

Benno

And Some of the Push

Dyson, Edward (1865-1931)

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Note

FIFTEEN of the sixteen stories contained in this volume were originally published in *The Bulletin*, Sydney. "The Big Spoof" was first printed in Sydney *Sunday Sun*. To the proprietors of these papers I am indebted for the privilege of presenting the tales in book form.

EDWARD DYSON.

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Benno and Some of the Push

Chapter I. The Picnic.

A RECENT disappointment in love had made Benno a perfect fiend to women. A woman had deceived him; by her perfidy his heart had been broken, his life blighted. At twenty-one and a half he was already embittered, and all through a woman. Henceforward he would give them no quarter. His cynicism would have made you shudder.

"I'm livin' on'y fer revenge," he told Feathers, darkly.

"Come orf the keg, little boy," replied the packer, with his man-of-the-world air. "You ain't talkin', y' know; ye're just makin' a noise."

"I'm talkin,' gorstruth," the clerk continued. "There isn't a bit o' common in treatin' women decent. If y' do, they'll dog on yer fer a cert. Deal 'em out stoush 'ard 'n' often, 'n' they'll lick yer 'and. Show 'em yer gone soft about 'em, 'n' y' get what yer lookin' fer—the sudden jerk. Ye're on'y fit t' be cut up fer dusters then. Women's pure nark, I tell yeh. I spared one woman once" (here the little clerk's voice became husky and morose, and his small brow darkened), "'n' she never forgive me fer it, but never again—never again. Any iv the sect what's in my power after this won't git no mercy, 'n' that's how it is."

"It's after 'avin' sixpen'orth iv 'ang-over et 'The Cankered 'Eart, 'r The Cooper in the Soup,' 'n' it's puttin' up fer a 'eavy villain et eight stone seven," Feathers commented; and then he continued in a declamatory manner: "'T' mothers 'iv fam'lies, 'n' all whom it may concern. As Benno, the feather-weight devil, otherwise the Merciless Midget, is now prowlin' at large in the parks 'n' waste places, it would be well 'n' wise t' keep all girls iv the female sex under sixteen stone limit on the chain till the monster's plugged with bullets 'r otherwise pervided fer."

"You're the king comic, ain't yeh?" sneered Benno. "Better mind out 'r you'll be makin' me larf. A man might 's well tork sense to a madhouse cockertoo."

The clerk returned to his high stool in a huff, but he was back at Feathers in the course of an hour as if nothing had happened, with an elaboration of his complaint, and the theme was staling on Mills. In fact, the whole factory was losing faith in Mr. Dickson in the character of a destroyer, although the Beauties still considered it worth while to affect a grotesque timidity when he approached them

"Oh, 'eavens! Take them eyes away," cried the ex-professional fat girl, retreating behind her board. "Have pity on the orfin girl!"

"Back, wretch!" hissed Sarah Eddie, arming herself with a paste brush. "I'm on'y a lone woman, pa's in the country, 'n' ma's gone fishin', but if you

touch me I'H scream.”

Selina Dodd (“Silly” in the vernacular), who was fashioned on the lines of the giraffe and, according to Feathers, “as plain as a hide pie,” elevated herself almost out of sight at the attenuated clerk, and quoted from a popular melodrama:

“Think, man, think! Would you stain your soul with this hidjis sin? Remember, you had a mother once.”

“Ar-r-r, get it stopped!” retorted Benno with awful vindictiveness. Or perhaps he said: “So y' ort to,” or “Git yer 'ead read,” or something equally felicitous. Benno was never wanting in telling repartee. But neither the burlesque of the Beauties, the derision of Feathers, nor the irony of the town traveller affected Benno's attitude. He loved himself as the soured victim of the perfidious sex, relentless in his anguish, justified in all his iniquities by the faithlessness and villainy of woman.

For some time past he had been hinting to Mills and Goudy, and even to the depressed foreman—the only person in the whole establishment who took him seriously—that he had found a victim. His hints were dark, but significant, and he smiled a mirthless smile.

“Lead 'em on, an' when yer got 'em fair dilly about yer, freeze 'em; that's my motto,” he told Goudy.

“Thanks be, my doors are shut to you,” answered the town traveller. “A man with maiden aunts of his own can't be too careful.”

“Out with it, Benno, who's yer cuddle?” said Feathers.

“There's 'ere an' there one,” Benno admitted wearily, “but the little hextra special's a bit iv a widder Kingy's interjuiced to me.”

“A widow,” murmured Goudy, and he laid a heavy, hot, fatherly hand on Benno's head, and sighed three times, “a poor, little, bereaved, helpless, artless, innocent widow, and you a man of the world, a callous, sin-stained devil! Ah, this is indeed a hard world for women.”

“Good enough for 'er,” Benno scowled darkly.

“But all the same your mother ought to be warned,” concluded Goudy.

“Is she a shine squeeze, Benno?” asked Feathers.

“Such ez they are,” replied Benno, without warmth. “They're all erlike t' me. But I'm thinkin' o' havin' it on my string fer the picnic so y' wanter watch out.”

The packer had no conscience, and respected nobody's confidence if his ruffianly sense of humour suggested that food for laughter was to be gained by violating it. And yet the packer never laughed. He went to the Beauties with the story of Benno's little widow, and inspired a systematic pulling of Benno's leg, and was happy through a whole week while the clerk cynically enlarged on the widow's great, despairing affection for him,

and gave everybody to understand that he could twist her round his finger, but her love awakened no reciprocal emotions in his case-hardened breast. He was a man with a past.

“Women's bin me ruin,” Benno told the foreman, surveying the wreck in the mirror on Ellis's wall with a good deal of interest and adjusting his tie, “'n' I've got it up agen 'em till my dyin' day.”

“My advice,” said Fuzzy earnestly and in almost a whisper, “is, do nothink rash.”

Benno laughed his new, mirthless laugh, and walked away.

“Gor' delp us orl!” cried slatternly Arabella Harte—called “Harrerbeller”—hearing the laugh, and the fat girl crossed herself.

The appearance of Benno's little widow before the loading-up on the picnic morning occasioned something like a sensation. She proved to be a tall, stout, hilarious woman of about thirty, with ruddy cheeks, black hair, and a large, dark, cheerfully defiant eye. She was of the stamp our fathers classified as “bouncing.”

“Mother of Jimmy! Is that the victim of Benno's guile?” gasped Goudy.

“It's it orl right,” answered Feathers. “Don't she look it t' the life? She's the one little ewe lamb bein' led t' the slaughter.”

Then Benno passed the lady round. “Let me interjuce yous,” he said. “These is Mr. Goudy 'n' Mr. Mills, 'n' this is Mrs. Norah Cavanagh, one of mine.”

Feathers could hold his face; he winked the lady hard in the eye, and stood his ground; but the town traveller retired precipitately behind the delivery waggon, and bit himself.

“What use 'ave yer got fer him, Norah?” asked the packer, familiarly.

“Oh, I don't let him get in me way,” replied the widow.

Then Benno introduced Nicholas Don, and Nicholas immediately entered into possession. The Don was employed as carter at thirty-six shillings per week. He told Mrs. Cavanagh, immediately and confidentially, that he was taking the odds on his being made junior partner within a year.

“If you are out for a good gay day,” he said, “place your order with me. I'm not financin' this frolic on my only, of course—a fellow can't do everything with a paltry ten pounds a week—but I'm spinning a few jim over it, and what's mine's yours.”

The Don was reported to have a way with women. His “way” was a system of cheerful and audacious mendacity, and was uniformly successful for a time. In ordinary circumstances his conversation was in the vernacular, but, when impressing a lady, he fell into a fairly accurate imitation of the barbarous accent of the English dude in the burlesques.

The factory went to its picnic in vehicles of nine kinds, and, passing

through the city, looked like a bush funeral gone astray; but it did not sound anything like that. It was a peculiarly blatant procession, and for the most part sang touching vaudeville ballads about “mother” or somebody's “broken heart,” each vehicle exercising its liberty of choice and striving to out-sing the other. Those excursionists who did not sing cast reflections on the habits, manners, and personal appearance of respectable pedestrians carrying small black bags to business. Their astonishment and indignation under the ordeal were considered most diverting.

Nicholas sat next to Mrs. Cavanagh during the ride out, and monopolised her. Benno sat on the other side of the widow, and was prey to a grievous uneasiness, in strong contrast with his previous attitude as the cold, proud avenger. His uneasiness was occasioned by the carter's frank repudiation of his right, title and interest in Mrs. Cavanagh, and by a painful suspicion that Don had his arm round Norah from the off side. The suspicion was unworthy, but well-founded. Benno strove to maintain an air of proprietorship, but his efforts to keep a place in the conversation were quietly ignored.

The picnic ground was at Dogwood, where there was a sprinkling of gums along the river, and a nice belt of ti-tree scrub offering cover for affectionate couples between meals. Nicholas Don remained in possession of Benno's widow, and the clerk prowled after the pair all the morning, making occasional protestations with an attempt at humour that became pitiful through repetition.

Norah could not be brought to understand that she owed allegiance to Benno, who had introduced her to such a select gathering and paid her way, and Don had no sense of honour. The moment Benno withdrew his surveillance the pair disappeared, and then Benjamin Dickson went trotting from cover to cover, making enquiries, the effectedly comic nature of which did not disguise his great distress, and meeting everywhere with the bitterest contempt. Benno threatened to be the ruin of the picnic.

Discovering Nicholas and Norah for the second time since dinner, Benno abandoned facetiae.

“Strike me up a stick,” he said, bitterly, “this is gettin' on my nerves. Say, what brought yeh to this corrob—me or his nibs?”

“Go on along and mind baby. Mummy's busy,” replied Norah.

“Don't I like yer pink cheek, polin' in on 'er bloke's ticket, 'n' then doin' the smoodge with his cobber.” Benno was deeply hurt. “Tain't the act iv a lady,” he added virtuously. He was so sure of this point of etiquette that he repeated it five times.

“Yar-r, go away, carn't yeh!” snorted Nicholas, “an' send in yer bill. Get somethin' iv yer own. I got a reserve on this.”

“Somethin' o' me own!” Benno fairly gasped. “I like that, I don't think.” He seated himself deliberately on the grass at their feet. “Somethin' o' me own!” he repeated.

Nicholas Don resigned himself to the situation. He pillowed Norah's head on his shoulder, he addressed to the widow words of tenderness and sighs of ardour, he kissed her at intervals, and Benno, the miserable, sat and looked on, and denounced them occasionally in his own inimitable way.

“Yeh needn't mind me,” he said, “I'm in the narse. I'm s'posed to be dead. All the same, it's daylight dam robbery, iv yeh arsk me.”

“Don't erpologise,” answered Nicholas

They tried to shake Benno off later, but Benno refused to be shaken. He yapped at their heels like a disagreeable little dog, following them everywhere, and voices out of ambush cried derisively after the three as they drifted from place to place.

Despairing of ridding themselves of Benno, Nicholas and the widow returned to the camping ground on the river bank, where a number of the Beauties and their boys were varying honest Pagan dalliance with another meal. Norah seated herself, and Don provided “am san'wiches” and picnic tea.

Benno stood over them while they ate, glowering darkly. He had no appetite. That was another injustice. He meditated an appeal to common decency and popular opinion, and, meanwhile, raked the perfidious pair with scathing invective; but they ate, drank and were merry.

“Don't 'ave 'im on yer mind,” said Nicholas; “he ain't on the earth.”

“But yer gotter,” piped Benno. “I'm 'ere t' live. You don't shake me. Get on to it, blokes,” he cried in shrill tones. “Ain't it dead hooketty? Here's me bin 'n' parted the beans t' bring a tom along, 'n' the Don backs his barrer 'n' burgles her. He's too dirt mean to finance a skirt iv 'is own, 'n' ”——

Benno's first public oration ended there. He was standing on the rug on which Norah was seated, with his back to the river. The widow's hand gripped the rug. She gave it a sharp tug. Benno's boots shot out. He sat down. The bank was steep there. Benno struck it halfway down, ricocheted smartly, and shot into the river, feet first.

There was an instantaneous rush of picnickers as Benno went down. There was a unanimous roar of advice as Benno came up. Benno disregarded it. He was clawing like a desperate cat with a weight on her tail. His eyes were wild. He opened his mouth and the river ran in.

Benno went under once more. Nicholas Don was waiting for him with a hooked stick when he reappeared. The stick was hitched in the back of Benno's coat, and Nicholas hauled the half-drowned clerk on to the bank, and left him there.

When Dickson recovered sufficiently to manifest an interest in mundane things, Nicholas and the widow had disappeared.

Deserted, deluded, sodden, Ben Dickson bore with the heartless barracking of the Beauties and their boys for ten minutes, and then turned his back on womankind and fled into the scrub. He went far beyond the range of the smoodgers, seeking the solace of solitude.

In the depths Benjamin lit a fire, and, having stripped, hung his dripping garments to dry, and then lay down in the shade, and, like a desolate babe in the woods, covered himself with leaves, and gave his mind to despairing reflections upon the perfidy, selfishness, and deceit of the race of men—especially women.

Our Mr. Dickson was awakened by an unpleasant sensation of frying, which attacked his feet, and sprang up with a yell. The scrub was afire.

The day had been extremely hot, there was a strong north wind, and the scrub burnt fiercely. Benno's only chance was in instantaneous flight. He fled—fled as he was—rushing, diving, tearing and tumbling through the bush, an image of supreme alarm, with the fire springing at his heels, licking out whips of flame to lash him along.

The fire swept through the scrub, and drove all the smoodgers into the open, Nicholas Don and Norah Cavanagh with the rest. Blame attached to Benno. The firing of the scrub was supposed to be an act of malicious retaliation, and the picnic cursed him.

At half-past five, when tea was spread, there was no Benno to appreciate the little acts of vengeance that they were saving for him. An hour later, when the vans were loaded for the home journey, there was still no Benno. Goudy, with the faintest suggestion of concern, advised a search of the burnt area.

The men went to the hunt with some ferocity, cursing Benno. They returned two hours later, walking like a funeral procession. Feathers had portion of a hat and part of a boot, recognisable as belonging to the deceased Benjamin Dickson. Nicholas Don carried some bones, not recognisable as those of the deceased B. Dickson, but reasonably supposed to be his.

The Beauties were overwhelmed, and consternation fell upon the picnic. The widow uttered cries of bitterest self-reproach, and, giving way to tears, reviled Nicholas Don for his cruelty and faithlessness to his poor dead friend. That would have been a proud moment for Benno had he only lived to witness the complete revulsion of feeling in his favour.

Some of the men remained to continue the hunt, and the bones and the other relics were handed over to the police at Dogwood, with details. There was no singing of ribald songs as Spats's picnic drove into town that night.

Gloom was seated in every vehicle. The Beauties discussed Benno's perfections in low, reverent voices. The widow was a pariah. Nicholas Don's unpopularity was absolute.

Next day there was the same gloom in the factory. Benno's deserted desk was a silent reproach to all who had aided and abetted Don in his act of treachery. The evening paper contained a full and not over-particular account of the supposed terrible death of a young clerk, but the papers of the following morning prepared the Beauties for the re-appearance of Benno.

He was pale and signed, and he sat with great apparent discomfort, but he had rather a jaunty air, for he was now a person of some notoriety and his race for life had been given quite a heroic aspect in the press.

Feathers, who had stayed at Dogwood to assist the police, explained the denouement.

"Seems 'is nibs there done a quarter mile in ten secs. under the hofficial record, with the fire proddin' him all the way, 'n' come out on the west side, alone in a crool world. Then he recorlected with a holler groan that in the 'urry iv shiftin' he'd clean fergot his glad rags, 'n' was ixposed to the hinclemency iv the weather 'n' the dangers iv the law 'orribly undressed, 'n' fearin' t' be caught in the act he went t' roost in a 'oller tree. He stayed there all night.

"In the mornin' there was nothin' better fer a man t' do, mother naked 'n' ten miles from 'ome, so our Mr. Dickson returned to his 'oller, 'specially as another picnic party rushed 'im outer sight, 'n' then camped in his backyard. A yeller dog traced him out in the afternoon, 'n' me 'n' a John discovered the plant, just when some boys was goin' t' light a fire t' smoke out somethin' or another—they didn't care which.

"We made a collection from the picnic, 'n' presented Benno with a storr lid, a pink tie, a flannel petticut, four handkerchiefs, 'n' a donah's bobtailed coat, 'n' I delivered him at his 'ome larst night. He was blistered, 'n' singed, 'n' smoked, 'n' scratched all over, 'n' the ants had got at him, otherwise he's free iv himpediments 'n' in good repair, 'n' he's thinkin' iv applyin' fer the Rile Humane Society's medal for distinguished bravery in savin' his own life, ain't yeh, Benno?"

"Better he had died," said Goudy impressively; "better have perished in the flames than live to continue his pitiless career among innocent and confiding widows."

"Pah! who let that in?" said Benno with contempt. "I ortenter talk t' your sort."

Just then the call pipe whistle blew, and a voice from the depths said very distinctly:—

“There's a gentleman from the press here to interview our Mr. Dickson.”

The call was timely. The celebrity took a lapel of his coat in either hand, gave a little, characteristic, saucy tug, squared his small shoulders, and went down stairs a cold, proud man.

“Fer photographs 'n' full perticklers, see our later editions,” said the packer.

Chapter II. Nicholas Don and the Meek Almira.

NICHOLAS DON was a gay deceiver. His attitude towards womankind was consistently frivolous, and his opinion of the sex was small but indulgent.

“They're all erlike,” said Nicholas, and it must be admitted that his experience was extensive. He devoted the greater part of his leisure to the pursuit of it, and his audacity in “wording” cold, proud young persons in the grand march past in the city on Sunday evenings, and his success in attaching himself to girls in whom his first advances had seemed to provoke unutterable loathing and contempt were the wonder, the admiration, and the envy of comparatively timid spirits like Benno and the printers.

On these occasions the Don always indulged a harmless and pleasing imposition, and presented himself to the little lady of his fancy—or the little ladies, for Nicholas did not hesitate in the face of numbers—as a person of consequence. He adopted the name of some singer or actor conspicuous for the moment, some well-known man about town, a titled visitor, or a local celebrity of great wealth, and he acted the part. Young devils from the factories and warehouses generally assume fictitious names when plunging into adventures of this kind.

Mr. Nicholas Don did not always expect the young lady to be deceived when he introduced himself as Lord Saveus or Walter Baker. Often the fiction was accepted with open glee, as the mere manifestation of a cheerful spirit. But if the damsel were sufficiently ingenuous, and seemed prepared to take Nicholas at his word, the carter presumed upon her innocent, trusting nature. Then the eye-glass appeared, the drawl became very marked, and the toothpick was gracefully manipulated.

The Don had carried through many a successful impersonation of a wicked young English aristocrat with these properties alone—especially the quill toothpick. Nicholas's faith in a toothpick was profound.

“A bloke with a bit iv sav 'n' a toothpick kin trade himself off ez a haide-de-kong 'r somethin' jist ez large ez life, though he's wearin' trowsis that look zif he'd bin tryin' t' blast 'em off with dinnymite,” said the Don.

Spats's carter admitted that his attention was first drawn to the meek Almira by an advertisement in the “Missing Friends” column of a morning paper. Therein Almira described herself as a young widow and a lonely soul, and craved the sympathy of “middle-aged gentleman similarly situated.”

“Thinks I, ‘Wha's the matter with me?’ said the Don, long after it was all

over. "I ain't middle-aged, but I'm a symperthetic soul. I'll do a duck in, 'n' mingle tears with Almira. I put on me bes' pretties, 'n' took me brass ring all covered with di'monds, 'n' me card-case, 'n' went forth ez the Hon. Horace Badminton-Carte t' yearn 'long with me Almira by happointment. Trust me when I say she wiz jist the best piece, a little fat widder risin' thirty, a sad, sentimental, hush-a-bye kind, but with a savin' bias towards oysters 'n' stout. She tole me 'er ole pot-'n'-pan 'ed dodged under the daisies through sittin' outside the draught in 'otel bars year in 'n' year out, 'n' took me to 'er 'umble 'ome, where she earned a 'onest livin', givin' man 'n' his young boxin' lessons on the pianner. I sighed over 'er unhappy lot, 'n' she tumbled that we was symperthetic souls orl right.

"The Hon. Horace Badminton-Carte was a young English gentleman, out 'ere fer change iv scene 'n' what not. I gave it to Almira strong, she lookin' a soft 'n' simple baby mine. 'It's dem hard,' I sez, 'fer ah fellah to be penned in this beastly country, but what's ah fellah to do, bai Jove, when the old gentleman says, "Go there, sir, and stay there, demmy, till you're sent for"?' That's what ah fellah gets for being too dooced rackety, and serve him dooced well right, of course. By gad, it's sobered me, by gad it has. By gad, I'd have been down to it on my bendeds if Sir Chawles hadn't dwopped a wemittance now and again. As it is, I've had to take a dem billet, by gad, and work like a bally slave seven hours a day. Bai Jove, yes. I'm ashamed to say where I am, positively. By Jove, yes, by gad.'"

The Don, who was a close student of the drama, got his idea of the English younger son largely from certain familiar comedy types, but he had a talent for dissimulation, and it must not be imagined that meek Almira was necessarily a fool in reposing some little confidence in Horace Badminton-Carte, and believing in his reformation and in his expected remittances.

The idea was that dear Horace was to call on Almira frequently, "with a view to the above" when eventually the remittances became regular, and the black sheep was restored to parental favour. Meanwhile they were to regard themselves as each other's, for better or worse.

Escapades of this kind were meat and drink to Nicholas. He followed-up the meek Almira with assiduity. He devoted evenings, Sundays, and Saturday afternoons to the quest. Twice during off-days in the city she excused him while he darted into a bank to see the manager respecting an idea he had that "Sir Chawles" might be placing a thousand or two to his credit. Once he detained her while he held a cordial conversation with the chauffeur of a grand motor, whom he afterwards described to her as "dear old Fitzie, you know. Dooched good chap. His people know my people at home. Beastly rich—wanted to lend me fifty. Couldn't think of it, you

know; couldn't think of it.”

The little widow found this all very convincing. She thought Horace's scruples in refusing to take the fifty from dear old Fizzie a trifle strained, but there was certainly wisdom in his heroic determination to let the governor see he could do without that sort of thing.

The Don's only doubts were inspired by Almira's maid, a pert young thing of sixteen, who giggled foolishly at him. She also called him “Percy” when she caught him alone, winked with insolent familiarity, and said, “Oh, what sort!” in a tone that almost made Horace Badminton-Carte forget himself. Horace feared that he might have met her in some former existence.

It was the meek Almira who suggested the evening at the theatre, and it was she who financed the venture. She had a new evening dress, and an early public display of it was essential to her happiness.

Horace, fearing a financial failure, raised objections.

“Fact is, me dear,” explained the younger son of one of our oldest families, “ah fellah's been peculiarly situated. Dem awkward. Yes, by Jove. Fellah's had reverses and that sort of thing, by gad. Had to sell his dwess clothes. Beastly vulgar thing to do. By gad, yes. But ah fellah had no alternative—honest poverty, don't you know.”

Horace seemed deeply moved by the contemplation of his misfortunes, and the little fat widow was touched. She shed two distinct tears, and strove to comfort him with a kiss. She said she had a dress suit that had been left by the late lamented Berryman. It was in an excellent state of repair, and it was at Horace's service.

So Horace Badminton-Carte and Mrs. Almira Berryman went to the theatre. Horace insisted on paying the tram fare. The dress-suit was a pretty good fit, but smelt suspiciously of pawn-shops. It was a trifle long in the leg, and full in the bust, but Horace had no difficulty in keeping it on. In the coat room he brushed his hair very flat, and arranged the parting and the curves with artistic deftness. The effect was highly decorative. Horace thrust an expensive red silk handkerchief negligently into the front of his evening vest.

The carter followed Almira into the circle, with the bland ease of a man to whom this was rather a come-down after Vienna and Paris, but who was prepared to be quite pleasant for all that. “The pater always had his box, you know,” he told the meek Almira.

In a conspicuous seat near the front Nicholas Don flattered himself he was quite at home, although hitherto when attending the theatre he had been a god in the galleries. He bought Almira a shilling box of chocolates from the boy. He bowed graciously into the thick of the crowd on the other

side of the circle, and made some show of being concerned on finding Sir John and Lady Winterton present.

“Dooched annoying,” he said. “Met 'em at Government House, you know, before the funds gave out. Fussy old devil, Sir John. Hope he won't come dinning ah fellah with his demmed invitation to dinner, by gad.”

Almira was radiant to find there were those present who appreciated Horace at his true social value. She was a trifle florid in her present setting, but the Don thought her a particularly fine woman. It was a proud moment. He spread himself. His attitudes were graceful. He made excellent play with the brass ring “all covered with diamonds,” which, he had explained, belonged to the Badminton-Carte family jewels, and was not to be parted with at any price. He talked familiarly of the people in the boxes. Not a doubt assailed him, until there came faintly to his ear a familiar voice from the gallery, which said:

“Strewth, Donny, howjer do it?”

Then Horace Badminton-Carte went cold all over, his flow of small talk was frozen under, and suddenly the Don realised that his dress suit was too big for him, that too much linen was falling out in front, and that his awful night had come.

“Tuck in yer washin', Nickie,” cried the voice, in graceful allusion to Horace's superabundance of shirt.

Something hit Nick on the head, and bounced into the lap of the lady on his right. It was a peanut.

There is nothing more humiliating to a young gentleman enjoying a rare interval of high life and superior refinement with the lady of his heart than to become the object of loud, vulgar, and familiar criticism. When discourteous address is accompanied by a fusillade of peanuts, the young gentleman fathoms the depths of human anguish, and knows utter degradation. For a moment the Don had a blind idea of springing up, dashing over or through the intervening audience, and flying from the scoffers, but presently his natural and acquired impudence came to his aid, and he determined to see the matter through.

Nicholas leaned gracefully towards the meek Almira, and entertained her with fluent small talk. He flourished his toothpick. A cone formed of a twisted programme, weighted with a grape, shot like a dart from above, smote him on the head, and skidded into the corsage of a very stout lady in front, where the grape remained.

A flush of rage spread all over the visible surface of the stout lady; face, neck, and suburbs glowed angrily, and she rounded on Horace Badminton-Carte with an ejaculation far below her apparent station in life. Horace was distracted at the unmerited accusation the address implied, and sat forward

to expostulate. He wore one of those steel-backed clip ties. The tie jerked from its moorings, struck the stout lady sharply on the nose, and fell into the depths, whence it was dug by the now furious female and flung aside.

A young man recovered the tie and it was courteously returned to Horace, passing from hand to hand. The incident was very popular; everybody seemed delighted.

“What-ho, Nickie, you won't get nothin' from the missus Saturday,” said a voice above—a voice of friendliness touched with commiseration.

“Doin' in yer board on choc'lates,” added another voice, in admonitory tones.

Horace Badminton-Carte did not enjoy that first act, and the meek Almira seemed uneasy. He was afraid her suspicions were aroused, and he whispered something about the demned lower orders always being stirred to malice at the sight of wealth, breeding, and beauty. He wished to convey the idea that the attack was the outcome of class prejudice, and was general, not personal.

Don thought of going out during the interval, but feared that a movement on his part would provoke a demonstration that must identify him as the boon companion of the ruffians aloft, and it was a long way to the door. Meanwhile an occasional peanut dropped on his head, and an occasional one fell into the recesses of the vast female in front.

The act was all too short, and when the curtain came down and the lights shone out again only two or three men moved for the door. The Don sat very still, waiting anxiously. He forgot Almira. The strain was awful, but didn't last long.

“Say, Nickie,” called a persuasive voice, “won't yeh come 'n' 'ave a beer—a long cool-'n'-juicy?”

“Garn, don't lure 'im!” said a second, in mock expostulation.

“Rats!” cried a third. “What's beer t' the Don after the bar'ls iv champagne he's used ter?”

Then the first voice again, pleadingly: “Nickie, where *did* you get them round-the-'ouses?”

“'N' that flogger?”

“'N' that little dickie-dirt?”

Involuntarily the Don made an effort to tuck in his shirt. The action called him to himself. He became extremely attentive to the little widow, and talked airily. The twenty-fifth peanut bounced off his head.

The Don was not quite his suave, collected self. Some of his sentences were in Horace's speech, some in the rude utterance of Nicholas Don, driver of Spats's delivery van. He was perspiring a little. His hand trembled, his monocle refused to stick in; he felt that every eye in the

theatre was on him. Then came the awful voice again in anxious warning:

“Don, Don, ye've clean fergot t' snatch the for hire docket off yer clobber.”

“Wait till the little tom from the pie plant gets onter these goin's on—false one!”

“R Lizzie et the pickle mill.”

At this point the specialist engaged to weed disorderly persons out of the gallery arrived and expostulated with the Don's friends up aloft. He said he would bump them down the stairs, and they said it was too big a trouble for a man with a face like that, and in the subsequent argument Horace Badminton-Carte escaped attention. But the badinage was resumed in the second interval, and the cheerful push above, having run out of peanuts, collected orange-peel, and dropped it into Horace's clothes. Remarks having reference to his humble calling were exchanged in a matter of fact way. He was cautioned not to spill the devilled oysters into his lap, otherwise the Hebrew owner of the dress suit would certainly bankrupt him with a claim for damages.

“Wear 'em et the two-up Friday, Ned,” said Chiller Green.

The Don was wholly himself now, and a bottled geyser of bubbling invective and boiling wrath. A section of orange fell on his head and stuck there. All was forgotten but his wrongs. He arose before the whole house; he shook a vengeful fist aloft.

“Righto, Pinkie!” he cried, “I seen yeh. I'll put a screw on your chin Monday see if I don't You—”

Here Almira swung on Nickie's coat tails, and dragged him into his seat. The gallery had broken into howls, shouts, stamping, laughter, and a roar of barracking; the dress circle was horrified and delighted; a small usher was tapping at the Don's shoulder, threatening to eject him; the Don was replying that if the minion didn't get a shift on he'd kick the crupper off him. And then came a violent diversion to Nickie's rescue. Loud, angry voices were heard from the vestibule, and suddenly a stoutish man fell into the circle through the folding doors.

The intruder was red, dishevelled, and somewhat drunken. He was uttering loud threats. Hands from outside clung to him, other servile hands hastened to thrust him back. He fell through the folding doors again and disappeared.

At the sight of this man meek Almira had started and uttered a cry of distress. She said she was feeling ill. Then came the blessed darkness, and the play was resumed.

Happily there were only three acts, and when the curtain fell Nickie and his little widow mingled with the escaping crowd, yearning for the night air

and the sweet oblivion of back streets.

But their trials were not over. In the crush room a large man—an angry man—breathing whisky and bad words, arose from a settee and lurched at Nicholas Don. It was the man who had fallen through the folding doors. Almira screamed and buried herself in the press of people.

