

JUST LIKE JACK!

by

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CHAPTER ONE

"Stop!"

Jack Free stopped.

He had no choice about that, for as the harsh rough voice rapped in the darkness, a hand grasped at his shoulder, and dragged him to a halt. A dim figure loomed over him in the dark shadow of the trees. On his other side another dim figure loomed.

It was a late hour for a boy of sixteen to be abroad. But it was no new experience for the boy who had been called "Jack of All Trades." Jack Free had had many ups and downs of fortune in his young life, in many lands. Now he was going through one of the 'downs': on tramp, looking for a job that seemed hard to find. A stick over his shoulder supported a bundle, which contained most of his worldly possessions. But his good-looking face was quite cheery in its expression, as he tramped under the shadowy trees in the dark Kerish lane. The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune had never made him downcast.

He had passed through the sleeping village of Friardale, where the only light

to be seen glimmered from a window of the "Cross Keys". His way lay through Friardale Lane, past the gates of Greyfriars School, to the town of Courfield, where he hoped to pick up something to do for a few shillings on market day. He was in the deepest, darkest part of the lane, midway between the village and Greyfriars, when that sudden and unexpected challenge came from the darkness, and he was suddenly grasped.

He had been thinking of anything but footpads. It was a lonely lane, and it was near midnight. But the boy who was down on his luck had nothing to lose—his bundle was hardly worth a footpad's while. The two dim figures, one either side of him, could hardly be anything but footpads; but he was not alarmed. He was quite prepared, if necessary, to handle the stick on which his bundle was slung. But it did not seem necessary.

"Well," he said, coolly, and without the slightest tremor in his voice, "What do you want?"

"You, Mister Vernon-Smith," came the reply in the harsh voice of the man who

was grasping his shoulder, "And we got you."

Jack Free peered at him, in the gloom. He saw a hard beery face and a pair of eyes that glistened like a rat's.

"Take his other arm, Mick," went on the harsh voice, "Better walk him into the wood."

"Safe enough 'ere, Tadger. Who's likely to come along at this time of night?"

"Get him into the wood, I tell you."

"Oh, all right."

"Hold on," said Jack Free, quietly, "If you're waiting for somebody named Vernon-Smith, a name I've never heard before, you've got the wrong pig by the ear. My name happens to be Jack Free."

Both his arms were grasped now, and the two night-prowlers were pushing him towards the trees at the side of the lane. But at those words, they stopped, both of them peering more closely at him.

"Wat's that?" growled Tadger, "Ere, show a glim, Mick."

Mick released Jack's arm, Tadger grasping him more tightly. There was a scratch of a match. The flame flickered in the gloom, and by its light, the two footpads peered at the boy's face.

Tadger snapped out an oath.

"We got the wrong bird, Mick."

"Wat's he doing 'ere, giving a bloke trouble for nothing," growled Mick, with a threatening note in his growl.

"Who are you, you young limb, and wot you doing 'ere?" snarled Tadger, giving the boy's shoulder an angry shake.

"I've told you my name," answered Jack, "If you want to know more, I'm on tramp, heading for Courtfield to look for a job. I haven't so much as sixpence in my pockets, and you may as well chuck it."

The match went out. The two men peered at him, evidently angry and disappointed. They had mistaken him, in the darkness, for the person, unknown to Jack, whom Tadger called "Mister Vernon-Smith": apparently a boy, for even in the gloom they could hardly have mistaken him for a grown man. Jack wondered a little who and what the boy could be, who was expected to pass by that lonely lane at such an hour. Not a penniless wayfarer like himself, clearly, for their

object could only be robbery.

There was a pause, while Tadger still grasped Jack's shoulder.

He waited quietly.

He was worth nothing to the two dingy rascals: they could only let him go on his way. But if, in their angry disappointment, they resorted to the "rough stuff," he was ready to resist.

But Tadger's grasp relaxed at last.

"So you're heading for Courtfield, are you?" he growled.

"Just that," agreed Jack.

"Stranger in these parts?"

"I've never been on this road before."

"Oh, let him run, Tadger," grunted Mick, "He ain't no good to us, and he'll be in the way if—"

"Shut that!" growled Tadger. He gave Jack's arm another shake, and then released him, "Look 'ere, young covey, if you're heading for Courtfield, the sooner you get there the better it will be for your health. We ain't arter your sixpence, if you got one. Get moving."

He gave the boy a rough shove, that sent him tottering into the middle of the lane. The bundle dropped from the stick as he tottered.

