

# JACK and the CARAVANNERS



by *FRANK RICHARDS*

## CHAPTER I

"HUNT!"

"Yes, Brown!"

"Have you seen my fountain-pen?"

"No!"

"Oh, bother!"

"Jack of All Trades" looked up, with a faint smile upon his sunburnt face.

The caravan was camped in a little field beside a shady Sussex lane. Jack, seated in the shade of a high hawthorn hedge, was peeling potatoes. Jack had been days with the two kind-hearted caravanners who had given him a "job": but he was not yet quite used to hearing two ladies address one another as "Hunt" and "Brown".

Miss Hunt, tall and slim, was reading, on a camp-stool in the shade of a tree that jutted from the hedge. Miss Brown, short and plump, had just come out of the caravan, staring round her through her gold-rimmed glasses a little like an owl.

Brown, apparently, had missed her fountain-pen: which was not very

surprising, for Brown was always missing something. Hilda Brown was a writer of "thrillers": a little dreamy, a little absent-minded, a little temperamental, and considerably forgetful. Generally she wore no hat: but when she did want a hat, it was seldom to be found. Sometimes she made the tea, on which occasions she was liable to forget to put the tea in the pot, and pour out clear water into the cups. Hunt, who was keen and practical, was very patient with her. Now she laid down her book, and fixed her clear eyes on the flustered face of her friend.

"When did you see it last, Brown?" she asked.

Brown passed a plump hand across a plump brow, in an effort to think.

"I laid it down somewhere," she said, at last. "That was yesterday afternoon—no, this morning!"

"Then it must be in the van," said Hunt.

"Do you think so?"

"You would hardly lay it down in the grass," said Hunt.

"Oh! Yes! Quite! How thoughtful you are, Hunt! But I have looked in the van," said Brown, distressfully. "It is not there! And—and I want it! An idea has just flashed into my mind. Where can it be?"

Jack jumped up.

"Shall I look for it, miss?" he asked.

Miss Brown turned her gold-rimmed glasses on him. With her mind full of the idea that had flashed into it, she had forgotten the existence of Jack. Thus reminded of it, she gave him a nod and a smile.

"Yes, please do, Jack," she said. "I am very anxious to get to work. Please find my fountain-pen, Jack."

"Yes, miss."

"Look in the van, Jack," said Hunt.

"Yes, miss."

Jack clambered into the caravan, and set to work searching. Brown sat down on a camp-stool and dropped her hand-bag into the grass beside her and opened a large writing-pad on her knee—all ready to start on a thrilling chapter as soon as the fountain-pen was found.

For ten minutes Jack was busy in the van. He emerged at last, but without anything in the shape of a fountain-pen.

"Have you found it, Jack?" asked Brown, eagerly.

"I'm sorry, miss—"

"Have you found it?"

"It's not there, miss."

"Now, it must be there," argued Brown. "As Hunt very sensibly remarked, I should not lay it down in the grass. If I laid it down anywhere, it must have been in the van: and I am sure—almost sure—that I did lay it down. If I had not done so, it would still be in my hand. And it certainly is not in my hand. Look again, Jack."

"Very well, miss."

Jack went back into the caravan. Having searched it once in vain, he proceeded to search it a second time, also in vain.

Brown frowned a little.

"Jack is a very useful boy, Hunt," she remarked. "But—"

"Very useful indeed," said Hunt. "Things have gone over so much better, in every way, since Jack has been with us, Brown."

"Yes, quite, quite! But—really, I think he should find my fountain-pen," said Brown. "Obviously it is in the van, and he should be able to find it."

"You may have dropped it," suggested Hunt.

Brown put her little head on one side, as if considering this suggestion very carefully.

"Possibly!" she admitted. "You think of everything, Hunt! But if I may have dropped it, it must be somewhere! The boy should be able to find it! It must certainly be somewhere, Hunt."

Miss Hunt glanced at her wrist-watch.

"We have to walk to the village, Brown," she remarked. "Suppose we do so while the boy is searching for your fountain-pen."

"But I have an idea—"

"No doubt! But we must do some shopping, as your brother is coming to tea with us this afternoon."

"Dear me!" said Brown. "I had quite forgotten that George is coming! We must certainly do some shopping for tea, Hunt. But I must get that idea down before it escapes me. It is really very singular that the boy cannot find the fountain-pen."

Jack emerged from the van again.

"'Tain't there, miss," he said.

"Really, Jack, you cannot have looked thoroughly," said Brown. "I hope you are not a careless boy, Jack."

Jack coloured.

"I'm sure 'tain't in the van, miss," he said. "I've looked everywhere. I couldn't have missed it if it was there."

"But it must be found," said Brown.

Both the caravanning ladies were looking a little impatient now.

Hunt, the practical one, was thinking of a visitor to tea at the caravan camp, and of the necessity to make some little preparations. Brown was thinking of the idea that had flashed into her mind, and which was liable to escape unless transferred to her writing-pad. Still, Jack, industrious and anxious to oblige as he was, could not discover an article that was not there.

"Do you think you might have put it into your bag?" asked Jack, diffidently.

"Absurd!" said Brown. "I should not be likely to forget putting it in my bag! Do not be absurd, Jack."

"No, miss," stammered Jack.

"On the other hand," said Hunt, "it is quite possible you might forget putting it into your bag, Brown."

"Do you think so, Hunt? Well, you may look in the bag, Jack! I am sure it is not there, but you may look through the bag."

"Yes, miss."

Jack picked up the handbag from the grass, and opened it. The bag was fairly well filled with handkerchief, letters, loose stamps, odds and ends, and—a fountain-pen! In a matter of moments, Jack fished it out from the heterogeneous collection, and held it up.

"Is that it, miss?"

"Dear me! There is my fountain-pen," said Brown. "I must have put it in the bag after all! How very odd."

"Really, Brown—!" said Hunt, with just a trace of sharpness in her tone. "Do you know that Jack has been looking for that fountain-pen for nearly half an hour?"