“That's him!” cried the inebriate. “That's the chap. He's got my clo's on. Gimme me clo's, yeh robber.”

The evening-dress crowd backed away and made a ring. Don was again the centre of interest. The drunken stranger slid down and hung on to his trousers. He tried with violence to pull them off.

“Gimme me clo's,” gurgled the inebriate. “Whatcher mean be stealin' a man's trousers?”

“Who th' 'ell 're you?” said Nicholas.

“I'm the man whose clo's yeh wearin', yeh bla'guard!” wailed the stranger. “Gimme me clo's!”

There was laughter and excitement and talk of police. The man had risen and barred the way. Nicholas Don saw red. He drew his foe with a feint, shot a left in on his neck, and the claimant of the clothes went down hard, skidded on the pile carpet and shot under the settee.

Then Horace Badminton-Cardé broke the ring and bolted, hatless and without his overcoat. The meek Almira had disappeared.

Nicholas turned to the left and ran for the slum streets, hunted by terror of the ignominy of being arrested in another man's clothes—if indeed it were true that the lamented Berryman had resurrected.

In a frowsy parlour Don reviewed the situation over a consolatory beer. He was abroad in the dyed garments of a total stranger, pursued by the law perhaps, his own suit was in the little spare bedroom at the abode of Almira, his hat and coat were in the cloakroom at the theatre. If the law were seeking him the widow's cottage was no safe place. He must proceed with caution.

Don had another beer. Three quarters of an hour later, Nicholas, wearing a dress suit, a staring white shirt, and an old soft felt hat—a villainous thing that had been at the service of the cat for weeks, but the only one the hotel would trust him with—stole down the dim, suburban street to Almira's garden gate.

A stout man was staggering about on the verandah brandishing his hands in the air, and clamouring in drunken speech for his clothes.

The house was in darkness, but curious neighbours were hanging their heads out of adjacent houses offering loud advice, all deeply interested in the stout man's grievance. The man rattled at Almira's window, pounded on the door, and filled the night with piteous cries for his wearing apparel.

Don ducked down a side street, found another hotel, and stayed till kick-out, taking counsel with long, strong drink. Then he sneaked back to Almira's cottage. The heads were all gone, but the stout man was sitting on the mat, with his back to the front door, drowsing and making weak lamentation. Nicholas stood cogitating. Would it be possible to steal by in the gloom and effect an entrance by the back? Suddenly the outcast put up a howl of great anguish and started battering the door again.

"Lemme in!" he cried. "Lemme get the vill'n who shtole me clo's." His voice broke, and he continued piteously: "Oh, M'rier, how could yeh—how could yeh?" He advanced to the edge of the verandah and addressed an imaginary audience in tones of poignant anguish.

"Lays 'n' shennlemen, I'm man iv sorrers. Behol' me broken 'eart. Englishman's clo's is hish cashle."

Nicholas Don left the man unbosoming himself to the stars, and stole away. He walked through the cold, dark, damp morning to his home in the distant suburb on the other side of the city.

Don held long arguments with policemen by the way—policemen whose suspicious were aroused by the incongruity of his hat and his costume. It is easy to arouse the suspicions of policemen at two o'clock in the morning.

On Sunday Nicholas could not venture out because he had only an old working suit and the evening clobber of a perfect stranger. On Monday night he recovered his overcoat and hat at the theatre, and journeyed to Almira's cot. From the door he heard the beery, melancholy voice of the stout man within, and the man of sorrows was still uttering bitter reproaches about the absent clothes. The person who had once been Horace Badminton-Carte retired without knocking.

On Tuesday Nicholas discovered an advertisement in the "Missing Friends" column, in which H. B. C. was informed that if he appeared at noon at the corner where he first met A. B. parcels might be exchanged.

Nick rolled the unfortunate evening suit in brown paper and took it to work with him. He managed with some difficulty to be at the corner mentioned at noon, with the delivery van. Almira's servant was waiting, nursing a parcel.

"What-o, Percy!" she cried, "'s that you?"

"No," growled Nicholas, "but it's me nearest 'n' dearest survivin' relation. Them my soft-goods, Sissie?"

Sissie nodded. "But you gotter part up first. I ain't t' be done in."

The Don threw down his parcel, and after Sissie had torn the paper and satisfied her mind she tossed the other bundle into the van.

"Strike me, you're a pretty pair o' take-downs," said the girl, "you 'n' mar."

“Me 'n' mar!” cried Don. “Garn, you ain't chattin' that the meek Almira's your mar?”

“Well, I *am!*”

“'N' I s'pose the pickled bloke was the ole pot-'n'-pan?”

“Yes—he's dad. Mum's got a legal separate, but he comes round sometimes when 'e's drunk 'n' lovin'. An' mar passed me off as the girl for fear your rich relations mightn't like me. How's Sir Charles?”

“'N' you put the old man on t' us at the theatre Saterdee?”

Sissie grinned.

“Lor' strike yeh cock-eyed for it,” said Nicholas, bitterly.

That evening Nick encountered Pinkie in Egg Lane, and they fought three rounds, to their great mutual disadvantage. The conclusion was postponed.

Nicholas did not open his parcel till he returned home, and then he found, to his astonishment, that it contained some old rags, a note, and a pawn ticket for his best suit. The note said:—

“This is the best I can do for you. Had to pawn your clothes to keep George drunk till I got his own back. You are an impudent impostor. Farewell.—ALMIRA.”

Nicholas sat down.

“Struth!” he gasped. “I do like that. Swelp me Jimmy Gee, I *do* like that!”

And then for five minutes Nick sat in a rigid attitude, staring blankly at the pawn ticket.

Chapter III. Dukie M'Kenzie's Dawnce.

BENNO had been looking forward to the hop on Thursday. It was not the ordinary weekly fixture of Dukie M'Kenzie's "Assembly," but something much more elaborate—almost a ball; and it celebrated the climax of the season. Admission on ordinary occasions was 1s.; on Thursday it was to be—gents, eighteenpence; double tickets, 2s. 6d. The familiar accordion orchestra was to be augmented with a harp and violin, dancing was to be maintained till two in the morning, and there were to be refreshments in the cloak-room.

But Mr. Dickson's special interest lay in the fact that he felt himself called upon to seize this opportunity of wounding and humiliating Miss Cilly Gwynne, who had turned him down for the third and last time. Any bloke with the usual allowance of human weaknesses may be "done in" once by the girl he's fond of. Any man with a forgiving heart added to those common weaknesses may take his chances and be "had" a second time. But only a confirmed chump and irremediable "gooey" comes up for a third "chuck." So the astute Benno argued with himself. He had had "the chuck" twice. Miss Gwynne had cruelly forsaken him for a strange German in the theatre. At Stonkie's picnic she had passed him over in favour of Billy Crib, the butter lumper, across the lane. And lately she was devoting her time and talents to a stocky youth, one Did Cootie, who mauled bags of carrots, spuds, onions, and other flora at the produce store.

Did Cootie was new to Egg Lane, where he provoked some little resentment by a slight superiority of style and a pretentious use of tall collars. He was quite quiet and apparently harmless, but truculent spirits in the lane discovered a certain confidence in his demeanour where humility might have been more natural and becoming in a stranger. The resulting prejudice was responsible for a display of fictitious sympathy for Benno. When quite honest, the Lane had nothing but derision for the bloke who showed any disposition to squeal over the vagaries of a mere "tom."

Mr. Dickson, mindful of the ignominy due to the man who "gets brusher," thought he was combining airy indifference to Miss Gwynne with a man's natural craving to "put it across" his enemy.

"All toms is erlike t' me," he said, tweaking his lapels with a birdlike jauntiness of demeanour, "but, all the same, it's up t' me t' put a mock on that tripester et the 'ay-an'-corn."

The packer winked a grave aside at the town-traveller. "Why don't yeh get to him, Benno?" he said.

Benno looked wise. "That'll be all right," he said. "He'll get his pot on.

You leave it t' me.”

“Yes, Feathers,” said the town-traveller, “you leave it to our little Benno—he'll give him a black look.”

Really Mr. Dickson was wounded, and secretly he hoped to score a triumph at the Assembly on Thursday night. Proprietary rights were respected at Dukie M'Kenzie's dances. No gent could appropriate another patron's “bit of skirt” at Dukie's and hope to escape the retribution prescribed for dishonourable conduct in well-regulated push society.

Benno was taking Miss Adelia Smith, Miss Priscilla Gwynne's rival for the honour of belle of Whimble's pickle mill. Both were in the pepper department, for Whimble milled coffee and spices, and manufactured many odorous condiments in addition to his main business, which was bottling onions.

The little clerk had not been hasty in his choice. It was a matter calling for deep deliberation. He was having a new suit himself, and the lady must not discredit it. As a clerk, he was a man of position. More is expected of a man with a position than is looked for in one who has only a job. Furthermore, and above all, there was the necessity of giving Cilly Gwynne thoroughly to understand that she was no wise necessary to his happiness, and that her betters were, to use his own expressive phrase, “dead easy” to him

True, Miss Smith was rather tall and aggressively lean, but her dress promised to be the best at the ball, and she was decidedly superior. At Whimble's, Adelia was abbreviated to Haddy, but the young lady's intense propriety was admitted and respected. She held herself aloof from Miss Gwynne, whom she considered “fast.” If professional duties threw them together, Miss Smith's mouth became depressed at the corners, her nostrils inflated, and she moved her lips and tongue as if tasting something disagreeable.

Mr. Dickson was very pleased with the effect when he entered the assembly hall with Haddy Smith on his arm. In consequence of Miss Smith's great height it was difficult for Benno to avoid the appearance of being a mere appendage to the lady, but his loud vest helped him, and his cardinal tie assisted in maintaining his individuality.

Cilly and Did Cootie were present. Benno and Haddy sailed in under their very noses. It gratified the clerk to note that in the matter of dressing Cilly was “no class” beside Miss Smith, while Cootie wore nothing that could have been heard in the same street with Benno's splendid get-up.

And yet Benno found it difficult to bear up against the plain fact that as a cheerful companion and a ballroom feature Cilly Gwynne was just “it,” and easily outdid Miss Smith, whose frigid style was not to the taste of

M'Kenzie's patrons.

"Blime, where'd yeh get it?" said Kingie, a bosom friend of Benno's. "Ain't she 'ead saleswoman at a hice fact'ry? Why, when I'm swingin' corners with 'er I sez, 'Ow are yeh!' I sez. 'It's a bit iv good goods 'ere t'-night, ain't it?" She ups with 'er trunk, sniffs at me, 'n' sez her gills 'No conversation, if yeh please!' " she sez.

"Yes," said Benno with a touch of regret, "she is a bit iv a lady."

While no one could possibly have a truer appreciation of the qualities of refinement and breeding than Mr. Dickson, he realised before an hour had gone that Haddy was overdoing the perfect lady. She was altogether too genteel. She sat, prim and erect, against the wall, her head slightly on one side, her face drawn down tight, and her eyes drooping. Her expression was that of one who has discovered a defect in the drainage, but is too well-mannered to mention it.

If asked to dance Miss Smith yielded, and went through the performance with a sort of stony energy. Hugged to her partner's breast, she danced with vehemence, but in silence, and her superior expression never relaxed for a moment. She seemed to say, "I dance with you, but allow no liberties."

There was another marked disadvantage in dancing with Miss Smith that presently excited some discussion.

"Nit, cobber, what's got that piece o' yours?" said M'Kenzie after a round dance. "I no sooner gets into holts with 'er than I fair sneezes me napper off."

Nicholas Don also rose to complain. "She's a snorter, Dickson," he said. "She's got everyone sneezin'. The blokes is blowin' false teeth all over the shop. Wot sort iv a game is this fer a perfec' lady whose ma washes fer the Gov'ner?"

Benno was sad. He had been sneezing a good deal himself. No man could grapple with Haddy without breaking the continuity of the dance several times while he got down to sneeze explosively.

The sight of Haddy standing erect and alone, waiting with a coldly superior aid while her gent bucked and contorted on the floor in a paroxysm of explosion, became one of the features of the evening. Not her partners alone, but all the dancers in a set in which Haddy took part were similarly afflicted.

Miss Smith's curious influence was due to the fact that she had been toiling among pepper in Whimble's factory all day, and had neglected to brush the floating stock out of her abundant fluffy locks in the hurry of preparing for the ball. Indurated to pepper herself, she felt no unpleasant effects; but when she came into good action she discharged the irritant in clouds, and infected the whole atmosphere of the room. This did not add to

her popularity. A tendency to isolate the young lady manifested itself.

Benno was hurt. His new grievance against Haddy increased the bitterness with which he regarded Cilly Gwynne and Mr. Cootie. He took occasion to mention to a few friends that Miss Smith had been in a measure forced upon him at the last moment in consequence of the gross unfaithfulness of Miss Gwynne.

“The blokie in the blue suit kidded 'er t' turn me down, 'n' she dogged on me after I'd made me arrangements,” said Benno. “It cost a bit, take it from me.”

“Gar-rn,” said Twitter Feeney disgustedly. “Didn' yeh take somethin' to 'im? The cow!”

“That's t' come,” retorted Benno with a sort of deadly composure.

Benno's friends were most sympathetic, especially Twitter. Twitter had a great reputation to lose. He was supposed to be a very destructive street fighter. He was said to have outed a fourteen-stone policeman in a dust-up. Benno cultivated Twitter Feeney; he took him in to refreshments two or three times.

The refreshment room was very small and extremely hot. Refreshments consisted mainly of corned beef and bread and beer. Dukie M'Kenzie had set up a large barrel of beer, and put Jumbo Stone in command. A charge of 3d. a glass was exacted. This was a breach of covenant, it being set out on the tickets that refreshments were free to all. It was also contrary to law, but Dukie was a law unto himself. Jumbo was a large man; he was hot and flurried by the strain put upon him. He chopped bread and meat and filled beer glasses with perspiring energy; but he found time to have one himself on Benno's invitation, and to show some interest in Benno's grievance. Then he had another to avoid the worry of giving the clerk his change.

Feeling right was with him, and that the weight of public opinion was behind him, Benno no longer took the trouble to disguise his enmity. He passed a gibe or two to Did Cootie, but Did was not looking for trouble, and heard nothing. Benno grew valiant, and bumped his enemy several times in the course of a dance. Cootie found nothing in this to object to. He went on dancing very amiably.

Mr. Dickson realised now that he had a “soft thing.” It was plain that Cootie would take it lying down. Benno became reckless in his attacks and in his loud criticism of Did's dress, appearance, and manner of dancing. Several young gentlemen, hurt by Cootie's success with their girls, took open joy in Benno's wit, and seconded his attacks. Did was jostled a great deal, and his feet were trodden on. Somebody knocked his boxer from its peg, and walked in it. The little clerk was doing a violent schottische with Miss Bills, and, to hasten a climax, came into heavy collision with Cootie.

Did resisted like a gum-butt. Benno ricocheted and went down hard, slid three yards on the polished floor and bumped his head violently against the wall. It was the last straw. Benno arose, spitting wrath. His hair was disarranged; his collar was adrift; there was homicide in his fiery eye.

“Ere, 'ere, wot sort!” he said, throwing himself in Cootie's way, his hands up, and sparring decoratively. “Yer lookin' fer it. Yiv bin fair beggin' fer it all evenin'. Put 'em up!”

Benno lunged a feeble left at Did Cootie, and Did very calmly evaded; and then he smote Benno dispassionately. He batted Benno with the open hand on the right cheek, then he batted him on the left cheek, and then, with a forward thrust, took the aggressor with the heel of his palm right on the nose. Benno went down again, harder than before, and this time he skidded right across the hall, like a fish on a marble slab, fetching up under one of the forms.

Instantly Twitter Feeney was up in arms in defence of his friend and patron. He walked up to Did Cootie with a leery swagger, and thrust his face into that of Did, and his countenance wore a look of ferocity terrible to behold.

“Come orf!” he said. “'Ow's this, pluggin' a bloke out iv yeh class? 'Ere's where yeh get it, see. Yes—yus—ya-as.” Twitter pushed his hard jaw closer to Did's with each repetition, then he swung a destructive left.

Did Cootie ducked the lead, and stepping up timed Twitter with such precision and such force that the youth's legs crumpled under him. He went down like a dropped sack and lay on the floor, without movement, while the crowd pressed round, gazing with silent, almost breathless, amazement at the vanquished champion.

Dukie M'Kenzie broke through the circle and grappled Cootie roughly.

“Out yeh get, 'n' get easy, 'r I'll topple yeh in the drain!” he snorted.

Dukie made a cocksure twist to get Did's arm up his back, but the young man from the produce store had an excellent repertoire of holds, twists, and clips. He took a jiu-jitsu turn on Dukie's arm, and kicked up Dukie's heels, and Dukie hit the floor with his ear.

The master of ceremonies arose, somewhat dazed. Twitter Feeney arose still more dazed. Benno was on his feet, but was not pushing himself forward at this stage. A line of angry enemies confronted Did Cootie, who was backed by Cilly Gwynne only.

“Jumbo!” yelled M'Kenzie. “Jumbo! Bring erlong Jumbo someone, 'n' we'll blessed soon clear up this gazob.”

Jumbo came, twining his sleeves neatly above the elbow. Jumbo was an elephant of a man. He could “chuck out” anything human, and for years had been toying with recalcitrant drunks and bad men in minor pubs and

similar resorts of the vicious.

“Pitch him through the winder,” said M'Kenzie, “ 'n' put all expenses down t' me.”

Jumbo advanced. He liked the job. Did Cootie backed quickly to the end wall. Cilly stood by him, shrilly abusing the company as cowards and people of mean instincts. Cootie was bent on escaping with honour. He was a ready-reckoner, and, snatching the bright hydrant from the neat folds of the hose on the stand, he said softly:

“Turn that little brass wheel, Priscilla. Turn it hard.”

Did had armed himself with the hose insisted upon by the Board of Health as a provision against fire. He made a show of using it as a club, and the enemy loitered. Cilly pounced on the wheel, with a squeal of rapture. The folds of hose jumped and pranced under the pressure of the rush of water, and Jumbo received the stream full in the face.

Jumbo was a brave man, but he loathed water. He fell back, gasping, and the flood got into his mouth, and washed his false teeth into his vest. Cilly gave the wheel another turn, and a hard jet bounced off Jumbo's large, taut corporation. Jumbo was beaten. He turned keel up, and lay gasping for breath on the boards.

The regular patrons who were backing M'Kenzie had formed a solid support behind Jumbo. It was now their turn. Did Cootie played the hose on Dukie, and Dukie collapsed. The great wash struck Benno in the breast, and Benno rolled over. Cootie followed up his merciless attack. He kept the stream on his small foe, and washed him across the floor and under the form again.

“The door, Priscilla!” said Cootie gently. “Put the key on the outside.”

Did ran the powerful stream among his foes, and they broke before it, and fled pell-mell, drenched and ignominious. Then Did dropped the hydrant, and leaped after Priscilla.

When the wet people recovered and rushed the door they found it locked on the outside, and long before an exit was made Cootie and Miss Gwynne were safely aboard a city-bound tram.

The drenched company in the water-logged hall thought seriously of inviting the intervention of the law, but wiser counsel prevailed.

Of all the woeful herd that went from Dukie's dance that night the most woeful was Mr. Ben Dickson, the great “cop-out.” His suit was wrecked, his vest was spoiled, and his cardinal tie could never be worn again. Above all, his *amour propre* had received an awful shock.

Next morning the little clerk passed Did Cootie at the store door in Egg Lane. Cootie smiled quite nicely, as if nothing had happened, and said, “How do you do, Mr. Dickson?” in the pleasantest way.

Here was Benno's opportunity.
He cut the fellow dead.

Chapter IV. The Truculent Boy.

NIPPER CREEGAN was a nugget of a boy, short, but stoutly built, tough and ugly, with a small corn of a nose and two narrow eyes, all set together in a wide waste of face. His mouth was far removed from the other important features, and came upon the observer as an afterthought. The ears of the truculent boy sprouted from his head with a suddenness somewhat disconcerting, and they were unnecessarily large.

“Say, Ned,” observed Billy the Boy, on the occasion of Nipper's first appearance, “'r them things ears, 'r what?”

“Wha' th' 'ell d'yer think?” retorted Creegan, sourly.

“Oh, I was thinkin' they might be handles 'r fakements t' swim with. 'Skews me fer mentionin' it afore we're interdooced, won'tcher?”

“I'll belt yer chin in iv yer get merry with me,” said the new boy, the light of battle shining in his eye. “Yes! Yes!”

“You will?”

“Yes, will I. Say, 're yer wantin' it?” Nipper sidled up to the printer's devil, and butted him along with his shoulder three times. “I'm yer man,” he said. “Yes. Fight yer with one 'and. Yes. Yes. Any day. Yes.”

“Dear, dear, dear,” murmured Billy the Boy, “'ow these children talk!” But Billy displayed a certain discretion in getting downstairs. Then his voice came up: “Hi, yous, get up 'n' 'ave a look et the strange-but-true on the bag-flat, It can flap its ears.”

“I'll pass that mug one iv he comes pickin' et me,” said Creegan to the packer. “Yes. Y-e-e-s.” And the boy resumed his work, growling with exceeding bitterness.

The “Yes” in Nipper's speech took the place that snarling holds in the vocabulary of an angry terrier. The word was uttered with an open mouth and a shooting of the under jaw, was drawn out as long as breath held, and the air that went with it was a hateful blend of malevolence and contempt.

The truculent boy made no friends. Within a few days he had established a reign of terror, and the feeble foreman displayed a nervous awe in his presence. He gave Nipper no orders, but sometimes ventured a mild request or a gentle suggestion, which was received by the boy with sullen mutterings.

Master Creegan entertained a dark suspicion that the people of the factory were conspiring to work him to death, and hate smouldered in his soul. His combativeness was purely instinctive; it dominated him on the slightest encroachment, or in the face of the smallest wrong. When roused to fury, his language was that of a sinner grown old and hardened dealing

with working bullocks.

On fine days the male employees from the factory and the printers' flat sat along the kerb or on the window-sills in Egg Lane, and Nipper's truculence made him the butt of the company. Billy the Boy was the first victim. Billy was something of a spoilt child in the business, and was allowed much latitude in consideration of his elderly humour, his quaint impishness, and his talent in imitating farm-yards, phonographs, and popular actors; but his quality as an entertainer did not appeal to Nipper Creegan, more especially when Nipper was the butt of Billy's insolence. The printer's devil had discretion, and as a rule he assailed Nipper from elevated places, or only when the road was open for a rapid retreat; but retribution overtook him one day in the middle of his lunch.

"D'jer know me 'n' Nip's goin' t' run a circus?" Billy asked the assemblage. "It'll be a boshter, too. I'm buildin' a cage fer Nipper. He's goin' ter be the mad monkey, 'n' flap his ears. Flap yer ears fer the gentlemen, Nipper. Get outer the lugs, lads; he pinched 'em from a baby helerphant. Iv Nip had any sense he'd fly with them ears, but yer kin see he ain't got no more savvy than a doped goslin'."

Here Billy dropped his lunch and "did his dash," but a delivery van blocked the way, and the next instant Nipper Creegan was on him, and for one minute there was a bewildering whirl of limbs in a small storm of dust, chaff, straw, and lunch wrappers. Then Billy went down in a sitting position against the store opposite, and he was a changed boy. He was ruffled and torn and had a black eye, and his nose shed much blood.

Billy the Boy wept and whined, and crawled round on his hands and knees seeking a "rock." As he crawled he heaped wonderful abuse upon his enemy.

"Yeh dirty, mean, cock-eyed Chow t' hit a man when he ain't ready," moaned Billy, continuing his hunt. "Yeh stinkin' cur! You'll see what you'll get. G' out, yer monkey-mugged slum mungrool, you'll cop yer doss."

Billy arose, and Creegan made another rush, but a stone bounced on his thick skull and broke a window on the second floor, and the printer's devil dived under a delivery van and fled into the wilderness of bales in the dark basement.

When next Billy appeared on the top flat his eye resembled a large, rain-cracked purple plum, but Billy felt he could afford to be jaunty, in view of the egg-like excrescence on Nipper's head and the blood-stains on his shirt. He whistled an airy strain, keeping a sidelong eye on the foe.

"When's the berloon goin' up?" he asked the packer, with a wink towards Nipper's swelling

"Yes, 'n' if yer gi' me yer lip y'll get more yes," growled Creegan. "Jist

wait till nex' time, that's all. Yes.”

“Hark et the animal with the 'ump,” retorted Billy. “Looks t' me 's if it got anythin' that was goin'.”

But Billy's air and utterance lacked the true assurance, and it was plain there was to be no next time for him.

Benno, the clerk, was ill-advised enough to incur Master Creegan's wrath on one occasion. Benno had given the boy certain orders in his superior way, and Nipper had carefully ignored them. Benno went up to him an hour later, very angry indeed, and Benno when very angry had the formidable aspect of an indignant cock-sparrow. He took Nipper by the ear and pinched.

“Here, me noble,” he said, “what erbout them samples? Er yer goin' t' trot 'em up, 'r am I a party iv the name iv Mud? Have 'em erlong in ten ticks, 'r I'll be a bad father t' yeh, little Creegan.”

“Take yer meat-hooks outer me,” snarled Nipper.

“Is the little boy goin' t' be good?” said Benno, playfully, and his pinch tightened.

Then Nipper let go with both hands, and Benno was rushed before a small tornado full of flying limbs, and was backed against the packer's table winded and suffering many hurts. He leaned there, very pale, open-mouthed, amazed, and his index finger went up and painfully oscillated a loosened tooth. The sight stirred the factory to unfeeling laughter.

Benno wagged the other index finger impressively at Creegan. “I'll see you after hours, Mister Creegan,” he gasped, “'n' I'll take my belt t' yeh, young feller, me lad. You can save up for it—you'll get an unmerciful.”

“Garn!” said Nipper. “I'm Mat Dooley's fav'rit pupil. I could do with a dozen like you jist t' toy with. Yes, I could—yes.”

The clerk did not take his belt to the truculent boy that evening. Perhaps he forgot. It remained for Sarah Eddie to visit upon Nipper the only retribution that befell him during his stay at Spats's.

Sarah was large, and Sarah was powerful. She happened to be turning quite suddenly with a stack of freshly-pasted brown bags in her arms, when Creegan was passing her board, and the bundle caught the boy in the face, bore him down, and skated all over him.

In circumstances like these Nipper never waited for apologies. He scrambled to his feet, maddened by the outrage and the yells of the Beauties, and plunged at Sarah, punching blindly. Miss Eddie sustained injuries before she quite realised what had happened, but, once understanding came to her, she got promptly down to business. She reached for Nipper Creegan with two large capable hands, and she grabbed his ears as he came in. Then she took the remaining trifle of sense out of

him; she rocked him to and fro; she bumped his head on the pasting-board; she anathematised him with screams; she towed him to the wall and deliberately knocked his skull against it five times; she kicked him repeatedly, then put him down and stood on part of him.

Nipper came up, blind with rage and far from conquered, and Miss Eddie was willing, but the packer intervened. Master Creegan writhed in his clutches.

“Lemme go!” he cried; “I ain't done! I'll fight her, big ez she is. Yes, I'll fight her any time she likes.”

Sarah went at him with her brush. “Come on!” she screamed, “come on!” She smote Nipper across the face, smearing him with paste.

“Let 'er fight fair!” vociferated Nipper. “Let 'er fight fair, 'n' I'm her man. She was foul in' all the time. Yes, yes; 'ittin' in holts 'n' fightin' all in, she was. Let 'er break clean, 'n' I'll fight 'er fer five quid. Yes!”

The packer dragged him away by the scruff, and planted him at his bench, soothing him with a punt.

“This ain't no place fer you, Baby Creegan,” said Feathers. “You're too dainty fer this job. You want a grip in a religious 'ome. Be busy, 'r I'll belt yeh.”

“You look who yer skull-dragging, see,” said Nipper, and he sparred at Feathers, but the packer adroitly kicked his heels from under him, and Nipper went down hard. Feathers hoisted him up by the scruff again, and rubbed his nose on the packing board.

“I kin see your untimely end, sweetie,” said Mills.

“Yes, you'd nark a church. Ye-e-es,” sneered Nipper. “Get me sacked, 'n' iv I carn't deal with yeh on me lonesome I knows them what can. Yes. My push'll mess you about. Yes. Yes.”

Feathers punted him again for comfort, and returned to his customary duties, and for the rest of the day the truculent boy was a black and bitter misanthrope.

Nipper would attack anything. He did not discriminate, and went for the largest man as readily as for the smallest girl. Goudy, the town traveller, was the largest man, and it must be admitted he brought it on himself. Creegan had merely run into him with a loaded truck. The load was so high as to obscure Nipper's view, and the iron lug took the town traveller across the calves. Now, there is nothing nastier to collide with than the iron lug of a perpendicular truck.

Goudy gave a bound and a howl, then cuffed Nipper in his anger and his pain, and foolishly went down to rub his hurts, instead of preparing his defence. Consequently, when Master Creegan came in, wrathfully punching and kicking, Goudy sustained a cut lip, a maimed ear, and a

clicking clip on the shin from a new boot before he could clear decks for action.

“Whoof!” cried Goudy in pure anguish, as he ran at Nipper.

It was not in Nipper's nature to run from anything. He met Goudy in a sullen, stupid spirit, and kicked him on the other shin.

“Whoof!” said Goudy again, and he sat down on some parcels and embraced his shins. “Wheew!” he cried, drawing wind in through his set teeth.

Goudy was an elderly man, and a stout one, and the father of a family. It was a painful sight. Feathers choked on his quid, struggled with his emotions for a moment, and then fell into un-Christian laughter. All the Beauties commanding a full view of Goudy's distress joined in the uproar, and the rest rushed for positions.

The town traveller recollected himself and came gingerly to his feet and turned on Nipper. The boy faced him like a young bull, with beetling brows, and lowering grimly. Goudy changed his mind and limped downstairs.

“Here's where yer bundled out, baby mine,” said the packer

“Well, what'd he wanter plug me for?” said the truculent boy. I never done nothink t' him. No. Yous all seem t' think I'm here t' practise on. Yes, yes, yes, yeh do. Ye-e-es.”

But Mr Goudy did not report the boy. He knew the Beauties were disposed to be resentful to a “put-away,” and after due consideration left Nipper to work his own undoing.

The truculent boy would not have lasted a month were it not that Feathers took a certain joy in the young ruffian. Feathers could always manage him. He had a pleasant way of dropping the bag-shaped dusty hessian off a bale over Nipper when he was otherwise uncontrollable, and bringing him up sharp, smothering and struggling, but helpless. One afternoon he had him bagged for an hour, while the foreman revolved nervously about the tumbling bundle, stumbling over things and ejaculating, “Now, now! Come, come! Bless my soul! Enough of this! Enough of this!”

