

TOM BROWNE'S COMIC ANNUAL

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Contents

58 ILLUSTRATIONS BY
TOM BROWNE, R.I., R.B.A.
THE WOODLANDS ABBEY
MYSTERY. BY **DICK DONOVAN**,
THE MIRACULOUS CURE OF
MR. CARMAN. BY **HAROLD BEGGIE**,
BALLAD OF YE CRITIC-SPORTSMAN.
BY **MOSTYN T. PIGOTT**,
THE HERO OF HAMMERTON STREET.
BY **W. PETT RIDGE**,
PUT IN AND PAID OUT ON CHRISTMAS EVE.
BY **ROBERT OVERTON**,
HOW LONDON SHOPS.
BY **HAROLD TREMAYNE**,
A PASSION FOR PETTICOAT LANE.
BY **CYRIL HURST**,
WHAT IS A POUND?
BY **JOHN HOLLINGSHEAD**,
MR. QUIVERFUL PROUDFOOT'S NIGHT OFF.
BY **HENRY J. DRANE**,
A CHRISTMAS COMEDY.
BY **CHARLES HAMILTON**.



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Browne

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A Christmas Comedy

By CHARLES HAMILTON

AUTHOR OF "THE BLUE BOX MYSTERY," "THE MAN WITHOUT A NAME," "SENT TO COVENTRY,"
"THE MYSTERIOUS MISS CARLVON," "BY THE KING'S COMMAND," ETC., ETC.

I

"BUT, ENID—"

Cyril Railsford was standing at the window looking out over the snow-covered park, with its array of gaunt, leafless trees. His face wore a slightly worried look. For Helston House was full of the excitement of amateur theatricals, and Railsford was stage manager, and he did not find the post a sinecure. He was in a brown study when the words suddenly fell upon his ears.

He looked round. The door which led into the library was open, and the voice came from the apartment beyond.

"But, Enid, listen to me."

"No, Arthur, I won't listen. You are only going to say something unpleasant. Just because Captain Creyke—"

"Oh, you knew what I was going to speak about, then."

"Of course I knew. Don't you look as glum as—as a gargoyle, whenever he is near me? It is positively painful to rehearse with you looking like that."

"It isn't exactly pleasant for me to look on and see that—and see Captain Creyke making love to you."

"Now, don't talk nonsense, Arthur. You know that it's all only acting."

"I know that it isn't—on his part, at least."

"I wonder you don't say, on my part too."

"What that ass Railsford wanted to choose such a piece for I can't imagine."

Railsford smiled grimly. He wondered whether he had better make his presence known. It was evident that the speakers did not know that anyone was within sound of their voices.

"That is absurd, Arthur. I think *A Christmas Comedy* quite the best thing that could have been chosen."

"Because there's a love scene in it for you and the captain?"

"Don't be rude, Arthur. You will have to make love to Lady Helston, and I am not jealous."

"Then you won't give it up?"

"Give what up?"

"The part!"

"The idea! I wonder what Mr Railsford would say!"

"Hang Railsford! That silly ass has caused all the bother."

"Nonsense! I'm sorry you should be so unreasonable, Arthur; but of course it's impossible for me to change my part now. It would upset everything. Lady Helston would never forgive me. Now I must run away and change my dress or I shall be late for rehearsal."

There was a rustle of skirts; then a muttered

something, and then a young man came through the open doorway from the library, into the room where Railsford stood, a grin on his face.

The annoyed look on Arthur Tunstall's features gave way to a blank expression as he saw Railsford.

"Hallo," he said feebly.

"Sorry I heard, Tunstall. But, you see, I couldn't help it. Your own fault; you know this room is my sanctum sanctorum. But sit down and try one of these cigars and tell me your troubles. Perhaps I can help you; although, like Dogberry, I must remember that I am an—"

"Excuse me, Railsford, I really didn't mean—"

"No, of course you didn't," Railsford assented cheerfully. "But what's the bother about?"

"It's that confounded Captain Creyke. You must have noticed how he—well, how he makes love to Enid. Pleasant for me, her fiancé, isn't it?" growled Arthur. "I can see his little game. He knows I am jealous, and he thinks that I shall provoke Enid into breaking the engagement. And then he thinks he will have a chance. It's all because of Enid's money. It is her fortune he is after."

Railsford was silent. He was quite aware that what Arthur said was probably true. He had before suspected that the captain, taking advantage of the opportunities afforded him by the rehearsals, was setting himself deliberately to make mischief between the lovers. And as Enid was a high-spirited girl, wilful and disdainful of control, and Arthur was too deeply in love to be very patient, it looked as if the

captain's manœuvres might be crowned with success.