"So long as that, Hunt?"

"And it was in your bag all the while!"

"Yes! Is it not odd? Thank you, Jack! You are a very clever boy to think of looking in the bag! Please close it without dropping anything. Jack is a very useful boy, Hunt, and very clever. I should not have thought of looking in the bag."

"Really, Brown—"

"Please don't speak now, Hunt: I am just getting to work."

Brown began to scribble at a great rate with the happily-recovered fountain-pen. Hunt resumed her book. And Jack, a little tired with his search, but glad to have been of such use to one of his kind friends, sat down once more contentedly to peel potatoes.

## CHAPTER II

**Pop!**  
It made Jack jump.

He was alone in the caravan camp. After lunch, the two ladies had walked away to the village of Oake, about a mile down the road, where they had their shopping to do. Jack was left in charge of the camp, the caravan and the horse. Having washed up, and put everything tidily away, the boy was at leisure: and he was improving the shining hour by reading Hunt's book, which she had left on her camp-stool. That sudden "pop" from beyond the high hawthorn hedge that barred off the road, startled him.

He had heard, without heeding, the sound of a bicycle on the road. But he heeded that loud pop, which announced that a tyre had had a burst.

The pop was followed by an exclamation. It was an exclamation of intense annoyance, in a man's voice.

"Hang the wretched thing."

Jack could see nothing of cycle or cyclist. The hedge was high and thick, and shut off all view. At a little distance was a gate, by which Hunt and Brown had left the field an hour ago. Jack walked along to the gate, and looked over it, and back along the road. Then he saw a cyclist.

He was a short plump man, with a plump face, and a plump nose adorned by a pair of pince-nez. He looked red, and hot, and dusty, and tired. And he looked very much put out and annoyed. He stood holding his bicycle, of which the rear tyre was as flat as a pancake, and staring at it angrily. And he was still uttering annoyed exclamations.

"The wretched thing! This is the second time! Confound it! Miles from everywhere—not a soul in sight—no sign-posts—nobody to tell anyone the way—and now a puncture again—pah!"

Holding the punctured bike with one hand, he took off his hat with the other and fanned himself with it. It was a hot afternoon, and bright sunshine streamed down on the Sussex lanes. The plump gentleman was middle-aged, and evidently feeling the heat.

Jack put his hand on the gate, and vaulted lightly over it into the road. He was a good-natured youth, and more than willing to help a traveller in distress. He walked along the road towards the spot where the perspiring cyclist stood, and the latter, catching sight of him, waved a plump hand.

"Here, boy!" he called out.

Jack hurried up.

"Do you know where the village of Oake is, boy?" asked the plump gentleman, blinking at Jack through his glasses, in a way that reminded him of Brown, also of an owl.

"Yes, sir! About a mile down the road—"

"Great Gad! A mile!"

"Three turnings, sir—right, and left, and right again—"

"Great gad! Three!"

"Yes, sir!" said Jack, smiling. "Can I help you with the bike?"

"Dear me! Do you think you could mend a puncture, boy?"

"I'm sure I could, sir! I've mended a good many punctures," answered Jack. "I'll mend yours if you like."

"That's a good boy!" said the plump gentleman, approvingly, and evidently very much relieved. "I will give you half-a-crown to mend my puncture."

"That's all right, sir," said Jack. "I'll mend it for nothing."

"What? what? You will do nothing of the kind! Wouldn't you like to earn half-a-crown?" demanded the plump gentleman.

"Oh, yes, sir."

"Then that is that! Mend the puncture, and I will pay you half-a-crown."

"Just as you like, sir."

Jack, certainly, was not averse from earning half-a-crown, or any other sum, by honest labour. He had no money of his own. The kind ladies of the caravan had fitted him out with clothes, since he had entered their service, but so far he had nothing in the way of cash. The idea of possessing a whole half-crown of his own was quite attractive to the waif of the roads. In his days with Pedlar Hatchet he had never had more than pence, and that seldom. He would quite willingly have helped the plump gentleman out of his difficulty for nothing: but he willingly let him have his way.

The plump gentleman relinquished the bicycle to Jack, and stood leaning against a wayside tree, fanning himself with his hat.

Jack lost no time. The bike was up-ended by the roadside, and he set industriously to work. It was a very bad puncture, and it needed time and patience to deal with it. Jack had plenty of both, and he made a workman-like job of it.

It was finished at last, and the tyre pumped up good and hard. Then Jack handed it over to the plump gentleman.

"Thank you, my boy."

"All right now, sir," said Jack, cheerily.

The plump gentleman tested the tyre with his thumb, and nodded approval. Then he took hold of the machine to mount it.

The next item on the programme should have been the transfer of a half-crown from the plump gentleman to Jack. But apparently he had forgotten it, for instead of putting his hand in his pocket, he put a leg over his machine.

"Did you say a mile up the road, boy?" he asked. "Did you say a mile or two miles?"

"A mile down the road, sir," answered Jack.

"And two turnings—?"

"Three, sir."

"Oh! Yes! Three! First to the left, and then to the right, and then to the left again—is that right?"

"Oh, no, sir!—right and left and right again—"

"Right and left and right again! I must remember that! Thank you, my boy—I am much obliged."

And the plump gentleman pedalled off, Jack staring after him. Jack could not help grinning. The plump gentleman, evidently, had completely forgotten the trifling matter of the half-crown: he rather reminded Jack of Miss Brown and her fountain-pen. Jack, certainly, had no intention of reminding him: he was quite willing to do a stranger a good turn for nothing.

But after covering about a hundred yards, the plump cyclist circled in the

road, and came pedalling back. He dismounted, and shoved a hand into his pocket. Apparently he was not, after all, quite so forgetful as Brown!

"Here, boy—"

"Yes, sir!"

"I forgot the half-crown I promised you for repairing my puncture. Why did you not remind me?"

