

“Fool Enough for Anything !”

By

Charles Hamilton

BUNNY was worried. The atmosphere in the breakfast-room at Wistaria Villa, Margate, was electric. Mr. Hare, Bunny’s uncle, sat silent and grim. Bunny’s cousin Gilbert was as silent as his father. Bunny of course, said no word.

Mrs. Hare— Bunny’s aunt— was talking enough for four.

“Two hundred pounds !” said Mrs. Hare for the eleventh time.

“My dear !” said Mr. Hare, breaking his silence.

“Two hundred pounds !” repeated Mrs. Hare.

Mr. Hare became silent again. Gilbert looked tip from his plate, and surreptitiously closed one eye at Bunny across the table.

Bunny nearly choked, having just transferred a spoonful of porridge to his mouth when he caught Gilbert’s sudden and unexpected wink.

‘ Oooooogh t’ gurgled Bunny. It was no time to laugh when the atmosphere was charged with electricity. Still s was it time to laugh when one’s mouth wne charged with porridge. But Gilbert’s sudden wink was too much for Bunny.

His uncle’s eye turned on him.

“Can you not behave yourself at table?” demanded Mr. Mayor.

“Oh ! Ooooh ! Yes, Uncle! Woooh !”

“Disgusting !” exclaimed Mr. Hare.

“Do shut up, Bunny !” said Gilbert.

Which was rather mean of Gilbert, as he was the cause of the catastrophe.

Mrs. Hare took no heed of Bunny. Her mind was occupied by more important matters. Mrs. Hare was up against the stupendous problem that bothers so many married ladies: the abysmal stupidity of menfolk when they refuse to be guided by womenfolk.

Mr. Hare, it was true, was generally guided. In his office in the City he was considered quite a hard nut to crack. But at home at Wisteria Villa he was usually as clay in the hands of the potter.

“Two hundred pounds!” said Mrs. Hare for the thirteenth time, heedless of Bunny’s gurgle. “And the mortgage almost due t And—”

“My dear!” said Mr. Hare. He made a feeble attempt to assume his office manner, though he was well aware, from experience, that it was not successful at Wistaria Villa. “I dislike discussing business matters at breakfast— especially before the boys !”

“Who is the rogue ?” asked Mrs. Hare

“ If you are alluding to the old friend whom I helped out of a difficulty with a loan of two hundred pounds—” began Mr. Hare, with a great deal of dignity.

“I am alluding to the man who owes you two hundred pounds and refuses to pay “ said Mrs. Hare.

“I am sure, my dear, that he would pay if he could !”

“A person who cannot pay has no right to borrow,” said Mrs. Hare.

“ Is he, whoever ho is, aware that there is a mortgage on the house?”

“N-no.”

“Is it your intention to mention it to him?”

“Oh dear t” said Mr. Hare. He looked at his watch. “Dear me! I must go at once! I shall lose my train!”

“It is still ten minutes before your usual time, Mr. Hare. And I should like to know—”

“Yes. But I have to call in at Bobby’s about—about my umbrella!” said Mr. Hare hastily. ‘ I have not a moment to lose !” Mr. Hare

escaped. Peace descended on his soul when he was safely seated in the 9.10 for Victoria.

But on the household of Wistaria Villa peace did not descend. Trouble brooded over that and abode.

Bunny drifted into the garden with a dismal face. Bunny had a happy disposition, and was always happy so long as he saw happy faces. But he had the sensitive nature, and felt other people's troubles as if they were and his own.

Gilbert Hare, however, looked quite cheery as he strolled into the garden after Bunny. Gilbert lighted a cigarette. Gilbert was seventeen, and no end of a man of the world, Bunny was fourteen, and not in the least a man of the world, and he shook his head when his cousin kindly offered him a smoke. "The mater's waxy" Gilbert remarked. It's a fact that the governor is rather an ass, Bunny. I think it runs in the family. Your pater was an ass and you're an ass, and the governor's an ass. Really, I must have had a jolly narrow escape of being an ass myself.

