Imp, Girl, and Commodore

By EDWARD CHILDS CARPENTER

WHEN the lights went up, everybody saw you kiss her on the stairs."

"You're mistaken: it was on the nose, only on the tip of the nose," he protested, pursuing her into a corner of the supper-room.

"That makes no difference. You intended to k-kiss her in—er—the usual—"

"I beg your pardon, Claire; I did not intend to kiss her—eh—anywhere."

Miss Furness laughed derisively. "You took advantage of the temporary darkness, when the lights went out, to—to kiss that red-headed girl from Swickely. I'll trouble you for my dance-card!"

"But, Claire, I did not intend to kiss her." He lowered his voice to a whisper as he added triumphantly. "It was you!"

"Me?"

"Of course! In the darkness I fancied that it was your hand that touched mine. I took it as a—a sort of signal."

"So! Ah! You thought I was that kind of a girl, did you? Well! Thank you, Mr. McCrea! Thank you!" She gave him a glance of shriveling contempt and accepted the ready arm of a disagreeable young man, who was happy to bring her ices and an immaculate dance-card, which he proceeded to desecrate with his hideous signature.

McCrea went home early to bed and late to sleep.

This brief dialogue chronicles an episode of great pith and moment in the career of Tom McCrea, the scene of which was the Indian Harbor Yacht Club midsummer ball. How limp, worn, and worthless, then, seemed his newly won honor, the commodoreship of the fleet, in the face of this fell trick of fickle Fortune! Surely, Claire Furness, the Most Adorable, would no longer wear the colors of the Jolly Roger? No! She would sail under the flag of the Yellow Dragon, with that disagreeable young man, Charles Gaylor, at the wheel.

McCrea was a true prophet. The next day, and for many a day thereafter, Claire and Gaylor sailed, swam, and sat on the sand together. And in his heart the Commodore knew that the great blame for all this might be traced to a friend—Coco the Imp, ten and terrible, who understood an electric switchboard as well as he did the handling of a sail.

Coco the Imp, a thing of tow hair and freckles, blue eyes and a grin, gray sweater and diminutive ducks, cruised the harbor for trouble in a sneak-box which sailed under the name of the Pollywog. He was focusing a miniature spy-glass on a scarlet parasol which decorated the bathing-beach, and from under its shelter he made out the duck-covered shins of Charles Gaylor and the dainty oxfords of Miss Claire Furness. The Imp understood the situation thoroughly. Indeed, there was nothing which should not be known in the life of Indian Harbor secret from him. And since he blamed himself for manipulating the electric lights to the discomfiture of his patron McCrea, it came to him that he was bound to set it right.

He shut his glass with a snap, and, making a significant gesture, embracing the person who had usurped the Commodore's place, remarked to the spritsail: "I'll put a half-hitch in Gaylor's halyards, or eat hardtack till Christmas."

A few minutes later he might have been seen stalking the scarlet parasol from the rear of the bathing-beach. His light tread fell inaudibly upon the soft sand, and the sunshade hid him effectually from the sight of those beneath it. He crawled close and lay still, listening. Gaylor was reading aloud "Lochinvar's Ride," cruelly boring to the Imp, who had been obliged to commit the poem to memory at the last school term. Presently, however, he began to grow interested, and soon comprehended that the devil might even quote Scott to his purpose.

Possessed then of the most tremendous secret he had ever surprised, Coco, still unobserved, stole back to the sneak-box. Standing away across the harbor, the boy picked out the Jolly Roger, a white-hulled little sloop, floating a bit of crimson and white silk at her masthead, showing that the Commodore was aboard.

"The Jolly Roger ahoy!" hailed the Imp, coming up under the sloop's stern: "The Admiral of the Pollywog's compliments!"

"Same to you," returned McCrea from the cabin.

The Imp dropped his spritsail, made his painter fast to the yacht's traveler, and jumped to the deck.

"See here," was the Commodore's greeting, taking the boy affectionately by the ear, "what do you mean by eavesdropping on Miss Furness—eh?"

Coco's grin widened as he pointed to the sloop's glass, lying open on the cabin seat. "You were watchin' too, Commodore."

McCrea flushed, and began polishing his briarwood on his coat sleeve. "But I wasn't listening," he retorted.

The Imp picked up the glass and swept the shore from the club-house to the point where the cottages clustered. "They're gone now," he announced.

"Coco, what's your game?" McCrea put this abruptly.

The boy tucked his bare legs under him and pinched the toes of his tennis shoes contemplatively. Then he replied with a question: "Commodore, am I a liar?"

McCrea smiled. "Not since—"

"Since you told me a fella couldn't be a good yachtsman an' a liar too. You bet! Aw right! If you know I ain't a liar any more, you'd believe I wasn't kiddin' you if I said I wasn't, wouldn't you?" Coco looked up quizzically, squinting under his lids, after a whimsical fashion peculiar to himself.