"It doesn't matter, sir."

"What? what? Nonsense. Here is your half-crown."

"Thank you, sir."

Jack slipped the half-crown into his pocket, and the plump gentleman put a leg over his machine again. But he glanced back at Jack.

"I must not miss the village," he said. "To make sure, you said left, and right, and left again—"

"No, sir," said Jack, patiently. "Right and left and right again—"

"Oh! Yes! To be sure! Good-bye, my boy."

Off went the plump cyclist again, and this time he did not turn back. Jack watched him disappear in the distance, rather wondering whether he ever would reach the village of Oake.

Jack of All Trades returned to the gate and vaulted into the field. He sat down once more on Hunt's camp-stool at the camp. But he did not pick up Hunt's book. He took the half-crown from his pocket and contemplated it, and tossed it into the air and caught it again. He was glad that the plump gentleman had remembered it after all. Half-a-crown was not, in itself, a large sum: but it was a large sum to the walf of the roads, who had never had any money of his own, and it was very agreeable to have earned it. Jack was in a very cheerful mood, as he waited for the return of the caravanning ladies.

#### CHAPTER III

**W**HAT is the matter, Brown?"

"My purse, Hunt."

"Is it not in your bag?"

"It is not in my bag."

"But you always carry it in your bag."

"Always! But—it is not there now."

"Brown!" exclaimed Miss Hunt.

They were in the village shop at Oake. Various purchases had been made, and neatly packed in a basket. Miss Hunt took the basket, while Miss Brown fumbled in her bag for her purse, to pay for the purchases. But her plump hand came out empty. The purse was not there.

"Brown!" repeated Hunt, startled. "Give me your bag—"

"It is not there, Hunt."

"Let me look!"

"You may look, Hunt, but it is not there."

Hunt soon ascertained that the purse was not there. She said no more, but handed the bag back to Brown, and extracted her own purse from her own bag, and paid for the purchases. Then they left the shop, both of them looking very grave.

They walked out of the village in silence.

"You are sure that you had your purse in the bag as usual, Brown?" asked Miss Hunt, breaking the silence at last.

"Quite sure," said Brown. "Where else could it be?"

"What was in it?"

"I remember perfectly. A ten-shilling note, and a half-crown, as well as some coppers. It was change from a pound note when we were shopping yesterday."

"I remember," assented Miss Hunt. She pursed her lips. "I remember! I saw you replace the purse in the bag at the time. We have done no shopping since, till to-day."

"None!" said Brown.

"Then you can have had no occasion for taking the purse from the bag."

"None whatever."

"You are a little forgetful, Brown, and if you had done so—"

"But I have not done so."

"No!" said Hunt, thoughtfully. "You could have no reason for taking the purse from the bag at the camp. But—it is not there now."

"No! It is not there."

The two caravanning ladies exchanged a startled, troubled, and worried look. The same thought was in both their minds: but they were unwilling to admit it.

"The boy is honest," said Hunt, at last.

"I am sure of it," said Brown.

"He was in bad hands before he came to us," said Hunt. "But—but I have every faith in him."

"So have I," said Brown.

"But—the purse is gone!"

"Yes, it is gone."

They walked on in silence again. Brown's purse, it was certain, was not in Brown's bag. That bag had been in Jack's hands, when he searched it for the fountain-pen, and in no one else's except Brown's own. Was it possible—could it be possible—?

Both of them knew that it was only too possible. They had befriended the wail of the roads, and taken him into their service, trusting to his frank



and honest looks: but they knew that he had been in bad hands before he came to them. They knew that he had no money, and had never had any money. Had a sudden temptation been too much for the hapless boy? He had groped through that bag for the fountain-pen—and the purse was missing! The thing seemed to speak for itself. They had trusted him on his looks: but looks, as indeed they knew from experience, could be deceptive.

There was a long and painful silence, as they walked back to the caravan camp with the basket.

When the gate of the field came in sight, Hunt spoke again

"It looks, Brown—"

"Yes, it looks—!" said Brown.

"But—but I cannot believe it, Brown."

"Neither can I, Hunt."

"If I have been so deceived, I think I shall never trust a face again," said Miss Hunt. "But—if by some remote chance you may have dropped the purse, Brown—"

"How could it drop from a closed bag?"

"It could not. Yet—!"

"I am determined not to distrust the boy," said Hunt. "There may be some explanation. We must hope so, Brown."

"Let us hope so, by all means, Hunt."

"The boy has no money," said Hunt. "We know that—he has told us so. He may have had a sudden temptation. But—he is not the kind of boy to feel such a temptation, Brown. I am sure of it."

"I am sure also, Hunt."

"Not a word to him on the subject, Brown."

"Not a syllable."

"He had no money," said Hunt. "If it should transpire that he has money now, it will be different. But I am sure that he still has none."

"And I am sure, Hunt."

"We must treat him exactly the same as before, Brown."

"Exactly, Hunt."

They reached the gate, and Miss Hunt opened it, and they entered the field. Both of them were very grave. Both of them were determined not to distrust the boy, with his open face and frank honest eyes. They were determined to convince themselves, and to convince each other. But they could not help feeling, and looking, very grave. And as they came up to the caravan camp by the high hawthorn hedge, they saw Jack on the camp-stool, and then they fairly jumped.

"Hunt!" said Brown, faintly.

"Brown!" said Hunt, blankly.

There was a silvery glimmer in the sunshine. Jack of All Trades was tossing a half-crown into the air, and catching it again. The boy who had no

money was in possession of a half-crown—and there had been a half-crown in the missing purse. That unexpected sight almost petrified the two caravaning ladies.

Then Jack, as he saw them, slipped the half-crown into his pocket, and came towards them, touching his cap.

## CHAPTER IV

JACK was puzzled.

In fact, he was distressed and worried.

He could not understand.

