefully, "you must have the half sovereign. I don't want that, and I should never have got this money but for you."

"No, no, sir," said the nigger, putting his hands behind his back. "It's yer earnings fair and square, and I shan't touch a penny of it."

"But you must," persisted Crawford eagerly. "Besides, I must pay for my share of the grub."

"Well, sir, I'll take sixpence, that'll pay for yer share, but not a penny more." And no amount of persuasion could induce him to change his mind.

"But, I say, you have been awfully good to me," pleaded the boy. "I should hate to feel I have done nothing for you."

"Well, sir," he said thoughtfully. "There is one thing yer might do, or perhaps yer wouldn't care to."

"Yes I would," cried Crawford eagerly. "What is it?"

"Well, you know sir, I gets awful hard up for my songs; I gets told they're old and that everybody's sick of them. But where am I to learn new? I can't read that there fangled music stuff. If I 'ears a thing, say twice, why I know it—"

"You mean you would like me to teach you my songs?" asked Crawford.

"That's just it, sir," chuckled the nigger in delight as he read Crawford's consent in the boy's eager face.

"Why, of course I will," said Crawford heartily. And forthwith he taught the old man all the songs he knew. They made a strange pair as they sat side by side in the country lane under the dull October sky—the young school-boy with his fresh clear voice, and the old nigger who followed him in rather quavering tones.

Then at last Crawford began Kingsley's ballad, singing it softly, first by himself. Then he began it again for the old nigger to join in. But he sat silent, and as the boy finished, he said a little huskily,

"May be 'tis time I crept home. I am old enough now, lad, and please God it won't be too late to find a face I loved when the world was young. But there I'm keeping yer waiting. No, no, sir," as Crawford took up his banjo, "I won't learn that song; I'll keep it in me mind just as yer sings it yerself."

This little bit of sentiment rather embarrassed Crawford, who jumped up quickly, saying,

"I think I'd better be off to the station now. Can you tell me what time it is?"

The old man pulled out a great turnip of a watch.

"Four o'clock, sir," he said.

"Oh, I shall just have time to catch my train," cried Crawford.

He wished the nigger a hearty good-bye, and slipped the half sovereign unobserved into his pocket. Then he started at a quick walk to the station.

He had hardly gone half way when he passed two tramps sitting by the wayside. Crawford, who did not like the appearance of them, hurried on so as to pass them as quickly as possible, but the most villainous looking one of them got up and blocked the boy's path.

"Give us a night's lodging, darkie?" he asked insolently.

"I can't give you any money," said Crawford, trying to pass on.

"'Elp ourselves then, Bill," cried the other, jumping up, and in a moment Crawford found himself struggling frantically with the two men. He hit out desperately, but he was no match for them, and soon a cruel blow on the head stunned him, and he fell senseless to the ground.

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When Crawford recovered consciousness and opened his eyes, he found to his utter amazement that he was lying in a comfortable bed in a strange room. It was dusk, but the light from a large fire enabled Crawford to look about him. He saw his own clothes and cap lying at the foot of the bed, and further off on a chair the striped trousers and coat of his Christy Minstrel costume. It was some minutes before he could collect his wandering thoughts. He felt very stiff and dizzy, and his head ached rather uncomfortably.

At that moment the door opened and a gentleman entered. To Crawford's surprise, it was the man with the eye-glass whose gaze had so disconcerted him when he was singing.

"Well, Crawford," he said cheerfully; "so you feel better?"

"Yes, sir, thank you," said Crawford in a puzzled tone, "but where am I?"

"You are in my house at present," he said, laughing. "My name is Ferrars. I found you lying stunned in the road, so I brought you home. I had my suspicions when I heard you singing that you were not quite what you seemed to be."

Crawford flushed uneasily. Then he suddenly remembered the tramps.

"I—I was attacked by two tramps, sir," he began, unsteadily. "Did they, I mean have they——"

"Stolen your money?" finished Ferrars, sitting down on the foot of the bed. "Yes, I am afraid they have, and banjo, too. The only thing they left was your bundle of clothes, from which I learnt your name and who you were."

Poor Crawford! So all his adventure had been for nothing. A great lump rose to his throat, and it was all he could do to keep the tears from starting to his eyes. Then he suddenly remembered another trouble. He must get back to the College.

"Oh, I say, please sir," he said, sitting up quickly, "I must catch my train. I shall get into an awful row——"

"Gently, my boy," said Ferrars, laying his hand on Crawford's shoulder. "You cannot go back to-night. For one thing there is no train. It is seven now, and the last train has gone. For another, you are knocked up and want a night's rest. I have telegraphed to the Doctor that you are safe."

Crawford's lips quivered at this, to him, terrible news. He was feeling so weak and dizzy from his blow that he turned on his side with a little groan and buried his face in

his arms. Ferrars looked at the boy's shaking shoulders with embarrassed dismay.

"I say, little chap," he said softly, touching the boy, "don't, you'll make yourself ill. Don't, Crawford."

