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THE KIDNAPPING OF COLLINGBURN.

(George Edwardes, in Tit-Bits.)

"Fate's been rough on Maxse. Got him down first go off and has sat on him ever since," said Harkness, as he knocked the ashes out of his pipe.

"Poor Old Maxse!" said Wenn.

"And the worst part of it is that he is undoubtedly clever—brilliant—a genius."

"Now, take you and me," he continued, after a pause. "We are neither of us particularly brilliant stars in the firmament of society, are we? We couldn't paint a farmyard fence decently, not to mention a picture." Harkness went on. "Music! We know as much about it as a dago organ grinder. We couldn't write a book—not to save our immortal souls. We—"

"Can make pickles," interrupted Wenn, with a grin.

"I'm coming to that. We are pitch-forked into the good old-established business of Harkness & Wenn, pickle makers, built up by our fathers and grandfathers before us and still to the fore because—well, because we're not just such a pair of fools as to interfere with smooth-running machinery."

Wenn nodded acquiescence and helped himself to whiskey and soda.

"Well, there you are," continued Harkness. "Think of it. Pickles brings us in close on ten thousand a year each, and genius—genius barely enables Maxse to keep himself and the wife and kids in bread and butter. What's the inference?"

"It's obvious. There's a better market for pickles than for brains."

"Well, it's rough that a man has to starve for want of an opportunity of showing the world that he's clever. Poor beggar! I met him in the Strand this morning, looking very seedy and down at the heels. Wasn't going to let on that he saw me; but I wouldn't have it. I hauled him off to lunch and made him tell me all about himself. You should have seen him trying not to wolf his food. He's managed to get a minor part in 'The Souls of Society,' which is to be produced next Monday. Laurence Collingburn is leading man, and Maxse is his understudy. Now, I'm dead certain Maxse could take the part fully as we as Collingburn, if not better."

"There was a pause and then Harkness laid down his pipe. He swung round in his chair and saw that the room was deserted, save for themselves.

"Suppose something happened to Collingburn—for one night," he said, leaning forward in his seat.

"What the deuce could hap—Great Scott! Harkness, do you mean—"

"Kidnap him."

"You make me perspire! Run away, or talk sensibly. One doesn't do that sort of thing nowadays."

"I'm perfectly serious," protested the other.

"But, hang it all, look at the risk! I'd do a good deal for Maxse, but I draw the line at kidnapping."

The two conspirators smoked in silence for some time, and then Wenn suddenly slapped the arm of his chair.

"Tommy Smith!"

"What about Tommy Smith?"

He's coming up from Cambridge for a run round London. We'll put Tommy into it. He's always game for a lark. He'll be up to his neck in this if you give him a chance."

"Good old Tommy! Yes, we'll have Tommy in by all means," said Harkness.

There was a knock at the door, and Collingburn was announced.

Tommy Smith jumped to his feet. "Not Mr. Laurence Collingburn?" he exclaimed. His face beamed.

Collingburn glanced round the room with a questioning look. "That is my name. But I'm afraid, gentlemen, there's some mistake."

"I think so," smiled Tommy.

"But I received a telegram from Mason, the manager of the King's Theatre, asking me to meet him at this address at six o'clock."

"Unpunctuality, thy name is Mason," said Tommy. "He told me he was going to look me up and was bringing a friend."

Tommy lied beautifully. "But I had no idea we were to have the pleasure of meeting Mr. Laurence Collingburn. We'll have to introduce ourselves in Mason's absence. My name is Smith. My friends, Mr. Baker and Mr. Thompson. Just give me your hat and coat and I'll put them outside. Ring the bell, will you, Thompson, and we'll have dinner up and see if the scent will bring Mason."

Didn't Mason tell you you were to dine with us.

"I new nothing beyond what was in the wire."

"This excellent dinner hasn't been provided without a purpose, it strikes me," was Collingburn's inward comment. "Some put-up game between them and Mason. Wonder which of them wants to get on the stage, for I guess that's about the hang of the thing. But he could not understand Mason's absence. Nevertheless the actor was thoroughly appreciating the good fare set before him."