"Bunny was not sure that Gilbert had escaped. But he did not say so.

"The poor old mater!" said Gilbert. "She's right, of course. Fancy him lending a chap two hundred pounds when he's as hard-up as the pater! That's the kind of thing your pater used to do, Bunny. That's why he had to vanish all of a sudden without leaving his address behind. If they foreclose on the mortgage, it will be the end of this show. Lucky I've got a good job in Cliftonville!"

"Can't we do something to help?" asked Bunny.

Gilbert stared at him, "What could we do, fatHead? The pater's lent that money to some friend who's let him down. Man must be a rogue not to pay up. Some sneaking blighter who's got round the pater because he's an ass!" "Must be an awful rotter!" said Bunny.

"A sneaking, miserable worm!" said Gilbert. "If I knew who he was, I'd jolly well tell him what I think of him. But the pater keeps that dark. He won't mention the Johnny's name. I dare say the man could pay him if he liked, But he knows the pater's soft. I'd like to

punch his beastly head !”

“So would I.!” said Bunny. “But --look here, Gilbert ! Can’t we do something? The man ought to be made to pay !” . He wrinkled his chubby brow in thought. “Uncle’s worried, and auntie’s worried; and it’s all the fault of that Brit who o uncle money and won’t pay up. We ought to make him, somehow. And from what auntie says the house may be sold up if uncle can’t meet the mortgage !”

“Looks like it !” agreed Gilbert. “Business is bad in the city, and the p A ter’s up against it. It will be a cropper for you. I suppose that’s what’s bothering you, isn’t it?”

“I wasn’t thinking about myself !” Bunny exclaimed indignantly.

“I never thought of that for a moment.”

“Shouldn’t wonder,” said Gilbert.

“You’re fool enough for anything. Bunny But if we come to a smash here, you’ll be fairly landed. You haven’t sense enough to bag a job of any sort, and you’ll never be worth your keep to anybody. You couldn’t push a truck without pushing it into a tram. You couldn’t take round papers without delivering the wrong papers at the wrong home. Frightful handicap to a fellow to have a brain like yours, Bunny !”

“I don’t care what happens to me,” said Bunny warmly. ‘But I do wish I could make that rotter pay up!

Look here! I’m going to try—

“You, old bean !” laughed Gilbert.

“You’re worth your oats to make a fellow laugh, Bunny. Well, I must be off!”

And Gilbert threw away the stump of his cigarette and departed.

Bunny was left alone in the garden.

He stared away over the garden wall towards the sea, his eyes following a ketch that had come out from Ramsgate. But for once Bunny was not thinking of distant seas and foreign lands and strange adventures in strange climes. He was thinking of the trouble that brooded over Wisteria Villa which clouded the brow of the uncle who had taken a charge of him when his father Disappeared, and which was turning his kind-h P. arted aunt into a

peevish and nagging woman. If only he could have done something to help— .

“Bunny !” It was his aunt’s voice, calling with a very acid note.

Bunny

hurried at once into the house.

To Beard the Lion.

BUNNY sorted out the papers on his uncle’s desk and set them in their places in a very orderly way. Mr. Hare was a rather untidy gentleman, and his study at Wisteria Villa always needed tidying. That was one of Bunny’s duties. Bunny had many duties to perform, and he performed them all cheerfully. He was aware that his uncle was scarcely in a position to take charge of an orphan, and place him in the world; but Mr. Hare had undertaken that duty, and Bunny had a grateful heart.

When he dreamed of a life of adventure in foreign lands; Bunny always dreamed of coming home some day with a fortune and making things easy for the relatives who had been kind to him when he needed kindness. Life was not always smooth at Wistaria Villa, but his uncle certainly was a generous man, his aunt kind when she was not worried about money, and Gilbert, though ineffably patronising, was a good fellow.

Bunny was fond of them all, and there was nothing he would not have done to help the family out of its present trouble.