THE TRUCULENT BOY

THE FOREMAN REVOLVED NERVOUSLY ABOUT THE TUMBLING BUNDLE.

“*Benno*”

The comps and printers on the lower flat delighted to aggravate Nipper. His bursts of fighting fury were vastly entertaining to everybody but the party attacked.

Master Creegan was a very strong boy, and took delight in displaying his

strength. It was his duty to truck the reams of paper up to the guillotines, and he stacked mighty loads on the upright truck, and deftly ran them up the gangway past the stair railings, hidden from sight behind the moving pile. While the road was clear, and he could keep his fifteen or sixteen cwt. of paper poised on a dead centre he was all right, but any misadventure that disturbed the equilibrium resulted in disaster.

The printers had often come up the stairs, and slid small obstacles in front of the truck-wheels, and Nipper had assaulted innocent folders when his reams shot all about the factory.

On this occasion Nipper was steering a stack of reams of brown paper higher than himself, and had a good run on the smooth floor, when Billy the Boy saw him coming, and pushed a length of “furniture” through the rails, and then shot downstairs again.

The two wheels of the truck struck the piece of wood with a terrible jolt. Nipper was hoisted off his feet, and his nose collided sharply with a cross-bar of the truck. The reams slid all over the place. One brought Sarah Eddie down, another crashed into a loaded pasting board, overturning it on top of two squealing pasters, and Master Creegan and the truck and one loose ream fell together, Nipper underneath.

The boy worried his way out of the scattered sheets and arose. He gazed at the ruin, he felt his injuries, and then he began to see red. He dashed for the stairs, he went down them with a swoop, collided with a figure on the midway landing, and “bucked in.”

With his hard, bullet head down, Creegan used his fists in desperate swings, and the thud of his blows was heard all over the place. Hurling back by his victim, Nipper fell in a half-reclining position on the stairs, and now he saw and understood. Towering over him was a massive, ginger man, purple with wrath. The man was a Personage, he was clad in broadcloth and fine linen, the blood from his damaged nose dripped through his moustache, his battered bell-topper floated in the lye tub below.

This time Nipper's victim was Odgson himself—Odgson the owner—Odgson the great and good!

For a moment Nipper blinked at Spats in stupid wonder, and then he grasped the situation.

“Gimme me money, 'n' I'll go!” he said.

Nipper Creegan was off the premises inside of four minutes.

Chapter V. The Fickle Dolly Hopgood.

MISS DOLLY HOPGOOD was commonly called "Ginge," an abbreviation of Ginger, and a polite allusion to her prevailing tint. She was a saucy young lady of about sixteen, and lived in a push-ridden suburb. Her hair was worn turned in a hard pad all round her head, so that from a little distance it looked very much as if she were wearing the pneumatic cushion from Odgson's office chair, as a sort of halo.

The dress in which Miss Hopgood came to business was of light-coloured, limp material, ribbed with cheap black lace, like the hoops on a barrel. Her hat was a wide-rimmed "gem," skewered so far forward that in her walks it preceded her by about half-a-yard; the high-heeled boots she affected accentuated the apparent precipitation of Dolly's top-hamper.

Dolly was a plump and cheerful rapsallion, but her face had a certain granite quality characteristic of the daughters of slum families—a quality devised by an all-wise Providence, no doubt, as a provision against injury in contact with the bluchers of husbands and lovers, the ardour of whose affection, when accelerated by beer, is apt to express itself in kicks.

On the first appearance of Miss Hopgood the packer greeted her with breezy familiarity.

"Ow is it, Sis?" he said. "Here, ain't I seen you proppin' the door at Crilly's Assembly Toosday nights?"

Benno grinned approvingly. "Strike me, Feathers, ye've fitted her in one!" he chortled.

Ginge certainly did suggest a larrikin hop.

"Gart! git back t' yer lorndry!" retorted the young lady. The remark conveyed a playful insinuation that Feathers and the clerk were of ignominious Asiatic origin.

There was usually some little diffidence about novitiates on the factory flat, but Miss Hopgood betrayed not the smallest concern.

"Yow there, Tilly! Scratchin' a livin' ere, are yeh?" she cried shrilly, shaking her crib basket at a distant paster. The ex-professional fat girl caught her eye. Miss Pilcher was wearing a superior expression. Ginge raised her hand, and wagged playful fingers at Martha. "Buck up, puds," she said; "you're all right. They're payin' quids a bar'l fer your sort at Stonkie Watson's." Watson's was the soap-boiling establishment that gave rank to a riverside suburb. The fat girl resented the insinuation with a loathly sneer, and Ginge passed by in triumph.

Ginge Hopgood was just as gaily impertinent with the comps, and machine hands on the printers' flat, and hailed them from the stairs with

frank familiarity. Clinker Gill, one of the feeders, was Sophie Oddie's boy, but Miss Hopgood assumed possession without a trace of compunction. Clinker, greatly flattered to find himself the chief object of her somewhat personal back-street flippancies, succumbed instantly, and Sophie ceased to be an item in his daily life.

Possibly Clinker lived to repent his perfidy. Sometimes he might have looked as if he did, but he never admitted it. Master Gill was about seventeen, a round-headed lad with closely-mown black hair, and a countenance the utter commonplaceness of which beggared criticism. On the morning of the fifth day after Miss Hopgood's arrival Clinker came to work with a damaged eye, and all day his manner was subdued, not to say penitent.

"How'd it 'appen, Ned?" asked Feathers, when Gill came up with a bundle of printed tea papers.

"Bit iv a dust-up with a bloke down ar way," said Clinker.

Feathers had all a woman's curiosity about details. "S'pose th' other lad won't be leavin' his bed this side Christmas?" he said.

"Oh, I dunno." Clinker was becomingly modest. "There ain't nothin' much wrong with him, barrin' two teeth out 'n' a thick ear."

"Give us the strength iv it, Ned. Did yeh hand him the pass out?"

Clinker Gill grew confidential. His opponent was a rival claimant for Ginge's favours Miss Hopgood had had another boy for some months, a boy who was prepared to assert his prior rights on the gory battlefield, and who had already done so on two occasions, to Clinker's great discomfort. The claimant's name was Holland. He was a stiff built youth, with large freckles and a fair down all over his face. Also, he was an impetuous and unscrupulous fighter, and lurked at corners to intercept Clinker and Dolly, charging down upon the former, and commencing hostilities without fair and sufficient warning.

In the course of the following fortnight Clinker had four scraps with Tommy Holland—wholly unsatisfactory street "scrimms" that were interrupted by the appearance of a John, or the intervention of some benevolently-disposed old lady or gentleman; but the feeder always sustained more or less damage, and he burned to fight a conclusive engagement with his hated rival.

Apparently there was no peaceful way of settling the matter in dispute, since Ginge could not be brought to see that she was called upon to accept any responsibility. The girl would not give a decision. She might walk home with Clinker in the evening, but she would stroll out with Tommy at night, and Gill was the occasion of a most unusual pleasant Sunday afternoon in the Botanical Gardens. He had discovered Holland reposing

by Miss Hopgood on the sward. It took three gardeners and a whole revival meeting to stop the fight.

Truth to tell, neither young gentleman seemed to expect Dolly to express any partiality, but the packer sometimes reproached her in a frivolous spirit. "Ain't yeh announced yer choice yet, Ginge?" he asked. "Strewth, if yeh can't make up yer mind which is prettiest, why not toss 'em for it—double or quits?"

"Not me," said Dolly. "I ain't took on either of 'em for keeps. I ain't one fer tyin' meself down."

"Then this 'ere bloodshed is t' continue to the bitter end?"

"My oath it is! While these blokes is fightin' each other they ain't fightin' me—see?" It was a specimen of slum philosophy that tickled the packer immensely.

"Jimmy Jee! You're a bird," he said, delightedly. "What you don't know ain't in the books."

Clinker Gill came to Feathers' board a few days after this, with an air of great importance.

"It's all fixed up, Mills," he said.

"What," cried the packer, "has she given yeh brusher?"

Clinker wagged his round head confidently. "No blinded fear," he said; "Ginge knows when she's got a good thing. The fight's arranged 'tween me 'n' th' other bloke. We fight the prelim. to the Bull Green 'n' Coffee Hogan scrap et the Smithers-street Hathletic Club's room on Monday night fortnight, catch-weights, fer harf-a-Jim 'n' a five-bob side wager—eight rounds, one t' win."

"Go on!" ejaculated Feathers, in proud appreciation.

"Yes, Markis o' Queensbee rules, four-ounce gloves, 'n' regerlation trunks. Prelimery starts punctual et eight; prices two, one, 'n' a tizzie. We've both signed harticles."

"Good e-nough," cried the packer. "I must 'ave a deener's worth iv that."

During the following fortnight Clinker Gill was the hero of Spats's factory. He trained industriously night and morning, and at lunch time he boxed vigorously on a full stomach in the lift-corner with any good friend who would oblige him with a generous hiding.

Clinker got punching enough in twelve days to have made him indifferent to anything short of a mad bull-camel. The bigger fellows nearly belted the head off him in the kindest spirit imaginable, believing they were doing him a great favour, and everybody offered him advice and gave him useful hints to beginners, especially Benno the clerk. Mr. Dickson insisted with great wisdom on the necessity of keeping a straight left. He committed himself no further, but he impressed that one point on

Gill at least twenty times a day.

"I sticks my left into 'em," said Benno. "Never do nothin' else, but jab 'em with a straight left ez they come in, savin' me right fer a finisher." Mr. Dickson had never fought a round in his life, but he was very impressive, and Clinker accepted his advice with proper respect.

Master Gill bought a shilling book on boxing, and started to learn it off by heart, from cover to cover; but he was a poor study, and had only mastered about three chapters relating to rules, training, and attitudes, when the eventful night arrived.

The room of the Smithers-street Athletic Club was over a threepenny hair-cut saloon in a cheap, crowded suburb. It was a small, low, dark apartment, with a tiny ring in the centre, and just space enough between the ropes and one wall for the high-priced patrons to creep to the cramped gallery rising abruptly from the ring side to the roof. The cheap "sports" were packed in a space twelve feet by twelve on the other side of the roped enclosure, and a third set of supporters gathered on the roof on the occasion of a really popular engagement, and looked down on the warfare through the broken shingles. In the course of the battle the proprietor of the threepenny saloon went among these latter with a collection box, and any spectator refusing to contribute was summarily chucked off. The chucking entailed a fall of six feet on to an adjoining roof.

Feathers, Benno, the Don, and several comps, from the factory occupied seats in the shilling reserve, the top half of the gallery close to the roof, where the smoke accumulated and the heat of perdition assailed them. For it was a summer night, and the room was packed as tight as it could hold with baking humanity, half of whom tugged at pipes which sizzled like frying-pans and stank like future punishment. The other half smoked cigarettes.

Benno took immediate steps to let it be known that he was a personal friend of one of the boxers, and in all probability had taught the lad all he knew, and then, finding nobody disposed to bet on the preliminary, he offered five to four on Clinker Gill.

"Five t' four in quids," said the clerk, addressing a "tough" who was nursing a brindle bulldog with a face like a Japanese nightmare. Putting a trace of pleading in his voice, he added: "Come on, Ned, be a sport. I'll say six t' four the Clinker outs him inside iv five rounds."

The tough answered hoarsely that he hadn't four warts, and the dog growled in a venomous way, so Benno did not press his point.

At twenty past eight Tommy Holland came into the ring, followed a few minutes later by Clinker Gill and his seconds, two lads from a racing stable with which Clinker was acquainted. Tommy Holland looked strong and

confident, but Clinker was pale and very nervous. He trembled visibly, his knees knocked as he sat in his chair. One of the seconds noticed this, and kicked the lad disgustedly.

“See 'ere, Clink,” he said, “drop yer bundle, 'n' make a guy iv me, 'n' I'll pelt yeh a few meself.”

Clinker's lip trembled, and a tear rolled down his cheek, which he wiped with his glove.

The M.C. and official announcer was in the ring. He was a retired lightweight run to flesh, and sported a face like a freak potato.

“Gents,” he said, addressing the dress circle, “I'll ask yez kindly t' put out yer smokes 'n' give the boys a charnce. Youse,” he added, turning with some fierceness on the sixpenny patrons, “stop smokin' 'r ye'll land in the fat. Don't let me 'ave ter talk t' yer agin. Gents,” he repeated, softening his voice, “this 'ere's a oerliminry iv eight rounds, 'tween a pair iv unknowns. I may tell yeh it's all erbout a bit iv skirt, 'n' I think I can promise yeh a dead willin' go. Nar then, lads, get ready.”

The announcer then joined the seconds, and there was some argument over the appointment of a referee. During the discussion Clinker's nervousness increased to such an extent that he began to whimper piteously, mopping up his tears with his gloves.

The announcer stepped forward again. “Is Mr. Peter Nickie present in th' 'all?” he cried.

Mr. Nickie was present. He arose with dignity. He was a fat and florid bookmaker, with a reputation for paying successful backers with stoush.

“Both parties is willin' t' 'ave you referee this 'ere, Pete,” said the announcer, and Peter obligingly rolled through the ropes, and swayed into a corner.

Mr. Nickie was now seen to be lamentably drunk. He propped himself securely against a post.

“Is yez all ready?” he said. “Shake 'an's!”

The boys advanced into the centre, Clinker pushed behind by his second, and touched gloves. They returned to their corners, and the timekeeper smote the gong, a superannuated dinner tray.

“Box on!” gurgled the referee, and Clinker Gill faced his enemy.

Clinker was snivelling; his face was very white; there was a wild look in his eye. The boys circled round and round, moving their hands mechanically. For a whole minute there was no attempt to strike a blow; then Tommy rushed furiously, whirling his arms, and Clinker went down. He rose again, still weeping, and Holland rushed him again, and again Gill was prostrated by the impact. On his hands and knees, his face pathetically contorted, and tears streaming down his cheeks, Clinker seemed to be

looking for a way of escape, but all exits were blocked. It seemed as if the whole world was screaming derision at him.

Gill arose, and Tommy charged him. Utterly demoralised, Clinker turned and ran. He ran three times round the ring, hotly pursued by Tommy Holland, and the onlookers roared with laughter. After the third lap Tommy overtook Gill, and hit him in the small of the back, and Clinker fell again. While he was down the gong sounded, and the pride of Spats's factory was dragged into his corner, and sat there, blubbering dismally, while his seconds fanned him, and covered him with scoffing and curses.

Tommy Holland came straight from his corner at the sound of the gong, and hit Clinker hard on the nose, and Clinker went to the floor. Clinker got up, and Tommy hit him again.

“Yeh blinded cow!” squealed Gill, and he whirled a glove on to Tommy's ear. He hurled his left, and hit Tommy on the mark. The crowd applauded. Clinker's blubbering was loud now, but there was a note of anger in it. He charged at his opponent, head down, and pounded with both hands. Clinching he got Holland's head under his arm, and punched him five times on the nose, while Tommy's seconds howled for a foul and the referee nodded in his corner, swaying on the ropes.

When the gong clashed the boxers continued fiercely fighting, and Clinker's seconds had to tear him off. Benno was applauding like a madman, and yelling advice. The crowd was delighted. Clinker made a dash out of his chair to get at the foe again, and had to be carried struggling to the seat.

Gill was no longer pale, and his nervousness had evaporated. The third round was full of fight. Clinker waded in. He forgot all he had learned, and utterly ignored Benno's wise advice. He hit in holds, he hit anyhow; he butted, and palmed, and screwed, and broke every known rule. Tommy had a cut lip, a bleeding ear, and a mouse on one eye. Again the pride of Spats's had to be torn from his opponent.

The boys spent the greater part of the fourth round on the floor, but time was not wasted. They fought there just as well as anywhere else, pasting each other desperately. Clinker bumped Tommy's nose against the boards, and while the crowd roared and laughed, the master of ceremonies woke up the referee, and expostulated profanely. Mr. Nickie blinked about vaguely, realised where he was, and murmured:

“Sh all ready? Shake 'an's.”

When the two minutes were up the seconds had to disentangle the boys, and drag them to their corners.

“Yiv got 'im done in, Clinker!” yelled the passionate Benno. “He's your mutton. Keep that left goin' how I told yeh, 'n' it's a moral.”

But Clinker was deaf and blind to everything but his mighty wrath. He charged Tommy, and felled him, he smote him on the chin as he was rising, and Tommy clung to his legs, and climbed up by them, and punched Clinker in the left eye, putting that organ completely out of action.

In the sixth they were both very tired, but continued to fight like terriers. In the seventh Clinker had Holland down three times, but in the eighth and last Tommy freshened up, and made it very willing. They finished on the floor, punching, clawing, and even kicking.

The lads were carried to their chairs, and once more the referee was shaken up.

“Hello! what's matter?” said Mr. Nickie.

“A decision—give a decision, blarst it!” hissed the master of ceremonies behind his hand.

Mr. Peter Nickie bucked up, he moved into the centre of the ring, and held aloft an impressive palm.

“Gen'lemen,” he said—“Smith the winner!”

“Ere, 'ere,” hissed the M.C., “there ain't no Smith in the fight!”

“Wha's that?” said the referee, staggering to the ropes.

“I say they ain't no Smith in the fight. Which lad are yeh givin' it to?”

“Smith the winner!” repeated Mr. Nickie, with the air of a man of marked integrity.

“But, dammitall, they ain't no Smith!”

“Look 'ere, Spud Malone,” said Mr. Nickie with great dignity, “are you refereein' thish fight, 'r 'm I?”

“But I tell yeh they ain't no Smith.”

“Wha' th' 'ell I care? Smith the winner!” Then the referee rolled out of the ring and fell into his seat, and the battered boys were led away to the changing room downstairs, while the over-joyed crowd, more delighted with the fight than it would have been with a pantomime, simmered down for the serious business of the evening.

The error of Mr. Nickie left things practically as they were with Clinker Gill and Tommy Holland; and Dolly, who had spent the night of the fight in full enjoyment of a “darnce” at the Six-penny Quadrille, remained perfectly impartial, so far as they were concerned. This was fair, since it could be demonstrated quite satisfactorily that Clinker had won on points and Tommy had won on a foul.

On the Saturday night, twelve days later, two young gentlemen were leaning in fraternal sympathy against the front of a cobbler's shop in the push-ridden suburb. They were Clinker Gill and Tommy Holland. Some traces of their battle lingered on the countenances of both, but they were now bosom friends, drawn together by a common sorrow.

A young lady passed, walking daintily on high-heeled shoes, with a characteristic projection of the figure, and wearing a large hat liberally feathered. By her side walked a young man his thumbs in the arm-holes of his vest, his hat hung precariously on the back of his head, a blazer screaming the local football colours tossed about, his neck, his cold grey eye defying creation.

Clinker nudged Tommy Holland. "There she goes," he whispered.

"Let 'er," growled Holland, "the nark!"

The passing fair was Ginge Hopgood. The young gentleman in charge was "Nigger" Tish, a promising welterweight.

Clinker and Tommy have now resigned all pretensions to Dolly's favour, knowing themselves hopelessly out-classed.

Chapter VI. On A Bender.

“S'POSE y' ain't 'eard iv it?” said Feathers.

He and the town traveller were lunching together in the small reserve shut off by the lift well and a stack of bales, and splitting sixpenn'orth of draught beer, Billy the Boy having “run the rabbit” for a consideration.

Benno was sitting back in the corner, pale and pimply, and wearing the satiated expression of a man who had breakfasted on cod oil. There was a sort of unearthly yellow down on the clerk's thin face, and his high, humped nose was dead white, an eerie, corpse-like feature. He had a black eye and some abrasions. Benno was not interested in meals.

“Have a look et his gills,” the packer continued, sitting back for the sake of the view.

“Look as if you were sickening for something, Benno,” said Goudy. “Better have it operated on.”

The clerk tried hard, and pulled his face into a faded smile, but failed to sustain it. He groaned.

“Don' make him laugh,” said Feathers reprovngly. “Once a bloke died iv laughin'. Let's pretend we don' notice nothin'. Fact is that in the corner's a great objec' lesson on temp'rance, it's a touchin' hillustration iv the 'orrid influence iv strong drink on the himmature 'n' the weak-minded.”

“Arr-rr, Scotty, call off yer monkey!” hissed Benno viciously.

“Ave a wet rag on it, dear,” said Feathers, in feminine tones and with great solicitude. Then resuming his confidential manner: “Benno's one iv the never-shoulds. 'E ain't built fer the purpose iv encouragin' the breweries. Men iv his physique ain't designed be an all-wise Providence fer puttin' down the demon, 'n' Benno ortenter entered for the novice pint-bitin' tournament yes'dee after.

“'Twas a harf day orf, 'n' our Mr. Dickson must get out after it along iv the Don 'n' yours till death. The Don was shoutin'—p'raps that's how—but shickerin' ain't a thing Benno 'ad done afore, t' my knowledge iv his 'abits. We scarcely knoo we had him erbout us, till he'd got his small load, 'n' was tearin' orf his rags t' fight a fifteen-stone mutton 'umper in a bar down be the freezin' mill. I dunno what the 'umper 'ad done t' get Benno in that dangerous state—mistook him fer the free lunch 'n' took him up with his bread proberly. Anyhow he was a helephan' iv a man, 'n' Benno was buzzin' round his outskirts with most iv his clo's on the floor, arrangin' a terrible death, 'n' the barmaid was weepin' piteous, 'n' hopin' Benno wouldn't act cruel be the pore man. Benno's shape was the dead ring iv that iv Griffo, 'n' he was a terrifyin' spectacle, but the big man jest wiped his

fingers on him, absentminded, 'n' then Benno got a worse attack, 'n' tore off some more clo's. But our Mr. Dickson's like a lot what 'ud rather take orf every stitch than fight, 'n' we got 'im away, leavin' a bit iv the 'otel standin'.

“Comin' up the road Benno had an air iv great gravity. He was stern with everyone, 'n' when blokes passed, peaceful ez kittens, Benno swung round on 'em, 'n' glared after 'em with the feerosity iv a tin tiger, shouting how he wouldn't take chin from no Little Willie bein' a naughty man himself when roused, 'n' good ernuf for penny bundles iv that sort. Then fer an orful moment he'd sorter totter on the brink iv gettin' across them, 'n' makin' a mess iv the place; but, somehow, he never done it.

“When we come to a 'orse tied to a post Benno gave a little start iv pleased su'prise, 'n' he stopped 'n' gazed at the crock with an air iv profound wisdom. Then he walked round 'n' examined the other elervation. Then he lifted up one 'oof, 'n' gazed into it, 'n' then put it down on his own foot. After that he tried to open the 'orse's mouth, 'n' the 'orse bit him, 'n' then Benno come away. He said he never see a finer specimen iv a Hinglish 'unter in the ole course iv his experience. Now, ez a matter of fact, our Mr. Dickson don't know a 'orse from an iron bed, but when he's got a dribble iv beer in he gets an idea he's bein' mistook all over the place fer a successful jockey.”

“Anyone claimin' t' be champion long distance liar'll 'ave t' toss you fer it, Mills,” said Benno weakly.

“We started on a 'ouse t' 'ouse visertation,” continued the packer, “with the penny comic there at heel. I wanted t' wire him 'ome t' mother 'n' the girls, but the Don wouldn't ear iv it. He said he found him a nice change this dull weather, 'n' so me noble drifted from bad t' worse. ‘Oh, my!’ 'n' afore night he was all sorts. S'pose you ain't studied how beer eats inter differen' people, Scotty? Nothin' brings character out like shick. Fer me, I'm never so carm and collected ez when chin-deep in cold colonial. The Don, he blows out his pout, 'n' rises in the soshul scale hand over dook; 'n' you can't reckon he's wet through 'n' through till he's a Hinglish Earl out t' buy an 'an'ful iv gold-mines 'n' a small quantity iv cattle-runs; but with a tup'ney like Benno you never know what's comin' erlong next. He's jist odds 'n' ends. There ain't nothin' def'nite in his jag, 'n' one moment his gills was layin' bare his passionate young 'eart to a barmaid big ernough t' be his fat aunt, 'n' the next he was sloped up agin the wall, pressin' his baby brow t' the cold, 'n' snivellin' erbout his sister Hameliar, what teaches a hinfant class et St. Mark's, 'n' is that unconscionable good the flies carn't live on 'er.

““Ah-h-h, Hameliar, what'd yeh say iv y' cud see what I've come ter?’ said Benno, low 'n' piteous, 'n' the tears dripped down like a leak in a

dipper.

“ ‘Y’ortenter bring it out without its comforter,’ said the crool barmaid, ‘n’ a torpid little gazob what was devourin’ a grown man’s drink et the other end iv the bar put up a ‘orrid laugh, ‘n’ cried: ‘Gor’ bli’, look et the lost boy!’

“Then Benno pulled his little self up stiff ‘n’ terrible, tugged his coat, ‘n’ went across the bar, his legs lockin’ every second stride, ‘n’ floundered inter the free lunch, passed t’ recollect what he’d come fer, stiffened hissself agin, ‘n’ hit the gazob with a ‘am san’wich. The gazob bellered, ‘n’ went buttin’ at Benno, ‘n’ both foundered in the rooins iv the lunch. They got up outer the sawdust, covered with fish balls ‘n’ mustard, ‘n’ the gazob said Benno was his dear ole cobber, ‘n’ Benno kissed the gazob, ‘n’ ordered all ‘ands ter the pump agin.”

“It’s a low, dirty lie!” cried the clerk, starting up. “I never kissed him. You’re lookin’ fer it, Mills, ‘n’ Jimmy Gee! ye’ll get it.”

Benno went suddenly limp again, and sat down. Mills disregarded the outburst.

“Afore the fat Duchess ‘d begun t’ pull the drinks Benno fell inter one iv them cold, dank, solemn spasms, ‘n’ stood in the middle iv the bar, swayin’ on his stem, ‘n’ lookin’ like a man feelin’ the ‘and iv death on him. Then he made a straddlin’ break fer the closed door, ‘n’ tried t’ walk through it. When he came back he sort o’ slid in, ‘n’ stood agin the wall, ‘n’ looked over at us, ‘n’ his face was like the chiv iv a pale goat I once saw what’d took a big drink on a lunch iv dried peas. A faint, billyus smile fluttered in the stubble, ‘n’ he said: ‘Thereshlovelymoon,’ ‘n’ the sawdust slid under him, ‘n’ he sat down. He smiled up at us agin like a fond poodle, ‘n’ he said: ‘Boys, yorter see moon—buful moon!’ Then his ‘eart broke in ‘im, ‘n’ he cried: ‘Hameliar! Hameliar! why don’ yeh come t’ me?’ ‘n’ he burrowed down in the sawdust ‘n’ wept.”

“Lies! Lies! Lies!” snarled Mr. Dickson, and groaned again.

“The lady ‘elp asked, sweet ‘n’ pretty, if the legal infant ‘ad the price iv the drinks he’d ordered in his sock, ‘n’ Benno was his self agin. He rose up, proud ‘n’ stern, ‘n’ called her madame.

“ ‘Don’ you make any mistook, Madame.’ he said, ‘Benno kin pay fer any drinks *he* orders Champagne ‘f he likes. Pay fer drinks! I like that!’ ‘n’ his voice rose t’ a pig squeak ez he went along. ‘It’s dam insult. Can I pay fer the drinks? Square ‘n’ all it’s a dam insult. Whad yer mean be it?’ he yelled, ‘n’ he whacked a pewter down on the bar, ‘n’ tore orf some clo’s. ‘I did’n’ come here t’ be insulted,’ he said. ‘I’ll fight the blessed barmaid. Come on,’ he yapped, throwin’ his cigger et ‘er, ‘I’ll fight yeh, big ‘s y’ are. Le’s see who’s bes’ man!’ ‘n’ he skipped ‘n’ sparred a bit ‘n’ skidded ercross

the bar, 'n' shot clean under the lunch table. He came back draggin' his coat after him be one sleeve. 'Pay fer drinks!' he said. 'Madame, d' yer know who yer pickin' at? D'yer know I got two 'unnerd quid fer me las' win et Corfield? Dam it, sen' fer boss 'n' I'll buy the infernal 'otel. Pay fer drinks! Here, take 't out iv that!' 'n' he bounced a coin on the counter. 'Take it outer that, Madame, 'n' yeh kin keep the change.' The coin was a lordly copper.

"Et the nex' pub the Don was doin' his magnificent Hinglish character himpersonation. He was an 'ell iv a swell frim 'Ome—a dizzy sport with a heyeglass 'n' guff erbout his fam'ly, 'n' I wus his trainer, 'n' Benno his jockey. 'Ow the Don kin do that kind iv thing on three 'thripneys,' the glass top off a penny puzzle, 'n' a brass ring full uv Chiny di'monds, runs me out, but he does it, 'n' was quite warm 'n' cosy with the ginger barmaid; on'y Benno got snivellin' mashed erbout 'er 'imself, 'n' wanted t' have 'er t' cry on all on their lonesome. That ginger pot-polisher 's bin through all the blood-'ouses in town, 'n' she's a tough, a fair halligator; but Benno, he cried on er 'and, 'n' said it done a man well t' meet a true, pure woman. He said if he'd met a hangel iv goodness like 'er in his early man'ood he'd never 've took the downward track. Then he called her Hameliar, 'n' said he was lost, lost, lost. He also said he'd 'a' bin a better man if his child 'ad lived. After that he bucked up wonderful, and called for more beer. He could stand up agin it all night, he said."

"Yar! chuck it. Yeh gi' me the 'ump!" came faintly from Benno's corner.

" 'Twas et the Gateway Mr. Dickson made the discov'ry iv his life. He come in, bustlin' with excitement, 'n' told us the moon was spiked on the spire iv the Wesleyan Church. He seemed a good deal upset erbout it, 'n' wanted ter call up the Premier down the pipe; 'n' when they wouldn't let 'im et the tellerphone he got proud 'n' hurt, 'n' said he washed his 'ands iv the 'ole business. Then he went over t' the bar, haughtily, 'n' took on an ole gent's beer. "Scuse me, young gentleman, tha's my refreshment," said the old gent. He was a very tiny, shaky ole gent, with baggy eyes, 'n' a mouth that flopped eround feebly, like a cow's. Benno looked et him zif he was a plague rat, 'n' he sez, like fifteen thousan' a year: 'Barman, remove this fellow; he is annoyin' me.' Then he raised the beer. That old gent was seventy if a day, 'n' all his joints seemed t' be mended with string, but he was a giant 'n' a 'ero in defence iv his beer, 'n' ten secs. later Benno was down in the sawdust agin, with them scratches 'n' the dawnin' symptoms iv the black eye you notice he's wearin' this spring, 'n' th' ole gent was in possession iv his own agin.