Ever since he had been with the caravaning ladies, he had been as happy as a lark. He had plenty to do—caring for the caravan horse, cooking, washing up, polishing shoes, cleaning the cooking-stove, and a hundred and one other duties to perform. But Jack was not afraid of work: rather, he seemed to thrive on it. He would have worked twice, or thrice, as hard, to please the two kind souls who had been so good to him. His one desire was to make himself useful, in return for the kindness he had received: and there was no doubt at all that he was exceedingly useful, indeed he seemed to have become indispensable. So long as that caravaning holiday lasted, life seemed rather like a bed of roses to Jack of All Trades—till now! Now it was overcast.

Something was the matter: he did not know what.

Since coming back from shopping at Oake, the two ladies had spoken hardly a word to him. Their faces were preternaturally grave. They seemed to have something on their minds. They seemed uneasy and perturbed.

Hunt was no longer buried in a book. Brown seemed to have forgotten her writing-pad and her "thrillers". When they spoke to one another, it was in low tones that did not reach Jack's ears. It was almost as if they had something secret between them.

Jack wondered whether they were worried about the visitor they were expecting that afternoon, who had not yet arrived. From remarks made that morning, Jack knew that Brown's brother, George, was staying for his holidays at Brighton, and was coming out that afternoon to visit the caravan camp. They had expected him early in the afternoon: but it was now late in the afternoon and he had not yet turned up. If George was anything like his sister, it was quite possible that he might have lost his way, or even forgotten the appointment altogether. Possibly it was that that was worrying the two caravaners. But it seemed to Jack something more serious.

He could not ask them what was the matter. He could only puzzle and wonder, growing more and more worried himself. He busied himself about

the camp, making everything tidy and spick and span for the expected visitor: but his eyes continually wandered to Hunt and Brown. Now they were seated on their camp-stools under the shady tree, conversing in low tones, with an occasional glance towards him. Their faces were so clouded, that it was obvious that there was some trouble—something more serious than the non-arrival of a visitor to tea.

Jack did not hear, and certainly did not want to hear, a word of that low-toned conversation. It would have startled him, had he heard. Of the purse missing from Brown's bag he knew nothing—and assuredly he never dreamed how the sight of a half-crown in his hand had startled them.

That had put the lid on, as it were.

Hunt and Brown had been determined to believe in him, to trust him, in spite of appearances: in spite of the fact that Brown's purse was missing from the bag that had been in Jack's hands. If he had deceived them, they agreed that it was better to be deceived than to be distrustful. There was a chance, a remote chance at least, that the purse was somewhere else—indeed, in view of Brown's extreme absent-mindedness, that chance was not, in Hunt's opinion at least, so very remote. But what seemed proof positive had transpired since. Jack, who had no money, as they knew, had a half-crown: money had come inexplicably into his possession. If that was not the half-crown from Brown's missing purse, where had it come from?

They shrank from questioning the boy. He could not tell them the truth, and even if he did, it would make matters no better. And they were not angry with him. Pity outweighed other feelings. But—this could not go on.

"The poor boy!" said Miss Hunt, in a low voice. "It is dreadful—but what chance has he had—with that bad man in whose hands he was before he came to us?"

"He is more sinned against than sinning," said Brown, charitably.

"More—much more!" said Hunt. "But—"

"But—" agreed Brown.

"There can be no doubt now. He had no money—now he has money—" Hunt sighed deeply. "It cannot go on, Brown."

"Impossible!"

"He must leave us."

"He must."

"But—let us make things easy for the poor boy."

"As easy as we can," agreed Brown.

"The fact is," said Hunt, "that this has spoiled everything. We have become used to the boy—he has been very useful—very many little troubles and bothers have disappeared, since Jack came—"

"That is very true!"

"After this painful shock, I feel scarcely inclined to carry on with the caravan holiday, Brown. How do you feel about it?"

"I feel the same," said Brown, shaking her head sadly. "It has upset me terribly, George would like us to join him at Brighton—"

"That is quite a good idea."

"The van could be collected—left at the farm for collection by the Caravan Hire Company—"

"Quite!"

"And we could return to Brighton with George."

Miss Hunt nodded thoughtfully.

"If we are agreed on that, Brown—"

"I think we are."

"Then the matter is simple," said Hunt. "The boy, naturally, would leave when the caravan holiday ends. If it ends to-day, he naturally leaves to-day—and all unpleasantness may be avoided. I shrink from wounding him, Brown."

"I feel the same—let nothing unpleasant be said. We will simply tell him that our trip is over, and go back to Brighton with George."

"But where is George?" asked Hunt her thoughts taking a new turn. "He should have been here long ago, Brown. You are sure you gave him accurate directions for finding our camp?"

"I told him we had camped near the village of Oake—"

"But that is a mile away—"

"Naturally he can inquire in the village, Hunt. Anyone there will tell him where to find our caravan."

"It would have been wise to give him the name of the farm to which this field belongs."

"True; but I had forgotten the name of the farm."

"Oh!" Hunt pursed her lips. "You are sure you posted the letter to him at Brighton?" she added, a little sarcastically.

"Quite sure," answered Brown. "I had forgotten his address, but I looked out my address-book specially for the purpose, after we came back from Oake yesterday, and Jack posted the letter for me at the post-box in the lane."

"Well, I suppose we shall see him sooner or later," said Hunt. "And—as we have now decided the matter, it will be best to speak to Jack. It might be better for him to be gone before George arrives."

"Quite!" agreed Brown.

They sat in silence, looking towards Jack, who was giving a few finishing touches to the folding-table, set for tea. They could not help noting that his face looked much less cheerful than was its wont. Perhaps he was expecting trouble—after what he had done! Perhaps he guessed why they were consulting apart in low tones! Conscience, perhaps, was troubling him! Both the caravanning ladies were feeling sad and downcast: and it seemed, on his looks, that Jack was sharing their mood.

Yet his face, downcast as it was, looked so honest and true, that Hunt felt a pang of doubt.

"Brown!" she murmured. "Is it possible that that—that after all there may be some explanation—!"