"The fellow's a howling cad," continued Arthur, wrathfully. "Everybody knows that he's a needy fortune-hunter. Nobody likes him, but the women. And what they can see in him beats me."

"He isn't bad-looking," suggested Railsford. Arthur sniffed.

"I don't see what's to be done," said Railsford, in a very thoughtful way. "It's too late to alter the cast now. Besides, Captain Creyke is the only one who can take the part of Colonel Rake. One can't deny that his acting is good. Suppose you try and possess your soul in patience till after Christmas week? The theatricals will be over then."

Arthur shook his head gloomily.

"It's no good, Railsford. I couldn't stand it. It isn't only the rehearsals I mind. There's other things—nothing a fellow can take hold of—but—"

Railsford nodded sympathetically.

"What are you thinking of doing then, Arthur?"

"Making some excuse to Lady Helston, and—"

"Not going?" exclaimed Railsford in alarm.

"Yes."

"Hang it, man, that won't do. Are you forgetting that you take Sir Charles in the comedy? You took the part with your eyes open, and you can't leave us in the lurch now."

"Well, you'll have to find some way of muzzling that beast Creyke, then," said Arthur, desperately. "It would make a charming *tableau*, wouldn't it, if I were to knock him down in the middle of a rehearsal?"

Railsford looked horrified.

"Arthur!"

"Well, it may come to that if I stay here."

And Arthur, thrusting his hands deep into his pockets, stalked away with a gloomy brow.

Railsford looked the picture of dismay.

"Scott!" he ejaculated. "And this is the result of all my labours! What a frightful bore these theatricals are. What did I let them make me stage-manager for? I think I'll resign."

"No, you mustn't do that, Mr Railsford."

Railsford looked up to see Lady Helston, his hostess, standing in the doorway. Lady Helston was twenty-five, a beauty, brimming with vivacity. Her husband, Sir Richard, was a diplomat of distinction, and his official duties absorbed a great deal of his time—a state of affairs which the lady submitted to with a very good grace. At the present moment Sir Richard Helston was detained in Paris by some affair of importance, and he had written that he could not arrive at Helston House before Christmas Eve. On Christmas Eve the performance of *A Christmas Comedy* was to take place, if all went well; but Railsford was beginning to doubt whether all *would* go well.

"No, we couldn't possibly spare you, Mr Railsford," her ladyship went on, "I know yours is a thankless task. But can I help you?"

"Perhaps you can," said Railsford, thoughtfully. "I know that I can rely upon your discretion, Lady Helston."

And he gave a concise sketch of the difficulty.

"You see, we mustn't offend the captain, at

least until after Christmas Eve. The comedy would be a frost without Creyke, it's no use trying to disguise the fact. On the other hand I'm doubtful about what Arthur may do. Besides, I'm really concerned about him and Enid. The captain's game is clear enough. Don't you think so?"

Lady Helston nodded.

"They say that woman's wit will often find a way out of a difficulty when men's duller faculties are at fault," Railsford remarked. "See what you can do with the problem, Lady Helston."

The lady was evidently thinking very deeply. There was a little pucker, indicative of deep reflection, between her arched eyebrows.

Presently her brow cleared; she looked at Railsford, her face breaking into a dimpling smile, her eyes alight with a merry sparkle.

"You have a plan," he exclaimed.

"I think so."

"Please tell me."

Her vivacious ladyship rapidly explained. Railsford listened, first with a smile, then a broad grin, and then an amused laugh.

"Will you have nerve enough?"

"Nerve enough," said her ladyship, superbly, "I've nerve enough for anything."

"By Jove! I believe you have."

"You think it is a good plan?"

"Oh, yes, the fellow's conceited enough for anything."

"But you must help me."

"With all my heart."

And after Lady Helston had left him, Railsford remained thinking over the situation, and several times he broke out into a prolonged chuckle.

II

RAILSFORD paused in the shadow of a huge mass of South American palms. From the ballroom the strains of a waltz came dreamily through the green coolness of the conservatory. But Railsford was listening to the subdued voices on the other side of the towering palms.

"But—your attentions to Enid—to Miss Grayle—"

"Nothing, merely nothing, my dear Lady Helston—the idleness of the moment—"

"They made me very unhappy—"

"Ah, if I had but known! From the first time I saw you I was attracted to you, but I never dared to hope—"

"I have done wrong to betray my secret. Yet, how could I keep it longer. But, Captain Creyke, I know that I can rely upon you."