"We missed Benno after that, 'n' found him down in the gutter, with a 'ot-pieman on top iv him. He'd wanted t' buy a box iv liver pills off the pie

stall, 'n' insisted on the pie-founder lookin' et his tongue. That's 'ow. I dunno meself 'ow we got into Reekie's, the Dago wine-shop back o' Paddy's. S'pose y' don' know it, Scotty? It's hextra special, 'n' Reekie was a brigand in his own country, but got fired out iv the push fer his bad 'abits. He's big, 'n' fat, 'n' lazy, 'n' his clo's 'r fallin' off him, 'n' he sez: 'Good-a th' ni', Meester,' same 's the purr iv a gorged cat, 'n' smiles a sudden white smile, like the fear iv death. He's got two fun 'n' fancy girls there, what deal out the ebony stain. They're called Will 'n' Won't. Will's a moth-eaten serio-chronic left over frim father's day. Won't 's a curious coon mixture—stout 'n' pig-eyed, with a peanut complexion, 'n' a cartload iv crinkled 'air, dyed lemon yellor.

“Reekie's shanty's got the name iv a 'ot shop, 'n' the young devils don't think they're edjikated till they've took liberties with Reekie's pianner. Ther wineshop's erbout the size iv the publican's coffin, but there's a room at the back where the barmaids 'll sit on yer knee when you've stood 'em three drinks outter the stained water bottle. The pianner's there, 'n' the young devils 're there too, actin' up t' it all they know how. Benno took t' Reekie's like a fair sport. He riglar splashed himself agin the bar, 'n' was perky ez a chicken rooster after his first win. Be this time he was the rich uncle iv us all. He had t' cling hard t' the dead cigar he was carryin' to keep himself up; but there was no moskeeters on his. When he plunged inter the smoke iv the back room he looked ez disjinted ez sixpen'orth iv bones in a bundle—but his soul was proud. ‘Ello! 'ello!’ sez he, with a r'yal gesture, ‘clear the room. This room's reserved for me 'n' mine, 'n' if y' don' get out I put y' out, see.’ A lad from a trainin-stable 'bout two foot 'igh hit Benno all iv a 'eap in a corner, where he sat, wonderin' what'd come erbout since he last remembered himself, 'n' tryin' t' work it out on his fingers.

“We left him there, restin' fer a time 'n' presently he was up, walkin' roun' the pianner, lookin' et it with a knowin' eye, same's he looked et the 'orse, on'y more hartistic. This trip his niblets was a great musician—in 'is mind. He went up 'n' touched the pianner in a himpressive sort iv way, 'n' listened with his 'ead all a one side. That pianner was a sort iv combination dust-bin 'n' slop-bowl, 'n' it sounded like a tinker's shop when y' 'it it. Benno touched it agin, 'n' seemed very pleased with it. He sat down t' it, 'n' done a crawl over the keys, 'n' the pianner cried out in pain. ‘That's a splen'id instrument,’ sez our Mr. Dickson, speakin' ez a hexpert. ‘That's a perticular fine instrument,’ sez he. ‘Yes,’ sez the lemon-'aired coon girl, ‘but you'd better not play it, sonny—you'll disturb the cat. That's where she lives.’

“Benno, who couldn't scratch a toon out iv a 'and-organ, tossed back his 'ead of 'air, 'n' got down to it. He hit 'er nine times, 'n' the commotion was frightful. Erbove the jingle iv fallin' tins y' cud 'ear the squealin' iv a clutch

iv blin' kittens, 'n' then, outer the top, flew a great grey cat. She landed in Benno's hair, 'n' hung on, 'n' Benno went over backwa'ds, hittin' the floor with his neck, 'n' screamin' 'Murder.'

"Ben rose up, free ev cats, but with that peanner snouted. He'd put some wine in on top iv his beer, 'n' was seein' red, 'n' the pianner was his t' kill. He grabbed up the chair 'n' bashed the pianner in the wind. He swung his club, 'n' biffed her in the teeth, 'n' she yelped like a 'uman bein'. Bash! crash! biff! went the chair, 'n' the ole pianner was shriekin' fire 'n' perlice 'n' murder every belt. Then the Dago, who's always lurkin' on the edge iv the smoke, stepped up 'n' called a finish on a foul. 'You spoila the pian',' he said—'breaka the bowel of the beautiful pian'. I fine-a you the ten shiel.' It was a good bluff iv Reekie's. Sometimes it comes off, but this was Benno's busy night. He swung the chair agin, 'n' the Dago took her where the monkey tucks the nuts. Then all iv a sudden 'ell got loose. Reekie whipped out a knife—a long, clean, crool-lookin' knife. I saw the light dancin' on it. Benno saw it too, 'n' he saw the Dago's white grin, 'n' he knew. His hands went t' his face, his knees fell in, 'n' fer a second his wild eyes stuck out through his fingers, glarin' et Reekie, who was tryin' t' fight his way through the push that'd rushed him.

"Then our Mr. Dickson screamed like a 'orse in a burnin' stable, 'n' he turned 'n' done a guy. The Don punched the Dago fair on the point, 'n' was after Benno. I got out after the Don all I knew. Run! You never in your natural seen a dead shick pace dirt the way Benno done it. He was jumpin' cross the town a block at a time 'n' every bound he yelled 'Murder!' I think in his dilly bit iv red brain he b'lieved we was the Dago out after 'im 'n' we saw him go down the white road, streakin' through the quiet, moonlit city disturbin' the peace with his 'owls, 'n' every now'n agin a fresh helmet ud flash out, 'n' go bobbin' after that squealin' streak iv a demented clerk, till cops' bonnets was ez thick ez fleas in the limelight. Benno went right bang through the city, 'n' then a long John got his foot on 'im.

"When we came up eleven cops 'ad our Mr. Dickson down, 'n' he was two'n-a-harf secs off dead fer want iv wind, but he was sayin': 'Murder! Murder! Murder!' in a thick, fat whisper, 'n' his chiv was ez white's a turnip."

" 'What is ut?'" said the long cop, lookin' at us, suspicious.

" 'It's a baby drunk what's broke erway from parents 'n' guardians,' I said.

" 'What's he talkin' murder fur?'"

" 'An old Greek oyster breathed on 'im up et Matter's fish-shop,' said the Don.

" 'Then I'll put 'im where he can meditate 'n pray,' said ther John.

“We tried t' beg the body, but the John was set on hushin' 'im up, 'n so our Mr. Dickson went t' beddy-by on a soft board lars night, 'n' was fined in a like hamount this mornin', 'n' he's just bin explainin' t' the Firm that he didn't turn up this mornin' cause his aunt what's goin' t' die nex' Sat'dee had t' be buried in advance, 'n' how his injuries was doo t' his fallen outer his motor car 'r somethin'—'ain't yeh, Benno?”

Benno said: “O-o-o-oh! Oo-oh! Oh!” and pressed his head against the bricks.

Chapter VII. At The Opera.

BENNO'S confidence in womankind being fully restored, for some time past the clerk had been going strong with Miss Cilly Gwynne.

Cilly was short for Priscilla, and Priscilla filled an inferior office in the pepper department in Whimble's pickle and spice mill, next door.

In his more candid moments "our Mr. Dickson" admitted to himself that it was something of a come-down for a man in his position to knock round with a "tom" who packed pepper for fifteen and a tizzie a week at "Stonkies'." But there was much to be said for Miss Gwynne. She had style, and Mr. Ben Dickson boasted a fine appreciation of style. She had social pretensions, too, having an elder sister in a comic opera chorus, and a brother, known as "The Flash," who was recognised as one of the best-dressed "guns" in the metropolis.

True, Cilly's tastes were rather expensive. She had a passion for the theatre, and apart altogether from the cost, it was not an unalloyed pleasure to take her to the play, since she invariably lost all conception of Benno's liberality, and his social status, his qualities of mind, and his charms of person, in her voluble and foolish adoration of the hero.

But on occasions Benno could be magnificent, and this was one of the occasions. He shouted Miss Gwynne to a two-shilling seat at the opera. More—in consideration of the fact that doors opened at half-past six, he had stood her a ninepenny tea. On the top of that, there were two tram fares, two ice-cream wafers, and a sixpenny box of chocolates. It was the night of Benno's life.

"Straight griffin," he told Miss Gwynne, "there ain't no one can tell yer uncle 'ow t' spend his stuff. It's scatter sixes with me while I've got it."

Neither of them had been to grand opera before, but Mr. Dickson understood "The Valkyrie" was "class." He also perceived that the generous management was giving a great deal for the money, the performance starting at seven and terminating at half after eleven. Furthermore, Cilly, having a sort of family connection with opera, was naturally eager to see the show, a fact she had delicately conveyed to Benno by occasional casual references to sundry gentlemen who were eager to take her—Billy Crib, for instance, greaser from the butter depôt, and Ned Morrissy, the lad in charge of the onion plant at Whimble's mill. "But 'avin' a John o' me own, I gave 'em all nay," said Cilly, virtuously. So it came about that Benno suggested a visit to the opera as a spontaneous idea of his own.

Their seats were in the centre of the gallery, up under the roof. Benno

had the box of lollies and a pair of battered field-glasses, and he filled Cilly's satchel with peanuts. Nothing was wanting to make the evening a complete success.

To be sure, Benno was not quite at his best in the presence of a staid and elderly audience, and he would have been easier in his mind if the pale-faced, black-haired young German on Cilly's left had been plainer and less polite.

"Wha's it all about, Benny?" asked Miss Gwynne.

Mr. Dickson hated being called "Benny" in public, but he passed that over. "I don't quite get on to it, t' tell gorstruth," said he, "but Mills the packer, one iv our 'ands, tells me she's great 'n' good. Better'n a pantermime, he sez. Sez he never larfed so much since mother blew up."

"That's bon tosh," said Cilly, with enthusiasm. "Benno, you're a taw. But what's come o' George Lauri? I don't see his name."

"Go hon!" Benno was amazed. He chased through the programme. He even examined the advertisements, to be sure the comedian's name had not strayed into the three-shilling supper. "Gor blime," he said bitterly, "old George ain't in it. They've juggled us fer our beans, that's what. George Lauri ain't appearin'." He raised his voice for the benefit of the people about him.

There was some tittering. "You'd better see the manager about it," said a wire-haired youth in front.

Benno resented the sarcasm. "If Willie ain't good he'll get his 'ands slapped," he said, quite loud enough for Miss Gwynne to hear. "Wonder why Lauri's bin took out," he continued. "Mills told me 'e was playin' Wotan, 'n' little Percy was playin' Siegmund. Funniest he ever saw, he said."

Priscilla tugged at Mr. Dickson's sleeve. All within earshot were grinning broadly.

"Hallelujah but someone's been swingin' on your leg-end," said the lad in front.

Benno gasped. Recollections of the frivolous disposition of the packer dawned upon him. For five minutes he was silent and depressed. Then came the commanding officer of the gallery, busily packing the already over-crowded audience by hand to make room for new-comers. He went along the rows at a great pace, hustling the people up by inches, and "Mind yer fav'rites! Mind yer fav'rites!" he cried with the insolence of an elected person. His efforts pressed Cilly into closer contact with the poetic German. Benno resented this.

"Yar-r-r!" he said, "better get under the 'ouse, this is th' day fer th' dogman." The official grabbed Benno and battled him into place. "Dunno

why they don't lay poison for 'em," said the aggrieved clerk.

"Gimme lip, 'n' you'll hit th' pavement with yer nut, sonny," said the usher, hurrying about his business.

"P'raps so—p'raps not. Me 'n' meself 'ud out a batch iv your sort," said Benno in quite a loud voice. Then to Cilly, with a tired air: "These gazobs what get proud, 'n' go round wantin' t' mix it with strangers, generally strikes a snag."

The orchestra came out, and played something that sounded to Mr. Dickson like the flight of a thousand kerosene tins down a hill. He listened in silence for a few minutes, and then exclaimed disgustedly:

"Jimmy Jee! what 're they givin' us? The orchestra's shicker, if yeh arsk me. They've got at Sunday's beer fer a cert. Why, that ain't anythin' they're playin'. It's jist every beggar fer himself, 'n' first man dead pay th' slate. Strike me up a pipe, yeh can't get a hook into this anywhere. 'Tain't coon song, 'tain't dance music, 'tain't ballads, 'tain't serio an' it ain't comic. Start again!" he cried, addressing the conductor.

"Shoot oop!" "Scats!" "Stop-a de rah!" "Lie down!" hissed fierce voices. The audience was a very mixed one, the alien being strongly and variously represented.

"You know," said Benno, in justification of his superior attitude, "me sister Hameliar sings in the choir at St. Mark's."

The clerk felt himself taken by the shoulders in two big, strong hands, and jerked violently to and fro, till he had a startling impression that his head was about to be shot into the stalls. When the shaking ceased, and he looked back in amazement, he discovered a large, stolid-looking Dutch frau dumped on the seat directly behind.

"Will you make no inderuptions off you please," she said, with a calmness in surprising contrast with her audacity.

"Our Mr. Dickson" was paralysed. He sat in stony silence till the first act was well under way. He was slowly overcoming his indignation, and trying hard to make head or tail of the happenings on the stage, and failing miserably. A very fleshy tenor, clad mainly in goat skins, lay in a most uneasy attitude on an inadequate rock in the centre of some ruins, making occasional outcries, the purport of which always evaded the little clerk. One emotional yell stirred the audience to its boots.

"Eh, wh-wh-what did he say? What 'id he say then?" said Benno eagerly to the man on his right.

"Ow t' hell d' I know!" responded the man, sourly, and the frau at the back kicked Benno in the spine, and said "Shoot oop!"

Later the large, round tenor, in the course of a struggle with his emotions set to music, lost his centre of gravity, and nearly rolled off the couch.

Benno liked that. He laughed rather noisily, and started to applaud.

“He's the funny one. That bloke in the carfskin vest. He's dead comic,” he said, excitedly, delighted to have discovered something at last.

“Shoot oop!” said the frau, and kicked again.

“Pud 'im oud!” commanded another voice

There were hisses of “Hush!” “Hush!” from all round the gallery.

Benno was hurt. “Ah-h-h, get work!” he said, vehemently.

A stout, fair lady and a wild man of the woods with profuse black whiskers, joined the corpulent tenor, and Mr. Dickson's hopes revived. He whispered to Cilly his belief that the cove with the chin whisker was old George Lauri in disguise, but when the three ranged themselves at a table, and sang endlessly, his soul revolted again. He bore up for twenty minutes, but at the expiration of that time, nothing having appeared, he could no longer contain his righteous emotions.

“Blime, send for someone, somebody; they've forgot 'ow t' stop,” he said, scornfully. “Ring up the fire brigade! Call in the amberlance!” Then, with still keener disgust, “They orter be shot! Call this grand operer! Grand! Strike me blue, it's rotten—fair rotten!”

The people at hand rose at him in a sort of frenzy. They were enthusiasts, and they loathed this discordant Philistine. The frau behind avenged the injured ones. Drawing a fat hand like a shoulder of lamb, she dealt Mr. Dickson a box on the ear that knocked him end over on to the people in the next tier.

“Will you make no inderuptions off you please?” she said, composedly, when Benno crawled into his place, wearing a dazed expression, and foolishly rubbing his damaged ear.

The clerk was too stunned to expostulate, and Cilly, who at another time would certainly have espoused his cause with violence and strong language, was leaning very much towards the young German, and trying to create an impression that she was not acquainted with the absurd person on her right.

Till close upon the conclusion of the act Benno was sulky, and occupied himself muttering scathing comments on the Dutch female behind. At this stage, however, he made a startling discovery. It was a great truth that should not be suppressed. He had unearthed a scandalous imposition, and he spoke up like a man.

“Jimmy Jee!” he said, “they ain't talkin' at all. They ain't said a word fer 'arf a hour. It's jist jabber they're givin' us.”

“You blighted ass, they'll fire you out in half a tick, and serve you good,” said the man on his right.

Benno rounded on him. “Since yer so smart, Ned,” he said, “what's the

bloke sayin'? Come now, what's his nibs gassin' about? Garn, I like your sort, kiddin' ye're pleased with the show, 'n' all the time yeh don' know what's *it* more'n a dead hen. There ain't bin a word iv English spoke. I'll lay yeh six t' four on it."

Had not the curtain come down just then, Benno would certainly have been ignominiously ejected.

During the interval he explained to Priscilla, in loud, assertive tones, that the members of the company had all forgotten their parts, and were merely pretending to employ civilised language.

"Jest jollyin' these gooey's, tha's how," he said. "But they don't jolly your Uncle Ben, not once. They orter be pinched."

He bought two ice-creams wafers in a defiant mood, and talked scathingly of the infamous conduct of the management in deluding an audience, the infantile innocence of which passed human belief.

"It's a bilk," he said. "This ain't no play. The cows 're makin' it up ez they go along."

Benno was quiet and depressed during the second act. He gave little attention to the opera. Cilly's conduct was filling his soul with gloomy doubts. The poetic young German was explaining the opera to her in a whisper as it progressed, and Priscilla inclined away from Benno, and towards the interesting foreigner.

The clerk had an uneasy feeling that "the Dago's" arm was about his girl's waist, but the press of knees behind barred investigation. He thought of his lavish expenditure, and the base ingratitude of woman. Twice he whispered to Cilly, but she disregarded him, bending an attentive ear to the stranger.

"Garn," blurted Mr. Dickson, "get orf the kraut hog. Let's get a word in."

"Scats!" retorted Miss Gwynne, contemptuously.

Benno's small soul bubbled with wrath. He sat there sourly, meditating vengeance. If his suspicions were verified his dealings with the bladder-headed Dago would startle the town. Little did the devoted Dutchman know what horrors of retribution were saving up for him. Little did he understand the pugilistic power and the grim malignancy of Mr. Dickson.

Benno's suspicions were verified immediately the lights went up in the second interval. Obviously "the Dago" was holding Cilly's hand under the poor cover of the programme spread on the girl's lap. The righteously indignant clerk tore the programme away. It was too true; the hands of Cilly and the German were clasped affectionately. The pale German blinked up at Dickson with bland composure.

"'Ere, 'ere! what yeh givin' us?" snorted Benno.

"Mint yer pissenes!" said the German, with a calmness that bespoke

depths of stupidity unprecedented even in a foreigner.

Benno struck his rival. The German arose. There was a scuffle and a sudden uproar. Mr. Dickson saw the gallery M.C. working rapidly towards the centre of disturbance, and then the German's fist landed with terrible force in dead centre. "Whoo-oof!" said the little clerk, and went down, writhing in an agony of breathlessness.

The next thing Mr. Dickson knew he was being rushed down the stone stairs ahead of the ruthless chucker-out. There was a choking grip on Benno's collar, there was an incisive connection with the rear of his pants, he was leaping perilously on his toes, his eyes stuck out, he had a nasty, dizzy feeling, and thought at every stride that he was about to be precipitated down the stone flight on his defenceless head.

Benno struck the wall opposite, rebounded, and sat in the gutter. Blind fury seized our hero. His craving for vengeance was not to be sated by little deeds. He circled fiercely, seeking a weapon, went down on a stone, and then did a blind, mad act. He hurled the junk of blue metal with all his force at the theatre. Fortunately the wall was well built, and no harm was done.

Rushing back to the entrance, he was confronted by a stern, cold policeman pointing a commanding finger into the middle distance. Benno pulled up short, gulping.

"Well, wh-wh——" he gasped.

The policeman's finger became more peremptory, and Benno picked up the hat thrown at him and stole away. He hung about till the performance was over, and saw the German courteously assisting Miss Gwynne down the stairs. When Benno took charge "the Dago" raised his hat gravely, and passed on. Benno said nothing at all. His soul was a black pit of wrath. On the tram he made an attempt to awaken some sense of compunction in the girl.

"S'pose yeh ate them choc'lits I bought?" he said.

"No," answered Cilly composedly, "Mr. Van Norden ate 'em all."

"N' the peanuts?" said Benno.

"He ate them too," replied Cilly. "He's a all-right John. So nice lookin'," she went on with enthusiasm, "and he's goin' t' teach me the pianner."

Benno arose, his eyes blazing. This was too much. "Is he?" he cried; "is he? Then, blime, *the gooeey kin pay yer tram fare!*"

It was a crushing rejoinder, too cruel perhaps, but relentless, Benno sailed out without another word, and took his seat on the dummy.

Chapter VIII. Susie Gannon's Young Man.

MISS GANNON made rapid strides in the bag factory. She came to the flat fresh from the country, a tall, bony girl of sixteen, very angular, all legs and wings, with strangely obtrusive feet, large freckles, and a face like that of a patient horse. At this time, too, Susie Gannon's apparel was markedly inadequate. She had grown out of everything, and the abruptness of her skirts, and the strain upon her jackets, and the brevity of her sleeves, showed how her parents had been distanced in their well-meant efforts to keep pace with their daughter's startling development. The whole effect made an irresistible appeal to the strong sense of humour in the women of the world dominant on the top flat, and Susie provoked much merriment for many days.

“Blime, she looks like a shillin' ling wrapped in a penny stamp!” cried Harrerbeller Harte.

“See yeh got yer ole brown—brown, brown—see yeh got yer ole brown 'at on,” piped the ex-professional fat girl every morning, when Susie's bizarre felt headdress appeared above the stairs.

The girls at Spats's were not over-burdened with sensibilities. They did not scruple to make merry at the expense of the smaller misfortunes and the little idiosyncrasies of their weaker sisters. The factory had a peculiar spirit of hoydenish frivolity; it helped to ward off weariness and break the tedium of a set task. Susie served her time as the common butt. It was everybody's lot.

In those earlier days Susie was gaunt and timid. She stole into the factory like a furtive cat. She loved to creep into cover of any kind, to get anything between her and the ribald pasters—a stack of bags or a heap of envelopes on a board. She was grateful even for a gas bracket that she could hand a strip of paper on. But marvellous is the sex's adaptability; its power of development is wonderful. In two months Susie was as pert and as self-assertive as the best of them.

Miss Gannon had not been at Spats's many days when she told Kitty Coudray, who was posing as a sympathetic soul, that she had left a lover behind her in the country, and Kitty, with a shocking lack of respect for the confidence reposed in her, instantly communicated the information to the whole factory.

“What-o, girls!” she cried, “little Gannon's got a John iv her own.”

“What!” cried Harrerbeller Harte in mock wonder. “T' do ez she likes with?”

“Yes,” said Kitty, “'er very own—'ers fer keeps. He's a squatter 'r

somethin', 'n' his name's Oliver Thripny, 'n' he'll call fer her with the fam'ly carriage 'n' pair when he comes into his own, 'n' she's goin' t' be married in white satin shoes 'n' horange blossom. She sez Oliver's got a noble bearin'."

"So he has," cried Susie defiantly.

"There," said Miss Harte to the pasters, "that's up agen' yeh. There ain't one iv yeh got a bloke with a noble bearin'."

"He's writ her a love letter," continued Kitty when the yells of derision had subsided, fluttering a slip of paper in the air. "Would yeh like a' hear it? No, iv course not."

A dozen girls scampered to Kitty's board, and danced about her with shrill clamour; but Fuzzy Ellis went hopping amongst them, protesting bitterly, spluttering threats of fines and dismissals, and with the help of the sullen forewoman, he drove the girls back to their boards again.

Kitty Coudray retained the letter, however, and read it to a large audience at lunch time. It was the love letter of an uncultured youth, written with dire pains, wonderfully spelt and quaintly worded. Evidently the opening passage had been borrowed from a tradesman's circular. The document began: "Dear sir or madam, this is to inform you how I'm still lovin' you with all me hart." And it concluded: "I have the honour to remain, yours obedient to command, Oliver Thripny."

Of course the Beauties revelled in the outpourings of Oliver's simple soul, and Susie, whose sense of the ridiculous was as yet but poorly developed, filled with triumph in the face of the loudly expressed envy of the girls.

Susie's squatter was adopted by the factory. It expressed unlimited faith in him. It endowed him with great wealth and superlative personal attractions, and affected to believe that his love for Miss Gannon, as expressed in his letters, was a consuming passion beside which the torrid affection of the ducal hero for the simple heroine in penny fiction was pale and cold and weak.

George Mills, *alias* Feathers, entered into the spirit of the comedy with unaffected joy. He pretended to find in Miss Gannon's equine cast of countenance a marked family resemblance to a popular racehorse, and rechristened her accordingly.

"Ello, Carbine," he said, "half a mo'. I want t' whisper. Will yeh put in a word with the squatter fer me nibs? I'm sick iv this grip; it don't suit me style. I'm hambitious, 'n' a bloke don't get no charnce t' improve his social position snatching bags in a measly city crib. What I'd like would be the management iv a big cattle run where I could spread meself 'n' develop, 'n' I s'pose iv yeh was t' put in a kind word with Mr. Thripny it ud be ez good ez done."

“Oh, he ain't got that much land,” said Susie dubiously.

“So yeh twitter!” answered the unbelieving Feathers. “Fair dinkum, yeh might use yer influence, Miss Gannon. 'Tain't ez iv I didn't know the game. I managed a milk run onst, 'n' I've sheared all our own cows fer years past.”

Miss Gannon promised to see about it, raking up the while an abbreviated stocking, much of the leg of which had been worn out, doing service as foot.

Harrerbeller bespoke the position of housekeeper, and the ex-professional fat girl thought she would like to be nursery governess.

The situation was almost forced upon poor Susie, but she certainly made a game effort to live up to it, and every day her young man in the country increased in importance, wealth, and manly beauty. Kitty Coudray, who had Susie's confidence, never failed to inform the factory of the latest development.

The packer introduced a highly decorative oleo-graph of a member of the royal family—a picture of astounding beauty, which he hung on the factory wall, decorated with a frame of tinted papers, and labelled “Oliver.”

The Oliver Thripny legend spread through the establishment. Susie met with elaborate courtesy from the clerks downstairs, and the compositors were painfully polite. Billy, the printer's devil, was humble, almost piteous, pleading, cap in hand, for the position of lady's companion for his dear mother. His mother, he said, had been lady's companion and confidential friend to all the best families in Paddy's Alley, and if Susie would engage her in some ladylike office at a prodigious salary when she married wealth and station, he would be, oh, so grateful. Billy the Boy wiped his eyes with his cap when he mentioned his mother.

Meanwhile Miss Gannon was steadily improving. She was taken from the folding board and put on to piecework, and she made great progress as a paster. Her comical, out-of-date garments fell from her, replaced by more stylish and appropriate articles.

Susie was earning good money, and she made a corresponding development in her ambition. Oliver grew and expanded. Susie was picking up town ideas, and she grafted city traits on to her country lover. His letters began to display some literary pretension. They lost their quaint and captivating stupidity, and became ponderously correct and stilted. They were full of fine expressions of love and devotion, wordy protestations, and formal offers of service. Harrerbeller was quick to note the change.

“Blime, that ain't a love letter,” she said. “That's a bit iv parsing.”

“Oh, he's 'ighly edjicated, Holiver is,” said Susie.

“'N' th' 'andwritin's different,” said Feathers. “But I s'pose he's had 'em

writ be his privit secretary.”

The letters became more numerous. Then one morning the ex-professional fat girl brought in a copy of somebody's “Ready Letter Writer for Young Lovers,” and huddled away in a corner at lunch-time, the packer and half-a-dozen of the Beauties went through it, and discovered the source of Oliver's eloquence. Susie was up to page thirteen, and had used every letter so far. Obviously she had been writing love letters to herself, and evidently it was her intention to go straight through the book. There had long been a suspicion that Oliver Thripny had no existence in fact, and now that suspicion was held to be confirmed; but the conspirators swore secrecy, and Susie was encouraged to further flights.

Susie produced more letters, and eventually a cabinet photograph of Oliver. She showed the picture first to sympathetic Mr. Mills, and the packer went into ecstasies, with Benno, the clerk, at his elbow, and a lot of paster crowded about him, craning to get a glimpse.

“A bloke with arf a neye kin see he's nobly born,” said Mills, “'n' iv yeh don't believe he's a gentleman iv means, there's the di'mond studs t' prove it, 'n' look at his proud, cold manner, 'n' his mock kids, 'n' his 'air caught back like Padder Whosths, the pianner scratcher's.”

“Ow beautiful the man is!” moaned the scandalous Harrerbeller.

“'N' such breedin'!” said Benno. “But what iv the down-droopin' yaller mo?”

“He's 'ad it pulled, yeh chump,” retorted the packer.

Mills begged the photograph, and it was hung on the wall with the other trophies.

“It's a photo iv one iv them beauty actors,” the packer told Harrerbeller, in confidence, some minutes later. “They're a bob a quart at the fancy-goods up town. Ain't yeh noticed it?”

Miss Harte threw her pasty hessian apron over her head, and squealed with rapture. “Love a duck! Susie's a treat,” she gasped. “This is better'n the wicked lady in the drammer. I'm wonderin' what's next.”

The next came one afternoon, when a young man arrived on the top flat from the front stairs. He was a very diffident young man, and plainly fresh from the wilds. He took off his hat as he entered, and stood with it in his hand, with the reverent irresolution some strangers display in church. He had very large feet, and his trousers were hung too high. So large were his feet and so heavy his boots that he looked like an immovable object standing there before the gaping factory. His hands were large too, and heavy and very red. His hair was profuse, and his face was covered with a fluffy down that caught a strange radiance from the sunbeams sloping through the windows.

The strange young man's clothes were new but curiously cut, and so small for him that each piece had an appearance of being semi-detached. He had adopted a tall white collar for this occasion only, and it rode high up above his coat at the back. His countenance was honest but not intellectual, and his neck very long. He gazed sheepishly about the place, wearing an uncomfortable grin, and the Beauties gazed at him in strained silence, awaiting developments.

“Get on t' it,” said Benno. “It's lost its mother.”

Feathers looked with great interest. “Looks a bit like a goose with ears, don't 'e?” he said.

The stranger found tongue. “Please, does Miss Gannon work here?” he asked.

A whoop of delight welled from the pasters, and a dozen brushes pointed to Susie's board, but Harrerbeller Harte intervened. She confronted the young man, and bobbed with a ridiculous curtsy.

“What name, if yeh please, sir,” she said.

“Oliver Thripny.”

There was another whoop, louder, longer, more ecstatic than the first, but Harrerbeller disregarded it. “Yes, sir,” she said. “Walk this way, if you please, sir?” She led him between the boards, with a ridiculous affectation of the manners of a shopwalker. “Nice weather we're 'avin', sir,” she simpered.

“Beautiful, Miss, thank you, and how's yourself?” stammered Oliver.

This broke up Harrerbeller's gravity, and she had only strength to point Miss Gannon out before collapsing. But the factory had hurriedly composed itself to enjoy the encounter between Susie Gannon and her young man.