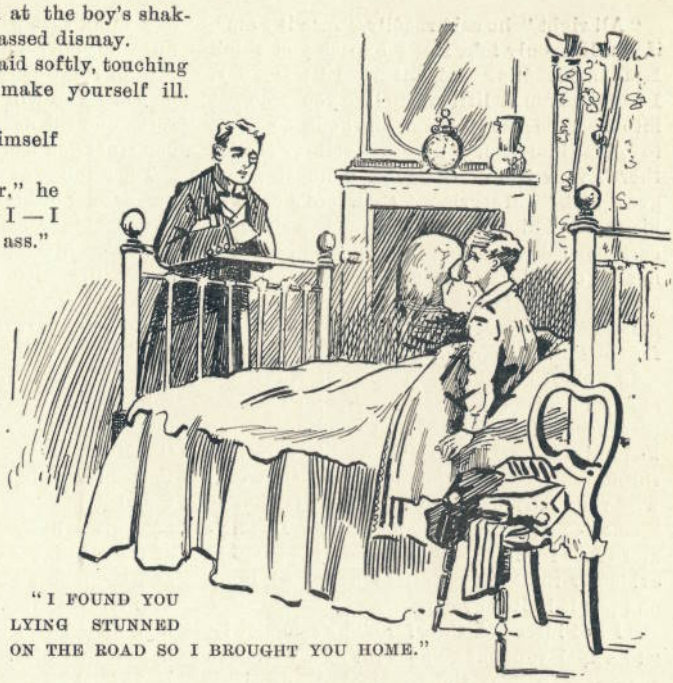
Crawford recovered himself with a great effort.

"I'm awfully sorry, sir," he muttered unsteadily. "I — I didn't mean to be such an ass."

"Look here, youngster, I am afraid you've got yourself into trouble. Won't you tell me all about it?"

There was something very winning in Ferrar's brown face as he looked at the boy in the firelight, and Crawford conquering his shyness, jerked out his whole story.

"By Jove!" said Ferrars slowly, when the boy had finished, "I am afraid you have got yourself into a mess. But I am sorry you acted on Potter's advice."



"I FOUND YOU LYING STUNNED ON THE ROAD SO I BROUGHT YOU HOME."

"Yes, I'm worse off than before, now," said Crawford, dismally.

"Oh, I didn't mean that exactly," returned Ferrars, flushing in the firelight. "I mean that—well—what you did to-day is not exactly riding straight, you know. Is it?"

Crawford looked a little puzzled.

Ferrars gave an embarrassed laugh.

"Oh, hang it all," he cried ruefully. "I am an awful hand at explaining, but I mean Crawford that it is cowardly," and here his voice became very earnest, and he met the boy's eyes very steadily, in spite of his evident shyness at anything approaching a lecture, "and it is cowardly to get out of one's scrapes. Of course, every fellow knows it's best not to get in them at all, but if you do, the only decent thing is to take the consequences like a man."

Crawford fidgeted a little uneasily beneath Ferrars steady gaze. Then he burst out—

"I don't know whether you will believe me, sir, but I never thought it was cowardly, or anything like that—"

"I am sure you didn't, Crawford," broke in Ferrars quickly. "That's why I have told you this, because it is a pity you should waste your—but there I am not going to pay you compliments or preach any more either. What do you think will be the result of your adventure?"

"I shall be expelled, I'm afraid," muttered Crawford huskily, his dreams of being a soldier now hopelessly dispersed.

"I'm afraid you will," remarked Ferrars, thoughtfully, yet not unkindly. "But look here youngster, go to sleep now. You will be better able to face your troubles after a rest. Good night."

Crawford did not feel very like going to sleep when Ferrars left him; yet he was so done up with excitement and so bruised and tired after his encounter with the tramps that he soon sank into a dreamless sleep.

In the morning he felt himself again, and although he was nervous and troubled about the coming meeting with the Doctor, yet he managed to keep up his courage during breakfast and the drive to the station. Ferrars drove him down, and as the boy jumped out, he leaned over the side of the dogcart and gave him two envelopes.

"Give this," laying his hand on one directed to the Doctor, "to your Head, after you have told him your story, and the other, well—er—you can settle your little affair with Gubbs."

Crawford flushed crimson, and a lump rose in his throat. He thrust back the envelope containing the money.

"I couldn't, sir, really, I couldn't take it."

"Rot," interrupted Ferrars, pushing back the boy's hand.

"Well, may I—that is—can I owe——" Crawford stopped in confusion, but Ferrars saw the boy's meaning.

"All right," he said readily, "owe it to me, if you like, only take it. I expect you think I am a meddling fool, but when I was a boy, I had a chum, a little chap like you, who got into a scrape also like you, but he had no one to give him a leg up—so—well— Hullo! there's your train. Good-bye, youngster, and good luck." He gripped Crawford's hand in his, then whipped up the horse and the dog-cart bowled away along the smooth road, yet not so quickly but that Crawford noticed a strange glitter in the blue eye behind the eye-glass, and he wondered greatly what was the fate of Ferrar's chum.

In a short time he was back at St. Dunstan's and told his tale in the Doctor's dread presence. He delivered up the note when he had finished, and the Doctor read it carefully through. It was rather long, and Crawford was very curious as to its contents, but it seemed to have a visible effect on the Doctor's stern face for it softened gradually. He was evidently thinking deeply as he folded it up and put it in its envelope.

"I had intended, Crawford," he said slowly, "to expel you, but on account of my friend's request—Yes," as the boy looked surprised, "Mr. Ferrars is a great friend of mine, and as I think that what you did was not done in pure mischief, but rather with the mistaken idea of righting your first wrong, I shall not do so. You will lose your half holidays this term, and the use of your study until I feel I can trust you again.

Then followed a short lecture on the folly and danger of his escapade, to which Crawford listened in silence. Finally, the Doctor, dismissed him, and Crawford went back to his school life with feelings of great gratitude towards Ferrars, and a strong determination that come what might, he would "ride straight" for the future.

Of course he could not take part in the concert, and Clavel had to do his best without him. He relieved his indignation by rowing Crawford for believing Potter's tales, and Potter for telling them. Crawford was only too glad to escape expulsion, and to find that he could still be a soldier. He often thought of the old nigger who had been so good to him and both he and Ferrars (for they became firm friends afterwards) did all they could to find him, but without success, so Crawford hoped that after all the old man had "crept home," and had ceased his life of wandering minstrelsy.