"Can you doubt it?"

"And the time of happiness is so short—"

"Why so, dear Lady Helston—Celia?" said the captain, in a tender voice.

"Because upon Christmas Eve Sir Richard returns," said Lady Helston, in a stifled voice, "and then—"

"You look forward with repugnance to his coming?"

"Can you ask?"

"Why should you await it?" said Captain Creyke, in low, passionate tones, "Why should you persist in this false idea of duty towards one for whom you do not care—for whom you cannot care."

"Ah, Captain Creyke, do not tempt me."

"Dearest Celia, I would not urge you if I were not sure that I could make you happy."

"Happy!" said the lady, with a long sigh.

"I would crush down the wild longings of my own heart, dearest Celia. But is not your happiness, as well as mine, at stake?"

"Alas!"

"Then let us consult only our own hearts, and despise the carping of a heartless world. Let us—"

"Do not urge me further, Captain Creyke," said the lady, in an agitated voice, "I—I know not what to say. I must think—I must have time to think. Let us return to the dancers."

The speakers moved away. Railsford smiled a broad smile. He seemed amused by what he had heard.

Half an hour later he encountered Arthur Tunstall, who was looking decidedly more cheerful than of late.

"Railsford, old man, come and have a drink."

"You are looking cheerful, Arthur."

"Am I? I can't make it out."

"Can't make what out?"

"About Captain Creyke and Enid. He seems to have changed his tactics all of a sudden. He's asked her for only one dance, and all his little graces seem to be frozen up. Enid denies that she ever thought of flirting with the captain, but I can see that she's perfectly wild at the change, though she tries hard to conceal it. I can't understand it."

"Perhaps Creyke has seen the error of his ways."

"Um—perhaps," said Arthur, doubtfully.

"You haven't lost any time," said Railsford, when he danced with Lady Helston.

She looked up at him demurely.

"So you've noticed?"

"I was in the conservatory an hour ago."

"Oh! You approve?"

"Decidedly."

"I am afraid poor Enid is sadly puzzled."

"I sha'n't waste any sympathy upon Miss Grayle. She shouldn't flirt. Should she?"

"Oh no. I never do."

Railsford smiled.

"The captain is an eager wooer, isn't he?"

"Yes. He is desperately in love with my thirty thousand pounds. Enid's ten thousand has no chance."

"Ha, ha! Do you think you will be able to keep him in hand till after the theatricals?"

"I think so—I will try."

"You mustn't fail. Above all, the comedy must be a success."

"But after that—"

"Oh, after that we shall know how to deal with our gallant captain."

In his room that night Captain Creyke indulged in some pleasant reflections.

"Thirty thousand pounds!" he said to himself; "it's a cert, too; no doubt about it; thirty thousand of her very own. Creyke, my boy, you're in luck."

III

DURING the following days, matters went very smoothly at Helston House. The captain's attentions to Miss Grayle no longer caused frowns to cloud Arthur Tunstall's brow, or significant smiles to be exchanged by the other guests. Arthur was sensible enough not to give Enid any hint of his satisfaction, and Miss Grayle herself appeared elaborately unconscious of any change.

Enid thought it just a little injudicious of

dear Lady Helston to flirt so very openly with Captain Creyke, and she confided this opinion to two or three intimate friends, who fully agreed with her.

But her ladyship appeared to be quite unaware that eyes and tongues had begun to busy themselves with her actions. She walked or drove or skated with Captain Creyke, with an air of blissful unconsciousness.

Christmas was close at hand now. But as the time of Sir Richard's return drew near, Captain Creyke became more urgent, and all Lady Helston's skill was needed to fence with him.

"Why wait—why wait, Celia?" he urged. "How painful to both of us to meet Sir Richard, when—"

"But—"

"Why do you hesitate?"

"The comedy."

"The comedy?"

"Yes. What would become of it without you—without me?" said Lady Helston, with an air of innocent seriousness.

"But—Celia—can you think of such a trifle at such a moment?"

"A trifle, Captain Creyke!"

"Well, in comparison with—"

"After all the trouble that everybody has taken—how could I spoil it? What horribly bad form."

"Well, but think of ourselves."

"Ah, don't ask me to spoil the theatricals—that would be too bad."

"Well, then, suppose we get the beastly thing—I mean the comedy, over—then—"

"That would be different."