The domestic service at Wistaria Villa was limited to one maid, who came in daily, so there was plenty to be done by a fellow who desired to make himself useful. Bunny attended to the garden and to his uncle’s study, and did many, many other things. He would gladly have done more.

Now, while he tidied his uncle’s study, his thoughts were running on that blighter, that miserable worm, as Gilbert called him, who owed Mr. Austin Hare two hundred pounds, and refused to pay him. Mr. Hare spoke of him as a friend. But Bunny could not help feeling that Gilbert was right in calling him a worm, and Mrs. Hare

right in calling him a
rogue.

If the man couldn't pay he couldn't. But both Gilbert and Mrs. Hare evidently believed that he was some unscrupulous person who could pay and wouldn't—taking advantage of Mr. Hare's weak and easy-going nature.

And such conduct as that appeared unspeakable to Bunny.

If only v knew who the man was, Bunny told himself, he would make the beast pay somehow. His uncle, certainly, would be angry if he butted in. But he could stand that.

And then, among the many papers scattered on Mr. Hare's desk, Bunny picked up a torn sheet. He looked at it, to ascertain whether it was a paper to be put carefully in a pigeon-hole or a useless fragment to be dropped into the wastepaper-basket. And he read on it:

“Loftus House, Cliftonville.

Dear Hare,—I have just received your note referring to the two hundred pounds. I'm sorry I cannot —“

Bunny jumped. That was all there was of the letter; the rest was gone. Mr. Hare, evidently, had torn it across intending to throw it away, and with his usual carelessness had left that half of the sheet lying about his desk.

But little as there was of the letter, there was enough for Bunny. Somebody owed Mr. Hare two hundred pounds. This letter showed that Mr. Hare had written to Loftus House referring to two hundred pounds. Obviously, what he had written was a request for the payment of the debt.

It was clear enough to Bunny. His face flushed with indignation. He knew all about old Captain Loftus, of Loftus House, Chiftonville. He was rich—two hundred pounds was nothing to him. That he had ever borrowed such a sum from Mr. Hare was rather surprising; but there was no doubt that he could have paid had he liked. Why, his car alone must have cost eight hundred pounds at least.

Bunny breathed Indignation. Old Captain Loftus was said to be

rather miserly. Perhaps that was the reason he did not pay. A precious reason.

Bunny stood with the fragment in his hand, buried in thought. It was rotten—it was really disgusting. Bunny felt an intense desire to punch Captain Loftus' Roman nose. Rolling in money, and refusing to pay a small sum—small to him—which would save Wistnria Villa from ruin.

“John !“ it was his aunt's voice.

Bunny crushed the fragment of in his hand and looked round guiltily. When his aunt called him “John,” it meant that the good lady was very cross. Jack Hare was always called Bunny at other times.

“You are a very long, time,” snapped Mrs. Hare, from the doorway. “I am waiting for you to take the order to the grocer's.” ‘ I'm ready, auntie.” Bunny put the fragment of the letter into a pigeon-hole and closed the desk: A few minutes later he was walking down the Northdown Road, heading for the grocer's. But he was not thinking of groceries. He was thinking of Captain Loftus, of Loftus House, and the two hundred pounds, and revolving in his brain many schemes for making that miserly gentleman “square.”

He arrived at the grocer's and gave in the order. Unfortunately, Captain Loftua had driven most of Mrs. Hare's careful instructions from poor Bunny's mind, and instead of ordering one pound of tea and five pounds. of boiling bacon, he ordered five pounds of tea and one pound of boiling bacon. Little mistakes like this often happened to Bunny.

Having finished with the grocer, Bunny did not immediately return home. He walked down to the sands to think out his problem. His mind was quite made up. It was all very well for his uncle and aunt to consider him the fool of the family. It could have been all very well for Gilbert, who had learned the American language at the pictures, to declare that he was the world's prize boob, Bunny was going to set the matter right.

How was that brute, old Loftus, to be forced to pay the debt, which

he could so easily pay if he liked?