"I noticed a telephone in the doorkeeper's box," he said, addressing his host. "Will you excuse me a moment? Was to have called at my costumer's this afternoon. Clean forgot about it. I'll just ring them up."

He rang up Mason's flat instead, and on inquiring for the manager was informed that that individual had been called away to Hampshire by wire at 4 o'clock that afternoon.

Collingburn chafed as he hung up the receiver, but his face was as inscrutable as the Sphinx when he resumed his seat at the table.

He pulled out his watch a moment or two later. "Seven o'clock, gentlemen, and I must be at the theatre at half past."

"Now for it," remarked Tommy, inwardly. "Can't think what has detained Mason, but I'm very pleased to have met you all. I'll have to be off if you'll pardon my rushing away like this."

"Better make a night of it," suggested Tommy with a bland smile. He made a sign and Harkness slipped to the door, locked it and put the key in his pocket.

"Open that door," demanded Collingburn.

"Can't. Har—Baker's got the key in his pocket. Strong man, Baker. Champion heavyweight boxer at Magdalen."

"Look here, I don't know what game you are playing, but I do know that you are forcibly detaining me here, and you'll suffer the penalty."

Tommy raised his hand with a deprecating gesture.

"Not force, my dear sir—merely gentle persuasion."

Collingburn moved toward the bell pash. Wenn slipped in between.

"Stand aside, sir," thundered Collingburn.

"Nother strong man. Thompson, champion lightweight wrestler at Magdalen," said Tommy, sweetly.

"Sit down, Collingburn, and have another glass of wine and a cigar."

Collingburn smoked on in angry silence for half an hour or so, then his eyes wandered several times in the direction of the three conspirators. He liked a game of bridge beyond anything. At length he rose and walked over to the card table.

"You're all Cambridge?"

"On our oaths, your worship," replied Tommy, solemnly.

"I'm Oxford. I can trust Cambridge men. I don't know what you're playing on me tonight, but I'm hanged if I can hold out against bridge."

"Good man," said Tommy.

By midnight the actor was £510 to the good. He inwardly voted the others as decent a trio as he ever had met. And it wasn't the winning of the cash that swayed his mind.

Tommy suggested an interval of something to eat.

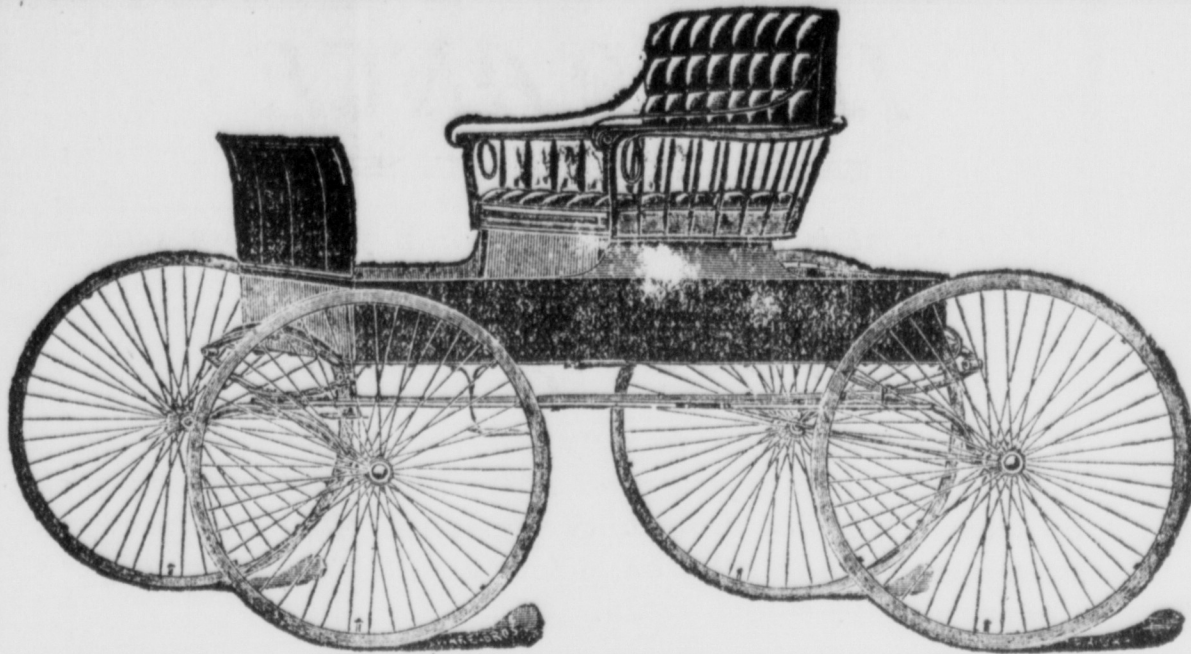
"Tell us a yarn, Baker," he said presently with a wink.