Jack's eyes flashed. He grasped his stick, powerfully tempted to lash out with it, at Tadger's toiled head. But he restrained that impulse.

"Get moving, do you 'ear?" came a threatening growl from Mick.

The boy bent quickly, picked up the bundle and hooked it on the stick again, and put it over his shoulder. Without a word more, he tramped on, the two ruffians muttering and growling to themselves as he went. His footsteps rang clearly on the hard, frosty road, gradually dying away in the distance out of hearing of the footpads.

CHAPTER TWO

Jack Free slowed down at last, and stopped. He had left the deep dark dip in the lane some distance behind him, and he knew that if the footpads had listened to his departing footsteps, he was well out of their hearing now. They could have no doubt that he had gone on his way, glad

to get out of their hands, and that they were done with him. But if they were done with him, Jack was not so sure that he was done with them.

He stopped in the shadowy lane, his face thoughtful. They had seized him, in the gloom, in mistake for another, for whom they were watching and waiting—some boy who, for some inexplicable reason, they expected to come up that dark lane from the sleeping village at close on midnight. Now that he had passed on, and they supposed that he was gone for good, they would still be watching and waiting for the unknown lad whom Tadger had called "Mister Vernon-Smith". And that lad, whoever and whatever he was, would walk blindly into their grasp in the dark, as Jack had done—and he would not escape like Jack. They could only intend robbery—and it would be robbery with violence in case of resistance. Jack Free's thoughts were of that unknown lad who was about to walk unobtrusively into danger. And he felt that he could not leave him to it. A stranger to him, of whom he had never heard before; but he could not, and he would not, leave him to it.

Ahead of him, in the distance, he glimpsed a grey old spire that glistened in the twilight, and he wondered, as he looked at it, whether that was Greyfriars School, of which he had heard, and which he knew that he would pass on the road to Courtfield. The unknown boy, perhaps, might belong there—he would be coming towards Greyfriars when he came up the lane from Friarhole—some belated school-boy. Whoever he was, whatever he was, Jack Free had made up his mind—he was not going to leave him at the mercy of the pair of skulking footpads.

He dropped his bundle at the foot of a tree, and grasped the stick in his hand. It was a stout oak cudgel, a useful weapon in a determined hand, and he had handled it more than once in rough quarters. There were two of the footpads, either of them more than a match for Jack, strong and sturdy as he was for his age. He was well aware that they would knock him out, without the slightest scruple, if he came between them and their prey. His heart

was beating a little faster as he turned back to retrace his steps. But he did not think of hesitating.

He had made his footsteps ring on the frosty road, to give the listening ruffians the impression that he was gone. But his footsteps made no sound now, as he followed the grassy verge by the lane, between the road and the shadowy wood.

Silently, the cudgel gripped in his hand, his lips set, he hurried back down the lane, into the dark dip where the footpads lurked.

His ears were intent to listen, for a sound of a scuffle, perhaps a cry. But he heard nothing but the sound of the winter wind in the dark branches overhead.

He slowed down, as he realised that he was close on the spot where he had encountered the footpads. Silently as a Red Indian on the war-trail, he crept on, his ears straining for a sound. And a muttering harsh voice in the darkness brought him to a sudden halt.

"He's late, blow him." It was Tadger's harsh voice.

"Ow long have we got to hang on here waiting for the young rip?" came a discontented growl from Mick.

"He can't be long now. Even that young sweep wouldn't keep it up till midnight."

"Might have gone another way—"

"Why should he? He's got to get back to his school, and this is the way. He wouldn't go round by the fields."

"I s'pose not. We got to wait."

"He's worth waiting for," growled Tadger. "Packed with coof, that young rip—more than's good for him, I reckon. Him a schoolboy, up at the big school yonder—and getting out at night to play banker at the Cross Keys. What's going to happen to him will be a lesson to him, perhaps." And Tadger chuckled.

Mick grunted.

Every word came clearly to Jack Free, as he stood in the darkness under the trees by the lane. He began to understand how the matter stood. "Mister Vernon-Smith" was a Greyfriars school-boy, out of bounds at night; evidently some wild and reckless young rascal. These men knew where he was, at that late hour, and that he was "packed with coof."

Unless Jack Free was able to help him young Vernon-Smith was likely to be relieved of that "sof" before he was much older, perhaps with a knock on the head in addition. The fact that the boy was some reckless scapegrace made no difference to Jack: he was going to help him all he could.