He had got to pay. Bunny was going to make him—somehow. With such a problem on his mind, time-passed swiftly. Bunny was late home to lunch. Somathing like a storm greeted him at Wistaria Villa.

Five pounds of tea and a pound of bacon had arrived there during hluniy's absence, completely upsetting Mrs. Hare's arrangements for the morning.

Bunny was glad to bolt a hasty lunch and get away. When Mrs. Hare was cross, her tongue was like unto the sword of sharpness in the fairy tale.

Bunny, of course, was sorry for the mistake, and he could not explain to his aunt that it was really due to his desire to benefit the family. It was more judicious to steer clear of the hurricane.

But that little matter soon passed from Bunny's mind. His thoughts were occupied with the difficult task of bringing Captain Loftus to book.

His aunt was angry now, over a trivial matter of tea and bacon in the wrong quantities. But how quickly the clouds would roll by when Bunny produced the two hundred pounds he' had collected from a bad debtor!

Bunny glowed at that thought. He could hear his aunt saying, "And this was the boy we thought the fool of the family! How we were mistaken in him !" It would be very pleasant to hear Aunt Hare saying that.

And in the afternoon Bunny walked valiantly up to Loftus House, determined to beard the lion in his den.

Bunny's mind was made up. And something was going to happen !

Sink or Swim!

" BOTHER !" said Bunny. It was disconcerting. Bunny arrived at Loftus House with the fixed determination of seeing Captain Loftus and screwing out of him, by hook or by crook, the two hundred pounds he owed to Mr. Austin Hare.

But he was informed at the door that Captain Loftus was not within, having gone down to the bathing-pool in the grounds for his afternoon swim. Loftus House stood in extensive grounds on the outskirts of Margate, and the bathing-pool was at a distance from the house, surrounded by old trees and flowery shrubberies. Bunny turned away in disgust. But he did not depart. He slipped away from the drive and went through the shrubberies towards the lake.

He had pictured an interview with the old gentleman in his library, and had fancied the captain shrinking under his accusing eye; blustering, perhaps, but finally coming round and paying up. Having taken on the job of debt collector, Bunny was not going to budge without the money. He was going to be as difficult to get rid of as an unpaid rate collector or tax gatherer. But interviewing Captain Loftus in his library and interviewing him in his bathing-pool were two rather different matters. Still, Bunny thought not one of those fellows of brilliant intellect, was a sticker.

He scuttled through the shrubberies and came in sight of the bathing-pool, secluded amid the leafy trees and shedding in the bright sun of Thanet.

It was a large pool—really a lake—and far out on its shining surface

Bunny spotted a swimmer. He paused near the dressing-hut on the bank and

Watched. In the little; thin gentleman in a bathing-suit who was swimming he recognised Captain Loftus.

But he felt rather at a loss. Certainly he could not shout to the man across the water that he had called to collect a debt, even if the captain had two hundred pounds about him, which was improbable. He had to wait. While he waited - and watched the man in the lake, Bunny wondered at the antics of the swimmer.

Bunny was a good swimmer himself, as much at home in the water as an otter. Every day Bunny went down to the shore for his swim, and Gilbert had often expressed his astonishment that Bunny could keep afloat. Bunny, in point of fact could not only keep

a float, but could swim two lengths to Gilbert's one. Bunny knew all about swimming and he grinned as he watched Captain Loftus, wondering why a man who could afford an expensive bathing-pool did not take the trouble to learn a few decent strokes. Then suddenly it flashed on Bunny's mind that the swimmer was in difficulties. His head would come up and go down again. One hand would be tossed in the air, and then the other. A foot appeared and disappeared. Strange sounds were coming from the swimmer—Inarticulate ejaculations.

"Oh Crumbs exclaimed Bunny.