Susie had been almost petrified on the discovery of Oliver standing hat in hand in the gangway. Now she was working at top-speed, with averted eyes and her face scarlet with the conflict of many emotions. Evidently she was taken wholly by surprise, and the drop from the ideal to the real left her in a state of utter confusion. Oliver came awkwardly to her board, hat in hand still.

“Hello, Suze,” he said, “how're you doin'?”

Susie turned up her Roman nose and closed her eyes in an expression of scorn, and continued her work. Oliver raised his voice, “How are you, Suze?” he said. “I said I'd come after you.”

Susie, with eyes still closed and nose still elevated, turned to him for a moment, and said contemptuously: “What yeh givin' us? I don't know yeh from a ding-bat!”

The young man was astounded. “Don't know me, Suze?” he gasped.

“Why, I'm Oliver—Oliver Thripny.”

“Phew!” said Susie, intensifying her scorn.

Oliver's situation was a very painful one. He gazed piteously about the room, as if seeking corroboration.

“Oh, go on, you know me all right,” he pleaded. “I on'y come down lars' night, 'n' I thought you'd be glad t' see me.”

“Phew!” repeated Susie, accenting her contempt to the utmost.

“Well, I'm bloomin' well jiggered!” said Mr. Thripny, helplessly.

The Beauties were moved by some small promptings of compassion.

“Garn, give the lad a show!” said the fat girl.

“It's Oliver the squatter come t' claim his bride,” pleaded Kitty Coudray. “Kiss him pretty.”

“Tisn't!” squealed Miss Gannon, with a sudden access of fury. “Tisn't! 'tisn't! 'tisn't!”

“HELLO, SUZE; HOW'RE YOU DOIN'?”

“*Benno*”

“Oh, crickey,” murmured the astounded bushman, “that'll tell you. Says I ain't Oliver Thripny. Crickey!”

“You ain't,” cried Susie, “you know you ain't. You're a himposter. It's forgery, that's what it is. The p'lice orter be sent fer.”

“Crickey!” said the helpless Oliver, “I wouldn't 'a' believed it. Oh, I say, Suze, have a good look at me.”

“I won't,” said Susie. “Go away. You ain't a bit like.”

Then Oliver invited the bursting of the storm. Appealing to Harrerbeller in his amazement he blurted: “There, that'll tell you the difference good clothes makes in a bloke.”

The shriek that followed welled from thirty throats, and before the Beauties had recovered from their paroxysm of mirth Oliver had fled down the stairs. In the language of the flat Susie “got nothing” for the next hour or two. As the pasters worked they exercised their ingenuity in reminding Miss Gannon of what she had lost.

“No more garding parties et Gov'ment 'Ouse fer you, me lady,” said the fat girl.

“Wot price th' opera 'n' the fam'ly jewels?” said Harrerbeller. “They're a blue duck fer Susie.”

“Now, who'll drive yeh in a brogham 'n' pair, 'n' spatter yeh with di'monds?” asked Kitty.

“Fame, fortune, lux'ry, 'igh society, all gone,” said the packer. “She might iv 'ad mullingatawney soup 'n' hice cream fer dinner every day, 'n' swelled it with the best, but she done in her chances in a fit iv pick.” Feathers meant pique.

But the factory had not seen the last of Oliver. He came up the stairs again at about five o'clock, and turned to pull something after him. He helped a short, fat, red-faced female to the flat. She was about forty-five, and she cuddled a large umbrella, and faced the pasters like a startled horse.

“Now,” cried the bushie, “*I am Oliver Thripny, and here's mother to prove it!*”

The “hoy” that greeted this announcement disturbed the whole establishment. Mid the laughter and badinage Susie escaped, and entrenched herself in the dressing-room.

Boldly Mrs. Thripny confronted the storm. The climb had robbed her of breath, but she brandished her broolly in the face of the factory. The pasters' demonstration was regarded by her as one of open enmity, whereas, as with most outbreaks amongst the hands, it was mere devilment, without a shadow of malice. A scampish craving for diversion inspired such displays. The Beauties were not tender souls themselves, and did not look for supersensitiveness in others.

Mrs. Thripny grew redder. Her redness merged into purple. She hurled thunderbolts at the laughing hoydens from the end of her fat gamp.

Oliver retired before the storm, and stood trembling at the head of the stairs. Not so his nuggety mother. She advanced, gasping, full of heroic wrath, and then she burst into language. It was a torrent, a Niagara. The woman tumbled great lexicons on the heads of the girls. Her shrill voice penetrated to the offices. It brought Spats and the junior partner to the top flat. They found Mrs. Thripny “going strong,” and the dusty foreman nervously skipping round just beyond the orbit of her umbrella, excitedly but piteously pleading for peace.

The lordly proprietor thundered orders, but Mrs. Thripny lunged at him angrily, crippling his bell-topper, and continued her speech.

Exactly what the woman said nobody knew, but she said a tremendous deal, and nothing was complimentary to Spats or the staring hussies, stunned by the downpour they had precipitated.

Mr. Duff, the junior partner, intervened, and it was quaint to see his timid overtures, but a prod in the ear from the raging gamp put him out of action.

Then the diplomatic Feathers took a hand. Feathers was a mere packer and something of a larrikin, perhaps, but in an emergency he was the wise man of that establishment.

“Garn!” he cried, addressing the factory generally, “le' the poor woman be, carn't yeh? 'Ave a bit iv manners if y' are fact'ry rats. It's dead hookety if a decent married woman's t' be abused 'n' hinsulted 'n' treated no better 'n' a Chow. Switch off, carn't yeh? Yeh might be decent people yerselves

some day.”

Mrs. Thripny, who was now breathless, fell back beside her ally.

“Don't yeh know a lady when yeh see one?” asked Feathers indignantly. Then, addressing Oliver's mother, he said: “You put it down t' their ignorance 'n' bad bringin' up, Mrs. Thripny.”

He soothed her with deferential words, and an air of vast respect, and in three minutes she was under perfect control. Before she left she invited Feathers to tea on Sunday.

The packer assured Oliver's ma that nobody doubted the authenticity of Oliver, and there was no intention to question his legitimacy. This was Mrs. Thripny's sore point. He said he would send her a written apology, signed by the proprietor and all the employees, and she departed after the boy, quite satisfied. Feathers called innocently over the stairs:

“Mrs. Thripny, may I bring mother with me on Sunday?”

Six months later, when Susie's squatter was almost forgotten, Susie startled the factory with the announcement of her forthcoming marriage to Mr. Thripny.

“He's sold out his selection 'n' bought sand drays. He's makin' his five quid a week,” said Susie, proudly.

“What!” ejaculated Feathers; “are yeh his special agin, 'n' after the way yeh dogged on him?”

“Oh,” said Miss Gannon, “he could see all along that was on'y my joke.”

“Could he?” answered the packer. “A wise gazob is Oliver—yeh can't kid 'im!”

Chapter IX. At a Boxing Bout.

THE big building was crowded. Below, in the five shilling and ten shilling reserves, was a flood of human faces. In the balcony opposite the two shilling push piled itself against the railing. The atmosphere was one of blue smoke, and through this the stout, bald, purple M.C. in the ring shouted the names, weights, and colours of the competitors in the preliminary tournament, his voice like that of a very old crow.

“Struth, his jibs wouldn't earn peanuts ez grip-man on a mussel barrer,” said the youth next Benno, sociably.

The clerk looked wise. “Tha's right, Ned,” he said; “but Dinny's a good enough spruicher. Givin' chat t' aujinces this size jiggers up the 'uman organ, I tell yeh.”

Feathers, on a seat behind, touched the lad on the shoulder, and edged him away from Benno with a sidelong motion of the head. “Knows a bit erbout elercution, he does,” he said confidentially behind his hand, “somethin' iv a horater 'imself. Fam'ly's in Parlymint.”

“Gar-rn?” said the lad

“S truth,” Feathers assured him. “Mother's got the contrac' fer scrubbin' n' dustin'.”

“Get yer ear out, Ned, 'r he'll bite it,” said Benno sourly to the stranger, suspecting mischief.

Benno had been to a couple of fights before this, and felt entitled to be regarded as an authority. Down in his heart he cherished an idea on the strength of the experience thus acquired that, should occasion arise, he could give an excellent account of himself. He had never hit a man, but it seemed easy, and he had magnificent dreams of outing fourteen-stone foes with a right cross which he had frequently tried on a bed bolster with success. This visionary feat always took place under the eyes of astonished and admiring multitudes.

Two featherweights were scrambling in the ring, exchanging wild swings, and the referee was dodging about, looking for points in a pointless exhibition. Benno watched closely, making a little critical “tut-tut-tut” now and again.

During the rests the clerk instructed the lad next him with a wise, old air. The lad chewed gravely, and said little. Occasionally he jerked a quaint grimace at an acquaintance on the off side, but nothing in his attitude was intended to disturb the clerk's pleasing faith in himself. The lad had a thick ear.

“O'Brien 'll out 'im this round,” said Benno, with calm confidence, when

the gong sounded. "He'll get that crool right iv his ercross, 'n' Scorcher'll go t' bunk, you take it frim the perfessor."

"Bin in the game yerself, Ned," said the lad, with a touch of mock reverence.

Benno lowered his voice. He had an uneasy consciousness of the proximity of Feathers and Nicholas Don, the driver. "Oh, nothin' t' speak of," he said in the way of a man deliberately hiding his light. "Matter ev a scrap 'r two."

"Perfeshional?" asked the lad.

"No-o," said Benno, "not yet."

O'Brien aimed a blind swing at Scorcher; Scorcher took it on his glove, and prodded his man a straight left flush. "Ha-ha," cried Benno, starting up excitedly. "What'd I tell you? O'Brien'll out 'im; O'Brien's got 'im goin'! He's got 'im goin'! Five t' one O'Brien! I bet five t' one O'Brien!"

"In cherry-bobs!" said a derisive voice.

Before the clerk could frame an apt rejoinder, the Scorcher planted a left on O'Brien's mark, and a right on his chin, and O'Brien went down. Eleven seconds later he was carried to his corner, as limp as a dead eel.

"A quitter!" cried Benno, disgustedly. "The Scorcher never touched 'im. That's often the way with clever sparrers, they've got science, but no 'eart."

Then Benno went on to explain to the lad with the thick ear how O'Brien must have beaten the Scorcher to dough if he had kept at him. The lad seemed quite grateful for this polite attention.

"If 'e'd on'y kep' that left iv 'is goin'," said Benno, regretfully.

A youth in front rounded on the clerk with vociferous disgust. "Garn, get work!" he said. "O'Brien never had a possible. 'E ain't got a left 'and, and 'e ain't got a right. 'E's a gander. 'E don't know enough to win a tombstone novice tournament up in the 'Ome for Incurables."

"Oh," said Benno, composedly, "p'raps I know somethin' erbout the game. It's just possible. Then again, o' course, I may be little Georgie, the gazob, 'n' maybe I'm goat ernough t' gnaw the posters off the 'oardings if I ain't watched." He looked about to note the effect of this preposterous supposition, and then warmed up. "But, all the same, Ned, I'm bettin' twenty t' five in quids O'Brien does Scorcher up inside seven rounds with two-ounce gloves. Come, now!"

"G' out," snorted the other; "you don't know boxin' from dominoes. Get back t' the socks."

Benno grew rash. Money was nothing to him. "I'll make it a 'underd t' twenty," he said, "'n' arrange the match meself. A 'underd t' twenty in Jimmy O'Gobs. Say what?" He even plunged his hand in his trousers pocket, where lurked three and fourpence and a bone stud. "Is it a bet?" he

asked, defiantly.

“My name ain't Chirnside,” growled the youth, quite overwhelmed. “I ain't got twenty ticks.”

“Then get 'em 'n' pull the string,” retorted the clerk. He looked about him magnificently. Several people were regarding him with marked respect. Benno exulted. He felt that he was being mistaken for a bookmaker. “Listen t' the oof bird twitter,” he said. “How does it talk 'em down.” He slapped his pocket.

“What do yo think of Brophy's chance in the big fight, young gentleman?” asked the greybeard on Benno's left, with proper diffidence.

Benno looked him over slowly, somewhat superciliously, took out a cigar-case, and drew out a cigar. It was a somewhat worn and ragged cigar, and Benno, who was no smoker, had once taken it for a threepenny shout. It came in handy now. He lit it like a millionaire. Then he condescended to speak. “If yer wantin 't' pick up good money dirt cheap, Whiskers,” he said, “back Brophy.”

“Fer a win or a place?” asked the derisive voice.

Young Mr. Dickson felt he could afford to ignore the interjection. “Put yer plate on Brophy,” he repeated, “his chances 're all right. He's got the quids ez good ez in 'is 'and. Hark to the prophet. I admit the big feller's strong 'n' game, but what's 'e done? He looked hard at the old gentleman, toying daintily with his ragged cigar the while and repeated, “What's 'e done?”

“Yes, yes; that's the point,” said the grey-beard.

“Whereas, look at Brophy,” continued Benno for the benefit of the company; “he's bin through 'em all. He's a bit small fer this, but he's got the science. He's used t' handlin' big blokes, too, 'n' you jist watch out 'n' see him quilt Mr. Rocker Dodd from gong t' beddy-bye. Dodd won't 'it 'im, he's too shifty. He'll jist pelt 'em inter Rocker's biscuit barrel, 'n' slide out every time the 'eavyweight offers t' pass 'im one.”

“Ever seen either of 'em fight?” asked the unbeliever in front.

For a moment Benno was taken back. As a matter of fact, he had not. He rallied quickly. “Have I seen 'em! Have I what?” he retorted. “Brophy's ez quick ez dam it, 'n' gets erbout a bit, I'm tellin' yeh.”

“I ain't seen Brophy,” growled the other; “but this Dodd can shift. He ain't as slow as a hearse.”

“You're comin' on all right, Ned,” said Benno soothingly. “When you're growed up you'll know a bit, I promise yeh, but jist now I wouldn't open me head too wide erbout boxin' iv I was you.”

Benno was very excitable and very demonstrative during the other preliminary bouts. He brandished a note-book and talked in hundreds with

the glibness of a King of the Ring. He even shouted directions to the combatants, using their Christian names familiarly.

Feathers and the Don, sitting behind, were enjoying themselves immensely. They refrained from interfering for fear of spoiling “our Mr. Dickson's” flow of skite, and the clerk, in his great exultation, had forgotten their existence.

But it was when the fight of the night came on that Benno excelled himself. While the men were in their corners his enthusiasm in the cause of Brophy manifested itself in a reckless offering of the odds to all and sundry. He stood on his chair gesticulating over the heads of the standing crowd, till those behind howled him down.

Mr. Dickson's cheap, dry cigar burst into flame at this point, but that did not disconcert him. Threats of personal violence he treated with a cold, scornful smile. He hoped he was looking as if he could fight a bit.

In his calmer moments our hero invited the lad with the thick ear to call on him at his hotel—Benno, it must not be forgotten, lived in a humble five-roomed cottage with his ma and his sister Amelia—and he would teach him a few hits that might be useful to him in his dealings with a cruel world.

In the first round Mike Brophy showed himself a flash fighter, and very fanciful in his movements. He had a fine figure and feline grace, and was anxious to display himself in the limelight, and, while he was pouting his chest and striking attitudes for the benefit of the artistic minority, Rocker Dodd, who was a hard-headed, lumbering pug with no eye for the beautiful, swung in a punch that lifted the smaller man up off his two feet, and dropped him like a bag of scraps.

“On'y a slip!” cried Benno. “He's up agin all right.” And so he was, but looking like a man full of warm whisky suddenly ejected into the cold night.

Rocker sprang at Mike again, and Mike ducked by instinct into safety under his enemy's wing.

“What'd I tell yeh?” squealed the clerk. “See that? What'd I tell yeh? Ain't 'e a beaut'? Rocker can't 'it 'im. He can't 'it 'im, that's what.”

Rocker shook his man off, and punched with right and left, putting a lop-sided head on Brophy, and then the gong sounded, and a thankful fighter sank into Mike's corner.

“Ain't 'e a beaut'?” vociferated Benno. “Good man, Brophy! It's twenty t' one on yeh! Twenty t' one Brophy!” cried the clerk, raising his voice. “Twenty t' one Brophy!”

A red-faced, pimply man bobbed up out of the crowd, and pinned Benno with a fat forefinger. “Done!” he said, “I'll take that, Ned.”

“Twenty t' one in quids erbout Brophy!” repeated Benno, flourishing his pocket-book.

“Same fer me, mister,” said a sport with a broken nose, tugging at Benno's coat.

Several others were anxious to do business with Mr. Dickson. “I'll have a dollar's worth in that,” said the lad with the thick ear. “Referee's decision.”

Benno was too elated to heed them. He was shouting expert advice to Brophy's corner. “Give 'im the tow'!” he cried, disgustedly. “He don't want no sermons frim you. Wag the washin', blarst yeh!” He turned to the lad with the thick ear. “Wish I was in his corner,” he said.

“Bitter bad mozzle fer Brophy yeh ain't,” said the other. “He'd be glad t' know all you don't.”

In the second round Brophy was more anxious to keep out of trouble than to show his elegant shape, and he sprinted about the ring with Rocker lumbering after him, punching anyhow and anywhere. Twice Mike was down, thinking, but that did not damp Benno's ardour.

The clerk was now offering thirty to one Brophy with splendid prodigality, and there were many takers whom he didn't even notice.

“He'll let the big bloke wear 'imself out, 'n' then he'll dish 'im up on the arf shell with a taste iv lemon,” said “our Mr. Dickson.”

Presently Brophy was bleeding from a cut over the eye, and had a numbed nose and a split lip, and Rocker Dodd was wishing the fight would begin in earnest.

During the next interval Benno was more confident than ever. He said it was picking up money backing Brophy. He casually offered to lay two hundred to ten about it. He addressed Brophy like an old and valued friend, advising him to keep cool and fight his own hand.

Mike tried to make the third round a foot-race, but Mr. Dodd was there, and wouldn't hear of it. He blocked Brophy in the corners, and punched him, and his punches had all the nervous energy that is in the heels of an exuberant young pack mule. When they reached Mike, Mike's feet sprang up, and he struck the boards with the back of his head.

For the fifth time in two minutes Mike was down, and now his better judgment prevailed, and he pretended to be asleep in order to evade the responsibility of getting up again. The seconds called him early, the ten-seconds-check reminded him it was time to be up and doing, but Mike slept on. It was all over. The referee, in a few terse, epigrammatic words, declared Rocker Dodd the winner.

“Yah-a-h, a schlinter!” cried Benno. “A schlinter! A schlinter!”

The red-faced man was working his way towards Benno through the press, pinning the clerk with that imperious forefinger. He took Benno by a

button. "That's a matter o' twenty jim you're owin' me, Ned," he said.

"Ah, scratch!" retorted the clerk. "That wasn't no bet."

The sport with the perverted nose and the lad with the thick ear were clamouring for an immediate settlement of their claims. Several others, thinking the bluff might be worth it, put in large demands. The red-faced man was furious and threatening. He recited terrible things that would happen to "our Mr. Dickson" if he did not instantly hand out twenty pounds.

The painful nature of the situation flashed upon Benno. He had been taken too seriously. He went chalk white, his legs wobbled foolishly.

"Bli'me, 'twas on'y a joke," he protested. "I was jist talkin'. I ain't got a bean."

"A blessed welsher!" yelled the red-faced man.

"An infernal gun!" cried the sport.

Twenty hands fell upon Benno. He went down into dark night that was full of arms and feet and broken chairs, and his only sensation was of being a mere scrap of himself whirling in the blackness, in which the arms, the chairs, and the feet continually multiplied themselves.

The packer and Nicholas Don, ably assisted by six policemen, effected a rescue, and what they rescued was a weary fragment. Very reluctant were the police to give Feathers charge of it, for it was ragged, dusty, blood-stained, hatless and battered, and would have been a striking object lesson in the dock next morning.

However, the packer's eloquence prevailed, and he and Nick took the weary fragment away with them, wrapped in Nick's overcoat. Without that coat it would not have been possible to introduce the clerk into mixed company on a tram, what remained of his clothes being hardly sufficient to establish identification.

"Well, you're the king cop-out," said the packer, having delivered Benno into his sister's hands at his own door. "If yeh was t' go t' church the boiler 'ud bust."

Benno answered never a word. His splendid spirit was broken.

Chapter X. The Disposal of a Dog.

NICHOLAS DON called across the street. He was leading, or rather dragging, a tall dog that objected strongly. When Nicholas put on an effort the dog sat down hard and choked his four paws ploughing through the dust like a new kind of one-man onion harvester. It was a hot Saturday afternoon, and this was hard work. The dog was heavy, he had plenty of bone, and when he threw his influence against the leader progress was almost impossible.

“What-o, Benno! A word with yeh,” cried the Don.

“Can't be did,” replied Mr. Dickson; “important engagement. Got a date with a bunch iv frill.”

“Ga-art! What of it? Len's a hand 'n' I'll buy the beer.”

Benno did not care for beer, but he hadn't the courage to confess it. The pretence of an undying devotion to “pints” and “pots” was one of the most cherished affectations of his class.

“Now yer talkin',” said the clerk. “That's me little weakness. Yeh could lure me from a harem with the smell iv a cork on a day like this.”

Mr. Dickson crossed the road with a proper show of avidity. Nicholas Don removed his hat, scooped honest perspiration from his brow, and hurled the moisture at the dog.

“Whew, ain't she er corker?” said the carter. “'N' I've pulley-hauled this 'ere cart-horse spaniel all the way from Spats's privit residence. I was jist tryin' t' make up me mind whether I'd go further 'r curl up here 'n' die when yer gills drifts in. Fer the love iv mother, Benno, stir 'im up aft 'n' save me life.”

Our Mr. Dickson examined the animal closely, accurately, with the wise air of a dog-fancier. He felt the tyke's ears, measured his tail, and inspected his teeth. “Er carriage dog,” he said, speaking as a man whose judgment was final, “but he ain't pure bred. Yiv bin done in, Nicky, if yeh give more 'n a quid fer 'im.”

“A quid!” cried the Don. “Me give twenty deener fer a batch iv calamity like that—in me sober moments too? Garn, who's dippy? This is a public nuisance I'm commissioned t' do away with. Fer months past he's bin makin' hissself perticularly objectionable to Odgson's people, runnin' steeplechases with the hens, moppin' up the breakfas' milk, sweatin' thè famb'ly cat, 'n' breakin' in 'n' dossin' on the best beds. So Spats instructed me nibs t' destroy the brute, 'n' slid me a dollar. That was this mornin'. Now I'm on me way, but I can't buy poison deadly enough fer a tough like this without a witness. If ye'll come along we'll dope Tiny, 'n' then chop up the

dollar.”

“I'm with yeh,” said Mr. Dickson, setting his straw on the back of his head. “You pull 'n' I'll push.”

So while Nicholas Don towed with the rope over his shoulder, Mr. Benjamin Dickson prompted the dog behind, and progress again set in. At the shop of Squills and Beegin, chemists, Nicholas explained his need. He wanted something fatal to dogs. “Somethin' sudden,” he said. “You mustn't give him time t' think, or he'll pull out. He's ez strong ez a camel 'n' has the digestion iv an alligator.”

Even while Don was giving his order the dog began to revolve. He turned round three times, and then sat up, stiff and hard with all his hair bristling, and snapped viciously at the atmosphere

Benno retreated to a corner. Nicholas fell back. The chemist seemed concerned. There was a wild look in Carlo's eye, and froth oozed from the corners of his mouth. He snapped right and left, and then started to revolve again. He increased his pace, spinning after the manner of a playful collie humorously chasing his own tail. But there was no frivolity about this dog—he whirled in a sort of frenzy. His pace increased till the characteristics of a dog were lost in a sort of revolving pattern.

“Stop him! Hold him!” yelled the chemist.

“That be jiggered fer a yarn,” retorted Nicholas Don, and he climbed on a chair.

“He ain't no dog o' mine,” protested Benno, disclaiming all responsibility.

“I gave him a dose this mornin',” explained the Don—“all I had, but it didn't seem t' do him no good; so I thought I'd fit him here with a fatal charge. Evidently proceedin's has just begun. Look out!”

Benno followed Don in a dash for the counter. The dog had changed his manoeuvres. He was now racing round the walls of the shop, chopping at things as he passed. He overturned the chairs, and brought down a small show-stand with a crash. The chemist joined Don and Dickson on the counter.

“Stop him!” stuttered Squills. “He'll wreck the shop. For Heaven's sake, stop him!”

“Stop yer Aunt Martha,” retorted Nicholas, bitterly. “Ow in thunder 'm I goin' t' stop him? Lorblime, he'd bite the leg off yeh!”

Carlo made frantic excursions up the wall. He bit madly. The froth flew from him, but he made no sound till he got among the crockery. He had to swarm over the counter to do that, and he crashed into a show case by the way, floundered out, and tore about a cwt. of phials off the shelves. For two minutes he raged up and down behind the scenes, overturning gallons

of physic. Then he took the counter in a leap again, revolved three times, and stiffened out in the middle of the floor, and there was a great silence for thirty seconds.

“Jimmy Gee!” murmured Nicholas, gazing at the ruin, “here's a tub iv trouble.”

“Mind,” protested Benno feebly, “he ain't no dog iv mine, 'n' I can prove it.” Benno edged towards the door. Nicholas seemed disposed to follow, but the chemist wouldn't hear of it

“No, you don't,” he said intervening, “who's to pay for all this?”

The discussion that followed was conducted with a good deal of warmth, but eventually Squills agreed to try his claim on Odgson and Co., 11 Pepper-lane, City, before going to legal extremes with Nicholas Don and Mr. Dickson. A more or less unsatisfactory conclusion having been arrived at, the friends again turned to depart.

“Here, here, hold hard,” said Squills, “what about the dog?”

“We throw the dog in,” said the Don, with a lamentable attempt at levity.

“You *do* NOT! I like your cast-iron cheek, hauling your infernal mongrel in here to die, and wanting to leave the corpse on my hands. You'll hike it out of this, or I'll call the police.”

“Come along, Benno,” said Nick, hopelessly; “take a holt. Grab his rudder.”

Nicholas Don gripped the carcass by the neck. Benno took it by the tail. The two marched out with their burden, and laboured down the street. It was a trying task they had in hand, and most ignominious.

No young man of the superior classes with a proper respect for himself, cares to be seen passing through town bearing the loathly carcass of a dog, and it must not be forgotten that Benno was a clerk and a man with a position to maintain. He felt degraded. People passed remarks. Two or three small boys raised a “hoi!” Then a ragamuffinly football team, passing in a van, discovered the hapless pair with the cadaver, and they yelled like demons.

“Ello, Ned! Gettin' 'ome with the week's meat?” roared a hardened barracker, and the van passed with howls of laughter and a volley of insults.

Benno dropped his end of the dog. “Jimmy Jee!” he wailed, “here's a sweet thing yiv let me in fer. What iv I got t' do with yer blighted dog? This is where I duck out.”

“Oh, come, I say, ez a man iv honour, yeh can't do that,” answered Nicholas Don reproachfully. “Yer in this now. Yiv got t' see it through.”

“Didn't I tell yeh I've got a meet? A bloke can't keep a lady waitin' ”

“Don't have it on yer mind,” said the Don, with great decision. His

manner implied that he would regard the dereliction of Benno as a personal affront calling for instant action.

At this point a fat policeman arrived on the scene. He regarded the three with grave suspicion. "What is it y' 'ave there?" said he.

"What is it!" retorted the Don, with bitterness. "Come closer, Charles, 'n' inspect. It's ther missin' jewels."

"No lip, me son," said the Law. The constable placed a foot on the dog, and pushed it inquisitively. "It's a dog," he said, "a dead wan."

"No use, Benno," murmured the Don in despair, "yeh can hide nothin' from a cunnin' devil like this. We own up," he added, addressing the officer, "it's a dorg all right, 'n' it's permanently dead."

"D'yeh know," said the policeman severely, "I could run yiz in fer bein' in possession of property raysonably supposed to have been stolen? Take it out o' this."

"But where in 'ell 're we t' take it?" cried Nicholas.

"Devil a man o' me knows. Try th' Zoo. If yeh lave it round th' town yer li'ble to penalties made 'n' provided."

The pair resumed their burden and their march. A few boys who had been drawn to them tagged behind with an air of lively expectation. A hansom driver yelled something in passing to the effect that they might try it boiled, and a publican asked them if they were taking it home for the cat. Most of the passing strangers had something funny to say. All grinned. Benno dropped his end again.

"Ere, 'ere!" he said. "Gimme the 'ead end; it's less ridiculous."

"Lorblime! the pride iv him!" commented the Don; but he consented to the change.

"By the way," asked the clerk, "what *are* we goin' t' do with him?"

"Dunno," answered Nicholas, hopelessly. A bright idea struck him. "D'yeh want a dorg?" he said, addressing one of the expectant small boys. "A beautiful dorg," he added persuasively; "brings sticks outer the water 'n' steals chickens."

"Garn!" said the grimy youth, "he's dead."

"Oh, no he ain't," Nicholas assured him; "he's only fainted."

But the boys were not enterprising. They refused to take over the dog even when assured that his hide and bones were worth seven shillings. Nicholas Don and Mr. Dickson next tried to put the corpse on a tram, with the idea of delivering it at the Zoo, but were hounded off by an infuriated conductor.

Nicholas had another inspiration when passing a hay and corn store. "I got it," he said. "I'll dip in here 'n' buy a sack. P'raps we'll be able t' leave him round somewhere if he's disguised."

Nicholas dipped in. Benno guarded the dog for five minutes, and then the usual policeman arrived and urged him to move on with the offensive remains. Mr. Dickson explained, and the officer entered the store to hasten the Don's efforts, but returned presently with important information. Don was not there. The villainous Nicholas had sneaked out by a back way, leaving Benno in sole possession of the dog's body. Dickson's fury was frightful to see. He used language that would have got him ten hours had not the policeman been a man of sentiment and sympathy.

“Annyway, ye must shift th' cor-r-rpse,” said the constable. He added, confidentially: “N' I wouldn't be kapin' him by me too long this warum weather.”

The policeman purchased a chaff-bag with Benno's money, and assisted the indignant and harassed clerk to push the dog in. The animal had stiffened, and it was not easy to bag him. Fifty-seven people watched the operation with great interest. Fifteen of them followed Benno some distance as he tottered away with his bag of dog. The policeman was careful to see the cadaver off his beat.

Mr. Dickson arrived before a pub in a side street, hot and despairing. He dropped his bag, and, entering the bar with a stagger, called for a long shandy. He drank deeply, and was refreshed and consoled. His magnificent brain got to work. Here was a chance to break with that horrible dog. He would escape by the side door, as Nicholas had done, leaving the defunct tyke to the corporation. Benno finished his drink, and was making for the safe exit, when a policeman entered from the street.

