

JACK TAKES OVER

BY MARTIN CLIFFORD

CHAPTER ONE

JACK of All Trades came to halt.

He was following a footpath across a sunny Sussex meadow. That footpath ended at a stile which gave access to Rylcombe Lane.

On the stile sat a burly youth, with a bullet head, a pimply complexion, and a cigarette sticking out of the corner of his mouth.

He had his back to the meadow, and seemed to be watching the lane, as if in expectation of seeing someone coming. But he glanced round at Jack's footsteps, stared at him, and then turned his head again, without otherwise moving. So Jack came to a halt. He had to cross the stile, to get out into the lane, and the bulky youth, sitting on the top bar with his feet on the step, barred the way. And apparently he had no intention of shifting.

"Mind letting me get over the stile?" asked Jack, mildly.

The commonest courtesy would have induced the big fellow to move and let him pass. But he seemed to have no use for courtesy, common or uncommon. He did not even answer the question, or turn his head again. He sat smoking and watching the lane.

Jack of All Trades breathed hard.

He was strongly tempted to grasp the uncivil fellow, and pitch him off the stile. And though the fellow was several inches taller, and twice his weight, he had no doubt that he could have done it. A rough life on the roads had taught the boy wanderer to use his hands, and landed him in more than one scrap with rough characters, in which he had not come out second-best.

But Jack was a peacable fellow, and he was

not looking for trouble. He breathed hard, but he kept his temper. He gave the fellow on the stile a gentle tap on the elbow.

"Let a fellow get across!" he said, politely.

The pimply youth stared round again. He gave Jack a frown, and his jaw jutted threateningly.

"Keep your paws to yourself," he snapped.

"I want to get across."

"You can want."

"Look here—."

"Jump it!" said the fellow on the stile, his frown changing to a grin, "Lots of room to jump! Chuck your bundle over, and jump after it, you young tramp."

A gleam like fire came into the blue eyes looking at him.

Who the fellow might be, Jack had no idea: but evidently he was the kind of fellow who prided himself upon being a "tough guy", and liked to "throw his weight about". Certainly it never occurred to him that the boy in the meadow, though nothing like his size and weight, could have knocked him right and left, had the spirit moved him so to do.

Jack was sorely tempted. His right hand clenched, almost itching to be planted in the grinning pimply face.

"Will you shift?" he asked.

"Shift me!" grinned the pimply one.

Jack almost took him at his word. But he restrained his temper. The fellow was not worth a scrap: neither did Jack want one: he wanted to get on his way. Quietly, though with deep feelings, he dropped his bundle over the stile, and clambered after it. The pimply youth watched him, grinning, as he

negotiated the high bar, and jumped to the ground on the other side.

Taking no further notice of the offensive stranger, Jack picked up his bundle, slung it over his shoulder, and stepped out. In one direction, the lane led to the village of Rylcombe: in the other, it passed the gates of St Jim's, a school that Jack knew. It was in the latter direction that Jack stepped out, though his destination certainly was not the big school which he had visited once, and had never forgotten. But he liked the idea of catching a distant glimpse of it, before he turned off to get to the Wayland road.

A loud laugh from the fellow on the stile followed him, as he started.

Jack glanced round, with a flash in his eyes.

The fellow was laughing at him, evidently under the impression that he was scared, and amused by his lack of spirit. Jack came very near throwing down his bundle, and rushing back, to give that offensive "tough guy" what he was asking for. But once more he checked the impulse: and turned his back on the fellow and tramped on his way—that derisive laugh followed him as he went.



CHAPTER TWO

"BAI Jove!"

Jack of All Trades gave a little jump, as he heard that surprised exclamation. It was uttered in a familiar voice. It was not the first time that he had heard the aristocratic tones of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form at St Jim's.