"But what?" asked Brown.

"I confess I cannot imagine!" Hunt shook her head. "But at all events, Brown, not a word on the subject of the purse—not a syllable. If the poor boy has done wrong, he is, as you have said, more sinned against than sinning, and we must be kind, to the very last."

And Hunt raised her hand, and beckoned to Jack to approach.

#### CHAPTER V

"YES, MISS!"

Jack of All Trades stood before the two ladies, waiting for them to speak. Neither seemed in a hurry to speak.

Brown took off her gold-rimmed glasses, polished them, and put them back on her plump nose. Then she took them off again, and polished them again. It was left to Hunt to speak.

"I—I have something to tell you, Jack," said Miss Hunt: her manner rather less decisive than usual. "The fact is—" She paused.

"Yes, miss?" said Jack.

"You are aware, Jack, that Brown's brother is visiting us to-day. We have decided to return to Brighton with Mr. Brown."

"Yes, miss! You want me to stay with the van and mind it while you are away?" asked Jack. "It will be safe with me, miss."

Hunt coughed.

"Not exactly, Jack! The fact is, we shall be staying for some time with Mr. Brown at Brighton, and—and the van will be left at the farm, to be collected by the people from whom we hired it."

"Oh!" said Jack.

His face fell.

This meant that the caravanning trip was at an end. That it had to come to an end some time, Jack knew: but he had not expected it so soon, or so suddenly. He could not help his face clouding. He had been so happy with the caravanning ladies: it had been so tremendous a change after his days on the road with Pedlar Hatchet. And he had grown sincerely attached to his kind protectors. This was a heavy blow to the wail.

But he rallied at once. It had been only a few days: but they had been glorious days. He could not expect them to last for ever.

"Yes, miss," said Jack, quietly. "Then you won't be wanting me any more, after to-day?"

"No!"

"Very well, miss." Jack looked from one face to the other. "When shall I go miss?"

"As soon as you please, Jack." Hunt paused. "Where will you go when you leave us, Jack?"

"I think I'll walk to Brighton, miss. It's not much over ten miles. I shall pick up a job there, holiday time and all."

"It is a long walk," said Brown, speaking for the first time.

Jack smiled.

"I've done longer, miss, when I was on the roads," he answered. "Ten mile won't hurt me."

"Then you had better start as soon as possible, Jack," said Hunt.

"Jest as you like, miss. F'raps you'd like me to wait till the gentleman you're expecting has come, to wait on him at tea?"

"Oh! No! I—I think not! Now that the matter is decided, Jack, I think you had better start as soon as possible," said Hunt, hastily. "You had better lose no time, Jack."



*It was with a heavy heart that he tramped away.*

"Very well, miss, just as you say."

"Make your preparations at once, Jack."

"Yes, miss."

Jack had not many preparations to make. He packed his few possessions in the rucksack Hunt had brought for him a few days ago, and was ready for the road. Then he came back to the two ladies under the tree: and they watched him as he came, wondering whether, at the last moment, he had a confession to make. If he had, they were more than ready to forgive him, and give him another chance. But poor Jack, never even dreaming of what was in their minds, certainly had no confession to make.

"I'm ready, miss," said Jack. In spite of himself, his voice faltered, as he realized that he was speaking to his kind protectors for the last time. "I'm going now, miss! But afore I go, I've just got to say how grateful I am, and how I shall never forget your kindness. I never knewed there was such kind people in the world, miss, when I was with Bill Hatchet, and I shan't ever forget it, miss."

Brown took off her gold-rimmed glasses and wiped them again. Hunt felt an unexpected lump in her throat.

"Good-bye, Jack," she said, and she shook hands with the boy.

"Good-bye, Jack," said Brown, rather faintly, and she gave Jack a plump hand in her turn.

"You have nothing to tell us, before you go, Jack?" asked Hunt, suddenly.

Jack looked at her, puzzled.

"No, miss, not that I know of."

"Nothing?" asked Brown.

"Only to tell you that I'll never forget your kindness, miss, as long as I live."

"Good-bye!" said Hunt, quite abruptly.

And Jack, with his ruck-sack on his shoulder, went out at the gate, carefully closing it after him. It was with a heavy heart that he tramped away by the leafy lanes in the direction of the Brighton road.

#### CHAPTER VI

"GEORGE is late?"

"Very!"

It was more than half-an-hour since Jack of All Trades had left the caravan camp.

Both the caravanning ladies had been left looking very thoughtful, pensive, indeed glum. It would have been a relief from painful thoughts, if Brown's brother George had arrived. But George had not turned up: and they had no companion but sad thoughts. Brown had opened her writing-pad and taken

up her fountain-pen: but inspiration, it seemed, refused to come, and she had not written a line. Hunt paced to and fro, between the caravan and the hedge, with a wrinkled brow.

Hunt and Brown had, in fact, had a very painful shock, from which it was not easy to recover. The boy had looked so honest, and they had trusted him, and grown to like him: and it had turned out—like this!

Hunt broke the despondent silence, at last, with the remark about George. She was, perhaps, a little irritated with Brown's brother for being so late. Now that all was settled, Hunt was anxious to make a move—but no move could be made till George Brown arrived. And still there was no sign of him. And Hunt, knowing her friend's little foibles, was not quite, quite sure that Hilda Brown had made things clear to George. Also, George was a good deal like Hilda in his ways: there was, in fact, no relying upon either of them.

"If he is not coming, after all—!" said Hunt.

"Oh, he is coming," said Brown. "George would not let us down."

"It is getting late for tea."

"George seldom remembers meal-times," said Brown, indulgently. "Indeed, I sometimes forget them myself, Hunt."

"You do?" agreed Hunt.

She paced and paced. Finally she stopped, in front of her plump friend sitting on the camp-stool under the tree.

"Look here, Brown, if George isn't coming, it is useless to wait here. Are you really quite sure your letter reached him in Brighton?"

