

Charley Moon



Reginald Arkell
author of "Old Herbaceous"

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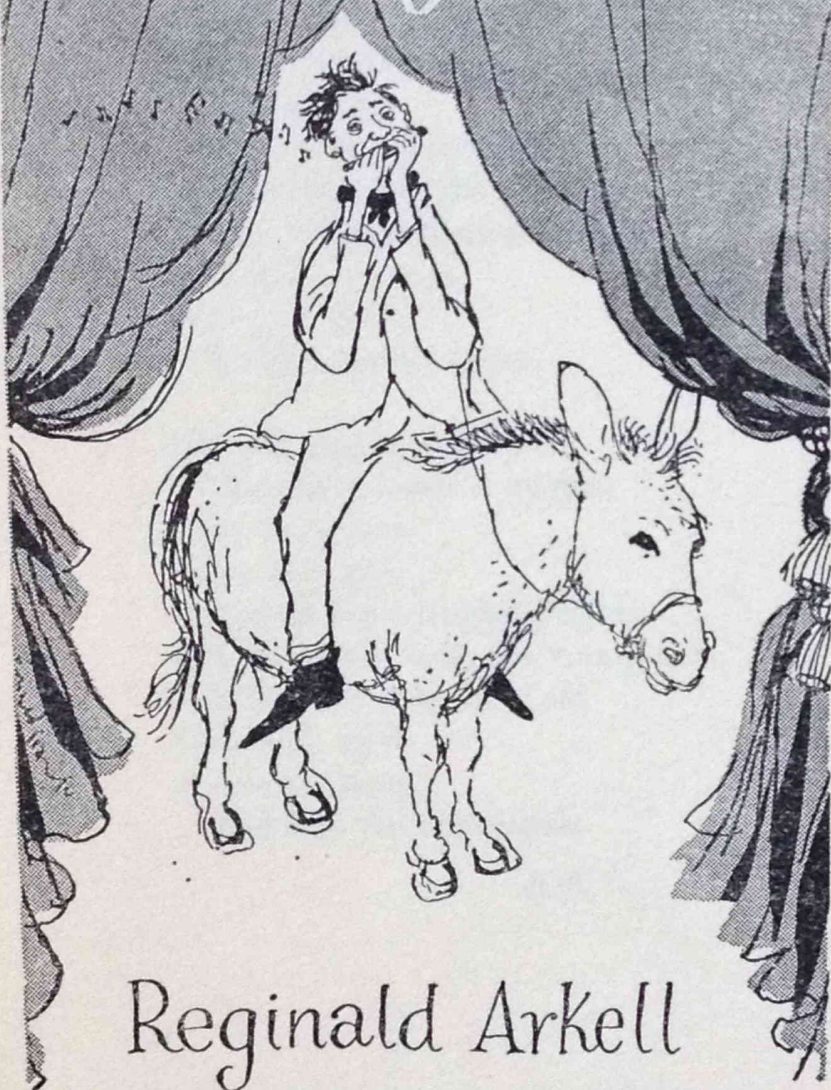


Also by Reginald Arkell

GREEN FINGERS
A COTTAGE IN THE COUNTRY
RICHARD JEFFRIES
OLD HERBACEOUS
etc.



Charley Moon



Reginald Arkell

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The young men, the young men,
 They hurry to the town;
They spend their days
In City ways,
 A-running up and down . . .
But the old men, the old men
 Can plough a furrow straight;
And still have time,
In rain or shine,
 To lean against a gate.

The old men, the old men
 They sit at home o' nights:
They envy boys
Those city joys,
 And all those laughing lights . . .
But the young men, the young men,
 When city pleasures stale,
Will walk again
A country lane,
 And hear the nightingale.

R.A.

Prologue

Four men were sitting in a theatrical club in the West End of London. They had finished dinner, but they still sat on; talking about the sort of things such men talk about, when they are in a reminiscent mood.

Being all of a certain age, their recollections went back a long time. One claimed to have seen Irving in his great days at the Lyceum; another remembered the London production of 'The Belle of New York'; a third had walked on with Harry Ainley in 'Paolo and Francesca.'

This sort of talk always developed into a friendly battle of memories. Tonight, having exhausted the great names of the legitimate stage, they were recalling old-time music hall stars: Eugene Stratton, Dan Leno, R. G. Knowles, Albert Chevalier and the rest, when, suddenly, someone threw a spanner in the works.

'What became of that little comic, Charley Moon?' he asked.

Charley Moon! They all remembered Charley Moon! Of course they did. Rather on the lines of Teddy Payne at the Gaiety and Dan Leno at Drury Lane. Hit the West End, just after the First World War. Sang that big song, in that musical at the old Delphic Theatre. What was the thing called? 'I'll be forgetting my own name next,' said one. 'I can see him standing there as plainly as though it were yesterday,' said another. . . .

'But what *happened* to him?' pressed the questioner. 'Did he go to America? He can't have died; there'd have been obituaries in the papers. A chap doesn't suddenly disappear for no reason.'

'Wasn't there some sort of trouble about something?' asked an elderly critic. 'I seem to remember . . . being at the theatre on a first night, and. . . . No! It's no good. I can't get it. . . . Probably thinking of something else altogether. . . . It's such a long time ago. . . .'

Baffled, they were passing on to less difficult problems, when a well-known writer of musical comedies, who had held his position for the last thirty years, joined the little group. 'Here's the man who can tell us,' said the critic.

'What d'you want to know?' asked the newcomer.

'What happened to Charley Moon?'

‘Charley Moon? I don’t know. Why ask me? Who was he? A jockey?’

‘Charley Moon,’ said the critic, ‘was a comedian. He came to London in the early twenties and scored a terrific success in a musical comedy—which I rather fancy you wrote for him. . . .’

‘Did I?’ said the author. ‘I forget. One writes so many—and they all seem the same to me. Anyhow, what’s one comic more or less? Probably died of drink or bought a pub. Where *do* comics go in the wintertime? Don’t ask *me*. Good night!’

‘Rather cagey, wasn’t he?’ said the man who had started the discussion. ‘Knows something, but wasn’t telling us.’

‘I seem to remember,’ mused the critic, ‘being in a theatre, on a first night. . . . No, it’s no good. . . . I can’t remember what happened. . . . It was all such a long time ago. . . .’

Part One

Little Summerford Mill was dropping to pieces, and up in the attics, where the miller's son was turning cartwheels to keep himself warm, you really wondered that it held together at all.

Village boys don't, as a rule, turn cartwheels, but Charley Moon, having once seen a clown spinning round on his hands and toes, was determined to master the trick of it.

Charley was like that. Put him on to a regular job and he would slip away as soon as you turned your back. Set him weeding a path or carrying sacks, and you couldn't see him for dust. But let him get some silly notion of his own into his head, and he would work as hard as the best of them.

When it was raining and too wet to go out into the meadows, he would climb up into the attics of the old mill. They were reached by the stepladder in the back kitchen, through a trapdoor in the ceiling, and extended from one end of the long, rambling building to the other. A crazy kingdom of vast beams and ghostly shadows, where Charley reigned as king.

You wouldn't get one of the women to go up into the attics. The older ones would have broken their necks and the younger ones were afraid of the mice. And so, when they needed onions that hung from the beams, or stored apples for the dumplings and turnovers, they had to call for Charley to adventure into that twilight world.

Fifty years before, someone had made a last despairing effort to reclaim the attics of the old mill by papering the walls with copies of the *Morning Advertiser* and the *Wilts and Gloucestershire Standard*. Here and there were pasted coloured pictures from the Christmas numbers of the *Graphic* and the *Illustrated London News*. But the damp and general decay had won in the end, and a few tattered remnants of newsprint were all that remained.

Charley Moon, no great reader, was fascinated by the bits of history still hanging from the walls. There was a picture of a little girl in a red coat, sweeping a path through the snow, and underneath was written:

If each before his own door swept,
The village would be clean.

There was a drawing of a boy bugler sounding the charge that had rallied the troopers of the Empire in a long-forgotten war; and another of a little old

lady being given a bunch of primroses by a gentleman in a frock coat and black, wavy hair. But what he liked best was the picture of a little man called Dan Leno, who made funny faces and lived in a place called Drury Lane.

Charley Moon, who was a bit of a comic on his own account, thought the world of Mr. Leno. He would stand in front of the picture and make faces at him by the hour. Mr. Leno was dressed as a pantomime dame and Charley once got hold of an old skirt and an older umbrella, so that he could look as funny as Mr. Leno looked. Why Mr. Leno was dressed up as an old woman, he didn't know. Perhaps there had been a circus in Drury Lane, like the one last August Bank Holiday at the seaside.

One day in November, Charley heard someone coming up the stepladder and the creak of the rusty hinges of the trapdoor—the drawbridge to his castle. Some enemy was approaching. Dropping on his knees, he moved the straw that covered the stored apples, and began picking out the rotten ones. To look at him, you would have supposed that he had done nothing but pick out rotten apples all the afternoon. Even when the enemy was standing over him, he was too busy to look up. . . .

‘Don't work too hard, Charley; you'll hurt yourself!’ The speaker was a rather solemn-faced little girl in a short cotton frock, with spindly legs and black stockings; the sort of small girl who does not laugh easily, because she has not had much practice. And yet, cheerful within her limits. Charley Moon stopped sorting apples, rolled over on his back and considered his visitor.

‘Hullo, Pig Tails!’ he said.

‘They're looking for you,’ said the girl.

‘Let them look.’ Charley was hardened to such a situation. Every day it happened. Everybody was always looking for him. Shouting for him all over the place. ‘*Char-lee!* Harness the pony! Run across to the farm! Take a bag of flour to the Vicarage!’ Always *something* to be done in a hurry.

‘What shall I tell them?’ asked the girl.

‘Say you haven't seen me, of course.’

‘I couldn't do that, Charley. It wouldn't be true.’

That was Rose all over. Not a bad sort, as girls went; climb a tree or jump a ditch like a boy; but always going into her shell, like a snail, when

you touched one of its horns. Rose would do anything for Charley—within reason. But there were times when hero-worship had its limits. When it came to telling the truth, George Washington wasn't in it with Rose.

'Poor old Pig Tails! Couldn't tell a story to save her life. Sit down and have an apple?'

That was different. Rose would risk a wiggling from her old granny, who kept the village shop, or from old Mr. Moon if he caught her helping Charley to waste his time when he was wanted to run errands. She took the golden Blenheim and looked at it solemnly. 'Charley,' she said, 'you know your father said he wouldn't have you start on the "keepers" until all the others were finished.'

'That's all right,' said Charley. 'If we shift them about a bit and fill in the gaps, who'll know? Don't be such a little owl. If anyone's going to catch it, it's me. And I'm always catching it for something, so what's the odds?'

Rose was dabbing her nose with the skirt of her cotton frock. 'I don't want you to catch it, Charley,' she sniffed. 'That's why I was reminding you. And I'm not a little owl . . .'

Charley Moon had a heart as soft as an over-ripe pear. He couldn't stand anyone crying at any price. 'Very well, Pig Tails,' he said. 'You're not an owl; you're just a nice little golden-crested wren and I love you more than pie.'

'Apple pie?' asked Rose.

'Apple pie!' said Charley. 'But you'll have to swallow the core, or the old man will know we've been at his Blenheims.'

Everybody in Little Summerford reckoned that young Charley Moon was a proper little caution, and no mistake. . . . Always up to his pranks . . . a bit larky, perhaps . . . but no real harm in him. Even Martha Peart, the fat washerwoman, who went along to the Mill every Saturday to put it in some sort of shape, wouldn't have a word said against him. And she, like the toad beneath the harrow, should know, for Charley had nearly been the death of her. . . .

Wandering into the wash-house, where she was busy at her tub, he asked her if she had ever seen a nightingale's egg. Martha hadn't. Wiping the suds from her large arms, she took the tin he offered her, removed the lid—and let out a squeal that started all the village dogs barking.

For, coiled in the tin, with its head sticking up, was a grass snake, caught sunning itself on a warm bank in the orchard. Like Charley, there was no real harm in it, but Martha wasn't to know that. Having screamed the roof off, she dropped to the floor in a dead faint and it took two buckets of cold water to bring her round again.

But Martha bore no malice. It was just young Master Charley up to his tricks again.

The Vicar had a harder row to hoe. Little Summerford was no nest of singing birds—and Charley sang like an angel. So there was no keeping him out of the choir; for who else could sing the solo bits in the carols at Christmas and the anthem at Easter? Every Thursday night, at choir practice, he was sent home in disgrace; and every Sunday he was back in his stall, looking as though butter wouldn't melt in his mouth—singing like an angel.

Once upon a time, a knight in armour, trying to find the Wars of the Roses, or some other battle, was lost in the network of little rivers round about the source of the Thames. Meeting a native of those parts, he asked if there was a ford by which he could cross to higher ground.

‘Aye, that there be!’ replied the local.

‘Do you,’ enquired the knight, politely, ‘know where it is?’

‘Aye, that I do,’ replied the son of the soil.

‘Could you direct me?’ asked the knight.

‘Aye, that I could,’ agreed the man of Wessex.

Holding on to his palfrey with one hand and his temper with the other, the knight rose in his stirrups and shouted, ‘WHERE IS THE FORD?’ To which he received this surprising reply:

‘SOM’ERORT’OTHER.’^[1]

The knight rode on, enquiring vainly for this same Somerortother Ford; and, being finally absorbed by those wet Wiltshire meadows, was never heard of again—if we except a bit of rusty old iron, preserved in a glass case in the museum at Cirencester.

The ancient place-name of Somerortother Ford became, in time, corrupted and contracted into Summerford. The plausible local assumption that this modern version derives from a ford which can be crossed only in the summer, or during other seasons of exceptional drought, should be treated with the greatest reserve.^[2] The hamlet of Little Summerford is so called to distinguish it from its larger neighbour Great Summerford, and the well-known village of Somerford Keynes has nothing to do with the argument. Now let us get on with the story.

It was said there had been a Moon at Little Summerford Mill ever since the Conquest. That was stretching it a bit, but the Moons had certainly been there long enough to get used to the place. You had only to look at the number and size of their tombstones in the churchyard to get an idea of their importance and the length of their line. Thomas Moon, who sent twenty

sacks of flour, at his own expense, for the relief of Londoners after the Great Fire; William Moon, who paid for the big bell in the church tower; Charity Moon, who scratched her name on a bedroom window with the diamond of her betrothal ring—the Moons of Little Summerford may not have borne arms, nor have been numbered among the esquires, but they had certainly been somebodies in their own right.

And now their glory had departed. The trouble started about the time of the Industrial Revolution when England, forgetting that an island should be self-supporting, lost interest in her major industry. Corn was no longer worth growing; cheese, of sorts, was imported in bulk; and a synthetic mixture of animal fats and vegetable oils ousted farmhouse butter from the breakfast tables of the great cities.

The Moons of Little Summerford were among the first to feel the pinch. For a while, the losses on the farm were offset by the profits on the mill, but very soon the outlying cornfields had to be sold to keep things going. So that, by the time this story opens, old William Moon found himself the nominal owner of a ramshackle mill; half a dozen water meadows—all mortgaged up to the hilt—and an only son, Charley.

It was said in the village that Miller Moon had never been the same man since his wife died having Charley, but the trouble went back much further than that. It takes more than a bit of bad luck to ruin a decent family, and the Moons had had it coming to them for long enough. Easy to say they had drifted into trouble, but equally fair to say they had held firmly to their course, in face of the gathering economic storm. If old Grandfather Moon had gone out of farming while the going was good, things would have been very different, but you had only to look at his picture above the sideboard to know that he wasn't the sort who runs away and lives to fight another day. . . . So he burned his boats, backed the wrong horse, and sleeps soundly enough under the last of the big tombstones in Little Summerford churchyard: leaving a grandson to suffer for his stern virtues.

Miller Moon, beaten before he began, had no hard feelings for ancestors who had landed him in this mess. He was rather proud of those fine old tombstones, and he was looking at them now, while waiting for young Charley to come out of the vestry, where he was probably getting a good wiggling from the Vicar for playing the fool in the choir. A thought which brought the lonely old man back to his one real worry.

What would happen to Charley? Certainly there would be no meadows and no mill to take over when *his* time came. And what else would he be

good for? Charley was no fool, but you couldn't run a farm without a goodish bit of capital. That was the problem of every farmer's son. Either you farmed the land—or you worked on the land for someone else. There seemed to be nothing in between. And when the master of Summerford Mill thought of his son working as a farm labourer, he looked at those fine old tombstones, and had a cold feeling in the pit of his stomach.

It had gone against the grain to send Charley to the village school. Enough to make some of those old Moons turn in their graves, *that* was! But where was the money to send him anywhere else? You had to cut your coat according to your cloth and beggars couldn't be choosers. . . . Thus did William Moon, with a few homely *clichés*, try to justify himself on that Sunday morning before the tombs of his ancestors.

The only one who didn't worry was Charley. Having sung like an angel and listened, in the vestry, to a strictly personal sermon from the Vicar, he came bounding across the churchyard to where his father was standing. There was only one Sunday service in Little Summerford and business was over for the day. Now he was free to get into his old clothes and lose himself in the water meadows below the mill. Perhaps there would be an eel in the gin, or a fine trout caught up under the old drock. You never knew what you would find in that lovely wet wilderness of reeds and sedges. . . . Even William Moon was caught up in the infectious gaiety of the moment. Father and son walked happily down the hill, as though neither had a care in the world.

The meadows of Little Summerford Mill, after starting life as a swamp, had been reclaimed by an ingenious Dutchman who came over from Holland with William of Orange. His elaborate irrigation scheme watered the meadows in time of drought, and carried the flood water back into the brook when the land was in danger of being waterlogged. A water bailiff had been permanently employed, cleaning out the carries and keeping the hatches in repair; so that the size and quality of the hay crops became a tradition upon that countryside.

Of all his possessions, old Grandfather Moon had valued the Summerford water meadows most greatly. They were the apple of his eye. Famous agriculturalists travelled across England to discover how the problems of rising water and low-lying land levels had been overcome. They examined ordnance maps; took complicated measurements; and returned home to make similar experiments. Grandfather Moon chuckled, as he

handed them their stirrup-cups—and the meadows of Little Summerford kept their secrets.

When counting our blessings, we should be thankful that the affairs of a future generation are no concern of ours. If Grandfather Moon had known what was to happen to his beloved water meadows, he would have been a most unhappy man; whereas to Charley, they were, in their derelict condition, a paradise indeed.

Before Charley Moon was half-way through his second helping of apple pudding, he was itching to be off. He knew where to look for a trout, by the old hatch; there might be an eel trapped in the withy gin—and Rose would be sitting, waiting for him, on the white gate.

Strange companions, these two. You didn't often find a boy and girl of their age running together. Usually the village children split up into two groups, but Charley and Rose had always been different. For them the meadows of the old mill were an enchanted playground, full of wonderful possibilities, and the white gate was the meeting-place from which all their expeditions started.

Rose would be sitting there now, dangling her skinny legs, wondering if Charley was never coming; and it would be dark before they returned, wet, tired and hungry to the domestic scene.

Some of the village folk wondered why those children hadn't got webbed feet by this time, or caught their death of cold, paddling in all that water and playing in all that damp grass. Why they hadn't drowned themselves in one of those old drockways, or in the main dyke that brought the water from the brook, was a lasting mystery; but the truth was that they were as amphibious as a pair of young dabchicks.

So here was Charley, slipping away from the Mill, with a jack-knife, a ball of string and an old bucket; and there was Rose, swinging her legs on the white gate. During the week she was kept busy, out of school hours, by her old granny, who ran the village shop; but this was Sunday and there was a picnic tea in her basket. . . .

The most wonderful thing about the meadows was that you could play all day in them without meeting a soul. That wouldn't have happened in Grandfather Moon's time. Then, a boy had only to show his nose over a gate and he was chivvied back on to the roads, where a boy rightly belonged. Either you were breaking the hatches, or spoiling the hay crop; but now all the hatches were broken and there was no hay to spoil. Where there had

been mowing grass, the ground was rank with rushes; wild duck and lesser water fowl had things all to themselves.

Miller Moon could have turned a tidy penny by letting the fishing and shooting rights, but an odd family pride kept him from doing so. 'Like charging sixpence for a cup of tea,' he had said, when some stranger, hearing of this sportsman's paradise, had approached him on the subject.

Not being old enough to fish with a fly, or carry a gun, Charley had developed into a ground poacher of the first order. He knew exactly where to lay an eel-gin and how to tickle a trout, while his home-made rod was a deadly weapon where coarse fish were concerned.

Tickling a trout was the best fun. He would lie flat on his face and wriggle his way to the edge of the brook. Then, with Rose sitting on his legs to save him from falling into the water, he would slide his fingers under the fish until he reached its gills, when a sudden snatch might do the trick. Or it might not. In which case, there was still a fish left to be tickled another day.

When the trout was too deep in the water to be reached by hand, his methods were even more primitive. Taking his jack-knife to the withy-bed, he would cut a slender branch of red willow, and twist the thin end into a loop, to form a running noose. So might some prehistoric hunter have snared the father of all trout; though it is doubtful if any one of a long line of poachers was handier at the trick than Charley Moon.

When it was a case of catching eels, Rose came into her own. The eel-gin, built of long willow wands, took a good deal of handling, for it stood higher than a boy, and accurate placing in the stream was the root of the matter. It had a cord at each end, and, when you got it to the bank, the fun started. For the sort of eel you caught in Summerford Brook would barely go into a bucket, and, when you got it in, the job was to keep it there. Rather a fearful monster, seen through the eyes of a small boy, and as near big game hunting as you could expect to find in that part of the world.

Crayfish were easier but smellier. This small, spiny, freshwater lobster was an evil liver, battenning on every sort of decay. Somehow you had to collect, for bait, bits of decaying flesh, which you placed on a net, tied to an iron ring and lowered to the bed of the stream. This was the job that Rose really hated, though nothing in the world would have made her admit it. Another trouble was that crayfish don't start to run until nightfall. Altogether a damp and dismal occupation for a young lady with a sensitive nose who was just a little frightened of wet meadows in the dark.

There were days when the jack-knife, the bucket and the ball of string were left at home; when Charley, no longer a killer, was content to lie in the sunshine, chewing sorrel and tickling her ear with the stalk of a moon daisy. Then they would surprise a heron standing in the shallows, or follow the vivid flash of a kingfisher as it skimmed round a bend of the brook. According to the season, Rose would pick bunches of water-bubbles, ragged robins, or willow herb, and, when Charley became bored with such gentle pleasures, they would race paper boats on the brook for fabulous prizes.

[1] Somewhere or the other.

[2] Cricklade Archæological Society.

Charley Moon left school, went into long trousers and was kicked out of the choir, all on the same day. Whether the long trousers went to his head, or whether his first day of freedom called for a celebration of sorts, we shall never know. The fact remains that the Vicar's wife, returning from choir practice by way of the churchyard, saw an enormous white owl, half the size of a man, flapping ghostly wings, before it floated away into the night air.

Careful search revealed that Charley's surplice was missing from its usual peg, and, although he protested that he had taken it home to be washed, it was felt that the Wings of a Dove should be attached to more responsible shoulders. So that, henceforth, Charley had to develop his odd, natural gift for melody upon an old mouth-organ in the sound-proof attics of Little Summerford Mill. . . .

When Rose saw Charley in his long trousers she knew that he was lost to her for evermore. 'Why, Charley,' she said, 'they look ever so nice. Now you'll be quite the man . . .' and that night, she put her head under the bedclothes and cried herself to sleep . . . just as his mother would have done. . . .

On the morning that Charley finished with schooling and stayed home for the first time, father and son sat facing one another at the breakfast table. Miller Moon, having finished his second cup of coffee, was looking at the grandfather clock and fidgeting about in his seat. Finally he pulled out the gold hunter, snapped open the lid, and compared it with the old clock in the corner. 'You'll be late for school, Charley,' he said. 'Best be slipping along.'

'I've left school,' said Charley. 'Don't you remember? Mr. Richardson told us at the end of last term.'

'Left school!' echoed the father. 'Then what are you going to do with yourself all day?'

'Help in the Mill, I suppose,' said Charley.

The Miller pondered this announcement for some time; or rather, he appeared to do so. Actually his mind failed to cope with a situation so surprising.

'What are you going to do in the Mill?' he asked.

‘Help around the place,’ replied his son with cheerful optimism.

‘You’d be no help. You’d only be getting in the way,’ said the old man. ‘What would you be good for?’

‘I could learn,’ said Charley. ‘Everybody’s got to learn at some time or another. Why not me?’

‘You’d only be getting in the way,’ repeated the Miller, who had got into such a rut that any sort of change shook him to the core. ‘Take this morning: how would I know what to start you at?’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Charley, ‘I’ll find a job soon enough.’

‘Then you’ve changed since yesterday.’ A rather obvious retort, but not so unfriendly as it sounded. The Miller was fond of Charley; rather admired him, in a way; but the sudden shock had got him on the wrong foot.

‘Yesterday was holidays,’ Charley reminded him. ‘This is different. I can be a lot more use in the Mill than you think. It wants shaking up . . . new ideas . . . the whole outfit’s on its last legs; it’ll drop to pieces one of these fine days. We’re drifting. . . . That’s what we’re doing . . . just drifting! You should hear what people say about us. They say anybody else would have scrapped the old wheel years ago.’

‘Oh, they do, do they?’ said his father. ‘And where would they find the money for that?’

Charley felt that all this argument was just to put him in the wrong. ‘I know where *I’d* get it,’ he said. ‘Where everybody else gets it. From the bank, of course.’

‘And suppose there was no money in the bank, what then?’ asked the Miller.

‘There’s always lots of money in a bank.’

‘Not in our bank,’ said the old man.

Charley stared at him. ‘You mean we’re—we’re broke?’

This was the moment the Miller had dreaded. It was one thing to mumble excuses to the tombs of his ancestors, but quite another to face the candid eyes of youth and admit that you have betrayed your trust. He wriggled unhappily in his wheel-back chair and said nothing.

‘You mean we’re broke?’ The boy’s question cut through the old man’s indecision like the searching probe of a surgeon’s knife.

‘That’s about the size of it,’ admitted his father.

Charley considered this for a moment. ‘Why didn’t you tell me before?’ he asked.

‘What could you have done?’ asked the Miller.

‘I could have left school a year ago.’

‘How would *that* have helped? Schooling costs nothing, and it kept you out of mischief.’

Charley’s face flushed. ‘Is *that* all you think of me!’ he said.

The father placed a hand on the boy’s shoulder. ‘Don’t be angry, son,’ he said. ‘What could you have done—at your age? Running the Mill is a man’s job, and if I’m not man enough to do it, how could I expect you to be?’

‘I might have thought of something,’ said Charley. ‘We could have talked things over together. I might have said to you, one night, “Dad, why don’t we sell something, so that we can pay for a new wheel?” . . . or . . . something.’

The boyish effort tailed away into a rather hopeless gesture. When you are wearing long trousers for the first time, the apathy of these old men is apt to be a bit trying.

‘It isn’t quite so easy as you think,’ said the Miller. ‘What could we sell, to get the money for this wonderful new wheel you, and your friends, talk about?’

Charley was gripping the edge of the table and his face was very white. He tried to speak, but the words stuck in his throat. Then he made his great sacrifice. ‘The meadows,’ he said, ‘we could sell the meadows.’

Whatever we may think of Charley Moon, and however much we may feel inclined to blame him in the future, let us always remember this moment, when he threw his beloved water meadows into the melting-pot. ‘You’d get a lot of money for the meadows,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ replied his father, ‘but it wouldn’t be *our* money.’ And, with all the numbed logic of the beaten man, he explained the mysteries of loans, mortgages and bank overdrafts; of ownership that was no ownership, and of men, apparently rich in worldly goods, who were so far from being what they seemed.

For Charley Moon, this was the moment of truth, indeed. ‘You mean,’ he asked, ‘you mean the meadows aren’t ours any more?’

The old man tried to make the mystery clear. In order to keep the Mill going, he had borrowed money on the meadows, and, when they were sold, the money would go back to the people who had lent it. All he could do was to go on as he had been going, hope for better times, and stave off the evil day as long as possible.

‘Still drifting,’ said Charley, with the brutal realism of extreme youth.

‘Still drifting,’ agreed his father.

It must be said for Charley Moon that he got up from the kitchen table with the firm determination to do something about it. He wasn’t quite clear in his mind what could be done, but there must be something. Folk didn’t go broke unless there was a very good reason. His father was tired and old, but that was all the more reason why he, Charley, should get busy. ‘Don’t you worry, Dad,’ he said, ‘things will come out all right, you’ll see.’

He pushed his chair back. ‘Where are you off to now?’ asked his father.

‘Down to the Mill house,’ said Charley; and he went out, closing the door quietly.

Charley did his best. He got up early in the mornings, carried sacks that were too heavy for him and was nearly drowned in the mill pool. Made himself no end of a nuisance, in fact. And all to no purpose. Nobody seemed to want him; and so, at last, he reverted to type: the small boy who was never there when he was wanted.

‘Char-lee! Char-lee!’ The cry would go up from the kitchen window or the door of the old barn. And Charley Moon, tucked away in the attics, or slipping off to the meadows, would feel like the old dog fox when the music of hounds in the covert warns him that it is time to lie low, or go while the going is good.

Which, as the village worthies remarked, was no sort of training for a boy his age. Some of the biddies talked of speaking to his father, and then thought better of it. Miller Moon might be down on his luck and drifting out on the social tide, but he hadn’t yet reached the point where you took liberties with him. That time would come—one or two envious types, who rose on the decline of others, were waiting for him—but not yet. Those mortgages and overdrafts were hidden away in the bank, and only to be guessed at by curious minds. But the writing was on the wall, and they could wait.

That is the trouble with living in the country—everybody knows your business better than you know it yourself, and there is so little to talk about that your private doings get well aired. You escape the active competition of the towns, where one man going down means another man coming up; but human nature being what it is, a man's failures are a lot more interesting than his successes, and from the neighbour in the next door cottage, nothing remains hid.

Very well, then: Miller Moon had made a rare mess of things; the Mill, itself, was on its last legs, and young Charley was about as much use as a sick headache. The vultures, kindly creatures with the patience of their breed, sat around waiting for the pickings that would be theirs on the day of the dispersal sale.

If you suppose that Charley was unduly cast down by his rather murky prospects, you must guess again. He was just turned sixteen; schooldays were over; nobody, except Rose, perhaps, bothered very much about him. So long as he turned up to meals, his plate was full and no questions were asked. What was wrong with that?

The awful inertia of a bankrupt concern, ruined by falling prices, had beaten the father to his knees. There was precious little happiness at home. Like Rip van Winkle, the son took down the old family rook rifle, whistled up Flo, the spaniel, and faded into the water meadows of Summerford Mill.

Happy days, indeed! What a playground for a small boy with nothing to do and all day to do it in. Laughing and splashing in the brook like a young otter; feeling the wet grass between the toes of your bare feet; flushing a woodcock or finding a moorhen's nest in the rushes. . . . A wild, useless land; coarse and rank as the Camargue; a wilderness of wild things and a sanctuary for the lesser warblers. . . . Some years now since the gaily-painted hay wagons had rumbled across the bridges with their golden loads. Charley could just remember the last of them; waterlogged, and left to rot, like an old barge stuck on a mud-bank. One of the horses had been drowned, and the boy leading it had been pulled out by his heels. That was the end of haymaking in the meadows of Little Summerford.

You mustn't suppose that Charley's time was entirely wasted. During the autumn, the Mill larder was fairly bulging with game, and there were no butcher's bills to speak of; especially when the wild duck were out on the floods. Sometimes it would be a pheasant from a nearby plantation, a jack snipe, or a brace of partridges, picked off from a covey that had come down from the drier uplands. Little Summerford was surrounded by the game

preserves of large estates, and, when the big shoots were held, there was no telling what feathered fugitives might cross its friendly frontiers. On such occasions, Charley was apt to run out of cartridges and the Mill larder was fuller than ever.

This was rather a sore point with some of the neighbours, and one or two discussed inviting young Moon to join up with them, so that they could finish their shoots in the Mill meadows. But Charley was much too shy, and the old miller much too independent, to fall in with such an arrangement. So the frightened coveys continued to swish across the boundary into no-man's land, and our young sportsman chuckled as he saw them come.

In the winter, when the weather made the meadows impossible as a playground, Charley retired, like a hibernating squirrel, to his hide-out in the attics of the old mill. To his surprise, he rather missed choir practice and singing the solo bits in the anthem on Sunday evenings. And so, night after night, he concentrated with fierce affection upon his old mouth-organ; until the church organ, as played by the schoolmaster's wife, appeared, by comparison, a very inferior instrument.

'No sort of training for a boy,' you might echo the village worthies, but once again, as in the case of those partridges hanging in the mill larder, a boy's idle moments were to pay dividends of sorts. Every Saturday evening, the male youth of the village would pack themselves into the local bus and be removed in a body, to savour the mild dissipations of the nearest market town. Occasionally, some bold spirit would try to start a sing-song, but the effort always fizzled out in a series of self-conscious giggles. Until, one evening, from a dark corner of the bus, came the soft strains of a well-worn melody.

'Who's that?' asked a voice.

'Young Charley Moon,' came the reply. 'He's got a mouth-organ.' . . . 'Come on, Charley boy, let's hear from you.' . . . 'Give us *Down on the Range*, Charley.' . . . 'No, Charley! Play *Bells of St. Mary!*' . . . 'Let's have *Sweet Rosie O'Grady*, Charley.' . . .

From being the youngest and least-considered member of the party, young Charley Moon blossomed out into the life and soul of the ship. From now on, the Saturday bus rolled out of Little Summerford to the lively lilt of a Sousa march and returned home to the yearning melody of *Love's Old Sweet Song*. No expedition was complete, unless young Charley was a member of the party; and, very soon, he was to find fresh fields to conquer.

Between the Vicar and his ex-chorister, there had been a marked coolness since the ghostly churchyard episode, so that the appearance of ‘the Reverend’ at the Mill came as something of a surprise. Charley made a dive for the barn, but the visitor was too quick for him.

‘Good morning, Charley,’ said the Vicar.

‘Mornin’, sir,’ mumbled young Charley, touching the tuft of hair, where the peak of his cap would have been.

‘Are you coming to the concert on Thursday?’

‘Dunno, sir.’

‘Too busy?’ smiled the Vicar.

‘No, sir,’ grinned young Charley.

‘Very well, we’ll expect you. . . . And bring your mouth-organ.’

‘My—what?’ gasped Charley.

‘Your mouth-organ. We want you to open the concert with some choruses.’

‘Not me!’ said young Charley.

‘All you have to do is to stand on the platform and play any tunes you can think of. . . .’

‘Not me!’ said young Charley.

‘. . . Just as you do in the bus. Nothing to be frightened about. Just play the tunes we all know and we’ll do the rest. It’ll be great fun . . .’

‘Not for me it won’t.’

‘Nonsense, you’ll be the success of the evening.’

‘You don’t catch me, not on that sort of caper,’ said Charley.

‘Splendid!’ smiled the Vicar, rubbing his hands together. ‘Don’t forget—next Thursday. Put on a clean collar and be there in time. I’ll be looking out for you.’ And he trotted off to shepherd other unwilling victims into the fold.

Just like the parson. Deaf as a door-post—when it suited him. You had only to whisper in church, and he was on you like a knife, but there was nobody so deaf when he didn’t want to hear. Artful old humbug! There he went, pretending everything was settled, and here was Charley in a nice fix. The wretched victim started to run after him; lost his nerve and mooned off

in the opposite direction, towards the village shop, where Rose was standing in the doorway.

‘Why, Charley,’ she said, ‘what’s the matter?’

Charley hadn’t seen so much of Rose lately. What with sing-songs in the bus and mixing with the older chaps, he hadn’t had much time for girls. But Rose was different. You could always talk to Rose. And, as always, Rose was ready with help and sympathy.

‘Why, Charley,’ she said, ‘that’s wonderful. When I see you standing on the platform, I’ll be that proud of you. Everybody singing, and you in your best suit. . . .’

‘Not me, you won’t,’ said Charley.

‘Playing all those lovely tunes . . .’

‘Not me, you won’t,’ said Charley, again.

‘On your old mouth-organ . . .’

‘Not me, you won’t,’ said Charley. ‘Not if I know it, you won’t.’

But Rose was as artful as the Vicar. Only that morning, a persuasive young commercial traveller had left at the shop, on sale or return, a wonderful new mouth-organ with gay silver trappings, guaranteed to produce such sweet sounds as never were heard on sea or land. This treasure she now produced.

‘I’ll give it you, Charley, if you’ll play it at the concert on Thursday.’

‘Not me, you won’t,’ said Charley, with just a touch of hesitation, which Rose was quick to notice.

‘Try it,’ urged the temptress. ‘Go on, try it. It won’t bite you.’

Charley took the lovely, glittering thing and ran up and down the scale. Then he started: *‘Just a song at twilight, when the lights are low . . .’* Rose was leaning forward, her elbow on the counter of the little shop, listening. *‘And the flickering shadows softly come and go,’* played Charley, nursing the little instrument to his lips. *‘Though the heart be weary, sad the day and long . . .’* In the tiny village store, you could have heard a pin drop. *‘Still to us, at twilight, comes love’s old song . . .’* In the pocket of her little apron, Rose was fumbling for a handkerchief, which wasn’t there. *‘Comes . . . love’s . . . old . . . sweet . . . song.’*

‘All right, I’ll do it,’ grumbled Charley, slipping the coveted mouth-organ into his pocket, and walking out of the shop without another word.

Charley turned up at the concert in his Sunday suit and a clean collar. If there was one thing he didn’t want to do, it was to stand on a platform and be stared at by an audience. Singing in the choir was different. Playing his old mouth-organ in the dark corner of a bus, *that* was different. But performing in a room with all the lights on, with the village boys nudging one another and making faces at him, was no joke. However, he’d told Rose he would do it, so he supposed he’d have to go through with it. The Vicar led him on to the platform, asked the audience to sing the choruses, and left him to it. . . .

Years afterwards, recalling his first appearance, Charley Moon would get a lot of fun out of this performance at the village school, but it wasn’t funny at the time. His hands were shaking so that he could scarcely get the mouth-organ to his lips, and, when he did, he found to his horror that he had forgotten what tunes he had meant to play. Luckily, there was a lot of clapping, with whistles from the back, which gave him a chance to settle down, and time to think. Licking his dry lips, he braced himself to the effort—and brought forth a forlorn, quavering note, which sent the audience into fits of laughter. This was young Charley up to his tricks again. ‘Always up to his larks, young Charley!’ ‘Can’t take nothing serious; no, that he can’t!’

‘Good old Char-lee!’ shouted a boy at the back; and, on that friendly note, Charley got going. Once more he was back in the bus; tucked away in a corner where no one could see him; everybody waiting to sing their heads off. Charley picked up his courage, and played for his life.

And how they sang. As he gained confidence, he played little tricks on them; pretending to start one tune and then breaking off into another; until, in the end, he had them singing *Onward Christian Soldiers*, almost before they knew what they were doing. That, of course, was young Charley up to his tricks again, but, though the Vicar looked a bit worried, the audience rolled out the grand old hymn, and everybody was happy.

So, Charley Moon tasted the bitter sweets of popular success for the first time. Sitting in her seat, fiddling nervously with her handkerchief, torn between laughing and crying, Rose almost forgave him for walking out of the little shop without so much as a ‘thank you.’

The year is 1916, and Charley Moon, too young to interest the military authorities, is still muddling about happily in the meadows at Little Summerford. Up in London, George Robey and Violet Loraine are singing *If You Were the Only Girl in the World* . . . and, at the Trocadero, that popular man-about-town, the Honourable Antony Aston, fat, forty and not too fit, is entertaining his young nephew, now a Major in the Guards, in the hope of wangling a commission in His Majesty's Forces.

The Major, however, is not very helpful. Commissions are not so easily come by; all that back-stairs business is a wash-out. Mr. Aston will have to join up as a private, and trust to luck; but in his case there should be no difficulty. He will be in the *Gazette* in no time.

'Am I to understand,' asked Mr. Aston, 'that you anticipate my promotion upon the stricken field?'

'Good Lord, no!' explained his nephew. 'You'll be so damned helpless, as a private, they'll recommend you for a commission to get rid of you.'