Half-a-mile or so from the stile, Jack had come to a stop again: this time standing by a gap in the hawthorn hedge, and gazing across the fields towards the big school to which he had once paid a happy visit. Even at the distance, he could make out the buildings, and innumerable chimneys and red roofs and the tops of tall elms. It was a

pleasant sight, in the summer afternoon, and his sunburnt face was bright and cheerful as he gazed. He did not notice a schoolboy coming down the lane from the direction of the school, until that exclamation caused him to look round, when he beheld the elegant figure and gleaming eyeglass of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

D'Arcy stopped, at the sight of Jack of All Trades. He came towards him with a beaming smile, and held out a white hand that almost disappeared into Jack's larger brown one as he shook hands.

"Fancy wunnin' into you, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus, evidently pleased by the unexpected meeting, "I wathah wondahed whethah I should evah wun into you again, and it is a weal pleasuah."

Jack smiled. He could hardly have expected that elegant St Jim's fellow, the son of a lord, to remember the wandering lad who had once done him a service. But D'Arcy, evidently, had not forgotten him: and was delighted to see him again: and apparently quite unconscious of any difference in social station between them. If there were fellows at St Jim's who might have turned up disdainful noses at the lad who tramped the road with a bundle on his shoulder, the Honourable Arthur Augustus D'Arcy certainly was not one of them.

"On the woad again, what?" asked D'Arcy.

"Yes, I'm heading for Wayland—."

"That is wathah a long step fwom heah," said Arthur Augustus, "But I wemembah that you are a wathah twemendous walkah. If you are staying in Wayland you must wun acwoss and see us at the school."

"I'd like to—but I've got to get on without stopping in Wayland," answered Jack. "But I'm very glad to see you again, and to know that you remember me."

"Yaas, wathah," said Arthur Augustus, "I wemembah you all wight, my deah boy. I'd be vewy glad to walk part of the way to Wayland with you, but I've got to keep an appointment a little furthah along the lane."

"I mustn't keep you, then!" said Jack: though he would have been glad of even a few

minutes in the pleasant company of the swell of St Jim's.

"Oh, that's all wight," said Arthur Augustus, cheerily, "Punch Boggles can wait a few minutes anyhow, bothah him. It will not hurt him to wait a little longah before he gets a feahful thwashin'."

Jack started a little.

This well-dressed, elegant, easy-mannered schoolboy of St Jim's was hardly the kind of fellow he would have expected to find on the war-path. But from D'Arcy's words, it appeared that somebody was booked for battle further along Rylcombe Lane.

"Let's walk a little way what?" asked Arthur Augustus, "That wottah can wait at the stile and be bothahed."

Jack started again.

"At the stile!" he repeated.

"Yaas: Punch Boggles is goin' to wait for me there, and I have no doubt he is alweady waitin'."

"Oh!" exclaimed Jack, "A big fellow with a pimply face—?"

"That's the wottah!" agreed Arthur Augustus, "His name isn't weally Punch, you know—that's a nickname, because he's supposed to pack a twemendous punch. I twust that I shall punch a little hardah, though."

Jack of All Trades looked at him. He had had an idea that the bullying fellow at the stile was waiting for someone. Now he knew for whom he was waiting.

"Pwobably you passed him as you came that way," continued Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, "You seem to know what he looks like—."

"A big hulking fellow, more than twice your weight, D'Arcy," said Jack, and he could not keep a note of concern out of his voice. "Surely you're not thinking of tackling a ruffian like that."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus, emphatically, "I twust that I shall be able to give him the thwashin' he deserves."

"But—!" Jack almost gasped. That the slim elegant swell of St Jim's could stand up, for a single round, against that big, strong, hulking fellow, was simply im-

possible. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had unlimited pluck, and no doubt he could box: but no amount of pluck, and no skill in boxing could avail him very much in combat with overwhelming size and weight and strength. Jack of All Trades knew, though D'Arcy evidently did not, that "Punch Boggles" would hammer him black and blue, and leave him lying a shattered wreck, if that combat came off at all. The swell of St Jim's had simply no chance, not the ghost of a chance, of thrashing that hulking rough. When the thrashing came off, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy could only be at the receiving end.