"Sure!" McCrea, having polished the pipe to his satisfaction, now packed and lighted it.

"Well, I know some things you don't," went on the Imp wisely; "an' you've got to do what I say, believin' me that—that it's the real cheese."

The Commodore reached over and, taking a handful of the Imp's yellow hair, threatened to bump his head against the woodwork, saying: "Coco, if this is some of your skylarking—"

The Imp made a huge mouth. "Cross me breath!" he exclaimed solemnly, "this ain't any—any game; it's serious. I made up how to do it sailin' over here."

"Well, what is it?" asked McCrea, releasing his visitor.

"Be ready to sail to Standford at ten to-night."

"For what, Coco?"

"You'll find out."

The Commodore shook his head.

"Aw right; you'll be sorry." The Imp got up to go.

"Wait," laughed McCrea, "I'm game to take your orders, just as though you were the Admiral; but if this is one of your jobs, Mr. Coco, I'll put you out of commission for the rest of this season." With that he picked up the Imp by the back of his sweater and held him over the side of the sloop, as one might hold a kitten over a pail of water, then with a shake dropped the boy carefully into the sneak-box.

"I ain't skeered—you see!" chuckled Coco, drawing in the sheet and pointing the Pollywog toward the club-house. "But, say, Commodore," he called over his shoulder, "I 'spect I'll have a passenger for you; an' if you're ast if you're Lochinvar, say 'Yes.'"

When McCrea pulled out to the Jolly Roger that night, although the moon was obscured and the stars shone faintly through the drapery of the clouds, he fancied he saw sail set on the Yellow Dragon, which occupied a berth to windward. He paused, wondering, and then distinctly heard the threshing of her sail in the freshening breeze which had sprung up since sundown.

It was five minutes of ten when the Commodore made fast the last halyard. He filled his pipe and sat on the deck, awaiting developments. The club-house was dark, save for the lamps in the billiard-room, and the big headlight, which usually illuminated the dock, was turned so low that he could make out little on the shore. He began to wonder if after all Coco had not been deceiving him. Presently the wind bore to his ears a shout, in the voice of the Imp. Then he heard nothing but the whipping of the mainsail. He looked toward the Yellow Dragon. She was under way and standing down toward the harbor's mouth.

"Lochinvar!" It was a muffled call close beside the yacht. McCrea caught up a lantern and held it over the side. Its light fell upon the Imp, swimming hand over hand toward him. He reached down the boat-hook and dragged the boy aboard.

"What in the name of—" began McCrea.

"He's got her!" gasped the Imp, pointing in the direction of the Yellow Dragon. "Slip anchor, quick!"

Only half comprehending the significance of his words, the Commodore did as ordered, while Coco seized the wheel and trimmed in the sheet. A squall struck the yacht and swept her off in the Yellow Dragon's wake with the speed of a racing motor-car.

Coco Stalking the Scarlet Parasol From the Rear of the Bathing-Beach.

McCrea hastened aft. "It's about time you made a clean breast of this business, Coco. From what I guess, it looks pretty serious. If that bounder Gaylor is running off with Miss Furness—"

"That's what he's doin', the stiff!" moaned the Imp, slowly surrendering the wheel to the Commodore.

"And you knew this?" Coco shriveled under the other's wrath. "Why didn't you tell me. I might have stopped it."

"I—I had it all fixed right; but—but he spoilt the whole game," explained the Imp, and added with a slight gulp: "I was goin' to let you elope her."

"Me?" McCrea was fairly dazed with astonishment.

"Y-yes," the boy went on, rubbing his impudent little nose with the back of his hand. "Didn't I tell you I had it all fixed great. They were readin' 'Lochinvar' this afternoon, an' I heard her say she wished things now were like they were when a fella just got his girl by stealin' her. An' Gaylor said he was that kind. So they made it up that they'd meet at the dock at ten to-night, an' he'd sail her to Standford an' get the Methodist minister to marry 'em. Then I thought what a cinch it 'ud be for me to get to the dock ahead of him an' bring her over to you, so you—you could get ahead of him."

McCrea was speechless.

The Imp went on in a blur of emotion: "I—I met her aw right, an' said that Gaylor sent me to bring her out to the Dragon. I got her in the sneak-box an' was just gettin' under way, when Gaylor comes along in his tender an' sees us; an' before I caught the wind, he'd caught us. Gee! but he was hoppin' mad! He ran me down an' yanked Miss Furness into his boat an' knocked me overboard with an oar."

"The cur!" snapped McCrea. "Hurt you?"

Coco put his hand to his forehead, and the Commodore saw a bruise over his eye.

"I'll remember that for you, kid." McCrea was savage about it.

"I guess she was skeered 'bout me, cause, when I came up, I heard him say: 'Oh, he's all right—swims like a duck.' And say, Commodore," he