Candour compels us to confess that Mr. Aston's entry into Armageddon was not of the triumphal order. It is true that on the day he joined up, as a private, *John Bull* said the war was as good as over, but that was all. He would have created more stir if he had missed a first night at the Empire, in the old days.

The battalion being under canvas, he was squeezed into a tent containing eleven drapers' assistants from Wales and a London newsboy who had left a flourishing one-man business in the Tottenham Court Road.

Thirteen is an unlucky number. Mr. Aston pointed this out to his corporal, but the latter was not superstitious. 'Anyway,' he said, 'it's only for one night. You'll have two more coming in the morning.'

And so the long war wore on. Private 'Fatty' Aston failed to 'cant' his rifle smartly upwards with the right hand, just as he never managed to 'cut that hand away with a stiff breeze.' He assumed what was intended to be the standing load position and hurled dummy bombs into vague, indefinite space. Until, even as his nephew had foretold, the specialists began to get sick of him, and he was recommended for a commission.

Private Aston's exit from the battalion caused more of a flutter than his arrival had done. The London newsboy congratulated him with something like tears in his eyes: 'Best thing that could have happened, Fatty, old man. I've always been worried about you from the first. You're a sight too helpless for the ranks.'

The eleven drapers' assistants from Wales rose and, in one voice, implored him to tell them 'how he had wangled it.' His C.S.M., twice turned down for a commission, on the score of inexperience, said that, from what he had seen of him, his men would be delighted to follow him anywhere he was likely to lead them. His Platoon Commander observed in mess: 'We must be getting dam' short of officers' . . . and three months later, following a Garrison Cadet Course at Cambridge, Mr. Antony Aston was passed on, complete with one new pip, to a rather nondescript unit which dug trenches on the east coast of England and trained youngsters not yet old enough to be sent overseas.

The new officer proceeded northwards, with some forebodings, in the dignified seclusion of a first-class railway carriage. On the same train, bound for the same unit, with no apprehensions of any kind whatsoever, travelled Private Charles Moon and other youngsters, singing their way into any adventure that might be awaiting them.

Fortunately for Mr. Aston, he had a batman, who was no ordinary person. Why Private Higgins, well over military age, was in the army was his own concern; but, being in, he was determined to make the best of it. Studying his new master he decided that here was the answer to the batman's prayer: easy-going, friendly, a real toff, in fact. Not the sort to lock everything up, and not the sort to run you off your feet, unless he paid you for it. 'He'll do!' Private Higgins had whispered to himself after their first interview; and, pocketing his first half crown, he had drifted across to the canteen to drink his new master's jolly good health.

It was Private Higgins who wangled the billet at Dale Farm and selected young Moon to share his jealously guarded paradise. This was no generous impulse. If he didn't choose a room-mate, he would have one chosen for him; so he looked round for a young and inexperienced fellow lodger who wouldn't want too many of the pickings. And his choice fell on Charley.

An ideal partnership. The junior member cleaned all the boots and buttons, while his senior sat in the only comfortable chair, talking to him for the good of his soul.

‘What you want, Charley my boy, is a bit more *Swish*. It’s positively heartbreaking, the way you carries yourself. You wouldn’t break up a dustman’s home. I learns you how to clean buttons and boots. I learns you to get the stains out of a tunic. I learns you to set your puttees to rights—and the result is a wash-out. You wouldn’t turn the ’ead of a workhouse kid. What you want, Charley my boy, if you don’t mind me saying it, is a bit more *Swish*; and if you don’t know what *Swish* is, I’ll tell you. *Swish*, Charley my boy, is all the difference between a swagger cane and a wooden leg. It makes a chap go down the street just as if he’d bought it last pay parade, and still had a bit left over to put into war loan. *Swish* makes an orderly corporal cry for work, and a company storeman believe he’s the very devil of a fellow. Nursemaids cringes before it, and even barmaids has been known to unbend. . . .

‘The trouble is, Charley my boy, you’ve got no real interest in life, you want to chuck a chest and get a girl in tow. A night’s birding would do you all the good in the world.’

Bending over the officer’s tunic, with which he had been entrusted, Charley Moon wondered if he ought to tell Private Higgins that he knew quite a bit about girls already. The household at Dale Farm, apart from themselves, consisted of the farmer, his wife and the fat land girl, Jessie Comfort, known, inevitably, to the more ribald, as Comfort for the Troops. Charley had been appointed purveyor of early morning tea, and his duties took him into the second best bedroom, where he pulled up the blind, smacked the bundle of bedclothes that was the fat land girl, and invited her to show a leg.

This playful badinage, based on barrack-room routine, had developed, by easy stages, into a friendly relationship, ranging from rough horse-play to intimate confidences on both sides. Sitting on the edge of the bed, Private Moon learned that Miss Comfort was starved for sugar and would do almost anything in reason for the boiled sweets obtainable only in the military canteen. By a lucky chance, Rose had sent him a packet of his favourite bull’s-eyes, which earned him a sticky kiss from the grateful maiden . . . With the promise of more favours to come. . . . ‘Anything in reason’ is an elastic phrase. . . . Charley wondered whether he ought to tell Private Higgins that bright buttons weren’t the only things girls fell for when boiled sweets were scarce and there was a war on.

Another pleasant feature about life at Dale Farm was the opportunity for a bit of rough shooting. When the farmer discovered that his younger lodger was more than handy with a gun, he produced an ancient fowling-piece, a

couple of ferrets and a handful of rabbit nets. Thereafter, Saturday afternoons were sacred to the chase—not even the blandishments of the fat girl could wean Charley from his first—and, so far—only love.

Very different, this Yorkshire coastal area to the wet meadows of Little Summerford; just as its people varied from the folk you met in the south. Harder conditions seemed to have produced a tougher type, and, though kindly enough, they really did call a spade a spade. Charley wondered what the farmer would have done if he had got up a bit earlier one morning and found him larking about with the fat girl. Probably laid his belt about the two of them. Better go easy, or he'd be losing a good billet. Meanwhile, there was a rabbit bolting. Private Moon brought the barrel of the old gun into line and the little white scut turned over and over like a bit of chalk bouncing down a steep hill.

‘My word!’ exclaimed the farmer, ‘your dad taught you to shoot.’

‘Taught myself,’ said Charley.

‘Then you made an almighty good job of it,’ grunted the farmer.

One evening, Private Higgins returned to the farm, wearing the face of doom and announcing that all was lost. Private Moon waited for him to spill the beans.

‘We’re sunk, Charley my boy, sunk, done to the wide, *fini*.’

‘Tell us!’ said Charley.

‘It’s my officer,’ explained his senior. ‘A dreadful thing has happened to my officer.’

‘Tell us!’ said Charley again.

‘I goes in with his tea, and there he is, lying all wild and red-eyed, not having slept a wink all the blessed night. “Your tea, sir,” I sez, placing his tunic on the chair, and preparing to *imshi*, in case he thinks of something he wants doing. But he stops me . . .

“Higgins!” he sez, raising his poor, tired head on one hand, “sit down a minute, and listen carefully.”

‘Well, of course, I takes this to mean that he’s copped one of those hangovers, that might happen to the best of us. Or he’s got mixed up with a bit of skirt, and wants me to suggest a way out of it. Or he’s had the father of all mess bills. But not so.’

‘Tell us,’ said Private Moon.

‘Worse than any of those things—and a mess bill can take the smile off a bloke’s face, believe me. Worse than any morning after any night before. Worse than seeing a hobgoblin sitting at the foot of your bed, pointing a cloven finger and gibbering: “You dunit, you dunit, you dunit! Yes you did, you silly ——! You dunit!”’

Private Higgins paused, for dramatic effect, before continuing. ‘Charley, my boy, that poor fellow has gone and got hisself a job!’

‘Oh, is that all,’ said the greatly relieved audience. ‘Well, why not? Do him good. He was too fat, anyway. And why should *you* worry?’

Whereupon, Private Higgins explained to this neophyte the traditional relations existing between that officer and that officer’s servant whom it had pleased Heaven to join together. ‘Can’t you see, Charley my boy, it’s like being married. There’s a bargain and you’ve got to stick to it. His troubles shall be your troubles—just as his whisky shall be your whisky. You can’t have it both ways. If you don’t share in his sorrows, you can’t pinch his fags—not with a clear conscience.’

‘And after all that,’ said Private Moon. ‘After all that, what is this precious job your bloke’s got?’

‘Entertainment Officer—that’s the job my Mr. Aston has gone and collected for himself.’

‘Entertainment Officer,’ echoed Private Moon. ‘Sounds like a bit of all right to me.’

‘An Entertainment Officer,’ said Private Higgins, ‘is the biggest joke in the battalion. He gets the job because nobody else wants it. They lays in wait for some poor devil; then they all sits back and laughs their silly heads off. I’ve seen it; and why I didn’t warn my officer against it I can’t think. I’ll never forgive myself—never!’

‘First thing that happens,’ continued Private Higgins, ‘he calls for volunteers and when he turns up at the rendezvous, he finds the hut cluttered up with one half-daft creature, who has been kidded that it’s Christmas Day and Santa Claus is handing out buckshee presents to all and sundry. Next thing that happens is the Old Man tells the outfit that if they don’t play the game he’ll make a parade of it, at a time highly inconvenient to those poor types who hang around the pubs trying to seduce village girls on Thursday evenings. That ’elps, I *don’t* think.’

‘Finally,’ concluded our narrator, ‘the Entertainment Officer descends on his batman (that’s me) and some soft-hearted cove (that’s you) to form what he calls the newcleus of a concert party; after which we blacks our faces, asks each other silly questions, and gets the razzberry, good and proper. Lucky if they don’t start throwing things. And then you say, “Why should we worry?”’

‘Have you told your bloke all this?’ asked Charley Moon, in an awe-stricken voice.

‘Told him! Not me. Why should I break the poor perisher’s heart right at the beginning? He’ll find out for himself, soon enough.’

When the notice went up, Mr. Aston happened to be passing. Two corporals stopped to drink in the glad tidings. ‘Blasted amateur theatricals,’ said the first. ‘Kids dressing up as girls—and conjurors.’ ‘Imitations!’ scoffed the second. ‘Startling and life-like imitations of the blackbird’s liquid note, and of a goods train coming out of a tunnel.’

But the first meeting was not so depressing as Private Higgins had feared. There was an audience of two; partly because it was a wet night and partly because they had exhausted their credit at the canteen. The chairman gave them a shilling apiece, sent them away happy, and tried again, with better results. Rehearsals became jolly and friendly affairs; beer being plentiful and free. As the pessimistic corporal had foretold, there was a conjuror, and a purveyor of imitations, who, wisely, told you what he was going to do before he did it. But the main ingredient of success was the beer. Mr. Aston launched his enterprise on beer; he rehearsed it on beer, and it sailed safely into harbour on beer.

The opening concert was a triumph, in spite of a few dissentients in the audience, who were under the impression that there would be free beer on both sides of the footlights. The commanding officer made a nice little speech, suggesting that the current show at the Alhambra Theatre, Leicester Square, London, W., would have to look to its laurels; and the noise of the company celebrating their victory—on free beer—could be heard in the next village.

Privates Higgins and Moon had sat at the back, with the fat girl; and, while Charley was seeing the lady home, Mr. Aston’s batman drifted towards those sounds of revelry to see if his officer needed any help with the beer.

He arrived back at the farm in a state of deep depression. Once again the world was out of joint, the cat was among the pigeons and all was lost. Evidently there was no pleasing Private Higgins. Charley waited for an explanation.

‘And what,’ asked Private Higgins, ‘and what do you suppose the poor, simple perishers are going to do now? They’re so pleased with themselves, they’ve kidded that unfortunate so-and-so to run a pantomime at Christmas. A pantomime! What in the name of all that’s wonderful do they know about pantomimes? This is a professional job. You can’t produce a pantomime on beer. We’ve got to find someone who knows the ropes. Otherwise, my officer goes roaring down the pan and I lose a cushy job.’

But, as always happens, the hour produced the man. Into the battalion drifted one of those nondescript types that inevitably found their way into that nondescript outfit. He had a blue chin, a rather intense look and his uniform fitted where it happened to touch him. A sad spectacle. Private Higgins, feeling the need for a quiet cigarette, found him lurking, out of harm’s way, in the friendly shadow of the incinerator. ‘Hullo, chum,’ he said. ‘What was *your* racket in Civvy Street?’

Instead of accepting this friendly overture in the right spirit, the newcomer appeared to resent it. ‘“Racket”!’ he exclaimed. ‘My dear fellow, what an expression to associate with the activities of a professional man. “Racket,” indeed! What next, I wonder?’

‘Listen, mate,’ said Private Higgins, ‘I asked you a civil question and I expected a civil answer. Why be shy about it? Suppose you *have* been in quod; where’s the harm? Anyway, if it’s a state secret, forget it. . . . Have a gasper.’

Not to be outdone in courtesy, the other accepted this olive branch. ‘Since you ask, I will tell you,’ he said. ‘I am an actor . . .’

Private Higgins leapt into the air and nearly landed in the incinerator. An actor! So the age of miracles was not past. But it wouldn’t do to rush things.

‘What sort of an actor?’ he enquired cautiously.

‘As a servant of the public,’ replied the other, ‘it has been my privilege to serve in almost every capacity. One man, in his time, plays many parts.’

‘Did you ever play in pantomime?’ A tactless question to put to one who had been privileged to serve the public in old English comedy, farce, melodrama—and the Bard. The battered thespian surveyed this enquiring

layman very much as one looks at some unsavoury object found under a stone. Then he said:

‘A star danced and under that was I born. I have even followed in the footsteps of the great Grimaldi.’

‘Which means?’ asked the baffled amateur.

‘I have played in pantomime,’ admitted the servant of the public.

‘That’s lucky,’ said Private Higgins.

‘A matter of opinion. I played in pantomime only when compelled to do so by—er—force of circumstance,’ confessed the follower of the Bard.

‘Everything hung on it,’ said Private Higgins. ‘No pantomime—no perks . . . No buckshee beer . . . Life one long sanitary fatigue . . . Potato bashing . . . Now you join Aston’s ’Erald Angels and life becomes one grand sweet song.’

‘Are you offering me an engagement?’ asked the bewildered actor.

‘That’s about the size of it,’ agreed Private Higgins. ‘Any comments?’

‘I should expect to occupy the star dressing-room . . .’

‘Agreed!’ said Private Higgins.

‘I should insist on a solus position in the billing—above the title of the play . . .’

‘Granted as soon as asked,’ said Private Higgins.

‘What pantomime were you proposing to produce?’

‘Take your pick,’ said Private Higgins.

‘Would you expect me to handle the production?’

‘None better,’ said Private Higgins.

‘I should need an efficient stage manager.’

‘Got the very man,’ said Private Higgins.

‘I should have to agree the script.’

‘Naturally!’ said Private Higgins.

‘Who is writing this pantomime?’

‘You are!’ said Private Higgins.

The actor felt that he was being killed by kindness. It was almost too good to be true. 'Is this,' he asked, 'a serious proposition?'

'Come along to Dale Farm after supper,' said Private Higgins, 'and you'll see just how serious it is.'

Tides in the affairs of Charley Moon were running that night at Dale Farm, on the lonely Yorkshire coast. Over the supper table, Private Higgins hinted darkly at sensational happenings in store, and the stage was set for drama, when his visitor appeared on the scene.

The newcomer wasted no time. As this looked like being a professional job, they must start as they meant to go on; putting all their cards on the table. He, for his part, was prepared to throw the whole weight of his professional reputation into the enterprise. (*Dramatic pause.*) Doubtless they were familiar with the name of Harold Armytage! (*Pause.*) Harold Armytage! (*Repeat.*) Harold Armytage . . .

The bombshell failed to explode. No one at the table had heard of Harold Armytage. Charley was thrilled to the core—but silent. The farmer was only mildly interested; his wife looked at him for guidance, drew blank, and returned her eyes to her plate. The fat girl giggled. An awkward pause was developing when Private Higgins saved the situation.

‘Not *the* Harold Armytage?’ he asked. And, being assured that such was indeed the case, made the only possible observation:

‘Well, strike me pink!’ said Private Higgins.

‘Who would have thought it?’ muttered the farmer.

‘Well, really, you *do* surprise me,’ chirped the farmer’s wife.

‘Coo!’ gasped the fat girl.

‘Are you a *real* actor?’ asked Charley Moon.

A shadow passed across the face of this stranger within the house. ‘Am I a real actor?’ he echoed. ‘Read these, and tell me if I am a real actor. Go on, read them!’ And as Charley picked up the bundle of greasy newspaper clippings, he added, ‘My press notices: the *Bacup Sentinel*; the *Pudsey Telegraph*; the *Todmorden Gazette* . . . and you ask me if I am a real actor.’

‘I was never at a theatre,’ said Charley. ‘How could I tell you were a real actor, if I’ve never seen one?’

‘Fair enough,’ admitted Mr. Armytage. ‘Never mind, you’ve seen one now. How speaks the bard? “There is a tide in the affairs of men . . .” Now, chuck back those press cuttings—they’re worth money.’

The farmer, having had about as much of this nonsense as he could stand, rose heavily, while his wife collected the dirty plates, and nodded to the fat girl to follow her into the kitchen. She was about to do so, when Mr. Armytage, who had been casting an appreciative eye in her direction, placed a restraining hand upon her shoulder. 'The young lady will remain,' he said firmly. 'We shall need a wardrobe mistress. Sit down, my dear, and participate in our deliberations. Who knows, we may even weave a little sex appeal into the pattern of our play.' Upon which barefaced alibi, the fat girl giggled, the farmer's wife sniffed incredulously, and the kitchen door closed with a bang.

For the next couple of hours, Mr. Armytage expounded his views upon the trials of the professional actor; the tragedies of the professional stage, and the triumphs of—Mr. Armytage. The finer points of his narrative were emphasised by episodes ranging from the dramatic to the sentimental, in which the fat girl became his foil, his confederate and his stooge. Ranging through the entire gamut of classic drama, she became, in turn, Ophelia, daughter of old Polonius; Lady Macbeth, and Juliet of the balcony. 'See how she leans her cheek upon her hand!' boomed Mr. Armytage. 'Oh that I were a glove upon that hand, that I might touch that cheek!'

'Stop it, you boulder!' squeaked the fat girl, in half-hearted protest. 'You'll have me all black and blue, you will.'

'She speaks!' rumbled Mr. Armytage. 'Oh, speak again, bright angel . . .' and, once again, the fat girl told him that, if he didn't give over, she would have the law on him, so she would.

Until Private Higgins, who had his own views about the fat girl, asked if it wasn't time to get down to the pantomime.

'Pantomime!' asked Mr. Armytage. 'What pantomime?'

'*Our* pantomime,' replied Private Higgins, coldly.

'Shakespeare, surely?' suggested the tragedian. 'Would you waste such good raw material . . .'

'She'll be raw, right enough,' countered Private Higgins, 'if you don't give her knee a rest!'

At that moment there was a loud knocking on the door. 'Knock, knock, knock! Who's there?' cried Mr. Armytage. 'Here's a farmer that hanged himself on the expectation of plenty . . .'

But he was wrong there, for once. It was the farmer's wife. 'If you don't let that girl out at once,' she said, 'I'll come in and fetch her.'

'The Curfew,' said Mr. Armytage, opening the door, with what dignity he could muster, 'the Curfew tolls the knell . . . Anon, anon! I pray you, remember . . .'

And so ended the first rehearsal. It was all so wonderful, that Charley Moon had some trouble in keeping up with it. Half drunk on the theatrical jargon of the fifth-rate actor, he was thrilled by the masterful touch of this man of the world, who dominated the fat girl as though she had been a kitten. Even Private Higgins had had his nose put out of joint in that quarter, and was not too pleased about it. But Private Higgins knew which side his bread was buttered and was much too old a sweat to worry about trifles of that sort.

The next morning, having placed his officer's tunic on the back of his chair and his boots by the side of his bed, he broached the question of the pantomime; upon which, Mr. Aston said things about pantomimes in general, and this pantomime in particular, that proved how deeply a human being can plumb the depths of woe.

Private Higgins, adopting his best bedside manner, spoke words of comfort.

'Don't you worry, sir,' he said. 'I've got it all taped. It's as easy as falling off a log. Just mark time, till I give you the word "go," and don't spare it another thought. We fixed it all up last night. . . .'

'*Who* fixed it up?' asked Mr. Aston.

'Me and Armytage.'

'Armytage? Who is Armytage?'

'Came in with yesterday's draft.'

'Can you depend on him?'

'Crooked as a corkscrew,' admitted Private Higgins, 'but you can't have it all ways. He's an actor, and did you ever meet an actor who was on the level? Can't trust 'em a yard—especially with women.'

'Doesn't sound very promising.'

'Leave him to me,' said Private Higgins. 'I've got him just where I want him, and if he tries any of his funny stuff, off he goes to the latrines, where he rightly belongs.'

The second rehearsal was more fruitful than the first. Backed up by a chit from the Orderly Room, Private Higgins put Mr. Armytage in his place, once and for all. Mr. Armytage, it appeared, had been heading straight for the sanitary squad, when Private Higgins got him transferred to the concert party. Only the personal intervention of Private Higgins had averted that awful catastrophe. Private Higgins had spent half the night, on his knees, pleading with his officer to spare Mr. Armytage from such degradation. Mr. Armytage had been reprieved, but he was still under observation: any half larks from Mr. Armytage and back he went to Central Dispersal. One word from Private Higgins. . . . This reading of the riot act, and the absence of the fat girl on night duty, cleared the air quite a lot. Private Higgins presided.

‘I’ve had a talk with my officer,’ said the chairman, ‘and we’ve decided to appoint Private Harold Armytage as head cook and bottle washer of this outfit. For which purpose, he will receive special promotion: acting, temporary—unpaid, to add to the dignity of his position. He will be given a free hand, under my direction, to produce a pantomime out of his hat, and to drill a squad of actors for the proper performance of the same. Any remarks?’

Private Armytage, the fear of the sanitary squad still heavy upon him, asked if he might be allowed a competent assistant to act as stage manager, property master, and prompter?

‘Highly reasonable,’ agreed the chairman. ‘Private Moon will report for such duties, herewith.’

Charley Moon could scarcely believe his ears. He was to become a real actor; to hobnob with this great man who had appeared in every theatre in the land. He, Charley Moon, was to be a stage manager, a prompter and a property master, all rolled into one. . . .

‘What next?’ asked the chairman.

‘Which pantomime had you in mind?’ asked Mr. Armytage.

‘That’s your pigeon,’ the chairman reminded him.

‘*Cinderella*?’ suggested the producer—acting, temporary, unpaid.

‘Agreed,’ replied the chairman; and *Cinderella* it was.

Mr. Armytage, having been trained in the last of the fit-ups and the number threes, knew his job inside out, and what Charley Moon learned during the next few weeks was nobody’s business. Sitting at a trestle table, he copied down, at the author’s dictation, the story of *Cinderella*, with

dialogue, songs and stage directions all complete. Mr. Armytage, striding up and down the hut like a caged tiger, poured out a constant stream of jokes, patter and punning couplets, salvaged from how many pantomimes, how long ago!

When the story was finally told; when Cinderella was married to her Prince, and the Ugly Sisters had got what was coming to them; Mr. Armytage turned to the problem of casting his masterpiece. 'There's only one part that really worries me,' he said.

'Which is that?' asked Charley.

'Buttons,' was the reply. 'Easy enough to find hard-boiled comics and straight actors, but when it comes to a blend of the two, with a bit of sentiment thrown in—that's what gives the producer a headache.'

'Isn't Buttons a comic?' asked Charley.

'He is and he isn't,' explained Mr. Armytage. 'He's a comic up to a point, so long as he's kidding the Dame and the Ugly Sisters, but when he's playing opposite Cinderella, he's got to show real feeling: a blend of humour and pathos—the sort of thing Dan Leno had . . .'

'I know all about Dan Leno,' said Charley. 'He acted at a place called Drury Lane; but he was dressed up as an old woman.'

'True enough,' agreed Mr. Armytage, 'but he could play anything, and I'd rather have seen him play Buttons than all the Dames in Christendom.'

'Why don't *you* play Buttons in *our* pantomime?' interrupted Charley.

'Too old,' sighed Mr. Armytage. 'Lost all my illusions. Buttons is the symbol of a young man's hopeless pursuit of the ideal. To play Buttons, you've got to have the courage of your dreams. You've got to believe in Father Christmas, you've got to believe in Cinderella, you've got to believe in the girl next door. It's a young man's part, and I've got a young fellow in my eye . . .'

Mr. Armytage paused. 'I've got a young fellow in my eye,' he went on, 'who would be the perfect Buttons . . . As good as Dan Leno could have been, at his best.'

Charley rather resented this. It made his first hero, discovered in the attic at Little Summerford, seem a little cheap. However, Mr. Armytage should know; Charley had great faith in Mr. Armytage. 'And who,' he asked, 'could be as good a Buttons as Dan Leno could have been?'

‘You could Charley!’ was the most surprising reply.

Charley Moon looked at the older man with the deep contempt we feel for some facetious ass who spoils good conversation with a cheap crack. Here they were, just the two of them, having a lovely talk, and Mr. Armytage must go and spoil it. ‘That’s not very funny,’ he muttered.

‘But I mean it, Charley,’ said Mr. Armytage. ‘I mean every word of it. If I’m any judge, with proper handling, you’ll be as good a Buttons as Dan Leno could ever have been.’

When Mr. Armytage let himself go, he talked a lot of romantic rubbish about anything that came into his head. Knowing this, Charley Moon took everything he said with a grain of salt, and supposed that he was up to his tricks again. But Mr. Armytage knew the real thing when he saw it. ‘Have you got any parlour tricks, Charley?’ he asked.

Charley Moon admitted that he had sung in the choir and could play a bit on the mouth-organ. ‘Splendid!’ said Mr. Armytage. ‘Now pin your ears back and listen to me:

‘Buttons is in love with Cinderella. Everybody knows he hasn’t got a dog’s chance to get her, but they’re on his side, and every time you give the poor little devil a break, they love you for it. When Cinders gets a raw deal from the Ugly Sisters, Buttons has got to nip in and put a spoke in their wheels. He mustn’t let himself be trodden on, like an old mat; if he did, they’d despise him. He’s got to be a cheery little bird, but not so perky as to lose sympathy. Get the idea?’

‘I’m trying to,’ said Charley.

‘You’re on thin ice, all the time,’ Mr. Armytage reminded him. ‘You mustn’t make him a hard little comic, capable of looking after himself; or a poor little runt who can’t say “bo” to a goose. That’s where the parlour tricks come in. You’ve sung in a choir. Ever hear a song called *Angels Guard Thee*? You have! Sing it.’

Charley Moon sang *Angels Guard Thee*—but something seemed to have happened to his voice on the last high note.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Mr. Armytage. ‘All the better if you crack a bit on the high notes. Now play it.’

Charley played it on the mouth-organ that Rose had given him.

Mr. Armytage was delighted. ‘It’s a gift!’ he murmured, half to himself. ‘A shame to take the money. Now listen, Charley. In the Palace scene, when

Cinders is going to be married to the Prince, and you've had the final turn-down, you stand outside, and you serenade her. How do the words go?"

Charley sang:

‘Sleep on, it is not yet the dawn . . .
Angels guard thee, dear love, till morn.’

On the last words, his voice wandered off into a quavering note, but his listener seemed to like it all the better for that.

‘Wonderful,’ said Mr. Armytage. ‘Just saves it from being too sugary. Keep that in, but don’t let them think you’re doing it on purpose. Accidental effect, just what might happen to a young fellow your age, all choked up with emotion. You’ll be a riot, you’ll smash ’em! If Charlie Chaplin had thought of that . . .’

The pantomime was a success, but it wasn’t Charley Moon who brought the house down. The raw lads who made up the battalion whistled for the fat girl, who played Prince Charming, in tights and tinsel; they screamed their heads off at the rough horse-play of the Ugly Sisters, but the lights and shades that went to make up the part of Buttons, left them cold. Only when the pathetic little troubadour’s voice cracked, according to instructions, did they bother very much about him. A derisive laugh swept the back benches. When the curtain fell, he kicked the check trousers, and the plaid waistcoat—those trappings of woe—into a corner, and crawled out into the night. . . .

If he had waited, he might have heard the Colonel’s wife say to her husband: ‘*Who* was that boy who played Buttons? I thought he was delightful. He made me want to laugh and cry at the same time.’

Early in the spring, a letter came from Rose: 'I know what you two are, about writing to each other,' she said, 'so I thought I'd better tell you that your father has been very poorly. And he's got something on his mind. I think you should come and see him—if you can spare the time. . . .'

Charley noted the sting in the tail. That was like Rose—she didn't grumble, but she let you know! Just like a girl, too; supposing a chap could get leave any time he liked. Didn't she know there was a war on?

A poor alibi, that covered a lot of sins, during those war years. What with the pantomime, and one thing and another, Private Moon hadn't been near Little Summerford since he joined the army. Most of the other chaps went haring off to their homes on every short leave; nearly always to see some girl they were tied up to; and came back with a lot of snapshots, which they passed to each other in the canteen; but, somehow, Charley hadn't bothered. He showed the letter to Private Higgins, who spoke to Mr. Aston, who packed him off on compassionate leave. . . .

Rose met him at the station. 'Why, Charley,' she said, 'you do look smart in your uniform. It almost fits you—in places. Couldn't you find someone to pull it together a bit? Aren't there any girls where you've come from, or do they like to see you looking like a rag bag?'

Charley looked at her out of the corner of his eye. Something had happened to Rose while he had been away. She had filled out and got more colour. When he went up north, she was a skimpy little thing; you wouldn't have looked at her twice; but now . . . Charley began to realize why those other chaps went home, whenever they had the chance, and came back with their pockets full of pictures. . . .

'Now, run off and see your Dad,' said Rose. 'He'll want to hear all about everything. When you've told him, come back to the shop, and we'll do something about that tunic; can't have you going about looking like a scarecrow. We don't see much of you, so we may as well see you at your best.'

When Charley got home, he found his father waiting for him by the fire. 'Well, you've got here,' said the miller.

'Yes, Dad,' said Charley.

‘Have a good journey?’

‘Yes, thanks, Dad,’ said Charley.

‘Many travelling?’

‘Quite a few, Dad.’

‘How do you like soldiering?’

‘Not so bad . . .’ Charley Moon shifted restlessly in his chair. He wanted to tell his father so many things. All about the pantomime, and Mr. Armytage, and how he was billeted at a farm. He wanted to ask how things were going at Little Summerford and whether the old wheel was still up to its job. But, most of all, he wanted to comfort this tired, lonely old man . . . yet, somehow, the words wouldn’t come. They might have been two strangers, meeting in a railway carriage for the first time.

‘They seem to keep you at it,’ said the miller. ‘I thought they’d have given you a bit of leave before this. I was almost writing to you, and then I thought, better not, perhaps. But it’s been a long time.’

‘Better late than never,’ said Charley; when what he wanted to do was to put his arm round his father’s shoulder and talk to him like a real son, straight from the heart. But the words wouldn’t come.

‘I’ve wanted to tell you how things are,’ continued the old man. ‘They’re in a mess, Charley; I’ve made a rare mess of it, one way and another, a rare mess. . . .’

This was awful. Charley Moon knew that if he didn’t do something, he would never forgive himself to the end of his days. He pulled his chair closer.

‘Listen, Dad,’ he said. ‘If you’re bothering yourself about what’s going to happen to me when I come out of the army, you can forget it. The old mill will last out your time, and nobody’s going to come making trouble till the war’s over. Up at the farm, where I’m billeted, they say things are going to be better on the land. Prices are going up, and all we’ve got to do is to hang on and not worry. Nothing’s gained by worrying; half the things we worry about never happen. And anyway, you’ve done your best, and if anyone’s to blame, it’s me—I’ve been precious little use to you, God knows; but I was never cut out for this job and there are lots of things I’d sooner do. We’ve had enough millers in one family. I’m going to strike out a new line. So leave me out of it. I shan’t be sorry to see the back of the mill—and the meadows, if it comes to that. They’re more trouble than they’re worth.’

‘But Charley,’ said his father, ‘I always thought you were so wrapped up in the place.’

‘Can’t bear the sight of it,’ lied Charley. ‘It’s different with you. Just because your father and his father have lived here, you think it’s all very wonderful. You’re ready to sacrifice yourself to keep it in the family, but you won’t catch me doing that. The sooner we’re out of it, the better I shall be pleased. To-morrow wouldn’t be too soon for me.’

Miller Moon swallowed this heroic lie, and the medicine did him good.

‘But you’ll have to turn your hand to *something*, Charley,’ he said. ‘Money doesn’t grow on trees. How are you going to set about earning a living?’

‘In the army,’ said Charley, ‘they always teach new recruits a profession. They ask you what you want to be when the war’s over, and then set about putting you in the way of it.’

‘What are they teaching you?’ asked his father.

‘Engineering,’ said Charley Moon. ‘Agricultural engineering! You wouldn’t realize it, stuck down here, but this is a mechanical age. Very soon, all the farms will be run that way. Everything will be mechanized. Tractors instead of horses; combine harvesters from America—you won’t know the countryside. They’ll thrash the corn in the fields; bale the hay in the meadows and milk cows by machinery. And you expect me to hang round this wet hole, trying to squeeze pennies out of a derelict old water-wheel. Not if I know it.’

‘But Charley,’ said the miller, ‘this alters everything. Why have I been worrying about what was going to happen to you, all these years? Why didn’t you tell me before?’

‘Didn’t think of it,’ said Charley.

‘But I thought you were mad about those old meadows.’

‘Hate the very sight of them,’ said Charley. ‘Wouldn’t be found dead in them!’ After all, if a lie is worth telling, it’s worth telling well.

When his father had dozed off in his chair, Charley went down the road to talk to Rose. As she sat with his tunic on her knee, a tape measure round her neck and her mouth full of pins, he couldn’t help thinking how different she was to some of the girls he had met lately. Whether they were different in the north, or whether you being in the army put ideas in their heads, he couldn’t say, but they only seemed to think of one thing—and that wasn’t

letting out the seams in your tunic. Although she was younger than he was, Rose had a quiet, motherly touch. ‘Why, Charley,’ she said, running the tape across his shoulders, ‘how *big* you’re getting. No wonder you look like a sausage in a skin too small for it. If you don’t stop growing, they won’t find anything large enough for you.’

This was artful of Rose, because it had always been a sore point with Charley that he was a bit on the small side. ‘Look how I’ve had to set these buttons forward,’ she went on. ‘And I’ve got to find *inches* in the back. Lucky they give you room to grow, but what’s the use if it’s all tucked in and no use made of it. Now let’s see how it sits on you; and don’t wriggle about like one of those eels we used to catch down in the meadows, or I’ll be sticking a pin in you.’ Rose helped him into the tunic, smoothed it across the shoulders and gave it a little tug in the tail. Then she stood back and looked at him.

‘No doubt, soldiering agrees with you, Charley,’ she said. ‘You’re twice the man you were when you went away. Is it the food they give you, or the drill, or getting up early in the mornings? I wouldn’t trust you with those Yorkshire girls, no further than I could see you.’

‘You haven’t been wasting time yourself,’ said Charley Moon, comparing this new Rose with the little slip of a thing he’d left when he went away less than twelve months before.

‘Oh, don’t bother about *me*,’ said Rose. ‘It’s *you* we’ve got to get right, or those girls up in Yorkshire won’t get their money’s worth. What are they like, Charley? Different to our lot, I’ll be bound. No wonder you don’t come down as often as you might; leaving us to wonder whether you’re dead or alive.’

‘You’d worry!’ said Charley.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ said Rose. She had got the tunic back on her knee and was putting in stitches where the pins had been. ‘I was never one to forget old friends.’

‘I never thought you were,’ said Charley, ‘but looking at you, I wouldn’t say *you* were left hanging out on the line to dry; not when there were any chaps about who knew a good thing when they saw it.’

‘No need to be sarcastic,’ snapped Rose, stitching furiously. ‘And don’t judge others by yourself.’

Charley accepted this rebuff with composure. ‘If I was one of the chaps down this way,’ he said, ‘I shouldn’t look much further than what’s under

my nose at the present minute. Have you got a nice, steady corporal taking you to the pictures, Rosie Posie?’

‘Dozens!’ said Rose. ‘They line up in a queue. Last night there were three ladders against my bedroom window.’

‘Don’t waste your time on corporals,’ Charley advised her. ‘Fidgety fellows! They take life too seriously.’

‘Not my corporals,’ said Rose. ‘When have you got to get back, Charley? Friday! That’s lucky!’

‘Lucky?’ exclaimed Private Moon, caught on the wrong foot for once. ‘Why “lucky”?’

‘Because,’ said Rose, ‘we still have early closing on Thursday.’

The next morning, Miller Moon seemed a different man. All his worries about the future seemed to have disappeared and he questioned his son closely about the prospects of agricultural engineering in the years to come. Charley had some difficulty in keeping his end up, and when Rose called in, after closing time, she could scarcely believe her eyes. ‘Why, Charley,’ she said, ‘you’ve been a real tonic. How lucky I thought of writing to you.’ And then she had to spoil everything by adding, ‘If only you’d come down sooner, instead of leaving him alone all these months, what a difference it might have made.’

Having tucked the sick man up in his armchair, they started off towards the meadows; like two young people going back to peep at the old nursery where they had played together as children. Down the ‘watery lane,’ with last night’s storm water still standing in its deep wheel ruts; round the bend by the ford, and into the long meadow by the white gate.

It was here, under the elms where the rooks were flapping and scolding one another among the high branches, that Rose sprang her great surprise. ‘The snakesheads are out,’ she said. ‘I came down early to make sure. They’re looking wonderful.’ And then, as her companion walked on, saying nothing, she looked at him, with a feeling of deep disappointment: ‘Aren’t you glad to be just in time for the snakesheads, Charley?’ she asked. ‘I thought you’d rather find they were out than anything you could think of?’ And then, as he still didn’t answer, she put her hand on his arm.

‘What’s the matter, Charley? There’s something hurting you. Why don’t you say what it is? You’ll feel better if you get it off your mind. Is it

anything I've done?"

'No,' said Charley, 'nothing you've done, Rose. How could it be?'

'Then what is it? Are you worrying about your father?'

'No,' said Charley again. 'I'm not worrying about him; not now. I've done all I can for *him*.'

'Is it some trouble with the army, or with a girl, or something? Have you done anything *wrong*, Charley?'

'No,' said Charley Moon. 'I haven't done anything wrong—nothing in particular, that is.'

'Then why don't you want to see the snakesheads, and the meadows and the river? Don't you like them, same as you used to?'

'More than ever,' said Charley.

'Very well,' said Rose, 'if that's all you've got to say, we'd best go home. No good hanging about like a couple of dumb things. And I thought you'd love to see it all again. . . .' Rose began to cry.

So Charley told her how the bottom had fallen out of his world; how he had found the old man worrying himself sick, because the mill would have to be sold and there would be nothing left for anybody. . . .

Rose was mystified. 'But he looked so happy,' she said. 'I haven't seen him look so happy for years. How did you manage to put it all right, Charley?'

'I told him,' said Charley Moon, 'that I didn't care a straw for the old mill, or the river, or the meadows; and how I only wanted to be quit of the whole rotten business. That's what made him happy. He wasn't worrying about the mill; he was worrying about me. So I told him he was an old fool to be sorry for someone who wasn't sorry for himself.'

'But that wasn't true, Charley?' asked the girl.

'Of course it wasn't. But what else could I do? No use letting him sit there like an old spaniel with its foot in a trap; looking at you, I had to say something—didn't I?'

'Of course you did,' said Rose. 'I love you for that, Charley. I think it was wonderful of you; and everything will come right, you'll see. . . . Now, let's forget about it. Let's imagine that everything was a silly mistake and that it's all yours for ever and always.'

‘Wish I could say “Amen” to that,’ said Charley Moon.

The meadow fritillaries, known as snakesheads because of their rather sinister shape and colouring, were wonderful. Unless you have lost yourself in the wet water meadows of the upper Thames, you can have no idea of the strange impression created by acres of these odd-looking blossoms. Imagine millions of green adders, with purple heads and yellow tongues, poised ready to strike; spread as thickly as a field of dandelions and buttercups! Here and there, by a strange freak of nature, the flowers are white, which, coupled with their hanging heads, possibly accounts for the alternative country nickname of ‘sullen ladies.’ Millions of them—literally millions—a never-to-be-forgotten sight.