"Surely the Post-Office would not fail to deliver a letter Hunt."

"Not if correctly addressed," said Hunt. "But—are you sure that you addressed the letter correctly, Brown?"

"I have already told you, Hunt, that I sorted out my address-book specially to ascertain George's address in Brighton. I copied the address from the book to the envelope, on this very camp-chair, and Jack caught the collection in the lane with the letter."

Hunt gave a little start.

"You keep your address-book in your hand-bag, Brown."

"Naturally."

"Then you opened your bag, after we came back from shopping yesterday, to find the address book?"

"Of course, as I keep it in the bag."

"Did you, by any chance, take out the purse, while looking for the address-book?"

"I had to turn everything out of the bag, Hunt, to find the address-book. I turned the whole contents out on this very camp-chair. I remember the circumstance perfectly."

"You are sure you put everything back?"

"I presume so, Hunt. Why do you ask?"



"Brown! Think a moment! If—if by chance you did not put the purse back in the bag, it would not have been there this morning, when Jack searched the bag for the fountain-pen," exclaimed Hunt.

"But I did put everything back."

"You noticed the purse among the other things—?"

"I did not notice it specially! I was thinking of the address-book, and writing to George at Brighton. But I certainly put everything back."

"You are quite sure of that?"

"My dear Hunt, had I not done so, the things I left out would have remained on the camp-chair," said Brown. "There is nothing on this camp-chair, excepting my own person."

"Unless—!" said Hunt, catching her breath.

"Unless what—?"

"Unless some article may have fallen when you turned the bag out on the chair, and you overlooked it, as you were thinking only of the address-book, and of writing to George."

"Do you think that possible, Hunt?"

"I think it quite possible."

"The matter is easily solved," said Brown. "If any article fell to the ground, unnoticed by me, it will be lying there now, Hunt."

"Let us look!" said Hunt.

Miss Brown rose from the camp-chair. There was a faint smile on her plump face. Evidently she did not think it probable that she had dropped anything unnoticed, when turning out her bag on that camp-chair the previous afternoon. Hunt, on the other hand, thought it quite probable.

But the matter was, as Brown said, easily solved. The grass was thick, where the camp-chair stood, and might easily conceal any small article that fell into it unnoticed. But a few minutes' search would settle the matter.

Hunt lifted the camp-chair aside, bent her tall head, and proceeded to rake in the grass.

She uttered a sudden, startled exclamation. She jumped up with something in her hand.

"What—?" exclaimed Hilda Brown.

"Look!"

Hunt held up a purse. Brown blinked at it, through her glasses, in owl-like astonishment.

"Is—is—is that my purse?" she exclaimed, faintly.

"It is your purse!" said Hunt, almost sternly. "You turned it out of your bag yesterday, Brown—it dropped unnoticed by you, and you did not observe that you did not replace it in the bag with the other things. Brown! Your purse was not in your bag when Jack looked into it for the fountain-pen this morning! It was here, in the grass, under that camp-chair!"

"Goodness gracious!"

"Open it," said Hunt. "Ascertain that the contents are safe. You have told me what was in the purse—a ten-shilling note, a half-crown, and a few coppers—"

"But—but—but—" stammered Brown, bewildered. "Did we not see the half-crown in Jack's hand when we came in from Oake to-day—?"

"We saw a half-crown in his hand. But it cannot have been the same half-crown, if yours is in your purse."

"But Jack had no money—"

"I know! I do not understand that! But look in your purse—ascertain its contents at once, Brown."

Brown opened the purse. She revealed a ten-shilling note, a half-crown, and several coppers. She gazed at them. Hunt gazed at them. Wherever Jack might have obtained his half-crown, obviously, now, it was not Brown's half-crown: for there was Brown's half-crown, as large as life.

Hunt's lip trembled.

"Brown! We have wronged that poor boy—"

"Unintentionally, Hunt," faltered Brown.

"Unintentionally or not, we have wronged him. Here is your purse, dropped by you, and found where you dropped it, the contents intact. Thank goodness we said nothing to him—that he never knew what we thought—"

"Thank goodness for that," said Brown, fervently.

"But—he is gone—!"

"He is gone—"

"A good, honest, faithful lad," said Hunt, "and—he is gone! We were right in befriending him, Brown, and in trusting him—and he is gone! He is miles on his way by this time—we shall never see him again! Your carelessness—"

"Have I been careless, Hunt?"

"Upon my word, Brown! Such utter carelessness—such thoughtlessness—such forgetfulness—such—such—such—"

"Really, Hunt—" Brown took off her glasses, and passed her hand over her eyes. "Do you think it was my fault?"

"Yes! No," added Hunt, hastily, as she saw a tear rolling down a plump cheek. "No! It was my fault as much as yours, Brown—I should have known that my instinct was true that the boy was to be trusted. I am as much to blame—more to blame! We are both to blame."

"If only it were not too late to call him back—!" said Brown, with a break in her voice.

"It is too late!"

"We shall never see him again—"

"Never!"

"The poor boy!" faltered Brown.

"The poor boy!" echoed Hunt.

Brown sorted a handkerchief from her bag, and applied it to her eyes. Hunt

who was made of sterner stuff, did not need a handkerchief: but she blinked several times. Jack of All Trades was gone, with nothing in his pocket but that mysterious half-crown: and the caravanning ladies would have given almost anything to recall him. But it was too late!

## CHAPTER VII

"**B**oy!"  
Jack of All Trades looked up.

He was walking, rather slowly, along a deep leafy Sussex lane. He had covered a mile or more from the caravan camp. But he was not hurrying. His footsteps seemed, for once, to drag. His face was clouded, and his heart heavy.