"Come on, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus, cheerily, "Punch Boggles can wait a little longah. Pewwaps you would like me to cawwy your bundle a bit."

"Oh! No! that's all right," said Jack, hastily. He walked with D'Arcy to the turning which led towards Wayland. He was glad of the elegant schoolboy's company: and gladder still to keep him, if only for a time, at a safe distance from Punch Boggles. Arthur Augustus, evidently wholly and happily unaware that he was rushing on destruction in keeping that appointment at the stile in Rylcombe Lane, chatted cheerily as they walked. But Jack of All Trades was feeling considerably worried.

"That chap at the stile is a lot above your weight, D'Arcy," he remarked.

"Oh, yaas," assented Arthur Augustus.

"Why not give him a miss?" hinted Jack.

"Imposs, deah boy. He would think I funk'd him."

"Oh! Yes! But—."

"I wathah think I shall handle him all wight," said Arthur Augustus, "Blake and Hewwies and Dig don't think so, and Tom Mewwy and Mannahs and Lowthah told me, one aftah anothon, to go to sleep and dweam again. They will be surprised when they heah that I have thwashed him."

Jack had no doubt about that!

"I slipped away this aftahnoon without tellin' them," added Arthur Augustus, with a cheery grin, "They would vewy likely have twied to stop me."

Jack could not help thinking that it was a

pity they hadn't! Arthur Augustus's friends, evidently, did not share his happy confidence in his ability to handle the young ruffian at the stile.

"But—" he said, uneasily. He could not help feeling deeply concerned, at a mental picture of that slim, elegant, kind-hearted fellow crumpling up, battered black and blue, under Punch Boggles's slogging fists. "But—the fellow isn't worth your trouble, D'Arcy—."

"Hardly," agreed Arthur Augustus, "But, you see, he kicked my young bwothah, Wally, and I am goin' to thwash him to teach him to behave. So I sent him a note wequestin' him to wait at the stile for me this aftahnoon, and I was on my way there when I wan into you. He is a vewy unpleasant and twoublesome person, always kickin' small boys or snatchin' their caps off, and it is time he had a lesson. I am goin' to give him one."

Jack walked on beside the elegant St Jim's fellow in silence,—thinking. That Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, with happy confidence, was going like a lamb to the slaughter, he knew quite well—just as well as Blake and Herries and Digby, Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther, would have known it, if they had known that D'Arcy had sallied out on the war-path that afternoon. While Arthur Augustus ran on with his cheery chat, Jack was trying to think of some way of saving him from himself, as it were. And Jack of All Trades, when he set his keen wits to work, seldom failed to find a solution to a problem.



CHAPTER THREE

"GOOD-bye, Jack!"

"Good-bye, D'Arcy."

"See you again some day, deah boy."

"I hope so."

"Cheewio!" said Arthur Augustus, and with a wave of the hand, he departed.

They had walked a mile on the way to Wayland, by a lane deeply wooded on either side. At that point Arthur Augustus had to

tear himself away, in order not to be too late for his rendezvous with Punch Boggles. Jack watched him as he went—walking at an easy saunter, and smiled. It was not Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's way to hurry: and at that rate of progress, he was likely to take some considerable time in covering the mile back to Rylcombe Lane, and the further half-mile to the stile therein. Which was exactly what Jack of All Trades wanted, and upon what he had calculated.

Jack had thought that little problem out, and he fancied that he had found a solution. As D'Arcy disappeared at that easy and leisurely saunter, Jack stepped out of the lane into the wood adjoining. There he deposited his bundle out of sight in a bush. His next movements were to be rapid: very rapid: and he did not want to be encumbered.

Leaving his bundle hidden, to be picked up later, he set off through the wood, winding his way at a swift trot, back the way he had come, but keeping clear of the lane, in order to keep clear of the swell of St Jim's. Arthur Augustus, supposing that he had gone on to Wayland, was not to have the slightest intimation that he had turned back. Had Arthur Augustus guessed, and guessed his intention, his noble back might have been up. But Arthur Augustus was booked to remain in happy ignorance of his movements and his intentions.