Such is the *Fritillary Meleagris*, or snakeshead fritillary; a sort of cross between a tulip and a wild orchid, yet belonging to neither family. Where it grows, you will find it in prodigal abundance, but you are more likely to spend a lifetime looking for it, and never find it at all.

Charley Moon stood and looked at this purple sea, on which flecks of white were showing. ‘I had a notion once,’ he said, ‘when the old man first told me we were going broke. I thought I would hire a lorry and a lot of chaps to fill it and take a load of these things up to Covent Garden. Like a chap I knew who made a year’s rent out of a field of mushrooms. But nothing came of it. By the time I’d made up my mind, they were all over, and it was too late. No doubt they would have withered by the time I got them to market, but there’d have been no harm in trying. It *might* have saved the ship for a week or so.’

‘Don’t start worrying again,’ said Rose. ‘It was a lovely idea and perhaps you’ll do it one day. Anyhow, it’s too late for this year; you wouldn’t have time to get the fellows to pick them.’

‘It’s always too late,’ said Charley Moon. ‘But I’d like to have seen the faces of those London chaps, when I drove up with my lorry of snakesheads. Been worth it, even if I hadn’t sold a couple of bunches.’

This notion of Charley’s made them both laugh. ‘There was another time,’ he said, ‘when the farmers were grumbling about the price they got for their milk. “Why don’t you stop grouching?” I asked one of them. “Why don’t you stop grouching and *do* something?” “Easy for *you* to talk,” he said. “You, with your mill! You wouldn’t think it was so funny if you found you were getting less for your milk than it cost to produce.” “If I ever found myself in that box,” I said, “I’d get a lorry . . .”’

‘Another lorry!’ laughed Rose.

‘Yes,’ said Charley, ‘there’s always a lorry. “If I found myself in that box,” I said to this chap, “I’d fill a lorry with milk churns, drive it into Trafalgar Square, and pour the lot of it down the drain,” I said.’

‘What good would that do?’ asked Rose.

‘You’d soon see what it would do,’ said Charley. ‘Next morning, the papers would be full of pictures of farmers pouring good milk down the drain because it didn’t pay them to sell it. That would have put the wind up those Londoners who don’t care what happens to anybody, so long as *they’re* all right. They’ve got a saying about that, up in Yorkshire.’

‘What is it?’ asked Rose.

‘Couldn’t tell you,’ laughed Charley. ‘It’s too rude for your young ears.’

From the fritillary field, they wandered down to the brook, visiting all their old haunts in turn. There was the deep pool where the stream swung round at right angles, to make a home for the big trout; there was the gravelly shallow where you could walk across without wetting your feet, and there was the ‘run’ under the bank, where the eel-gin was set. The ‘water bubbles’ with their large golden flowers were at their finest and the tall green spikes showed where the yellow iris would be.

‘I always think,’ said Rose, ‘that if yellow flags were as rare as orchids and if orchids were as common as yellow flags, you’d see those smart ladies wearing these to dances.’

‘Why not send some to London?’ suggested Charley.

‘In a lorry!’ laughed Rose.

The ragged robins weren’t out yet, but in the corner of the wood the bluebells were showing. Forget-me-nots fringed the edge of the stream, and when they stooped down to pick some, they caught the scent of the water mint they had trodden upon. A few white anemones, almost as delicate as harebells, swayed with every wiffle of wind that came down the brook. Buttercups gilded the higher parts of the meadow with gold.

‘Pity we can’t sell the buttercups,’ said Charley.

Rose looked at him in her old-fashioned way. ‘Charley Moon,’ she said, ‘you think of nothing but making money.’

‘About time some of us did,’ said Charley.

Rose shook her head solemnly. ‘Don’t be too sure of that,’ she said. ‘We’ve been very happy this afternoon, and we haven’t got fourpence between us.’

‘Give me the money and I’ll buy all the happiness I want,’ he told her.

‘If money will make you happy, I hope you find all you want; but I wouldn’t count on it, Charley. It’s like the buttercups; all very well where they grow, but rare things to wither when you get them home.’

Charley Moon looked across the field of yellow buttercups.

‘Very well,’ he said, ‘there’s only one thing for it—go where the buttercups grow.’

A faint cold breeze stirred the nodding fritillaries. Rose shivered in sympathy. ‘We’d better be going,’ she said. ‘If we stay here any longer, your father will wake up and wonder what’s happened to us. . . .’

Rose needn’t have worried. When they got back, they found the old miller dead in his chair. ‘Looking for all the world,’ as the old woman, who was called in to see to him, said, ‘like a child who had just been told it was going to a party.’

After the funeral, a kind-faced old gentleman took Charley Moon into a corner and told him some of the things he knew already. The place was mortgaged to the last brick. When it had been sold up, there would be nothing left—not a penny. But doubtless the mortgagees would pay any legal costs and the funeral expenses could come out of the sale. He, their lawyer, would see to everything. Charley was not to worry . . .

‘Nothing left for me to worry about,’ suggested Private Moon.

The legal gentleman gave an embarrassed little cough. ‘As a matter of fact,’ he agreed, ‘it doesn’t really concern you at all. Owing to your late father’s unfortunate financial situation you can scarcely be considered a principal in any subsequent proceedings. There may be a few things to sign, transferring your nominal interest in the estate, but that will only take a matter of minutes. We’ll send you the papers, and your commanding officer will no doubt advise you. Let us have them by return. My clients hope to clear up the mess as quickly as possible. You see, although they virtually owned the property, they could do nothing to protect their interests during the lifetime of the late tenant.’

‘The old man rather outstayed his welcome?’ suggested Charley.

The lawyer looked a little hurt. ‘It might be argued,’ he admitted, ‘that the late Mr. Moon was a little foolish—possibly “ill-advised” would be a more generous way of putting it—not to . . . not to . . .’

‘Anticipate the rising market,’ suggested Private Moon.

‘That is so,’ agreed the other. ‘It is possible, even probable, that certain adjustments at the right moment might, as we say, have paid dividends, but that was entirely his own concern. War is a great leveller . . .’

‘It either levels you down, or levels you up,’ said Charley.

‘It has certainly stimulated the demand for agricultural properties,’ agreed the lawyer. ‘Well, Mr. Moon, I’m pleased to have met you, even under such sad circumstances. If there is anything I can do . . .’

‘Don’t worry about me,’ said Private Moon. ‘I sail under my own steam, from now on.’

‘Have you anything in mind?’ asked the lawyer.

‘Like hell, I have,’ said Charley. ‘I’m looking for a short cut to the place where the buttercups grow!’

Armistice Day was very unsettling. In the officers' mess, some unnamed hero dropped a thunder flash into the piano, while the commanding officer was singing *The Holy City*; the messing officer, who like Ammonal, absorbed moisture very quickly, kissed the padre good night; and, the black-out being over, the W.A.A.C.'s went to bed with their blinds up.

The next day, all was commotion—Fred Karno's army was on the move. The army acted swiftly. Overseas troops were to be relieved, at the earliest possible moment, by those oldsters, youngsters, lame ducks and cripples of all categories, who had been engaged on home service. Someone in Whitehall pressed a button and the general post was on! Within a week, Private Moon, Mr. Armytage, and a bunch of similar 'odds and sods,' found themselves in a Belgian mining town, being hailed as conquering heroes who had won the greatest war in the world's history. Only Private Higgins remained behind. No foreign junketings for Private Higgins; you didn't catch that sort of old bird on that sort of chaff. Things were looking up in the East End; evacuees were flocking back to their rabbit warrens; there was a costermonger's barrow for sale in the Mile End Road. . . .

Dear Charley, my boy [wrote Mr. Alfred Higgins], sorry not to see you and the other chaps marching away to foreign parts; but, if the truth must be told, I was busy, wangling a spot of 'compassionate,' which has since transformed itself into permanent A.W.O.L.—and no questions asked. Truth is, Charley, my boy, they've got themselves into such a flaming muck-up with this demobbing, they're only too happy to see the last of you; so here I am, back in civvies and likely to so remain. . . .

Keep this under your hat, Charley [continued Mr. Higgins], because if you start spilling the beans, you'll get killed in the rush. The yarn is going round that this 'first in, first out' racket won't work, and that the blokes to get home will be those that can prove they've got a shop to come back to. I don't know how you're fixed, Charley, my boy, but if you can pinch a chit from your orderly room, I'll get it signed up, all good and proper, and we'll have you back in blighty before you can look round. Don't leave it too late, boy; the jobs are being snapped up in some fashion, and first come, first served is the motto; as always. . . .

P.S. This goes also for that old windbag Armittage—but if he thinks he's on a job down my street, he's got another guess coming.

Charley Moon stuffed this friendly epistle into his kit-bag, and forgot all about it. So far from wanting to get out of the army, he was having the time of his life. No drills, no trench digging, no night guards; and everybody taking you for a hero. True, you couldn't talk to the girls, but talking wasn't everything, and what they wouldn't do for a pound of sugar or a packet of tea was nobody's business.

And then there was the theatre. Not a converted hut, like the one in Yorkshire, but a real slap-up affair with footlights and plush seats, all complete. Soon after they got to Belgium they were paraded, and an officer asked if any of them had any theatrical experience. True to army tradition, they all stood stock still, like a lot of tailor's dummies—all except Private Harold Armytage, who heard the sound of the trumpets, and stepping from the ranks, stood, a lonely figure, superb against the dawn.

'What were you in civil life?' asked the officer.

'I was an actor,' replied Mr. Armytage.

'Amateur or professional?'

Mr. Armytage shuddered. That it should come to this! After a lifetime spent in the service of his profession, to be insulted by this stripling. Mr. Armytage bit on the bullet, kept a stiff upper lip and maintained a dignified silence.

'Stage fright, eh?' smiled the officer.

'Stage fright!' rumbled Mr. Armytage. 'Let me play the lion, I will roar, that I will do any man's heart good to hear me. I will roar . . .'

'No need to shout,' said the officer.

' . . . I will roar,' continued the actor, 'I will roar you as gently as any sucking dove; I will roar you an 'twere any nightingale.'

'Report to the Divisional Employment Company,' said the officer. 'They want singers for the concert party.'

Mr. Armytage stood as one stricken. His jaw dropped; he forgot to keep a stiff upper lip. His mouth fell open—and remained open. A singer—in a concert party!

‘Don’t thank me,’ said the officer. ‘We like to put round pegs into round holes, when we get a chance. . . .’

Mr. Armytage made a deep impression on the Divisional Employment Company, and, very soon, he had them feeding out of his hand. Shortly afterwards, Private Moon was summoned to headquarters, where he found the great man roaring like a lion, a sucking dove and a nightingale, all at the same time. ‘Charley,’ he said, ‘we’re on a good thing. The poor lads don’t know their arms from their elbows. They’ve handed everything over to me; you’re my stage manager, and if we play our cards right, we’re in for the longest run on record.

‘Now, it wants two months to Christmas. So we’ll revive the pantomime we gave them last year—with knobs on. Come and see the back of the stage; it’ll do your heart good.’

This was the first time Charley had ever been back-stage of a real theatre. As he stood, looking out into the auditorium, his companion pulled a switch, and the footlights sprang to life. A chuckle came from the wings.

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ intoned Mr. Armytage, ‘we are honoured to-night by the presence of that world-famous comedian, Charley Moon. Given your kind attention, he will recite “Don’t go down the mine, Daddy—they’ve taken the ladder away.” Now, Charley, just to get the strength of the house, sing a verse of *I’ll Meet You Half-way, Dear*—same as you did at that little dump up in Yorkshire.’

Charley tried, but the words wouldn’t come.

‘Go on,’ said the voice from the wings. ‘We’re burning good juice and it’s all got to be paid for.’

‘I can’t,’ said Charley.

Mr. Armytage chuckled again. ‘That’s the footlights,’ he explained. ‘They cut you off from the audience. You’re missing the kind friends in front—but you’ll hear them all right, when you once get started. Wait till you stand under Cinderella’s balcony and sing *Angels Guard Thee*.’

‘Not me!’ said Charley Moon. ‘I don’t mind working the lights and curtains, if you show me how, and I’ll play the mouth-organ, but no more singing—not after that last time.’

‘Don’t be daft,’ said Mr. Armytage. ‘You’ve got a lot to learn, and you’ll never get another such chance as this. Maybe you didn’t get the inflection

just right, or, maybe, your timing was a bit woolly. That can happen to the best of us. I remember talking to Seymour Hicks. . . .’

‘At the Garrick?’ scoffed Charley.

‘No,’ said Mr. Armytage, ‘the drinks were on me this time. We’d dropped into my club, the Athenæum, and Seymour, bless his heart happened to say they’d had a sticky audience at the matinee. “Don’t blame the customers, Seymour,” I said, “your timing was all over the shop. I was there and I saw what happened. Take that time when you were dodging backwards and forwards between the bedroom door and the window looking out over Paris. There was a scene full of laughs, and you missed half of them. Why? Because it was a matinee and you wanted to be at Hurst Park.”’

‘How did he take that?’ asked Charley.

‘He looked me straight in the eye,’ said Mr. Armytage, ‘straight in the eye, he looked at me, paused for a full minute, and then said, “By Jove, Harold, old man, you’re right. Bad timing! Shocking bad timing. But it won’t happen again. D’you know what I shall do next Thursday? I shall put on the understudy.” Incurrible fellow, Hicks, but what an artist! Couldn’t put a foot wrong when he was really on the job. . . . What were we talking about, Charley?’

‘We were talking about me not singing *Angels Guard Thee*,’ said Charley, ‘but you needn’t worry. I see what you mean, and what was good enough for Seymour Hicks, is good enough for me. Next time we come to that balcony bit—I shall put on my understudy.’

The pantomime of *Cinderella*, produced, as Mr. Armytage had promised, ‘with knobs on,’ ran for two months and was a crashing success. Special scenery was hired from Brussels and a corps of dancing girls made the journey from Paris in two divisional ambulances. Proprietors of certain dubious establishments, which were feeling the competition, complained to Higher Authority, that these ladies were lowering the morale of local residents. A very senior officer came over from G.H.Q. to see what the—th Division had been up to—and booked seats for the entire staff for the following evening.

But, by the end of February, the sands were running out. The troops, ‘sweating on demob,’ thought only of home; and Charley Moon, though he had no home to go to, was bitten by the general unrest. One morning, he was prowling round the room he shared with his theatrical chief, when the latter looked up from a letter he was reading. ‘Sit down, Charley,’ he said, ‘and

listen to this. There's a manager I know who works the "smalls"; he's getting a company together, and he wants me to play the heavy parts. He'll guarantee me a job. That means I'll be out in a fortnight.'

'You're lucky,' said Charley.

Mr. Armytage considered his young companion, through half-closed eyes. 'Why don't you come along, too?' he said. 'There's always room for one more in that sort of outfit. I could work it for you. Why not get someone at home to apply for you and then join up with us? Haven't you got anybody?'

'Only a girl at a sweet-shop,' said Charley, 'and she never told a lie in her life. It's against her religion. Looks as though I'll be back in blighty two years come next muck-spreading.'

'By which time,' said Mr. Armytage, 'actors will be twelve a penny and they'll be running a charity benefit for George Robey! Sorry, Charley, but I'm afraid you've missed the boat.'

And then Charley bethought him of the letter from Alfred Higgins, still tucked away in his kit-bag. That night a letter went to the address in London, E.C., and a week later came a very official form, stating that, in consequence of the demobilization of the army, Private Charles Moon had been disembodied as from the 4th of April, 1919. Private Moon was thanked by the army council for the excellent work he had done during the late war and was promised a further notification of any gratuity to which he might be entitled. . . .

Dear Charley, my boy [wrote Mr. Higgins, in a covering letter], here is the order for your release, granted at the urgent request of yours truly, who has guaranteed to employ you for a period of six months, come rain come shine; after which, your loving country doesn't give a dam what happens. Anything to get rid of you, Charley, my boy; and after seeing you bashing those spuds, I can't say I blame them.

P.S. No funny stuff about that old windbag Armittage. The business will carry you, Charley, my boy, but that human gasometer gives me the willies.

Private Moon showed Mr. Armytage the printed form, but kept the covering letter in his pocket. 'An interesting document,' said the actor. 'Coming from any other quarter, one might suppose it to be genuine.'

However, 'twill serve. Now is the winter of our discontent, made glorious summer by this son of Spitalfields Market. To horse, Charley, to horse! And let us not wait upon the order of our going.'

They reached Calais on the next leave train; passed through Dover, where a few war-weary malcontents were demonstrating against being sent back to France, now that the war was over—and lost themselves in the labyrinth of little streets that feed the squares and avenues of London's West End—that Mecca of an actor's dreams.

Coming suddenly round a corner, they found themselves facing the glittering façade of the Alhambra Theatre. 'Beautiful!' murmured Mr. Armytage. 'The golden gates of Paradise—shut, as usual!'

'Looks uncommonly like a field of buttercups to me!' said Charley Moon.

Dear Charley [wrote Rose], I suppose you will be leaving the Army very soon now, though they say it is a case of last in last out, so there will be a lot to come home before you, worse luck. Never mind, Charley, quite a lot won't ever come back, so you must count yourself lucky and say 'Better late than Never.' They say the Mill has been sold and is to be turned into a big private house. About time something was done to it, as you were always saying, but where was the money to come from? Not from working in the country, that's certain. Did you get a parcel from me at Christmas? I'm not getting at you for not writing, Charley, but if it was lost, I will send another as soon as I can get a few things together. Or shall you be coming home before then? Shall you come back here, Charley, or shall you go chasing off somewhere else? You always were a one to want to see the world and perhaps this is your chance. Then you can come home and settle down when you've had enough of it. Like old Mr. Salt who went up to London and came back with a pension. I can't tell you anything about the meadows, Charley, I don't like to go down there, now they aren't yours any more. Someone might send me packing, and I shouldn't like that—not after the times we used to have. Well, good-bye, Charley, when you've got a minute to spare, write and tell me all the news. . . .

‘*Let us take the road,*’ sang Captain Macheath and his cut-throats, in *The Beggar’s Opera*; and ‘*We take the golden road to Samarkand,*’ sang Flecker’s more peaceable merchants in Hassan. Rudyard Kipling sent Kim, and his lama, adventuring against the colourful tapestry of the Grand Trunk Road; and it was along the pilgrims’ way to Canterbury that Chaucer’s *Tales* were told.

Romance dies hard. Even to-day, with each succeeding spring, a crazy band of happy lunatics: actors, singers, dancers, acrobats and circus clowns—direct descendants of the jesters, jongleurs and troubadours—prepare to take the roads of England—the spring tours are starting.

When Charley Moon stepped into this crazy world of make-believe he received a number of shocks. The first of these concerned the status of Mr. Armytage. It is true, he sustained a number of extremely vital rôles, under a variety of aliases, but he was also baggage man, and Charley was something less than that.

The tour of *The Midnight Express* had been organized to introduce a famous old melodrama to those lesser industrial towns, known professionally as the number threes. The company was a brilliant one—how could it be otherwise, with Mr. Armytage himself, playing so small a part in its composition. It was headed by a distinguished tragedian, who had sustained the same rôle at the Lyceum, when that old melodrama was new. The leading lady was his third wife, and the soubrette, a daughter by a former marriage. Quite a pleasant family affair—or a glaring example of nepotism in its worst form, if you prefer it that way.

The mechanics of a touring melodrama in the early 1920’s were such that, time being needed to set the larger scenes, this void was filled by the comedian, working a single turn, or two comics, in a double act, before a front cloth. Undeterred by the noise of scene shifters and the hammering of carpenters, these heroes would come down to the footlights, and put over an individual effort which had nothing whatever to do with the play. No particular importance was attached to this incident; it did not figure in the script and no appreciation was expected or received. . . .

So that when *The Midnight Express* company arrived at Oswaldtwistle, to find that their comedian had basely deserted them *en route*, the manager

told Mr. Armytage to fill in the gaps—and dismissed the matter from his mind.

Not so, Mr. Armytage. At their new diggings, Charley Moon found his fellow lodger in a state of suppressed excitement. At last, their great chance—that tide in the affairs of men—had arrived. To-morrow they would wake to find themselves famous. ‘Make no mistake,’ said Mr. Armytage, ‘we shall bring the house down!’

‘*We!*’ gasped Charley. ‘What has it got to do with me?’

Mr. Armytage explained that he was not the sort of man to keep a good thing to himself. Together, they had scrambled up the steep ascent, and together they would view the prospect of their promised land. . . .

‘Not me, I shan’t,’ said Charley.

Mr. Armytage ignored the interruption. Opportunity only knocked once, and here was their chance to build up a good double act. All the big comics had started that way. A couple of cross-talk comedians could go anywhere and do anything. They could go on the halls; step into a pantomime, or pick up a bit, on the side, at a smoking concert. . . .

Once again, fate took Charley Moon by the scruff of his neck and ran him along the road that fate intended him to tread. ‘What do you want me to do?’ he asked.

‘We come on,’ said his instructor, ‘as two characters in keeping with the story. This is *The Midnight Express*. Very well, we’ll be a couple of porters. Next, we think up some old routine, and switch it to suit the situation. Take two paper-hangers spilling a pail of whitewash all over the place. . . .’

‘We could whitewash the tunnel,’ suggested Charley.

Mr. Armytage considered this ill-timed jest with a baleful eye. ‘Funny, but not helpful,’ he said. ‘We do not appear as two paper-hangers; we appear as two porters and we pinch the paper-hanging business—up to a point. Whereas they got their laughs out of dropping a bucket from the top of a ladder, we shall convulse the audience by the emptying of a passenger’s trunks all over the platform.’

‘Would that be funny?’ asked Charley.

‘It depends,’ said Mr. Armytage, ‘on what is in those two trunks.’

‘Whitewash!’ suggested his junior partner.

‘Lady’s underclothes,’ corrected Mr. Armytage, ‘or an admiral’s hat, or a pair of elastic-sided boots. Anything unexpected—the shock of surprise . . .’

‘Somebody may laugh,’ agreed Charley. ‘That would be a shock.’

‘Another word from you,’ said Mr. Armytage, ‘and you’re out on your ear. Some have greatness thrust upon them—and haven’t got the sense to see it. Don’t you want to be a great London comic and earn fifteen quid a week?’

The two porters were not, immediately, the riotous success that Mr. Armytage had foretold.

No one bothered about them. While they were on the stage, the rest of the company were in the dressing-rooms getting ready for the next big scene—the rescue of the heroine, who had been tied to the rails, at the mouth of the tunnel. When the scene shifters had completed this tremendous set, a whistle was blown, the lights went out, and the two comics had to slip away in the darkness. Heaven help them if they were caught on the stage at the end of the black-out.

As they scurried away like a couple of frightened rabbits, the lights went up on a truly terrifying spectacle. The yawning tunnel, the belching smoke, and the villain tying the last knots in the cruel ropes, which bound the heroine to the railway lines. Away in the distance was heard the rumble of the approaching train; the midnight express, driven by the young lover of the virtuous girl, who had preferred death to dishonour.

It is a long tunnel, and the train is not due for another five minutes. There is still time for the unhappy victim to change her mind. The villain reasons with her. He paints an engaging picture of the primrose path. If she will give herself to him, she will ride in a carriage and pair; be loaded down with diamonds and dine at the Trocadero. If she still refuses, she will be squashed to a jelly by the midnight express; with its driver, her lover, picking bits of her out of the cruel wheels. *Now* will she consent?

This takes a bit of considering. If any of you have found yourselves in a similar situation, you will agree that the poor girl has quite a lot to think about. After all, diamonds are diamonds, and ‘dinner at the Troc’ has quite a nice ring about it. Up in the gallery, the customers are in two minds. There is the sternly virtuous section, whose watchword is ‘Death before Dishonour’; but there is also the more human element, wishing they could have half her chance!

The villain waits for his answer. More smoke belches from the mouth of the tunnel. The scream of a whistle is heard. A second scream comes from a girl in the gallery—making a duet of it. The villain leans downward . . . and then, clear above the roar and rattle of the approaching train, comes the answer: ‘No! No! A thousand times, NO!’ . . .

No doubt about it, a play *was* a play, even as late as the early 1920's, in the number threes. None of your chatty drawing-room stuff for the industrial north. No silly little palate-tickling appetisers for them. They filled a mighty flagon and drained it to the dregs. Where will you find such a situation in the West End to-day? Gone are the thrills of yester-year!

And so, *The Midnight Express* roared and rattled round the provinces, until it came to rest at a mining town on the borders of Yorkshire and Lancashire. Bad business, attributed to rival attractions, inclement weather and a recent colliery disaster, had frayed everybody's nerves; but a local Northern League football match suggested better conditions. If only the home club should win, a good Saturday night audience could be expected, and all might yet be well. Mr. Armytage and Charley Moon went along to see the game, and brought back the reassuring news that the local lads had carried all before them. They fed largely on jellied cow-heel, strong tea and Eccles cakes, and arrived at the stage door, still wearing large red rosettes, the colours of the winning team.

The theatre was crowded. 'House Full' boards littered the pavements. Everybody was in fine fettle. The stalls were complacent; the circle, exhilarated; pit and gallery ready for anything—the sort of atmosphere one found at the good old Empire on Boat Race night. Mr. Armytage reported these glad tidings to the star dressing-room, and was rewarded with a cigar.

As the time for the great tunnel scene approached, one almost felt that the strain on the audience might be too great. The heroine rubbed a little more chalk on her cheeks, the pallor being heightened by a dash of defiant red and dark rings round her eyes. The villain gave his top-hat an extra touch of vaseline; the front cloth fluttered down on the preceding scene—and the two porters were on. . . .

They still wore the big, red rosettes, colours of the new champions of the Northern League. Their dark porters' caps had been replaced by large, red tam-o'-shanters; Charley Moon carried a red umbrella and Mr. Armytage had bribed his landlady to stitch a red patch on the seat of his trousers. It was a large patch, and its wearer lost no opportunity of exhibiting it to his audience. . . .

The heroine, being tied to the cruel rails, and separated from the uproar by the thickness of the front cloth, was not so pleased with life. She insisted on knowing what 'those damned comics' were up to, now; and, being told, ordered a stage carpenter to make them stop it. Vain hope! The carpenter was supporting half the weight of the tunnel, and couldn't be spared.

Mob hysteria is apt to be catching. It spread, on this occasion, by way of the orchestra to the stage itself. The trombone, instead of arranging his band-parts for the musical background to the next scene, stood in his place to see what was happening above him. Intoxicated by success, Charley Moon and Mr. Armytage produced a rather dubious piece of earthenware from one of the bags, and presented 't'coop' to the conductor. Pandemonium!

At this precise moment several things happened. The carpenters signalled the stage manager that the famous tunnel scene was set . . . The stage manager, in turn, signalled the comics to get off the stage, and raised the front cloth . . . Charley Moon and Mr. Armytage fled, leaving the unhappy conductor with 't'coop,' which he waved vainly in their direction . . . The heroine fell back on the railway lines . . . The villain advanced to the footlights . . .

But the audience would have none of him. They wanted the two porters and they were going to have them. The villain demanded silence . . . The heroine added shrill protestations . . . The stage manager, panic stricken, lowered the front cloth and raised it again . . . Charley Moon and Mr. Armytage were hustled back to bow their acknowledgments, but all these activities only added fuel to the fire. . . .

Seizing his opportunity, the conductor handed back 't'coop,' which Charley accepted, with a low bow, before making a triumphant exit—into the tunnel.

Leaving the unhappy heroine tied to the cruel rails; at the mercy of the cruel villain, with the cruel midnight express ready to roll over her at any moment!

But the Saturday night audience had, by this time, lost their taste for such serious affairs. They were more in the mood for a bit of fun; they wanted to laugh, and, most of all, they wanted the two porters back again—complete with tam-o'-shanters, red umbrella and 't'coop.' . . . Particularly 't'coop!'

When nothing happened, a faint note of frustration crept in. Drama is all very well in its way; even a spot of Shakespeare can be tolerated when you are in the mood for it; but there is a time and place for everything. Saturday night, following a victory for t'la-ads, called for lighter treatment. . . . A fat fishmonger—prominent supporter of the winning team, known as 'Fog-horn'—implored the two 'mournful beggars' to 'get on wi' it, and get it over like.' . . . When the heroine asked the villain what was at the back of his mind, the audience told her. . . .

When the curtain fell at last, Charley Moon was summoned to the Old Man's dressing-room—a most unusual honour. He was not the only visitor. The leading lady was also present.

‘Quite a reception,’ thought Charley. If he had been more observant, he would have noticed that the heroine was tapping her white silk slipper on the floor: a sign of irritation—as when a cat sways its tail, before starting to spring.

‘Well, Moon,’ said the Old Man, who was still in his grease-paint, ‘are you satisfied?’

‘Yes, sir. Quite, sir. Were you, sir?’ Once again, a little more experience in the wicked ways of the world, might have warned the listener that there was more in the question than met the ear.

‘Oh yes, Moon, *I* was satisfied—more than satisfied—*much* more!’ replied the Old Man, looking out from under his bushy eyebrows. ‘You had quite an ovation.’

‘I’m glad you’re pleased, sir,’ said Charley.

‘I’ve been a member of my profession for many years, Moon,’ continued the old actor, ‘but I can honestly say that never, in the whole course of my long experience, have I witnessed such scenes as occurred upon our stage this evening. I trust I may never see such scenes again.’

And now Charley Moon began to smell a rat. ‘They did get a bit noisy,’ he admitted. ‘But after all, sir, it was football night; you have to make allowances.’

‘I’m not blaming the audience, Moon. Any fool can start a Saturday night audience laughing, but any fool can’t stop them. This is your first engagement, I believe.’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Charley Moon.

‘You have a great deal to learn. I blame myself, of course. I should have had understudy rehearsals. I should have limited your props to something reasonable. I should have examined the contents of those dreadful bags. . . . Where did you find that red umbrella?’

‘I gave a chap sixpence for it—after the match,’ replied Charley.

The old actor took a coin from a small pile by his looking-glass. ‘I wouldn’t like you to be out of pocket,’ he said. ‘And that other—utensil?’

‘Borrowed it from my landlady,’ said Charley.

‘Very obliging! Landladies have changed since my young days.’

‘I didn’t tell her.’ The Old Man, who was not a bad sort, smiled at that, but he was pulled up short by an impatient movement from the corner of the dressing-room, where the heroine was nursing her wounded vanity.

‘Why the hell don’t you sack him, and let us get out of this?’ she demanded. That was the trouble with men. No moral courage. Always trying to dodge unpleasant decisions.

The Old Man coughed, apologetically. ‘Ah, yes, my dear, of course, I was forgetting . . . You will realize, Moon, that you have made it very difficult for me to retain you as a member of my company. Discipline is as essential on the stage as in the armed forces. You, having worn His Majesty’s uniform, won’t need to be told that. You will complete next week, under the strict supervision of my stage manager; after which you will be free to take up another engagement. I will do all in my power . . .’

‘You won’t!’ snapped the heroine. ‘I’ll see to that!’ and, having carried her point, she departed, to have a fit of hysterics in her own dressing-room.

Charley Moon had been wondering, all this time, why he had been picked out for this telling-off. Perhaps Mr. Armytage had been sacked already. He was with the stage hands, helping to clear the stage and load the scenery for to-morrow’s journey, just as if nothing had happened. In the ordinary way, Charley would have been there, lending a hand, but somehow he didn’t feel like it to-night. He would go for a bit of a stroll, to cool down after all the excitement, and talk things over with Mr. Armytage when he got back to the diggings.

There he found his fellow lodger waiting for him. ‘Well, stranger,’ said Mr. Armytage, ‘success gone to your head? Too big to help get the stuff on the truck? Where have you been all this long time?’

‘Talking to the Old Man,’ said Charley.

‘Gave you a cigar, too, did he?’

‘No,’ said Charley. ‘He didn’t give me a cigar.’

‘Too bad!’ sighed Mr. Armytage, breaking his precious gift into two parts, and handing one regretfully, to his partner. ‘Did he say anything about the act?’

‘He thinks we were funny,’ said Charley.

‘Good,’ said Mr. Armytage.

‘Too funny!’ added Charley.

‘Ah-h,’ said Mr. Armytage.

‘Much too funny!’ concluded Charley. ‘He gave me a good ticking off and then sacked me.’

‘Good!’ said Mr. Armytage, again.

Charley Moon looked at him in astonishment. ‘All very happy and glorious for *you*,’ he said, ‘but not so good for me.’

Mr. Armytage, the optimist, gave this young pessimist a pitying look. ‘You’re still very green, Charley,’ he told him. ‘As a rule, when a touring manager has the luck to engage a really good act, what does he do? He holds it under contract till he’s squeezed all the juice out of it. I’ve known great comics who were kept touring the provinces and never saw London; not because the West End managers weren’t after them, but because the touring managers kept exercising their options. We’ve been lucky. If the Old Man had used his loaf, instead of flying off the handle, we should have been tied to him for always. Now he’s lost us. That bit of prima donna stuff by his missus has cost him a fortune, and it serves him right.’

‘You say he’s lost *us*,’ Charley corrected him, ‘but I’m the only one that’s been sacked.’

‘Wrong again,’ said Mr. Armytage. ‘He didn’t sack me because I was useful, but we’re an act . . . A double turn . . . Partners . . . We signed on together and we sign off together. An act is an act, all the world over. They were glad enough to have the two of us, when hands were short; now they’ve got to lose the two of us. They can’t have it both ways. . . .’

This was Mr. Armytage ‘whistling his courage up.’ Loyalty to his young partner sent him out into the wilderness, but he had no illusions. Mr. Armytage had been in the wilderness before. Many times. Actual hunger had driven him into the army, and sheer good fortune had got him his present job. Heaven alone knew where the next one would come from. But an act was an act; partners were partners—they would sink or swim together.

Dear Charley [wrote Rose], what has happened to you since you got out of the Army. I hope you are quite well, Charley. Everything is very short, but I could scrape up a few things, if you let me know where to send them. The new people have started to pull the Mill to bits, and everybody says they took on more than

they bargained for. You never saw such a mess; almost as though one of those bombs dropped on it. I can't think how long they'll take, getting it put to rights—years, I should think. The fritillaries were wonderful, but are over now. No one was allowed to pick them because they are working on the meadows, cleaning the brook, mending the old drockways, and putting up new gates. I expect it will all be ever so nice, when they're finished, but it won't ever be the same again, Charley, not to my way of thinking. The new people never come into the shop, unless they run out of something, and then they ask for things we haven't got. Old William Tidy had a sort of stroke, and serve him right, people say, but I feel sorry for him, he only started drinking after his wife died. Look after yourself, Charley. I don't know where you are, or if you will get this letter, but if you like to send some of your socks, I could find the time to darn them for you, how I used to. I can't think why you're keeping so quiet, unless you've been up to something. You needn't tell me if you don't want to, Charley, but let me know about the socks. . . .'

Having so nearly wrecked *The Midnight Express*, Charley Moon and Mr. Armytage turned their attention from melodrama to the Halls. Back in London they called at the office of a fifth-rate variety agent, at the top of the most rickety stairway Charley had ever seen.

The name of the act—‘Armytage and Moon, cross-talk comedians’—was entered in a book, and they each paid half a crown registration for the privilege. Someone took an order for visiting cards—to be presented at box offices, for free seats on matinee days—and a furtive little man borrowed sixpence, to get himself back to Brixton. Finally, they promised to call again to-morrow; climbed carefully down the stairs, and stood together in the swirl and sunshine of Cambridge Circus.

‘Well,’ said the senior partner of the new firm, ‘we’ve made a start!’

‘All crackers!’ said his junior. ‘Mad as a lot of March hares. What do they use for money? I’d like to be there when the landlord calls for the rent.’

Mr. Armytage looked at him thoughtfully. ‘No need to get up-stage,’ he said. ‘We may be glad of half their money, before we hit the bright lights.’

‘Do they ever get anybody a job?’ Charley asked.

‘Now and again,’ was the guarded reply. ‘Things are always quiet about this time.’

‘Why “about this time” especially?’

Mr. Armytage couldn’t answer that one; but he was understood to prophesy better times when the pantomimes came along.

‘Pantomimes come along once a year,’ Charley reminded him.

‘Thank God for that!’ said Mr. Armytage. ‘When you’ve been in this business a bit longer, you’ll be thankful for small mercies. . . .’

They climbed those stairs many times, during the following weeks, with no better results. Always they were a little too early, or just too late. They were prepared to go anywhere and do anything for any money; but, beyond a day’s ‘crowd work’ in a film, nothing happened. They joined the dreary pilgrims of their profession, who wandered aimlessly from mean lodgings to poverty corner and back again. Even their beautiful new visiting cards were pushed back at them by cynical box-office managers—lurking autocrats,

spoiled by success, soured by failure, or lacking the fellow feeling supposed to make us kind. . . .

Just as things were getting desperate, Charley Moon, having nothing better to do, found himself leaning against a pillar in Covent Garden Market. He often spent a spare half-hour among the fruit and vegetables, savouring the country smells and admiring the porters, balancing on their heads those piles of baskets which looked like the leaning tower of Pisa. The place was crowded with large, cheerful men: cockney salesmen from Battersea, market gardeners from the West Country and traffic police who succeeded, most miraculously, in securing some order out of the surrounding chaos. Fat, comfortable women were loading incredible masses of flowers on to ancient perambulators, which they wheeled away to some distant street corner in the city; and the general back-chat which roared and rattled under the glass roof had to be heard to be believed.

Charley chose Covent Garden as his playground for several reasons. It amused him to study the odd types and to get his tongue round the cockney accent. The all-pervading humour was of the genial, kindly type that appealed to him. . . . Drury Lane, with its memories of Dan Leno, was just round the corner and Covent Garden Opera House was in the middle of the market. . . . The smell of vegetables and the scent of flowers brought him nostalgic memories of his old home. . . . Just the place, in fact, for an out-of-work comic with no money to spend and nothing better to do.

He was listening to a bit of cheerful badinage between a fat gentleman and a fat lady, as to the better uses to which her perambulator might be put, when a hand fell on his shoulder, and a voice said:

‘Why, Charley, my boy, what are *you* doing among the cabbages and peas?’ . . . And there was Alfred Higgins—but so different to the rather furtive batman of the old army days, that Charley scarcely knew him.

While the joyful reunion of old comrades was being celebrated at the Bedford Head, Mr. Higgins took careful stock of his young companion. ‘What *you* need, Charley, my boy,’ he said, ‘is something under your belt: two helpings of everything, starting with thick soup and finishing with plum duff.’ And when they had moved down the long room to where the tables were laid for lunch, ‘Now spill the beans, Charley, my boy.’

So Charley spilled the beans.

‘Blimey O’Reilly!’ exclaimed Mr. Higgins, ‘whatever made you link up with old Armittage? Whatever made you do it, Charley, my boy? That old

gas-bag!’

‘He’s not such a gas-bag these days,’ said Charley.

‘Punctured!’ opined Mr. Higgins.

‘He was very good to me,’ said Charley.

‘I’ll forgive him a lot for that,’ said Alf Higgins. ‘And what are you two perishing orphans going to do next?’

Charley handed over one of his precious visiting cards. ‘Armytage and Moon,’ read Mr. Higgins. ‘He *would* have his name first.’

‘He’s leading man,’ Charley explained. After all, an act was an act. You had to be loyal to your partner. So he added: ‘He worked up the act and he arranges all the bookings.’

‘When you get any! That old gas-bag couldn’t book a toy balloon for a kids’ party. Get this into your head, Charley, my boy; *you’re* number one in this circus. You could eat that poor pippin—and spit out the pips. He hasn’t got enough gumption to put the sleepy pears on the front of the barrow. As much backbone as a jellied eel—filleted!’ Alf Higgins called the waiter, paid the bill, and led his companion into a little turning out of the market, where a patient pony, attached to a gaily-painted four-wheeled cart, was waiting for him. ‘I’ve got your address,’ he said, settling down on a sack of potatoes and gathering up the reins, ‘I must get along to the boys, or half the barrows in London will have to put their shutters up. But I’ve got your address and you’ll be hearing from me. So long, Charley, my boy! So long!’

Charley Moon, greatly cheered by the meeting, and greatly fortified as to the inner man, stood on the kerb and watched him clatter out of the market.

Two days later, there was a letter:

Dear Charley, my boy [wrote Alf Higgins], at our local flea-pit, every week there is a competition night for nutty coves like you and Armittage. I have booked your act for next Friday. You won’t get any dough, but the first prize is a week’s engagement. I enclose chit, giving the running order.