He had known, of course, that the caravanning must end some time. But the end had been so sudden—so unexpected. Until that afternoon, there had not been a word about it. The good ladies seemed to have made up their minds all of a sudden, as if something unexpected had happened to cause them to give up the trip. Jack had grown to like, and admire, both of them, immensely: there was nothing that he would not have done to serve them. And now—now he was facing the wide world on his own, and was never to see either of them again. He did not fear to face the world—he had courage and confidence. But he did miss those kind faces and kind voices: and he had a harking feeling that perhaps he might have displeased them somehow—he did not know how. He walked slowly, his eyes on the ground: and did not heed a bicycle as it came along the lane, till a voice he had heard once before hailed him, and he looked up, to recognize the plump gentleman in glasses whose puncture he had mended, long hours ago, in the lane near the caravan camp.

The plump gentleman looked redder, and hotter, than when Jack had seen him last. He looked tired, and a little dusty. Jack, sad as he was feeling, smiled a little as he looked at him: wondering whether he had been successful, after all, in finding the elusive village of which he had been in quest.

"Here, boy!"

The plump gentleman dismounted, and Jack came up to him. He blinked at Jack through his pince-nez, apparently recognizing him.

"You are the boy who mended my puncture!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, sir," answered Jack.

"You gave me directions to reach the village of Oake?"

"Yes, sir! I hope you got there all right."

"I did not get there! I have not found it at all! I have been looking for it ever since," said the plump gentleman, testily. "You must have given me the wrong direction."

"Oh, no, sir—"

"You must have done so! I turned left and right and left again, and found myself riding out on the downs—"

"But I said right and left and right again, sir!" exclaimed Jack.

"Did you? Are you sure?"

"Quite sure, sir."

"Then that accounts for my not finding Oake," said the plump gentleman, blinking at Jack. "I am glad that I have fallen in with you again, my boy. You seem an intelligent lad. I have asked at least a dozen people the way, but they have given me such confused directions that I am no better off."

Jack could not help wondering whether the confusion might have been in the plump gentleman's own mind, and not in the directions he had received.

"I must get to Oake," went on the plump gentleman. "I simply must—I am already late for an appointment near the village. Indeed I am very late. I am quite bewildered by these endless lanes without sign-posts. Do you think you could guide me to Oake, boy? I will give you another half-crown."

He blinked hopefully at Jack.

"I'll guide you with pleasure, sir," answered Jack, smiling. "But you'll have to walk—I couldn't keep up with the bike."

"Very well, very well! So long as I do ultimately get to Oake, I shall be satisfied," said the plump gentleman. "Is it very far?"

"About a mile, sir, from here."

"It was a mile from where you mended my puncture, I remember. But we are nowhere near that spot."

"In a different direction, sir," explained Jack.

"Oh! Very well! Goodness knows what they will be thinking! I should have arrived several hours ago. Let us lose no time now, my boy. But one moment," added the plump gentleman, as if struck by a sudden thought. "You seem an intelligent lad—an observant lad. Perhaps you may have noticed a caravan—"

"A caravan?" repeated Jack.

"Yes, a caravan, which I understand is camped in a farmer's field about a mile from Oake. That is really what I am looking for—but if you chance to have seen it, I need not go to Oake to inquire!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Jack. He began to understand.

"A caravan with two ladies—"

"Miss Hunt and Miss Brown?" asked Jack.

"Exactly! Then you have seen it—you know the names!" exclaimed the plump gentleman, eagerly. "Perhaps you could guide me to the caravan, my boy, instead of to the village?"

"Easily," said Jack, trying not to laugh. "You were quite near it, sir, when I mended your puncture some hours ago. There was only a hawthorn hedge between. It was in the field there."

The plump gentleman jumped.

"What? what?" he ejaculated. "I did not see it! Do you mean to say that I have actually passed the caravan, and missed it? Bless my soul! Are you quite sure of what you say, boy?"

"Quite! Perhaps you are the gentleman Miss Hunt and Miss Brown were expecting this afternoon?" said Jack.

"They certainly are expecting me. How extraordinary that I should have been so near the caravan, without knowing it! But why did you not tell me that it was in that field?"

"But I didn't know you were looking for a caravan, sir."

"Eh? Oh! No! Quite so! Naturally, you did not know. Do you think you could find the caravan again, boy?"

"Very easily, sir."

"Then lead me to it as fast as you can," said the plump gentleman, briskly. "How very fortunate that I fell in with you. What is your name, boy?"

"Jack, sir."

"Jack? Hilda mentioned a boy Jack in her letter—a boy who looks after the caravan—"

"That's me, sir."

"Bless my soul! How very extraordinary! So you are the boy Jack! Please lead me to the caravan without delay, Jack."

And Jack of All Trades turned back, to guide the plump gentleman—evidently Mr. George Brown—to the caravan camp. He wheeled the bicycle, and Mr. Brown walked by his side, fanning himself with his hat.

"Here you are, sir!" said Jack, at last, when they reached the gate of the caravan field. He opened the gate, and the plump gentleman, stepping in, was able to see the caravan, camped by the hawthorn hedge at a little distance. He gave almost a gasp of relief at the sight of it. No doubt he was tired of looking for that caravan.

"Thank you, my boy, thank you." The plump gentleman took the bicycle from Jack. "I am extremely obliged to you, my boy."

"Not at all, sir," answered Jack, politely.

The plump gentleman wheeled the bike into the field. Apparently he had forgotten his intention of giving Jack half-a-crown for his guidance. Jack touched his cap, and went down the lane again, and Mr. George Brown wheeled his bicycle to the caravan camp—safely arrived at last!

#### CHAPTER VIII

"G EORGE!"  
 "Hilda—!"  
 "You are late—"

"I'm afraid I'm very late! How do you do, Miss Hunt? Very late indeed, Hilda! I had great trouble in finding your camp! I hope you have not waited ten for me. What? What?"

George shook hands with Brown and Hunt, and then mopped his perspiring forehead with a handkerchief, and then fanned himself with his hat. Then he dropped into a camp chair, still fanning himself with his hat.