Jack covered the ground fast, winding through the wood, till he was sure that he was well ahead of the sauntering schoolboy. Then he emerged into the lane, and ran on faster than before in the open. The boy wanderer was thoroughly sound of wind and limb, and running a mile cost him nothing. Indeed, his feet seemed hardly to touch the ground as he ran. He was well ahead of D'Arcy—and he had to get further ahead—as fast and far as he could.

He came speeding out into Rylcombe Lane, and turned in the direction of the stile. Without slacking speed for a moment, he ran on, and very soon came in sight of the stile, where he had left the pimply youth. "Punch Boggles"—Jack knew his name now,—was still sitting on the stile and smoking cigarettes. He stared at Jack as he

came up, and stopped, panting a little after his long and rapid run.

"You again!" he said, aggressively.

"Little me!" assented Jack. He stood in front of the hulking fellow occupying the stile, looking at him. He was in no hurry to commence operations—he wanted to get his breath after his run. And he had no doubt that the leisurely swell of St Jim's was still a mile or so away. What Jack of All Trades had planned, would be over and done with, long before Arthur Augustus D'Arcy arrived on the spot. D'Arcy would never even guess that he had taken over!

"Well, what do you want?" growled Punch Boggles, puzzled by Jack's return, and by his look and manner. "If it's a thick ear, you'll get it fast enough, if you stand there staring at a chap."

"Get off that stile."

"Eh?"

"I said get off that stile."

Punch blinked at him.

"You said—what?" he stuttered.

"Deaf?" asked Jack, pleasantly, "I'll say again! Get off that stile, before you're knocked off it."

Punch Boggles fairly gaped at him. This was the fellow for whom he had refused to stir, and who had quietly allowed himself to be bullied, and gone on his way with Punch laughing at him. The change was quite startling. Having tamely tolerated Punch's offensive aggressiveness, he had gone off—now he had unexpectedly reappeared, with not the slightest sign of tameness about him: quite the reverse, in fact. Punch realized that he come back hunting for trouble, and a very ugly look came over the pimply face.

"You're asking for it!" he said, in a growl of menace. He threw away his cigarette.

"Exactly!" agreed Jack, "You wouldn't shift to let a fellow get over that stile. I've come back to shift you. You're getting off that stile, or I'm going to knock you off."

"By gum!" breathed Punch Boggles, "I'm waiting 'ere for a feller I'm going to make mincemeat of, but I'll make mincemeat of you while I'm waiting, you cheeky young tramp. Knock me off this 'ere stile, will you?

Look out that I don't knock your own block off. I'm coming for you."

"Come on then, and don't waste time gassing."

Punch Boggles came on, with a rush, with two big clenched fists sawing the air. His pimply face was red with rage. Under that savage rush, there was no doubt that the slim and elegant swell of St Jim's would have gone down like a ninepin. But the boy wanderer of the roads was built of tougher material than the elegant Gussy of St Jim's. He did not recede an inch, and he did not side-step the rush: he stood up to it like a granite rock, and met Punch with left and right, crashing in the pimply face.

"Ooooooh" gasped Punch, again, as he staggered. Left and right came again, landing like hammers, and Punch's stagger became a totter, and he pitched over on his back, landing on Sussex with a resounding thud.

Jack stood, panting, and rubbing his knuckles. Contact with the pimply face had been hard and sharp.

"Ooooooh" gasped Punch, again, as he sprawled. Jack of All Trades waited for him to get on his feet.

Punch was not long in doing that. He struggled up, and, almost hissing with fury, fairly hurled himself headlong at Jack of All Trades.

The next three or four minutes were wild and whirling.