Bunny was not, perhaps; quick on the uptake. But as soon as he realized that Captain Loftus was in difficulties and in danger of being drowned in his own expensive breathing-pool, Bunny acted promptly. He threw off cap and jacket and shoes and plunged into the water. Bunny had always found swimming easy. But swimming with his clothes on he found far from easy. But he swam rapidly and steadily for the centre of time lake, where the hapless captain was an almost at his last gasp. He reached Captain Loftus and grasped him.

"Hold on to me !" gasped Bunny. The old gentleman did not need telling. He grasped Bunny, and clung to him like a limpet to a rock. Bunny gave a choking gurgle as he was dragged under.

He fought up to the surface again, dragging Captain Loftus with him. An arm was round Bunny's neck, almost choking him. Every movement was incommoded, and, good swimmer as he was, Bunny found it hard to keep his head above water. It was useless to gasp and shout at the old gentleman, who was only half conscious now and quite irresponsible.

He had something to cling to in deep water, and he clung to it frantically. Bunny went under again, gurgling, and came up again and, spluttering. It was fortunate for Jack Hare that he was strong and sturdy, that he was a good swimmer, and that he had plenty of pluck. For he had to fight for his own life now, as well as that of the man he was trying to rescue.

He fought his way towards the bank, with the heavy weight of the

helpless man dragging him down. But it seemed to Bunny in those terrible moments, that he would never reach it alive.

There was no help. The house was out of sight beyond the trees. No one was at hand Two lives hung on Bunny's strength and determination. His wet clothes dragged him down, as well as the weight of the man who clung to him. And how Bunny escaped being drowned he never knew.

Inch by inch he won his way towards the green, sloping bank and again his head went under, and he felt his strength going.

But it did not occur to Bunny to shake off his horn and save himself. The thought did not even cross his mind. It was sink or swim together.

His senses were reeling, strange lights dancing before his eyes, and still the green bank seemed as far off as ever. And then suddenly Bunny felt something under his feet. His despairing hand clutched a tuft of grass.

He dragged himself painfully out of the water dragging the half-drowned man with him, and sank down in the grass. And then the universe seemed to spin around Bunny, and he did not know what happened next.

Pay up !

“My brave lad !”

Bunny's eyes opened.

“ Groogh !” was his first remark. An arm supported him and he sat up.

He blinked round him in the bright sunshine. He was sitting in the grass in a pool of water that had tripped from him a few yards from the margin of the lake. Captain Loftus was bending over him and supporting him. The old gentleman's rather leathery face was full of emotion

“Brave lad!” he repeated. “Gallant lad! How do you feel now?”

““Groogh!” I'm all right, sir!” gasped Bunny, and rubbed the water from his eyes.

“Feeling fit again, what?” asked Captain Loftus.

“Oh yes, quite !” and Bunny agreed, with another gasp. As a matter of fact he was feeling quite dazed and dizzy, and not quite sure whether he was still in the land of the living.

“You have saved my life !” said the old gentleman.

“Have I?” gasped Bunny.

“Yes. I had a sudden cramp. I had, given myself up. I should have gone down like a stone if you hadn’t pulled me out ! I owe you my life !”

“Oh ! murmured Bunny I-.I’m glad I helped you, sir.”

“I don’t know what you and were doing in my grounds” said Captain Loftus “but I’m glad you were on the spot, by gad ! What’s your name?”

“ Jack Hare.”

“Hare, Hare !” repeated the old gentleman. “Have I heard that name before somewhere?”

Bunny almost glared at him. Had the man forgotten the name of the man to whom he owed two hundred pounds? It looked like it. Bunny pulled himself together.

“I’m all right now,” he said.

“Wait for me,” said the captain; and he disappeared into the dressing hut. Bunny squeezed the water out of his clothes while he waited, and donned his shoes and jacket and cap,

He did not need bidding to wait for Captain Loftus, He meant to wait! In the excitement of saving him from the water, Bunny had forgotten what he had come to Loftus House for. He remembered, now. He had serious business with Captain Loftus before he left! The old military gentleman who was some time dressing. But he emerged from the hut at last.

“You’d better come up to the house and dry your clothes, lad,” he said graciously.