“Hi, you!” cried the Law. “There's a bit of a dog waiting. Don't forget the dog.” He gripped Benno, and led him into the street. The dog was there, lying stark and stiff on the pavement. Benno uttered a wail of pure anguish. Somebody had stolen the bag!

From the publican Benjamin Dickson purchased another sack, and went on again, staggering under his woeful burden. That policeman also saw him off his beat. Another policeman saw him carefully the whole length of the next beat.

Never had Benno met so many policeman. Several times he tried to rid himself of the canine incubus, but he failed in his purpose. Once when he dropped the deceased among a lot of cases in a yard behind an ironmongery, and fled, a splenetic man chased him up the lane, captured him, and skull-dragged him all the way back. Benno was forced to take up the sack of remains again, and was then kicked off the premises. The coward kicked Benno with the child in his arms—kicked him nine times.

Blessed release came all in a moment Benno came upon a doctor's motor standing unguarded, and a desperate idea struck him. Made reckless by his

misery, he marched boldly to the motor, dropped the body into the back compartment and walked away. Turning the first corner trepidation seized him, and he ran a mile.

Terrible was Benno's scorn, bitter his reproaches when he confronted Nicholas Don at the warehouse on Monday morning.

"It's no use buckin' up, Benno," said the Don. "I wasn't responsible fer me actions. I had a kind iv kidney fit in the 'ay 'n' corn, 'n' the blokes carried me t' the pub fer stimulants. Anyway cut it out; I got troubles enough iv me own. Wait till Spats sees the bill from Squills. Jimmy Jee, won't he pig-jump!"

Nicholas was correct in his anticipations. Odegson was furious when the chemist's account came to hand. He went at the Don in a series of hops, barking. There were flecks of froth on his whiskers.

But this was not the end. Nicholas came upstairs to Benno on the Tuesday afternoon, looking like a man haunted.

"Ell 'n' Tommy!" he said, "here's a blighted mess. That dorg we killed"——

"*We* killed!" interrupted Benno, in a squeal. "WE killed! Oh, I like that, I don't think. WE killed!"

"Well," continued the Don, waiving Benno's repudiation, "it appears it's the wrong dorg."

"The wrong"—— Benno was unequal to the occasion. He collapsed mentally.

"The wrong dorg! The dorg what's bin givin' Odegson's people all the troub' ez turned up agin', 'n' he's sweatin' the cat 'n' sleepin' on the beds same ez heretofore. It turns out the dorg we killed belonged to Packthro, Odegson's neighbour, 'n' he was a Great Dane, 'n' worth twenty quid. At any rate, Packthro's rushin' you 'n' me fer twenty quid compensation."

Benno's small face was very white. His body was as limp as a damp duster. He stared at Nicholas in stupid dismay.

"Blime! Don't perch there like a paralytic hen," yelled the Don. "What yer goin' t' do about it?"

Benno opened his mouth feebly. "Twenty quid!" he whispered. "Twen' "—— Then he fell off his high stool and lap huddled upon the floor.

Chapter XI. Barracking.

GOUDY, the town traveller, examined the clerk curiously. Benno was perched on his high stool like a monkey on an organ. He crouched at his work, hiding his face with his left arm, writing laboriously. He only pretended to be oblivious of the Scotchman's scrutiny. As a matter of fact, he wrote at random, setting down meaningless figures. His small intellectual capacity was occupied in framing bitter and biting abuse of Goudy, whose cursed inquisitiveness was very unwelcome at that moment.

Benno consumed his splendid invectives, however, and was silent under the scrutiny. Goudy moved in a semi-circle, peering under and over with an air of grave concern, and the clerk manoeuvred adroitly to hide his injuries.

"It's never my old friend Benjamin," said the town traveller with affected concern; "never our Mr. Dickson! It's not possible. Man, man, but you're changed. Tut, tut, tut, poor laddie, the moths have been at you."

"Garn scratch!" grumbled Benno.

"But you have a black eye, Benjamin; your ear is a ruin; you have a split lip. You are ashamed, my boy, you are covered with contrition. Your effort to hide your disgrace implies a lingering remnant of decency, but it advertises your fall, Benno. The beaten bantam creeps under the barn, but the conqueror crows from the housetops. Open your heart to me, laddie. Weep on my bosom. It will ease you."

"Some'n 'll git a belt in the whiskers if he don't behave," said Benno, reaching for a glass paper-weight.

"That face outrages the proprieties," Goudy continued. "It ought to be brought under the notice of the Executive. Bless my soul, it's enough to lose us all our Wesleyan trade."

"Come erway," interposed the packer, taking Goudy by the arm. "Respect a strong man's sorrer."

Feathers led Goudy to the packing bench, and resumed the handling of a ream of printed tea wraps.

"There was a game iv footy, Saturdee," said Feathers.

The town traveller whistled a gust eloquent of enlightenment.

"Our Mr. Dickson was there. Benno's bin bestowin' his vote 'n' patronage on St. Kilda fer some time past. He's bin recitin' bits 'n' expressin' loud 'n' large opinions t' th' effect that St. Kilda is the dazzlin' P., the bonzers, the boshters, the pink, the pride, 'n' the pick iv th' earth at the noble game iv footy. Jimmy Jee! T' hear him flute you'd think he'd discovered th' whole team on a doorstep, 'n' 'ad brought 'em up by 'and on the bottle with much

patience 'n' self-sacrifice.”

“You know Dickson has a splendid public spirit,” said Goudy. “He'll be city dog-catcher one of these days.”

Benno crouched lower, and the figures swarmed over his page. He knew the ignominious story would be told, and, knowing *how*, felt his inwards curdling with hate for G. Mills.

“Benno don't live at St. Kilda” said the packer, turning in the end of his parcel with movements graceful and adept, “but he 'as 'igh notions. He lives on the fag end iv one iv them cheap, weather-board subbubs what's all sloppy rightaways 'n' battered rubbish tins, 'n' what's inhabited mainly by bottle-ohs, deserted wives, 'n' soured cats. But he's a peacock fer style, 'n' he hadopted St. Kilda 'cause it goes well with his two-'n'-sixpenny helephant's breath gloves 'n' his pinch-back overcoat.

“I have t' report that our Mr. Dickson went t' the match, Saints versus South, Saturdee. Me 'n' the Don was privileged to accompany his nibs, 'n' his chinnin' aboard the train was th' chatter iv th' man what ain't mistaken, never was, 'n' never will be. In one iv his proud moments he offered t' wager a forty horse-power 'igh-grade, nickel-plated motor-car agin the poor but honest belltopper iv the ginger gent opposite that Saints 'd win, 'n' he threw a goal in. His magnernimity was terrible t' behold.

“The ginger bloke declined t' bet, mentionin' how he was a preacher iv th' Gorspel, a hantigambler, 'n' a Society fer the Prevention iv Vice.

““Then don't talk so much,” sez Benno with some severity. ‘Don' get eloquent iv yeh ain't prepared t' put yer oof down with a firm hand.’ Which was scaldin' hot, seein' the ginger gent 'adn't said a word. But you can't stop little Benjamin once he gets flutterin' his rag in public. Afore we'd reached St. Kilda he'd got the people in the nex' compartments peepin' over th' partitions in the belief he was the prodigal son iv a rich old family; 'n' the perfect lady, with the brazen head of 'air 'n' the beautiful set iv new china teeth, lookin' like a glazed tile staircase, told th' Don she knew Benno well. He had mountains iv gold, she said, but he was crool t' women.”

Benno screwed his head round, and snarled at them like a teased dog. “Yar-r-r, get work,” he said. “Who's polin' on th' 'ouse now? Strike me dilly, they's blokes 'ere don't earn enough t'keep a canary in corf drops.”

“But Benny was at th' height iv his splendour on the field iv battle,” continued Feathers remorselessly. “He got an early camp, 'n' screwed in t' th' fence, 'n' gave th' general public some advanced opinions on a lacrosse game what was pervided ez a sort iv preliminary canter. Our Mr. Dickson always selects a confidant on occasions iv this kind—someone t' sort o' play 'Oratio t' his 'Amlet—someone t' lean up agen 'n' address hissself to. By this means he lets information about hissself leak out, 'n' 'elps t' edjikate the

masses. Ez a matter o' fact, his niblets don't know th' game iv lacrosse from tiggie-tiggie-touchwood, but that didn't diminish the flow ev Benny's heloquence nothin'. He told the silent bloke next him all about it, trustin' to his own common-sense t' pick up points ez he went along.

“Benny's always trustin' to his own commonsense, disregardless iv th' fact that he ain't got none. Presently the crowd sort iv glued itself round Mr. Dickson 'n' the silent lad, 'n' bekan t' pass the blurt. Then 'Oratio bestirred himself. He shouldered 'Amlet off.

“‘Gar-r-rn,’ sez he, ‘this ain't a game iv hi-spy-hi, 'uthbert, this is quoits. Turn yer voice th' other way. It's givin' me the sleepin' sickness.’

“ ‘P'raps I don' know lacrosse?’ said Benno; bravely. ‘Yeh think yeh can gi' me instructions, don't yeh? Let me tell yeh I was playin' the game when you was suckin' milk through a tube.’

“ ‘Any'ow, Ned, don't talk all over me. I got me Sunday things on. 'Sides, everybody's lookin'. They'll be thinkin' we're out o' th' same cage.’

“ ‘There's someone in th' himmediate vicinity infested with rats,’ says Benno in his 'appiest style.

“At this th' lad got the flat iv his juke agin Mr. Dickson's chiv, 'n' shoved it 'ard t' th' off. ‘If yer turn it on me again, Ned,’ sez he, ‘I'll hurt it.’

“Benjamin the cop-out was dooly impressed, 'n' suffered a long spasm iv silent reflection. Then he shifted his bunk, 'n' wormed in lower down. When the Saints ambled out, he was ready 'n' waitin'. The yell he let loose caused er fat peeler t' shy, 'n' turned er lady's umbreller inside out.

“ ‘Get at 'em, Saints!’ he howled. ‘Now fer th' sacrifice. No beg-pardons, 'n' no mercy. Give 'em a bump. Stand 'em on their necks. You can do it, you beaunts!’

“Little Benny's frenzy when the game got goin' would freeze yer blood. He was that angry with the South pie-biters, he didn't care what 'appened to 'em, 'n' the way he screamed at the doomed wretches would mind you iv Mrs. Canty tellin' Mrs. Bill Higgins candidly what she thinks iv her 'n' hers over the right-o'-way, after a sisterly spree 'n' a dispute 'bout a stew-pan.

“ ‘Wade into 'em, Saints!’ he yelled ‘Swing him on his ear, Cumby. Snatch th' 'air off him! Bring 'em down, you boshters! Jump 'em in the mud. Good man, Barwick! That shifted 'im. Give 'im another fer his mother!’

“Benno's 'appiest moments was when a S'melbin' player got busted, or took the boot in er tender place, 'n' curled up on the field, wrigglin' like a lamed worm. These affectin' incidents stirred th' clerk deeply.

“ ‘Oh, a bonzer, a bonzer, a boshter, a bontoshter!’ screamed our Christian brother. ‘Fair in the balloon, 'n' good enough for him! That's the way to tease 'em, the blighters! They're lookin' fer it, so let 'em have it wet

'n' heavy! Lay 'em out! Stiffen 'em! You can get better players fer old bottles anywhere!'

“There was on'y one thing our Mr. Dickson was undecided erbout, 'n' that was th' humpire. He couldn't quite make up his mind whether he should get a presentation gold watch 'n' a gran' banquet, 'r be tethered t' the field with a stake driven through his gizzard. Yeh see, when he gave a free kick t' Saints he was a noble soul 'n' a bright 'n' shinin' example iv all th' virtues; but when he gave a free kick t' South he was a despicable 'n' disgustin' object what orter 'ave been smothered in mud. Th' humpire blew his toot, 'n' passed the leather on t' Ginger Stewart, representin' Saints, 'n', iv course, the South barrackers took it in bad part, 'n' put up the yell iv hate. Sez Benno:

“Yah-h-h! get work! What's er matter with that? Want the blanky humpire t' put the Saints t' bed, 'n' let yer lame hens play it on their own, do yer? Good man, Tulloch! You're a blitherer!’ 'N' the nice boy 'd put his 'ands t'gether 'n' exalt Mr. Tulloch with prayer 'n' praise.

“By'm-bye, Tulloch blows his horn again 'n' Hughie Callan, representin' South, is allowed a free-'n'-easy, coz one iv the Saints bit him in a burst iv affection, 'r somethin', 'n' Benno's disgust almost stiffens him.

“ ‘Lorblime!’ 'e wails, ‘wot sort! Jimmie Jee, it's murder—gory murder 'n' blanky robbery, tha's what it is!’ Then he lets his whole himpassioned soul loose, 'n' blasts th' humpire with abuse, coverin' his family with shame 'n' degradin' his name fer ever.

“But 'twas when someone was shootin' fer goal that little Benjy worked 'is 'ead t' the best effect. 'Twas et sich tryin' moments that his nibs ducked in, 'n' went it blind, hangin' on ter the railin', his mince pies stickin' out like warts on a horse, 'n' all his henergies 'n' his surprisin' intellec' screwed up t' the breakin' point, 'n' his young emotions fair seethin' 'n' bubblin' out iv him. 'Twas et a moment like this Benno hachieved his splendid effort iv diplomacy.”

“Don' be fergettin' what yeh got frim the three-card sparrer at Flemington that Saturdee, Mills,” said Benno from his desk, with sudden ferocity. “ 'N' by the holy, you'll get it agin if you give me too much iv yer gibber. Jist you be careful, tha's all.”

Mr. Dickson actually looked as if on the point of coming down from his stool, and indulging in manslaughter, but the packer paid no attention.

“Scotty,” he said, “you don't do justice t' the keen 'n' brilliant mind iv our Mr. Dickson. Yiv no idear iv his power t' grasp a situation, 'n' his great promptness 'n' resource in a hemergency. The game was at a critical stage, 'n' Benno was bumpin' the Saints up all he knew 'ow.

“ ‘Lay 'em out,’ sez he. ‘Tear 'em down, 'n' walk over 'em. Jerk him on

his chin, Scotty. Bust up the gander-neck. Fracture his back. Lorblime, Saints, you got 'em goin'. Rush it along there, Harwick! Oh, the cripples, they're dead t' the world! Welt their 'ead in! *Stiffen 'em!* KILL 'EM! Buck in, S'—

“There Benny's eloquence was shut off. Yeh never struck anythin' suddener in yer natural. ‘Buck in, Sus——’” sez he, 'n' stuck there, with his north-'n'-south wide open, 'n' his eyes fair glarin'. ‘N' why?’ sez you. Fact is, Benjamin's splendid powers iv persuasion 'ad bin attractin' a good deal iv public attention lately, 'n' slowly but surely a lot iv South barrackers had been percolatin' through the crowd, 'n' gatherin' round Benno, 'n' Ben discovered 'em at that tragic moment when his head was wide ajar in his best burst iv horatory. The push had blood in its eyes, 'n' its fists was ready. 'Twas jist th' toughest bunch, 'n' carried a banner made iv a old white shirt with the legend: ‘Deth or Victry.’ Fer ten terrible seconds Benno glared, chokin', on them vital words, ‘Buck in, S——’ Then his bright mind got t' work, 'n' the squeal he put up split the blouse iv a fat lady on his left.

“ ‘Buck in *South!*’ sez he. ‘Lay 'em out, *South!* Tear 'em down! Waltz over 'em! Whooroo, Souths! Oh, you beauts, you bonzers! South'll do 'em! South's the pride, the boshters! I'll lay a doller to a dump on South Melbin!’ ”

“'Twas a masterpiece of strategy,” said Goudy, gravely.

“'Twas an instance iv phenomenal presence iv mind,” continued Feathers, “'n' it saved Benno's life. The push suspended 'ostilities, 'n' fer twenty minutes 'r so Bennie was very subdoo'd, puttin' in on'y a half-'earted word fer South now 'n' agin. 'N' when he got his chance he backed out, 'n' shifted his pitch. He shoved in further round, where the toms was thickest, 'n' where he reckoned it'd be safe t' have some hopinions iv his own.

“We had some trouble in findin' him agin, but when we did he was hittin' up St. Kilda once more, 'n' givin' South samples iv slum language that 'd demoralise a navy's cow. But Benno had made another mistook. The toms erbout was ingrained South barrackers to a woman, fact'ry rats from the Port 'n' the river mills, ez willin' ez cats, 'n' 'ard in th' face ez fish-plates. We 'eard Benno's yell, 'n' then somethin' fizzed like pullin' the cork out iv a soder-water foundry, 'n' out iv the throng comes a push iv bright girls fighting round somethin'. like a pack iv greyhounds on a starved cat. There was no noise 'cept a sort iv buzzin' 'n' tearin', 'n' then the toms opened out, leavin' their prey on the ground. 'Twas Benno. 'Twas th' immortal cop-out, 'n' he sat up in the mud ermong his rags, blinkin', a monimint iv human sorrer. His eye was black, 'n' his nose was bleedin' free, but the look on his face was not anger. 'Twas a look iv sad perplexity. He thort th' earth had bin hit with a comet.

“He went 'ome at once, not bein' fit fer publication. He rode in the guard's van, hidin' from the crool world under a 'orse rug, 'n' he never spoke iv his troubles.

“This, Scotty, accounts fer them evidences iv a bad past what our Mr. Dickson is displayin' fer th' edification iv the vulgar, 'n' which he tells the junyer partner was obtained in a 'eroic effort t' save a sick policeman from a ill-mannered gang up in Little Lon. Poor Benno; his luck's disgustin', but he's the backbone iv our national winter game. I wouldn't give peanuts for a play iv footy without him as leadin' comedian.”

Chapter XII. The Rivals.

JINNY BITT—known as Thripny—was going on for sixteen, too tall for her age and her width and her wearing apparel. Her shins were so thin they seemed to have a cutting edge, and there was too much of them visible, although the frayed, stained and faded skirt was let down so far in the hope of covering the deficiency that a wide gap existed between it and the skimpy body part of her costume, where a quantity of dun-coloured underclothing protruded. Her arms, too, were long and thin; so was her neck. The long, thin arms came far out of her tight sleeves, always worn at the elbow and torn in the armpit. The long, thin neck was surmounted by a very small head decorated with pale, drab-tinted hair that had been cropped within the year, and was now about a span in length, and amenable to no kind of treatment. It writhed like shrivelled pea-pods, and Miss Bitt thought it was curly.

Jinny wore a bit of stale red ribbon awkwardly knotted in the middle of her swan-like neck, but she was not a girl who put forth any pretensions to style. Her boots were heelless, and their symmetry had been destroyed by bigger feet. Her stockings had many holes. The hat she wore had been a “gem” in its day and generation, but most of the rim was nibbled off by the rats and cockroaches abounding on the factory flat, and its only ornaments were a bootlace and a large brass button. Miss Bitt might have picked up a better hat any day anywhere, but she seemed cheerfully unconscious of this one's imperfections.

“Thripny looks ez if she was painted on elastic, 'n' then stretched,” said the packer. The description was apt.

Coffee Morgan was Miss Bitt's cobbler. She was a girl of about the same age, shorter, and fleshy in an unhealthy way. She owed her nick-name to her prevailing tone. Her hair might have been bright red under more favourable conditions, but she oiled it liberally, and it collected the factory dust and assumed the tint of ground coffee. Her complexion was like coffee milked, and her disposition was morose.

Miss Morgan dressed rather better than Miss Bitt, but the Beauties soon discovered that her new dresses were always made of second-hand material, and her latest hats were at least a generation too old for the girl, and had evidently come down to her after seeing long service. From the fact that all her dresses were coffee-coloured, the Beauties rashly concluded that her grandmother was a “Beardie,” a brown sect closely allied to Quakers.

Nearly all the Beauties paired off. Their mateships were close,

affectionate, and to some extent secretive. Once the alliance was formed, and while it lasted, the two friends seemed to cherish identical tastes, appetites, and desires. The characteristic is not peculiar to factory hands; it is noticeable in a young ladies' seminary. This intimacy of Thripny and Coffee Morgan was more quaint than another, because of Thripny's length and leanness, and Miss Morgan's shortness and shapelessness, and for the reason that Thripny had the ungainly sprightliness of a half-grown Newfoundland pup, while her cobbler was slow, weighty, and depressed in manner. Miss Bitt was shrill and voluble; Miss Morgan talked little, and then in a low, mumbling tone, and with an aggrieved air, as if resenting the task.

The two were typical of the younger hands from the slum suburbs. They served in the lower branches of the game, and were still novices. With experience and increase of income would come something like a sense of decorum, and a passion for fine raiment and brass bangles; but as yet Thripny was an undisciplined rascalion of a girl, street-bred, unconscious, and with no more restraint than the unowned, shambling, jubilant mongrel you may see brazenly claiming acquaintance with elegant young ladies in public places.

Turned loose from Spats's, Thripny tore down Egg Lane, her bony knees tossing up her sparse petticoats, her left hand hitching some detached or displaced portion of apparel, her right clutching her battered sugee crib basket, her scrap of a hat dangling from the bootlace, one end of which she always chewed as a precaution against high winds or casual mishaps. Now and again she might look back in her wild career and shout: "Come 'long, Mordie, here's er jinker!" And Miss Morgan, a bad second, would paddle behind, displaying no manner of interest in anything.

The grease-grimed lads at the egg, ham, and butter market looked out for Thripny, and whooped at her as she passed. The grimier young men in the potato depot assailed her with joyful badinage. Miss Bitt's troubles—she was bent on catching the first jinker or lorry for home at the Port and had time only for a breathless "Ga-an, get work!" which was no more than the civilities demanded.

If it happened to be a timber jinker Thripny dashed at the protruding beam and scrambled astride, excited and voluble, shouting encouragement to Miss Morgan as the stout girl made clumsy efforts to follow suit. At the rope works they were joined by four or five congenial spirits of their own age, sex and station, and so, triumphantly, with legs a-swing, squealing jubilant impudence at all sorts and conditions of men, the Pagans rode home.

The way to work in the morning was enlivened by frequent encounters

with jocose young milkmen, raucous sand carters, and whimsical butcher's assistants. Strange though it may seem, it is nevertheless true that no driver of a milk-cart could pass Jinny and Maud without shouting at them some terse sentiment, the humour of which lay in its gratuitous insolence. Thripny usually responded for both with a shrill yell: "A-a-a-h, 'ave it stitched!" or, "Hi, where yer goin' wi' the bones?"

The uninitiated might have thought the greeting and the response bitter, even vindictive. They were nothing of the kind. Often they were the preliminaries to an amorous friendship, and led to votive plates of hot peas and sociable rides in the swing-boats at the gay market on Saturdays.

Coffee Morgan and Thripny worked close together at the same board, and when not working they were linked together in an awkward embrace. They were the closest cobbers the factory had known, and yet Maud was never anything but sullen and depressed, whereas the factory often revolted against Jinny's joyful melodies because of their "damnable iteration." It needed Maud's warning growl: "Chuck it, Thripny!" a dozen times a day to repress her musical exuberance.

Then, one morning, Miss Bitt came in alone. "Gor bli!" said the packer, in amazement, "bin a funeral in the family, er what?"

"Speak t'cher equals!" said Thripny, with none of her usual vivacity.

Coffee Morgan came later, looking more morose than ever.

"Split partners, hev yeh, Corfee?" said the packer. "S'pose the dark man's come between yer?"

"Give yeh swipe cross the jore!" mumbled Miss Morgan.

At their board the pair worked in silence, as far apart as possible. Thripny had no inclination to sing; she was ill at ease. Maud's face was set sourly over her work, and she never raised her eyes. The Beauties were inquiring and derisive, and Jinny, who had hitherto done all the barracking for herself and Maud, and had always been effective in retort, was silent now. So matters remained till the afternoon, when Feathers intervened.

"It's like this," said the packer, addressing the factory, "Mord saw 'im first, 'n' Thripny's bin 'n' pinched him. No wonder Morgan's givin' 'er brusher—he's the pride iv the habbatoirs, ain't he, Mordie?"

Coffee Morgan was slapping paste all over her work, and her small, "greenery-yallery" eyes were turned up vindictively.

"Don't have him on yer thinker, little sister," continued Mills, with much sympathy, "he ain't th' on'y sardine in the tin. Put on yer spring millin'ry, 'n' get out after a squatter, why don't yeh?"

At this point Coffee Morgan's feelings became too many for her. She uttered a piggish scream of fury, and darted at Thripny. Clutching her bunch of short hair with one hand Maud smote her cobber of yesterday

about the face and head with her paste brush, and then, dropping the brush, got at her with the Beauties' favourite weapons, and scratched like a burrowing terrier.

Borne back against the board, slightly off her perpendicular, Thripny was quite helpless against the fury of her small enemy. She seemed overcome with a great amazement, and stared with wide-eyed, stupid surprise, while Miss Morgan scratched, and tore, and punched. Jinny Bitt's astonishment was so comical that, tragic as the incident was, the unfeeling Beauties laughed aloud.

The packer went to the rescue, and struggled with Coffee Morgan, while the lean foreman, in his excitement, endeavoured to walk through two pasting boards, and fell three times in ten yards, hastening to quell the riot.

Jinny and Maud were put to work at separate boards. The former did not recover from her surprise for twenty minutes, and then she started to cry, and wept long and bitterly, and her tears ran down the furrows Miss Morgan's nails had made.

During the following three days Jinny continued silent, and Maud vindictive. There was something of triumph in Jinny's air, however, that excited Maud beyond bearing. Five times she rushed Jinny with the intention of inflicting liberal bodily harm, but Maud was nowhere in a race with Thripny.

The factory was enjoying itself, but the lean foreman was thrown into pathetic distress of mind. Spats's was short-handed. If Fuzzy Ellis sacked a girl the authorities below would bound on him, and break his heart with duplicated abuse; and, on the other hand, if knowledge of the disturbance above came to the powers below, they would unite to abase and abuse him. That was what he was there for. Several stout pasters were posted between the foes to intercept and overcome Coffee Morgan when wrought too far by silent contemplation of her wrongs.

On Monday morning there was a new development. Maud came upstairs smiling, actually smiling. The Beauties squealed, Feathers cried "Wow!" and the town traveller collapsed on a stack of bags. Maud had not been known to smile even in the old happy days.

Jinny Bitt came up a few minutes later. Her eyes were red and swollen, and she was the picture of misery. The Beauties greeted her with a shout that broke her up, and, mopping her tears with the front of her jacket, she bellowed dismally on her way round to the changing-room.

There was a silence of seven minutes, and then a yell announced the outbreak of hostilities. The packer rushed, but was just too late. Thripny had struck Maud on the head with the hot, iron pasteladle, and Maud was thinking it over on the floor.

Now, the difficulty was to keep Jinny Bitt off Coffee Morgan. Jinny, as the turned worm, was much more ferocious than Maud had been. She had a tongue, too, and before noon the factory had Maud's history, and the history of Maud's mother, who, it appeared, once cleaned skins at a sausage mill, and of Maud's father, who had to be treated in gaol for a morbid habit of gathering bags of hens from other people's roosts at unseemly hours.

"'N' she cracks she's someone, 'n' wears asylum 'and-me-downs!" squealed Jinny. "What price pauper 'ats frim the Ladies' Beneverlent? Anyone kin put on dog when they cadges their rags frim a bloomin' institoot."

Coffee Morgan plied her nimble fingers, mumbling sourly all the time, only an occasional word or two like "scrougers," "sooer rats," and "low commonies" being articulate.

"I'll fight yeh," yelled Thripny defiantly. "I'll take it outer yeh, any day. Come 'n' 'it me now, 'n' y'll cop yer doss in the Morgue."

Maud mumbled on, but kept out of range. Thripny's demonstrations had cowed her.

"So yeh loored him back with yer pretty ways?" said the packer to Coffee Morgan at lunch-time.

"How yer talk!" growled Maud.

"The Pride's true t' yeh after all. 'Come back,' sez you, 'n' all will be fergot 'n' forgave, 'n' no questions arst'; 'n' now he's yours for keeps."

"The lad what's keepin' co. with me ain't got no use fer scraggs, if that's what yer song's erbout," said Miss Morgan, almost pertly.

Maud paid dearly for her triumph. Jinny harried her in the factory with hard blows and bitter speech, and she hunted her all the way home in pursuit of her vengeance. The sight of Thripny tearing down Egg Lane after her enemy was a new joy for the lads at the butter mart and the potato depot, and the "hoys" that resulted startled the town.

But another change came within a week. Jinny bobbed up on Friday, radiant.

"'Twiz all a mistook," she said joyfully to Feathers. "He's true t' me. Coffee's gone t' the tip."

"Bli' me," said the packer, "Ned's a bit shifty, ain't he?"

"Oh, we're pets now, me 'n' him. He's arst me t' Snadger Halligan's darnce nex' month"

For four days Maud was terribly depressed, and Jinny crowed over her without pity. Once Miss Morgan threw a ladle of hot paste over Thripny, and once the pair fought a destructive two-minute round in the lift corner, but there were many changes before Snadger Halligan's dance came off. Coffee Morgan came into her own again, and was deposed again. The

fluctuations of feeling wrought by the mysterious unknown awakened a hilarious interest amongst the Beauties, and the first question every day was "Who's got him this mornin', Thripny?" Through it all Maud and Jinny remained bitterest enemies.

Thripny was in possession of the vagrant fancy of the much beloved, and Snadger Halligan's dance was only two nights off. Which would have him for the "darnce"? The Beauties were much concerned, and betting was rife. Feathers was making a book on the event.

It was at lunch time. Feathers was sitting on his own bench, finishing his bundle, when an unknown came up the stairs. He was an under-sized, bullet-headed youth of about twenty-four, "ez plain ez a bottle iv pickled mussels," said the packer to his friend, the town traveller, "'n' look-in' like the cockie talker from a tuppenny push. He was jist erbout class ernough t' be a roustabout et a trainin' stable fer dogs, 'n' he 'ad the sting-proof cheek iv a Scotch auctioneer."

The stranger stopped at the top of the stairs, put his hands to his mouth, and uttered the familiar call of the early morning milkman. That identified him. Then he turned to the packer, and said:

"Got a tom name iv Bitt workin' 'ere erbart, ain't yeh?"

"Supposin'?" said the packer, with his mouth full.

"Oh, she's one of mine, tha's all."

"What-o, Billy-be-dam'd, are you *it*?" said the packer.

"Come orf, I'm no *it*," answered the lad. "I'm somethink."

"Yer dreamin'," scoffed Feathers.

Thripny had heard the call. She approached diffidently.

"Ello, Danny," she said. "Who'd 'a' thort?"

"'Ere's ther bit o' stick," said Danny to Feathers, and then he took Jinny aside, and for a few moments they talked in low voices, but with increasing feeling, and from over bales and round stacks the Beauties tittered and giggled at the prize boy who had kept Thripny Bitt and Coffee Morgan at deadly enmity for a month past. Maud stood at a little distance and glowered. It was presently seen that Danny and Miss Bitt were not agreeing too well.