Jack was hard as hickory, tough as steel. But the bullying Punch was big and strong, and had a longer reach and tremendous force in his hitting. Not a tithe of his wild and furious blows landed on his active opponent: but when they did land, they landed hard. But for every one that landed, Jack gave back two or three, with plenty of drive in them. Punch soon ceased his fierce rushes, and gave more attention to defence: but that did not save his pimply countenance, upon which fists that seemed to him like lumps of lead crashed again and again. It dawned on Punch Boggles that he was getting the worst of this: and he exerted every ounce. Not till his nose was swollen and streaming red, both his eyes blackening

and blinking, and most of the rest of him feeling as if it had been under a lorry, did Punch Boggles admit defeat.

He had to admit it then: as a terrific right-hander, landing on his aggressive jaw, hurled him back against the stile, where he collapsed in a gasping, gurgling, groaning heap.

He did not even attempt to rise again. He could not. He sprawled helplessly, utterly spent, utterly knocked out and done for. There was not another punch left in Punch. He could scarcely have swatted a gnat. He lay on his back a complete wreck, blinking dizzily with blackened eyes, too far gone even to mop his streaming nose.

Jack made a step towards him: and Punch found energy enough for a gasping howl:

"You keep orf! I'm done! I give you best! Don't you touch me."

Jack laughed. He had had some hard knocks, and he was feeling the effects of them. But he could have gone on cheerfully, if Punch had wanted more. But Punch, evidently, didn't want more. Very much indeed he didn't. He was too utterly used-up even to be able to crawl away. He could only lie and gasp and gurgle and blink dizzily. And most undoubtedly he was in no state to "make mincemeat" of the St Jim's schoolboy when he arrived on the spot,—which was all Jack wanted.

"O.K!" said Jack, "Next time you pitch into a chap smaller than yourself, chum, better make sure that he isn't too tough! Cheerio!"

With that, Jack of All Trades swung himself over the stile, and cut away across the fields, to get back by a roundabout route to the spot where he had left his bundle, without risk of encountering Arthur Augustus D'Arcy on the way. He had saved that elegant and unsuspecting youth from a terrific hammering: but of that circumstance, the swell of St Jim's was to remain in happy ignorance.

"OH, cwumbs!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

He had arrived—about ten minutes after Jack of All Trades had disappeared into space.

He expected to find Punch Boggles at the stile. And he found him. But he did not find him as he expected to find him. He found him lying by the stile, feebly clasping an anguished nose with one hand, and feebly rubbing a darkened eye with the other. He gazed at him in astonishment.

"Oh, cwumbs!" he repeated, "Is that you, Boggles?"

Punch blinked at him.

"You!" he mumbled.

"Yaas, wathah! Weren't you expectin' me?" asked Arthur Augustus, "But you don't look much like scwappin'. Have you been havin' a wow with somebody else? You seem to be a vewy quawwelsome and aggwessive person, Boggles. I certainly shall not thwash you in your pwesent state."

"You keep orf!" moaned Punch, "Leave a bloke alone."

"Pway to not be alarmed," said Arthur Augustus, "I have no intention whatevah of hittin' a fellow when he is down. You seem to have been thwough it. You look an uttah w'eck. I have no doubt that you asked for it. It appeahs that somebody has saved me the twouble of thwashin' you. Pewwaps this will be a lesson to you, Boggles, not to be so vewy aggwessive and unpleasant. I weally twust so."

And, as there was evidently nothing doing now, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy turned, and walked back to St Jim's: leaving the once-aggressive Punch crumpled by the stile, caressing his eyes and his nose and other damaged spots almost too numerous to enumerate. It was quite a long time before Punch was able to limp away, a dismal, doleful, dizzy, dilapidated Punch.

By that time, Jack was miles on his way.

He had a cut lip, a swollen nose, and slightly darkened eye, and other traces of the fray. He was not feeling his best, after that strenuous combat. But his face was cheery, as he tramped on with his bundle on

his shoulder: leaving Punch Boggles a sadder and perhaps wiser Punch: and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, serene and undamaged at St Jim's, in complete and happy ignorance of what he owed to Jack of All Trades.



THE END