Captain Loftus had the reputation of being an extremely tart old gentle-

man, but his manner was graciousness itself to Bunny.

“ That’s all right, sir” and, said Bunny. “I’m not far from home.”

“If you’d rather run home, very well” said captain Loftus “But let me see you again, my boy. I’m not likely to forget that you saved my life. Mark this. If I can do anything for you at any time, you have only to ask. I’m not a man to make rash promises. I say what I mean, and I mean what I say.” Bunny drew a quick breath. This was his opportunity. For himself Bunny would never have dreamed of asking anything. But he was entitled to ask for what was due to his uncle. There could surely be no doubt about that ! He made the plunge at once.

“I’m glad to hear you say that, sir !” he exclaimed. I came here to ask you for something—

The old gentleman looked at him. “You came here to ask me for something?” he repeated, and the graciousness of his manner faded a

little. “What was it, pray?”

“Two hundred pounds, sir !” said Bunny.

Captain Lofton is jumped.

“Are you sane, boy?”

‘Eh? Yes, said Bunny.

“You—you came here to ask me, a perfect stranger, for two hundred

pounds?” bawled the captain.

“and Yes You see—“

“Preposterous!“

“You see, I am Mr. Austin Hare’s nephew,” Bunny hastened to explain; and my uncle’s hard up— “

“What is that to me? snorted the captain.

“Well, I think it ought to be a good deal to you, in the circumstances” said Bunny indignantly Two hundred pounds isn’t a lot to you, but to him it means—”

“Rubbish !“ snorted the old gentleman

Bunny breathed hard.

“I’m only asking what’s fair and right, as you jolly well know,” he said determinedly, “and you’ve just said that if you could do anything

for me I'd only to ask it. Well I'm asking for that two hundred pounds

—‘

“Pah!“ All the old gentleman's graciousness had vanished now.

“You have saved my life. I admit it. I would be glad to help you in any way I could. But to ask me for money—and such a sum —“

“It's not for myself, is it?“ exclaimed Bunny indignantly. “My uncle never was in. a position to lend the money—”

“If your uncle has lent money without being in a position to do so, lie is a fool !“

“Well, I like that !” gasped Bunny

“Look here—”

“Silence ! And You have saved my life. I have offered to reward you—and

you ask me for two hundred pounds! I am a man of my word. I will give

it to you—and never let me see your face again !”

“I don't want to t” said Bunny.

“All I want is the two hundred pounds, and you can't deny—”

“Silence !“ roared Captain Loftus. “Come with me !”

He stalked away towards the house, evidently in a very bad temper.

Bunny followed him. He did not care for the man's bad temper, so long as the man paid up. That was the important point. He was feeling angry and indignant too. Captain Loftus spoke just as if Bunny had asked for a large monetary reward for himself, instead of the payment of a just debt. It was irritating and unpleasant: Still, Bunny was there to collect the debt. That was the main point, and he saw success ahead at last.

Captain Loftus stalked into the house with Bunny at his heels.

Bunny followed him into the library .

Without a word the old gentleman unlocked they escritoire and took out a

Bundle of banknotes From these he extracted two for a hundred pounds

Each and Bunny's eyes danced as he saw them

The captain's eyes gleamed at him.

"Mercenary young rascal!" he said as he handed Bunny the two banknotes

"Look here, sir"

"Not a word!" snorted the old gentleman. "By gad, I am ashamed to

have had my life saved by such a mercenary young rascal! But I am a

man of my word You have named your price 'Take it and go!'"

"I think—"

"Go!" roared the old military gentleman and Bunny jumped up and went.

"Cheek!" murmured Bunny indignantly, as the door of Loftus House

closed behind him. "Nerve! Anybody would think that it was wrong

to ask a man to settle a debt. Doesn't the old donkey expect to to pay his debts? Cheek!"

But Bunny's brow smoothed out as he took his homeward way. He had set

Out on his mission with great determination, but with doubtful hope