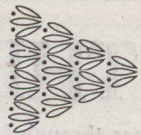


HUMBLE PIE



*How the King of Kentish Town-
road was made to eat it.*

By EDWIN PUGH

S AID the cynical youth in the amazing collar: "There's a kind of young man who is merely background. I mean, that without his clothes he wouldn't be noticed."

"All depends," remarked someone. "If he lived in a swimming bath—"

"I mean," the youth explained, "that he doesn't exist—outside his clothes."

"Few of us do."

"There was Bertie Amplett, for instance," said the youth.

"Was there?"

"You remember him?"

"Imperfectly."

"Now, tell me, how do you remember him?"

"I remember him—as a perambulator."

"Good!" cried the cynical youth. "You tell the story, Flatface."

"This Bertie," you know," said Flatface, "was a deuce of a fellah. He didn't work 'in the City somewhere.' He drew, I believe, a quid a week; but I vow he never earned it. His wages went on clothes, mostly, and Woodbines, and bittahs. His mother was a char-woman—when not too ill to work—and she kept the back-room going. Bertie was King of the local Monkey Parade. And if you don't know what a monkey-parade is ask Anderson here. He's straight off one."

"It's a place where the elite of the beau monde of Suburbia meet nightly, for purposes of flirtation. It's generally a big main thoroughfare. The fellahs and the girls wink and smirk as they pass, and break hearts at two yards with deadly precision."

"Well, Bertie was king of one. The Kentish Town-road was his preserve, and he pervaded it nightly, like a revolving sky-sign. There wasn't any escaping him."

"You see, he was a tall chap, and that isn't usual. He was good-looking, too, in the style of the novel-ette hero. And he really knew how to wear clothes. In fact, it was in his blood, his father having been a shop-walker. And so it came to pass that his hat didn't fit him very well, owing to his suffering from swelled head. The girls spoilt him, you see. They hung on his words. They played Sweet Alice to his Ben Bolt—wept with delight when he gave them a smile, and trembled with fear at his frown. All that sort of thing. He'd only got to press the button; they did the rest."

"And, naturally, the other paraders didn't like it. A point to be borne in mind, this universal enmity. Personally, I'd rather have a hundred friends who bored me than one fascinating foe. The fellows, you may be sure, fussed poor Bertie up till his blushes would have made his eyes water—had he been anybody else. As it was, he spooned the sickly stuff into himself, and thrived on it. And his darling enemies would go away and ask one another what it was the girls thought they saw in Bertie. They hadn't tumbled to the truth, you see—being cubs—that the world is willing to accept any man at his own valuation, providing he prices himself at a fancy figure. And Bertie did. He had a pretty way of taking things for granted—and inevitably they were granted."

"Well, Bertie's career had lasted perhaps two years when he met the girl who was different from every other girl in the world. (You all know her.) Her name was Minnie Bates in this instance; and she was an attendant at a theatre—a sterling little thing! She believed in Bertie, just as the other girls did. She agreed with him in thinking that he was the handsomest and finest man that ever was born; and when there is perfect agreement on a point of that importance love follows as a simple matter of course."

"Bertie forsook the Monkey Parade to spend the long May evenings on Hampstead Heath with Minnie. They discovered the new world of the sky together, and gave the moon many unsolicited testimonials. They tried to break a sixpence in half, but couldn't manage it, so changed it for two three-penny bits—with difficulty, Bertie having grievously maltreated the coin in his efforts to break it—and they wore one threepenny bit each, as near to their hearts as the exigencies of modern underwear permit. And they were as happy as two infants who have succeeded in extracting the cork from a bottle of ink."

"And the Monkey Paraders rejoiced exceedingly, for the ladies now became aware of their existence. And a new king reigned in the land

who knew not Bertie.

"But, of course, it didn't last for ever. Nothing ever does last as long as that—not even a hundred up between two suckling billiardists. Minnie was smitten with sickness, and had to go away for a holiday in Devonshire. And Bertie, bored in her absence, and realizing that nothing cheers up a man so much as the sight of old faces—especially when the old faces are young—returned, for one night only, as he phrased it, to the scene of former triumphs. But the altered state of affairs on the Monkey Parade, instead of heartening, depressed him."

"A man of no account at all came up and criticized his hat. 'My dear old boy,' said the man of no account, 'where did you find it?'"

"What's the matter with it?" inquired Bertie, irately; but his head had shrunk so that it felt several sizes too large already."

"All I can say is," was the rejoinder, 'Popkins wouldn't be found dead in it.'

"He would," retorted Bertie, 'if he's taken to stealing hats and took mine.'

"You know what I mean," said the insufferable one."

"I do not," said Bertie. 'And who is Popkins when he's at home?'"

"I don't know," was the reply; 'but he's a daddy when he's out.'

"Now, this was galling. And Bertie was even less pleased when he found that the girls no longer played Alice to his Ben Bolt, choosing rather to play Juliet to Popkins's Romeo."

"This must be seen to," he decided. And he saw to it. So deep still was the old impression he had made that he had little difficulty in re-establishing his supremacy. Popkins was summarily deposed. The girls once more flocked to his piping. In a week he was once more the Great Gazoo of the Monkey Parade, and ruffling it with the keener zest for his temporary eclipse."

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AT the back of his new exaltation, however, lurked a feeling of resentment against the memory of Minnie. He wondered what he had seen in her, not knowing that it was a glorified reflection of himself mirrored in her limpid eyes. And when the winsome maid returned, expectant, palpitating with glad anticipations of a blissful reunion, he cut her dead."