P.S. If you can shed that old gas-bag, Armittage, you may stand a chance. I’ll be seeing you.

The ‘enclosed chit’ was a small hand-bill, which Charley handed to his partner. Instead of leaping to his feet, the latter considered it morosely,

shivered slightly, and passed it back across the table. ‘Trial show!’ he said. ‘We haven’t sunk to that yet.’

‘What’s wrong with it?’ asked Charley.

‘Everything,’ replied his companion. ‘Just a trick to boost up their Friday night, and get a lot of extra turns for nothing.’

‘What about the week’s engagement! That’s better than nothing.’

‘If you get it,’ said Mr. Armytage darkly. ‘But you won’t get it. They’ll see to that. They’ll put up the conductor’s wife, or the manager’s kid, or one of the programme girls . . .’

‘They have to give it to the turn that gets most applause,’ Charley reminded him. ‘They can’t fake that.’

‘You’re a simple one. They’ll pack the back of the pit with deadheads; and, up in the gallery, there’ll be another army cheering like mad—but not for you. If things seem to be going your way, there’ll be a lot of booing, and they’ll drop the curtain on you. . . .’

‘Alf Higgins won’t like it if we turn this down,’ said Charley. ‘He thinks it’s a good idea.’

‘Then let him have a dip at it,’ growled Mr. Armytage. ‘Nothing would please me better than to see that fat profiteer wheeled off in his own barrow. Why doesn’t he stick to selling cucumbers in the Mile End Road?’

In the end, Mr. Armytage was persuaded, and once they had settled down to working out a routine, he became quite enthusiastic. ‘Stick to the old act,’ he advised, ‘the old act, tickled up to suit the new occasion. Instead of the two porters, we’ll be a couple of cockneys, complete with baskets, beetroots and a bunch of bananas. . . .’

‘And a perambulator,’ added Charley.

‘A perambulator,’ gasped his companion. ‘Now what in heaven’s name made you think of a perambulator?’

Charley told him about the fat woman of Covent Garden and the ribald porter.

Mr. Armytage leapt at the idea. ‘Charley,’ he said, ‘you’re a genius. I come on in an old skirt, wheeling an old pram . . . you stick a few baskets on your head . . . and we’re away! What a pity you can’t talk cockney.’

‘I can,’ said Charley.

‘Let’s hear you.’

Charley treated his partner to a spate of Covent Garden patter that he had picked up in the market—cheerful, bawdy, harmless stuff, with a bite in it. ‘Heaven’s alive!’ exclaimed Mr. Armytage, looking at his young *protégé* with frank admiration, ‘how long have you been keeping *that* under your hat? What a pity we’ve got to wait till Friday!’

They spent the next few days, scrounging props and polishing up the act. Half a dozen porter’s baskets were borrowed for the price of a drink, a derelict old pram, with three working wheels, being thrown in for make-weight. Transporting this booty to the scene of operations was an adventure in itself. If it created half the interest on the stage that it did in the shopping centres of the East End, they were, as Mr. Armytage opined, home with the haddocks.

It looked like being a big night at the old Octagon Music Hall. Already, an hour before the show started, there were queues for the pit and gallery, while a healthy little group was gathered round the box office. The local nobility were arriving in the gaily-painted little four-wheelers Charley had seen in the market, decanting their ladies, and driving them away to be stabled until the end of the show. The public house next door was packed to suffocation. . . .

‘What’s all the excitement about?’ asked Charley.

‘Coming to see the lions fed,’ replied his partner. ‘If we live through this, we shall be lucky.’

At the stage door, they had some trouble with the perambulator, loaded high with porters’ baskets. The stage doorkeeper was unfriendly, until Mr. Armytage asked for the star dressing-room, when he laughed off a little of his displeasure. The passages and stairs were a seething mass of unco-operative competitors. The call boy, a typical East End urchin, referred them to the Coving Garden Oprouse, and the stage manager, whose small daughter had already been promised the first prize, was the worst of the lot.

Finally, they came to rest in a grimy little dressing-room, more thickly populated than the Black Hole of Calcutta. A trapeze act, consisting of five large Turks and one small Armenian, were changing into spangled tights; an amateur tenor was making what he imagined to be nightingale noises with inadequate vocal chords; and an old-time actor, twice as tall and twice as thin as Mr. Armytage, was rehearsing *The Green Eye of the Little Yellow God*.

Nobody knew when he was likely to be called. Like aristocrats during the French Revolution, they huddled together, waiting to learn their fate. What made it worse than the Terror was that the victims returned to recount the indignities to which they had been subjected, and the horrors they had seen.

Sitting in his corner, Charley Moon learned that the pit was in a state of pandemonium and the gallery was hell let loose. Everything that was movable had already been thrown on to the stage. . . . The conductor had intercepted a rotten orange intended for the green eye of the little yellow god . . . the trapeze artists had had the curtain rung down on them before the stage hands had erected their steel uprights and horizontal bars . . . the tenor returned in tears, and refused to say what had happened to him. But all were agreed that the first prize had been as good as won by the little girl in the pink silk frock, who had already sung *God Send You Back to Me* three times, and was still being called before the curtain.

Charley was beginning to feel sorry he had come, when the door opened and Armytage and Moon were beckoned into the arena. They lost their way to the stage, the perambulator got stuck on the stairs and Mr. Armytage fell over one of the iron struts, supporting the scenery; but they needn't have worried. The little girl in the pink silk frock was still bowing and blowing kisses in front of the curtain. It seemed the audience could never have enough, and the new act only got under starter's orders when the stage manager, thinking he might be overdoing it a bit, patted his little daughter on the shoulder and lowered the curtain. Mr. Armytage gave his partner a 'we who are about to die, salute thee!' look—and they were on. . . .

To be received with the most tremendous roar of welcome that Charley had ever heard! It was so unexpected that it entirely took the wind out of their sails. They were as incapable of action as an old four-master in the doldrums. Mr. Armytage smiled foolishly, and Charley Moon, who should have opened the dialogue, was dumb. Fortunately, the applause continued, giving them time to collect themselves; and when, at last, it died down, they were ready.

But the opposition was waiting for them. They had hardly said half a dozen words, when boos and catcalls came from pit and gallery, and things began to fly. . . . Seizing his chance, the stage manager, who had already sensed a dangerous rivalry in this unknown turn, began to lower the curtain . . . whereupon the entire stalls rose in a riot of protest, and the stage manager, thinking, for the second time, that he might be overdoing it, pulled it up again and allowed the act to continue.

For the next ten minutes, the audience had matters all their own way—the pit and gallery howling derision and the stalls cheering as one man. Armytage and Moon, the bone of contention in this dog-fight, were entirely inaudible. Now and again, one would pull something out of the perambulator, or the other would balance porters' baskets on his head, but no word could be heard above the din. Finally, the act concluded in general uproar; Armytage and Moon bowed their acknowledgments, and were hustled off the stage. The show was over, and the time had come to award the prizes.

Then the fun began. For the assistance of the judges, the outstanding competitors were recalled to the stage, and the act receiving the most applause was declared the winner. Obviously, there were only two in it and, equally obviously, the house was split, from floor to ceiling, into two definite sections—the Stalls *v.* the Rest. Numerically, the Rest had the advantage, but the Stalls were a compact body, nearer to the stage, and evidently out to see that justice was done. Whether they had sensed the claque working behind them, or whether they were merely having a bit of Friday night fun on their own account, did not transpire. Nor did it matter. The fight was on, and its original causes were forgotten.

The stage manager, spurred on by his wife, in the wings, fought nobly for the family honour. His daughter, deluged in soft amber lights, and supported by throbbing chords from the orchestra, sang *God Send You Back to Me*, until everybody knew that lovely lyric by heart. Armytage and Moon, on the other hand, shoved around by stage hands and tripped up by the call boy, scarcely knew whether they were on their heads or their heels. They did their best, but it was a losing fight and judgment was about to go by default, when an excited figure rushed through the pass door and dashed up to the stage manager as he was about to announce that the young person in pink had won on points. 'Stop!' he hissed. 'Stop, you —— fool. Don't you see what you're doing? D'you think I'm going to upset all my stalls for the sake of your brat. Get out of the way, and let me handle this!'

So that when the curtain rose, for the last time, it was to display Mr. Sol Rosenberg, proprietor of the Octagon Music Hall; who had dropped in to check the night's takings. Taking the centre of the stage, he beckoned on to it, the three contestants. . . .

'Ladies and gentlemen,' said Mr. Rosenberg, 'as proprietor of this famous old hall, and from the stage on which the great Dan Leno, Alec Hurley and Shaun Glenville first trod the boards, it gives me the greatest possible pleasure to tell you that, to-night, you have participated in an

historic occasion. Ladies and gentlemen, for the first time in its long and honourable history, this grand old house has *topped the three-figure mark on a Friday night* . . . a hundred and five pounds, ten and threepence! Well, we've had a good show and it's been a close thing. It might have gone either way, but someone's got to succeed and someone's got to fail. After close consultation with my colleagues, I have to announce that these two boys win by a short head. They will appear on this famous old stage all next week, and I hope that those of you who have rallied round them on this occasion, will be here again on Monday night to give them a good send-off.

'Now, as to this little lady! She's put up a great show and, no doubt, a lot of you think she should have won the first prize. Well, I tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to make up the second prize to the value of the first. Seven pounds, ten shillings—there you are, my dear, and don't spend it all on sweets. Give it to your father, and he'll know what to do with it. Now we'll just sing the National Anthem and go quietly home. . . .'

The stalls cheered wildly, and, robbed of their official backing, the pit and gallery had nothing to say about it. So everybody sang the National Anthem and went home quietly. Mr. Rosenberg had a way with him, and his word was law in that grand old house, the Octagon Music Hall.

Outside the stage door, those famous cross-talk comedians, Armytage and Moon, found Alfred Higgins waiting for them. 'Well, boys,' he said, 'it was a close thing, and it cost me a pretty penny, packing all those barrow boys into the stalls, but it was worth every brass farthing of it. Now shove those baskets on the old how's your luck, and I'll drive you home.'

The week's engagement at the Octagon Music Hall was soon over and the two partners were out of work again. But they had broken the ice. A paragraph in *Variety*, telling of the record Friday night, and Mr. Rosenberg's generous gesture had singled them out from the ruck; and, when they climbed the dusty stairs to the booking agents' offices, they found they were already persons of more account in their small world.

From the little industrial towns, they worked their way into the bigger provincial halls, developing their act as they went. Mr. Armytage was too set in his habits to change his methods, but Charley Moon, being younger and more adaptable, with a natural flair for the game, was improving all the time.

Added to which, he had quite a nice little collection of parlour tricks; ranging from a really good singing voice, to those handsprings and cartwheels, practised in the old Mill attic; while the mouth-organ Rose had

given him was rarely out of action, though Rose, herself, was rarely in his mind. . . .

So the months slipped away. Another Christmas came and went, but London and the bright lights of the West End were as far away as ever. Although Charley was much too loyal to admit it, his partner was a bit of a liability. Cross-talk comedians, like the corner men of a nigger minstrel show, were on the way out, and Mr. Armytage was becoming as old-fashioned as a hand-plough. All very well to say that a comic must have a stooge, but everything was speeding up, and even a stooge must have a sense of timing. . . .

During a snooker game, a young American, appearing on the same bill, startled Charley by asking why he was wasting his time with 'that old ham' and suggesting that he should team up with something more lively, or strike out on his own.

Charley Moon potted the remaining colours before replying. Then he explained the ethics of partnership as they occurred to his simple country mind. Mr. Armytage had given him his start on the stage. If it hadn't been for Mr. Armytage he would have been on his beam-ends. Mr. Armytage was, in a way, the owner of the act; and, though he *had* slowed up a bit . . .

'Slowed up a bit,' scoffed the other. 'I'll say he's slowed up. He's so slow, he couldn't dodge a dust-cart.'

'No point in both of us rushing about the stage,' said Charley. 'You must have contrast. I want a foil and, according to you, I seem to have got it.'

'If it's a slow-motion act you're after, you've certainly got that,' said the American, 'but don't bring him over our side, or he'll be run over by a hearse.'

'Nice of you to worry,' said Charley, 'but he got me into this racket, and I'm not dropping him. While he can stand up, we run together.'

'Nice, but nuts!' sighed the American. 'You guys stick to your old favourites as long as they've the strength left to take a curtain call. With us, a fellow has to make good every time he comes back to Broadway. Once he slips, he's out! Tough, but good for the business.'

'I like it our way,' said Charley Moon. 'That last game cost you fifteen and sixpence. . . .'

'How much is that in real money?' asked the American, putting down a pound note.

Charley passed over the change. 'Give you your revenge to-morrow,' he said. 'Unless you think you ought to make way for a younger and better player.'

'Fair enough,' laughed the American, 'but billiards is billiards and business is business. . . .'

The more Mr. Armytage slipped back, the more he asserted himself. When Charley wanted to drop a rather time-worn gag or some hackneyed bit of business, he would fight for it, until his partner, for the sake of peace and quiet, let him have his way. As business manager, he handled their bookings and quarrelled with managers about their position on the bill and the size of type in which their names should appear. He began to fumble for his lines and his timing was deplorable. Sometimes, Charley Moon was tempted to take the young American's advice and call it a day, but an act was an act, and loyalty to his partner postponed the inevitable parting.

Dear Charley [wrote Rose], what are you doing with yourself all this long time? It seems ages since you wrote. Are you getting enough to eat? Things are still very short, but I could spare you some eggs if you let me know where to send them. The may-blossom and the chestnuts are over, and the ragged robins are coming out along the brook. Alice Mustoe has got her first baby and they are cutting the trees in Ferny Wood. Most of the old Mill has been pulled down, and they are working like beavers in the meadows. Old Mrs. Peart has gone to live with her daughter, and her cottage is empty; nobody wants to live in it, and no wonder. You never saw such a mess. Write to me sometimes, Charley, when you've got a minute . . .

Part Two

One winter evening, back in the 1920's, a large and important passenger arrived at the midland railway junction of Bilson (Notts). He wore a large and important overcoat and carried, in addition to his hand luggage, a box of large and important cigars.

Consultation, with the stationmaster, confirmed the unhappy fact that the next fast train to Manchester left in three hours' time. Lesser spirits might have quailed, but Mr. Montagu Brass had a soul above such vexations.

Was there, he asked, a theatre or music hall in the place? The stationmaster replied that the Bilson Empire was running its annual pantomime, but he didn't recommend it.

Monty Brass brushed aside such amateur criticism. He enquired the way to the Bilson Empire, handed the stationmaster a cigar—together with his hand luggage—and passed out into the night.

While this important visitor is working his passage through the wet, cobbled streets of Bilson (Notts), we might take a closer look at him. He is, so far as the provincial musical stage is concerned, the most important man in his profession; for he handles all those proved London successes that are sent out to clean up in the provinces. Not for him the awful risks of West End production. Let others burn their fingers, pulling their theatrical chestnuts out of the fire. He waits, until the success of the latest musical comedy is assured, before acquiring the touring rights. He takes the cash and lets the credit go.

But Monty Brass has an amusing, and profitable, little sideline. He is, in fact, a pantomime king. Every Christmas, he writes, and produces, pantomimes which vary in size and excellence, according to the provincial centres in which they are staged. Learning, from *Variety*, that Mr. Montagu Brass has written and produced his usual thirty-six pantomimes, the casual reader is apt to wonder how he finds time for his amazing activities. Perhaps we should explain.

Monty Brass, as a young man, paid a penny for a non-copyright version of *Cinderella*; engaged a company, and invited his comedians to fill in a number of ten-minute gaps, with their own music hall material—which he included in his promptscript—thus acquiring the nickname Penny Pantomimes Unlimited.

The next year he sent his original effort to another town, bought a penny copy of *Little Red Riding Hood*, engaged another team of comedians and completed his second pantomime. Relentlessly pursuing this system of compound production, he now had six companies playing the same version of *Cinderella* in six separate towns; six companies playing the same version of *Little Red Riding Hood* in six separate towns; six companies playing *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* in six separate . . . but why continue? On the evening in question, the sum adds up to thirty-six pantomimes, all written and produced by Montagu Brass—of Penny Pantomimes Unlimited.

But here we are at the Bilson Empire. The pantomime is *Cinderella*, and the show is nearly half over.

Monty Brass bought a ticket and slipped unobtrusively into the stalls. Monty Brass was always unobtrusive when visiting a rival house. It meant you had to pay for your seat, but you were free to come and go. Besides, he wanted to see a normal show. If it went round that he was in the house, the comics might sit on their best jokes—and Monty Brass had picked up some very good ideas, in some very unlikely places. . . .

But not to-night. Nothing here but the old tired gags that he had used himself, again and again. . . . Sheer waste of time. . . . Almost as bad as sitting on the platform at Bilson Junction, waiting for the Manchester train. . . .

And then, suddenly, he leaned forward, struck a match and looked at his programme:

BUTTONS.....CHARLEY MOON

Monty Brass may have been a joke as an author, but he knew a comedian when he saw one. This fellow had something to him. One of those quiet types who carried on the story without missing the fun. . . . Listen to the house. . . . Not a cough till the end of the scene. . . . Then the applause. . . . Boy, did you hear that? There's personality for you. . . .

Real comedians are few and hard to come by. Montagu Brass could scarcely wait for the interval. When the curtain fell, he handed in his card and was shown to the manager's office, where that harassed individual was adding up the night's takings. When he read the name, he sprang, literally, to attention.

'Have a cigar,' said his visitor. 'Take two—one for the road. How's business?'

‘Fair,’ said the manager. ‘Weather’s against us. We play very big Saturday nights.’

‘Pity there’s only one Saturday a week,’ sympathized Monty Brass. ‘I like your show. Who’s the girl? Nice, fresh little thing.’

‘She’ll learn,’ said the manager. ‘How did you like our Buttons?’

‘Buttons?’ echoed the other vaguely, as though dragged out of an opium dream. ‘Buttons? Oh yes, not bad; not bad at all. Where did you pick him up?’

‘We had him here in a double act and I rather liked his work. So I fixed him for pantomime.’

‘Not bad,’ condescended Mr. Brass. ‘A bit rough yet, but worth keeping an eye on. Got him under contract?’

‘Yes!’ lied the manager, after a little pause.

Montagu Brass could have kicked himself, all the way from Bilson to Manchester. That slight hesitation stamped the lie, but things would now be more difficult. He changed the subject by asking how the manager liked living in a one-eyed dump like Bilson; following this up with a vague suggestion that there might be a good touring job going in his organization.

The manager did not like living in Bilson, and he would have given his ears to join forces with the great man. It had never occurred to him to put Charley Moon under future contract, but there might be a little something to be made on the side. So he kept up the polite fiction that he, alone, held the key to the situation.

‘Stopping in Bilson the night?’ he asked.

‘Good God, no!’ replied Monty Brass, consulting a very important gold watch. ‘Catching the 11.30 for Manchester.’

‘In that case,’ said the manager, ‘you’ll want to see this boy before he starts changing. They’re after him, you know. I’ve had two or three nibbles, already. Shall I send round word . . .?’

‘No harm in *seeing* him,’ agreed Mr. Brass, ‘but don’t say who I am. No point in raising false hopes. And how about your contract?’

The manager swept this small detail aside. ‘I shouldn’t stand in the boy’s way,’ he said. ‘I’ve got him well tied up, naturally, but if you thought of him seriously, I should waive that. . . .’

‘For a consideration?’ suggested Monty Brass.

‘For a consideration,’ agreed the manager.

‘Naturally!’ sang the voice of the charmer.

‘Naturally!’ repeated the faithful echo.

Montagu Brass, that famous impresario, pushed over the box of cigars. ‘Take ’em,’ he said largely. ‘Take ’em out of my sight. Put ’em in the drawer. My specialist says I smoke too many of the damned things.’

‘You’re very generous,’ hesitated the manager.

‘Plenty more where those came from. Keep in touch with me, and let my folk know if you ever feel like joining us. How about a cab to get me to the station?’

‘But aren’t you going to see this boy?’ asked the manager.

‘Not if he’s already under contract,’ said Monty Brass, piously. ‘Against my religion. If you start tinkering about with contracts, you get into deep waters. No, you keep him, and good luck to you.’

The manager, having been softened up by the cigars, and feeling a lively sense of favours to come, was now anxious to please his distinguished guest. You didn’t have a chance of getting on the right side of a man like Montagu Brass every day. So he disclaimed all interest in any contract whatsoever, whether signed, sealed or merely suppositional. ‘Take him, he’s yours,’ was now the burden of his lay. ‘To be perfectly candid, the arrangement was a verbal one; not legally binding on either side. . . .’

‘A sort of gentleman’s agreement,’ suggested Monty Brass.

‘Exactly,’ agreed the manager. ‘Forget it!’ And so was Charley Moon, at this critical stage of his career, given away with a box of cigars.

Two messages were sent down to the stage door: Charley Moon was to report to the manager’s office on the fall of the curtain, and a cab was to be waiting at 11.25, punctual, to catch the Manchester train. Consulting his watch, Monty Brass confirmed that he still had half an hour to complete a little arrangement which should take three minutes at the most. . . . But he reckoned without Mr. Armytage.

When the curtain fell, and a knock came on the door, two figures entered: Buttons—and the hindlegs of a horse, with its head tucked underneath its arm. Monty Brass considered this apparition. . . .

‘Who the hell is this?’ he asked.

‘Harold Armytage,’ replied the hindlegs.

‘Get out!’ said the manager. But the hindlegs stood their ground.

‘What’s he doing here?’ asked Monty Brass.

‘God knows!’ said the manager.

‘You sent for us,’ explained the hindlegs.

Montagu Brass, accustomed to the ways of comedians, scented a practical joke. ‘Look here, boys,’ he said. ‘I like a bit of fun, but I’ve got to catch the 11.30 for Manchester, and time’s short. Now, will you (addressing the hindlegs), will you, Mr. . . .’

‘Armytage,’ said the hindlegs.

‘Will you, Mr. Armytage, like a good chap, clear out, so that I can have a word with Mr. Moon, here . . .?’

‘You can speak freely in front of me,’ said the hindlegs. ‘I am Mr. Moon’s business representative.’

‘Get out!’ said the manager.

Monty Brass turned to the silent member of the firm, for an elucidation of these mysteries.

‘That’s right,’ said Charley Moon. ‘He manages the act—Armytage and Moon. What’s the trouble? Anything wrong?’

‘I’m not booking an act,’ groaned Monty Brass. ‘What would I do with the backside of a horse? Tell me that!’ This last appeal was made to Mr. Armytage—or to the animal’s head, which hung in front of him, and gazed at the speaker with hollow eyes.

‘You find me at a disadvantage,’ explained Mr. Armytage. ‘I also play the Demon King and one of the Ugly Sisters. . . .’

‘You can play the hump of a camel in *Chu Chin Chow* for all I care,’ said Monty Brass, ‘but I’m not booking a lousy, fifth-rate, music hall turn . . .’

This offensive reference to the old firm of Armytage and Moon was more than Charley could stand.

‘I don’t know who you are,’ he said, ‘but we don’t look to you for our money, and we don’t look to you for your opinions—good or bad. Who are

you, anyway?’

Monty Brass searched vainly for a cigar, but they were all in the manager’s desk. As a substitute, he handed Charley his card. ‘That’s who I am,’ he said.

‘You run shows,’ said Charley. ‘Well, why don’t you run them, instead of interfering with us. We may be lousy, but that’s no business of yours.’

‘I didn’t say *you* were lousy,’ explained the great impresario. ‘I thought you were pretty good. . . .’

‘Thanks for nothing.’

‘I was talking about the act . . . I was addressing my remarks to this poor fish. . . .’

‘My partner,’ corrected Charley.

‘I don’t want him,’ explained Monty Brass.

‘It’s a free country.’

‘But I want *you* . . . and I’ve got a train to catch.’

‘Don’t lose it on my account,’ said Charley Moon. ‘Listen! You’re trying to break up an act, just because it suits you. You happen to want me and you happen not to want my partner. So you try to break up the act. Suppose it was the other way round. Do you think my partner would drop me just because you whistled a tune with money in it?’

‘I wouldn’t put it past him,’ said Monty Brass. ‘But that’s nothing to do with it. I want you for pantomime, and I can’t do with the act. You can work together for the rest of the year. What’s wrong with that?’

‘Everything,’ said Charley Moon. ‘I’ve seen partnerships broken up like that before.’

‘Take it, Charley,’ urged Mr. Armytage.

‘There you are,’ said Monty Brass. ‘Your business representative talks sense.’

‘My business representative is the wrong end of a horse, and talks that way.’

‘Horse sense,’ said Monty Brass, making a mental note to include this timely gag in his thirty-six pantomimes.

‘Nothing doing,’ said Charley Moon.

‘Taxi at the stage door, sir,’ announced the janitor from below.

Monty Brass rose hurriedly; looked round for his box of cigars and remembered that he had lost them on this wild-goose chase. ‘You’ll be hearing from me,’ he told the hindlegs of the horse. ‘I’ll write you in the morning.’

‘Save your stamps,’ said Charley Moon.

Monty Brass wasted no time. He wrote the next morning, enclosing an offer for both partners—at the price he had been prepared to pay for one. The contract included a perpetual option to renew the engagement for the Christmas pantomime following any appearance under his management; their salary increasing, by a rising percentage, until a stated maximum had been reached. The offer was accepted.

Stepping out of the provincial music halls into the Monty Brass ‘Penny Pantomimes, Unlimited’ circuit, was like moving into a new world. The organization that could pack thirty-six shows into a couple of months, had to be seen to be believed.

Rehearsals were held all over the country, and Monty Brass flitted round, like a peacock butterfly on the buddleia. He kept his companies on their toes, by turning up at the oddest times, and saying the oddest things, from the back row of the empty stalls. Sometimes a fairy queen, reciting one of his favourite couplets, would be greeted with a hollow groan, as the disillusioned author fled from the scene of her crime. . . . Or again, the company would be assembled along the footlights, to be told how good they were—and how much better they might be. Monty Brass never killed you by kindness, but he never left you with your nose in the mud.

If a company had satisfied him the previous Christmas, he left them alone; but new recruits came in for a lot of attention—especially when he felt he had an ugly duckling that might turn out to be a swan. Monty Brass always took the long view. What this particular pantomime might gross at the box office did not matter so much; what *did* concern him was the position a certain comedian would be occupying in ten years’ time. Such are the attractions of the unknown quantity for the astute managerial mind!

Charley Moon was under the microscope. The manager of the company knew that the guv’nor had an eye on him. He, the manager, had been told to give him his head and let him do, more or less, what he liked with the part. The pantomime was *Cinderella* and the part was Buttons. ‘If I come down and find those dud comics pushing him up-stage,’ said the guv’nor, ‘I’ll

have the skin off them. That boy's got something, and I want to see what he's got.'

'How about his partner?' asked the manager.

'Forget him!' said the guv'nor, tersely. 'He's the donkey they put in the loose-box with the Derby favourite, to keep him from feeling lonely.'

'He doesn't see himself that way,' warned the manager.

'Any nonsense from *him* and he's out!' said Monty Brass.

As a result, those two partners, Armytage and Moon, found themselves caught by contrary winds. Poor Mr. Armytage could do nothing right; whereas his junior partner could do nothing wrong. All very confusing. Added to which, they never seemed to meet on the stage at all, and not one of their many admirable gags was included in the script. Mr. Armytage, accustomed as he was to being kicked around, had never felt so sat upon. But the money was good, so he put his pride in his pocket, and hoped that virtue would be rewarded in the end.

But in his case, virtue was its own solitary reward. 'If you have any trouble with him,' Mr. Brass had said, 'sit on his head; and keep sitting on his head until he has the sense to stay down.' The manager followed his guv'nor's instructions to the letter, until poor Mr. Armytage was brought to his senses. He was lucky to be in the band.

Meanwhile the part of Buttons burgeoned and blossomed beyond all telling. Cinderella was a sweet little thing; pretty as a chocolate box, and gay as a sunbeam. Charley Moon fell for her with a bang—as she meant him to do. It was good for the show. Buttons is a classic of frustrated affection: the unselfish lover who stands aside, in the best interests of his well-beloved. Nothing like a spot of real sincerity, to bring out the scent and sweetness of the situations. Cinderella must marry her Prince, but that last, long, lingering look she gives to poor little Buttons, in the transformation scene, is the crux of the matter. So Charley Moon was sacrificed, happily, on the altar of his art—and enjoyed it no end.

Cinderella must marry her Prince, whether in pantomime or out of it; but she must always have a soft spot for Buttons—as this Cinderella certainly had. So that, by the time Monty Brass got round to seeing the final dress rehearsals, all the omens were favourable. He slipped quietly in, during that first scene, in which, you remember, Buttons brings poor little Cinders his own helping of Eccles cake, and Cinders allows Buttons to sit at her feet.

‘Hold it!’ he cried. ‘Hold that; it’s good!’ cried Monty Brass, who had once seen the inside of a film studio and knew what was expected of him. So Charley Moon continued to look at Cinderella, and Cinderella continued to look at Charley Moon, until they felt like two dying ducks in a thunderstorm, and started to laugh at one another.

‘Charming!’ said the guv’nor. ‘Quite charming! Keep that laugh in—it rounds off the scene.’

At a rehearsal, as in other undertakings, when the guv’nor is happy, everybody is happy. But now a little cloud passed across the face of the sun. . . .

One of the Ugly Sisters—the thinner, taller and less important one—came down to the footlights; shaded her eyes from the glare; peered into the black void of the auditorium and enquired: ‘Was that Mr. Brass speaking?’

‘It was,’ replied Mr. Brass. ‘What d’you want?’

‘Might I venture to suggest . . .’

‘What?’ barked the guv’nor.

‘A possible improvement . . .’

‘In what?’ asked Monty Brass.

‘In their positions. If Cinderella had her broom on her *right* side, she would find it easier to turn and look at Buttons. When we played this scene. . . .’

‘Well?’ asked the guv’nor, with ominous calm.

‘Cinderella always had the broom on her *right* side.’

‘Who are you?’ enquired Monty Brass coldly.

‘Harold Armytage,’ replied the Ugly Sister. ‘I didn’t wish to interrupt, but I thought it might interest you to know that, when we played this scene at Ashby-de-la-Zouch . . .’

‘You have never seen this scene at Ashby-or-any-other-Zouch.’

‘Oh, but pardon me; if memory serves . . .’

‘I wrote it myself, less than five weeks ago!’

The Ugly Sister appeared a little flustered. ‘Of course,’ she said, ‘I wouldn’t dare to question . . .’

‘You better hadn’t!’ screamed the author of thirty-six pantomimes, relapsing into his original lingo. ‘You better hadn’t, you poor bum!’

Now, if there was one thing Mr. Armytage couldn’t stand, it was being called a bum. To-day that unfriendly expression has been replaced by the more genteel ‘ham’—but no world of difference lies between these two descriptions of an actor who has seen his best days—and was never much good, anyhow.

Mr. Armytage did not appear again that afternoon, and when Charley got back to their hotel he found that his partner had left, taking all his worldly possessions with him.

‘Well!’ said Monty Brass, after the rehearsal, ‘what d’you think of him?’

Back in the star dressing-room, the wardrobe mistress had taken much of Cinderella’s wedding finery, and was hanging it behind a curtain. Cinderella, herself, removed a white satin slipper, and threw it at the speaker.

‘Careful!’ he said. ‘They cost money.’

‘And hurt like the devil! Why don’t you get the shoes from Alibi’s?’

‘What d’you think of him?’ asked the guv’nor.

‘Trouble with you,’ said Cinderella, ‘is that you forget a girl *walks* on her feet. You’re so damn romantic, you think we float on air. . . .’

‘So you do,’ said Monty Brass. ‘Like a bit of thistledown . . . There’s nothing wrong with those shoes . . . What d’you think of your new Buttons?’

‘If the shoes were half as good as he is, I shouldn’t worry . . .’

‘Damn the shoes!’

‘I like his friend’ (*mimicking Mr. Armytage*): ‘“Was that Mr. Brass speaking?”’

‘Shut up, Angel!’

‘“When we did this scene at Ashby-de-la-Zouch . . .”’

‘Oh, shut up!’

‘“. . . We had the broom on the *right* side.” Poor old devil. I was sorry for him. He only wanted to help.’

‘Will you stop fooling and tell me what you think of this fellow, Moon.’

Miss Angel Dream (pretty name! Monty Brass thought of it) had been in one of those thirty-six pantomimes since she signed on as a Tiny Tot, at the age of four. Not yet twenty, she was a dyed-in-the-wool professional and knew the business backwards. When her employer asked her opinion, he wasn't wasting his time.

'He'll do,' she told him. And this, coming from Angel Dream was not just praise—it was rhapsody. Mr. Brass gave a sigh of pure relief. 'Bless you, Angel,' he said.

'He loves me—ha, ha!'

'Good!'

'And I love him—ha, ha!'

'Better and better!'

'He thinks I am as good as I am beautiful—or was it the other way round?'

'So you are,' said Monty Brass.

'Sir!' cried the lady, 'I was never so insulted . . . He's never seen anything like me before.'

'Neither have I,' said Monty Brass.

'Steady!' warned the Angel, 'I'm a good girl.'

'I know you are,' said her *guv'nor*. 'Why keep on telling me?'

'But I will *not* wear these damned shoes.' Miss Angel Dream gave him a little peck on the end of his nose, and pushed him out of her dressing-room.

Charley Moon did his best to get on the track of Mr. Armytage, failed, and settled down to enjoy the run of the pantomime. Playing in a first-class show, in a first-class theatre, was a wonderful experience. The part of Buttons did not carry top billing, but there was no doubt about his position in the company—or his appeal to the public. After the first performance, his salary was doubled—by the simple process of eliminating the name of his late partner from the new contract, and letting the original figure stand.

Charley was not too happy about this; but Angel, when consulted, brought her practical, professional view to bear. 'If you don't take it,' she said, 'it goes back into the kitty, and the poor old so-and-so is no better off. Monty didn't want him, anyhow; he's still buying you in the bargain

basement and you can do with the money. Take it!’ Charley, having inherited a somewhat bloodshot conscience from all those Moons, was still unhappy; but with his higher rating in the social scale, and as the Angel’s constant cavalier, he could certainly find ways of spending that bit extra.

Their relations, at this time, were a little complicated. On the stage, twice daily, Buttons mothered Cinderella, fighting her battles and getting precious little in return. Off the stage, it was the other way round. The Angel, that hardened old trouser, did all the mothering; giving him good advice from a store of professional knowledge, won the hard way. Compared to her, Charley Moon was still an amateur, ready, and almost anxious, to put his foot in it on every possible occasion. ‘You’re nobbut a babe in this business,’ she said once, mimicking the local dialect, and Charley, six years her elder, had to admit that she was right.

But she maddened him with her dressing-room jargon, her trifling insincerities and her funny little feminine ways. Though, on the stage, he could make them laugh and cry at the same time, he had no way with women when it came to close quarters. ‘You’re afraid of us, Charley,’ she would laugh. ‘You needn’t be frightened—I shan’t bite you.’ And Charley, realizing, perhaps, the truth of this shrewd summing-up, would relapse into uncomfortable silence.

One day, when they were tramping over the neighbouring moors, he wanted to know her real name.

‘It’s on all the bills,’ she told him.

‘Rot,’ said Charley.

‘Don’t you like it?’

‘I *hate* it!’ Charley surprised himself by the force of his objection, and tried to soften the blow. ‘What made you choose such a sloppy name?’ he asked.

‘Because I was four years old; because I hadn’t met you and because I didn’t know your views. Anything else you don’t like about me?’ When it came to a scrap, Angel was as full of claws as a kitten. Charley tried to mend matters; but the damage was done. They walked home without speaking.

That night, their scenes, though still the high spots of the show, seemed to lack something. Monty Brass, chancing to drop in on one of his flying visits, sensed trouble. Slipping through the pass-door into the star dressing-room, he found his leading lady in tears.

‘Hullo, Angel,’ he said, ‘what’s wrong?’

Angel Dream, still in Cinderella’s rags, was a picture of misery. Wiping the mascara from her eyes and pointing to a theatre bill on which her name was boldly displayed, she demanded, tragically:

‘Why did you saddle me with that awful name?’

‘Don’t you like it?’ asked her astonished guv’nor.

‘I hate it,’ said Angel Dream. ‘I hate it! I hate it! I hate it!’

‘You’ve taken a long time to make up your mind,’ said Monty Brass, retreating, until the storm had blown itself out. In the corridor, he ran into Charley Moon, who had forgotten the incident and was feeling rather pleased with himself. ‘What’s all the trouble about?’ he asked.

‘Trouble!’ said Charley. ‘What trouble?’

‘She’s gone mad. She doesn’t like her name, now!’

‘Oh, *that!*’ laughed Charley. ‘Don’t worry about that, guv’nor. I only told her it was too damned silly for words. Who thought of it?’

‘I did,’ said Monty Brass. ‘I took a lot of trouble—a lot of trouble—thinking of that name. It looks well on the bills. I was going to call her Peach Blossom, but someone else thought of that first. And now you come along and spoil everything. Why can’t you mind your own business? What’s the matter with you fellows? First your bum partner doesn’t like my production and now you start upsetting my leading woman, killing my best scene. . . .’

‘What’s wrong with the scene?’ asked Charley.

‘Gone to hell!’ said Mr. Brass.

‘I didn’t see anything wrong with it,’ said Charley.

‘You wouldn’t! You don’t know your job . . . Like all you ex-army types . . . knock around the camps in a dud concert party, and then come blundering into the profession, thinking you know it all. . . . Just a lot of—amateurs.’

‘Sorry about that!’ said Charley.

‘I don’t deny,’ admitted Mr. Brass, cooling down a little, ‘I don’t deny that you’ve got something, but your trouble is, you don’t know what you’ve got. You’re funny, but you don’t know why. You’ve no technique. You’re what we call a “natural.” I know your sort. I’ve seen what happens to them.

One of these fine days, you'll lose your touch, and then you'll be sunk. Like a—ship without a—rudder.'

'What's all this got to do with the silly sort of name a girl likes to give herself?' asked Charley Moon.

'Everything,' answered the other. 'It proves you don't belong to the theatre. You've got your foot in the back door—ready to slip out at any minute. You're not one of us. You're penny plain and we're tuppence coloured. Why do you suppose we have footlights and cover ourselves with grease-paint? Because we're not ordinary folk. We can't afford to be. We've got to be larger than life and twice as natural . . . Then you come round; meet us behind the scenes, where you don't really belong; and laugh at us behind our backs. . . .'

'Sorry!' said Charley.

'I'm only speaking for your good,' said Monty Brass. 'You'll make a big name and a lot of money; but you'll never be an actor. Watch your step!' Then he hurried away to another northern city—and a little cloud passed across the face of the sun.

Angel Dream told him very much the same thing. Charley had tried to straighten things out, on the old, old assumption that names don't matter where roses are concerned. 'If it comes to names,' she said, 'some people might think "Moon" was funny without being vulgar.'

'It *is* my own,' Charley reminded her.

'There you go,' she said. 'Talking like a good little curate or an old-fashioned family solicitor. You're too conventional to live. You haven't a scrap of feeling for the theatre. You'll be grumbling next because I use stage make-up and wear false eyelashes.'

'Quite unnecessary,' said Charley.

That was the time when she described him as 'nobbut a babe in the business.' 'It's my belief that you hate the theatre,' she said.

'I could do without it,' Charley told her.

'Be careful it doesn't decide to do without you,' warned Angel Dream.

But they were very good friends; and, perhaps, a little more than that. On the last night of the pantomime, the parting was a melancholy affair; but back-stage romances have shallow roots, and when next Christmas came,

they were too important to waste on a single production. They were now stars in their own right, and so went their separate ways.

Dear Charley [wrote Rose], this is just to wish you a Merry Christmas, hoping it will reach you. I would send you a little parcel, but I don't know your address. Why don't you write, Charley. Are you still fed up about them selling the Mill and the meadows. Some of the boys went down there skating, but the new man's manager turned them away. They are all saying that wouldn't have happened if the Moons had still been here. And how right they are. Everything seems to be getting in the hands of the wrong people these days. That's the worst of a war. Turns everything upside down and upsets everybody. I know how you feel Charley, but it wasn't my fault they turned you out of your old home. I'm a bit worried myself. My grannie is breaking up and I don't know what will happen when she goes. I suppose they'll turn me out the same as they did you, and then there will be the two of us. Well, good night, Charley. A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. Write to me some time. I'm still writing to the address you gave me, and the letters don't come back; but you never write, and I keep thinking something awful has happened to you. . . .