"I was just thinking of something in Collingburn's line," he replied.

"Let's have the story, by all means," said the actor.

"Well," he began. "I knew a fellow at Cambridge who was a don at acting. We did 'The Gay Lord Quex' one night and this man took the title role. I saw Hare and I'm hanged if he did the thing one bit better than our man. Well, when this fellow left Cambridge one or two of us dined it into him that he ought to go on the stage, and this he eventually did. Poor beggar, he never seemed to get a chance, and yet, by Jove, he could act—no mistake about that!"

"I never knew a man who was really well up in stage business who didn't eventually



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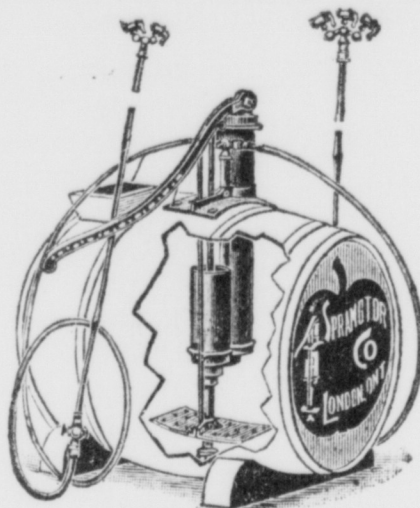
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come out on top," said Collingburn.

"This man did—eventually," went on Harkness, "but he went through a deuce of a rough time before the laurels came his way. And in the meantime he had got married. Chorus girl in one of the touring companies, I think it was. Couldn't act for nuts, but as nice a girl as one would wish to meet anywhere—no nonsense about her. She was, in fact, a lady, and wouldn't have been on the stage at all only—but that's another story, as Kipling says. 'Well, as I said before, our friend went through an awful grind. Kids, too, and half starved. Then at last his chance came. He got a minor part in a new piece, and was understudy to the leading man. To cut a long story short, the principal actor was called away suddenly one night—urgent business, or something of the sort—and our man's opportunity was before him. He acted as he never acted before. His name is made—tonight."

"Tonight?" echoed Collingburn, sitting forward in his chair.

"Tonight," replied Harkness, quietly.

Collingburn dab-dabbed with the end of his cigar in the ash tray before him. Then he lay back in his chair and frowned.

"I see," he said slowly. "Upon my word I don't know whether to call you a pack of scoundrels or," his brow cleared, "a trio of bricks."

"Go and see him to-morrow, Collingburn. See his wife and the kids. Look at the happiness in their faces when they've read the papers; and—make it bricks," said Harkness.

When the rattle of the milk cart over the rough cobbles awakened Maxse next morning, he hurriedly dressed and ran out to buy a morning paper.

This is what he read: "The Soul of Society" at the King's.—Through the unavoidable absence of Mr. Laurence Collingburn, the leading part was played by Mr. Herbert Maxse, who is the former's understudy. Whatever feelings of disappointment the announcement that the leading actor would not appear may have evoked in the minds of the audience, these feelings were quickly dispelled by the magnificent acting of Mr. Maxse. We would not for one moment depreciate Mr. Collingburn's talent—it is beyond dispute; but we do say, unhesitatingly, that Mr. Maxse's portrayal of the dissolute scion of a wealthy and titled family could scarcely be surpassed.

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