"It's orf," said Danny; "I thort I'd tell yeh it's O double F orf. This is the chuck fer yow, Sticks. I'm otherwise engaged fer the future. Yeh got smooGIN' up ter Gopher Eddie at the Blondin, Chewsdee, 'n' that's the last quarter. It's me takin' Little Bilk-street ter the darnce at Snadger's—Bilk-street! Put it in yer book. No more fact'ry rats for Danno." This was hurled at Maud, who was edging up. Dan threw out his hand, edge on, and wreathed lip and nose contemptuously. "No more rats, d' y' 'ear? Both o' yeh, when yer meets me next, 'll get brusher."

Dan had turned at the top of the stairs to deliver the last salute, and a tornado of discarded lunch struck him, and blotted him out. The Beauties considered “fact'ry rats” an offensive phrase.

“Bilk-street!” gasped Thripny.

“It's Liz Brickly,” mumbled Miss Morgan.

Thripny flew to the balusters, and yelled abuse after Danny. Danny responded in kind as he passed down in a shower of scraps. Mills gave him “the order” most offensively.

“Gar-r-rt, cat's milk,” cried Miss Bitt. “Wouldn't be seen with your sort at a bottle-oh's garding party.”

“Scrouger! Scrouger!” mumbled Coffee Morgan, spitting after the retreating lad. “Who bit the pig?”

“Ever speak t' me agin 'n' y'll cop out,” said Jinny. “I'll put the John on ter yeh, that's what.”

“Cat's milk! Cat's milk!” said Maud, sullenly. She was not audible five yards off, but wished to keep her end up.

Jinny had the last words, a triumphant yell covering Dan with odium as a stealer of door mats.

“Now yiv done yerselves in, both iv yeh,” said the packer. “Hensforth, Danno's on'y a cherished mem'ry. Bilk-street's got him clinched.”

“Our trubs!” answered Thripny, with terrible scorn. She wound a long, thin arm affectionately around Maud. Maud responded in kind

“Don' want nothink t' do with low larrikins like Danno, we don't,” mumbled Miss Morgan, and the two went down the room, linked lovingly.

The *entente cordiale* was restored.

Chapter XIII. The Rescue.

IT was Sunday. There were three of our friends in the darkened bar. Benno, the Don and Mr. William King. They had been living expensively during the last few hours, and had recently arrived at a due sense of their importance in the great scheme of things. The Don, who was a sturdy drinker of native ales, was as thoroughly "pickled" as little Mr. Ben Dickson, a mere amateur and a thirster of wretched capacity; but this spree was something in the nature of a handicap, Nicholas Don having started on a career of profligacy early in the day. He associated himself with Billy King in the afternoon, and towards evening the two fell in with Benno, and straightway adopted the small clerk with the intention of making him as disgraceful as themselves.

As a result of this nice adjustment, the Don, Benno, and Billy King were in a corresponding condition of exaltation and noble pride. Their admiration for each other was only exceeded by the appreciation each had of his own splendid qualities as a man and a brother, a public-spirited citizen, a friend of virtue, and a heroic champion of the poor and down-trodden

The conversation had taken a philosophical turn; it bore gravely on the shocking inequalities fostered by the existing social system, the increasing tyranny of the rich, the sweat and agony of the toiling masses. There were moments when the little clerk felt strongly impelled to go out and kill a plutocrat in the interests of the working man. He had mentioned it more than once.

Nicholas Don set down his pewter where the counter should have been, but wasn't, and gazed at Benno with brimming eyes. He embraced him.

"I'm ver' fon' iv you, Benno," he said. "You're splennid fel'r. Man iv me own 'eart Brave's er lion. True's steel. What I like in you, Dickson, is there's no beas'ly pride 'bout you—'n' you're brave!"

Benno was much moved. He seized the Don's hand, and wrung it with silent fervour. It was a touching scene. Billy King, from under whose hat tiny drops of perspiration were oozing, surveyed it with symptoms of profound emotion.

"Yes y' are," said Nicholas, defiantly "ye're brave. You stan' up fer the sufrin' masses, same's me"

"Me too," said Billy King. He was very pale, but determined. "Le's do 'r die," he said.

Nicholas Don embraced Billy with the other arm. He regarded him with tender pride. "'Ere, 'ere!" he said. "We'll stan' t'gether. 'S time somethin'

was put down. There's too much unnecessary suf'rin' poor in th' worl'. The rich is gettin' richer, 'n' the poor's gettin' poorer! Look et th' widder 'n' th' orphan," he cried. "Look et th' widder 'n' th' orphan!" he repeated still more vehemently.

Benno burst into tears. There was silence for a few moments. The other two regarded "our Mr. Dickson" in puzzled melancholy. They were struggling to recall the circumstances.

"Widder 'n' orphan," said Billy King, prompting, but his brilliant mind refused to connect Benno's tears with the argument.

The two fell on Dickson, they smothered him with sympathy. Billy King wiped his eye. The Don patted him on the back, and murmured soothingly. "Buck up, ol' man," he said. "Buck up. Never say die while yeh got strong 'eart 'n' stout 'ead."

It appeared that Mr. Dickson was crying over the widow and the orphan in a general sort of way. He thought he once knew a widow and orphan somewhere. He could not recollect where. He thought she was pale and beautiful with a look of heavenly resignation, but he was not sure. However, his grief was not for any individual case; it was for widows and orphans as a class. He wept on principle.

Benno's friends did not despise his tears; they respected him for them.

"Shows ten'er, symp'thetic nature," said Nicholas. "Aver drink?"

The Don looked narrowly at the two pewters on the counter. His own was on the floor. He counted the pots, and a worried calculation fled across his mind.

"Where's ol' Billy gone?" he said. He counted the pewters again. Billy was still absent, so he drank Billy's beer.

They had another, and the conversation developed greater fervour. It became evident that the democracy must awake and arise. In the absence of a general awakening and arising the three were prepared to awake and arise entirely on their own responsibility.

"There's their wireless telegraphy 'n' their preferential votin'," said the Don, argumentatively; "what good 're they t' the workin' man? What we want's 'quality iv opporchewnity. 'Quality iv opporchewnity," he repeated.

"Yesh," said Benno, "quali vopertunity."

"'N' liberty iv the subjec'," said Billy King. "Ow 'ave they bin treatin' Hemming? What price a free country where they pinch a pore man fer speakin' his mind?"

"Tha's right," said the Don, sagaciously; "tha's right. It's hinfringement iv the rights iv free speech."

"Somethin' 'll 'ave t' be done!" Benno was quite positive about it. He saw the country sliding to ruin. Immediate action was called for. "'N' it's up to

us t' do it," he said. "Hemming's a frien' iv the strugglin' masses Damn it, he's frien' o' mine!"

Hemming had been arrested that morning for inflammatory language in the course of a Yarrabank oration dealing with constituted authorities, conventional religions, and great persons, and was then languishing in a prison cell. Billy's reminder gave point and purpose to the fine emotions of the brothers in beer. Their aspirations took form. Here was an object, a mission.

"It's outragis," said Nicholas Don. "Hemmin's a decent bloke. He hasn't done nobody any 'arm; 'n' jist because he's speakin' up fer suf'rin' humanity the Johns runs him in. This 'as gotter be put a stop to." He hit the counter with his pint. "This 'as gotter be put a stop to!" he said decisively, addressing the barmaid. "Don' care hang washer say."

"Righto," cried the little clerk. "It's up t' us t' use our influence."

"We'll see someone 'bout it," said Billy King, vaguely.

Determination was stamped upon their brows. Enthusiasm was in their hearts. Their souls were suffused with a righteous scorn for the oppressor and a hatred of wrong-doing. They had another drink.

"Now we'll go t' get that man out," said the Don.

"Yesh, now we'll gettimout 'r perish in attempt," said Kingie.

"Liberty 'r death!" cried Benno.

They shook hands on it, and marched resolutely into the street.

The three patriots did not merely hail a tram, they commandeered one. They were public-spirited men with a great purpose. Already their quest had assumed the dignity of a popular rising. They did not stop the tram with insolence or hauteur, but there was a terrible impressiveness about their joint behest that might have stopped a universe. The whole tram system trembled and obeyed.

Benno explained to the conductor that they were bound for the city to secure the immediate release from durance vile of good Comrade Hemming. It was understood that in these circumstances the tram would be rushed straight through, and when presently it stopped to pick up passengers the public benefactors were hurt and indignant. It seemed to them that the conductor was showing a lamentable lack of enthusiasm in a great cause. Benno threatened to report him. He promised to hold the tramway system up to popular odium. He expressed the belief that that system was no friend of the working man.

When the three reached the city their grand purpose was still uppermost in their minds. They knew perfectly well what they were going to do. They were about to visit the powers, and by the exercise of their own enormous personal influence and their great perspicacity induce them to throw open

the gaol doors to the martyred Hemming.

In the event of a failure of the methods, which however, was not likely, Nicholas Don was prepared to remind the Premier that their force of character alone was preventing a terrible rising, and that what restraint they exerted over an outraged and furious populace would be withdrawn at once if the just request of the democracy were not instantly complied with.

They met Fuzzy Ellis. Fuzzy was leading four little nephews and nieces. He did not seem over-joyed to see them. They backed him against the Town Hall and explained their mission to him. They explained it at great length. Fuzzy tried to get away, but they held him to the wall, saying that he must not detain them, as it was absolutely necessary that they should go at once and bring the Chief Justice to release Comrade Hemming.

Fuzzy Ellis was painfully propitiatory. He sympathised with everything. He agreed with everybody. His little nephews and nieces clung to his legs, and Benno and Nicholas and Billy King enlarged on the infamy of which constituted authority had been guilty in incarcerating that noble soul, Comrade Hemming. Finally they got very angry with Fuzzy for detaining them, knowing the importance and urgency of their mission. and Benno dismissed him with scorn and contempt.

“It's no use yer talkin', our min's made up,” said the clerk. “We'll 'ave 'im out 'r perish the 'tempt. What good 're you t' th' workin' man? You're hireling iv the rich. Stan' 'side! Stan' 'side, I say!”

They passed on. The Don suggested that their next course was to have a drink. No doubt that was the proper procedure. There was not a dissentient voice. Don knew a pub.

In another dark, secluded bar they told the vague, furtive barmaid their splendid intention. They swore her to secrecy; and then, having looked up the address of the Prime Minister in a directory, they went forth again, firm in their purpose.

Billy King was “on the door” at another pub, and after that they took tram to a northern suburb to visit a hotel where the Don was known and respected.

All this time their zeal in the interests of the people's champion, Comrade Hemming, burned white hot. Through many dim, confused excursions, it remained with them. There was a project to rouse the people, and lead an armed insurrection to tear down the gaol. There was a passionate interview with a fat man in a motor car—a fat man whom the three patriots insisted was the Premier, and whom they afterwards wanted to fight for trying to impose himself upon them as the Premier.

The three reformers spent half-an-hour knocking up the Premier at a large city wool store; and Benno was publicly kicked by the watchman

before he would desist. Later, a policeman drove them from the steps of Parliament House, where the Don was making a passionate speech to some lampposts, while his satellites slept at his feet.

At a quarter past eleven o'clock three splendid, public-spirited electors passed out over Prince's Bridge, and along the St. Kilda-road in the soft and kindly light of the full moon. They were no longer eloquent. Their gait was eccentric; their minds were clouded. Still, they were true to their trust. The demands of a sublime duty drove them forward. A man tried to bar their way at the big gates. He seemed to have a gun. His behaviour was most extraordinary. The Don explained to him that there was not a moment to lose.

“Life 'n' libity!” cried Benno.

“Nothin' turn us 'side,” said Billy King. “Victim-iv-brutal-tyranny-languishin'-prison.”

The man with the gun was obdurate, and the Don did something to him. The three heroes passed over that man's body, and on to the residence of the Governor-General to accomplish their object.

“Pity we f'got t' bring brass band,” said the Don.

Wild telephones summoned the police in numbers, and when they arrived they found three young men besieging Government House. One was hauling at the bell, another knocked at a window, the third was delivering a stirring oration from his seat on the door mat. The subsequent remarks of the young men conveyed the idea that they wanted the Governor-General's assistance in striking for freedom. They thought His Excellency would get up and do justice to a wronged man if they were admitted to his bedside to put the matter to him in its true light.

When Benno awoke on Monday morning it was with a horrible sense of suffering and calamity. His bones were full of aches. His head was as heavy as a pig of lead. His mouth was littered with Dead Sea fruit, and a burning thirst consumed his vitals. He groaned, he blinked, he stirred on his bed of tumbled bricks. Then he uttered a cry of apprehension, and sat up. Wildly he shook his companions from their sleep, wildly they looked upon the four walls and the wretched furnishing.

“Jimmy Jee, we're pinched!” The wail came from the lips of Billy King.

It was terribly true—they were in a cell. There was a fourth man in the drear compartment. He sat on a bunk, and gazed at them with contempt.

“It's a damnable thing that a decent man should have to spend a night with a herd of stale drunks like you,” he said disgustedly.

The fourth man was Comrade Hemming!

Chapter XIV. An Amorous Boy.

THE lads who came to the bag factory in the course of a few years were many and various. They represented pretty well all possible variants of the human boy, and quaint and curious types were numerous. The quaintest of all was Claude Alva Arthur Johns—miscalled Snivel—the Amorous Boy.

Claude was not yet fifteen, and was plainly a spoilt child. This was his first job. He came upstairs on his first morning, clinging to the hand of his papa, timorous and tearful.

Johns, senior, was a type of the highly respectable mechanic, the perfect model of all those splendid drawings of the British workman that adorned the BAND OF HOPE, and other pious, non-alcoholic publications familiar in our youth. He had the same surprising and shining cleanliness, the same benignant, ox-like eye, the same trim, hyacinthine side-whiskers, the same luxuriant hair deftly combed into a “cockie,” and was obviously possessed of all those gentle virtues that endear the teetotal, church-going English mechanic to the editors of moral publications for the very young.

Claude was a smaller edition of his excellent parent—spotless, deftly combed, highly polished as to face and boots, and extremely proficient in “manners.” He took off his hat on entering the factory; he called the packer “Sir,” and plaintively begged Harrerbeller Harte's pardon for merely being alive. Master Johns's large, turned-down collar gave him an infantile appearance, which was accentuated by his shy blue eye and childish diffidence.

Billy the Boy, who had followed in that spirit of earnest investigation so characteristic of him, surveyed Claude with disgust that implied an abandonment of all hope in the future of the human race.

“Now yiv got it,” he said to the packer. “Iv it ain't the king stinker boy, pickle me.”

“Wha's that?” asked Mills.

“G'out. A stinker boy's a bub et school what won't fight nothin', smooges t' the teachers, narks everythin', 'n's clean an' pretty alwiz. You know—it's granny's ickle sweetie—early t' bed, 'n' early t' rise, 'n' gets sops fer breckfist every day.”

Having commended Claude to the care of the foreman, with much solicitude, the elder Johns departed leaving his son leaning over the balusters of the parcel-well by the stairs, tremulous and desolate.

When his father passed from sight Claude's apprehension quite overcame him. He cried “Dadder! dadder!” in despair, and then blubbered miserably.

The ruffianly young printer's devil was struck speechless at the sight. He

approached Master Johns, he examined him closely, and then, diving a knuckle into each eye, he too roared in an excess of grotesque woe.

Claude raised his voice. Billy the Boy raised his Billy's anguish was something awful. Master Johns was touched at this generous sympathy. He ceased crying himself and looked tenderly at the evil.

“Dud-don't kuck-cry, little boy,” he said.

That finished Billy. He hadn't believed such simplicity could exist. He gaped dumbly for a moment, and then fell back in a simulated fit, and the packer took him up by the ear and solemnly slid down stairs.

“Yiv got somethin' t' dry-nurse now, Feathers,” cried Billy from the first landing. “Lucky yer fond iv kids. Stick it in a corner with a crust t' suck, 'n' it'll be good.”

Harrerbeller Harte, whose camel-like ungainliness and blatant humour masked a somewhat sensitive soul, took Claude under her wing, fashioned a hessian apron for him, and, having divested him of his coat and his impossible collar, decked him for labour, and handed him over to the packer.

“What's yer name?” said Mills.

“please, sir, Claude Alva Arthur”——

“Time flies,” interjected the packer. “S'pose we make it Snivel? It's more like yer.”

Mills instructed Master Johns in the art of making up 141b. parcels, and the youth shaped better than might have been expected. In the course of a few days he was more at home in the factory than many hardened boys had succeeded in being in as many weeks.

Feminine company was congenial to Claude. He revelled in it. On the second day he kissed Harrerbeller, and that was more than a grown man would have done in seven years. He was already very partial to the ex-professional fat girl too, and had smoozed about prim Miss Magill's board a good deal.

Claude's way with the women was distressingly ingenuous, and he had none of a boy's natural shame about cuddling or being cuddled. He offered caresses in company without compunction, and received them unabashed. To Billy the Boy he was a source of unending amazement, and an object of unmitigated loathing. To vindicate the honour of his class the Boy felt called upon to boot Claude every time he found him guilty of conduct unbecoming a grown lad.

“Get t' yer game,” he snorted disgustedly, coming upon Claude dangling about a paster of thirty, with an arm round her waist, and he punted him skilfully. “Want people t' think y' ain't weaned? Look 'ere, you'll cop sock-o every time I get onter yeh playin' handies, 'r doin' duckie with our

hempeoyees. Take that t' go on with. It'll make a man iv yeh!" He punted Claude again and then had to double smartly, and dive for the next flat to evade retribution from Feathers.

Claude wept. Claude always did weep. An unkind word would drive Claude to an excess of tears, and make him bleat like a motherless calf. The packer had no patience with his new assistant's deplorable weaknesses, but was not willing to share with Billy the authority he himself had usurped from the timid foreman.

In fact, Claude's snivelling was a new and poignant horror in the professional career of Mills. Where another boy would take a curse and a cuff uncomplainingly, counting it all in the day's work, Snivel, if sternly rebuked, would relapse into a condition of tearful misery, and cry copiously for twenty minutes or so. When he had grown accustomed to the place, a tirade of doleful complaint went with the long blubbing.

"Come outer that, 'n' dig in," said Feathers, finding Claude philandering with the machinists when there was a rush on. "We ain't hirin' yeh t' play hose you blighted gooey"

Claude came, his face wreathed into an expression of deep-seated spiritual anguish and tears flowing down his cheeks.

"There you go," he blubbered; "there you go, getting on to me again. You're always getting on to me. Everybody gets on to me. I wish I was dead!"

"Jimmy Jee! that would be er himprovement," said the packer. "I'll squeeze half a dollar fer the undertaker's exes."

"Dicken there, Feathers," chimed in Benno; "let the kid be. It's his teeth worryin' him. His mother sez he ain't t' be teased."

"That's right," wailed Claude, "insult my mother now; go on, insult my dear mother. If I was a man I would kill you but you know I am only a boy, and you do everything you can to make me unhappy."

Snivel boo-hooed, and his tears splashed on the bags he was handling.

Billy the Boy went to him murmuring the soothing prattle usually addressed to fretful babies. arranged his apron with a few motherly touches and then tenderly wiped his nose with a bunch of cotton waste that left blobs of ink on Claude's pink cheeks. Master Johns put up a pitiful cry. Benno laughed derisively, and Feathers plaintively requested the world at large to "give it milk fer the love iv Heaving."

There was a yell of protest from the girls. Harrerbeller Harte dashed at Billy with her brush, and the devil jumped for the lift chain, and slid into the depths. Harrerbeller cleaned Claude's face with the softer parts of her very pasty skirt, subjecting Feathers and Benno to contemptuous criticism the while.

“Lor' bli,” she said, “yorter be shot, a pair iv buck larrikins slingin' off at a bit iv a kid.”

“Terust him not, gentle lydie,” sang Feathers. “Bit iv a kid,” he said—“that? 'Struth, he's a bloated Brigham Young, 'n' he ain' troo t' you, Harrerbeller. He loves some others. What erbout you, Beller, wastin' yer wealth iv affection on a goody-goody-two-shoes when y'orter be standin' up agin a sixteen stun p'leeceman?”

Miss Harte almost blushed. “What's torkin'?” she said contemptuously, retiring to her table.

Nothing surprised Feathers so much as the attitude of the elder Beauties towards Claude Alva Arthur Johns. The younger girls treated him with the derision he deserved; the youngest—hoydens of about Claude's own age—quarrelled with him continually, and slaps were frequently exchanged; but the elder girls and the old ones mothered him quite affectionately. When Snivel let them out by the basement door at night, after overtime, he kissed them all.

“Strike me cock-eyed iv the old dorkin's ain't stricken with it,” said Mills to the town traveller. “It's a taste iv the unexpected. They waited for him comin' 'n' he never come at all, 'n' now this is a sort iv Consolation Stakes. Et first 'twas had out in th' open, but now it's goin' inter hidin' behind the bales 'n' stacks, 'n' takin' on the character n' complexion iv 'n established smooze, with a touch iv the dear old Auntie Aggie business thrown in fer the sake iv decorum. Ez fer Snivel, he's perfectly satisfied. He's a whale fer motherly love 'n' auntly affection 'n' sisterly sollicitude. Takes it all shapes, 'e does. He'd rather lean his bonny curls up agin a gentle breast than carry bricks.”

It was true that the demonstrations of affection for Claude, at first quite careless, had become somewhat covert, but the Beauties were responsible for this. They had grown sensitive to the gibes of the packer, and, although they might accept Claude's caresses in comparative seclusion, they were impelled to restrain his innocent impetuosity in the eye of the factory. No barracking could alter Snivel's affectionate little ways, but it often awoke tearful remonstrance.

“Well, I'm blessed!” he would cry with doleful self-pity. “It's enough to break a fellow's heart, abusing him just because he's got a loving disposition. You're cruel wretches, and I hate you!”

Then Claude would weep many tears, grumbling at his work about the packer's wickedness and want of brotherly love.

“You're always making my poor dear mamma cry with the way you treat me!” he blurted one afternoon, following the disclosure with a howl so poignant that Fuzzy came tumbling down the flat, thinking the boy had

sustained a mortal injury.

The printer's devil remained the sorest trial Snivel was called upon to endure. Billy found an infernal joy in pursuing him. Claude had to have a bodyguard of pasters going home in the evening and coming in in the morning; and Billy the Boy ferreted him out amongst the stacks at lunch-time, and, finding him in affectionate juxtaposition with the fat girl or Harrerbeller, or Miss Magill, or some other, mounted a bale and pointed out the error of his ways in language of remarkable fluency.

"I wish I'd had the bringin' of yeh up," said Billy the Boy.

Claude had a favourite in the factory It was Miss Lucy Tooth, machinist. She was a thin, decorous woman of twenty-seven, with superior airs and eyebrows permanently elevated. She called Snivel "a sweet boy," and "a perfect little gentleman," and coddled him a good deal. Then came the announcement of the machinist's approaching marriage. It was not broken to Claude gently; the awful truth was flashed upon him, and it brought on one of his worst bursts.

"There, I knew you didn't love me! You just pretended to love me, and you loved somebody else all the time." He was crying wretchedly. "I don't care, I won't stand it," he bleated. "Nobody loves me. I'll kill myself! I'll kill myself!"

Claude rushed to the recess by the lift where stood the taps and the paste-boiler, and presently sounds of a mild commotion issued from that quarter. Benno made a somewhat anxious move.

"Snivel's gorn to kill hisself," said Feathers; "don't disturb him."

But there followed screams and cries of terror, and the packer was constrained to approach the disturbed centre in a leisurely way. He found Master Johns with his head and shoulders burrowed down in a bin, and three or four folders standing round in helpless consternation. Claude was actually endeavouring to drown himself in flour. He was pulled out, and spread on the floor in an unconscious condition, and he could not breathe till about a pint of flour had been dug out of his wide-open mouth.

" 'Twas a cold-blooded case iv attempted suericide while in a state iv unsound mind," said Feathers, and there was more of gravity and thoughtfulness in his attitude towards Snivel after that.

When Miss Tooth had gone Snivel was more than usually lachrymose for a week, and then he permitted Kitty Coudray to console him.

"Coudray's makin' a little love with his gills now," Feathers informed Goudy, who was interested in the development of Snivel. "She doesn't know it's loaded, but Sonny's a mummer's boy what'll make scandals afore he's hanged, take it frim me. He's got too much emotion fer his size in knickers."

Feathers was a true prophet. Within a fortnight a bloke came to visit Kitty. The whisper went round that this was her “regular,” and Claude heard it, and began to fret.

The boy was not so demonstrative in his grief as usual, however. But it happened that when Kitty's bloke passed down stairs, Claude was standing at the drop with three 28lb. parcels of brown bags in the rope, balanced on the handrail.

With practice it was easy to swing a load like this on the rope and pulley into any flat. Claude let the lot down with a rush, swung it badly and it took Kitty Coudray's regular boy in the small of the back, wiped him off the stairs, kicked him head over tip into the well, and then the whole 84lbs. struck him in the wind as he lay on the asphalt floor of the basement, with a broken collarbone and minor injuries.

The packer did not pause to investigate. He took Claude Alva Arthur Johns by the scruff, and kicked him all the way to the changing room, and there gave him a paternal doing. Later, Mills said to the foreman:

“Ain't yeh thinkin' it's time we made representations below erbout this sweet child of ours? Don't it strike you he ain't no fit companion for me 'n' you 'n' innocence 'n' beauty generally?”

“He's a very nice lad, only a little unfortunate,” faltered Ellis.

“Oh, he's a peach bloom, he is, but it's up t' you t' be tired of him afore he bites holes in the wall. Tryin' t' drown hisself in the flour bar'l was a bit hookity, but nothin' t' homycide. Look 'ere, you think droppin' them goods on the lad just now was haccidental. Yer wrong. I was watching his nibs, 'n' it was dam, deliberite manslaughter. Claudie's too passionite for a hot shop like this; better recommend his ole pot 'n' pan t' put him in a ice mill.”

So it happened that Claude Johns was passed out, but Feathers is waiting for him to turn up in a striking evening-paper sensation.

Chapter XV. A Prank That Reacted

HENRY INMAN had already drunk more beer than was good for him when he drifted into the Dago's little, dark, dirty smoke-house of a wine shop in the Black Slum, a blind alley backing a jumble of warehouses and Sin Fat's odoriferous banana market.

But if Henry took a drop too much he had always the melancholy satisfaction of knowing that he was driven to it. People, Fate, circumstances and events combined with malicious diligence to drive Henry to drink. To begin with he was at the pitiful necessity of having to earn his own living by the sweat of his brow when the weather was sultry, and this, to a young man of his temperament, was sufficient justification for a little indulgence. Then there were the sisters and mother at home, who nagged at him to mend his manners and customs and to contribute more liberally towards the household expenses; and they introduced Brother Dripstone Meekin, from No. 3 Blue Tent of the Fighting Rechabites, to point out the error of his ways, from two to four on Sundays, and endeavour to win him to temperance.

Henry was often surprised at his own moderation when he considered the number and persistence of the forces impelling him.

Reekie's wine shop was no place for a man, already stricken in drink. The Dago's wines possessed some of the qualities of corrosive sublimate, and, acting alone, rapidly undermined the intellect and the higher instincts of man; but operating in conjunction with beer or any other foreign substance, they set up almost immediate acute inflammation of the faculties.

"Good-a-ni', Meester," said the bulky licensee, lounging in the doorway, his long, white grin flashing like a bared knife through the black stubble. "Queek, queek! you miss-a th' fun. Insi' th' boys they make-a th' 'ell-play. The great-a time eet is. Ah, gran'!"

Up went Reekie's hands in affected ecstasy.

"Righto, Metto!" cried Henry, clapping the Dago's fat back with a fine show of appreciation, it was part of the convention, to affect an airy familiarity with this blowsy ruffian, and to be intimate with the frequenters of his den. You could not expect to be rated as a young devil, a no-doubt bad lad, and a real sport if you were not bosom brothers with Fiani and quite at home in his grimy parlour bar, with the tinted barmaids, the old grey cat, and the buckled piano.

The wine-seller had a tremendous name that steeplechased across the front of his shop and half-way round the building, but the customers had broken it into seven pieces, and they used the fragments indiscriminately.

Fiani bustled Inman towards the parlour.

“Th' boy-a they cry out—they speak-a for 'Enry. They want-a 'Enry, they say-a th' fine fella, th' splendid-a fella, 'Enry. Queek, queek!” Reekie resented any delay in getting down to business.

Inman was greeted with a shout of boozy enthusiasm when he entered the back parlour. Three acquaintances of his held two strangers to the wine bar; a red-headed youth was carving his initials on the grand piano; the brunette barmaid, a pale Australian with Chinese symptoms, was arranging her bunch of black mule's wool at the dingy mirror behind the shelves; the lemon-yellow blonde devoted her time and talents to the younger of the two strangers. Everybody smoked cigarettes. The small counter pinched the girls into a corner, with a few wine bottles fraudulently labelled “Claret,” “Burgundy,” “Port,” etc.

“'Ello, 'ello, Willie,” cried the brunette. “What ink are you drinkin'?”

“Make it red,” answered Inman. There was no pretence of expecting virgin purity in Reekie's liquors.

The taller of the two strangers insisted on paying for Henry's drink. “Any fren' o' yours sa fren' o' mine,” he explained to the company.

Inman and the newcomers were formally introduced, the latter as Jim and Bill. There was an uncertainty as to the correctness of these names; in fact, nobody could guarantee which was Jim and which Bill, least of all Bill and Jim; but no man present was in a condition to worry over trifles.

Bill and Jim were American sailors, both very young, clean-limbed, clear-skinned, fresh from the green sea, and both open-hearted and fairly ingenuous, despite the reputation for precocity in wickedness that attaches to sailormen all the world over.

Johno Hobbs and Raymond Cato, alias “The Toucher,” had met the sailors at a riverside bar. Drinks and compliments were exchanged, and the four fraternised. Then the Australians, with the best intentions in the world, started out to show the Americans the hospitality of the town. Cordial relations deepened with successive refreshments. In an hour the four agreed among themselves, with kindest regard, that Americans and Australians were first cousins on both sides, and that America and Australia united could dictate terms to creation.

“As fer Japan,” said Johno Hobbs, resuming the conversation, when Henry was comfortably disposed, “let 'em get gaudy ideas about ownin' the earth, and they'll have We-Us t' deal with.” Hobbs ranged alongside the tall sailor.

“Them's the facts,” said the sailor, with Bacchic gravity. “We call off the spread of Japanese influence, and the Orient gets biffed.”

“'Ave another?” Cato was gloriously reckless.