Cinderella, produced in a third northern city, for the third time of asking, was nearing the end of its most successful season. Monty Brass, on his rounds, was up for the night; staying at the large and luxurious Imperial Hotel. He asked Charley Moon to have supper with him after the show.

They walked round from the theatre. Half a dozen waiters fought for their hats and coats in the hotel lounge—rather as players scramble for stumps and bails at the close of a test match. In the American Bar, George mixed them his special cocktail, ‘Molten Brass’ (dedicated to the famous impresario). The head waiter led them to a centre table and took their order. The ice-bucket was already in position . . . ‘Must be the old boy’s birthday,’ thought Charley Moon.

He looked round the crowded restaurant. At a long table, a famous musical comedy actress, trying out a London production at the opposition theatre, was entertaining the entire company and a few dozen friends. A special menu had been printed, and each dish was named after a character in the show. The *pièce de résistance* was a glittering figure, carved in ice, and illuminated with coloured lights. As it was carried in by the chef, the entire room burst into applause.

‘That’ll set her back a pretty penny,’ said Charley Moon.

‘Don’t worry about her,’ grunted Monty Brass. ‘She can afford it. How much d’you suppose she’s pulling down in this new show? Three hundred a week. That’s money.’

Charley made a mental note. When his contract was renewed he would remember that what was sauce for the goose was sauce for the gander. ‘Does she bring that much into the theatre?’ he asked.

‘That’s to be seen,’ was the cautious reply. ‘A theatre holds a lot of money—when it’s full.’

Meanwhile the lady in question was saying to her principal guest and backer—a local industrial magnate: ‘That’s Monty Brass over there. If we’re a success, he’ll buy the touring rights and make a pot of money. If we’re a flop, we shan’t see him for dust. We pay the money and he takes his choice—artful old so-and-so!’

‘That be ’anged for a tale,’ said the sponsor of London’s latest success-to-be. ‘Why don’t *we* run tours, if there’s that much brass in ’em?’

‘My *dear*,’ replied the lady. ‘You *couldn’t*. It’d be like diving under the luncheon table for the last bit of lettuce. You must leave *something* for the servants—and creatures like Monty Brass. If you took away his tours, how would he *live*?’

‘Looks to be living lavish at now,’ said the backer. ‘That’s what comes of being on summat to nowt. Must look into these tours . . .’

But his hostess wasn’t interested. ‘Who’s he got with him?’ she asked.

‘Boy out of pantomime at Palace,’ said her neighbour on the other side. ‘Ee, but ’e’s comical; ’ighly comical’—which was the way money talked, for quite a long time after the First World War. . . .

‘Cigar?’ asked Monty Brass.

A long step back to that last night with *The Midnight Express*, when a cigar from the old man had put Mr. Armytage on top of the world. Funny how things worked out. Now it was Charley smoking the cigar, while Mr. Armytage . . .

‘Liqueur?’ suggested Monty Brass.

‘Hullo!’ thought Charley. ‘We’re very friendly to-night. What’s cooking?’ He had never been warned to beware the Greeks when they brought gifts; but they had had a rather similar saying back in Little Summerford, and his native caution was on the alert—like a rabbit, sitting at the mouth of its burrow, with one ear cocked.

Monty Brass sensed that he was being discussed at the long table. ‘What a circus!’ he snorted. ‘They’re all the same, these West End productions. Some fly-by-night manager gets hold of a mug with more money than sense, and chucks a play on the stage—like a rubber ball. If it bounces he’s clever. If it doesn’t, he packs up and looks for another mug. . . . More good, north-country money going down the drain.’

‘Somebody’s got to take the risk . . .’ Charley reminded him.

‘No risk if you know your job. Get a good play . . . Engage the right company . . . Run it on business lines . . . Watch your overheads . . .’

‘Sounds easy,’ laughed Charley. ‘Why don’t you do it?’

‘Why should I?’

‘Well,’ Charley reminded him, ‘you’d have the film rights, the American rights, broadcasting—and this new television they’re talking about. . . .’

‘It’s a thought,’ agreed Monty Brass. ‘You’ve got something there . . . Have another cigar.’

‘How would you set about it?’ Charley asked him.

Monty Brass pretended to consider this novel proposition. Actually, he had laid his plans for a West End production, and those plans included Charley Moon; but he didn’t want to seem too eager. That would send the price up. Better the suggestion should come from the other side. If you want someone to travel your way, let him think he is choosing the road. ‘It’s a thought,’ said Monty Brass. ‘Where would I find the money?’

They both laughed at that. Monty Brass was a warm man and he rather liked people to know it. He wouldn’t need backers.

While developing the idea, he kept it well in the world of fantasy . . . an amusing notion . . . just a pipe dream . . . quite ridiculous, of course, but after all, why not?

‘An excuse to give some of my boys and girls a chance in the West End,’ smiled Monty Brass. ‘I suppose you’d have to be on the band wagon. . . .’

‘Don’t worry about me,’ said Charley.

‘Oh, but you thought of it.’

‘I’m very happy as I am.’

‘Nonsense,’ protested Monty Brass. ‘You can’t waste your life drifting round the provinces. Besides, you’re not cut out for the Halls. Variety isn’t your pigeon . . . Just filling in between pantomimes.’

‘Nice of you to worry,’ said Charley Moon, ‘but I’m doing quite nicely.’

Monty Brass came to the point. ‘Better let me tear up your contract, and give you another, to cover the whole twelve months,’ he suggested.

‘That would cost you too much,’ said Charley.

They were out in the open now. Talking turkey! Too late to argue about terms, once the contract was signed. It was now or never for Charley Moon. But Monty Brass held strong cards: the offer of a star part in a big West End production wasn’t to be sneezed at. . . . Lots of provincial comics never got to London. . . . On the other hand, Charley was, as he had said, doing quite nicely. His success at Blackpool, last summer, had been outstanding. . . .

‘I know what they paid you,’ said the manager . . .

‘I’m getting double this year,’ countered the actor. . . .

When the waiter came to clear the table, Charley Moon had moved up into the very top drawer of his profession, and Monty Brass had agreed to a contract that gave him nightmares for a month.

Having decided to take the plunge, Monty Brass went in off the deep end. His first concern was an author, and there was a young fellow at his club who seemed to have the right ideas. After lunch, one day, he buttonholed him and led him to a quiet corner of the smoking-room. . . .

‘Have a cigar?’ said Monty Brass.

‘Thanks,’ said the young fellow, ‘I don’t smoke.’

‘Glass of port?’

‘Never drink during the day,’ was the surprising reply.

Monty Brass, accustomed to being wafted by fragrant tobacco smoke across the friendly seas of alcohol, was at a loss. How did one start to talk business under such odd conditions? ‘I’m coming into the West End,’ he said.

‘Good!’ said the author. ‘I’ve got the very thing.’

‘Forget it,’ said Monty Brass.

The author forgot it.

‘I want to work on my own lines,’ explained the manager. ‘I’ve got the rough idea, and I want you to develop it.’

‘Nice to meet someone who knows his own mind,’ said the author.

‘Ever heard of a comedian called Charley Moon?’

The author hadn’t.

‘He’s not exactly a comedian . . . No rough stuff . . . no belly laughs; but, give him the right material, and he fairly rocks ’em—especially the women.’

‘Sounds interesting,’ said the author. ‘What is he? North country?’

‘No—not north country.’

‘Cockney!’

‘No—nor cockney.’

‘Must be one or the other,’ laughed the author. ‘If a comic doesn’t come from Wigan, he comes from Walthamstow.’

‘Not this comic,’ said Monty Brass. ‘He’s out of the blue. None of the obvious tricks. Quiet little type. Pulls out all the soft stops. . . .’

‘I begin to like this fellow,’ said the author. ‘Tell me more.’

‘He’s playing in my pantomime, just outside Manchester. Run up and see him.’

‘I’ll go to-morrow.’

‘Ever thought of turning *Cinderella* into a musical comedy?’ asked Monty Brass.

‘It’s been done—scores of times.’

‘I know. We’ll do it again.’

‘Suits me!’ said the author. ‘As a matter of fact, this play of mine——’

‘Forget it!’ said Monty Brass.

The author forgot it.

‘You mustn’t mind if I seem a bit set in my ideas,’ explained the manager, ‘but we’ve got to fit this chap, and we’ve got to fit him like a glove. He’s the world’s best Buttons; and, after that, he may be nothing at all. I don’t know; but I’m not taking any risks. Give me a twist on the old Cinderella situation; build up the part of Buttons and I’ll do the rest.’

‘Can do!’ said the author. ‘I’ll be back on Wednesday.’

‘Meet you here,’ said Monty Brass. ‘He’ll probably have a week out when we finish the run, and we can talk it over. He’s got ideas.’

The author went north to have a look at his new leading man, and, within the limits of his medium, he liked what he saw. After the show, Charley was invited to a second supper party in the restaurant of the big hotel.

‘I’ve been wondering about your accent,’ said his host. ‘There’s just a trace of something I can’t get.’

‘Accent!’ said Charley, in mock surprise. ‘That’s no accent. I haven’t been home for years.’

‘Where’s home?’ asked the author.

‘Little Summerford,’ said Charley. ‘Where all the folk have webbed feet.’

‘How d’you get there?’

‘You hire a boat and row up the Thames till you can’t row any farther. Then you get out, and pull the boat, till you can’t pull it any farther. You leave the boat, stuck in the rushes, and walk through the meadows, till you get to a mill, six houses and a sweet-shop.’

‘Sounds wonderful. Odd you’ve never been back.’

‘Hate the place,’ said Charley Moon. ‘Don’t ask me why.’

‘Find the lady,’ suggested the author.

‘There *was* a girl,’ said Charley. ‘She had pigtails. There was also an old man who died of a broken heart; a lawyer with a mortgage; sundry debtors and a mill-wheel that wouldn’t go round.’

‘So you packed up and left them to it.’

‘As you say, I packed up and left them to it.’

‘She wouldn’t have pigtails now,’ laughed the author.

‘Who wouldn’t?’ asked Charley, coming out of his dark dream of old, unhappy things.

‘The girl in the sweet-shop,’ said the other.

‘Oh, *that* kid,’ said Charley Moon. ‘We used to ride down the meadows . . . to catch eels . . . on a donkey . . . one behind the other. . . . No, she wouldn’t have pigtails any more.’

Monty Brass was waiting at the club the following morning. ‘Any news?’ he asked.

‘I shall want a donkey,’ said the author.

‘A donkey,’ gasped his manager. ‘This isn’t a pantomime, with the Bogally Brothers.’

‘A real donkey,’ explained the author. ‘A live donkey, a dead mill-wheel and a lawyer with a mortgage.’

‘Comic relief?’ asked Monty Brass.

‘Not entirely,’ replied the other. ‘Sorry I can’t wait for lunch. I’m running down to Little Summerford.’

‘Never heard of it.’

‘Neither had I, till last night.’

‘Pretty name! What on earth are you going there for?’

‘All the people,’ mused the author, ‘have webbed feet. You hire a boat, and row up the Thames, till you can’t row any farther. Then you get out and pull the boat, till you can’t pull it any farther. You leave the boat, stuck in the rushes, and walk through the meadows, till you get to a mill, six houses and a sweet-shop.’

‘He’s potty!’ groaned Monty Brass.

‘There was a girl,’ said the author. ‘She had pigtails. . . . Well, I must be going.’

‘Potty!’ said Monty Brass. ‘All authors are potty. That’s why I have to write my own pantomimes.’

Yet the author was only obeying instructions. The new play was to fit Charley like a glove. The part was to be as like himself as possible. He was to act and talk exactly as he would in real life. When the author had finished, the actor wouldn’t know whether he was himself, or the character he was supposed to be.

As a rule, they wrote the play, and looked round for actors to fit the parts. This time, they were doing it the other way round—writing a play to fit the actor. And, surely, the best way to make him feel easy and comfortable, was to surround him, on the stage, with friendly, familiar things.

The method seemed a bit odd, but that was the way Monty Brass had fitted the comics and their material into his pantomimes; so there might be something in it. How the plan would work out in practice remained to be seen. No harm in trying. So the author went down to Little Summerford.

He put up at the Shaven Fleece, in the nearest market town, hired a bicycle, and started to prowl round the district. The first thing was to catch that elusive accent. It was far from being the thick, fruity brogue, affected by impersonators of West Country types; ridiculed in the profession as Mummerset. It depended more on the twist of the sentence than on the vowel sounds. The author propped his bicycle against gateposts; talked to country boys and listened in local pubs. He found the folk shy, friendly and not unamusing. Again and again, he dotted down some odd little expression, which suggested a line of dialogue, or the title of a song. . . .

And all the time, this quiet, pleasant background seemed to provide the ideal setting for a simple story, still to be written.

The author was careful not to draw attention to himself by appearing too interested. If these quiet folk once felt they were being quizzed, or placed under the microscope, they would shrink back into their shells, and that would be the last you would hear of them. So he passed the time of day, remarked on the weather, and waited for the chance happening that might lead to something.

He didn't have to wait long. Walking through the churchyard, he came upon those fine old tombstones of the Moon family; a little neglected now, but bearing all the evidence of leadership in that quiet countryside. A dwindling pageant: starting with that Thomas Moon who had sent all those sacks of corn to relieve the citizens of London, and ending with a simple cross, bearing the date that saw the end of the Kaiser's war. That would be Charley Moon's father—the old man who had died of a broken heart. The author thought of the lawyer with the mortgage, the derelict mill-wheel—and began to understand.

He walked down the village street and came, as he expected, to the little shop. Opening the door, he was startled by the jangle of what sounded like a young fire-bell.

A young woman came from an inside room—a young woman who seemed rather old for her years, with the kindest eyes he had ever seen. While she was putting a stick of chocolate into a paper bag, the author asked the name of the village.

'Little Summerford.'

'A pretty name.'

'Plenty as pretty,' said the young woman.

'You're too modest,' smiled the author, by way of keeping the conversation going.

She seemed to consider the point. 'I don't know,' she said. 'There's Marston Meysey . . . and Stanton Fitzwarren . . . and Clyffe Pypard is ever so nice.'

'Rather quiet in the winter?'

'And wet!' added the young woman. 'Folk used to say we had webbed feet; but since they started dredging the Thames, things are better.'

‘Is that the Thames, running through the meadows?’

‘No,’ said the young woman. ‘That’s only the brook. It runs into the Thames further down.’

‘Past the Mill?’

‘Past the Mill,’ echoed the young woman—and the echo seemed to carry with it the scent of half-dead flowers. Or was that just fancy?

The author was wondering how far he could safely—and decently—carry his enquiries. ‘I’ve been looking at the old tombs in the churchyard,’ he said, ‘and I was wondering if that old family—the Moons—were related, in any way, to the actor of the same name?’

‘I couldn’t say,’ replied the young woman. ‘I’ve never heard of him. What was his name?’

‘Charley Moon.’

‘Do you know him?’ she asked.

‘I’ve met him once or twice.’

‘There was a Charley Moon,’ said the woman. ‘He lived at the Mill, before it was sold. But I never heard of him acting. Have you seen him act?’

‘I saw him once,’ said the author.

‘Was he good?’

‘Very—I thought.’

‘What did he do?’

‘He was playing in a pantomime. He sang and danced—the usual things—and played on a mouth-organ. . . .’

Someone called querulously from the inner room: ‘Rose! Rose! How much longer are you going to stand gossiping?’

‘Coming, Grannie!’ replied the young woman.

When she had gone, the author slipped out of the little shop. He didn’t want to start any awkward complications, and the dark flush on the young woman’s face had told him all he wanted to know. Better leave it at that. He walked down the village street, until he came to the Mill.

An old man was leaning against a wall, watching workmen convert the old building into a lesser manor house. The stores and granaries had been pulled down; the great slabs from their stone floors being used to make

crazy pavings and rockeries for a particularly beautiful water garden. Evidently the old-mill-wheel was to be left in position, by way of ornament. The author leant against the wall, next to the old man.

‘Making a good job of it,’ he said.

‘Ar-r-rh!’ admitted the ancient, with the caution of his class. ‘You med say so.’

‘What happened to the last people?’

‘Dead,’ said the old man, with the morose relish of extreme old age.

‘Nobody left?’ asked the author.

‘Nobbut young Charley.’

‘Where’s he now?’

‘Who?’

‘Young Charley.’

‘Gone.’

‘Gone where?’

‘How should I know?’

‘I thought, perhaps, you remembered him.’

‘ ’Course I remembers him. Everybody know’d young Charley. No good to nobody, he wasn’t. Nor his feyther—young Willum. Let the place go to rack and ruin between ’em. Not like the old man. Ar-r-h! You had to get up main early to best the old miller, so you did.’

The author passed through a gate, and walked along the side of the brook, working it all out in his mind. The tough breed of millers . . . the changing times . . . dwindling capital . . . decay . . . the lawyer with the mortgage . . . debt and despair. . . . Not much of a subject for a musical comedy; but he felt he knew Charley Moon better now, and something might come of it. Across the meadow, a party of labourers were putting in a new sluice gate. One of them walked across.

‘Private water, sir!’ he said. ‘Strictly preserved. Better not let the guv’nor see you. He’s very particular.’

‘Don’t blame him,’ said the author. ‘How’s the fishing?’

‘Over-stocked! Close on a thousand yearlings in this short stretch. They’ll have to work for their living!’

The author was a bit of a fisherman in his spare time. ‘Wonder you could find room for the water,’ he smiled.

‘Just about!’ laughed the other; and went back to join his mates.

The promised conference between the three principals—producer, author and actor—took place in London. The author had consulted with Monty Brass, as to the wisdom of telling Charley Moon about his visit to Little Summerford.

‘Better not,’ advised Monty Brass. ‘Might make him self-conscious. Keep off his private life, and let him think the rest is just coincidence. If he begins to smell a rat, I’ll tell him he’s been talking in his sleep.’

But the author had a better plan. He told them that, for the sake of his story, he needed a country setting; but, as a townsman, he was a bit weak on his facts. Could Charley help him. For instance, he had seen pictures in *Country Life* of an old mill converted into the sort of residence he had in mind. The mill-wheel seemed to have been left in its original position, with the mill-stream diverted. Was that feasible?

‘I was born in a mill,’ said Charley Moon.

Monty Brass pretended to be delighted. An omen of success, already. And what a scene: water cascading and girls in bathing dresses. . . . The author cut him short:

‘This mill-wheel,’ he reminded his ebullient manager, ‘is out of action—an example of picturesque decay.’

‘It would be,’ said Charley.

Safely over his first hurdle, the author proceeded to draw upon his leading man for further country lore—much as a conjuror forces a card upon a member of his audience. ‘I want to develop this river motive,’ he said. ‘If there’s a mill, there must be running water, and those yellow things that grow on the banks . . .’

‘Water bubbles,’ said Charley Moon. ‘Water bubbles, yellow flags and mimulus.’

‘Good for colour,’ said the author. ‘Who’s painting the scene?’

‘Alick Johnstone,’ said Monty Brass. ‘What’s this mimulus?’

‘Water-musk,’ explained Charley.

‘Expensive?’ asked the manager, anxiously.

‘Very,’ said the author; and quoted:

‘. . . Dozing in the heat,
Among the mimulus and meadow-sweet.’

‘Sounds good,’ said Monty Brass. ‘Forget the expense. I’ll be ruined, anyway. . . .’

Charley Moon went off into the provinces, and the author got down to his story, in which love, romance, water-wheels and meadow-sweet were happily entwined. The audience would have anxious moments, but all would come right in the end—thanks to the resource and integrity of a simple country boy, who had loved the leading lady from afar. A popular composer provided a lilting score, which included *The Song of the Water Wheel* and *Among the Mimulus and Meadow Sweet* (without apologies due to the original author). Two lines of the lively river pageant still linger in the memory:

‘Goring and Streatley and Henley and Bray;
Wonderful places for people to play . . .’

All that remained was to find a title for the show. Some said one thing, and some said another. Monty Brass made a number of rather exciting but impossible suggestions; Charley Moon, consulted by post, had no suggestions; and the author was verging on a nervous breakdown, when he happened to recall a remark made by the young woman in the shop at Little Summerford. ‘It’s ever so nice,’ she had said. . . .

‘Ever So Nice.’ What a title for a musical play and what a duet for a couple of sweethearts. . . . The author dashed off a lyric; posted it to the composer, and got his theme song back by return of post.

The stage door of the Delphic Theatre lies, discreetly, in the narrow thoroughfare known, for no apparent reason, as Virgin Alley. As Charley Moon arrived, on the morning of his first rehearsal, he noted the various landmarks of his new world: the famous bohemian chop house, with its memories of his first hero, Dan Leno . . . the trade entrance of a leading publisher . . . the jobbing tailor who dispensed shreds of philosophy with the patches of his craft . . . the doorway in which a matinee idol of other days had been murdered, in the hey-day of his success. . . .

No theatrical glamour identified the back door of this famous old home of musical comedy.

Passing through a dusty entrance, the visitor was faced by a sombre individual, who obviously resented any intrusion upon his private preserves. Having convinced this unfriendly Cerberus that he really had business in the theatre, Charley Moon was allowed to pass down to the stage, where most of the company had already gathered.

They were standing about in little groups. Members of the chorus, who had met in other productions, or had shared the horrors of an audition on the previous day, had already broken the ice. One or two principals talked quietly in a corner; while a middle group, uncertain as to their category, hovered round, in the hope of professional advancement. Charley Moon, having no such inhibitions, joined up with the boys and girls of the chorus. A middle-aged woman, seated at a rehearsal piano, the stage manager and his assistant completed the gathering.

The arrival of Monty Brass, with the author, provided the first excitement. The principals moved forward to meet him; the middle group wanted to follow them, but lacked the necessary nerve; the chorus waited until the big guns had finished their social stuff and were ready to begin. When these preliminaries were over, an informal circle was formed, and the stage manager called for silence.

Monty Brass stepped forward with an anxious look, and whispered to the stage manager, who spoke to his assistant. The latter shook his head, before passing the problem on to the company:

‘Has anyone seen Mr. Moon?’ he asked.

Charley Moon trotted forward. ‘Here, guv’nor!’ he said.

Monty Brass beckoned him over; introduced the author to the company, and invited him to give them the main facts of his story, so that they might have some idea of what it was all about. Type-written parts were handed round; the author and principals withdrew to the saloon bar, to break in one or two of the scenes, and the stage was handed over to the chorus. The great adventure had begun.

On the stage, all was friendly liveliness, but upstairs, in the saloon bar, a slightly cooler atmosphere obtained. Those principals who had met before, knew what they were up against, in the way of competition. But who was this unknown provincial actor, who hobnobbed with the chorus, and was handed a fatter part—twice the number of pages—than anyone else? The leading lady eyed him with an air of open hostility. Some cheap recruit from one of those penny pantomimes, she supposed. Well, if Monty Brass thought she was going to risk her reputation playing opposite a dud touring actor, he had another guess coming to him. She sidled up to the author. ‘Who’s the new boy?’ she asked. ‘Looks like something out of a pantomime.’

‘That’s right,’ said the author. ‘But you needn’t worry. He’s good!’

Which only made matters worse. A conspiracy to cheapen a West End show, just to save a few pennies. And the author was in on it . . . Bolstering him up with a lot of special material . . . Talking to him now!

‘Look out for squalls,’ the author was saying. ‘Mary’s on your tail. Don’t let her start anything, or we shall have trouble.’

‘I’ll watch my step,’ said the new boy.

Miss Milton put up her first fight over the theme song, *I Think You’re Ever So Nice*. She thought this number, though quite pretty in its way, would be more effective as a solo, rather than as a duet. Definitely not a duet! Didn’t the author agree? After all, it carried the title of the play, and a solo was so much more important than a duet.

‘But it was written for two people,’ explained the author.

‘I know! I know!’ replied the lady, as one humouring a wayward child, ‘but don’t you *see* how a *duet* in that situation . . . it’s so *difficult* to explain . . . what we need, just there, is a real punch. One strong personality expressing itself . . . driving the message home. . . . It’s so difficult to *say* these things, without being hurtful, but the show *does* come first, and Mr. Moon, if he will excuse me saying so, hasn’t got a *very* strong singing voice, has he?’

‘We should have to rewrite the entire number,’ said the author.

‘Oh, surely not,’ protested the lady. ‘One or two *very* minor alterations, *surely*.’

‘Easy enough,’ said Charley Moon. ‘Give her a hand-mirror, and let her sing, “I think *I’m* ever so nice!”’

Miss Milton decided that her hairdresser had been kept waiting long enough, and the rehearsal broke up a little earlier than usual. Walking across to the famous bohemian chop house, the author spoke to Charley for the good of his soul. ‘That was a smart crack of yours,’ he said, ‘a very smart crack! I expect you’re feeling rather pleased with yourself?’

‘She asked for it,’ said Charley.

‘Oh yes, she asked for it,’ agreed the author. ‘She certainly asked for it.’

‘Suppose you’d been in my place?’

‘If I’d been in your place,’ the author told him, ‘I would have been very happy to have thought of such a good comeback, but I’d have been very sorry to have said it. . . . What d’you suppose she’s doing now? Telling half a dozen of her pals that Monty Brass has gone raving mad. That, in order to save a quid or two, he’s engaged some cheap skate from the provinces; that the poor fish can’t act and that when he tries to sing, he sets your teeth on edge.’

‘Perhaps she’s not so far wrong there,’ laughed Charley. ‘Anyhow, where’s the harm?’

‘The West End,’ the author reminded him, ‘is a very small place. It starts at the Gaiety and ends at the Pavilion. When you’ve taken out Shaftesbury Avenue and the Strand, there isn’t much left. Things get round. . . . Hullo, Tom! Two extremely nice chops and a bottle of that fine old vintage vinegar that you pass off as Beaujolais.’

The proprietor grinned. ‘How’s the new show shaping? I’m told you’ve dug up a dead pantomime and engaged a lousy comic from Scunthorpe.’

‘Good news *does* get round,’ laughed the author. ‘Meet Charley Moon—the lousy comic!’

The proprietor called up his head waiter. ‘Book the big dining-room for a supper party on the hundredth night of the new show, across the road. We’ll teach these knockers. Lousy comic, indeed! Bring who you like, Mr. Moon. It’s on the house.’

‘Give him a lousy supper and you’re quits,’ said the author.

The knockers were certainly getting busy. At one of those semi-professional West End clubs, where actors, authors and critics pretend to like one another, a couple of gag merchants were competing for public attention, by knocking the coming production:

‘I hear there’s a deep depression moving in from the provinces,’ said the first.

‘Never mind,’ said the second, ‘there’ll be bright intervals!’

In the theatre itself, the weather forecast was: ‘Stormy, with occasional squalls reaching to gale force.’ So much so, that Monty Brass called Charley Moon into his office. ‘You seem to have an extraordinary effect on my leading ladies,’ he said. ‘Miss Mary Milton has been in here talking about you.’

‘Nothing but good, I hope,’ said Charley.

‘Just a few suggestions. She insists I postpone, and get another comic . . .’

‘She doesn’t like me?’

‘She hates you so hard, it hurts her to think of you. If you were half as bad as she thinks, you’d be in a freak tent.’

‘Okay! I’ll starve!’

‘She won’t have your name in lights . . .’

‘But you’ve taken me out of the show,’ Charley reminded him.

Monty Brass ignored this little quip. ‘In fact,’ he continued, ‘you’ve got under her skin so deep, she’d pull the plug out of the boat, if she thought you’d drown. I don’t care what happens after the first night—I’ve got an understudy who can eat her head off—but if she comes any of her funny stuff before then, we’re sunk. . . . Have you got that?’

‘Yes, guv’nor; I’ve got that.’

‘There’s a type of comic who thinks it’s clever to go all out at rehearsals; to get cheap laughs from the chap who plays the piccolo and a few silly little chorus girls. This unsettles the leading lady. It’s been known to give her a sore throat on the morning of production. I’d hate, like hell, to read in the early evening papers that, owing to Miss Mary Milton having a severe attack of laryngitis, I’d had to postpone the opening. . . . Have you got *that*?’

‘Yes, guv’nor; I’ve got that.’

‘To-morrow night, at the dress rehearsal, I’m going to sit in the front row of the circle with a gun. If you waste time being any funnier than the lines allow, I’ll shoot you—and that’ll be one comic the less.’

‘What about the first night?’ asked Charley Moon. ‘Can I be funny on the first night?’

‘On the first night,’ said his guv’nor, ‘you can be as damn funny as you know how.’

‘Suppose she walks out on us?’ asked Charley.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Monty Brass. ‘You won’t be as funny as that.’

At the dress rehearsal of the new musical, *Ever So Nice*, to which a few privileged people were invited, it was remarked that the new comedian was a little on the light side—not quite up to West End standards. . . . Monty Brass smiled . . . his leading lady smiled . . . and everybody was happy. Proving, once again, the truth of the old saying that it doesn’t always pay to be as funny as you can. . . .

Charley Moon spent the morning of the great day hovering about the theatre; glancing round his dressing-room, checking up on his personal props, asking for letters, and ordering in a few drinks, for visitors after the show. There were telegrams to be sent to the other principals and an outsize bouquet for the leading lady, just to show there was no ill-feeling. The front of the theatre had a challenging display of pictures and play-bills; gallery enthusiasts were already in position, and a thin trickle of patrons were making enquiries at the advance booking office.

No great excitement yet! Surprising, the number of Londoners who passed the theatre, their minds concerned with more important matters. Here, under their very noses, was the theatrical event of the season, yet how little they seemed to care. They crowded into the more popular restaurants, snatched at the early racing specials, peered into shop windows; but their lack of interest in the first night of this new production was a thing to marvel at. Charley Moon, with growing uneasiness, began to wonder if the author’s gloomy warning, about shows that died on their feet, before the curtain went up, hadn’t, perhaps, a grain of truth in it, after all.

He was passing the front of the theatre for the third time, when two rather more intelligent types stopped to consider the freshly painted board, bearing the names of the cast, beneath the title of the play.

‘NEVER SO NICE,’ parodied the first. ‘And who’s Charley Moon, when he’s at home?’

‘Another of these little comics from Wigan,’ replied the other. ‘If Monty Brass runs true to form, he’ll find something under the bed, and there’ll be a transformation scene in the last act.’ Charley wasn’t to know that the first speaker was a song-plugger who had tried to get an interpolated number into the show, and that the second was an actor who would have given his ears to play his part. . . . Lunch at the famous bohemian chop house seemed to lack a little of its usual high quality. . . .

Things were a little better, when he came along in the evening. Passing the front of the theatre, on his way to the stage door, he saw his name in bright lights for the first time. If you had asked him, two years ago, how it would feel, to be walking down the Strand and suddenly see his name in lights, above a West End theatre, he would have had no doubt of his answer. But, now the astonishing thing had happened, his feelings were not at all what he had expected. Somehow, there seemed to be a challenge—a slightly ominous challenge—in the thrill of the occasion. He was rather frightened than otherwise, and he shivered slightly, as Rose had done in the meadow of fritillaries. . . .

Who was he, Charley Moon, to have his name blazoned above a London theatre? What had he done to deserve it? How could he hope to hold a position so easily won? The questions came tumbling out of the evening sky, like moths, attracted by motor lights on a dark road. . . . Most disturbing! No triumph and no trumpets; only a chill foreboding of possible trouble to come. . . . If this was fame, they could keep it. . . . Charley Moon turned up the narrow passage which led to the back of the theatre. . . .

Here, the gallery girls, having been served with tea by a thoughtful management, were in great form. The fact that they had been sitting on hard stools for six hours, only added to the fun of the thing. Very soon, the doors would open, and they would reap the reward of their long vigil.

‘Who’s this Charley Moon?’ wheezed an extremely large lady, perched precariously on her little stool.

‘Never heard of him,’ said her neighbour.

‘Nor me,’ echoed another.

‘Ee, *I* have,’ announced a lady in the unmistakable accent of a northern city; ‘in our panto, at Barnley! He’s a smasher, is Charley.’

‘He’ll need be, if he’s to keep upsides with Mary Milton,’ sniffed the first speaker. ‘She’ll have the pants off him.’

‘Don’t worry for him,’ said the lady from Barnley. ‘He knows his stuff, does Charley.’

‘What Barnley sez to-day, London will say to-morrow,’ scoffed a male voice.

‘Many’s the true word spoken in jest, Mister.’

‘We’ll see.’

‘Ee, you’ll see!’

Charley Moon passed into the stage door with his ego slightly buttressed by these few kind words. The doorkeeper handed him a bare half a dozen good luck wires—from other members of the company. That was the penalty of being unknown in the West End. Even the boys and girls of the chorus had more telegrams—and more personal friends in the audience. Any applause that might welcome this new comedian, would have to be worked for; no armchair ride past the winning post for Charley Moon.

But there was one bright spot; a large bunch of carrots from Alfred Higgins and a message of goodwill:

Dear Charley my boy, all the best for to-night. I see, from the pictures, you have a nice little donkey in the company. Give her the enclosed with my love. I’ve always been partial to donkeys, Charley my boy—ever since I met you.

If Charley Moon had been in the auditorium, five minutes before the rise of the curtain, he would have had a shock. Stalls and dress circle were empty. Up in the gallery, the faithful gods had been in position for the past hour. The pit was fully occupied. But the more expensive parts of the house were bare as the back of your hand. What had happened? Had the fashionable West End public turned their backs on Monty Brass and all his works? Not at all!

The vestibule was crowded to suffocation with the usual first night indispensables—critics, relatives of the players, actors who happened to be resting at the moment, representatives of the libraries (you want the best seats, we have them), and all those regular first nighters who had managed to attach themselves to the free list of this particular theatre.

Raised slightly above the common herd, by the simple expedient of standing on the first step of the stairs leading to the dress circle, was a romantic figure; a raggle-taggle Beau Brummell, wearing a black stock and an air of aloof austerity. Some famous old actor, you supposed: relic of the great days when Irving trod the stage of the Lyceum Theatre. Then you supposed wrong. He was a critic, and one of his claims to fame was that his face was once slapped in public by a visiting American actress. . . .

Conspicuous in the crowd was a second critic, lacking his colleague's faded sartorial graces, yet blessed with the gift of tongues—acquired during the late war (1914-18), while employed as a Provençal horse-coper in H.M. Forces. Next Sunday he would give some such Gallic twist to the play's title as *Elle est Charmante*, or even *Tu es si Gentille*.

Why were all these ardent playgoers hanging round the vestibule instead of taking their seats? They were waiting, as they still do to-day, in the hope that the candid camera of the *Daily Mirror* or *The Tatler* would record their presence at this social function. But the bells were becoming more insistent; there would be a lowering of lights in the auditorium; the curtain would be going up. Let us pass along, frustrated and regretfully, with the rest. . . .

Sitting well in the back of his box, Monty Brass heaved a sigh of relief, as the stalls and circle began to fill. . . All this waiting was getting on his nerves. . . . He had already had enough of this first night nonsense. The sooner it started, the sooner it would be over with. . . . Thank god, here was

the conductor at last. . . . A round of applause, a tap with the baton, and they were into the overture. . . .

The show started with a bang. There was a round of applause for the opening scene—a picturesque old mill, with enough moss and maiden-hair fern on the water-wheel to sink a ship. Its working days, alas, were over, but a thin trickle of water dripped down it, in memory of former glories. If you had ever been to Little Summerford, the familiar picture would have brought a touch of nostalgia in its train. It wasn't just a mill—it was *the* mill. . . . The author, and his pocket camera, had seen to that.

Then there was the chorus. Monty Brass may not have been a Charles Cochran, but his young ladies were good enough to go on with. He had combed his touring companies and held endless auditions, to show the West End what he could do. These girls could sing; they were good-lookers and they could dance more than a bit. To-night they were on their toes. The audience—especially the mothers and aunties in the gallery gave the little girls a hand. Monty Brass, at the back of the stage box, found strength to light a cigar. . . . A good start was half the battle. . . .

Mary Milton received her usual ovation. She might be a little over the peak of her popularity as a musical comedy queen, but a London audience is faithful to old friends. Once you have made the grade in the West End, you are in the bright lights for ever—unless, of course, you lose your memory, have a serious illness, or become so difficult that managers fight shy of you! Mary Milton could be difficult, but she hadn't yet reached the stage when a manager was afraid to take the risk of engaging her. She still had a following, and her name on the bills brought real money into the theatre. And so, when she made her first entrance, to sing the song of the Old Mill Wheel, she brought the house down—as everybody knew she would do.

Perhaps that was the trouble. She was so competent; so sure of herself, that the element of diffidence and surprise was ruled out. She had done it all so many times before, that she couldn't put a foot wrong. Even on a first night, she would sail through to certain success: the manager knew it, *she* knew it, and worst of all, perhaps, the audience knew it. They felt safe, but 'Safety First' can be a dreary doctrine. You can be bored in the most comfortable armchair.

Supporting the star, were two young performers; a cheeky little soubrette and a village boy, brought up together by the banks of the old mill stream. They rode in together, on the back of an old donkey, pillion fashion. All very fresh and jolly; even at this early stage, you scented a budding romance; but,

somehow, their little affair had to take a very back seat when the lovely lady from London came along, with her fine feathers and her pink parasol. The more sophisticated members of the audience shifted a little uneasily in their seats. The old mixture with a new label. . . . Monty Brass up to his old tricks. . . . Cinderella in modern dress. . . .

And yet, not quite the old mixture. The little story had a fragrance, a touch of reality, that held your interest in spite of yourself. Something real seemed to be emerging from this rather conventional hotch-potch. Almost against your better judgment, you began to find yourself caring about what happened to these poor little puppets. Even the famous critic—he who had been slapped—thought of something that had happened to him, as a boy, down in his native Sussex, and brushed the memory aside. His colleague, who hated all musical comedies, however good, decided, regretfully, that the show wasn't bad enough to justify the pungent little aphorism he had coined during its earlier stages. A pity! Now they were back again, wallowing in the slough of mediocrity. Not too good, not too bad, which ruled out any sort of lively writing. . . .

The musical score was patchy. Some of the more ambitious numbers took you back to those dear, dead days at Daly's, when Evie Greene sang in the *Country Girl*; before the current American invasion swept all that rather old-fashioned stuff into the ash-can. And yet, here again, there was a something—a sort of saving grace—that came from goodness knew where, and did something to you. The two critics wondered, uneasily, if they were growing old—and buckled on their shining critical armour.

The interval caught the audience in two minds. Was this just another average, adequate musical comedy, or had it really got something? They found themselves arguing the point over their drinks in the big saloon bar; and diversity of critical opinion is the greatest friend that any theatrical production has ever known. Once you can get them arguing on the way home, you've got them. . . . But this was only the interval. Charley Moon wasn't home yet. Not by a long chalk.

Indeed, we seem to have heard very little about Charley Moon. It wouldn't be fair to say he had been left at the post; but no one is shouting him home from the stands—as yet. So far, the favourite has made all the running, and with half the journey to go, he has a lot of ground to make up, if he is to be in the picture at the winning post.

On their way back to the stalls, the two famous critics chanced to coincide for a split second. 'Same old story!' said the first. '*Plus ça*

change!’ echoed the second—each hopeful that the other had missed that odd little undercurrent, which might so easily affect the ultimate fortunes of the play. What had really shaken these astute men, was the reaction of the audience to Charley’s song, towards the end of the first act, *The Field where the Buttercups Grow*. Quite an ordinary little song, you would have said; and yet, it had about it a haunting quality, that made you want to hear it all over again. Its theme was the hackneyed little parable of a crock of gold at the rainbow’s end, but what Charley did with it was nobody’s business. The defiance of youth . . . the glamour of the unknown . . . the pathos of parting from old familiar things—all were packed into a tiny lyric, set to a simple folk tune of the English countryside. It was over before you knew it had started; and the singer had passed on, with a gay laugh, before the audience quite realized what had happened. ‘What a wicked waste of a good number!’ muttered an actor, in the wings, to his companion. ‘Wish they’d given it to me. I’d have squeezed some juice out of it.’

‘Like all these touring-types,’ said the other. ‘They can’t create a part. We have to show ’em how. That’s why they stay in the provinces.’

‘This one didn’t stay there.’

‘Perhaps not, but if he’s wise, he’s kept his return ticket. He’ll need it!’