The minutes passed. The two footpads not a dozen feet from the invisible boy under the trees, listened for a sound from the direction of Friarsdale: and Jack listened as intently as either of them. Mister Vernon-Smith was keeping it up late: for the chime of midnight came from somewhere in the distant darkness, and still there was no sound of footsteps on the road.

But the last chime was followed by a hurried whisper from Tadger, that barely reached Jack Free's ears.

"Hark!"

Faintly, from the direction of the village, came footsteps. Someone was coming up the dark lane.

"That's him!" breathed Mick.

"Can't be anybody else," muttered Tadger, "But we don't want to get the wrong bird agin. Look 'ere, you be lighting your fag when he comes up, and we'll see his face by the match."

"O.K."

Louder came the sound of tramping feet on the frosty road. Nearer and nearer came the footsteps, till they were close at hand, and a dim shadow was faintly visible in the gloom.

Scratch!

A match flamed out.

There was a startled exclamation, and the footsteps halted. The flickering light of the match in Mick's hand shone on a boy's face—a rather hard face with strongly-marked features and keen eyes. Jack Free could see the face, which he had never seen before: but it was evidently familiar to Tadger and Mick, for both of them exclaimed together:

"That's 'im!"

The match dropped to the ground.

"What—!" It was the schoolboy speaking. But he got no further than that word. The next moment the grasp of the two footpads had closed on him, and he

was struggling fiercely and savagely in that grasp.

CHAPTER THREE

Herbert Vernon-Smith, the "Boulder" of Greyfriars, was taken completely by surprise. Many a time had the scapegrace creep from his dormitory after lights out, to join his sporting friends outside the school: often and often, he had traversed that dark lane at a late hour, with no thought of danger in his mind—and now it had happened, suddenly, unexpectedly.

But taken by surprise as he was, assailed by two pilfering rascals each of whom was stronger than himself, he had no idea of yielding tamely. Smithy might be a good deal of a blackguard, but he was full of pluck, and hard as nails. He struggled fiercely in the grasping hands, so fiercely and desperately that the three of them rocked to and fro: and his right fist, clenched and hard, shot out, crushing in Tadger's eye.

Tadger gave a spluttering howl and recoiled, releasing him, leaving him only Mick to contend with. He made a frantic effort to tear himself loose from Mick's grasp: but the ruffian had him fast, and the effort only dragged them both over, sprawling on the frosty earth. Mick, panting, held him down, still resisting fiercely.

"Ere, Tadger," panted Mick, "Land a 'and with this blinking young wildcat, will you."

Tadger spluttered oaths. One of his eyes was closed and blackening. The other glinted fury, as he flung himself at Vernon-Smith. His knucky fist was lifted to crash in the schoolboy's face and knock him out.

Smithy saw the blow coming: but Mick held him fast, and he could not raise a hand in defence. A second more, and the knucky fist would have crashed, and the schoolboy would have been knocked senseless. But in that second, an oaken cudgel lashed, descending on Tadger's wrist with a crash that cracked the bone. Tadger's blow never reached the Boulder—his arm dropped helpless, as he uttered

a yell of agony.

Jack Free had been swift, but he had been only in time.

Tadger sprouted in the road, his left hand clapping his right wrist, howling with pain. He was knocked out, with a broken wrist—it was likely to be a very long time before Tadger used that knuckly fist again.

Mick gave a splutter of amazement and alarm, staring blankly at the dim figure that had suddenly appeared, as it seemed, from nowhere. Before he could collect his wits, the cudgel lashed again, landing on the side of his head, and sending him sprawling.

Vernon-Smith lay panting for breath, as amazed as the two footpads by the sudden turn of events. All he could see of Jack was that he was a boy, who had appeared on the scene as if by magic.

Jack Free gave him no attention for the moment. Mick scrambled to his feet, his face ablaze with rage, and came at him like a tiger. Jack Free faced the ruffian with upturned cudgel, and struck with all his force. He had time for only one blow, and if it had failed, he must have gone down under the ruffian's rush. But it did not fail. The stout oak cudgel crashed on a touselled head, and Mick dropped to the earth as if he had been shot, momentarily stunned.

Jack's eyes flashed round to the other footpad. But Tadger, in a state of collapse was groaning with the pain of a cracked wrist. There was no more trouble to come from Tadger.

Vernon-Smith sat up, dizzily. His voice came huskily to Jack.

"Is that you, Tom? Did you come to look for me, or what?"

Who "Tom" might be, Jack had no idea—doubtless some Greyfriars junior. He did not answer for the moment—he was bending over Mick to make sure that the ruffian was hoes de combat.