Hunt and Brown were glad to see him at last. They gave him welcoming smiles. But they could not feel very bright. They could not help thinking of poor Jack, so unjustly condemned in their minds, and cleared of that unjust suspicion too late. Where was Jack? Far away on the dusty roads—far from recall—and their only comfort was, that he did not know why he had been sent away—never even dreamed that distrust of him had entered into their thoughts at all.

George sat and fanned himself. Hunt brought him a cup of tea, Brown a plate of sandwiches. Both were welcome to the tired traveller.

"I have covered miles," he said. "Miles and miles and miles! Would you believe that I passed this very field on my bicycle, two or three hours ago, and never knew that the caravan was here! What?"

Miss Hunt, at least, could quite believe it. George was so like his sister Hilda that Hunt could have believed anything.

"The hedge is so high," went on George. "I saw nothing of the caravan on this side of it! I never thought of asking the boy."

"The boy?" repeated Brown.

"What boy?" asked Hunt.

"Of course, if I had known that he was Jack, whom you mentioned in your letter, Hilda, I should have known that the caravan was at hand. But I did not know then that he was Jack—and he, of course, did not know that I was your brother, Hilda! Ha, ha! Singular, was it not?"

"You have seen Jack—?"

"Oh! Yes! I did not know that he was Jack when he mended my puncture—just on the outer side of this very hedge—how odd! He was merely a boy—just a boy—a very handy and intelligent lad, I thought him: very obliging also,—he offered to mend my puncture for nothing, but I insisted upon giving him half-a-crown—"

Hunt and Brown jumped simultaneously.

"Half-a-crown!" gasped Brown.

"Half-a-crown!" breathed Hunt.

All was explained now. They knew where that half-crown had come from which they had seen in poor Jack's hand. During their absence at Oake, he had earned it by mending a puncture for a stranger! Hunt looked at Brown! Brown looked at Hunt. The plump gentleman rattled on:

"If I had known that he was Jack—but I did not know that he was Jack! Naturally! Bless my soul!" exclaimed the plump gentleman, with a sudden

start. "I had forgotten—I was going to give him another half-crown for guiding me here—it quite slipped my mind—where is he?"

He stared round through his pince-nez.

"He—he, he guided you here?" stuttered Hunt.

"Oh! Yes! You see, I fell in with him a second time, a mile from here—and then I learned that he was Jack—and he wheeled my bicycle for me as far as the gate yonder—where is he now?"

"Oh!" gasped Brown.

"Then—!" breathed Hunt.

She did not stop to say more. From the rambling remarks of the plump gentleman, she knew that Jack had guided him to the caravan camp—only a few minutes ago. No doubt he had then gone on his way, as he had not come into the field. But he could not be far away! Jack, whom the caravanning ladies had never hoped to see again, had come back—with George! He was at hand! He could be recalled! Seconds were precious! Hunt started for the gate at a run! Her long legs covered the ground almost like lightning. George stared after her as she flew.

"What—what—what—?" said George.

Brown did not heed him. She stared after her friend, hoping against hope that Hunt would overtake Jack before he disappeared for ever.

Hunt looked like it! She was out of the field almost in a twinkling! She shaded her eyes with her hand, and stared along the lane. At a distance she had a view of a boy's back, with a rucksack slung over it. And then she flew again, her feet seeming scarcely to touch the ground.

## CHAPTER IX

"JACK!"

Jack of All Trades gave a little jump, and looked round.

He had gone on his way, after landing the plump gentleman safely at the gate of the caravan field. He was glad that he had been able to perform that last little service, before he took to the road. Now he was tramping away down the leafy lane, his heart far from light, but his chin up. The caravan and the caravanning ladies belonged to the past now, and he did not dream of ever seeing them again. And then, to his astonishment, came a well-known voice from behind, calling his name.

He halted and turned.

Hunt, breathless, red with running, met his view.

"Jack!"

Jack touched his cap.

"Yes, miss!" he answered, as Hunt came panting up.

He wondered what was up. Hunt could not speak for a moment or two.

She was quite out of breath from that rapid chase. But as she panted for breath, her face was bright. She had caught Jack in time—the boy had not vanished into space, after all: the misadventure of George had saved the situation. Here was Jack!

"My dear boy!" She found her voice at last. "Come back!"

Jack's eyes widened.

"Come back, miss," he repeated.

"Yes! Yes! Yes!"

"Is there anything I can do, miss?" asked Jack. "I'll be only too glad, miss, if there is! Praps you'd like me to drive the van to the farm—"

"No! Yes! We—we—" Hunt stammered.

The boy had no knowledge—no suspicion—and he was never to have either. Never, never was he to know how he had been doubted! He was to come back, and everything would be the same as before. All he need know was that the ladies had changed their minds about giving up the caravan holiday—as, indeed, they had!

"Yes, miss?" said Jack.

"We—we—we have decided—rather suddenly, I know—but we have decided to carry on with the caravanning, Jack! You would like to stay with us till the end of the holiday?"

Jack's face brightened. Indeed it was rather like the sun coming out from a cloud.

"Oh, miss!" he gasped.

"You would like to come back, Jack—?"

"Oh, miss!"

"—and stay with us so long as we keep the caravan—?"

"Wouldn't I just, miss!"

"Then come back with me," said Hunt. "We take the road to-morrow, Jack—and we shall be glad—so very glad—to have you with us—"

"How kind you are, miss," said Jack. "I'm jolly glad, miss!"

He walked back to the caravan field with Hunt, like a fellow walking on air.

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The next day the caravan was on the road again: George had returned alone to Brighton. Jack walked with the horse, as of old: Hunt walked with him, and Brown sat in the van busy with fountain-pen and writing-pad, scribbling thrillers. Jack did not know, and never knew, how or why he had so nearly parted with his kind friends: and Hunt and Brown were kinder to him than ever. As the caravan rambled on its way through the leafy Sussex lanes, the summer sun had never shone down on a happier party than Jack and the Caravanners.

THE END