Leaning over the back of the dress circle, the author was very well pleased. Things were going according to plan. Either he had written an average musical comedy, liable to score an average success; or there was more to it than that. Between himself and the gate-post, he had banked everything on Charley Moon. Into the fool-proof, but conventional setting of a Cinderella theme, he had twisted a surprise motif, and surprise was the essence of the contract. Let the other characters delude themselves, and the audience, that the race was as good as over: somewhere in the ruck, was the outsider who carried the stable money. That little song, carefully thrown away, marked the moment when the unconsidered competitor shook up his mount and started to come through.

It was all a matter of timing. From now on, Charley should have matters his own way. All the situations, all the sympathy had been packed into his part—but had the challenge been left too late, and would the novice be strong enough to beat these tough professionals at their own game? Only one man in the audience knew what was really happening. Monty Brass didn’t know. Charley Moon, himself, didn’t know. Only the author, up there at the back of the dress circle, sensed the rising excitement. This was the

moment he had worked for—this was fun . . . good theatre . . . real drama . . . a play within a play. . . . *Come on, Charley!*

Gradually, the audience began to realize that something unusual was afoot. The play seemed to have turned a somersault. The heroine was just as charming; she swept on to the stage with her retinue of bridesmaids; her wedding-gown, which had cost a young fortune, was a thing to marvel at; yet, somehow, she didn't seem to matter quite so much. Interest had shifted to the self-sacrificing little fellow who, having adored her with a hopeless passion all through the play, was now handing her over to his more fortunate rival. Everything seemed to be working out for the best, in the best of all possible theatrical worlds, but the brutal truth was that the audience had lost interest in their leading lady. All those little human touches, interlocking and building up, had done their work. Much cynical lip-service has been paid to authors, but here was the truth at last—the play was, after all, the thing. *Come on, Charley!*

Mary Milton was the first to sense the defection of her kind friends in front. She felt the audience slipping away from her, as silver sand runs through the fingers. She felt the challenge, and tried to shake it off. But it was too late. She began to press, and that only made matters worse. They were into the *reprise* of the duet: '*I think you're ever so nice,*' Charley was singing—looking as though he meant it. Now he was handing her over to another—and, in her heart she knew that the audience didn't give a damn whose woman she was. . . . Little beast, making a stooge of her. . . .

Thank god, he'd gone. At last she would have the stage to herself, for the *reprise* of her big number. Now she'd show them . . . *No good fighting, Mary . . . You're whacked! The old pattern's busted . . . You don't get home first because you have your name big on the bills.* . . .

At the back of the dress circle, the author, waiting for the inevitable climax, pictured the various repercussions: Monty Brass, in the stage box, anticipating nice average notices; a nice average library deal and a kindly pat on the back for a new London management; the company, bewildered by the turn events were taking—and the outsider, coming through on a loose rein, to win in a common canter. Charley Moon, 'the lousy comic from Scunthorpe,' romping home, wondering what had happened to him, and what all the noise was about, anyway!

'He won't wonder for long,' guessed the author, cynically. 'Give him a week to settle down, and he'll think he did it all on his own. . . . What the hell! Who cares? . . . It was worth it! *Come on, Charley!*'

It was nearly over now. Charley had only to repeat the little number in which he said good-bye to the spurious joys of the great city, and crept back to the little sweetheart of his boyhood days, who was waiting for him by the old mill-wheel, in the field where the buttercups grew—leaving the heroine to queen it, among her bridesmaids, in the glittering finale. That was how Monty Brass had planned it and that was how it would have to be. Unless . . . unless . . .

Would the audience stand for it? Would they allow the little man to slide away into the background, or would they refuse to let him go? That was the climax, the photo-finish, for which the author was waiting. Was it to be the rather obvious victory of an odds-on favourite, or the thrill of an outsider coming through on the rails, snatching the laurels on the winning post?

Charley Moon finished his *reprise* and, like a good little trouper, trotted away into insignificance. He didn't acknowledge the applause or try to force an encore. His job was finished. He had guided the heroine into that haven where she would be—and here she was! Not even Solomon, in all his glory, was arrayed as Mary Milton had been arrayed by Monty Brass, for this stupendous moment of triumph; this shattering apotheosis, designed to stampede the audience into that final delirium of joy, which marks the climax of any West End musical comedy, however obvious or flat-footed it may have been. . . .

But not to-night. There was applause, there were cheers: noise enough to drown the final frenzies of an augmented orchestra; but the cheers were all for Charley Moon. They wanted him back again. They wanted another *reprise* of the little song, and, like the baby in the advertisement, they wouldn't be happy till they got it. Unfortunately, the object of their affection had a quick-change in the wings. He had to appear, in the final tableau, as they had seen him in the first act; complete with donkey and the girl with pigtails. There wasn't much time, but with the help of his dresser, and some of the boys, he could just manage it. . . .

Knowing how he was fixed, the actors carried on with the scene, but the more they mimed and gesticulated through the clamour, the more the audience were determined to have none of them. Mary Milton, rage in her heart, tried, very properly, to defeat this friendly, if slightly mischievous, opposition. Quite unfairly, the warm-hearted pit and gallery assumed that she, the star, was attempting to rob a minor colleague of his just dues. Everybody was at cross-purposes . . . the orchestra stopped playing . . . the stage manager was at a loss . . . Stalemate!

From his box, Monty Brass sent urgent messages for the missing comedian to take a call. Confound the fellow; hadn't he the gumption to know what was happening? Why couldn't he push his head round the corner, or something? Couldn't the stage manager . . .

Meanwhile, willing helpers were falling over one another, in frenzied efforts to get Charley Moon into his trousers. The conductor signalled his orchestra to be ready for an encore—if and when needed. At the back of the dress circle, the author began to realize that he had really started something—but what?

At last, out from the wings, like the towel of a beaten prize-fighter, floated a white shirt; followed closely by Charley Moon, wearing those elusive trousers—and precious little else. With a diffident gesture of apology to the leading lady, and an infectious grin at the audience, he ambled down to the footlights and sang the little song all over again. Then he trotted away, as though nothing had happened, to be ready for the last line-up.

The situation was saved. Everybody was happy. The audience, having carried their point, were in great good humour. The finale hadn't suffered in any way. Monty Brass, after the first shock, told himself that, in spite of a bit of a mess-up, his organization had stood up to the strain. . . . The author had done all he had set out to do: 'Well, Charley,' he whispered to himself, 'we've pulled it off between us. If you can keep your head, we'll pull it off again, and again after that.'

The only person who took the affair entirely in his stride, was Charley Moon. He didn't seem to realize that anything unusual had happened. Collecting his donkey and his bunch of carrots, he lined up with the rest, prepared to play his small part in the carefully rehearsed routine, following the final fall of the curtain.

Nothing had been left to chance. First of all, the entire company would face the audience, and take as many curtain calls as the enthusiasm warranted. The chorus and small-part people would then disappear, leaving the stage to the principals. These would, in turn, be winnowed out, until only four people—the leading lady, the tenor, the comedian and the soubrette—remained. After which, the leading lady would make a solus appearance; and finally, backed by the entire company, she would deliver a few gracious words of thanks, and the proceedings would terminate with the National Anthem, in which everyone on the stage would join—or Monty Brass, watching from the back of his box, would know the reason why!

That was how this heart-stirring impromptu had been planned, but the planning of impromptus is a catchy business. The audience co-operated grandly—until they realized that, once again, Charley Moon was to be exiled to his field of buttercups. . . .

That did it! Fearing no evil, the leading lady swept forward; a solitary, gorgeous figure with arms outstretched as though she would hold each single member of the British public to her heart, in one convulsive embrace—and got what was coming to her!

‘Charlee!’ yelled the gallery girls, as one woman. ‘We want Charlee!’

So the curtain was lowered; the company was reassembled; the curtain rose again, and everyone waited for those few kind words. . . .

But the sorely tried leading lady had had enough. Turning her back on her innocent persecutor, she threw herself into the arms of the embarrassed tenor, and burst into floods of tears; leaving Charley Moon to feed carrots to his donkey; to kiss the girl with two pigtails—and to make the curtain speech:

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ he said, ‘we brought this show to London to see if it was fit for the provinces. You may like us in London, but will they like us in Barnley?’

‘Ee, la-ad!’ came the answer. ‘Thee’s champion!’

There is nothing quite so heart-warming as the surprise success of an unknown performer. When success becomes a matter of ordinary routine, it has little interest for anybody, but the knowledge that fame can still be won in a night, carries a message of hope straight to the heart of every one of us. . . .

And sudden, unexpected success is *news*. Monty Brass, sitting in his stage box, would have been satisfied with success of any kind; but the author knew better. As a writer he had realized the value of surprise. What could a critic, for instance, make of an ordinary flat-footed musical comedy, trundling along to ordinary, flat-footed success? Nothing! But, give him success, leaping at him from an unexpected quarter, and he had a chance. . . . The author thought in headlines—and he looked like getting them.

Good news gets round! Before he left the theatre, Monty Brass had fixed up a library deal that would pay his production costs. At ten o’clock next morning, all the telephones in the box office of the Delphic Theatre were

ringing. By midday, a second box office, to handle advance booking, had been opened; and by the evening, blocks of seats were being pencilled in for family parties on Boxing night. Nothing like it had been seen in the West End since the wartime triumphs of *Maid of the Mountains* and *Chu Chin Chow*. . . .

What surprised Charley Moon was the number of people who gloried in his success. Complete strangers surged into his dressing-room, after the first performance; shook him solemnly by the hand, and surged out again. When he was leaving the theatre, more complete strangers patted him on the shoulder and asked for his autograph. Across the road, at the famous little chop house, his supper table was the centre of general rejoicings. A press photographer, noticing that he was sitting beneath a picture of Dan Leno, took a flash-light photograph; which, appearing in an early evening edition, helped to point the moral and adorn the tale.

Then there was the mystery of all those missing telegrams. Everyone he met had wired good wishes; yet, by some odd fatality, not a single one of them had been received. Very odd—unless, of course, that fool of a secretary had sent it to the wrong theatre. . . .

Quite a lot of people were caught on the hop that night. Even Monty Brass, having arranged a slap-up supper in the Savoy Grill, found that, by some incredible oversight, Charley Moon had not been invited to the party. Urgent messages were sent to the theatre, but by the time the missing comedian had been tracked to his favourite resort, he had finished his chop and slipped away to his little flat in Endell Street; leaving the official celebration to get along as best it could—a production of *Hamlet*, without the prince.

Charley Moon woke early; slipped out to the little newsagent's shop; bought all the available papers; threw them on the bed and got back between the sheets. He didn't expect anything very surprising, but there was no harm in knowing what people thought about you. He was a little worried about the part he had been forced to play in last night's affair, though he didn't see what else he could have done. No fault of his that the gallery started acting the goat; and if Mary was too overcome by her reception to make the final speech, *someone* had to bring the curtain down. He picked up the paper on the top of the pile—and there it was:

BOW TO THIS NEW MOON
Unknown Comic Steals

West End Show

Charley Moon rubbed his eyes; read it again, to make sure he wasn't dreaming, and fell back on his pillow, to let it sink in. He was almost afraid to open the next paper, but there it was again—splashed across the page:

LAST NIGHT'S NEW MOON

(Put all the Stars to Shame)

The more sober journals were less exuberant, but equally enthusiastic:

LONDON LAUGHS AGAIN

was the heading of a thoughtful article on the uses and abuses of comedy in all its branches. Here, said the writer, was a comedian worthy to wear the mantle of Dan Leno; recalling the homely good humours of Teddy Payne and challenging the wry pathos of Charlie Chaplin, himself. Admittedly, the production was designed as a vehicle for the new star, yet even so, it held promise of a possible return to that golden age when British musical comedies set a pattern to the world.

A great national daily, in its brilliantly improvised last minute leading article, 'Laugh, Clown, Laugh!' struck a note of warning: MR. MOON, said the writer, could be congratulated on an unusual *tour de force*; but, it was to be hoped he would not accept, too literally, the first night hysteria surrounding the welcome discovery of a new star. If one approached the problem in appropriate astronomical terms, it was difficult to ignore comparisons between those bright bodies which keep the same relative position in the heavens, and an equally heavenly body with an eccentric orbit, a nebulous light surrounding the nucleus—and a luminous tail.

That took some digesting. Something to do with 'up with the rocket, and down with the stick,' Charley supposed. Oh well, they needn't worry about *him* getting swelled head; he was scared stiff: frightened to face the other members of the company; scared of his second night audience; terrified, almost, to poke his nose outside the little flat in Endell Street. As he was thus pondering, the telephone rang. 'Well,' asked the author, 'have you read your notices?'

'I've read *your* notices,' replied Charley.

'Rubbish!' said the author; pleased and a little surprised at this modest disclaimer. 'You earned them and you've got them. Good luck to you.'

'What you've done to me!' groaned Charley Moon. 'How about to-night?'

The author laughed. ‘Penalty of success. Serves you right for being so good. Now you’ve set the standard, you’ve got to live up to it. I wouldn’t be in your shoes for something. Wait till you meet your leading lady.’

Charley had been thinking about that. ‘She won’t be too well pleased,’ he said. ‘And neither should I, in her place.’

‘Don’t worry,’ laughed the author. ‘She’ll find an alibi. And if the worst comes to the worst, I’ll send you a wreath. . . . Better get down to the theatre; they’ll be wanting you.’

The author was right. At the stage door there was a queue of visitors, all clamouring for Charley Moon. Photographers from the glossy weeklies, gossip writers from the evening papers, young women journalists who wanted his views on every subject under the sun—all anxious to hitch their wagons to this new star. Charley Moon took his key and slipped down to his dressing-room, to try and sort things out in his rather bewildered mind. What was it all about?

Yesterday, at this time, none of these things had happened. He had come to this same stage door, sat in this same small dressing-room, and no one had taken the slightest notice of him. Yet he was the same Charley Moon. Why hadn’t it happened before? Why had it happened now? Suppose the whole thing was a crazy accident. Suppose they came along that evening and told him what they *really* thought of him? What could he do about it? Nothing!

Two stage hands, and his dresser, walked in and started shifting some of the furniture.

‘What’s happening?’ he asked.

‘They’re moving us into the old green-room,’ said the dresser. ‘Closer to the stage and handier for that last quick change. They’ve been at it since five o’clock this morning; you’ll have to mind the paint, and the new curtains won’t be up till this afternoon.’

In the old green-room, Monty Brass was directing operations. ‘Sorry we had to put you in that rabbit hutch last night,’ he apologized, ‘but we weren’t quite ready for you. Why weren’t you at the party?’

‘What party?’ asked Charley Moon.

‘I’ll sack that fool of a secretary!’ said Monty Brass. ‘If you want a thing done, you have to do it yourself. I told them about this room a week ago!’

The rest of the day was spent in a whirl of interviews, sittings for photographers, appointments with costumiers and wig-makers, telegrams,

telephone calls, more congratulations from more complete strangers. . . . Lunch was out of the question. A cup of tea, five minutes with the evening papers—and it was time to be thinking of the evening show. Charley Moon stretched himself on the new, but extremely uncomfortable settee, and longed for the happy, carefree days when he could enjoy a quiet game of snooker, and wander into the theatre, five minutes before the curtain went up. If this was success, he wasn't sure that he liked it.

Besides, he was in no sort of state to do his job. How could they expect a man to be funny when he was dog-tired; absolutely whacked to the wide! As much as he could do to stand on his feet—let alone skip about and make a fool of himself. Last night, he'd been on his toes, ready for anything; but now he felt as though a couple of steam-rollers had been over him. Damn all photographers; damn all silly strangers with their fatuous grins and silly compliments. Why couldn't they leave him alone, and let him get on with it. And there was the second night audience, out in front, stuffed up with a lot of nonsense about a new comic, who was going to make them laugh their heads off. What a hope!

Sorry, Charley! But you can't have it both ways. Being a star isn't just a matter of coming on and bowing in front of the curtain. There's a lot more to it than that. Those old, happy, carefree days are over; done and finished with.

The second night of a theatrical production is a trying business. The tumult and the shouting have died; all the glamour seems to have gone; a sense of anti-climax has set in. . . .

That was how it seemed to Charley Moon and the cast of *Ever So Nice*, waiting for the curtain to rise on their second performance. They needn't have worried. Having read the notices and heard the gossip, the audience had made up their minds well in advance. They were going to see the best musical comedy since *Chu Chin Chow*. . . . They were going to laugh at the funniest comic since Teddy Payne. . . . They had come to enjoy themselves, and they were jolly well going to enjoy themselves. . . .

The new play at the Delphic Theatre would run a year—there was no doubt about that. Everybody concerned with it could sit back and relax. Little personal touches were added to the dressing-rooms. It was unlucky to tempt Providence by taking success for granted, too early in the run; but this was the real thing. So Mary Milton turned her dressing-room into a boudoir; Charley Moon turned the old green-room into a bar parlour, and the rest of the company settled down to enjoy themselves, in their fashion.

Being a star, Charley discovered, carried with it certain obligations. It was your privilege to entertain, after each performance, any member of the audience who had the nerve to claim your personal acquaintance. Another way of saying that anyone, who felt like a drink at that late hour, and who had the foresight to slip half a crown across the stage-door counter, could usually join the happy throng in the star dressing-room. Fortunes have been made by fully licensed men, but when all the drinks are 'on the house,' the financial results are not quite so satisfactory.

But it was all good for business. It proved you were popular, and that you were in the money. You might get a bit of a shock, at the end of the month, when the bills came in; but all the other stars did it, and life would be very dull without a few of the boys dropping in after the show. So 'Charley's Bar,' as it came to be called, developed into a regular 'pull-in' for the lads. Invitations for private parties, social functions and charity matinees poured in from every quarter. Supported by the chorus of *Ever So Nice*, he was given pride of place at a Royal Performance, and was presented during the interval. All of which was very gratifying, but, as Charley remarked, didn't

leave much time for ‘getting the laundry together, and taking the dog for a run.’

Happy days, when success was strange and new. To pretend not to notice when you were pointed out in the street, and folk turned to look at you. ‘That’s Charley Moon, the new comedian at the Delphic,’ they said, and passed on to their homes or their clubs, to tell interested listeners that they had really seen the great man. Everywhere you went, you were recognized, and everything you did became an amusing little ceremony. If you dropped into a shop to buy a new hat or a pipe, the other assistants were looking over their shoulders, whispering to the customers they were serving. When you walked into a restaurant, there was the odd rustle of turning heads and speculations among diners as to whether you were really yourself, or only someone who looked rather like you. You didn’t have to tell the taxi man where you were going, and almost any policeman on point duty would give you a friendly little salute.

‘Never to feel *lonely* any more!’ said Charley, as he answered his bedside telephone, for the tenth time in five minutes. He would be trying to snatch another hour’s sleep, after a particularly late night, and half the world would be wanting to make appointments for the glad new day, just beginning. Golf at Moor Park; lunch at the Savoy; a seat in the Bentley for racing at Sandown Park . . . no party, it seemed, could be quite complete without Charley Moon.

At his hairdresser’s, when he leant back in his chair, and let his regular man give him the entire works, all the other assistants and all the other customers had to treat the occasion as a huge joke. A comedian, it seemed, was expected to be funny all the time—even to the point of having funny nightmares when he was asleep, Charley supposed.

It might become a little tiring, but it was very gratifying—and how you would miss it. When Charley Moon went to a matinee, he meant as much, sitting in the stalls, as he did standing on the stage of his own theatre. Moving among theatrical folk, he was able to estimate his standing in his profession. All the managers were after him. When you really bring in the money, you don’t have to look for a job. When your name on a bill means the success of an otherwise average production, you can, in reason, name your own terms. Your presence in the cast has a publicity value out of all proportion to your worth as an actor.

Everyone wanted to hitch his wagon to the new star. It was good for a budding new actress to be seen with him at the Ivy restaurant; good for a

young actor to be drawn against him in a Stage Golfing Society competition; good for any hostess to have him at her table—especially when he was popular and helped to keep the fun going.

Six months after the opening night, he moved into a service flat in Jermyn Street. Why he did this, he couldn't have told you; it was stuffy, and the 'service' was the sort of impersonal attendance that seemed little short of an insult to anyone who was country born. Charley Moon was being caught up in currents that were not of his choosing. He was doing things because they were done, rather than because he wanted to do them. He found himself being dragged into bars by people he didn't know and being proposed for clubs he had never heard about. He learned the non-committal jargon of that easy, superficial good-fellowship which starts anywhere and leads nowhere. Conversation consisted of a string of stories, crackling rib-ticklers, bandied back and forth like a ping-pong ball. Most of them were old, but who cared? Everybody laughed, and what else could you talk about, anyhow?

Inevitably, he drifted into that strange half-world of financiers, gamblers and super-sportsmen, where the clown is king. The post-war boom was over and easy-money was on the way out; but no one would admit it. No one dared admit it; and so they filled themselves with Dutch courage by celebrating the sudden successes of the turf, the city and the stage. So long as a city man could clean up, by selling a good old family business, at double its value, to a gullible public; so long as a young apprentice could win the Derby; so long as an unknown provincial actor could hit the headlines, there was hope for all of them. 'Eat, drink and be merry—for tomorrow we may go bust' was the slogan, and it was up to the clowns to make them laugh—and forget.

Helping himself to a generous whisky and soda, in 'Charley's Bar,' a complete stranger said to his host:

'I never see you at the Peregrine. Aren't you a member?'

Charley pretended to ponder the question. What was a Peregrine, when it was at home?

'You know the Peregrine Club,' the other prompted him. 'That new joint in Bisley Street. Everybody belongs to it. You must join—I'll put you up.'

'Nice of you,' said Charley Moon. 'I'd like that'—and thought no more about it. A week later, he received his membership card, a banker's order for the annual subscription, and a pressing invitation to avail himself of the amenities of the club, from that day forth.

The Peregrine Club, while satisfying the gourmet, was the answer to the gambler's dream. It no longer exists, but in those days, it had a glittering membership of notables, such as had never been previously collected under any one roof. Its chef had been stolen from a famous restaurant; the food was the best in London and the betting-room robbed racing of all its terrors—you could lose your money without seeing a horse run.

Charley Moon, having eaten the meal of his life, and having hobnobbed with all the people he had ever read about, felt as one who walks, on an equal footing, with gods. He accepted an outsize cigar from a sporting duke, and strolled upstairs to the betting-room with a famous owner, who had a horse running in the big race. 'Don't let me persuade you,' said the latter, 'but my trainer tells me we should be there or thereabouts. Have a little each way—and don't blame me if you lose.'

Here was a problem. During his touring days, Charley had often had a bit on, each way, but these people would be playing with bigger counters. What, reckoning by their standards, would be a reasonable amount? Better be on the safe side. . . . He put twenty pounds on his new friend's horse—to win.

Racing, on the tape, is more exciting than on the course. The excitement is concentrated in a small space. There are gaps in the narrative, when you are entirely at a loss. The horses are at the post . . . they are under starter's orders. . . . They're off. (Stand by for the result.) . . . The winner . . . The starting price . . .

The right horse won—at the right price. The lucky backer made a mental calculation of his winnings—and was lost. From now on, Charley Moon was betting with bigger counters; and he didn't always win.

But he didn't always lose. Up in the billiard-room, where they would have as much as fifty pounds on a snooker game, he could more than hold his own. A shade more concentration, and he might have been in the amateur championship class. The reigning professional champion, who came along to the club to give a demonstration, singled him out for an exhibition game and only just scraped home under the handicap. As Charley had played for pocket money, and sometimes for his supper, in the old touring days; so he now wiped off some of those racing losses which were always mounting up in the betting-room next door.

He was immensely popular with those members—a jolly, noisy, shiftless crowd—who seemed to spend all their time in the big bar, buying prodigious rounds of drinks and laughing uproariously at endless stories that happened

to be going the rounds. You could always tell when Charley Moon was in the bar. Over in his favourite corner there would be a larger and noisier group, laughing their heads off at some quaint conceit, or odd incident that was supposed to have happened to him on his way from the theatre. Sometimes, when the laughter was a little more exaggerated than usual, some of the quieter members would shake their heads and hope he wasn't going the way some of those other good fellows had gone; but for most of them, he was just a great comic with a grand sense of humour, who was in the money, and had the sense to enjoy life while the going was good.

The big event at the Peregrine Club was the annual snooker competition. There was a sweepstake that ran into four figures, and the individual bets would have seemed fantastic to the average member of an ordinary West End club. Charley was the favourite, and you might have supposed that the amount of money wagered on his success would have worried him more than a little. Not at all! If they were fools enough to risk their money on a game, they'd have to pay up and look pleasant, if they lost. That was the way *he* looked at life, and goodness knew, *he'd* been losing enough lately.

He got through the opening rounds, without much trouble, but the semi-final, in which he played a popular Anglo-French jockey, was a needle game. The excitement was terrific, but neither player took himself, or his opponent, so seriously as to spoil the fun. The laughter was continuous, and the two scores mounted, neck and neck to a photo finish, when it was all on the black. . . .

Having lost, the jockey climbed on a chair, twined an imaginary wreath of laurel round the victor's brow, and kissed him on both cheeks. Charley, not to be outdone in courtesy, seized the little man, carried him into the bar, and poured champagne over him. . . . Good losers, and good winners, those Peregrines. . . .

But not all of them! The final, in which Charley had to play a rather dubious and intensely unpopular city gent, was a very different affair. Just as the game was about to begin, there was a rather mysterious telephone call, which led to the start being postponed for half an hour, and Charley was borne away to the bar by his supporters for a final round of good luck drinks. When, after a second postponement, and a second good luck round, a start was made, he was in no condition to play a strenuous game of any sort—and his opponent was looking just a little too pleased with himself!

Unlike the happy-go-lucky semi-final, the game developed into an unfriendly dog-fight, in which every technical objection was raised and

pressed home to the limits that the rules allowed. The sort of game that didn't suit Charley Moon's easy-going temperament at all. He began to show irritation and to cover up his failures by going for ridiculous shots: fumbling for miracles to get him out of his difficulties. The miracles didn't happen, but he was able to hold his own until, once again, everything depended on who potted the black ball. . . .

Charley Moon walked to the table. It was a difficult shot, but not impossible. Should he go for it, or play safe? He tried to make up his mind, but found himself quite unable to concentrate. His brain began to spin, like a cog-wheel missing on all its teeth. Then it became a complete blank. The spectators waited; ordinary suspense became unbearable tension; someone sniggered, from sheer nerves. . . .

'Oh, hell!' said Charley Moon. 'What does it matter?' He gripped his cue, made a vicious shot at the black ball, missed it . . . and the game was over.

'Drunken little rat!' said a disappointed sportsman.

'Shut up!' said his companion. 'He'll hear you.'

'Hope he does,' said the sportsman. 'Do him good! We've got too many of these blasted comics in this —— club!'

Charley was not spared this reminder that popularity, based on beer, bar, and betting-room bonhomie, has less solid foundations than some suppose. He was moving away, when a hand was placed on his shoulder and a voice said: 'They rather got you on the wrong foot, I'm afraid.' Turning, he found himself faced by a kindly old man who was scrutinizing him from under bushy eyebrows.

'What you mean,' said Charley, 'is that I made a damned fool of myself.'

'Not entirely,' said the other. 'There were, what we call, contributory causes.'

'They certainly got me rattled,' admitted Charley. 'All that hanging about put my nerves on edge.'

'Nerves are funny things—I've made something of a study of them. But a young fellow like you shouldn't be bothered by nerves. What are you doing to-morrow morning?'

'Nothing particular,' said Charley.

‘Come along to my consulting-room; ten o’clock. Bring your nerves with you and we’ll run the tape over them. Funny things, nerves. We can’t let our comic men suffer from nerves—what would there be left for us to laugh at. See you at ten. Here’s the address. Don’t be late. I can only give you five minutes.’

Charley took the card, and read on it a famous name that had been included in several Honours Lists. ‘I don’t know why you should bother about me,’ he said.

‘My dear boy,’ smiled the great doctor, ‘you and I are in the same line of business. We both cure the sick. I get most of the credit, but you sell the best medicine. Laughter is the great healer.’

‘The trouble with you fellows,’ said the specialist, ‘is that you live on your nerves.’ It was ten o’clock next morning, and they were sitting, facing one another, in the big consulting-room. ‘And, being the sort of people you are, that’s the last thing you should do. Fundamentally, you’re unsound in some particular, yet you’re always bringing intolerable pressure to bear on your weak spot. Is that clear?’

‘Clear as mud,’ said Charley Moon.

‘Professional jargon!’ laughed the other. ‘We have to start that way to impress the patient. It doesn’t mean a thing. Shall we say that a comedian, considered as a type, is not quite normal?’

‘Bit of a freak?’ suggested Charley.

‘Your gift, such as it is, is an accidental effect. It crops up in the most unusual places and for no apparent reason. Your father, for instance, may have been a serious and quite ordinary person, who never made a joke in his life.’

‘You must have met him!’ said Charley.

‘Then how does it happen that his son is paid hundreds of pounds a week for making people laugh?’

‘Search me!’ said Charley Moon.

‘Possibly some little gland disturbance—call it a kink, if you like. . . .’

‘Right-o!’ said Charley. ‘We’ll call it a kink—no brain is stronger than its weakest kink! What do I do about it?’

The doctor stood up. ‘Stop acting the fool,’ he said. ‘Stop trying to be a clown twenty-four hours a day. Cut out all this silly dressing-room stuff. Stop burning the candle at both ends. When I stand on the side-lines, and see the lives some of you fellows live, I wonder you last as long as you do.’

Walking back across the park, Charley Moon decided that there was something in what the old boy had said. He’d been making a fool of himself; wasting time with a lot of hangers-on . . . Sitting up half the night laughing at silly jokes, telling silly stories, drinking too much, smoking too much . . . ‘Living on his nerves?’ Much more of this, and he wouldn’t have any nerves left to live on . . . Thank goodness he’d been warned in time. No more drinks in the dressing-room . . . No more gate-crashers . . . No more charity matinees . . . No more midnight parties . . .

He was feeling better already. When he got to the theatre that evening, Charley’s Bar was dismantled; all the bottles were put away and orders were left at the stage door that no more strangers were to be admitted—no matter how large the tip.

Dear Charley [wrote Rose], the man who has bought your place is a real caution. He is a baronet, but everybody calls him ‘the Bart,’ for short. He’s very fat and very jolly, and nobody knows what he’s going to do next. He’s very rich and works in London all the week. We only see him at weekends, and not much then. There’s only him and the servants. Some say he was married and his wife died, or ran away, or something—but you know how people talk. I’ve only seen him in church, but he looks nice. They say the Vicar tried to make him read the lessons, but he gave fifty pounds to the choir outing to be let off. He certainly is a caution. You’d like him. When are you coming down to see us, Charley? You’ve been away such ages, I’ve almost forgotten what you look like. Yours ever, Rose.

The news that young Charley Moon was now a famous actor took some time to trickle through to Little Summerford; and, when it did, no one would believe it. No one, that is, except Rose, who remembering the visit of the inquisitive stranger, supposed there must be some truth in his surprising story.

When people dropped into the little shop, wanting to talk, Rose shut them up by pretending that she knew nothing, and cared less, about what had happened to her old playfellow. She was deeply puzzled and deeply hurt by his silence. Three times she had written to his old army address, asking for the letters to be forwarded, without getting a reply. Evidently the letters had reached him, or they would have been returned. Then why hadn't he written? Of course, he had been upset at being turned out of the meadows and the old Mill, but that wasn't her fault. . . .

So that when someone suggested they should spend the Bart's fifty pounds by going to London for the annual choir outing, and seeing Charley Moon in *Ever So Nice*, Rose was all against it. She didn't believe in pushing in where she wasn't wanted, not she! If Charley had wanted to see them, he would have been back months ago. There was nothing to stop him. He'd got legs, hadn't he?

Rose was very firm, until the morning of the outing; when she suddenly changed her mind, and slipped into a back seat of the big charabanc. She was very quiet all the way to London, and when they pulled up outside the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square, she would have given everything in the world to turn round and go home again. However, she couldn't sit alone, all day; so there was nothing for it but to join the excited party, as it gaped at Nelson's column, fed the pigeons, and arrived at the Delphic Theatre in good time for the matinee.

Several of the visitors were still quite sure that this famous new actor couldn't be their Charley Moon, but the photographs of scenes in the play, left no room for doubt. That was Charley all right—sitting on his donkey, playing his mouth-organ to a girl with two pigtails. . . . 'Why, Rose,' said one of the old ladies, 'it might almost be you!'

'Why *me*?' asked Rose.

‘When you two used to go off down those old water meadows, on that old donkey,’ explained the old lady. ‘Don’t say you’ve forgotten—you two on that old donkey, and him playing that old mouth-organ?’

But somehow, Rose couldn’t seem to remember, and so they all trooped in to see what new wonders might unfold.

Yes, it was their Charley, all right. The same little imp of mischief; the same shy laugh, the same half-pathetic droop of the mouth, when things weren’t going too well. Sitting there, in the dark, Rose wanted to hug him, and mother him, and smack him; just as in the old days.

Charley might have forgotten some things about Little Summerford, but he had remembered quite a lot. That first scene was the old Mill to the life, to say nothing of the donkey and the girl with the pigtails. Then there was the song about the field where the buttercups grew. Even Rose had forgotten that, until the song reminded her. . . . When they were all talking things over, in the interval, one of the other girls told her she ought to go round and see Charley.

‘Why *me?*’ asked Rose, for the second time.

‘You were always about with him,’ said the other. ‘He’d love to see you again.’

‘Go on, Rose!’ urged the old lady. ‘If you don’t you’ll only be sorry when you get home. And then it will be too late.’

All through the next half of the programme, Rose was trying to make up her mind. She was aching to speak to Charley again, but suppose he made some excuse, and wouldn’t see her. After all, he had never bothered to go back to Little Summerford and he had never answered her letters. If she got sent packing, she would feel *awful*. Better let things stay as they were, and hope that they would turn out all right in the end.

So she told herself; but, all the time, there was another voice urging her not to miss this wonderful chance. The old lady was quite right; she might never get another. And suppose, for some reason, Charley had never had those letters. That wasn’t likely, but you never could be sure.

At the end of the play, when Charley received his usual ovation, and made his usual funny little speech, her mind was made up. The charabanc was just round the corner—she could slip away from the others, and join them in good time for the journey home. Perhaps, she would bring Charley with her, to meet them all. That would be wonderful. As they were leaving

the theatre, Rose slipped away, and asked the girl in the box office where she had to go to see the actors.

The girl smiled. Another of these fans! ‘Up the little passage, and the first door on the right. It’s marked “Stage Door,” ’ she said. ‘You can’t miss it.’

All stage doorkeepers are difficult, and this stage doorkeeper was more difficult than most. It was part of his job to protect people like Charley Moon from the sort of girl that this girl seemed to be. Just another stage-struck female, who would stand first on one foot and then on the other, and have nothing to say for herself.

Besides, there had been trouble about this very thing. Only last night he had had a good wiggling, because he was letting people through who had no right to be there. Mr. Moon had raised hell, saying that his dressing-room was no better than a public bar, and that he was sick of it.

So that when Rose asked if she could see Mr. Moon for a minute, he was ready for her. Had she got an appointment?

No, she hadn’t, but she was quite sure Mr. Moon would see her. She was an old friend.

The stage doorkeeper had met those old friends. They were the cause of all his troubles. One of them had nearly got him the sack, already, and he wasn’t going to risk that again. Mr. Moon, he explained, couldn’t see anyone. No one was allowed into his dressing-room after a matinee on any account. He was sorry, but he had his orders, and there was nothing he could do about it. She must leave her name and call again to-morrow.

Rose replied that she was up from the country and this was her only chance. Having nerved herself to the ordeal, she stood firm, like most timid people, when their minds are made up. It was for Charley, not this man, to say whether he would see her or not. So she stood her ground and insisted on her rights. Deadlock!

That, thought the stage doorkeeper, was how it always went. You let yourself be over-persuaded; you went along to the dressing-room, with some name they’d never heard of, and you got well told off for your pains. Just another silly fan wanting an autograph. No wonder Mr. Moon had said he was sick of them. Everybody was sick of them. Time some of them were taught a lesson—this one for a start.

The stage doorkeeper took her name, retreated for a decent interval behind a screen, and returned to say that Mr. Moon was very sorry, but it

was quite impossible for him to see her. If the lady would write, he would make an appointment and meet her next time she was in town.

As Rose was leaving, a young actress who had been to the matinee, passed her, clamouring loudly for the famous star.

‘Straight through, Miss!’ said the stage doorkeeper. ‘You know the way.’

There was no doubt about *that* one.

‘Makes a long day of it,’ said the old lady, settling down in her seat in the charabanc, ‘but I’m glad I came. Who would have thought to see young Charley Moon, dancing and singing, and remembering all those words? Different to when he was at school. He couldn’t remember the day of the week—unless it was Saturday. He remembered holidays quick enough . . .’

Rose sat back in the dark, pretending to be asleep. She kicked herself for coming on such a fool’s errand. Why hadn’t she realized that he had had enough of them; that he was sick of Little Summerford and everybody in it. You couldn’t blame him. There he was, on top of the world; everybody laughing and cheering and clapping. He might have been King of England, the fuss they made . . . All very well to come up to London with the others; she was glad she’d done that, but why hadn’t she been satisfied, and not spoiled it all by going round after the show? Or why hadn’t she taken ‘No’ for an answer? Then he wouldn’t have thought that she was running round after him—like those girls chasing the soldiers during the war. Making herself look cheap; pushing in where she wasn’t wanted . . .

One of the girls called back to her, but she didn’t answer. ‘Leave her be,’ said the old lady. ‘She’s asleep.’

‘I always reckoned that young Charley was sweet on Rose,’ said the girl.

‘No doubt about Rose being sweet on young Charley,’ said another. ‘Did you see her face when he was singing that song of his about the buttercups? Went as white as a sheet, she did.’

‘He’s travelled too far for our Rose,’ said a third. ‘A woman behind me said he was getting two hundred pounds a week for all that nonsense. Wicked, I call it. That’s what upsets real working people—makes them come out on strike, it does. And can you blame them? Oh, well! No good will come of it; you’ll see!’

‘He married the poor girl, in the end,’ piped in a small boy, who sang in the choir and was of a romantic turn of mind.

‘That was only in the play, silly!’ said his elder sister. ‘That wouldn’t happen in real life. It never does. When they’ve got money they mix up with the other rich folk. No good Rose setting her cap at Charley any more. She isn’t his class.’

‘He might do a lot worse,’ said the old lady. ‘A lot worse, he might do; and I don’t care who hears me say it.’

They spent the rest of the journey trying to remember some of the songs, and to the tune of *The Field Where the Buttercups Grow* Rose really got to sleep at last. And the dream she dreamt had a very different ending to the rather sordid little story that has just been told. In her dream, Charley Moon had come to the stage door, and taken her to his dressing-room, where they had talked, and talked, and talked—all about old times. How he longed to be back again, walking in the wet meadows by the old brook, or lying on his back in the hay, tickling her nose with a bit of mowing grass, or holding a yellow blossom under her chin, to see if she was fond of butter. Then, when they had said everything they could think of, he had walked round with her to meet all his old friends, and she had kissed him good-bye, not caring who was looking, or what anybody thought.

That was what Rose dreamed in her dark corner, and how easily that was what it might have been . . . But dreams are fragile things. They wither in the sunshine and float away like thistledown. Next morning, Rose knew, all too surely, that things which happen in plays never happen in real life, and it was no good her thinking of Charley any more. He had travelled too far for her . . . She wasn’t his class. . . .

So, like a sensible girl, she went back to the little shop, and tried to forget all about him.

But life, like the winding course of the Thames, takes some funny twists. Charley Moon, like most people in the public eye, subscribed to a Press Cuttings Agency, and glancing through a bunch of reviews, gossip notes and so on, he came across an account, cut from the local paper, of the visit paid to the Delphic Theatre by the choir and friends of Little Summerford church on their annual outing to London.

On the morning this cutting arrived, Charley was suffering from a slight attack of nostalgia. He was prepared to believe that there were no times like the old times, and no friends like the old friends. In this mellow mood, he was sorry they had not sent him the entire paper from which the cutting had been taken. What fun it would have been to read all the home news; to know who had died, who had been married and who had had babies. Even the

advertisements would have been interesting. Why not get the publishers to send him the paper every week? And so it came about that when Rose's grandmother died in her sleep and was buried with all the outward signs of respect due to such an old inhabitant, he learned that the little shop would have to be sold—in which case Rose, in her turn, would find herself without a home.