"They met on the Monkey Parade on a Sunday evening. He had a girl on either arm, and they were both adoring him and hating one another. Minnie's face paled. Her lips parted in a sighing breath of woeful dismay. She looked at him pleadingly; but he tilted his chin and passed her by, and gave her neither word nor smile."

"It was two or three weeks later that the second act of this tragi-farce opened," said Flatface. "Sunday night again, and the Monkey Parade crowded from end to end with flamboyant young humans, all bent on tender dalliance. Bertie walked magnificently alone. There was none too proud to do him reverence; but he was a little weary of too-facile conquest, and longed for something better than the sickly homage of these shallow nincompoops."

"And then, quite abruptly, there emerged from the press of familiar faces one that he did not know—the face of a woman, beautiful, alight with a rare intelligence, a radiant spirit, an expression of utter aloofness from the chattering, jostling horde—the face of one sublimely sure of herself, queenly, dominating."

"She came straight towards Bertie, and shook hands with him. He raised his hat in a dazed transport. She talked. She rattled on with a lively self-assurance that stupefied our dandy Cockney. She pretended that they had met before—she couldn't remember clearly where; the amazing suggestion conveyed by this glorious creature was that her assumption of an old acquaintance was a mere subterfuge to win his regal countenance. To say that he was taken by storm expresses the idea only mildly. He was swept into subjection, body and soul, by this superb and resplendent beauty, who wore clothes that he had only seen in pictures as if they were the veriest duds, who commanded him to buy ices for her, and hailed cabs as if they had been omnibuses. There never was a case of such complete obsession as Bertie's!"

"They met again and again, always by appointment, and he was invariably punctual. She was not

—often arriving late, sometimes not turning up at all. Her name, he discovered, was Isabel Mirramore, and she—this was the cream and the joy of it!—was a married woman."

"It was on a Sunday late in August that the last act opened. Bertie had arranged to meet Isabel at the corner of Prince of Wales-road, outside the undertaker's—a favourite trysting-place. He was there to the tick, as usual; and she, as usual, was not. He waited. Half an hour passed—a chastening time for Bertie; but by now he had grown used to such discipline. And then she appeared."

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FLATFACE paused eloquently. "She appeared," he repeated, slowly. "And at sight of her Bertie's lower jaw dropped, so that his nose and mouth looked like a note of exclamation. For she was not alone. No. She had a companion, of dubious sex, whose face made an indistinct pink smudge behind a thick creamy veil. Her companion was a baby, and it rode in a perambulator, which Isabel pushed. It was not even a smart pram. It was one of those old-fashioned contraptions on three wheels—the sort of thing you never see now, except in back-of-the-world villages. She greeted the obfuscated Bertie, seeming all unconscious of offence, and they shook hands. She did not apologize for the outrageous pram, or the accursed kid either."

"Cyril did so want a ride, and his nurse is ill," she explained, breezily."

"Bertie moistened his dry, sticky lips. 'I'm awfully sorry,' he stammered, 'but—'"

"He was about to plead another engagement, but she looked inscrutably dangerous, as only a weak woman can, and he dared not. He never had mastered Isabel, and he could not do it at this crisis."

"Let's go a quiet way," he uttered, hoarsely."

"Oh, no!" she cried. "Baby enjoys a crowd so!"

"And thus we behold this weird cortege trundling slowly up Kentish Town-road."

"Bertie had never before felt so big and awkward and hot and uncomfortable in all the days of his short merry life. He felt as if he must be ten feet high at least, and that the pram was fully as large as a pantechmicon. Isabel walked beside him, smiling serenely. Every now and then she stooped to fuss up the abominable infant to prod him in the wind and whisper words of loving kindness. Outside the railway station she deftly transferred the handles of the equipage to Bertie. He would have protested, but a dreadful clairvoyant feeling oppressed him. He saw the grinning, leering faces of his rivals, and heard the titters of the girls—discarded flames—as though through a lurid mist. He heard the raucous, jeering mirth of Popkins, and was horribly aware of the fact that a queue of triumphant mockers trailed away in his wake indefinitely."

"So they proceeded."

"They came out at last on Parliament Hill, and Isabel yearned for ices. In an awesome, solemn silence Bertie wheeled the pram up to the little chalet at the foot of the long slope, and took possession of a table."

"You go and order it, dear," said Isabel, languishing at him. "I'll look after baby."

"He went. He was minded to flee; but she had laid a spell on him, and he dared not. He was a good time absent; but he ordered what he did not require at last, and returned to the spot where he had left his tactless lady."

"And she was gone. The pram was there all right, with the baby fast asleep in it, buttressed against the four winds by innumerable swaddlings. Hideous and grim the vehicle stood, shabby and loathsome, a ghastly anachronism in faded, blistered green and yellow, obtrusively conspicuous in the rosy westering afterglow."

"His eyes roved wildly over the sylvan scene. The hillslopes swarmed with happy folk in all their Sunday bravery; but she—the faithless, treacherous She!—was nowhere to be seen. And there he stood in his glossy top-hat, his thirty-two-and-sixpenny frock-coat and vest, his twelve-and-elevenpenny trousers, his collar like a white-washed wall, his bed-quilt tie, his Abyssinian gold watch-chain, and cut-glass pin—a forlorn figure of derision. He could have wept. He could have flung up his hands to the sky and cursed the eternal ironies. But he was not built that way."

The sweat poured down his haggard face. His collar seemed to be pushing his ears into his hat. He would have risen to poetic heights of declamatory despair; but the resources of his vocabulary were not equal to the effort. He could only mutter, 'This ain't 'alf a go!' and drop limply into a chair beside the pram."

"An officious menial bustled up and began to unload the heavy burden of a huge tray."

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