"Perhaps, too, we should find it easier to

fly undiscovered on Christmas Eve," the captain said thoughtfully. "Everybody will be talking about the theatricals, and how easy it would be for you to slip off under pretence of changing your dress, and join me in the grounds. It is only ten minutes' walk to the station."

Lady Helston's eyes gleamed for a moment. Then she smiled.

"How easy," she murmured.

"It is agreed, then?" Lady Helston did not speak, and, taking silence for consent, the captain continued, "And now for the rendezvous."

A twinkle of fun darted into the lady's eyes.

"The plank bridge over the stream in the grounds," she suggested.

"That is a distance from the house."

"All the better."

"Be it so, then."

"You will wait there for me. I will wear a dark cloak with a hood—you will know me."

"How happy you have made me."

"But the comedy—you will do your best?"

"Your wish is my law."

"I do so want it to be a success."

Verily, the captain said to himself, the ways of women are strange. She seemed to think more about the comedy than about the terribly serious step which was to follow. But the captain was a wise man, or thought himself one, and he had long given up trying to solve the mystery called woman.

When Lady Helston demurely told Railsford about the rendezvous for Christmas Eve, he looked grave. But when she proceeded to explain her views, his face relaxed into a grin.

"What do you think of the idea, Mr Railsford?"

"Excellent."

"He ought to have some punishment for his insolence."

"Yes—I should like to give him a horse-whipping—but that would be a scene. Leave it to me."

The rehearsals went on excellently. Arthur Tunstall, so far from wishing to introduce the startling *tableau* he had spoken of to Railsford, had begun to think that the captain wasn't such a bad fellow after all.

And so came Christmas Eve, and Sir Richard Helston, and the long-looked-for performance of *A Christmas Comedy*.

IV

EVERYBODY agreed that *A Christmas Comedy* was a success. Everyone who participated in the acting played his or her part well, and Railsford's management was perfection. Captain Creyke especially was a success in the part of Colonel Rake. And Arthur, with his mind freed from anxiety, was excellent; and Enid, determined to show Captain Creyke that she did not care, was dazzling.

There was general satisfaction. And in the buzz of talk after the theatricals, Captain Creyke strolled away to smoke a cigar on the terrace.

Railsford saw him go, and smiled. Lady Helston was with Sir Richard, apparently thinking of nothing in the world but making his home-coming happy, as was natural after his long absence.

Captain Creyke did not finish his cigar. As

soon as he was satisfied that he was unobserved, he went into the grounds.

It was a clear, cold December night. The ground, powdered with snow, glimmered in the steely starlight. Captain Creyke soon found himself at the rendezvous.

The little streamlet, winding amongst the leafless trees, was frozen over, but the ice was thin and treacherous. Captain Creyke halted by the rustic plank bridge, and lighted another cigar. No sign of Lady Helston yet. He smoked and waited.

Presently a sound made him cease his pacing, and glance across the stream. A figure enveloped in a long dark cloak and a hood appeared under the frosty trees upon the opposite bank. He saw a hand raised to beckon him.

Captain Creyke was a little puzzled. Lady Helston must have gone round by the iron bridge, two hundred yards away to reach that side of the stream. Why she had done so was a mystery.

However, there she was, and he had only to cross the plank bridge to join her. He stepped upon the plank. It lay level upon the surface of the ice. He waved his hand and advanced.

Crack!

The ice cracked and gaped, the plank, parting in the middle, plunged into the stream. Before the captain could realise his danger, he

was up to his armpits in icy water, gasping and sputtering.

He scrambled ashore, drenched, half frozen, wholly enraged. For he knew that the plank must have been sawn through the middle, so that his weight had fallen upon the thin sheet of ice; that was the only explanation of the catastrophe.

What did it mean? He stared round in search of Lady Helston. But the cloaked figure had vanished. But, as the unfortunate lover stood wondering, furious, and shivering, the sound of a laugh came mockingly from the trees.

“Ha, ha, ha!”

Captain Creyke ground his teeth.

The gallant captain was confined to his room by a severe cold all Christmas Day, and he had the pleasure of listening to the sounds of merry-making in the intervals of coughing and sneezing. And as soon as his cold was better he made his excuses to Sir Richard and Lady Helston and took his leave.

“So sorry you must go,” gushed Lady Helston, as she gave him the extreme tips of two slim fingers. “Still, I am glad you were able to stay for the theatricals. I hope you will carry away a pleasant recollection of our little Christmas comedy.”

But it is to be feared that the captain's recollections were far from pleasant ones—though, to this day, the whole affair remains a good deal of a mystery to him.