"Is that you, Tom Redwing? Lend me a hand, I've hurt my leg falling."

Mick was senseless, though it was not likely to be for long. Jack Free turned to the schoolboy sitting up in the road.

"I'll help you," he said, "Better get out of this."

Vernon-Smith stared up at him, blankly.

"Who are you? I don't know your voice. You're not a Greyfriars man."

"Hardly," Jack could not help smiling at the idea, "My name's Jack Free—I'm on tramp, looking for a job—that's how I'm here. But let me help you up, Mr. Vernon-Smith."

"How the dooce do you know my name?"

"I heard those two rogues mention it. They've been waiting for you to come—they collared me by mistake when I passed—and I came back to lend a hand when they set on you. But let me help you."

He helped the schoolboy to his feet. Vernon-Smith stood a little unsteadily, leaning on him.

"My leg's hurt," he muttered, "Must have twisted it in falling with that brute. By gad, if I can't get back to the school—but I must. Will you help me?"

"Of course I will."

"It's nothing much—it will pass off. If you'd let me lean on you for a bit—"

"Come on."

There was a mumble from Mick, a sign that the ruffian was beginning to recover. But he still lay where he had fallen; and Tadger, groaning over his cracked wrist, took no notice of the two boys at all. With the Greyfriars schoolboy leaning heavily on his arm, Jack Free moved off up the lane. Vernon-Smith winced as they went: it was evident that his leg was hurting him, though he would utter no sound of pain. They did not speak again, till they emerged from the dark dip, and came out into the light of the stars, with the tall spire of the chapel at Greyfriars School glimmering in the distance.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Hold on a minute," said Jack Free.

"What—?"

"I left my bundle here."

"Oh!"

Jack picked up the bundle he had left at the foot of a tree by the lane, hooked it on his stick, and put it over his shoulder. The Greyfriars junior watched him

curiously.

"So you're on tramp?" he said, slowly.

"Yes."

"You don't look much like a tramp."

Jack laughed.

"I'm not exactly a tramp," he answered, "I'm looking for a job. I've been told that it's market day at Courtyard to-morrow, and I may be able to pick up something there. How's your leg now?"

"Not too bad. You might stick to me as far as the school, and give me a bunk up the wall. Then I shall be all right. Look here, you must be pretty nearly on your uppers, to be tramping at night, to pick up a job in the morning."

"Not far from it," admitted Jack.

"Well, I'll gladly stand you a quid for helping me."

Jack coloured.

"Thank you, Mr. Vernon-Smith," he answered, quietly. "But I don't want to be paid for lending a fellow a hand. Let's push on."

The Bounder of Greyfriars looked at him, in the starlight, a faint sneer on his somewhat sardonic face. But he moved on without replying, and they followed the road to Greyfriars in silence.

Vernon-Smith turned into a narrow dark lane.

"This way," he said, "This lane runs by the old Cloisters, and that's where I got out—and where I got in. I suppose you can guess that they don't know I'm out of school bounds at this time of night."

"Yes, I can guess that," said Jack, "You might have to leave, if they know—"

Vernon-Smith gave a scoffing laugh.

"No 'might' about it," he said, "I should be sacked like a shot."

"Sacked?" repeated Jack, puzzled, "You don't mean that you've got a job at the school—I thought—"

"Oh, my hat!" said Smithy. "No, I don't mean that I've got a job at the school—ha, ha! When I say sacked I mean expelled."

"Oh," said Jack, "I see. I—I wonder—"

"Well, what do you wonder?" asked Vernon-Smith, as he paused.

"It's no business of mine," said Jack, "and a young gentleman like you doesn't want advice, I suppose, from a fellow

tramping the roads. But I do wonder that you do this kind of thing. If I had the luck to be at a school like Greyfriars, I shouldn't have any fancy for sneaking out at night to mix with shady outsiders at a pub. I suppose you know you're doing wrong."

The Bounder of Greyfriars stared at him. For a moment he looked angry. Then he laughed.

"That sounds like Tom Redwing over again," he said.

"Who's Tom Redwing?"

"A pal of mine in school. You've got his seventh manner to a T."

"Well, if your pal gives good advice, you're rather a fathead not to listen to him," said Jack, bluntly.

"Perhaps I will—some day! Now give me a bunk over this wall—dashed if I think I could make it on my own."

Jack Free "bunked" the Greyfriars schoolboy up the old stone wall. Vernon-Smith clambered up, with the help of the thick old ivy, and the "bunk" from below. He sat on the top of the wall, looking down at Jack.