Charley Moon knew what that meant. It had happened to him, but he couldn't let it happen to Rose. One week's salary would buy the whole outfit, and she would have the little shop all to herself. But would she accept the money? Doubtful, he thought . . . Better not risk it. . . .

When the sale was advertised, he wrote to the local solicitors, instructing them to buy the freehold, stock, fittings and furniture, and to make it over, by deed of gift, to the present occupier. They would act as his agents in the matter, and they could tell the new owner any story they liked, but his name was not to figure in the transaction.

A week later, he signed two cheques, for almost identical amounts. One went to his bookmaker—the other was spent in an even better cause. Money may be the root of all evil, but plant the root in the right garden, and it can grow some very pretty flowers. . . . He wrote the single word 'Rose' on the stub of his cheque-book, and felt happier than he had done for quite a long time.

Have you ever tried to spend two hundred pounds a week for twelve months on end? It can be done—especially when you are the sort of person who buys houses on a sudden whim and backs horses on the grand scale. Spending that amount of money, when it is coming in regularly and looks like doing so for ever, is like letting water run out of a tap. No one worries. It's only water and there's plenty more where that came from. Sometimes, of course, you leave the tap running all night, or use the garden hose during a drought; in which case you get a letter from the Water Board, but no one *really* worries. It's only water, and there's plenty more where that came from.

Charley Moon was a bonny spender. Generous, warm-hearted and a little on the weak side, he was what is known as 'an easy touch.' Having no enemies, he was liable to lend money to anyone who asked for it. He could never say 'No' to a hard luck story—and what other story do you hear at the stage door of a West End theatre? He had no idea of the value of money. When *Ever So Nice* celebrated its first anniversary, he hadn't saved a penny,

and owed the whole of his income tax. . . . The Inland Revenue people became unfriendly . . . They sent a final demand note.

That was a bit of a shock. ‘What do I do about this?’ he asked a fellow actor, who was supposed to have had experience in such matters.

‘Pay it!’ was the unfeeling reply. ‘What’s the use of saving all the money *you’ve* got? You can’t take it with you.’ Very little sympathy is wasted, in this world, on poor little rich boys, who can’t pay their income tax. Charley tried to cheer himself up by going down to Newbury for the spring meeting—and lost a packet!

He was now faced with the bleak prospect of paying double income tax for the next twelve months; but what did that matter? He would be earning more money in his next show. In order to persuade him to sign his first contract, Monty Brass had agreed to steep rises in salary for a second and third engagement. ‘You won’t want me if I’m no good,’ Charley had argued, ‘and if I’m good, I shall be worth it.’ So Monty Brass had signed on the dotted line; for he *was* good; he *was* worth it—but what a price to pay for a comic!

And so, fearing no evil, Charley Moon sailed happily down his primrose path. Even when it became obvious that *Ever So Nice* would not last through the summer, he had nothing to worry about; for a new show, by the same author, was scheduled for production, and he would be in it, on the revised and more favourable terms. Added to which, he needed a holiday and would be able to snatch a few weeks before rehearsals started.

He was discussing possible projects in the dressing-room, when a smart young motor salesman with an eye to future business, and a holiday for himself, made an attractive suggestion: ‘Why not let me run you down to the Riviera?’ he asked. ‘I can get a new car out of our people; I’ll drive, and all you’ll have to pay will be petrol and hotel bills for two. Shouldn’t cost any more than going on the Blue Train, or hiring a car and chauffeur.’

‘Done!’ said Charley, without a second thought. He had been a bit under the weather lately, and this was the very thing the doctor would have ordered. The car was brought round the next evening, and the company gathered round, with murmurs of appreciation from the men and little squeaks of ecstasy from members of the chorus.

Everyone was agreed on one thing. It was far too spacious and magnificent to be wasted on two people. That was the value of a big car, when you were covering long distances. Four could travel as cheaply as two.

What a pity to waste those wonderful back seats. Half the chorus volunteered to be thrown in as ballast, if only to keep the wheels on the road.

Driving back to Jermyn Street, the young salesman developed the idea. 'I'm sorry for those kids,' he said. 'They never seem to get a real break. If we were to run two of them down and back again, it would be good for the car, company on the road, and the room they would share would cost them less than a fortnight at Southend. They'll never get another chance like it—and where's the harm? Suppose they'd gone across on a walking tour, and we'd passed them on the road? We'd give them a lift, I suppose?'

'I suppose so,' agreed Charley.

'No need to advertise it. We'll pick 'em up, quietly, somewhere and slide off into the blue. Leave it to me. I'll fix it.'

'Only one objection that I can see,' said Charley. 'I'm sick of chorus girls. If I meet another chorus girl during the next four weeks, I shall scream the place down. Nothing doing!'

The last night of *Ever So Nice* was a roaring success. All the old friends booked seats; all the songs were encored; all the principals made speeches. At the end, the entire audience, including three cabinet ministers and a royal duke, joined hands for the singing of *Auld Lang Syne*. Charley Moon received an ovation that could have been heard from Charing Cross to the Bank of England. He was on top of the world.

Back in his dressing-room, there were cheers and tears, with presents for everyone—from a gold cigarette-case for the musical director to specially designed brooches for the chorus. As everybody was to be in the new show, there were none of the usual regrets. Even Monty Brass, that old campaigner, was carried away on the flood-tide of success. He, a newcomer to the West End, had found the formula, and nothing short of an earthquake could stop him now.

Only Charley Moon, walking back to his Jermyn Street flat, found himself wondering how it had all happened—and whether it could all happen again. Having to make a new start frightened him a little. In the country, when you had once got things going, you could reckon on the wheels turning for a century or so. Whereas, up here in London, a year was looked upon as a little eternity. Fancy making all that hullabaloo about something that had lasted only eighteen months. Crazy people!

Turning into St. James's Street, he passed a little shop that had sold hats to men who fought under Wellington at Waterloo. Nothing about it was changed—even to the old shako in the queer little bow window. That was something he could understand; a reasonable way of life. . . . Ah well, perhaps things weren't so crazy as he supposed. Perhaps he had got a bit stale and was needing that holiday. After a month in the South, he would come back with all his old confidence. . . . Ready for anything. . . . Even Wellington was always fighting new battles!

If Charley Moon lives to be a hundred, he will never forget that holiday in the south. Some things are worth while, whatever money they cost and whatever trouble they cause. This happy scramble down the sunny roads of France was one of those things.

True, the amateur chauffeur was inclined to look over his shoulder, regretfully, at those empty back seats, where the two chorus ladies should have been; but, by the time they reached Rouen, that lovely car, swallowing all those miles of lovely roads, between those lovely lines of poplars, had wiped them, almost, from his memory.

They were standing in the bar of the Hotel de la Poste, when he said: ‘Charley! What was the name of the second girl from the end?’

‘End of what?’ asked Charley Moon.

‘End of the first row in the chorus,’ was the reply. . . .

That is the moment when a holiday in France really begins. When, feeling you ought to send a postcard to somebody at home, you find that, either you have forgotten the name, or that you can’t be bothered. Perigord is farther from Piccadilly than M. Michelin ever imagined in his wildest dreams.

Leaving Paris on the left, and scorching across the flat country round Chartres, they came to Orleans, and the country of the ‘Maid.’ Charley may have been a comic, who cut his teeth on pantomime and starred in musical comedy, but he knew all about St. Joan, and it gave him a thrill to stand on the banks of the river, waiting five centuries afterwards, where the French troops had waited for the west wind on the silver Loire. Almost, he seemed to hear the challenge:

‘Halt! Who goes there?’

‘The Maid.’

And here was he, Charley, five centuries afterwards, standing on that very spot. . . .

They drove down the Loire, learning the music played by the tongues of simple folk, when they direct you on your way, in a foreign tongue. They saw the castles of Blois and Tours, and ran down through Poitiers and

Angoulême, until they met the South at Périgueux; when poplars turned into acacia trees, wistaria became vines, and petunias made way for the sub-tropical ipomée, that heavenly dawn flower of the scented South. Charley Moon, making his first entry into that Promised Land, will never think of Provence except in terms of mistletoe and magpies; avenues of apple trees, and the hot sun shining on the white end of a house, bearing the fading legend—DUBONNET.

At midday they stopped by the roadside to let the car cool and to lunch on Roquefort cheese, green figs and vin rosé. They were in the grape country now, and in the little vineyards, families from the towns were gathering in the harvest. Ox-carts, with grapes piled high, were trundling along the narrow roads, to the communal wine press in the nearest village. Old ladies with bent backs, old gentlemen with faces like walnuts and laughing girls with freckles, stripped the low-growing vines of their grapes. The *patron*, noticing that they were interested, beckoned them down, patted Charley on the back, and loaded him with all the bunches he could carry. Everybody laughed—especially the girls with freckles. There was an air of carnival over it all.

Back in the car, Charley wondered what was responsible for this festival atmosphere. Was it the warm sun, the spirit of the wine, or just a tradition of that particular countryside? You wouldn't find English labourers setting about a tough job in that frame of mind. Fancy an English farmer giving a complete stranger a sack of potatoes, or a cooking of field peas!

They stopped to look at the mighty silhouette of Carcassonne, clear-cut against the sky. Charley Moon had never heard this colossal work of restoration criticized by modern highbrows. As a man of the theatre, he had nothing but admiration for its dramatic qualities; and who shall deny that Carcassonne, seen from the Toulouse-Narbonne road, upon a summer evening, is a sight to make the heart miss more than a beat? 'My God, what a stage set!' said Charley Moon.

They went to a bull-fight at Arles, and saw two shiny black bulls killed in the sunshine, by a man in rather sordid finery—at considerable personal risk. As an actor, Charley Moon appreciated the pageantry and the suspense; as a countryman, accustomed to killing things, he was not over squeamish; but by the time it was over, he had had enough of it. . . . Even though the spectacle had its lighter relief: 'allô! allô!' came a voice through the loud-speaker. 'The public is informed that they can get a bit of that bull at the shop of M. —, Boucher, rue de —.'

Up in the hills round Grasse, Charley was fascinated by the little flower farms, that fed the scent factories. The jasmine harvest was in full swing—a harvest of the scent of flowers. Here was something he understood and appreciated. In a field by the roadside, someone had made a bonfire of prunings from every scented thing that grows on arid soil—thyme, lavender, rosemary . . . ‘Don’t you miss the theatre?’ asked his young chauffeur; and it was with almost a painful wrench that he forced his mind back to those faraway days.

‘I don’t care,’ he answered, ‘if I never see a theatre again.’

The young Londoner looked at him in astonishment. ‘Well, you’re a queer cuss,’ he said. ‘There they are, queueing up to buy seats for your next show; and here are you, sitting on a gate, smelling an old bonfire.’

Charley gave his companion one of those twisted little smiles. One of these days, they might not be queueing for his next show, but down here they would always be burning scented rubbish in the sunshine.

It was too good to last. Running down by hairpin bends to the coast, the car pulled up, as of its own accord, outside the Carlton Hotel at Cannes.

Charley looked up at this imposing and slightly awe-inspiring spectacle. ‘Young man,’ he said to his amateur chauffeur, ‘your car has a nice nose for the best hotels—but isn’t this a shade over the odds? I am a man of simple tastes. A flask of wine, a loaf of bread . . . Surely we could be happy under less exalted conditions?’

The young gentleman was horrified. If you came to Cannes, you had to stay at the Carlton. All right for ordinary folk to go slumming at the wrong end of the Croisette, but suppose it got back to the West End that Charley Moon went to Cannes and didn’t stop at the Carlton! The car slid gently up to the entrance, the door was opened by one of the lesser major domos, and Charley Moon was numbered among the elect.

The summer season on the Riviera was becoming fashionable. Juan-les-Pins had been discovered just along the coast; all the beautiful women in the world flocked to the Eden Roc bathing pools on Cap d’Antibes, and here, at Cannes, the new summer casino of Palm Beach was prepared to collect any spare money you might have left over. There were no currency restrictions. The sky was the limit.

There was a *gala* at Palm Beach that very evening—or any other evening, for that matter. Charley Moon, forced into compulsory evening dress, was watching the gamblers, while recalling those quiet, starlit nights

at Avignon, when he was discovered by a joyous crowd of happy merry-makers. Hopeless to plead that he was resting between shows, under doctor's orders, studying his part for the new production—he was swept up and whirled away; like the last leaf in a November gale.

The news that Charley Moon, London's latest and most popular comedian, was staying at the Carlton, went round like a forest fire in the Esterels. The actor, a servant of the public, is anybody's game; and he appeals particularly to the bored, idle set, always on the lookout for some new excitement. He is expected to have all the money in the world and to be funny all round the clock. Charley Moon knew the signs; he had walked right into it, with his eyes open, but it was too late to pull out now.

And who wanted to pull out? Dammit, he'd been working like a black for the past eighteen months, and he was in for another spell, which might last even longer. A bit of fun would do him all the good in the world.

How the days slipped by, and how the money flew! There were gay parties, packed into Charley's big, new car, and swept along the Corniche to Monte Carlo; or up into the hills, where some incredible new restaurant served incredible meals, at equally incredible prices. Charley Moon—'Isn't he a *lamb*? Don't you *adore* that shy little smile of his?'—became the pivot of half the fun and frolic along that crazy coast. Nobody ever went to bed until daylight, and nobody got up until *apéritif* time, when champagne cocktails laid the rather shaky foundations for a further round of excitements.

Nothing very new about all this for Charley Moon, but the young gentleman who handled the big new Bentley was beginning to show signs of wear and tear. Charley was paying all the bills, but watching him at the tables, he began to wonder where all the money he lost was coming from. Also, he was getting in with a rather tough crowd; something quite different to the ordinary lively bunch who turned night into day, but knew where to draw the line. There was a furtive, half-frightened look in his eye, his nerves seemed shot to pieces and the way he took those hairpin bends left something to be desired. Charley decided it was time they got packing. A quiet run home through the wine country—Beaune, Pommard, Volnay, Nuits-Saint-George—a night at the 'Chapeau Rouge' in Dijon and a theatre in Paris to round off the holiday. . . .

That night at dinner, he broke the news. 'We're leaving to-morrow,' he said. 'This is your last night—make the most of it.'

The effect of this simple statement upon his companion was surprising. A rather languid young man of the world became, suddenly, a frightened schoolboy. And then, under a little pressure, it all came tumbling out: he had made rather an ass of himself . . . he had been playing for more than he should . . . he had lost a packet . . . he was in debt all round . . . he was most frightfully sorry, but the luck had gone against him, and in trying to get out of the mess . . .

‘How much?’ asked Charley.

The young fellow hedged.

‘How much?’ asked Charley, again; and was told an amount that made him whistle. ‘All the more reason for getting out of this,’ he said. ‘Tell them they’ll get their money in a week. Give them a post-dated cheque and we’ll see to it when we get home. Have the car at the door at nine o’clock in the morning, and we’ll get the hell out of here.’

‘We can’t!’

‘Who says we can’t?’

‘They won’t let us. They’ve got the car in their garage. They’re holding it as security.’

‘The hell they are!’ said Charley. ‘Fetch the manager. We’ll get to the bottom of this.’

But there was more at the bottom than he bargained for. The young fellow had brought the car abroad under false pretences. He had told his employers a cock-and-bull story about a possible purchaser who couldn’t quite make up his mind. If they heard of the trip to the South he would be ruined. It would be the end of him. Once the story went round the trade he would never get another job. Couldn’t Mr. Moon do something about it?

What *could* Mr. Moon do about it? Nothing—except write a cheque for a fantastic amount, and hope the bank would back him until the money from the new show put him on his feet again.

That last night, at Monte Carlo, an official was explaining to the great English comedian that, in Monaco, they had no poor.

‘Oh, haven’t you!’ laughed Charley, jingling his empty pockets.

The new play at the Delphic was its predecessor all over again—no better and, technically, no worse. Yet, lacking that element of surprise, it failed to make any particular stir. There were flowers, speeches and curtains galore. Charley was given a tumultuous reception; but there was only a moderate library deal and the notices, though friendly, were cool:

‘Just a nice, average musical comedy, scarcely worthy of the talents of this brilliant performer.’ . . . ‘Mr. Montagu Brass has been content to rubber-stamp his last highly successful production.’ . . . ‘Not quite so nice as *Ever So Nice*.’ . . . ‘What’s the matter with Charley Moon? He doesn’t seem to be quite so funny as last time.’ . . . ‘Perhaps it is a little unfair to judge a new show by the high standards of an exceptional success, but one cannot help drawing comparisons.’ And those fatal, famous last words: ‘When the production has been pulled together and Mr. Moon has settled down in his part . . .’

Everything had been done on a lavish scale. Too lavish! Monty Brass had gone to Paris for the frocks; there was an augmented orchestra and the scenery was prodigal in its magnificence. Added to which, there was the ridiculous salary being paid to the principal comedian, as a result of that unfortunate contract. If this was West End production, groaned Monty Brass, fingering some of the larger bills, they could keep it. No more London for him.

The gloom of the manager’s office seeped down into the dressing-rooms. Actors are resilient folk, but they are highly susceptible to the cold winds of apprehension that whistle along the corridors, when things are not going too well. They cheered up considerably, when they found themselves playing to good houses, but these were largely the result of advance booking, based on their previous success. The Christmas holidays filled all the theatres, and seats at the Delphic were hard to come by, but once the children had gone back to school, a slump set in, which promised to last until Easter.

A more depressing feature was the absence of all those gay visitors who love to flutter round the candle of success. Charley looked round his large and rather cheerless dressing-room. No need, now, to warn the stage doorkeeper against uninvited guests. Charley’s Bar was a thing of the past. He would have welcomed any gate-crasher who cared to poke his nose round the corner.

There was, too, the embarrassment of answering enquiries as to how the show was doing. It didn't do to cry stinking fish, but when they said, 'Well, Charley, how's business?' the look in their eyes said, as clearly as words: 'Don't tell me, you liar!' That was an old theatrical gag which didn't seem so funny when you were at the receiving end.

Of course, business would pick up at Easter. Folk spent all their money at Christmas, and then sat tight . . . but, would the show last till Easter? The running costs were enormous and, although Monty Brass was a warm man, he wasn't one to throw good money after bad. So that no one was surprised when the notice went up on the call board, and the curtain fell for the last time. Monty Brass made no secret of the fact that he was through with the West End. They had got most of his money back and he was content to leave it at that. Let others take the gamble of London production—he would be quite satisfied with the touring rights of their few and far between successes. He bade a firm farewell to all the members of his company; implored them not to slam the stage door as they went out—and that is the last we shall hear of him.

Charley Moon sat in his Jermyn Street flat tidying up his affairs. He was out of a job and hadn't the slightest idea where the next one was coming from. That didn't matter, of course; plenty of offers would come along when the other managers realized he was in the market. But in the meantime, he had to live. There was no money at the bank, and expenses were much the same as usual. He had to be seen at the smart restaurants, or they would think he was touring in a new production—if you didn't keep in the swim, you might as well be dead. He might give up the flat, but there was the question of the telephone; and he had to live somewhere. He could drop a few of his clubs, but that was only saving pennies—like spitting in Niagara! And meanwhile, the Inland Revenue people were prodding him about last year's income tax. . . .

Charley Moon was on his beam-ends, but nobody realized the fact. He was still expected to splash money about, like a terrier being bathed in a tub. A tradesman who closes his shop, or a farmer forced to sell up, is in an obvious dilemma, but a successful actor is supposed to be earning all the time. This is good for his credit, but debts, like Trafalgar Square starlings, come home to roost.

It was the first time he had been out of a job in the West End, and he hadn't quite got the trick of getting going again. He couldn't run round asking for work, but if he didn't let people know he wanted a job, how on earth was he to get one? He wasn't in touch with any established

management, and he couldn't go on tour, or he would never get back into the West End. What was the answer? Apparently there was a technique in such matters, and he hadn't quite mastered it. He was an innocent abroad—very innocent and very much abroad.

Adversity takes people in different ways. Some it stiffens and others it corrupts. The process is slow, and imperceptible to the casual observer. But if you return after an absence, you are startled by the changes it can make in a man.

How did it affect Charley Moon? He went to pieces—not so immediately that the process was obvious to his particular circle, but as surely and inevitably as the Moons of Little Summerford had lost their grip on their water meadows and their old mill. He was a little noisier at the bar; a little more careless in his choice of drinking companions. He became nervous and irritable, lost his appetite, smoked incessantly, slept badly, had the most alarming nightmares and woke to fits of depression that drove him back to the bar—when the vicious circle began all over again. . . . One morning, his hand was shaking so that he couldn't hold a cup of tea to his lips; his memory seemed to be going, and he became really frightened. If he couldn't concentrate on small things, how could he ever hope to learn a part or face an audience again?

His fears drove him round to the famous specialist, who had talked to him in the Peregrine Club. Once again, they sat facing one another in the consulting-room; the kindly eyes considering him from under their bushy brows. The old man listened to his all-too-familiar story. 'We'll pop you into my private nursing home,' he said. 'Keep you quiet for a couple of weeks—give you time to ponder on your awful past and make a few good resolutions. As to the future—do you really want my advice?'

'That's why I'm here,' said Charley.

'You won't like it.'

'I don't like myself, as I am.'

'Very well,' said the other. 'Here's my advice. You won't take it—they never do—but here it is: get out of the theatre before it's too late. I suppose you'd say you've made a success of it. Perhaps you have, in a way: but it won't last. You're the wrong type. You're not tough enough; you can't play them at their own game and you can't take the hard knocks. All very well when you were swimming in a small pond, but you're in deep waters now, and you're out of your depth. Go back to the country.'

‘What would I do there?’ asked Charley Moon.

‘When I was fishing in the Cotswolds,’ said the doctor, ‘I saw an old tramp sitting on a gate in the sun. I’ve always thought he was the happiest man I’ve ever met.’

‘You’ve never been a tramp.’

‘No, but I’ve studied the breed. In France, the mayor of a town will always help a tramp—to get rid of him. The curé will give him a piece of bread and a holy medal—if he will only go and say his prayers in the next village. The farmer lets him bed down in a barn, after a meal of hot soup—and the tramp sneaks away at sunrise, so that he won’t have to work in the fields.’

‘What happens to him in the winter?’ asked Charley.

‘In the winter,’ said the old man, ‘he leaves the sunny roads of France, for the arches of Paris. The *cigales* sing all the summer and suffer all the winter. You can’t have everything!’

Charley Moon was tucked up in bed for a fortnight, and the blinds were drawn all the time. The nurse slipped in and out of the room, like a furtive sunbeam. If he tried to talk, she wouldn’t answer. At the end of the fortnight, they brought him his letters. Most of them were bills, but one of them offered him a leading part in a forthcoming London show. The name of the producer was new to him. The theatre was one of those badly-sited buildings that are accused of being unlucky. . . .

‘Shall I take it, doc?’ Charley asked.

‘I hope not,’ was the reply. ‘I’ve done all I can for you, but you’re not out of the wood, by any means.’

Charley Moon was feeling better, but still a bit shaky. That would be lying in bed so long. He’d soon feel his feet again. And there were all these bills. If he hadn’t been so pressed for money, he would have rested a little longer, but beggars couldn’t be choosers. . . .

He started rehearsals on the following Monday.

The new show was one of those awful things that might happen to anybody. A gifted amateur had written a story, set it to music, taken a theatre, painted the scenery, and engaged one of those producers who will put on anything if someone else puts up the money. Unfortunately for quite a

lot of people, this particular amateur was rich, as well as gifted. He told his producer that he was not to spoil the ship for a ha'porth of tar, and the producer took him at his word.

Fearing that his young employer might come to his senses, or be put into a lunatic asylum at any moment, the producer acted with promptness and decision. He engaged any actor who happened to be available, whether there was a part to suit him or not; so that the stage was crowded with well-known people with nothing to do but stand about and hate one another. As the author was paying for the production, no one dared criticize the story. The same applied to the music, the scenery and the choice of the theatre . . . Anyone could criticize the actors—and the actors, themselves, saw to that!

The book was too bad to be true. The music was reminiscent of all the sentimental drivel that had ever been written since the writing of music first began. The scenery made no allowances for exits or entrances. The producer, an incompetent person, lost his head and started shouting orders that meant nothing at all. Everyone was talking at once, and when the tumult was at its height, the author joined in the chorus, from the front row of the stalls.

Every day an actor handed in his part, and his place was taken by a newcomer who made confusion more confounded. Quarrels were continuous, and at the end of six weeks, nerves were at breaking point. So that when the first night arrived, the company had lost all confidence in their play, in their colleagues, and worst of all, in themselves.

There had been two postponements, and the word had gone round that the first night audience were likely to see the spectacular flop of the season. The dress rehearsal had lasted all through the previous night, and the performers were still rubbing the sleep out of their eyes when they arrived at their dressing-rooms. The final scene had not been rehearsed with the orchestra and no one was quite sure how the play ended. The prompt script did not include half the alterations made during the past weeks, so that the prompter, a nervous young woman, would be helpless in the event of a sudden emergency. The stage manager had no lighting cues; the men in the flies might as well have been in heaven—if this ship found herself, it would be an all-time miracle.

Most of the principals were soured by this ineptitude and retired behind a screen of cynical derision. They made jokes about the management, laughed openly at the producer and helped to spread the tale of coming disaster through the town. Perhaps you couldn't blame them. Several had

given up good engagements which would have carried them through the next twelve months; and apart from such personal misfortune, their professional feelings were outraged by such incompetence. How, they asked, was it possible that people like this could find a footing in the West End? The sooner they were swept away, the better for everybody.

The first night was a shambles. . . .

Only Charley Moon and the unhappy stage manager really fought to save the sinking ship. To carry on the analogy, they pacified the frightened passengers, strove to avert panic and lent a hand at lowering the boats. Now and then, Charley would turn disaster into comedy with some happy impromptu. He never left the stage. Wherever his practised eye saw trouble coming, he threw himself into the breach—he was Horatius and the boy on the burning deck, rolled into one. . . .

But all to no purpose. For a time the audience made allowances for first night nerves and mechanical misfortunes. Then they laughed, not too good-naturedly, at the increasing chaos; and finally they lost patience with the whole wretched business. When the curtain fell, there were hisses and a storm of booing from the gallery; a little half-hearted applause from friends of the management, and an icy silence from the rest of the house.

The stage manager was in a dilemma. To drop the curtain at once, was to admit defeat. To raise it a second time was to invite a riot. He looked round helplessly at Charley, who was at his side. Was it still possible to turn the tide with a bit of fun or a timely gag? No harm in trying. He made his last appeal to the colleague who had stood by him all the evening.

‘Charley,’ he whispered, ‘go out in front and see if you can do anything.’

‘Not me,’ said Charley Moon. ‘Cue the orchestra for the Anthem, put up the house lights, and call it a day.’

But the stage manager was insistent. Charley was an old favourite. They would take anything from him. . . . Meanwhile, the clamour was growing and nothing was being done.

Charley Moon pulled himself together, slipped round the curtain and faced the footlights—to be received with a storm of hisses. . . .

For the past six weeks, and during the nightmare dress rehearsal, he had been fighting a hopeless battle; doing three men’s work; carrying the weight of that ill-starred enterprise upon his shoulders. All the evening, he had worked for the show; sacrificing his own chances in a desperate effort to snatch some sort of success from obvious disaster. Now, at the critical

moment, tried beyond human endurance, and much against his better judgment, he was sent out to face the storm.

There was still a chance. An audience was always liable to get a bit out of hand, but these people must know who was really to blame. They weren't fools; they knew that actors could only make the best of the parts they were given to play. Now that they had blown off a bit of steam, their sense of fairness would prompt them to give the company a little credit for trying to make the best of a bad job. . . .

'Ladies and gentlemen,' he began; but the row was so deafening that he couldn't hear the sound of his own voice. All he could do was to stand, alone, in the glare of the footlights, and take what was coming to him. Not much fair play about this. If he'd had the sense to let the show take care of itself, he would have been better off. That's what the others had done—and now they were safe on the other side of the curtain, while he stood there like a fool, being yelled at by a lot of lunatics . . .

Suddenly there was a pause in the hubbub, followed by one of those odd silences, as of an angel passing. Here was the chance—but Charley Moon had cracked under the strain. . . .

'Ladies and gentlemen,' he said, 'it's all very well for you to sit up there, howling like a pack of wolves, but how about *us*? D'you think *we're* enjoying it?'

'Shut up!' shouted a gallery girl.

Charley Moon winced, like a child that has had its face slapped suddenly, for no reason, and is too frightened to cry. He'd asked for it and he had got it. But it hurt.

'Go home!' came the shrill voice from behind the white wall of the footlights.

'Go home yourself, you ——,' said Charley Moon.

Many things are forgiven in the easy-going world of the theatre, but the actor who quarrels openly with his audience is *out*. Charley Moon had committed the one unforgivable sin. No manager would risk engaging a performer, however talented, who lost his head in an emergency. He would be lucky if he ever acted in London again.

Part Three

On a certain Sunday in June, if you had been walking along the road that winds under the Sussex Downs, between Edburton and Fulking, you would have seen, sitting on a gate, a tramp who seemed to be the happiest man in the world.

And well he might be, for the road between Edburton and Fulking, when the June roses are blooming in the hedges, is as pleasant a spot as you could wish to see. Enough to make any man happy—especially when he is feeling as fit as a fiddle, and has managed to leave all his troubles behind him.

Charley Moon sat on the gate, contemplating the dark mass of Chanctonbury Ring, with no thought in his mind except that it was good to be alive. Somewhere over the hills was Brighton with its big hotels, and all those other things that didn't matter any more. Later on, if he felt like it, he might climb the Downs and lie on his back in the sun . . . Or he might walk on to Steyning . . . Or he might lose himself in the dim, blue goodness of the Weald. . . .

For the first time in his life, he was really his own master. Looking back, life seemed to have been nothing but a series of unwelcome disturbances: a voice from a kitchen window . . . a shout from a barn door . . . a bugle call . . . 'Beginners please!' . . . 'Five minutes, Mr. Moon!' . . . Always someone wanting him to do something he didn't want to do, when he least wanted to do it! But all that was over. Now he could sit on the gate, drinking in the first freshness of the morning. Or he could get down off the gate. He could walk this way or that way. He hadn't a care in the world. Having lost everything, he had nothing to lose.

Of course he had to live, but it was surprising how well you could get along, if you kept away from the towns. The fields were full of food of a sort; and you had only to lean over the wall of a cottage garden, admiring the flowers, to be offered something a little more substantial. If you were a vegetarian, you could live on the country.

His clothes wouldn't last for ever—he was beginning to look a bit of a scarecrow and things wouldn't be so easy in the winter; but that was a long way ahead. Anything could happen before then. Things always happened when least expected. . . .

Round the bend in the road came a caravan, painted gaily in red and yellow and green—like a barge, moving slowly between the flowered banks of some old canal. It was followed by a string of other caravans, odd vehicles of every kind, loose ponies and the familiar paraphernalia of a small circus touring the country towns. Lean, hungry lurcher dogs sniffed at the hedges. An old woman, sitting on the tail-board of a cart, was making clothes-pegs. Each caravan bore the legend: TREVALLON'S MAMMOTH CIRCUS. It was as pretty a sight as you could see upon a summer's day.

Charley Moon's eye was caught, and held, by a single detail of this colourful cavalcade. Seated upon a two-wheel contraption, drawn by a mule, was a little girl of six, with curly, black hair and eyes like ripe sloes. She drove with great dignity, well aware of the importance of her position. . . .

Suddenly, for no apparent reason, the mule crossed its legs, and sank to the ground, like a devout old lady kneeling upon a hassock in a place of worship. Taken by surprise, the small driver pitched forward, but saved herself from disaster, by holding on to the animal's tail. . . .

Charley Moon acted promptly. Grasping the child in one hand, and the reins in the other, he jerked the mule to its feet; replaced the driver, and was returning to his gate when a man hurried up from the following caravan.

'Nice work,' said the man. 'As neat a job as I've seen in a month of Sundays. Lucky you were there. Thanks a lot!'

'Thank the lady for keeping her head,' said Charley. 'She hung on like a good 'un. Is she all right, or shall I take a lift and keep an eye on things?'

'I'd be glad if you would,' said the other. 'We're a chap short, and there's no one to spare. Jump up, and I'll see you at Steyning.'

So Charley jumped up, handed his companion the reins, and the procession moved off, along the country road.

'Nice work,' said the child. 'I knew it was nice work before my dad said so.'

'So that was your dad. What's his name?'

'Trevallon. Can't you read?'

'The boss?' asked Charley.

'It's our circus,' explained the child.

'Is it a good circus?'

‘Mammoth!’ was the reply. ‘It says so on the caravans. Can’t you read?’

‘I’m not much of a scholar,’ said Charley Moon. ‘I had to leave school when I was seven—for stealing the jam.’

‘What sort of jam?’

‘Plum jam. Great big yellow plums. I pulled them out with my fingers.’

‘Lovely!’ said the child. ‘I don’t go to school. When they try to catch me, I hide in the straw. What’s your name?’

‘Charley. What’s yours?’

‘Benesta. And the mule is called Mary Quite Contrary.’

‘Does Mary often say her prayers in the middle of the road?’

‘It’s part of her act. When she saw you sitting on the gate, she started showing-off. My dad says she’s bloody-minded. Is that swearing?’

‘No,’ said Charley, ‘that isn’t swearing. All mules are bloody-minded.’

‘Why?’ asked the child.

‘Because they think they’re ponies, and half the time they’re only donkeys. All very confusing. What do you do in the circus, Benesta?’

The little girl explained that she had a Shetland pony and made it do tricks. But the pony was ill, and they had to leave it behind with a man who was going to bring it along when it was better. Now there would be nothing for her to do except run about with the clowns. She didn’t like being a clown, because they put a lot of white stuff on her face, and dressed her up in a boy’s trousers, with a patch on the back.

‘Too bad!’ said Charley. ‘I was a clown once. I hated it; so I ran away.’

The child studied him, solemnly. ‘I think you’d make a nice clown,’ she said. ‘You’ve got such a funny face. Why don’t you ask my dad to let you be a clown; then you could stop with us always? You wouldn’t want to run away, if you were with us.’

‘I’m sure I shouldn’t,’ said Charley Moon.

They drifted along in the June sunshine; through little villages and past fields where haymaking had already begun. Once, Benesta jumped down from her seat, picked a wild dog-rose and put it in his buttonhole. Then she fell asleep, and he drove, holding her in the crook of his arm. . . .

Surely, he thought, this life, of all lives, was the one most worth living. Why not join up with this happy, roving family? He was worth his salt in the ring, on the road and in the stables. Dressed as a clown, he could never be recognized by any chance visitors from his own world. The circus was short of a man. Why not try it for a week or so, and see what happened? . . . When the little girl rubbed the sleep out of her eyes, his mind was made up.

‘Listen, Benesta,’ he said. ‘Why shouldn’t we two have an act all to ourselves? I’ll dress up as a clown, pretend I’m a pony, and you can teach me to do tricks. When I do them properly, you give me a knob of sugar, and when I make a mistake you whip me.’

‘How hard shall I whip you?’ asked the child.

‘Till I cry,’ said Charley. ‘It won’t really hurt, because I cry very easily.’

The little girl clapped her hands. ‘That will be lovely,’ she said. ‘I shall whip you, and whip you and whip you; and you will cry, and cry, and cry. Now I don’t care if the pony never comes back.’

Arrived at Steyning, in the field where the circus was billed to appear, the owner came across to thank the stranger for his help on the road. He was about to let him go on his way, with the price of a drink, when something about his appearance struck him as unusual. This was no ordinary tramp. His clothes were worn, but they had style, and sat on his shoulders, as though they had been made for him by a good tailor. Perhaps he wasn’t a tramp after all. Somebody on a walking tour, or wanting to keep out of the way for reasons best known to himself. Mr. Trevallon put the half crown back in his pocket, and talked as man to man.

‘You know all there is to know about mules?’ he said.

‘Some of it,’ said Charley. ‘Nobody knows it all. They keep a bit of it to themselves.’

‘Bloody-minded!’ said the child.

‘Now, honey-pot!’ said her father. ‘No swearing on Sunday!’

‘It isn’t swearing,’ said the little girl. ‘Charley said it wasn’t swearing; didn’t you, Charley?’

‘That’s right,’ Charley told her. ‘There’s no other word for it. If a mule isn’t bloody-minded, he’s dead.’

‘Going far?’ asked the circus proprietor.

‘Charley is stopping with us,’ said Benesta Trevallon. ‘He’s going to pretend to be a pony and I’m going to teach him tricks. If he gets them right, I’m going to give him a lump of sugar; if he doesn’t I’m going to whip him till he cries.’

‘Oh no, honey-pot! That would be cruel,’ said her father.

‘He cries very easily,’ said the child. ‘You do, don’t you, Charley? You said you did!’

‘Sounds like a good act,’ laughed Mr. Trevallon, ‘but I wouldn’t like to be in your trousers when Benesta gets her big whip going. . . . Well, we mustn’t keep you, Mr. ——’

‘His name’s Charley, and we *are* going to keep him,’ cried the little girl.

‘Whose circus is this?’ asked her father.

‘Ours,’ said Benesta Trevallon, firmly. ‘It says so on the caravans.’

The two men looked at one another—the tramp and the circus proprietor—and what they saw, they liked. ‘No good our talking,’ laughed Charley. ‘These ladies always get the last word. If you’re short of a man for a week, I could be handy about the place—and do a bit of clowning.’

‘Been in the game?’ asked George Trevallon.

‘No,’ said Charley Moon, ‘but I’d take a chance.’

‘It’s not all that easy. Even a clown has to be funny.’

‘I’ve got a few parlour tricks,’ said Charley Moon.

As it was Sunday, they had time to work out a routine; and while the idea was developing, George Trevallon became a most perplexed man. Here was something he didn’t understand. No amateur, without professional experience, could step into the ring and do what this fellow was doing. His sense of timing was uncanny; his imitation of a circus pony had to be seen to be believed. And all the time he was nursing his little partner along, until a child of six became, before their eyes, a seasoned veteran, knowing all the tricks of the trade.

When she was chasing him round the ring, with her long whip, and he was turning somersaults in his efforts to escape, he showed her the exact moment when the lash might be supposed to do the most damage. Every now and again, he would offer her that tempting target—the patch on his

trousers—until it seemed that she had him completely at her mercy. He taught her how to turn to the audience while he slipped a bit of old sacking over the stricken parts, and how to discover his perfidy at the right moment. His crocodile tears convulsed the small village boys, who had played hookey from Sunday School to creep under the tent; and when the act was finally set, Charley Moon was a highly welcome member of his new family circle.

George Trevallon was puzzled, but he was far too old in the game to ask awkward questions. If this mysterious newcomer cared to drop into his lap like pennies from Heaven, why should he try to stop him. He knew his own business best, and one wrong word might upset the whole apple-cart. Strange things happened in a circus, and this was one of them. . . .

So they dressed Charley Moon as a clown and what he had done in London he and his new partner did at Steyning—stole the show. They would be gone next morning; through Washington and away into the Weald; but, for one night, there was magic in that old Sussex town. Strange things happen in a circus, George Trevallon had told himself, and this was one of them.

He watched his new recruit helping to dismantle the circus and bedding down the horses. What a find! But, of course, they wouldn't keep him. He was a wanderer, and that sort always wandered off when they were most wanted. On the road, next morning, he packed off the indignant Benesta in charge of one of the women, and took her place, next to Charley, behind the mule.

'That was a grand job of work you did last night,' he said. 'And I told you that a clown had to be funny. I could kick myself. But you *did* say you were new to the game.'

Charley Moon laughed. 'A bit rough here and there,' he said. 'We'll get it better than that. Have a look at us in a couple of nights.'

'I watched you with the horses.'

'I like horses,' said Charley. 'And dogs and donkeys—anything on four legs. It was when they began walking on their hindlegs that all the trouble started.'

George Trevallon came straight to the point. 'How long are you stopping with us?' he asked.

'As long as you want me.'

‘That’s for always.’

‘Suits me!’ said Charley Moon.

Tenting, through the English countryside, made no allowance for the eight-hour day. Everybody was about at five-thirty, and the cavalcade moved off, as soon as its component parts had been assembled, to the next stopping-place, ten or fifteen miles away. There the tent was erected, two performances were given, and the entire outfit was packed away, ready for the early start on the following morning. Seventeen hours in all!