They had another. Hobbs proposed "Hail Columbia" as a toast, and sat down to the piano to sing "The Star Spangled Banner." Reekie's piano was the only ancient ruin Australia could boast of. When Hobbs sparred with it, it made hideous noises like the jangling of tin-ware on a drover's horse, but Hobbs's singing provoked immense enthusiasm. "Advance Australia" was demanded, and Reekie's grey cat's nine kittens rallied round their mother on the lid, and added their noisy protestations to hers. All hands joined in the chorus. It was a moment of concord and patriotic fervour.

"Fill 'em up again," said Henry Inman.

Henry was playing his part, but, truth to tell, he was not happy. It had been his privilege to monopolise the attentions of the lemon-yellow barmaid on occasions like this, but to-night she was absorbed in the blue-eyed sailor, who seemed to have most right to the name of Jim, and Henry's pride was hurt.

Jim's years of discretion were yet far off; he had drunk much more back-lane beer and Barcoo burgundy than was good for him, and he was seeing things in quaint perspective and through a glamour of beatitude. Belle Devoy, the blonde, was considerably his senior, and she "made up" with the audacity of an elderly circus rider, but Jim thought her rarely beautiful. She had whispered to him the sad story of her life, and his manliness was tired. He was a monument of chivalry.

Belle loved to tell the sad story of her life, with its sorrows, its sicknesses and sufferings, its heroic struggles with adversity, and its triumphs over the machinations of wicked men. Jim believed. Just then he was prepared to believe anything creditable to the fair. He was very respectful to Miss Devoy, very gentle with her, and Belle was deeply touched. She drank wine with him, clinking glasses like a perfect lady.

Inman soured. He felt that he was being badly treated. He was out on the edge, he who should lead the band. With the grand audacity with which drink sometimes endowed him, Henry began to blurt derision, but his gibes were lost in the din and in the thick, smoky atmosphere of international conviviality.

The sailors called for fresh bottles. Belle and Miss Peony Dodd, the brunette, had to help to do honour to the great men of two great countries. They toasted George Washington and Captain Cook, President Roosevelt and Alfred Deakin. Then Jim, striking as dignified and perpendicular an attitude as circumstances would permit, gravely and gallantly proposed the health of Miss Belle Devoy.

"Mos' bu'ful garden in Beauty's blossom," said Jim, with a burst of poesy.

The figure was mixed, but who cared?—the sentiment was all right. They

drank the toast with jubilation.

This incident served to fix attention on Jim and the barmaid. The emotions of the company took a new trend.

“Jimmy Jee! They're shook to their foundations,” cried Inman. “It's a case of love et first sight, and a complex attack at that.”

“'Merica 'n' 'Stralia, hooray!” cried the red-headed youth. He swung his glass in the air, and fell in a sitting position in the corner behind the piano, and was not heard from again for some time.

Raymond Cato solemnly clapped the sailor on the back.

“Congrasherlations, old fl'r,” he said, affectionately. “She's goo' girl!”

“Girl any man ud be proud of,' added Johno Hobbs.

“Oh, go on; let go!” giggled Belle. “I'm sure me and Mr. Jim is on 'y friends.”

Jim took her hand and held it. “Mos' bu'ful garden in Beauty's blossom,” he repeated, vaguely.

Belle's heart was stirred, or, possibly, Reekie's red Burgundy had obscured her natural sense of propriety. She sat on the counter, and wound an arm about Jim's neck. The others stood off, and surveyed the touching tableau with owl-like earnestness.

Hobbs began a speech in which he gave expression to his opinion that a match between Miss Belle Devoy, of Melbourne, Australia, and our friend and ally, Jim, of United States, America, would be a source of gratification on two continents, and would serve to bind together still more closely the people of the great English-speaking countries. It was a very fine speech, and provoked yells of approval and another toast.

At this stage Henry Inman conceived the idea of his magnificent joke. Why not marry Belle and Jim as a climax for the big spree?

It was not a new joke. There are many men in Australia, who have had the quaint experience of awakening after a night of wassail, and finding themselves well and truly married to total strangers. Melbourne “marriage shops” for the convenience of casuals were open at almost all hours, and in them an impulsive couple could be married by a duly-qualified clergyman (of a kind), equipped with a ring, and supplied with witnesses for a trifling cost. Henry knew of one man who had recovered from a jamboree to a knowledge of the fact that he was possessed of a legally-wedded wife whose face he did not recollect, and whose maiden name he did not know.

All the elements for the magnificent, merry, and mischievous prank were at hand. Inman began to work them up. He was drunk, but not quite so thoroughly obfuscated as the others, and he had sense enough to keep the general attention fixed on the idea of a love-match between Jim and the lemon-yellow barmaid.

So the idea grew until it was quite understood by the company that Jim's marriage with Belle was fore-ordained. Bill, who at first seemed to possess a puzzled impression that there was some show of unnecessary haste, eventually became a clamorous advocate of short engagements and early marriages. He insisted on being best man.

This point was not reached without a further liberal consumption of Reekie's red Burgundy, however, and meanwhile Henry was losing command of his gorgeous idea. It had a misty effect now, but he had brilliant intervals, when he saw his purpose clearly enough.

When closing time came even Belle and Peony had abandoned their earlier impression that it was all a joke. An inquisitive policeman brought festivities to a hasty close, and precipitated the nuptials.

Presently the members of the party found themselves in the street, animated with a fugitive impression that a sacred duty lay before them. They pursued it with the sobriety and decorum the occasion demanded. They were seeking Swinnerton's Matrimonial Bureau.

Raymond Cato led the way. Bill followed importantly, with the lady on his arm. Inman and the bridesmaid, Miss Peony Dodd, came next. The bridegroom and Johno Hobbs were in the rear.

A feeble light burned in Swinnerton's windows, but the proprietor of the Matrimonial Bureau and his tame parson were lurking for possible victims, and the party had a cordial reception.

Raymond Cato explained the situation, and tendered the fees, the sum of which had been contributed by all concerned, for Henry had taken round the hat at Reekie's. Meanwhile the prospective bridegroom and Johno were having a contest of courtesy at the street door.

“'Merica first,” said Johno, politely making way for his companion.

“Not a' tall,” replied Jim, with equal cordiality.

“You firs', Jim—bri'groom firs',” insisted Johno.

Jim solved the problem. “We'll go togerrer,” he said. They linked arms, and he made another stagger, stuck in the narrow doorway, rebounded, and sat down on the mat, where, after a minute's inlence, Jim asked with some anxiety:

“Say Ned, wheresh thish ole paraffin drag whirl-anyway?”

Johno did not know. He thought they were going to a wedding, or perhaps it was a funeral. On second thoughts he was sure it was a funeral. In endeavouring to preserve the solemnity proper to their character as chief mourners both fell asleep

Inside while the proprietor was arranging preliminaries, a vague uneasiness was manifesting itself among the wedding party. It knew it was a wedding party, but it was hazy about details.

“Where'sh bridegroom, boys?” asked Cato.

“Dem 'fiknow,” responded Bill.

Even Inman was bewildered. “There orter be bri'groom,” he said, positively.

There was general agreement that no wedding was complete without a bridegroom. Cato appealed Devoy, but the bride-elect no longer held rasp of actualities. She responded sleepily that any old thing would do.

“someone's gorrer be bri'groom,” said the redheaded person to Cato. “I'll tosh yer for it.”

This solution was acceptable to Cato, and he was act on it, when, in a sun-burst of perspicacity recollected that he was already a married man with a family.

Mr. Swinnerton and his ordained clergyman were weary and little disposed to waste time over trifles. The ceremony proceeded. Somebody was married according to law and the rites of the Free or Partially-Chained-Up Presbyterian Church of Gippsland, and the wedding party was driven forth. It gathered Jim and Hobbs off the mat by the way, and trooped into the street, where presently it was disbanded by a zealous constable.

Henry, John, and the red-headed youth, impressed with the idea that the laws of hospitality required them to see their guests safely home, spent an hour wandering with the sailors through the streets of an inland suburb, waking the occupants of one demure villa after another to inquire if that was the American ship *Acme*. Once they narrowly escaped arrest for wanting to fight a stout councillor in pyjamas. They suspected him of spiriting away the good ship *Acme* for his own evil purposes.

Henry Inman was feeling very poorly when he awoke next morning. His appearance gave his mother and sisters much concern, and he was profoundly sorry for himself. It was a shocking thing that a man in his low state should have to turn out and work for his bread.

Henry recollected things as he trained into the city, and eventually his morning was brightened with a full comprehension of his glittering joke. It was the joke of the century—immense, magnificent—it would become historical.

At the warehouse Inman told the clerks how he had lured a motherless sailor-man into marrying one of Reekie's she-rapscallions.

“The one with a head like a scrambled egg,” Henry explained. He gave a graphic description of the wild night, taking full credit for all its humours.

Some of the clerks did not think Inman's joke a joke at all; they said it was a dog's trick, but they were persons wanting in a true sense of the ludicrous.

Knowledge of the joke travelled all through a city block. The affair was being discussed during lunch hour when Johnno, looking very limp and woebegone, called in on Henry Inman. He beckoned Henry aside.

“That was an awful business last night,” he said. “What're you going to do about it?”

“Do!” ejaculated Henry. “Why, nothing. It's star joke. It's all over the shop.”

“Joke! Why, the infernal marriage is valid!”

“To be sure it is. Have you seen the American sailor? Is he buckin' at all?”

A strange light shone in Johnno's eye. “'Enery,” he said, “you're switched to a sad delusion. The Devoy wasn't married to any sailor—she was married to Cato.”

Henry Inman was dumb for fully half a minute. He glared at Hobbs, his eyes astare, his mouth ajar, petrified with astonishment and some terror. “You're—you're monkeyin',” he murmured.

“It's the immortal I'm tellin' you,” retorted Johnno. “Cato was the bridegroom and he was married already. It's bigamy, and you're an accessory before and after the act. It'll get you two years hard. I've seen Cato. He's sure he's the man, and he's out for you with a gun.”

Henry was trembling in every limb; he put a hand on Johnno's shoulder. “Not a word,” he said piteously.

Inman pleaded sickness that afternoon, and rushed home. A greater horror awaited him. There were five persons in the dining-room—Henry's mother, his two sisters, Brother Dripstone Meekin, and, standing at the head of the table, Belle Devoy, looking ghastly through the dye and the powder, and in all the fluff and shabbiness of “the day after.”

As Henry entered Belle slapped a document down before the company, and stepped back with an air of triumph.

Henry snatched the lines from the Rev Meekin, and as he read them an agony of grief prostrated him. He collapsed on the couch.

Here Belle swooped upon him. She asserted ownership in a fond embrace.

“Me husbind!” she murmured.

Henry Inman answered with a hollow moan. Johnno Hobbs's version was a mere trifle to the actual disaster. The name of the bridegroom on Belle's legal document was Henry Inman.

Not the sailorman, and not Cato, but Henry himself was securely married to Belle Devoy of the Black Slum!

Chapter XVI. The Big Spoof.

IT was noon of the first Tuesday in November, and there was half-holiday at Spats's. Factory hands were streaming from the lift door into Pepper-lane, the majority squealing and jubilant, like kiddies unexpectedly delivered from scholastic bondage, but many of the Beauties, severely decorous in gay Cup dresses and extravagant hats, prepared for the inexpensive fascinations of the Hill.

Mr. Ben Dickson, recording angel of the topmost flat, leaned desolately on the western wall, and answered the badinage of the girls with flabby interest. Benno was "broke," so depressed financially that a corresponding moral condition was induced, and the small clerk was really as hapless as a tarred cat. But in no circumstances was it the disposition of our Mr. Dickson to expose his penuriousness to a bitter world, barren of respect for honest poverty; even as he mourned his pitiful lack of pence he sedulously rattled a bald-faced six-pence on a latch-key and a lucky penny with a Boer bullet wound in it, with the object of asserting his competence.

Feathers, the wise packer, to whom no man's weakness was sacred, had summarised this trait in Benno.

"Jimmy Jee!" he said, "there's Dickson, the gord on the 'igh stool, drorin' his thirty-five 'n' a tizzie a week—'n' thank yeh kindly, sir—'n' he'd have us all think Rockefeller a motherless blind cripple aside him. His good ole ma divvies thirty off the high pile, leavin' her bonny boy five shillin's fer dress, 'n' drink, 'n' to scatter alms 'n' run his 'arum on, not to mention trifles iv bangles 'n' diamond tararas for the young 'n' fair, 'n' yet whoever knew Benno admit he was short iv the price iv a town mansion? Even the night afore the oof blooms he'll jingle like a mint in full goin'. He's a miracle iv sound finance, that's what Benno is. He'll get enough sound out iv tuppence in small change to establish the credit iv a patent bath-heater in Gehenner."

Benno's straitened circumstances were due to lavish expenditure on a new "straw" and a purple tie last Saturday night, when the Cup seemed a matter of small concern, and now, when all the world was running to Flemington, he felt himself pitifully out of it, and experienced much difficulty in hiding his anguish of mind.

"Garn! Be a sport," said the Don; "butt in with the push, 'n' slop yer wealth about. Are all them dead certs yiv bin talkin' up fer weeks to be coldly neglected?"

"Can't be did, Nickie," answered Benno, carelessly. "I placed me bit on the birds all right—trust yer uncle—but the fact is, a man's got a better offer."

“Oh, what-oh!” cried the driver. “A little Dutch?”

The small clerk's face twitched in a wan, blasé smile. “There or thereabouts,” he said. “She's all fer the simple life; reckons on weanin' me nibs from vicious courses. You know what women are? We all gotter play up to 'em a bit.”

“Flemin'ton won't seem the same without yeh,” called Harrerbeller Harte in gentle derision, “not to mention the Gov'ment 'Ouse party's broken 'eart.”

“Ya-a-ah, what's the cat got now?” This telling retort called for no discoverable effort in the master of repartee. Benno resumed his conversation with the Don as though nothing had happened. “She holds a bushel of tram shares, 'n' sonny's wise,” he said.

The Don tried to look impressed. “Righto! If you won't, you don't. Woman wins. Wot about commissions? Can I put you a bit on 'ere 'n' there?”

Benno thought this matter over carefully. No-o,” he replied. “I've pinned me dollars on hat I like. Got in early. Alwiz do.”

The Don passed on, the late leavers bobbed out of the little door, one by one, bolts were shot, and presently the melancholy midget leaning on the western wall gazed up and down an empty lane. He passed a hand over his mouth in pathetic cogitation. “Now, what's a bloke ——”

Benno's eye fell upon a ticket at his feet. He stooped quickly, and snatched it. He read its superscription with a touch of awe, so direct an answer was it to the prayer of his lonely soul.

“First-class Return, Flemington. Admit one—*Lawn!*”

The last word came from Mr. Dickson in a yell. He crowded the ticket into his pocket, turned as if expecting to face an accuser, and fled precipitately in a direction opposite to that the racegoers had taken.

From round the corner Benno peeped back. He saw an agitated figure break into Pepper-lane, searching hurriedly right and left. The figure was Harrerbeller Harte's. Mr. Dickson felt no higher impulses, he recognised no promptings towards restitution, he felt only that the ambition of a life-time was about to be realised, and in order that the manifest intentions of Providence should not be frustrated he left the vicinity of Pepper-lane with uncommon celerity.

Benno spent several minutes lurking in a doorway up a dingy street, endeavouring to grasp the situation in a masterly way. He had access to the Lawn at Flemington, he was privileged to rotate with the whirl of fashion, to blend with youth and wealth and beauty, to do the thing as he had lusted to do it, with appropriate “dog,” and now it was up to him as an ingenious and spirited youth to make the most of a noble opportunity.

Fortunately our Mr. Dickson had arrayed himself that morning as a young Solomons, in all his glory. Feathers described him as “the acme of It.” His suit was a beautiful blue, his socks were bluer, his tie was bluest. He was sartorially *ne plus ultramarine*, and he knew it.

But there were cockroaches in Dickson's soup, beetles in the bread; in the matter of finance he was down to hard macadam. Benno scrambled in his pants pockets, and ruefully examined the net result. Never was cash so petty. The bald-faced sixpence was only to be negotiated on a bluff—it was that thin you could cut an acquaintance with it.

Still, if a man is hard in the oof, he need not parade his financial instability by going limp in the face of a purse-proud generation. Benno bucked up. From the pocket to which his brass-filled iron watch-chain was tethered with a safety pin he drew a small wad of very dirty paper, and straightened it out on his palm. It was not negotiable paper money, but bore a striking family resemblance to the legal quid; no longer to be regarded as beans, it was a good has-been. In fact it was a five-pound note once, but the banking institution which issued it was now so much a thing of the past that two of the directors were out of gaol again.

The clerk made a collection of scraps of soft, suitable paper, folded them into a neat pad and around this he tenderly wrapped the decayed fiver. That disabled and discredited note had often been worked to give Mr. Dickson an air of financial stability; once more it must serve to impart the semblance of wealth.

Benno having padded the oof, patted his wad into nice shape, and felt a better and bigger man as he looked at it. It might not have been ready money, but as a money “ready” it was entirely satisfactory.

At Spencer-street the clerk hustled a small boy for a card, and escaped through the gates while the vendor was straightening out the bald-faced sixpence, seeking marks of identification.

Wearing his shrill socks, his good-as-gold and pearl-bead ring, and his barley-sugar diamond shirt-stud very much in evidence, Benno lolled in a first-class carriage, sitting almost on his neck, studying the race-card with painful elaboration, making sudden little marginal notes as if millions depended on it. He drew fourteen disused betting tickets from his breast pocket, and after looking them over made a dashing calculation in his notebook. The result seemed to please him. He smiled languidly up one cheek, as he had seen the miraculous detective do in a worst-ever play called “The Wickedest Barber in Bologne.” The business of backing winners was too easy to Benjamin Dickson, any passenger could see that. They were all impressed, especially the red-faced man in the corner opposite, and the anxious gent next him with the lap full of nail parings.

The red-faced man was first to dare. He leaned forward, and plucked Benno by the elbow, drew the clerk's head into the onion belt that clung to him like a curse, and said hoarsely:

“Say whatcher know? Gotter real thing fer the second?”

Benno smiled his cynical, lop-sided smile.

Gotter real thing?” he said. “I've got the dead bird stuffed and trussed and baked brown, but this ain't my day for handin' out quids in bulk. When I'm distributing me good things I'll ring you up.”

“ 'Tween gentlemen,” pleaded the red-faced man, what's the whisper? Square'n' all, I'm that seedy the weevils 'll get at me if I can't hit a homin' pigeon this trip.”

Mr. Dickson took pity on him. He ran his eye down the card and chanced it. “Dandy's the P,” he said. “Put yer whole week's wash on Dandy, 'n' hold me responsible if the goods ain't delivered.”

“Dandy!” cried Red Face. “Dandy's a never-did 'n' never-will. He gallops like a cow. Dandy; Streuth, I know a pound ov cheese that'll donkey-lick Dandy.”

Benno lolled with an air of patient weariness! he addressed his conversation to the lamp in the carriage roof.

“Dandy can't shift; Dandy's a permanent fixture. He's that slow they paste bills on him. He was put off the hearse fer loiterin'. All the me son. Dandy's comin' 'ome t'-day. S'pose you ain't dreamed iv them ever savin' a horse, Mr. Wise?”

“Savin', yes,” said Red Face sulkily: but not after he's got general debillity, 'n' the crows have been at him. Dandy's eighteen if a day.”

“You take it or leave it,” said Benno with a decisive gesture, magnificent in itself. “I can't force money on yeh.”

All doubts vanished, the passengers gave Dandy good-conduct marks on their cards, and the gent sprinkled with nail-parings said diffidently:

“I suppose you had a few winners Saturday, young gentleman.”

“A few!” Benno pulled his trick roll, and gave the eager people a peep at that monetary hollow mockery. “A bit left over from Derby winnin's,” he said. “Tons more where those were grown.”

The nice, gentlemanly young chap with the classic profile, sitting next to our Mr. Dickson, turned an eye of kindly regard upon the improvident punter.

The anxious person opposite was quite tremulous. “Dear me,” he stammered, “you might be robbed.”

“I might,” said Benno, with some amusement, “things 'appen, but a man could drop a mangy couple of hundred quid without 'avin' to sell up the 'appy home.”

“Then you really win a very great deal, sir?”

This nonsense was wearying the small clerk. He yawned. “Well, a fellow doesn't need to wear his fingers to the bone juggling bricks,” said he.

“One lives without tearing up roads, 'n' maybe one lives high.” The matter was not one to argue about. Benno yawned again.

The gentlemanly young fellow with the Greek profile offered Benno his card. Benno ruffled his clothes, perturbed for the moment, and then he soared to an Alpine pinnacle of effrontery.

“Curse it,” he said; “if my man hasn't forgotten that infernal card-case again.”

“Ghastly incompetents, these colonial valets,” said the nice-looking stranger. The latter's card was inscribed, “Michael Ambrose.”

Benno made a gesture of weariness. He introduced himself by word of mouth, and learned that the stranger was an Englishman travelling to see little of the world, and without acquaintances in Melbourne. Mr. Ambrose was soft-spoken and unassuming; not for a moment did his confidence seem obtrusive. As they approached the course he suggested that since both were unencumbered they might keep each other company for the afternoon.

“Shall be decidedly obliged to you, Mr. Dickson, you'll be so good as to show a fellow round,” he said. Of course, musn't let me impose, you know; but if you have nothing better to do you might amuse yourself instructing a new chum. I'm positively a lost sheep here, and it might occur to some of these clever Johnnies to fleece me, but with a smart man like you, knowing the whole bally scheme, as guide, philosopher, and friend, I should be jolly well all right. You will? Now, that's awfully good of you. We'll go right away and have a small bottle of the best beaded, shall we?”

Benno had some trifling misgivings at first, but his share of that half-guinea's worth of champagne served to dispel them. He was a very small clerk, and it took only a trifling amount of strong drink to inflame his ideas.

After the champagne Mr. Dickson was properly proud of his new acquaintance. Michael Ambrose was tall and well-dressed, an aristocrat in appearance and manner. Benno admitted the Englishman did him credit.

Ambrose bought two tickets for the saddling paddock, and with the pink-ribboned blue tag gaily decorating a well-washed check vest the clerk felt that nothing was lacking in his impersonation of a dashing young sport dissipating a large patrimony. He hoped many of his friends and acquaintances might see him.

In return for the other's generosity Benno imparted information about his besetting sins, mainly horses and women. The information was poor, but

there was plenty of it.

Later, Mr. Ambrose paid for whiskies and soda. Over the drink Benno explained his system of betting. His habit, it appeared, was to get his money on early in history, when a man could command a fair price. None of the cheap push's dogging round in the heat and dust for a dollar's worth of the favourite at five to three on for Ben Dickson.

"Use your own 'orse sense," he said. "Pick the most promisin' thing for a long shot, 'n' slap yer dough on it in gobs." Here Benno gulped his whisky and soda a trifle rashly, it took the wrong shoot, and the clerk blew out, as it were; but he was in no mood to be deterred by trifles like that. In fact, he almost shouted in the excess of his exuberance, but recollection of the fact that he possessed only three ounces of tissue paper wrapped in a cracked note deterred him.

Mr. Ambrose dragged Benjamin off to lunch. Benjamin did not resist violently.

"What will you drink," asked his friend cheerily. "For my part I think nothing sits on a good lunch as a spanking whiskey and soda."

Benno said he would take a spanking "wissy 'n' sorer" too. He was a man, a fact that he was ready to assert in the world's teeth, and what became a grown man better than a spanking 'wissy 'n' sorer."

Our Mr. Dickson had turkey and tongue. Then he had trifle. This was life. The top flat at Spats's seemed a hideous unreality, a dim dream.

Over the trifle Ambrose left our dear young friend for a moment, but although Benno was by this as comfortable and creditable a companion as a sore dog, his faithful Michael returned, and conducted him to the Lawn once more.

Here for a terrible moment Benno encountered something that looked like retribution. It was large, camel-like, ungainly; it was profusely, if not lavishly, garbed; it had the face of Harrerbeller Harte, and in that face, as the eyes glared into his, was utter amazement and fiery accusation; but just as grim fate appeared about to overwhelm him Ambrose towed Benno into the thick of the crowd. The crisis passed and was forgotten.

At this point Benjamin wanted to shout. Never was a little man so bent on squandering his substance.

"'Aver wissy 'n' sorer," he said. "'Aver bot cham. 'Ave wha' yer like; I pay." He tore out his roll, he flourished it with desperate courage.

But Mr. Ambrose would not hear of Benno paying, he even took the roll from him and restored it to his pocket.

"No," he said, "this afternoon you are my guest."

Mr. Dickson was touched. "You're splendid," he said. "I'm glad I took you up. Yesh, I am. Tell you wha', you gorrer come to dinner wi' me after

races. Thash settled. Give you besht dinner in Melbourne.”

Soon after this Mr. Dickson seemed to pall on the gentlemanly stranger. You might even have thought he was trying to break with our improvident Benno, but he had brought it on himself, and retribution clung to him. B. Dickson was not the man to be easily shaken off once he contracted a deep and generous affection for a friend, more especially when that friend needed his guiding hand and wise guardianship. He clung to Mr. Ambrose with the tenacity of a nettle-rash, he mothered him with half-drunken effusiveness, and the poor young Englishman was kept busy dissuading him from avishing his bundle of tissue paper on costly wines and extravagant cigars.

“Why can't man spen' 'sown money? cried Benno, “ 'unnerd poun 'snothin' to me. Benno the Boy can pick winners in the dark. Ask anyone. Everyone knows Benno—Benno man of beans. Aver magnum?”

He almost carried Ambrose to the bar, but, fired as was, the clerk had a little glimmer of sense at the back of his half-helping of brains, which kept him from risking two year's hard by attempting to pass his perished fiver, so he was prevailed upon to let Ambrose pay in every case.

Two or three times the amiable stranger broke through the crowd and dodged cunningly, but at the conclusion of the manoeuvre Benno was always there, and when the penultimate race had been run the clerk was still hanging affectionately to Michael's arm, promising to never leave him while danger threatened and trouble loomed.

“You trus' me,” he said. “You trus' Benno, 'n' you're all ri'. Ole Benno'll see you dumped safely on your own doorstep without scar or stain. Never deser' a pal. Tha's smi motter.”

Mr. Ambrose had Benno as a travelling companion back to town. In Collins-street the little clerk remembered the sumptuous dinner he had promised his friend. He insisted on having that dinner. In a state of almost deadly calm Ambrose endured the dinner and the ignominious Benno's shocking behaviour at table, under the eyes of a superior company. (N.B.—Ambrose also paid for the repast.)

Mr. Benjamin Dickson was very much worse after dinner. It was now his appointed mission to see dear old Mickie home. Poor Mick, he insisted, was in no fit state to be left to the mercy of the guns and thieves with whom Melbourne was infested.

Then, somehow, the pair got into a narrow, dark lane, and next day Benno recollected his being stood against a wall, and hearing his dear old cobber Mick Ambrose saying in a cold, hard voice:

“You will have it, you pestilent little swine. Here's where you get it.”

Then Ambrose punched Benno awfully on the jaw. Benno went down.

“That's for remembrance,” said the gentlemanly young Englishman, and he kicked Mr. Dickson, and Mr. Dickson's ribs hummed like a muffled drum.

Then Mr. Ambrose hastened along the lane, sauntered into the lighted street, mounted a tram, and passed out of this history.

Benno's next recollection was of leaning on a Collins-street bank, weeping dolorously, and addressing his tale of woe to the wide, wide world.

“'Twasn' the act iv a jennleman,” he wailed. “After all I done for him, he punch me onner jore. I took him up when he was lone 'n' frien'less; I shtood by him in all hish troubles; 'n' he kicksh me fair in the basket, he gives me the boot hard in the bag, 'n' me a mother to him. Hesh no jennleman.”

The policeman admonished Benjamin, as one man to another, to go home and forget it.

“Don' care wha' yeh say,” Benno wailed; “he's jennleman. No jennleman kicksh 'nother what's been a mother to him. See here, I took that bloke outer the gurrer. Yesh I did—took him outer gurrer, treated him liker brother, shpent poundsh poundsh on him, 'n' he fouled me out, 'n' then put in the boot. There's gratitude! There's——” “See here,” said the policeman roughly, “go home wid you, 'n' tell it to the cat, 'r I'll put you bed on a board, so I will, will I.”

Benno went home. He spent a troubled night, and awoke in torment, with a large, hard, unfamiliar head that felt like a wooden block with a wedge in it. He drank comfortless cold water that couldn't touch the spot, and tried to think of his great day. His stiffened jaw and its sore tendons minded him Ambrose's merciless punch, a bruise on his ribs like a blooming iris recalled the brutal kick. Benjamin Dickson groaned aloud; but at that moment something fell from his clothes. It was the padded oof. Benno took up the roll and opened it. The wad of paper fell out, leaving the note in Benno's hand.

The clerk gazed at the note, mournfully at first, then with a startled air, and then in blank amazement. Mr. Dickson took a pull at himself, walked to the basin, and deliberately soaked his head. Then, with water dripping over him, and streams running down his back, he examined the note again and a great cry of gladness burst from him.

The note in Mr. Dickson's hand was a good, sound, Bank of Australasia note for five pounds sterling!

Benno sat and hugged his treasure, and his giant intellect worked like an electric motor. The note he held was not the note he wrapped round the wad of paper the wad of paper on the bed was not the paper with which he had readied up his splendid roll.

A great sunburst of perspicacity illumined Benno's mind. Michael Ambrose was a spieler; from the first he deliberately designed to rob the clerk of his pile believing it to be good goods to the tune of two hundred pounds. This accounted for the liberal effort to intoxicate his victim, and the short absence at lunch, when the second roll, wrapped in a good fiver, to take the place of Benno's bunch, was fabricated. It accounted, too, for Ambrose's efforts to restrain Benno from paying and his anxiety to escape when the exchange was made.

Benno had never possessed a whole five-pound note in his life before. As he gazed at this one another jubilant idea grew radiant in his joyful soul.

"Jimmy Jee!" he murmured, "here's a mag that'll fair paralyse the house. I'll just stun 'em with it. The big gun gets out after Little Benno t' do him fer his savins iv a lifetime, 'n' Little Benno, lyin' low, 'n' crackin' soft 'n' silly, does the 'gun fer all he owns, 'n' gets home with the boodle."

Benno smiled his lop-sided smile, a smile of ineffable vanity, and stood, erect and square, happy in defiance of his sore head.

"Lor lum!" he gasped, "I've bit the dog; I've spieled the spielers. Me! Oh, wot-oh, Benno ain't cute, Benno ain't up to schemes, he ain't wise! Oh, no, not in a manner of speakin.' Benno, yer a fair bonza!"

Benno did an exultant step-dance, and then got back into bed, cuddling his five-pound note. As a man of means he did not care a curse if he should happen to be late at Spats's that day.