"All right now?" asked Jack, looking up at him.

"O.K. I can get on all right from here. Look here, Jack Free, if that's your name, you saved me from getting knocked out back there in the lane—"

"That's all right."

"That wouldn't have been the worst of it, either—it would have had to come out that I was breaking bounds at night, and that would have meant the sack for me here."

"All right now," said Jack.

"You've refused a quid for helping me, though you're as good as on your uppers. Well, I'm going to make it a fiver."

Jack stared up at him. He had a few coppers in his own pocket, and the prospect of short commons unless he picked up a job in the morning at Courtyard market. This schoolboy apparently had fivers. Vernon-Smith, as he saw the astonishment in his face, laughed.

"I've less," he said, "My pater's rollin' in it, and he lets me have all I want. Here you see, kid."

He drew a wallet from his pocket. Jack

stepped back from the wall.

"Thanks, no," he said.

"Don't be a fool!"

"Good-night," said Jack.

"Look here—"

"You'd better get in. I'm going on. Good-night, Mr. Vernon-Smith." Jack Free turned away.

"Hold on." There was an angry note in the Bounder's voice. "Hold on, I tell you. You've helped me, and I don't choose to remain under an obligation. See?"

"I'm afraid there's no help for that," said Jack, quietly. "I'm looking for a job, Mr. Vernon-Smith—not for a fiver for nothing."

"Will you take it or not?" snapped Vernon-Smith.

"No."

"You're a cheeky fool!"

Jack Free made no reply to that. He walked away down the lane, and disappeared in the gloom, leaving the scapegrace of Greyfriars staring after him angrily from the top of the Cloister wall.

CHAPTER FIVE

Patter, patter.

Jack Free stopped at the corner where the little dark lane joined the road, and looked back, startled. Behind him was the sound of running feet. It could only be the Greyfriars schoolboy who was following him, at a run to overtake him:—damaged leg and all! Startled, he stared back into the shadows, and Herbert Vernon-Smith came pasting up. His face was white: the strain of running, with his limping leg, had told severely on him. Jack Free caught him by the arm to steady him.

"My dear chap, what's up?" he exclaimed. "Can't you get in after all? If there's anything I can do to help—"

Vernon-Smith parted.

"It's not that! I had to catch you!"

"Why?" asked Jack.

Vernon-Smith did not reply for a moment or two. He leaned on Jack Free's sturdy shoulder, to take the strain off his painful leg.

"By gum, it's given me jip, running like that," he said, at last.

"You shouldn't have—"

"You'll have to bunk me up that wall again," said Smithy. "But I had to speak to you. Do you know what they call me, at my school?"

"No," said Jack, in wonder.

"The 'Bounder'—that's my nickname. Vernon-Smith spoke with a half-sneer. "Too many fivers for my own good, and a spot of swank—rather a big spot. That's why they nicknamed me the Bounder."

Jack could only look at him, at a loss what to say.

"But I've got my points," said Vernon-Smith. "You've chucked my fiver back in my face—"

"Not exactly that," said Jack, colouring. "But—"

"I should have done the same in your place—at least, I think so; but I've never been on my uppers, so I don't know. You can't put your pride in your pocket, though, you've got nothing else there?"

Jack laughed.

"Very little," he said. "But—"

"Well, you won't touch my fiver, but one good turn deserves another. You're looking for a job, you told me."

"Yes."

"I can get you one."

Jack stared at him.

"You—a schoolboy—"

"My pater's a big man in business, pretty well known, though I dare say you've never heard of him. He will give you a job if you're willing to work."

"More than willing," said Jack. "But—"

"Go to 17, Courtman Square, London, and tell him you're Jack Free—he will know your name before you get there: I shall get him on the telephone to-morrow. If it's a job you want, there's one waiting for you."

"Oh!" said Jack.

"Now come back and bunk me over that dashed wall again."

"I—I say—you're a good chap—I shall be glad—more than glad—I can work my way to London, and—and—I don't know how to thank you—" stammered Jack.

"Cut it out, and come and bunk me up."

Five minutes later, the Bounder of Grey-

frars was over the Cloister wall, limping through dark shadows to the House. Jack Free, with a light heart, was swinging along the road to Courtfield, humming

a cheery tune as he went. There was a "job" ahead, and that was all he wanted— Fortune's wheel had turned once more in favour of "Jack of All Trades."



Five minutes later, the Boulder of Geopfrars was over the Cloister wall.