A testing time-table; but no one seemed to mind. Certainly not Charley. He loved every minute of it: from the first walk through the wet grass, and a swill in the brook; to the last pipe on the steps of the caravan, under the quiet stars. He loved the show; he loved the performing animals, each with its own freakish personality; and, most of all, he loved jogging along the country roads with Benesta, at the tail of Mary the mule.

The two partners were inseparable. Charley became big brother and business partner rolled into one. The child followed him everywhere, believed everything he told her, and thought him the most wonderful man in the whole world.

Was it this eager, young hero-worship, or the wet meadows, that started him thinking of Rose? He began to wonder how she was getting on, alone, in the little shop. Thank goodness he thought of buying it for her, while he had the money; but he couldn’t forgive himself for not answering her letters. Because he was fed up with everybody and everything at Little Summerford was no excuse. . . .

‘What’s the matter, Charley; why aren’t you talking?’ asked Benesta.

‘I dreamt I was Alice in Wonderland.’

‘Who was she?’

‘A girl who looked at herself in the looking-glass; and the more she looked, the smaller she seemed to be.’

‘Do you feel small?’ asked the child.

‘I feel so small,’ said Charley, ‘that you could put me in a match-box.’

He wondered if Rose had come up, with the choir party, to the theatre. He hoped she had but surely, she would have tried to see him. Perhaps she couldn’t be bothered . . . Perhaps she was married . . . Now he came to think

of it, that young traveller from Swindon, who used to call every week for orders, was always hanging round. . . .

‘Are you getting bigger, Charley?’ asked the little girl.

‘No, Benesta; I feel smaller than ever. If I’m not careful I shall fall through a crack in the cart.’

One afternoon, there was great excitement in the circus. A scout from the big Christmas show at Olympia was in the tent, looking for turns. After the show he stopped behind, and came across to Charley, who was still in his make-up.

‘I liked your act,’ he said. ‘Is that your own business, or just a routine you picked up somewhere?’

‘All my own work,’ laughed Charley. ‘Would you like my autograph?’

‘On a contract?’ suggested the other. ‘Six weeks in London, and a long tour.’

‘Sorry. Nothing doing,’ said Charley Moon.

‘You haven’t heard what we’d pay you,’ said the scout. ‘You’re good, and the money would be good.’

‘No London for me.’

‘What’s wrong with London?’ asked the scout.

‘So bad for my catarrh!’ said Charley Moon.

The man from London was baffled and angry. ‘You’re mad!’ he said.

‘I am,’ agreed Charley. ‘Every time I wake up, I think I’m Napoleon—or the Archbishop of Canterbury.’

Never before, in the memory of living man had there been a circus at Little Summerford. There was a legend that Wombwell’s Menagerie passed through the village in 1860, on its way to Uffington, for the Scouring of the White Horse, but no one really believed this. So many rumours were floating about these days, you could only believe half you saw and nothing that you heard.

Little Summerford had been chosen as a centre for the surrounding district. You could get there fairly easily from half a dozen villages, and the buses from Swindon to Cirencester passed the field in which the tent was to

be pitched. Everybody hoped that the harvest would be over, so that the men could knock off sharp to time, and take their families to the evening show.

The great news broke on a morning when large yellow posters appeared on the sides of barns, the wall of the canal bridge and the trunk of the old oak in the centre of the village. Someone had been along in the night, when all the world was sleeping, and plastered the place with advance publicity. What the policeman had been doing, while all this was going on, remained a mystery.

Rose was in the little shop, going through her stock, and placing orders with the young traveller from Swindon, when a strange man appeared in the doorway—with a business proposition. If she would put a poster in her window, he would give her two seats for the circus. Rose was as fond of a circus as anybody, but like most country folk, she was a little afraid to be mixed up with anything a bit out of the ordinary. Her first instinct was to refuse, but the young fellow from the wholesalers wouldn't hear of it. Why shouldn't they go together? He would be delivering goods on that side of the country. Why not let him call for her, and they could have a bit of fun for once? Rose hesitated, but the man from the circus supported the suggestion and the poster went into the window.

Down at the local, the water bailiff of the Mill House, was holding forth on the subject of gipsies—a shiftless, thieving lot; poaching game, setting gins, breaking down the withy-beds—what would happen with this circus coming, he trembled to think. . . . Nobody listened. The water bailiff, a newcomer to the district, had managed to make himself thoroughly unpopular. Always creating about something; a fair prick of misery. Why couldn't he shut up and let them get on with their beer? Until, finally, old Reuben Parsley took up the cudgels for this oppressed community. Fixing the common enemy with a watery eye, he sailed in to the attack.

'You takes things too serious, Alfred,' he said. 'You'd be much better comp'ny if you was to stop grousin' once in a while. You be as full of troubles as a old hedgehog be full of ticks. Alluz runnin' up to the house, squealin' to the master about this an' that. Fust somebody's bin after the mushrooms; then somebody's bin pickin' up a few plovers' eggs; now it's the gippos. You'll wear yourself out, Alfred.'

'Better wear out than rust out—like some people.' Old Reuben ignored this unfriendly thrust.

'I'm only speaking for your good, Alfred. You'll worry yourself into your grave and when you lies there, pushin' up the daisies and some little

lass sits makin' a daisy chain with *your* daisies, you won't be able to do a thing about it. Not a thing!'

'You'll be in your grave long before I am,' growled the water bailiff.

'Mebbe,' agreed Mr. Parsley. 'Mebbe, and agen, mebbe not. I bean't wearin' myself out with worry—like some people. Live and let live, that's my motto. Now, about these gippos. What's wrong with 'em?'

'Everything!' snapped his victim.

'Everything,' said Mr. Parsley, 'is like always—and always is a long time. I never met a chap yet as was wrong in everything. Take these gippos you've bin working yourself into a fever about. They toils not, they spins not—but they makes uncommon good little fish-baskets. . . .'

'Out of my withies!'

'One night!' rumbled old Reuben. 'One night they'll be playin' hell and blazes in your precious withy-bed. One night, after they've done two shows and put all their clobber back on the vans. When do they sleep, do you suppose?'

'I'll promise you this,' said the water bailiff. 'Here's *one* who won't sleep that night, and if I catch any of your funny friends in my meadows, up he goes to my guv'nor, and gets what's coming to him.'

When Charley Moon heard that the circus was going to Little Summerford, he didn't know what to do about it. He was quite game to act the clown in front of the village folk, but it might not stop there. Suppose the local press got hold of it. What a story for the Sunday papers. He could see the headlines:

STAGE SENSATION RECALLED . . . TRAGEDY OF
FAMOUS COMEDIAN . . . LONDON STAR CLOWNS
IN COUNTRY CIRCUS . . .

That wouldn't do at all. He decided to say nothing to anyone in the show; to lie low while he was out of the ring, and to trust to his disguise not to be recognized. Then he would be able to slip away next morning without anyone being any the wiser.

It would be nice to have had a talk with Rose, but he couldn't risk it. Perhaps he would write to her afterwards; or he might come back one day and have a laugh about it.

So that when Trevallon's Mammoth Circus came into the village, on the great day, Charley the Clown was confined to his caravan with a slight chill. He couldn't even help put the tent up, or groom the horses; but when the show was due to open, he suddenly recovered, put on his costume, and took his place in the ring.

The audience at the first performance was made up of small children, old people, and those who had driven in from a distance. Charley moved about among them without any fear of discovery. He knew quite a few of them and made the most of his local knowledge. When the very important lady from the big house in the next village came in a little late, Charley the Clown ran up and received her like royalty; even laying his coat on the ground for her to walk on. When Benesta was chasing him with the big whip, he flew for protection to motherly old Martha Peart, who had done the washing at the Mill in the old days. Everybody was doubled up with laughing, and when they went home they told their friends and neighbours not to miss the circus on any account.

So the second show was a bumper. Charley hadn't expected to see Rose at the first performance, because he knew she couldn't get away from the shop; but she might be at the second. He hoped she would, and he could hardly wait to make sure. . . .

Strange how Little Summerford was getting hold of him again. He had tried to scrub it out of his mind, together with everything it stood for; and here he was, peering through the curtains which would open to let the horses gallop into the ring; wondering who was in the audience, and more excited than he had been at any other performance. Was it coming back to his old home, playing to people he had known when he was a boy, or just the chance of seeing Rose again? He would have found it difficult to answer that.

Yes, there she was . . . looking the same as ever. Smartened up a bit for the occasion, and sitting close to the ring. He would go over, sit on the plush barrier and pretend to tell her fortune. He would warn her against the dark man sitting next to her. That always went well: telling the girls their fortunes and warning them against dark men. And there was the dark man sitting all ready. Nothing to do with Rose, of course; but that made it all the funnier. Perhaps he would order the young fellow out of his seat, and sit next to Rose for a minute or two. He might even let her know who he was, and arrange to meet her after the show. . . .

But suppose she was startled, and gave him away? That wouldn't be so funny. Anyhow, it would be grand sitting next to her again . . . just as he had done in the old days . . . down in the meadows. . . .

And then he made a discovery. The dark man was no stranger. He was the young traveller from Swindon, and he had evidently brought her to the circus. She was talking to him, and laughing at something he had said. Rose wasn't one to laugh easily, and when she did, you wanted her to go on laughing for ever. But not to-night. This was different. Suddenly, all the zest had gone out of the game. He seemed to know what Rose had meant to him all the time, and now, he supposed, it was too late.

But the ring was empty, and Benesta was standing by him, with her big whip, wondering if he'd been taken ill again.

'What's the matter, Charley?' she whispered. 'Aren't you well? Why aren't you laughing?'

Charley Moon pulled himself together. 'Come on, kid,' he said, 'let's go!'

They galloped through some sort of routine, but there was no real fun in it. The child was too anxious not to hurt him; and he was too hurt already to care what happened. . . . What a mess he'd made of things, from start to finish! Ah well, there was one consolation: they'd be away next morning, and he need never set eyes on the place again.

The caravan was very hot, and Charley Moon, lying low while the others were taking down the circus, had had about enough of it. He'd been inside all day, and he knew he wouldn't sleep without a bit of fresh air. So when everyone had settled down, he decided it would be safe to take a bit of a walk down the meadows, and see what had been happening while he had been away.

The moon was full, but there would be a mist rising along the brook. He would be able to see, without being seen. He slipped quietly out of the field, crossed the road as silently as any other creature of the night, and was soon back in his old world of meadow grass, willow trees and running water.

But what a difference. While he had been away, someone had been doing the things he had always wanted to do. The weeds had been cut; drockways and carries had been repaired and a wilderness of rank grass had been brought back into cultivation. There would be crops, heavy crops; and in a year or two, all these improvements would pay for themselves. Just showed

what you could do with a bit of money. If only he'd had the sense to hang on to what he'd made, instead of frittering it away like a fool, he might have done all this, and been back where he had a right to be—master in his own place and among his own folk. . . .

He came to the corner, where the brook, taking a sudden turn, had scoured the hole, under the big willow. You could always be sure of finding a trout under the big willow. The grass was soaking wet, but he lay flat on his face and peered into the depth of the pool. The light was deceptive, and it was some time before he could accustom his eyes to the reflection of the moon on the swirl of the stream, as it ran round in eddies, before changing its course. Several times he changed his position, until getting the right angle, he thought he had found what he was looking for. . . . Yes, there she was; facing upstream, camouflaged against the gravel, swaying slightly like a bit of floating weed; as fine a fish as you could hope to see on a summer night. What a beauty; three pounds if she was an ounce. . . .

'So I've caught you, have I?' came a gruff voice, out of the darkness. 'I thought some of you —— gippos 'ud be up to your tricks, and here you are . . .'

Charley Moon looked up over his shoulder, and saw a dark form bending over him, with a gun in its hand. 'Take a look at this,' he whispered. 'If you've never seen a real trout before, you can see one now.' He rolled over on his side, to make room for the stranger.

'Oh no, you don't,' growled the water bailiff. 'I've met your sort before. Come on; get up! And don't try any funny stuff, or there might be an accident.'

Charley Moon laughed. 'It's a fair cop,' he said. 'A fair cop. All right, sheriff, I'll come quietly. You mounties always get your man. Lead me to the village lock-up.'

'You'll laugh on the other side of your face,' said the other.

'I'm not laughing,' said Charley. 'I'm scared to death. The way you're holding that old firearm, and the way your hand's shaking, would frighten a better man than I am. Lead on, Macduff. Whither are we withering?'

'Up to the Mill House,' said his captor. 'To have a nice little chat with my guv'nor.'

'A bit late for calling on a complete stranger,' suggested Charley.

‘Don’t worry,’ said the water bailiff. ‘He keeps late hours, and we’d be welcome at any time.’

Up at the Mill House, Charley's old home, the door was opened by a butler, in his shirtsleeves, who seemed none too pleased to see them. In fact, he washed his hands of the whole business. The master was in the billiard room, and if anyone was such a fool as to disturb him at that time of night, well, he could get on with it, and take the consequences. Whereupon, the butler closed his pantry door, leaving the two interlopers to make their own decisions.

'This way!' said the water bailiff, and Charley was led up a new main staircase that had not been there when he was a boy. Indeed, the place had been so altered that he found it difficult to believe he was in the same house. He could easily have lost himself. The inside had been completely gutted. Small rooms had been knocked into one; corridors led into new wings, and parts of the old Mill had been turned into bedrooms. A magnificent work of reconstruction, but all very confusing. When they reached a door, high up under the roof, he felt like Aladdin at the entrance to his cave. They might have been anywhere, and anything was liable to happen.

The water bailiff knocked. Charley whispered, 'Open Sesame,' and they were bidden to enter. . . .

Charley Moon got the surprise of his life! He was standing in the attic of the old Mill. But what a transformation scene! There were the oak rafters, stretching from end to end; built on the lines of an old ship, to support the heavy stone tiles of the massive roof. The dormer windows still made little alcoves in the walls, and the vast floor space stretched away into gloomy shadows. But that was all that remained of his boyhood's playground. The old attic had been swept and garnished out of all recognition. Gone was the stepladder that led up through a hole in the floor. Gone were the strings of onions that hung from the rafters. Gone were the apples, spread out on straw . . . the walls papered with old newsprint . . . the dead butterflies . . . the spiders' webs . . .

In place of these old familiar things hung tapestries, heavy curtains and a set of sporting prints. The beams had been scraped of their white paint, and polished until you could see your face reflected in the black oak. The floor was covered with oriental rugs. In the middle of the room, a billiard table had been placed; its green shades and bright lights giving just the touch of

vivid contrast that was necessary to relieve the rather sombre luxury of the almost mediæval scene. . . .

At the billiard table, a jolly, middle-aged man was concentrating ferociously upon a problem concerned with the impact of a rolling ivory ball against static rubber cushions. The problem eluded him, but he continued his pursuit of the apparently impossible, until a respectful cough from the water bailiff interrupted him. Even then, he didn't look up, but studied the tip of his cue with an air of mingled incredulity and dismay.

‘Well,’ he said at last. ‘What d’you want?’

His henchman stiffened to attention. ‘I’ve caught one of them gipsies, poaching trout, in the lower meadows, Sir John. I’ve brought him along, Sir John. What would you have me do with him, Sir John?’

‘Put it down, anywhere,’ said Sir John, still considering the tip of his cue.

‘I beg your pardon, Sir John?’

‘Leave it and get out.’

‘Yes, Sir John.’

‘The man’s a fool,’ said John Ferris, tenth baronet. And he continued upon his pilgrimage along the road that led to nowhere.

His objective was one of those trick cannons off the cushion that have fascinated beginners since billiards first began. Charley Moon could have done it with his eyes shut. He watched, until he could stand it no longer; then he walked over to the table, and placed a finger on the cushion.

‘Aim here,’ he said. ‘Hit your ball low down, with a bit of right-hand side. Not too much, and not too hard.’

The baronet obeyed, and lo! the miracle happened. No one was more surprised than the striker. ‘Well, bless my soul,’ he exclaimed. ‘Well, bless my soul! Where did *you* spring from? I thought he said he’d brought a trout. Where did you learn that cannon?’

‘Thurstons,’ said Charley Moon. ‘I had just the same shot in a final at the Peregrine Club. . . .’

‘Good Lord,’ exclaimed the baronet, looking at his unusual visitor, ‘are you a Peregrine?’

‘I was, for a bit,’ said Charley.

‘Haven’t been there for years. Too hot for me. But they got me to pay my subscription with a banker’s order, and I always forget to cancel the damn thing, till it’s too late . . . Never sign a banker’s order. That’s a tip in return for the one you gave me. Now we’re quits. . . . What’s this rigmarole about poaching trout? Were you poaching my trout?’

‘No,’ said Charley. ‘I wasn’t poaching. I was taking a stroll along the brook, thinking what a good job you’d made of our meadows. . . .

‘*Your* meadows!’ exclaimed Sir John. ‘What d’you mean—*our* meadows?’

‘They used to be ours.’

‘Then you’re one of the Moons?’

‘That’s right!’ said Charley. ‘I’m one of the Moons. The last of them.’

‘But you’re the very man I’ve been looking for,’ said the baronet. ‘This is wonderful. You can tell me everything I want to know. . . . This is the whole thing in a nutshell. I’ve bought the Mill and the meadows, but I’ve got an option on the five farms that used to go with them. Let’s have a look at the map.’

Taking a large-scale ordnance map from an old chest, he spread it out on the billiard table. ‘Now, can you show me how your boundaries ran before you started selling?’

‘Easy!’ said Charley Moon. ‘There were five farms in all. Starting here, at the Mill, we followed the brook till it came to that bridge. Then we turned left-handed, missed that cover, and kept going till we struck the Cirencester Road. We followed the line of the road for two miles, turned left-handed again, crossed the railway, and took in all this higher ground—about five hundred acres of pretty useful corn-land. Then we turned left-handed again, and ran down into the valley, hitting the brook here. That brought us back to the Mill.’

‘How many acres altogether?’

‘As near two thousand as made no difference. Of course, that was all before my time. When I came along, we’d sold off four of the farms, which left us with about three hundred acres of arable and the meadows. We had to keep the meadows to safeguard the water for the Mill, but the last farm went the way of the rest.’

‘You struck the bad patch.’

‘And how!’ agreed Charley Moon.

‘Pity you couldn’t have hung on till the better times came along.’

‘We were just farmers,’ explained Charley. ‘Business wasn’t our strong point. Some of the others kept going by selling out and buying back at the right time; some went in for dealing; but the Moons were always producers, and they went on producing till they went broke. If it hadn’t been for the Mill, they wouldn’t have lasted as long as they did.’

‘They’d have been all right to-day.’

‘We’re not talking about to-day,’ said Charley Moon. ‘We’re talking about yesterday—and the week before that.’

‘Too bad!’ sympathized the baronet. ‘I’m sorry to open old wounds, but it’s rather important to me . . .’

‘Go ahead,’ said Charley. ‘Anything I can do . . .’

‘D’you carry this bigger area, your original holding, in your mind?’

‘I know it like the back of my hand.’

‘Well, this is what I’m trying to get at. If you were in my shoes, would you take over the lot, or are there bits not worth bothering about?’

‘I’m no farmer . . .’ began Charley.

‘Perhaps not,’ said the other, ‘but you’ve a pretty shrewd idea. I’m in the fortunate position that I can pick and choose. How far shall I go? Show me on the map.’

Charley thought for a moment. ‘Well,’ he said, at last, ‘I wouldn’t take that corner at a gift—it isn’t called Starve All for nothing. Grows very good poppies, but I’d let them keep it. All this corn-land, well farmed, should more than pay for itself. The rest is as good farming land as you’ll find anywhere.’

‘I want to start a dairy herd—not too near the house. Where should we milk?’

Charley considered. ‘Long Doles,’ he said, ‘used to have very good buildings and there’s plenty of good grazing for the cattle. You wouldn’t have to walk the cows along the main road four times a day.’

‘You think of everything,’ laughed the baronet.

‘Common sense,’ said Charley. ‘You can’t have cows in milk being frightened and pushed into the ditches by a lot of motor cars.’

‘How about the sporting side?’

‘Ah!’ said Charley. ‘Now you’re talking . . . You know all about the fishing?’

‘I’m learning. We overstocked the water at first, but it’s getting into better shape. How about the game? Where could we breed pheasants?’

Charley smiled. ‘You don’t have to breed pheasants,’ he said. ‘Have you got a one-inch ordnance map? Good! Now follow this: here are *your* boundaries. *There* is Compton Bois; *there* is Brocksley Park and *there* is Grantwood—three of the best sporting estates in the county. All closely preserved. You lie right in the middle, and you’ll find other people’s pheasants such a damned nuisance, that you’ll be forced to shoot them in self-protection. We don’t breed pheasants at Little Summerford. They look in as visitors and some of them stay for ever.’

‘I should be popular with my neighbours!’ laughed the fat baronet.

‘Pheasants don’t travel far,’ said Charley. ‘You’d only get their birds round the boundaries and near the breeding-places. Just enough to brighten up a good rough shoot. Your real asset is that five hundred acres of arable—real partridge country. Your neighbours will always let you have a go at their pheasants if you’ll let them have a go at your partridges. That’ll save you a lot of trouble.’

‘Did you pool your shooting with the nabobs?’ asked Sir John.

‘The Moons,’ replied Charley, ‘were a proud race. I don’t know if you ever go to church, but if you do, you’ll have seen their tombstones. Was it likely that men who lie under such tombstones would have put up with any damned patronage from a banker or a biscuit maker?’

‘That lets me out,’ laughed the fat baronet. ‘I’m in steel.’

‘Every bit as bad. If you weren’t a Moon, you were mud. Even when everything had gone, except the meadows, my old man wouldn’t let his fishing, not even to pay the butcher’s bill.’

‘I rather like him for that,’ said Sir John. ‘What d’you think *I* should do?’

‘Love thy neighbours,’ laughed Charley. ‘Give them a day with the partridges once in a while and join in their big shoots when you feel like it.’

But don't add to the confusion by breeding more pheasants. It wouldn't be kind.'

The fat baronet, who had been leaning against the billiard table, still holding his cue, suddenly remembered his duties as host. Now he pulled up two armchairs and went to a cupboard. 'Sit down,' he said. 'I've been so busy sucking your brains, I've forgotten all about the drinks. Have a sandwich. As soon as it's light, I'm going down the meadows, to see if I can pick up a duck. Care to come along?'

'Suit me fine,' said Charley Moon.

So they sat together—the man from the circus and the man from the city—and, supported by cigars, sandwiches and syphons, they waited for the dawn.

They talked of everything. They talked themselves round the West End, into famous restaurants, behind the scenes of the city and the stage. Tiring of London, they talked themselves down quiet country lanes, into the scented comfort of a modern milking shed and across lawns that were old when George the First was king. As the blue cigar smoke curled up to the black rafters, they talked of that old house, of the changes it had seen, of the room in which they were sitting. They talked, as men do, when the hour for such confidences seems ripe, without reservations of any kind. All their barriers were down. Is there a man who cannot remember just such a magic moment? We have all heard those chimes at midnight, Master Shallow!

And so, Charley Moon found himself tracing—as he had traced those boundaries on the ordnance map—his story of the last ten years. 'The funny part was,' he told his sympathetic listener, 'I never really cared a damn about the theatre. I just drifted into it, and I never really knew what it was all about. I got nothing out of it, except money, and I threw that away because it didn't seem any more real than the rest. A crazy world; no comfort in it—like living with a woman you can't trust. Some folk like it that way, but it never seemed to suit me. So here I am; through with it all, back where I began, a sort of prodigal son—without the fatted calf!'

A drowsy silence settled over the old attic. Its new owner quietly turned off the lights on the billiard table and pressed the switch of an electric fire. 'Now you're back again,' he said, 'why don't you stay? I'm going to buy those farms, and I shall want someone to keep an eye on them. You'd be the very man.'

‘Nice of you,’ said Charley Moon, ‘but it wouldn’t work. I’m no farmer. I’ve got a feeling for it; it’s in my bones, but farming is skilled labour. I’d make a rare mess of things. I should cut the hay too soon and the corn too late. I shouldn’t know what to put the chaps at in the morning. I’ve no head for business. The prices would beat me every time. . . .’

‘Suppose I told you I wasn’t looking for a farmer; that someone else would give daily orders and that *I’ve* got a pretty good head for business . . .?’

‘I should wonder what there was left for me to do,’ said Charley. ‘I’m not looking for charity.’

‘That old family pride coming out again?’

‘No,’ replied Charley. ‘I like to earn my keep; that’s all.’

‘I’m afraid to tell a countryman that I’m buying these farms for the shooting and fishing. It wouldn’t be quite true. I’m going to build up a pedigree herd; I’m going to run a first-class flock of sheep; but sport comes first. That’s where you come in.’

‘A sort of gamekeeper?’ asked Charley.

‘You’d have a gamekeeper and a farm bailiff under you. There’s plenty of accommodation and plenty of money. Why not do the thing well?’

‘There’d be more bosses than hands. We should be treading on one another. And how can I handle a farm bailiff if I don’t know what he’s supposed to be up to?’

‘In my business,’ said the baronet, ‘I organize the concern, I pick the best men, and I start them right. I find it works. I should be buying what you’ve got in your bones, not what you’ve read in books. They say it takes three generations to make a farmer. Well, say that I’m buying the first two, and write the third off as a dead loss. I’m still satisfied. . . . Which is the best farmhouse?’

‘Broadwells,’ said Charley. ‘It’s central, easily converted, and it’s got a good garden.’

‘That’s where you’ll live,’ said the baronet. ‘The bailiff can be down with his cows, and that idiot who brought you up to-night can stay where he is—unless you decide to make a change. He’s stupid but honest. Please yourself. Every Saturday night, you’ll feed with me, and we’ll talk shop. On Sunday we’ll drive round in the car, and you can tell me how much better your grandad used to do it. On Sunday night we’ll have a game of billiards

—and more shop . . . The rest of the week, you'd have the place to yourself . . . Think it over. I can't offer you what you were making on the stage, but—think it over . . . Hullo! Time we were moving. I'll get you a coat. It can be cold along the brook these mornings. The guns are down in the hut.'

They collected a spaniel from its kennel in the yard and were soon lost in the heavy ground mist of the meadows. There was a good moon, with fleecy clouds, just the conditions for wild-fowling. Reaching the hut, they lit a paraffin lamp and opened a double gun-case, the contents of which made Charley whistle.

'What beauties,' he whispered under his breath. Then they improvised a hide and waited, like ghosts in the grey mist, for the dawn flight.

If this were a chapter on wild-fowling, there would be a lot to tell. Sport was good, so far as opportunities were concerned, but the fat baronet found conditions rather against him. He fired, fumed, and cursed quietly under his breath; but no victim fell to his gun. Charley, on the other hand, was in his element. Here, at last, was something he really understood. This was a game he had mastered in childhood. It held no mysteries; its peculiar problems of light and flight only added to the fun. When it was all over, the spaniel was sent splashing through the water carries to retrieve a dozen sodden carcasses.

'Not bad for an actor,' said his companion.

'Sorry if I wiped your eye,' grinned Charley; 'I had all the luck.'

'Twelve flukes, all in a row,' laughed the fat baronet. 'And in my meadows. Evidently you aren't looking for a job, or you'd be more tactful.'

'Blame the gun,' said Charley. 'I just couldn't miss.'

'The pair of them go with the job,' said the tempter. 'And they couldn't be in better hands.'

They left the guns and the wet corpses in the hut, to be collected later, and walked back towards the village. The single bell had been ringing for early communion some time before, and when they came to the road, two figures were approaching. Sir John stopped. 'I must make my peace with the Vicar,' he said. 'I've been getting in his bad books by not going to church. He's a new man, and I don't want to hurt his feelings.'

Charley Moon was in a bit of a spot. His companion didn't realize that he was playing 'possum in Little Summerford. However, it was too late to start explanations of that sort. He'd have to go through with it. . . .

And then he saw that the second figure coming towards them was Rose. He made an instinctive movement to slip back into the field, changed his mind, and was lost. Rose had seen him and could only suppose that he didn't want to meet her. He must put this right at all costs.

Leaving the baronet and the Vicar, he stepped across to where she was standing. 'Hullo, Rose!' he said. 'I was coming up to see you . . .' He got no further. All the hurt that Rose had suffered from that slap in the face at the stage door of the Delphic Theatre, sprang into her eyes. Then she turned quietly away, and walked down the road, a forlorn little figure, as though she had never met him in all her life before.

Charley was about to run after her, when he was interrupted. 'Oh, Vicar,' said the baronet, 'I want you to meet Mr. Moon. He used to live at the Mill. I'm trying to persuade him to stop with us.'

The new Vicar was all smiles. 'I know your ancestors,' he said. 'Their tombstones are in my charge. I was just thinking, we shall have to do something about your great-grandfather, or he'll be dropping to pieces. Does Sir John mean you are staying here permanently, or only on a visit?'

'Permanently,' said Sir John. 'Quite, quite permanently.'

'I'm afraid not, Vicar,' said Charley Moon. 'Sir John's been very kind, and very flattering; but I'm afraid it's quite out of the question.'

'Oh, come, come!' rumbled the baronet; and then, seeing the look on his companion's face, he decided not to press him further. 'Well, good-bye, Vicar. Come to me if the organ blows up or the roof leaks—and I'll come to you when I need spiritual guidance. I'm not a bad sort, really; just one of those week-end heathens. Why don't you have services on Wednesdays?'

'I do,' said the Vicar. 'Evensong, at six o'clock.' . . . But the fat baronet had flown.

Over the breakfast table, Sir John tried to get at the reason for Charley's sudden decision not to stay on at Little Summerford. He had refused at first, but there had always seemed a chance that he might change his mind. Now he stuck his toes in, and wouldn't even discuss the matter. The baronet made a last attempt:

'I don't know what's biting you,' he said, 'and I'm not going to ask; but you're making an awful mistake. All very well to drift round with a circus, in the summer, while you're still young, but what's going to happen later on? You've got to come to rest somewhere. You say you've done with the West End. You're not going to act again. What's the alternative?'

‘Search me!’ said Charley Moon.

‘You’ve made a real mess of things. You’re in a spin. And I come along, like a fairy godmother with a magic wand, offering you everything you need most—a good position; a country home, with shooting and fishing laid on—in a district where you’re known and liked; no particular responsibility—and you throw it back in my face. Why?’

‘Because,’ said Charley Moon, ‘it’s all coming out of your heart and not out of your head. That couldn’t last.’

‘We’ve covered that ground before,’ said Sir John. ‘Now let’s have your real reason. You’ve crossed an old trail and it’s pulled you up in your tracks? Something has popped up out of your past, and you’re running away from it? I bought a mare once. A lovely animal. You couldn’t fault her. But every time she came to a shadow in the road, she tried to jump it. One day, when she’d nearly broken my neck, I walked her through the shadow of an elm tree for the best part of an hour. When she realized there was nothing there, we went home.’

‘You think I’m seeing ghosts,’ said Charley. ‘Jumping at shadows?’

‘I think, if I were in your shoes, I’d take another look into things. No harm in making sure. It’s easy to make mistakes, and you can be sorry for a long time . . . *I* discovered that!’

An hour later, Charley Moon was ringing the bell of the little shop. Nothing happened for a minute, and then the door was opened by a small boy, a very small boy, about half the size of Benesta. Without waiting to be questioned, he delivered his breathless answer.

‘Aunty’s out,’ he said.

‘Where is she?’ asked Charley.

‘In the room,’ said the urchin.

‘What’s she doing?’

‘Laughing at me—aren’t you, Aunty?’

‘You said she was out. When is she coming back?’

‘I don’t know. Shall I ask her?’

‘Yes,’ said Charley. ‘Ask her when she’s coming back.’

The small boy disappeared, but returned almost immediately. ‘She can’t see you,’ he recited. ‘She’s too busy to see anybody. She’s resting. Call again, any time you’re passing.’

‘Young man,’ said Charley Moon, sternly. ‘D’you know what happens to little boys who tell stories?’

‘No, mister,’ said the child, thrown suddenly on to his own resources.

‘They get their bottoms smacked,’ said Charley. Whereupon the youngster set up a howl of terror that threatened the Sabbath peace of Little Summerford . . . which brought Rose out with a rush.

‘Oh, come in, both of you, and shut the door!’ she cried, bundling the two of them into the little room behind the shop. ‘Now Freddy, stop that noise, or home you go to your mother. . . .’

Having got over the first shock of surprise, Rose was her old self again. But Charley had always been a little uppish, and a bit of a lesson wouldn’t hurt him. So she busied herself with the small child, leaving him to make the first move.

‘I’m sorry I didn’t answer your letters, Rose,’ he began, ‘but you needn’t have turned me down quite so flat . . .’

‘Letters?’ said Rose. ‘Who said anything about letters?’ Her surprise was so genuine, that Charley was at a loss. ‘Well, what else have you got against me?’ he asked.

There was no nonsense about Rose. What she thought, she said; straight and to the point. So Charley Moon heard, for the first time, all about that bad five minutes at the stage door. He was horrified; but, most unfairly, he seemed to think she was partly to blame.

‘Well, save me from such a woman,’ he groaned. ‘To think that you, of all people, would swallow an old story like that. Why didn’t you *do* something?’

‘What could I do?’ asked Rose.

‘Not much,’ he admitted. ‘But why didn’t you write and say you were coming? Then I’d have had the red carpet down and all the bands playing. I’d have put you in the royal box; taken you out to tea; made a fuss of you . . .’

‘You were so grand,’ said Rose. ‘All those people clapping and cheering. I was scared stiff.’

‘They’re not clapping and cheering now,’ said Charley Moon. ‘How’s the shop going?’

‘I want to talk about that,’ said Rose. ‘It’s well stocked, and there’s a bit of money waiting for you in the bank. . . .’

‘Waiting for *me*? What d’you mean: waiting for *me*?’

‘It’s all yours,’ said Rose. ‘You paid for it. I’ve only been running it for you till you came back.’

‘I’ll kill that lawyer. He swore he wouldn’t tell you.’

‘He didn’t. I knew all the time.’

‘How did you know?’ asked Charley.

‘Because,’ said Rose. ‘No one but you could have done a lovely thing like that . . . How long are you stopping, Charley?’

‘I’m stopping for always,’ said Charley Moon. ‘I’ve got to lunch and talk business, but I’ll be back about three and we’ll go for a bit of a walk—if you can park your young friend in a bottle of bulls’-eyes.’

‘He’s only a stray,’ laughed Rose. ‘You go back to your mother, don’t you, Freddy?’

‘No!’ said Freddy.

‘Oh, yes, you do,’ said Charley. ‘Two’s company; two and a half is a crowd.’

‘Where shall we go?’ asked Rose.

‘Over to Broadwells,’ said Charley Moon. ‘The Bart is thinking of buying it, and he wants me to look at the garden.’

‘Well, now you’ve come to your senses,’ said the baronet, ‘we’ll fix everything up before you change your mind again. Here’s the agreement: “I, John Ferris, take thee, Charles Moon, to be my confidential adviser, estate agent, billiards coach, agricultural expert, for better for worse; in consideration for which services we do now bestow upon the said Charles Moon our manor of Broadwells, to have and to hold, in perpetuity, or for all time—whichever may be the longer.” Sign please!’

‘I’d rather shake hands on it,’ laughed Charley.

‘Very well,’ said the Bart. ‘It’s just a gentleman’s agreement till the lawyers can get down to it. But I’m not having you hop away into the wood to play with the gipsies. We’ll start with a ninety-nine years’ lease, and see how we get on. We may not like each other.’

‘Talking about gipsies and gentlemen’s agreements,’ said Charley Moon, ‘I must catch up with the circus at Marlborough, by to-morrow morning, at latest.’

‘Sleep here to-night,’ said his new landlord, ‘and I’ll drop you on my way to the station. Have a look at Broadwells this afternoon, and let me know what you want done to it . . . We’ll have it ready in about three months . . . You’ll have to find someone to look after you. . . .’

‘Yes, I’ve been thinking of that,’ said Charley Moon. . . .

Three years later, the village folk were still saying that it wouldn't work. How could it? All very well for the Bart to buy up half the county, but what did Charley Moon know about farming? He'd been lucky up till now; but there'd never be another barley crop on the Big Ground like that last one. And as for those Friesians down at Long Doles; who couldn't win prizes, with all that money put into the herd?

There'd be a most a'mighty row between those two, one of these days—both on 'em as wild as a pair of kites! Either the Bart would get tired of writing cheques, or Charley would pack up and go back to his theatres. They were sorry for Rose, giving up her nice little shop, but how could she expect Charley to settle down at Broadwells, after living in London, and earning all that money?

Sometimes, Rose would listen to them, and wonder if there was any truth in their talk. Up till now, everything had been wonderful: a fine new home, a lovely garden, and a lawyer's agreement that would make the place theirs if things went as well as they hoped.

And things *were* going well. There were times, during the first year, when they'd felt a bit nervous; but Charley had taken hold of the reins, and now, everybody knew who was master. . . . What worried Rose was whether he would get bored, living down in the country. He never spoke of the old days, but sometimes, in the evenings, she stole a look at him, over her sewing, and wondered what he was thinking about. Having seen him being made such a fuss of in the theatre, she could hardly believe that he wouldn't want to go back. And then what would happen to them. Faced by such a possibility, Rose grew really frightened. . . .

One afternoon, there was a knock at the door, and when she opened it, she was faced by a strange man, who seemed to know her.

'Hullo!' he said. 'Fancy meeting you again!' Rose looked at him, and something about his face seemed familiar. 'Don't you remember me?' asked the author. 'I met you, years ago, in that little shop, down in the village. I was told I should find Mr. Moon here. Is he anywhere about?'

'He's out on the farm,' said Rose, 'but he'll be back for his tea.'

'May I wait?' asked the author. 'It's rather important.'

‘Come in,’ said Rose. She remembered him now and wondered what was the important thing he wanted to see Charley about.

‘I hope I’ve got some good news for him,’ said the author. ‘I’ve written a new play and I want him for the leading part. . . .’ Taken entirely by surprise, Rose gave a little cry, and leant forward, with her head in her hands, sobbing as though her heart would break. Then she looked at him.

‘You can’t do that,’ she said. ‘You can’t do that to us; just when we’re so happy. Why can’t you leave us in peace? Why don’t you go away?’

There was an awkward silence. The author was the first to speak. ‘I don’t want to cause any trouble,’ he said. ‘You’d better tell me everything. What are you to do with Charley Moon?’

‘Only his wife,’ sobbed Rose.

‘What has he been doing all this time?’

‘Farming,’ said Rose. ‘We’ve been here for three years, and just as everything has got right again, *you* come along. Now you’ll spoil everything.’

‘Oh, no, I shan’t,’ said the author. ‘I’m not going to be the serpent in *this* garden of Eden. Good-bye! Forget you ever saw me—and go on being happy.’

‘You can’t do that,’ said Rose, again. ‘He might find out, and then he’d never forgive me.’

‘Nonsense,’ said the author. ‘If he hears that a strange man was asking about him in the village, say I tried to sell you a vacuum cleaner.’

‘You may meet him,’ said Rose.

‘If I do, I’ll say I heard he was here, and looked in to see how the farm was doing.’

‘I think you’re ever so nice,’ Rose told him—which made them both think of that other day in the little shop when all the trouble had started.

They went together to the door—and there was Charley Moon coming up the garden path. ‘Hullo, Charley,’ cried the author. ‘I hoped you’d be back in time, and here you are!’

‘Good Lord!’ said Charley Moon. ‘What are *you* doing here?’

‘Prowling round!’ replied the author. ‘Taking a look at rural England. Getting the soot of London out of my hair. I was looking at the church, and I

happened to see a lot of old tombstones with your name carved all over them, and I started asking questions. They told me you were here, so I popped over. Sorry I can't stop. I'll drop in another time and have a cup of tea with you and the missus.'

Everything had gone off wonderfully; but, of course, Rose couldn't leave it alone. 'It isn't true, Charley,' she said. 'He's making it all up. He came on purpose to offer you a wonderful part in a new play, and I asked him to go away.'

'What made you do that?' asked her husband.

'Because,' replied Rose, 'because we're so happy as we are.'

'Don't you want me to act in London and earn a lot of money?' asked Charley.

'No,' said Rose. 'I want you to stay here, where you rightly belong.'

Charley Moon turned to the author, with a laugh that had no regrets in it. 'Well,' he said, 'I'm afraid that settles it. You see, we're partners in this act—and I'm not breaking up any more partnerships, not this side of Jordan. . . .'

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Charley Moon* by Reginald Arkell]